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**Manifesting the Communion of Saints in a Culture of
Expressive Individualism**

By
Ian G. Hard

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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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how church members who have undergone church discipline and been restored describe their experience of the communion of the saints through the process of discipline and restoration. Expressive individualism opposes biblical definitions of the individual and community, presenting apologetic challenges in engaging those outside the church and ecclesial challenges to Christian formation within the church. The communion of saints presents an alternative understanding of people within the economy of God and this study examines practices that demonstrate the communion of saints in the trying context of church discipline.

This study utilized a qualitative design with semi-structured interviews of seven members of reformed churches who had been disciplined and remained at, or were restored to, their churches. The interviews focused on how the participants related to their churches before, during, and after discipline, as well as how they related to God during their discipline.

The literature review examined the development and effects of expressive individualism, belonging within healthy community, and the doctrine of the communion of saints, particularly as expressed in the local church through discipline.

The study found that time physically present with others, relationships to individuals, and the mutual exchange of gifts and services were very important to the participants' connection to their churches. After discipline they felt closer to God, more connected to their churches, and more invested in personal ministry to others. The study concluded that churches manifest the communion of saints well when they invite participation of individuals, practice honesty, and value the physicality of their members.

Communion with God exists only through Christ, but Christ is present only in his church, hence there is communion with God only in the church. This fact destroys every individualistic conception of the church.

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer,
Sanctorum Communio

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“All things, born or made, human or not, are until-further-notice and dispensable.”¹ So Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes liquid modernity, an age in which the nature of identity and significance has been radically transformed—an age in which the internal dictates of the individual determine identity rather than external circumstances. Instead of institutions, family, and community determining identity, participation in these societal pillars has become contingent on one’s own definition of self. How does the church function as a body united in Christ – an eternal community in Christ – in a society in which relationships and self-conception are so fleeting? How is the communion of saints to be manifest in a culture of expressive individualism? Such questions reflect challenges to churches and church leaders – both in gospel formation and gospel proclamation. If Christian churches are to be examples of shared identity in Christ through spiritual union with him,² then it follows that the influence of a culture of expressive individualism warrants consideration.

In addressing the culture for the sake of the gospel, Christians and church leaders gain wisdom through reflection on themselves and the world. Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin contends that there is no such thing as a “culture-free gospel,” yet the gospel

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?*, Institute for Human Sciences Vienna Lecture Series (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 185.

² 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 (ESV)

“calls into question all cultures.”³ Cultural expressions exist inside the church as much as outside its community. Therefore, lack of cultural self-examination leads to the risk of gospel distortion. Newbigin posits, “The only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.”⁴ That is to say, people comprehend the good news of Jesus through lived-in Christian community. If Christian community is distorted by unbiblical conceptions of personhood, identity, and community, the gospel is distorted. Conversely, healthy community promotes gospel comprehension.

Expressive Individualism

Robert Bellah coined the term “expressive individualism” to describe the focus on individual freedom and self-definition in modern, Western culture.⁵ This perspective holds a sense of self as “drawing its purposes, goals, and life-plans out of itself.”⁶ It contrasts with a conception of identity as that which is given — given by history, geography, familial relationships, and other external contingencies. As people define themselves apart from such constants, freedom becomes an absolute — a prerequisite to the meaning and fulfillment sought in expressing that self-designated identity. Therefore, as Professors Mark Sanford and Steve Wilkins contend, expressive individualism

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 4.

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 227.

⁵ Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, ed. Robert N. Bellah (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 27.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 39.

“worships the freedom to express our uniqueness against constraints and conventions.”⁷

This idea contrasts with the premodern understanding of self as defined within the confines of larger wholes such that, as philosopher Charles Taylor puts it, “Human agents are embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporates the divine.”⁸

Expressive individualism departs from historic descriptions of humanity as moral agents. It also departs from descriptions taught in the Bible. The Bible describes humans as bearers of the divine image.⁹ Whereas expressive individualism puts the onus to find or define such significance upon each person Scripture acknowledges individual giftings, vocations, and the import of private conscience.¹⁰ However, the individual is not treated as autonomous. The refrain, “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” in the book of Judges is an ominous warning from the author, not a celebrated motto of expressive individualism. In the Bible, a primary understanding of Christian community is the integrated whole of a body.¹¹ People are accountable to obey God’s commands and are born within family lineages and covenantal contexts. Historically this concept has been a comfort rather than a consternation. The Heidelberg Catechism states, “I with body and

⁷ Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 28.

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 152.

⁹ Genesis 1:26-28

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, Ephesians 4:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

¹¹ Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:11-27, Colossians 2:19

soul, in life and in death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”¹²

Expressive individualism has also reshaped broader conceptions of institutions and community. Whereas, in the past, individuals were encouraged to view their role through the lens of what was good for the community, now as Carl Trueman writes, “Outward institutions become in effect the servants of the individual and her sense of inner well-being.”¹³ Yet, this arrangement creates thin and fragile community, wherein people feel they belong only to the degree in which they feel fully affirmed in their freedom of self-expression. This self-definition paves the way for flight from constraints, correction, and accountability when freedom is challenged. But self-selected community does not appear to fulfill its purpose of serving individuals’ sense of well-being. While the internet provides means of connection to communities of all sorts of varied interests where individuals can project themselves as whomever they choose, studies indicate that such internet and social media use decreases the sense of belonging and leads to diminished self-image.¹⁴ Kelly Kopic describes the feelings of this phenomenon, writing, “We walk on a knife’s edge between the demand to ‘be yourself’ and the unspoken

¹² Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 2.

¹³ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 49.

¹⁴ Zeliha Tras, Kemal Öztemel, and Umay Bilge Baltacı, “Role of Problematic Internet Use, Sense of Belonging and Social Appearance Anxiety in Facebook Use Intensity of University Students,” *International Education Studies* 12, no. 8 (July 29, 2019): 6, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v12n8p1>.

requirement to conform to current social trends that often masquerade as self-expression.”¹⁵

The recasting of the individual implicates one’s understanding of the nature and function of the church community. Modern pursuit of self-determination results in communities serving subordinate purposes. In an age of contested belief, community and religious affiliation is primarily perceived as resulting from active choice and selective affiliation.¹⁶ Thus, as political analyst Yuval Levin puts it, “We have moved, roughly speaking, from thinking of institutions as molds that shape people’s character and habits toward seeing them as platforms that allow people to be themselves and to display themselves before a wider world.”¹⁷ This shift impacts the mission of Christians to declare the gospel to the nations. English professor and pop culture commentator Alan Noble notes, “But if we are born into a culture that sees belief as first a performance of identity and thus something we can easily slip on or off, then it’s only natural that when we share the gospel we will be inclined to treat it as a performance of our identity.”¹⁸ Noble points out that instead of mere performance, the church is supposed to proclaim authoritatively that Jesus alone is the hope of forgiveness of sin and life everlasting.

The change in individual identity shapes the expectations of life within a community, particularly the church. Historically, Christians understood that faith in Jesus

¹⁵ Kelly M. Kopic, *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God’s Design and Why That’s Good News* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), 21.

¹⁶ Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 59.

¹⁷ Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 33.

¹⁸ Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 60.

and their belonging to the church are inextricable. For example, Protestant reformer John Calvin discussed the role of the church as mother.¹⁹ Union with Christ establishes communion with his saints wherein Christians are:

bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities.²⁰

Such a notion of intrinsic, mutual obligation runs counter to the individualist's autonomy of the self.

The current culture of autonomy also contrasts with previous definitions of the true church. Traditionally, the marks of the church have been faithful proclamation of the Word of God, right practice of the sacraments, and the corresponding discipline of the church to maintain the purity of Word and sacrament.²¹ Expressive individualism does not encourage people to conform to orthodoxy, but "individualism dictates that I become the authoritative source of what is right and wrong for me."²² This view of morality challenges the teaching, authority, and practice of discipline by church leaders. It is hard for churches to reflect the historic marks of the church when the pervading culture contends against collective definitions of the right and good.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), IV.I.4.

²⁰ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: As Adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America: With Proof Texts*. (Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education & Publications Committee of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2007), 26.2.

²¹ Westminster Assembly, 25.4.

²² Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 33.

Community Disengagement

The challenges of expressive individualism are not limited to the church. Though difficult to determine what is cause, effect, or just correlation, the broader culture has seen an erosion of communal engagement.

American Society

In his work *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert Putnam outlines the decline of American community as expressed in social trust and engagement. He presents statistical information indicating a decline in American participation in politics, civic groups, and religious worship, reflective of a decline in general social capital.²³ Fewer Americans are engaged in community than ever before.

The trend is not isolated to larger societal institutions but is expressed in families as well. Social commentator and journalist Arthur Brooks notes the historical decline in the size of familial communities. “Until 1850, roughly three-quarters of Americans older than 65 lived with their kids and grandkids. Nuclear families existed, but they were surrounded by extended or corporate families.”²⁴ The size and connectedness of families has declined since the Industrial Revolution, down to the isolated nuclear family of the mid-twentieth century, and further to its more fragmented contemporary state. Pew

²³ Robert D Putnam, *Bowling Alone: Revised and Updated: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2020), 9, 60, 72–73.

²⁴ David Brooks, “The NUCLEAR FAMILY Was a MISTAKE. (Cover Story),” *Atlantic* 325, no. 2 (March 2020): 57.

Research notes, “Only 44% of Millennials were married in 2019, compared with 53% of Gen Xers, 61% of Boomers and 81% of Silents at a comparable age.”²⁵

Many factors are identified as contributing to the change in societal cohesion. Sociologist Linda Wilcox notes how changes in family structure, including divorce and dual breadwinners working further from the home, diminish opportunities for solidified community bonds.²⁶ Historian and theologian Carl Trueman points to ease of movement via car and plane as “shatter[ing] the previous authority of geographical space.”²⁷ No longer constrained by travel, people may choose to work in one community, shop in another, and live in a third. To these factors Brooks adds the economic stresses on the nuclear family requiring greater time and attention to work outside the home.²⁸ Multiple factors – historic, philosophical, economic, and more – have led to community disengagement and disintegration within American society.

The Church

The societal trend of community disengagement is reflected in Christian churches in America. The Pew Forum notes a decline of 12 percent among those who identify as Christians between 2009 and 2019, with a 9 percent increase in those who identify as

²⁵ Pew Research Center, “How Millennials Approach Family Life” (Washington, D.C., May 27, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/27/as-millennials-near-40-theyre-approaching-family-life-differently-than-previous-generations/>.

²⁶ Linda Wilcox, *No More Front Porches: Rebuilding Community in Our Isolated Worlds* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2002), 10.

²⁷ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 41.

²⁸ Brooks, “The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake,” 58.

religious “nones” in that same period.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, the same research shows that regular religious attendance has dropped by 9 percent.³⁰ As the study notes:

The Christian share of the population is down and religious ‘nones’ have grown across multiple demographic groups: white people, black people and Hispanics; men and women; in all regions of the country; and among college graduates and those with lower levels of educational attainment.³¹

These statistics reflect the challenge for churches tasked with sharing the gospel. The data correlate disengagement in the church with larger societal disengagement.

Institutional Mistrust

As fewer Americans are involved in institutional communities, there is less established trust in such communities. At the same time there has been an increase in overt mistrust, based on very public institutional failures.

The Generations

Public policy researcher Robert Putnam notes a decline in social trust since the 1960s, such that, “every year fewer and fewer of us aver that ‘most people can be trusted.’”³² He attributes the decline to generational replacement, as successive generations have demonstrated significantly lower trust quotients.³³ Pew Foundation

²⁹ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace” (Washington, D.C., October 17, 2019), <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

³⁰ Pew Research Center.

³¹ Pew Research Center.

³² Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 140.

³³ Putnam, 3, 141.

research notes this trend in its ongoing research on decline in trust by generations.³⁴ The youngest generations are those that express the least general trust of others.

The Church

Within the larger church, a growing institutional mistrust mirrors the external culture and reflects gross failures within the institutional church. Spiritual abuse and bullying have become increasingly reported and verified. Popular evangelical website The Gospel Coalition featured three articles on these failures in the first five months of 2021.³⁵ Similarly a serial podcast examining the scandal of prominent evangelical megachurch Mars Hill sat among the top ten shows on Apple podcasts in 2021 as this project began.³⁶

A significant source of mistrust of the institutional church comes from commission of sexual abuse within churches and the failure of church leadership to properly address such moral failures. Researchers note that abuse within nonfamilial organizations can result in institutional mistrust.³⁷ Avoidance often follows mistrust. “For example, some individuals who were abused in a church setting described avoiding

³⁴ Lee Rainie, Scott Keeter, and Andrew Perrin, “Trust and Distrust in America,” Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy, July 22, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/>.

³⁵ Pete Nicholas, “Enabling Abuse Invites God’s Judgment,” The Gospel Coalition, March 24, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/enabling-abuse-judgment/>; Michael J. Kruger, “Standing Up to Bully Pastors,” The Gospel Coalition, January 5, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/standing-up-to-bully-pastors/>; Jeremy Linneman, “We’re Hurt, and Healed, in Community,” The Gospel Coalition, May 18, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/hurt-healed-community/>.

³⁶ “Apple Podcasts: United States of America: All Podcasts Podcast Charts - Top,” August 23, 2021, <https://chartable.com/charts/itunes/us-all-podcasts-podcasts>.

³⁷ David A. Wolfe et al., “The Impact of Child Abuse in Community Institutions and Organizations: Advancing Professional and Scientific Understanding,” *Clinical Psychology* 10, no. 2 (2003): 184.

anything related to church and religion; in the process they lost their faith in God to protect their well-being."³⁸ The breakdown in trust is not just with the immediate victims. The uncovering of decades of sexual abuse by priests within the Roman Catholic church has left the majority of Americans with the opinion that such abuse continues to be a problem.³⁹ The American evangelical church is wrestling with its own revelations, broadcast by the hashtag #churchtoo shortly after the start of the #metoo movement.⁴⁰ Institutional failures create mistrust that hamper Christian participation within churches and witness to those outside them.

Purpose Statement

The challenges to church community and mission pervade this cultural context of individualism, disconnection, and mistrust. These characteristics challenge the functioning of the church as the communion of saints and thus the mission of the church as witnesses through that community. They are challenges from within as much as from without.

These trends undermine experience of the communion of the saints, obscuring a mark of the true church. Individuals lose opportunity for sanctification and maturation. Church communities miss opportunities to manifest the beauty of the gospel through the

³⁸ Wolfe et al., 186.

³⁹ Pew Research Center, "Americans See Catholic Clergy Sex Abuse as an Ongoing Problem" (Washington, D.C., June 11, 2019), <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/06/11/americans-see-catholic-clergy-sex-abuse-as-an-ongoing-problem/>.

⁴⁰ Eliza Griswold, "Silence Is Not Spiritual: The Evangelical #MeToo Movement | The New Yorker," June 15, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/silence-is-not-spiritual-the-evangelical-metoo-movement>.

process of confronting sin, offering forgiveness, and enacting restoration.⁴¹ This loss is particularly costly when one considers the lost apologetic opportunity of presenting an alternative to the burgeoning “cancel culture.” In this current context, how can the church fulfill its function as a light to the world⁴² and manifest a community which enacts discipline with restoration as the result?

How might one identify best practices for churches to maintain the bonds of Christian fellowship, mutual obligation, and shared purpose? Church discipline presents a lens for identifying such churches. Exercising church discipline and submission to it, even to the point of censure as acts of corrective discipline, are counter to the cultural narrative of individual autonomy. Thus, churches wherein members undergo church discipline and restoration to the congregation indicate these churches value culture and practices which mitigate the corrosive effects of expressive individualism.

The purpose of this study is to explore how church members who have undergone church discipline and been restored describe their experience of the communion of the saints through the process of discipline and restoration.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do church members describe their relationship to their churches prior to church discipline?

⁴¹ 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 (ESV).

⁴² Matthew 5:14 (ESV).

2. How do church members describe their relationship to God during the church discipline process?
3. How do church members describe their relationships to their churches during church discipline?
4. How do church members describe their relationships to their churches after the resolution of church discipline?

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for Christians seeking biblical community, for leaders seeking to actively cultivate faithful expressions of the communion of the saints, and for leaders and laymen who hope to see the church maintain its witness to the beauty and truth of the gospel through Christian community. The study also has bearing on the interaction between Christian churches in America and the broader culture.

Belonging Seekers

The influence of expressive individualism and broader community disengagement leaves many people yearning for deeper belonging. This study holds significance for those looking for signs and practices of local churches offering deeper fellowship in Jesus. The findings may help those seeking such a community identify such churches which may offer it.

Church Leaders

“Culture is caught not taught,” according to a popular leadership axiom. A church community’s culture is not always the product of overt actions or explicit values. This

study offers opportunity for church officers and leaders to consider what members of healthy church community experience and observe. It affords opportunity to consider factors beyond the realm of the intentions of the leaders themselves.

While the Bible establishes the message of the gospel, people and communities mediate that message. As educator and proponent of cultural intelligence David Livermore writes in *Cultural Intelligence*, “We are on a journey from the desire to love the Other to a place where we effectively *express* [emphasis in original] the love of Jesus to people of difference.”⁴³ The study’s findings may help leaders understand their communities and, thus, be able better to express love and better be the “hermeneutic of the gospel.”

Non-Christian Communities and Institutions

Studying the flourishing of Christian community may hold significance for communities and institutions outside Christianity, or religion itself. A society needs well-connected individuals and communities to have social capital available to expend for the common good.⁴⁴ Cohesion within churches offers social capital to the larger society. Robert Putnam contends, "Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America."⁴⁵ Thus

⁴³ David A. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World*, Youth, Family, and Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 17.

⁴⁴ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 20.

⁴⁵ Putnam, 66. Putnam continues the thought, saying, “As a rough rule of thumb, our evidence shows, nearly half of all associational memberships in America are church related, half of all personal philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context. So how involved we are in religion matters a lot for American social capital.”

factors that convince a disciplined member to choose to remain not only strengthen churches but the broader American society.

Definition of Terms

This study defines key terms as follows:

Belonging conveys the sense that one is a part of a larger whole and that there is the mutual responsibility of ownership. It is coupled with the sense of positive association with the whole of which one belongs, a longing to be with that whole when apart.⁴⁶

Church officers are ordained leaders within a local church and its denominational body and may include pastors, bishops, elders, and deacons, depending on the church governance structure.

Communion of the saints refers to the spiritual reality of the bond that Christians have to one another through their union to Christ. This bond creates reciprocal obligation to “the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.”⁴⁷

Church discipline includes instruction in God’s Word for positive formation as well as corrective response to sinful behavior with the purpose of restoration. Broadly speaking, this process can include teaching and preaching from God’s Word, as well as the formative experience of worship and the sacraments. More narrowly, this refers to the exercise of church authority for the correction of theological error and sin.⁴⁸ For the

⁴⁶ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2009), xii.

⁴⁷ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 129.

⁴⁸ Matthew 18:15-20; Galatians 6:1-2.

purpose of this research, the term refers to the process initiated and following the point at which church officers have been brought in to confront the offender as the representatives of the church.⁴⁹

Culture includes learned behaviors, beliefs, and products that reinforce belief in a group of people.⁵⁰ For those within a culture, it often exists as a set of unexamined norms.

Expressive individualism “describes the modern idea that we gain meaning and justification in life through our individual identity, and we establish our identity through self-expression.”⁵¹ The popular notion of “just follow your heart” depicts the idea well.

Reformed describes churches which identify their theological roots in the Protestant Reformation, particularly as expressed in Calvinism.

Presbyterian describes a form of church government wherein local churches are governed by a plurality of elders while maintaining connectional bonds with regional and national bodies. Presbyterian denominations are generally Reformed in their theological lineage.

⁴⁹ Matthew 18:17.

⁵⁰ Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 24.

⁵¹ Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 62.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore how church members who have undergone church discipline and been restored describe their experience of the communion of the saints through the process of discipline and restoration. The researcher read literature in three areas important for foundational research. The first area focuses on expressive individualism as the larger challenge to ministry motivating the purpose of the study. Next, this section reviews literature on healthy community formation as a counterpoint to expressive individualism. Lastly, literature on the theological topic of the communion of the saints, including its maintenance through discipline, is reviewed for ministerial application of the research.

Expressive Individualism

The review of literature now examines the topic of expressive individualism as an aspect of the cultural context for ministry practice today.

History and Development of Expressive Individualism

The literature generally agrees that the descriptor “expressive individualism” comes from Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart*, while crediting Charles Taylor for deeper development of the concept.⁵² “Expressive individualism, in its purest form, takes

⁵² Newbigin also notes the work of Peter Berger in this arena, without referencing the particular terminology of expressive individualism. Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 11–14.

the individual, atomized self to be the fundamental unit of human reality.⁵³ Expressive individualism not only focuses on the individual as opposed to the corporate but also “worships the freedom to express our uniqueness against constraints and conventions.”⁵⁴ Taylor describes the development of expressive individualism as resulting from an inward turn for understanding the self which has come to be characterized by self-responsible independence, recognized particularity, and personal commitment.⁵⁵ Trueman and Taylor are circumspect in giving a full account of the historical account or direct causality behind its development.⁵⁶

Trueman emphasizes that the contemporary experience of expressive individualism does not stop with the agent’s expression of one’s sense of self but also the recognition of others, such that “there is a need for the expressive individual to be at one with the expressive community.”⁵⁷ Starke contends that this need for recognition may actually be a new stage of individualism which he calls “performative individualism,” wherein identity is that which is performed before others for recognition.⁵⁸ Noble describes the weight to self-express and perform, saying it creates “the responsibility to justify our existence, to create an identity, to discover meaning, to choose values, and to

⁵³ O. Carter Snead, “The Anthropology of Expressive Individualism,” *Church Life Journal*, December 1, 2020, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-anthropology-of-expressive-individualism/>.

⁵⁴ Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 28.

⁵⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 185.

⁵⁶ Taylor, 306; Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 379.

⁵⁷ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 62.

⁵⁸ John Starke, “Going From Expressive Individualism to Performative Individualism,” February 17, 2021, <https://johnstarke.substack.com/p/going-from-expressive-individualism>.

belong.”⁵⁹ While the literature agrees on the definition of expressive individualism, it provides many different aspects of its development.

Philosophical Roots

Romantic Reaction to the Enlightenment

The literature ascribes particular significance to the Romantic reaction to the rationalistic Enlightenment in the development of expressive individualism.⁶⁰ However, the literature emphasizes different pathways for how the reaction formed. Taylor’s work emphasizes the Romantic period but reaches back past early Enlightenment and Medieval thought to roots in Augustine’s inward move for self-understanding – a move with which Trueman agrees.⁶¹ Curran notes the strong philosophical and linguistic aspects of the movement, wherein knowledge is tied to one’s experience and expression of the experience as definitive for knowing.⁶²

Significant Philosophers

While the literature describes Romanticism as a reaction to the Enlightenment’s “anthropology, and epistemology, rooted at once in optimism in man’s powers of

⁵⁹ Alan Noble, *You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 35.

⁶⁰ Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 80–81; Tara Isabella Burton, “Postliberal Epistemology,” *Comment Magazine* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2020): 34; Mary Bernard Curran, “Expressive Individualism: A Change in the Idea of the Good and of Happiness,” *Heythrop Journal* 54, no. 6 (November 2013): 979; Patrick Madigan, “Expressive Individualism, the Cult of the Artist as Genius, and Milton’s Lucifer,” *Heythrop Journal* 54, no. 6 (November 2013): 997; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 171; Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 56.

⁶¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 127–42; Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 106.

⁶² Curran, “Expressive Individualism,” 979–80.

knowing and a willingness to divorce that knowing from subjectivity," it acknowledges a philosophical dependence on pre-Romantic development of the idea of self.⁶³ Bellah and his colleagues credit Locke as one of the first to discuss "identity in the modern sense of the term."⁶⁴ Taylor likewise stresses Locke's significance in the realm of identity, pointing to his the concept of the punctiliar self (the awareness of self in past, present, and future) as establishing a sense of self that is self-making.⁶⁵ While the literature identifies Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers like Descartes and Hume as laying the groundwork for individualistic self-conception, Taylor uniquely credits Montaigne, who precedes these thinkers, as an originator of the search for each person's originality and claims that the French philosopher inaugurates the search for the self, which "has become one of the fundamental themes of our modern culture."⁶⁶

Much of the literature identifies Rousseau as a prominent philosopher in the development of individual identity.⁶⁷ Trueman states, "Rousseau lays the foundation for expressive individualism through his notion that the individual is most authentic when acting out in public those desires and feelings that characterize his inner psychological

⁶³ Burton, 34. Despite his foundational work for the Romanticists, Ohana squarely places Rousseau in the category of an Enlightenment philosopher, David Ohana, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Promethean Chains," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 18, no. 4 (December 2017): 384.

⁶⁴ Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 80.

⁶⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 171.

⁶⁶ Taylor, 182–83.

⁶⁷ Sidney Axinn, "Rousseau Versus Kant on the Concept of Man," *Philosophical Forum* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1981): 384; Mark S Cladis, "Redeeming Love: Rousseau and Eighteenth-Century Moral Philosophy," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 28, no. 2 (2000): 221; Ohana, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Promethean Chains," 383; Michael J. Thompson, "Autonomy and Common Good: Interpreting Rousseau's General Will," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25, no. 2 (May 2017): 266, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2017.1286364>; Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 107–8.

life.”⁶⁸ Authors like Cladis and Thompson discuss the political implications of Rousseau’s work, which gives primacy to the individual will and definition of the good before that of the corporate or societal good.⁶⁹ Other authors, like Axinn, discuss Rousseau’s view of individual moral agency based on the assumption that mankind is naturally good.⁷⁰ Taylor goes into further detail, presenting how Rousseau relates moral agency to nature as opposed to society, explaining, “The original impulse of nature is right, but the effect of a depraved culture is that we lose contact with it.”⁷¹ These disparate foci overlap with Rousseau’s conception of freedom. Taylor writes:

Rousseau is at the origin point of a great deal of contemporary culture, of the philosophies of self-exploration, as well as of the creeds which make self-determining freedom the key to virtue. He is the starting point of a transformation in modern culture towards a deeper inwardness and a radical autonomy. The strands all lead from him...⁷²

The literature presents Rousseau as a significant transitional figure between the rationalist Enlightenment and Romanticism.

The literature also suggests Friedrich Nietzsche significantly influenced expressive individualism. Trueman credits him, though not an Enlightenment philosopher or Romanticist, with carrying forward the turn from external authority to individual taste as the determiner of ethics.⁷³ Trueman also points to Nietzsche’s analysis of power as

⁶⁸ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 125.

⁶⁹ Cladis, “Redeeming Love,” 246–47; Thompson, “Autonomy and Common Good,” 266–67.

⁷⁰ Axinn, “Rousseau Versus Kant on the Concept of Man,” 348.

⁷¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 357.

⁷² Taylor, 363.

⁷³ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 160.

furthering individual mistrust of corporate authority.⁷⁴ Both Taylor and Trueman mention that Nietzsche builds on Rousseau's' discussion of the natural world as amoral.⁷⁵ Ohana and Truman both point out how this philosophical stance leads to Nietzsche's view that humanity must therefore have the capacity for self-creation, where "every act of value in art or life there is a creative overcoming of raw nature."⁷⁶ Trueman directly describes this conception of self-creation as "a philosophical rationale for a form of expressive individualism."⁷⁷

Art & Literature

Several authors credit the development and popularization of expressive individualism to Romantic literature and poetry, with differing emphases on particular authors and poets. Trueman and Taylor highlight European poets such as William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and William Blake, with Taylor distinct in the attention he gives to Johann Herder's influence.⁷⁸ The authors of *Habits of the Heart*, focusing more on the move from American rugged individualism to expressive individualism, list American authors such as Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau, claiming it is Walt Whitman "who represents what we may call 'expressive individualism' in clearest form."⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Trueman, 173.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 462; Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 174.

⁷⁶ Ohana, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Promethean Chains," 387; Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 174.

⁷⁷ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 191.

⁷⁸ Trueman, 194; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 378–79.

⁷⁹ Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 49.

Bellah and his co-authors emphasize the literary themes of Romantic poets, noting the importance of experiences, the centrality of the individual, and the import of personal freedom.⁸⁰ Madigan and Taylor focus less on Romantic subject matter and more on the paradigmatic shift in the artistic process from one of *mimesis* (re-presenting what already exists) to *poiesis* (creation), in which, as Taylor quotes Johann Herder, “The artist is become a creator God.”⁸¹ While Taylor acknowledges that this movement started in the eighteenth century before its emphasis in Romanticism, Madigan points back to seventeenth century roots.⁸² He finds the seed of the movement’s cult of artistic genius in Milton’s portrayal of Lucifer, the “self-begot” in *Paradise Lost*. He states, “The traditional vocation of art as mimetic ... is here o’erthrown; on the contrary, the artist now claims to be literally creative. It is no longer a metaphor: he brings into being something that has never existed before.”⁸³ Thus, Madigan is able to trace an arc of creative self-expression from Milton to the celebrity obsessed culture of the present. Taylor’s additional discussion of the visual arts traces expressionism’s influence upon the idea that expression itself is meaningful.⁸⁴ Curran likewise sees the influence of Romantic authors and artists but adds their effect on popular twentieth century music as well.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Bellah et al., 50–51.

⁸¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 378.

⁸² Taylor, 377; Madigan, “Expressive Individualism, the Cult of the Artist as Genius, and Milton’s Lucifer,” 992.

⁸³ Madigan, “Expressive Individualism, the Cult of the Artist as Genius, and Milton’s Lucifer,” 998.

⁸⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 423–26.

⁸⁵ Curran, “Expressive Individualism,” 982.

Theological Roots

The theological development of expressive individualism is particularly pertinent to ministry. While authors like Wilkens, Sanford, and McCracken discuss the influences of expressive individualism upon church culture and pastoral ministry, few look particularly at its theological roots. Taylor and Guelzo stand out among the literature for their theological analyses. Taylor credits the Protestant Reformation as significantly promoting the inward turn that would undergird later development of expressive individualism. He does this by pointing to the Protestant emphasis on ordinary life (production and reproduction) and personal commitment.⁸⁶ Despite the early Reformation focus on God's sovereignty, the undermining of institutional authority that accompanied its critique of Roman Catholic abuses opened the door to more and more experiential evaluations of salvation and the Christian faith, per both Taylor and Guelzo. Guelzo notes the growth of the import of the interior spiritual life and its expression from Arminius to Charles Wesley and on through the awakenings and development of experiential evangelicalism.⁸⁷ He notes how this theological development then shaped the work of moral philosophers and ethicists in the nineteenth century.⁸⁸ While Guelzo's work centers on the increase in Arminian understandings of faith and salvation, both he and Taylor note the growing significance of personal religious experience and practical life reform.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 213–28.

⁸⁷ Allen C Guelzo, "Free Will and the Descent of the Protestant Reformation into Narcissism," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 81, no. 2 (2019): 261–63.

⁸⁸ Guelzo, 264–65.

⁸⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 399.

Expressive Individualism Within American Christianity

The literature which addresses Christian ministry consistently notes the influence of expressive individualism within churches. Curran's evaluation of Taylor's Durkheimian scale points to a new cultural era when it comes to belief and argues that it has rewritten the definitions of the good and happiness.⁹⁰ This fits with Noble and Smith's contention that even religious belief and revival will not turn back the clock on the secularist framework in which expressive individualism flourishes.⁹¹ Taylor states it baldly, "Born-again Christians in the United States cannot help being somewhat influenced by expressive individualism."⁹²

Bellah and his co-authors posit that the influence of individualism on Christianity in America is in part due to the significance that biblical religion held in the American experiment from its earliest days.⁹³ They note how the biblical virtue of self-reliance was important for those sailing to a new land for religious freedom.⁹⁴ They also note how faith in America became increasingly privatized through the disestablishment of churches and "the peculiarly American phenomenon of revivalism."⁹⁵ "Already in the eighteenth century, it was possible for individuals to find the form of religion that best suited their inclinations," a trend which the authors of *Habits of that Heart* note as continuing into the

⁹⁰ Curran, "Expressive Individualism," 989.

⁹¹ Noble, *You Are Not Your Own*, 3; James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 23.

⁹² Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 497.

⁹³ Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 44.

⁹⁴ Bellah et al., 55–56.

⁹⁵ Bellah et al., 233.

twentieth century as Americans point to personal preference rather than church standards as determining their beliefs.⁹⁶

Some authors connect expressive individualism’s rejection of authority to contemporary responses to the institutional church. McCracken observes, “This anti-institutional shift—which positioned the individual as the primary arbiter of authority and meaning—has wrought havoc on churches and religious institutions during the last several decades.”⁹⁷ Burton notes how certain iterations of expressive individualism lead to the rejection of any affirmative declarations of doctrine.⁹⁸ Curran similarly writes that decalogue and even the gospel have been usurped as primary definers of the right and good.⁹⁹ Individual conscience has become the ultimate moral authority instead. Though less particularly doctrinal than Guelzo’s work, Curran points to the way the nature of belief has changed among Christians in America. While writing in in a European context, Stanton identifies similar patterns which have produced hostility toward Christianity and institutional churches, especially among youth.¹⁰⁰

Ministry in Light of Expressive Individualism

Much of the literature discusses ministry engagement rather than prescribing remedies for expressive individualism. Seeking the “genuinely missionary encounter”

⁹⁶ Bellah et al., 220, 224.

⁹⁷ Brett McCracken, “Church Shopping with Charles Taylor,” in *Our Secular Age*, ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 75.

⁹⁸ Burton, “Postliberal Epistemology,” 43.

⁹⁹ Curran, “Expressive Individualism,” 989.

¹⁰⁰ Graham Stanton, “The Glory of Kings: Dialogical Practices of Bible Engagement with Teenagers in a Culture of Expressive Individualism,” *St Mark’s Review* 240 (July 2017): 34–35.

that Newbigin says is needed to communicate the gospel to the Western world, the literature examines understanding the role of expressive individualism within the culture, to educate Western Christians on their cultural moment.

The most mentioned remedy is Christian community. Newbigin states, “In the missionary encounter between the gospel and our culture, the first party will be represented by a community,” because communities offer a plausibility structure for belief.¹⁰¹ Newbigin also contends that ecumenicism is imperative for faithful witness to the culture.¹⁰² Trueman says the larger church must demonstrate itself to be a community, with a focus on relationships, while Burton emphasizes the importance of a return to a sense of embodiment within community.¹⁰³ Stanton speaks of the formation of dialogical community as a space in which biblical teaching can be explored by those with an expressive individualism framework.¹⁰⁴

A few authors contend for the importance of physicality in responding to the influences of expressive individualism. For Burton, Christians must recover a mindset convinced that thought and rationality cannot truly be disconnected from embodied reality.¹⁰⁵ Trueman more broadly contends, “Protestants need to recover both natural law and a high view of the physical body.”¹⁰⁶ Kopic adds that a focus on our embodiment

¹⁰¹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 61–62.

¹⁰² Newbigin, 143–46.

¹⁰³ Burton, “Postliberal Epistemology,” 43.

¹⁰⁴ Stanton, “The Glory of Kings,” 37.

¹⁰⁵ Burton, “Postliberal Epistemology,” 44.

¹⁰⁶ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 405.

points to our creaturely dependence upon God, pointing to our identity as God-given rather than self-created.¹⁰⁷ For these authors, the limitations and situatedness of physicality better reflect the reality in which we are to make moral choices than individual will or sentiment. Trueman is not limited to the physical, though. He adds an ideological remedy not addressed in the rest of the literature, namely that Christians must reflect on how they are allowing aesthetics to shape their understanding of core Christian beliefs and principles.¹⁰⁸

Stanton alone offers concrete ministry responses to expressive individualism. Utilizing educational theory from Maxine Greene, he points to communities of dialog as significant to youth in their quest for meaning-making.¹⁰⁹ He stresses that Bible study with teen-agers should be dialogical, with the community working together imaginatively to discover meaning and promote further learning, rather than delivering predetermined conclusions. He connects this to the Reformed tenet of *semper reformanda*, wherein scripture has the final word per *sola scriptura*.¹¹⁰ Stanton's work is a realization of Newbiggin's hermeneutical circle operating in community, specifically oriented with respect to addressing expressive individualism.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Kopic, *You're Only Human*, 71.

¹⁰⁸ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 402.

¹⁰⁹ Stanton, "The Glory of Kings," 38.

¹¹⁰ Stanton, 42.

¹¹¹ Newbiggin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 55.

Summary of Expressive Individualism

The literature reveals a growing concern to understand the development and influence of expressive individualism. There is evident consensus that this paradigm shapes culture not only outside the Church but also within. American Christianity often demonstrates the assumptions of expressive individualism. What remains lacking are practicable ways of addressing this cultural reality when ministering to those shaped by expressive individualism.

Healthy Belonging Within Community

Though expressive individualism strongly shapes modern culture, all people live within various forms of community – whether defined by geography, ethnicity, or voluntary association. Strong connectedness to a network of people is described as social capital.¹¹² Social capital within a group can be described as belonging, the sense of the fit and connection of an individual within a network of relationships. Yet, many continue to feel isolated, marginalized, and disconnected from those communities.

This literature area examines the relationship between belonging and community and the experience of healthy community. What are the dynamics between existence in a community and the sense that people truly belong within that community? What challenges exist to the experience of belonging within a community? What are the factors of a community that offer belonging to those that would join the community? This

¹¹² Robert D. Putnam, Lewis M. Feldstein, and Don Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 2.

section examines the literature on the relationship between a community and people's experience of belonging within a community.

Challenges to Belonging in Community

Peter Block describes communities as the structures in which belonging can be experienced, and how healthy community is necessary for belonging.¹¹³ Multiple factors contribute to the challenges to the formation of healthy community.

Externalized Problems

Multiple authors point to the tendency to miss the challenge to community as the state of community itself, pointing to externals instead. Block writes, "Safety, jobs, housing, and the rest are symptoms of the unreconciled and fragmented nature of the community.... This fragmentation of breakdown creates a context where trying to solve the problems only sustains them."¹¹⁴ Jake Meador reflects this sentiment about community in the larger world. He denies the struggle of community as one of external secularizing forces, but "rather one of a comprehensive social breakdown that leaves no corner of life untouched, no person immune to its effects."¹¹⁵ Similarly, as Levin looks at the political context, he points out that the challenge to American institutions "is not the pressures we are under but the weaknesses of our institutions--from the family on up

¹¹³ Block, *Community*, xii.

¹¹⁴ Block, 34.

¹¹⁵ Jake Meador, *In Search of the Common Good: Christian Fidelity in a Fractured World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 44.

through the national governments, with much in between."¹¹⁶ There is a shared understanding that the challenge to the health and belonging within a community first comes from the nature and characteristics already present in that community.

Competition & Retribution

The literature also points to the related challenges of competition and retribution. Meador points to those that have a “zero-sum” view of common life ending up in competition within the community.¹¹⁷ With no shared common goals, “[t]here is only a bundle of competing private goods each individual wants for themselves. In the quest to obtain those goods, these people will compete with each other.”¹¹⁸ The result of this competition is retribution, according to Block, such that communities turn hostile. Greater monitoring and punitive responses result from fear of the problems at hand and the eternal forces at work.¹¹⁹ This retaliatory tendency is identified by Levin, who points to times when society responds to disappointment through “demolition crews of various sorts, promising to knock down oppressive establishments, to clear weeds and drain swamps and end infestations.”¹²⁰

M. Scott Peck draws the themes of competition and retribution together as he discusses stages in community formation. He describes how the surfacing of competing

¹¹⁶ Levin, *A Time to Build*, 22. N.B. Levin primarily uses the language of “institutions,” in a manner that corresponds to other authors’ discussion of “community,” as he sees institutions as structures of connectedness.

¹¹⁷ Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 62.

¹¹⁸ Meador, 101.

¹¹⁹ Block, *Community*, 34.

¹²⁰ Levin, *A Time to Build*, 5.

ideologies within a group is met with attempts to “obliterate” those competing ideologies from a “motive to win.”¹²¹ Sarah Schulman likewise connects competition and retribution, as she describes societal tendencies to escalate the normal conflict of competing visions and values to that of harm, which in turn is used to justify abusive response.¹²² Christine Pohl’s discussion of envy as chief among the challenges to community also brings these two themes together as she explains that envy is not only being jealous of others (competition) but is also a desire to see the good fortune of the other destroyed (retribution).¹²³

Focus on Past

Block and Levin identify a focus on the past as a hindrance to community health. Interacting with the work of Werner Erhard, Block contends that discontinuity with the past is necessary for a community’s future. “Whatever we hold as our story, which is our version of the past, and from which we take our identity, becomes the limitation to living into a new possibility.”¹²⁴ Levin parallels Block’s contention, arguing that many address present challenges with “a return or a reversal -- a recapturing of something lost that seems as impractical as unscrambling eggs.”¹²⁵ However, Levin is less pessimistic about

¹²¹ M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (New York: Touchstone Simon and Schuster, 1987), 91.

¹²² Sarah Schulman, *Conflict Is Not Abuse* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016), 11.

¹²³ Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2012), 46.

¹²⁴ Block, *Community*, 16.

¹²⁵ Levin, *A Time to Build*, 40.

the role of story for the future of a community, pointing to how story can serve as an inheritance for younger generations to learn from and build upon.¹²⁶

Service vs. Care

The substitution of services rendered versus care offered also inhibits community per Block, Meador, and Berry. Block summarizes:

As soon as you professionalize care you have produced an oxymoron.... Talk to any poor person or vulnerable person and they can give you a long list of the service they have received. They are well serviced, but you often have to ask what in their life has fundamentally changed.¹²⁷

This distance between service and the transformational nature of care is raised in Meador's discussion of isolation and loneliness. He points out the turn "to various professionals who can now be counted on to fill the roles once held by the organic communities we were born into."¹²⁸ Yet, service has not merely substituted for care. Meador points to a 3,206 percent increase in services in the same period in which the US population only grew by 134 percent.¹²⁹ Berry reflects the distinction between service and care through the lens of scope, noting how answers at the global or macro level "can only be statistical," resulting in collateral damage through actions taken, while care is offered through localized understanding and approaches.¹³⁰ Servicing of needs rather than relational care obstructs, rather than builds, community and belonging.

¹²⁶ Levin, 40.

¹²⁷ Block, *Community*, 13.

¹²⁸ Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 42.

¹²⁹ Meador, 43.

¹³⁰ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1993), 20.

Controlling Leadership

Various authors identify the nature of community leadership as a factor in community health. Levin notes the harm inflicted by leaders who see institutions as a means for performance and display rather than a community for formation.¹³¹ He further argues that communities seeking change and growth through solutions from “maverick outsiders” contribute to the problem, making themselves a platform for celebrity leadership.¹³² Block expresses similar concern for leadership that uses a community rather than serving it, pointing to the distinction between presiding over a community versus convening it.¹³³ There is a shared concern that leadership that seeks to control a community risks malforming it. Peck goes as far as to say that the exercise of a need to control, by leaders or those seeking influence in a community, is a “primary bugaboo.”¹³⁴

Forming Healthy Community

This section engages the factors identified by the literature as necessary in the process of forming healthy communities of belonging.

¹³¹ Levin, *A Time to Build*, 33.

¹³² Levin, 25.

¹³³ Block, *Community*, 88–89.

¹³⁴ Peck, *The Different Drum*, 98.

Positive Outlook

Much of the literature says that healthy community formation comes from prioritization of what is present and available rather than what is lacking or problematic. Block contrasts this approach with the that of prioritizing external challenges, such that healthy community formation requires a turn “from problems to possibility; from fear and fault to gifts, generosity, and abundance.”¹³⁵ Pohl reflects the need to focus on what is already present and positive as well, when she notes, “Wisdom and experience teach us that what is noticed and celebrated is usually also repeated.”¹³⁶ The authors of *Better Together* add that the identification of the presently positive not only serves to start healthy community but sets it up for endurance as well.¹³⁷

In addition to an outlook of possibility, some authors point to the importance of forming the community around the gifts and abilities already present among the people. Referring to the work of John McKnight on asset-based community development, Block points to the positive response to community formed through the mutual care through one another’s gifts, contrasted with waiting for professional services to meet needs.¹³⁸ Pohl reflects the positive response, observing, “People come to life, however, when they and their offerings are valued.”¹³⁹ However, she offers caveats lacking in Block’s discussion of asset-based formation. She cautions, “Not every gift is ‘just what we always wanted.’

¹³⁵ Block, *Community*, 47.

¹³⁶ Pohl, *Living into Community*, 7.

¹³⁷ Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, *Better Together*, 283.

¹³⁸ Block, *Community*, 13–14.

¹³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, ed. Geoffrey B Kelly, trans. Daniel W Bloesch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 4.

They can derail a worthy project or undermine the ethos of a community.”¹⁴⁰

Bonhoeffer’s discussion of community formation goes beyond valuing of peoples’ gifts and skills, to the necessity of viewing the people themselves as gifts.¹⁴¹

Structure

The literature attends to the importance of structure in healthy community formation in terms of space and size.

Space

The authors of *Better Together* indicate that meeting space, whether physical or virtual, is necessary for building of social connectedness.¹⁴² Meador is less sanguine about virtual meeting space, instead emphasizing the need for a community to be formed in connection to its geographic location.¹⁴³ Block goes beyond the availability of space and location to its arrangement. He notes the need to reconfigure physical meeting spaces to reflect the goals and values of a community – from architectural design to placing chairs in a circle.¹⁴⁴ Zygmunt Bauman likewise points not just to the availability of space but the right type of space. He warns against the spaces that give the illusion of community but offer homogeneity instead, being “tamed, sanitized, guaranteed to come

¹⁴⁰ Pohl, *Living into Community*, 37.

¹⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 4.

¹⁴² Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, *Better Together*, 291–94.

¹⁴³ Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 29–31.

¹⁴⁴ Block, *Community*, 145–47.

free of dangerous ingredients.”¹⁴⁵ Though not in full agreement about the nature and configuration of the relationship of a community to its space, the literature agrees that space for the group is important.

While not speaking of space like other authors Pohl identifies the regular practices of a community as serving to give it contour. She writes, “Practices are at the heart of human communities; they are things 'people do together over time to address fundamental needs.' Every community has practices that hold it together.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, a set of defined practice may serve as the “space” in which a community may function.

Size

In addition to the space utilized by a community, authors consider size an important factor for healthy community formation. Most authors assume or contend that smaller groups are better for community formation. Block says that groups should start small.¹⁴⁷ Levin argues that small groups are important because transformation comes more from “personal formation much more than social reform.”¹⁴⁸ He adds that small groups are important for belonging for in them, “[w]e can be known and appreciated, we can be missed when we are absent.”¹⁴⁹ While Levin notes the benefit for individuals, Putnam and his associates note the corporate value of a smaller group, writing, “The

¹⁴⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000), 99.

¹⁴⁶ Pohl, *Living into Community*, 5.

¹⁴⁷ Block, *Community*, 24.

¹⁴⁸ Levin, *A Time to Build*, 41.

¹⁴⁹ Levin, 176.

more extensive interchange that is possible in smaller groups makes it possible to discover unexpected mutuality in the face of difference.”¹⁵⁰ While the literature agrees that small is preferable, none of the authors provide parameters defining “small.”

Putnam and Levin agree that small groups can and should function within larger contexts. Levin argues that society united by common ideals is well served by a diversity of small groups pursuing diverse ends within the larger whole.¹⁵¹ Whereas, the authors of *Better Together* argue for smaller groups nested within larger ones because of the benefits of cross-pollination and the spreading of institutional knowledge.¹⁵²

Slow

Pace is also identified as a structural component of healthy community formation. Peck writes, “Beware of instant community.”¹⁵³ Meador agrees, asserting that relationships take time, and his descriptions of rootedness in a community necessitate large amounts of time.¹⁵⁴ The authors of *Better Together* likewise observe that healthy community formation is a time-intensive process. Their research suggests that the time it takes to form community would be well spent focusing on incremental, short-term goals as part of a larger vision.¹⁵⁵ None of the literature consulted suggests that healthy community formation is quick.

¹⁵⁰ Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, *Better Together*, 276.

¹⁵¹ Levin, *A Time to Build*, 42.

¹⁵² Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, *Better Together*, 278–79.

¹⁵³ Peck, *The Different Drum*, 88.

¹⁵⁴ Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 37–38.

¹⁵⁵ Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, *Better Together*, 287.

Characteristics of Healthy Community

The literature reviewed in this section covers various forms of healthy community: religious, civic, and social. They all share a sense of the common good, an ethos of hospitality, as well as an interplay of commitment and accountability.¹⁵⁶

Shared Common Good

Block, Levin, Meador, and the authors of *Better Together* describe shared pursuit of the common good as a characteristic of healthy communities.¹⁵⁷ The reasons differ among the authors as to why this factor is significant. Meador identifies this benefit as a reflection of the structuring of the larger world, writing, “[T]he world has an order to it, that we are part of that order, and that the order is far larger than we are.”¹⁵⁸ He contends that a lack of acknowledgment of the common good leads to competition rather than community.¹⁵⁹ Levin’s reasoning is based on personal fulfillment, describing the “personal satisfaction” that comes from serving a higher, common good.¹⁶⁰ *Better Together* describes the benefit of pursuing a common good as functional, because a

¹⁵⁶ In addition to the characteristics of the community itself, there are indicators of healthy community in individuals. Those that experience a sense of belonging within a social context exhibit higher functional confidence and self-esteem. Cf. Gregory M. Walton, David Paunesku, and Carol S. Dweck, “Expandable Selves,” in *Handbook of Self and Identity*, ed. Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney, 2nd ed (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), 142.

¹⁵⁷ Block, *Community*, 63; Levin, *A Time to Build*, 174; Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 29; Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, *Better Together*, 283.

¹⁵⁸ Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 125.

¹⁵⁹ Meador, 101.

¹⁶⁰ Levin, *A Time to Build*, 174.

shared agenda “has far more staying power than it would were it imposed from without or formulated in advance.”¹⁶¹ Though for different reasons, the literature identifies a shared sense of common good as a characteristic of health for a community.

Hospitality

Hospitality that welcomes people and their contributions is a component identified by multiple authors. Meador and Pohl discuss its importance as a Christian virtue for community.¹⁶² Pohl adds:

Communities in which hospitality is a vibrant practice tap into deep human longings to belong, find a place to share one's gifts, and be valued. The practice of hospitality reflects a willingness on the part of a community of people to be open to others and to their insights, needs, and contributions.¹⁶³

Pohl identifies hospitality as the offering of belonging for which so many are seeking. Block identifies hospitality along with generosity as “two elements that we want to nurture as we work to create, strengthen, and restore our communities.”¹⁶⁴ Beyond the feeling of welcome, Block adds that failure to be hospitable is a loss for communities:

The cost of our detachment and disconnection is not only our isolation, our loneliness, but also the fact that there are too many people in our communities whose gifts remain on the margin. Filling the need for belonging is not just a personal struggle for connection, but also a community problem...¹⁶⁵

According to Block, failure to be hospitable leaves a community impoverished.

¹⁶¹ Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, *Better Together*, 283.

¹⁶² Pohl, *Living into Community*, 159; Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 136–38.

¹⁶³ Pohl, *Living into Community*, 159.

¹⁶⁴ Block, *Community*, 3.

¹⁶⁵ Block, 2.

The practice of hospitality is accompanied by an attitude of appreciation of a diversity, per the authors of *Better Together*. They describe “bridging social capital,” which entails smaller communities valuing and engaging other groups within a larger community.¹⁶⁶ The authors contend that such appreciation of diversity opens the door to constructive dialog, rather than mere conflict, when differences manifest.¹⁶⁷

Pohl likewise addresses attitudes necessary to promote hospitable communities but goes beyond appreciation to gratitude. Pohl observes that gratitude promotes hospitality as it requires patience and slowing down to observe the gifts of others,¹⁶⁸ writing, “People come to life . . . when they and their offerings are valued.” Gratitude, hospitality, and belonging are drawn together as she states, “Human beings need a place in which they and their contributions are valued, and a hospitable community finds ways to value the gifts people bring.”¹⁶⁹

Commitment & Accountability

In addition to the hospitality which welcomes people into healthy community, much of the literature addresses the importance of commitment and accountability. Wendell Berry says, “A community cannot be made or preserved apart from the loyalty and affection of its members and the respect and goodwill of the people outside it.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, *Better Together*, 2.

¹⁶⁷ Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, 3.

¹⁶⁸ Pohl, *Living into Community*, 30.

¹⁶⁹ Pohl, 170.

¹⁷⁰ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, 121.

Levin and Block see commitment as intrinsic to institutions and communities with a shared common good, for it is the context in which people may devote themselves to their ideals.¹⁷¹ The constituent importance of commitment, especially in Christian community, is the character of the God of steadfast love and faithfulness, according to Pohl.¹⁷²

Meador and Levin add the importance of self-examination to the discussion of healthy community. Their discussions overlap in the questions that community members should ask themselves. Levin suggests that, in times of decision within a larger group, healthy community members ask, “What should I do here, given my role or position? As a parent, a teacher, a police officer, a scientist, a senator, or a pastor, what is my responsibility in this particular situation?”¹⁷³ Meador writes that membership in a community, “directs us to look at another life and ask, ‘What does it demand of me?’”¹⁷⁴ Meador and Levin’s work explains how self-examination undergirds commitment the community.

While much of the literature asserts the significance of commitment to community health, Pohl goes on to identify how it strengthens community. Pohl explains, “Commitments and promises that have been tested and proven are at the root of our ability to trust one another, and without some measure of trust, it is difficult to do much anything.”¹⁷⁵ She posits that commitment not only builds trust for a community but also

¹⁷¹ Levin, *A Time to Build*, 173; Block, *Community*, 24.

¹⁷² Pohl, *Living into Community*, 67–68.

¹⁷³ Levin, *A Time to Build*, 42.

¹⁷⁴ Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 127.

¹⁷⁵ Pohl, *Living into Community*, 63.

works against deception, which undermines and threatens community.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, Pohl points out vital roles necessary during challenging times. She writes, “In the midst of a crisis that is filled with confusion, it can be helpful to be faithful to the tasks we know need to be done.”¹⁷⁷

Freedom’s Relationship to Commitment

Cognizant of the cultural valuation of individual freedom, the relation of freedom to community commitment is also addressed in the literature. Block writes, “Choosing our freedom is also the source of our willingness to choose to be accountable. This insight is that freedom is what creates accountability. Freedom is not an escape from accountability, as the popular cultures so often misunderstands.”¹⁷⁸ Arguing from a theological perspective, Meador claims that freedom is not for oneself, but freedom is to be offered to others in the community. He writes, “The faithfulness of love will shape—and constrain—the freedom of love.”¹⁷⁹ For Block and Meador, freedom rightly understood contributes to the accountability necessary for healthy community.

Summary of Healthy Community

The literature reveals that belonging in healthy community results from communities that are open and inviting, while maintaining structure and commitment. A

¹⁷⁶ Pohl, 112.

¹⁷⁷ Pohl, 105.

¹⁷⁸ Block, *Community*, 21.

¹⁷⁹ Meador, *In Search of the Common Good*, 62.

community too narrowly constrained by its past, its leadership, or its expectations for the future is unlikely to offer healthy belonging. However, communities with a shared sense of common good and with practices that invite others in through hospitality and involvement tend to be much stronger.

The Communion of Saints

All those who confess the Apostles' Creed state belief in "the communion of saints." This phrase has been in the Apostles' Creed since the eighth century, with attestations dating back to the fourth century.¹⁸⁰ This section reviews the various understandings of the doctrine, its implications for worship, and its relation to church governance and discipline.

Doctrine of Communion of Saints

The phrase "communion of the saints" does not appear in the Bible. As such there are differing opinions as to the meaning of the doctrine and its relationship to the holy catholic church, the phrase which precedes it in the Apostles' Creed. Lamirande explains that the Council of Trent viewed the phrase as an explanation of what was said about the holy catholic church.¹⁸¹ Clark contends that communion of saints was not an explanatory

¹⁸⁰ Nithyananda Augustus Nathan, "The Origin and Development of the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints" (M.Phil. thesis, Queensland, Australia, Australian Catholic University, 2010), 13.

¹⁸¹ Emilien Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, Faith and Fact Books 26 (London: Burns & Oates, 1963), 106.

phrase but a new one.¹⁸² The Westminster Confession treats the doctrine in its own chapter, separate from that of the church.¹⁸³

Terminology

The term communion of saints comes from the Latin *sanctorum communio*. The word *communio* reflects the Greek word *koinonia* found in the New Testament. The literature agrees that the word is relational in nature but also reflects deeper connection. Barclay points out that it was often used in business relationships and partnerships,¹⁸⁴ while Nathan says that in Greek culture prior to the New Testament, it referred to "all forms of relationships which brought people together."¹⁸⁵ Nathan adds, "Paul's adaptation of *koinonia* as 'participation' or 'sharing' in the Lord's Supper is central to the theology of *communion of saints*."¹⁸⁶

The Catechism of the Catholic Church and Haymes point out that because *sanctorum* is a form that can be either a neuter or masculine, it can refer to holy things or holy people.¹⁸⁷ Haymes sees no conflict in assuming both per the biblical witness.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸² Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe? The Westminster Confession: Yesterday and Today* (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1965), 223.

¹⁸³ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 26.1-3.

¹⁸⁴ William Barclay, *The Apostles' Creed for Everyman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 291.

¹⁸⁵ Nathan, "The Origin and Development of the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints," 17.

¹⁸⁶ Nathan, 32.

¹⁸⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019), 247, <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/248/>; Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes, and Richard Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints: A Theology of Covenanted Disciples* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 21.

¹⁸⁸ Fiddes, Haymes, and Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints*, 21.

Lamirande reflects a similar comfort with multiple meanings, writing, “It can signify a share in the visible or invisible treasure of the Church; the relationship between Christians on earth; the relationship between the members of the Church militant, the souls in purgatory and the saints in heaven.”¹⁸⁹

There are different emphases in the literature concerning the meaning of saints when *sanctorum* is applied to people. Catholic literature often uses the words to describe particular Christians of the church triumphant who have been beatified. Protestant authors use the word to describe all Christians. Haymes notes that Baptist confessions use the word to describe living Christians, while understanding that those who had died had “not left the fellowship of the church.”¹⁹⁰ He points out that the use of “saint” in the New Testament corresponded to the call and purpose of God's holy covenant people in the Old Testament.¹⁹¹ Bird reflects a similar idea when he describes the holiness of the church as “something that is both a divine gift and an urgent task.”¹⁹² Petry describes Calvin’s earthly focus on the communion of saints as people pursuing, with divine power, the active way of sanctification unto which they had been individually and collectively called.¹⁹³ While Lamirande finds this understanding of saints appropriate to the holiness conferred on believers at baptism, he prefers to refer to saints as the beatified, preferring

¹⁸⁹ Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 115.

¹⁹⁰ Fiddes, Haymes, and Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints*, 10–11.

¹⁹¹ Fiddes, Haymes, and Kidd, 15.

¹⁹² Michael F. Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine through the Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 199.

¹⁹³ Ray C Petry, “Calvin’s Conception of the ‘Communio Sanctorum,’” *Church History* 5, no. 3 (September 1936): 230.

the word “faithful” for other Christians.¹⁹⁴ The authors agree that “saints” describes a holy people of God while focusing on different subsets of that group. Further discussion of the makeup of the communion of saints is below.

The Two Fellowships

The literature defines communion in terms of fellowship with God and fellowship among the saints. Nathan describes the communion of saints as “biphasic,” with horizontal and vertical elements wherein the People of God serve the common good of the earth and a common life in God.¹⁹⁵ While Bavinck’s discussion covers the same two elements as Nathan and the rest of the literature, he uses horizontal language to refer to those on earth and vertical concerning those saints already in heaven.¹⁹⁶

Communion with God

Though the literature shares inclusion of fellowship or communion with God in its discussion of the communion of saints, the emphases within that definition vary. The literature generally describes fellowship with God that centers on Christ. The chapter on the communion of saints in The Westminster Confession starts with, “All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with Him in His graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory.”¹⁹⁷ The Westminster Divines

¹⁹⁴ Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 108, 110.

¹⁹⁵ Nathan, “The Origin and Development of the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints,” 2–3.

¹⁹⁶ Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 201.

¹⁹⁷ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 26.1.

continue their focus on Christ as they frame the experience of communion among the church upon Christ.¹⁹⁸ Luther similarly focuses on Christ, saying, "All the saints, therefore, are members of Christ and of the Church, which is a spiritual and eternal city of God, and whoever is taken into this city is said to be received into the community of saints, and to be incorporated into Christ's spiritual body and made a member of Him."¹⁹⁹ Fellowship with Christ is central to fellowship with God throughout the literature.

Some authors expand on the nature of the fellowship with God by further discussion of the role of the Spirit in the communion of saints. Bonhoeffer credits the Spirit with establishing the bond among believers, the apprehension of the Spirit furnishing membership in the communion.²⁰⁰ The animating work of the Spirit is Lamirande's emphasis, for he writes, "The Spirit gives life and movement to the body and to each of its members, and thus ensures the cohesion of the whole."²⁰¹ Bavinck's discussion stresses connection with the Spirit as the basis of the gifts in which the church shares.²⁰² The Westminster Confession notes that it is through the Spirit that union with Christ is accomplished, and reflecting on the Confession, Hodge notes the role of the

¹⁹⁸ Westminster Assembly, WLC 69.

¹⁹⁹ Martin Luther, "A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament and Concerning the Brotherhoods," in *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes*, trans. J. J. Schindel, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, PA: A.J. Holman Company, 1915), 10.

²⁰⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1960), 116, 119.

²⁰¹ Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 80.

²⁰² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 299.

Holy Spirit in dwelling in and binding the saints together.²⁰³ Nathan uniquely stresses communion with God as a trinitarian fellowship. He writes, “It embodies the loving and living communion of the Trinitarian God, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the implications it has for our relationship as a New Being with God and between us as the chosen People of God.”²⁰⁴ He contends that the love shown in the communion of saints stems from participation in the love of the Trinity.²⁰⁵

Authors disagree about the nature of the communion saints experience with God.

The description of strongest participation in the godhead comes from Nathan. He writes:

For the salvation of the human person, within the ecclesial context, one receives a divine human nature or personhood; by being baptized into Christ. By sanctification Christians become the People of God. Ontologically, as a result of the transformation, a Christian acknowledges the reality that beyond the things that can be seen, tasted touched and heard: there is a God. In subscribing to the doctrine of *communion of saints*, the confessor ontologically enriches his interest in God and his relation to the world.²⁰⁶

No other authors go so far as describing the communion with God as ontological. While Lamirande also writes from a Roman Catholic perspective and acknowledges a mystical union with Christ in the body of Christ, he states that the conjunction is not ontological -- it does not result in a unity of being.²⁰⁷ The Westminster Confession likewise denies an ontological participation, stating, “This communion which the saints have with Christ,

²⁰³ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 26.1; Archibald Alexander Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding the Westminster Confession* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 324–25.

²⁰⁴ Nathan, “The Origin and Development of the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints,” 224.

²⁰⁵ Nathan, 123.

²⁰⁶ Nathan, 223.

²⁰⁷ Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 79–80.

doth not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of His Godhead.”²⁰⁸ Sproul and Van Dixhoorn echo the Confession stating that such a union is alien to scripture, with communion in Christ being according to his mediation, not his substance.²⁰⁹ These distinctions are reflected in the fact that the Incarnation does not factor in the discussion of most authors but is prevalent in Lamirande and Nathan.²¹⁰ Nathan contends that it is only through the Incarnation Christians are able to fellowship with God in Christ (not just be saved), saying, "The foundational link of the Incarnation and *communion of saints* cannot be overstated.”²¹¹ It is unclear whether other authors in the reviewed literature would disagree with Nathan and Lamirand; they just don't include the Incarnation in their discussions of the communion of saints.

Communion with the Saints

The literature emphasizes the nature and extent of the relationship the saints experience, which flows from union with Christ. “Because we are all image-bearers of God, our relationship with God flows out to other human beings. Religion cannot be purely individual and private.”²¹² This flow serves as majority of the discussion of the doctrine.

Nature of the Communion

²⁰⁸ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 26.3.

²⁰⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Layman's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 2007), 65–66; Chad B Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 354.

²¹⁰ Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 72.

²¹¹ Nathan, “The Origin and Development of the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints,” 188.

²¹² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:273.

The literature consistently describes the basic nature of the communion as spiritual, with the Holy Spirit establishing the relationship between fellow believers, as discussed above. The manner participants experience and express that communion is variously described. Love is mentioned throughout the literature as a primary factor in the fellowship of the saints. Barclay defines the communion of saints as “*the way in which Christian people in mutual care and love share everything with each other.*”²¹³ Across theological lines, Lamirande, Nathan, and the Westminster Confession describe love as the bond of the saints.²¹⁴ Similarly, Bonhoeffer describes the communion of saints as “the Christian communion of love,”²¹⁵ and Bavinck echoes the fundamental nature of love, writing, “The love that remains even when faith and hope disappear permanently unites all believers with Christ and each other.”²¹⁶ However, Bavinck and Bonhoeffer provide the caveat that love in and of itself is not what forms the bond, independent of the union to Christ by faith.²¹⁷ The *Catholic Confession* does not describe the bond itself as love but rather that the bond is expressed in charity and acts of love.²¹⁸

The literature draws on various scriptural metaphors to describe the communion of saints. The use of the metaphor of a body²¹⁹ is ubiquitous throughout the literature as

²¹³ Barclay, *The Apostles' Creed for Everyman*, 293. Emphasis original.

²¹⁴ Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 129–30; Nathan, “The Origin and Development of the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints,” 2; Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 26.1.

²¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, 125.

²¹⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:630.

²¹⁷ Bavinck, 4:300; Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, 122.

²¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 248.

²¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 12

descriptive of the communion of saints.²²⁰ In addition to the body, Luther uses the imagery of a city to describe the mutual need and aid of the saints.²²¹ Other authors speak of the communion of the saints with familial language, especially that of brotherhood.²²² Rupp and Trozzo highlight friendship as reflective of the communion of the saints, with Trozzo pointing to John 17 and the early church discussion of the communion of saints.²²³ The variety of images is not presented as oppositional but as assorted options used interchangeably.

Who Shares in the Gifts of Communion

The matter of who is included in the communion of saints divides the literature, and this division reflects theological distinctions. Catholic literature includes saints in the church militant (on earth), the church triumphant (in heaven), and in purgatory, though Nathan chooses to elide those in purgatory for the sake of his work.²²⁴ As Protestant theology rejects purgatory, it is not included. Another distinction exists regarding the

²²⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:273; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.VIII.12; Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, 324–25; Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 79; Luther, “A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament and Concerning the Brotherhoods,” 10; Nathan, “The Origin and Development of the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints,” 208.

²²¹ Luther, “A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament and Concerning the Brotherhoods,” 10–11.

²²² Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, 131; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.I.3; Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 123; Herman Amberg Preus, *The Communion of Saints* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1948), 123.

²²³ E. Gordon Rupp, *Last Things First* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1964), 16; Eric Trozzo, “Being Called Friends: The Friendship Metaphor for Saints in an Intercultural Context,” in *Communion of Saints in Context*, ed. Eric Trozzo, Cheong Weng Kit, and Joeferick Atang, Regnum Studies in Mission (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 9, 17. Trozzo explains that the disciples are Jesus’ friends through their participation in him through obedience to his word, thus friendship is a type of communion.

²²⁴ John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan, trans., *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish and Priests* (New York: Joseph F. Wagner Inc., 1934), 63, 99, 552; Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 95; Nathan, “The Origin and Development of the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints,” 9.

inclusion of angels among the communion of saints. While Catholics include angels, Reformed creeds and authors Luther, Calvin, Bonhoeffer, and Bavinck do not. However, Rupp, Barclay, and Speegle do.²²⁵ These distinctions lead to differences in understanding how the saints share their gifts and graces.

Sharing in the Gifts

The literature consistently speaks of the saints sharing in gifts (or graces). Bavinck explains that these graces (*charismata*), “include the benefits of grace imparted to all believers, but in a more restricted sense, those spiritual gifts that are granted to believers in variable measure and degree for each other’s benefit.”²²⁶ The literature also agrees that the gifts within the communion of saints are not merely for individuals but for the whole communion. Calvin focuses on God’s intent to supply the church. He writes, “God, indeed, measures out the gifts of his Spirit to each of the members, so that nothing necessary to the whole body is wanting, since the gifts are bestowed for the common advantage.”²²⁷ Preus presents the concept through the lens of recipient responsibility:

But the Communion of Saints is not only a treasure house of good things, which I am privileged to draw on daily. It is also a thing to which I can contribute by sharing what God has given me and by putting my shoulder under the burdens my brothers are carrying. We can call this an obligation if we wish. But to the friend of Christ, it is on a higher level than duty.²²⁸

²²⁵ Jonathan Speegle, “We Believe in the Communion of Saints: A Proposed Protestant Reclamation of the Doctrine.” (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2006), 283–84, <https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/handle/2104/4830>; Rupp, *Last Things First*, 15; Barclay, *The Apostles’ Creed for Everyman*, 298.

²²⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:299.

²²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.VIII.12.

²²⁸ Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 123.

While the literature agrees that the gifts are for the mutual good of the communion, authors differ in which gifts they emphasize and thus how those gifts are shared.

All authors include the sharing of both internal and external gifts and services as part of the sharing of the communion, with various emphases. Some sources, like The Westminster Confession, present a balance in distribution of spiritual and temporal gifts, stating, “Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities.”²²⁹ Lamirande diminishes the importance of the second category of gifts when he writes, “And not even the humblest area of temporal need is outside the communion of saints.”²³⁰ This comment contrasts with Bavinck’s focus when he says, “The church, however, is especially a this-worldly term, a fellowship of persons equipped with offices and ministries that function in the visible world as the gathered people of God”²³¹ The Westminster Confession offers the qualification that this tangible sharing does not remove personal property, with Van Dixhoorn arguing that the doctrine does not advocate for communism.²³² Even authors who vary in valuation of “this-worldly” gifts expect that such gifts within the communion will be shared without as

²²⁹ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 26.2.

²³⁰ Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 127.

²³¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:297.

²³² Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 26.3; Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 354.

well.²³³ Petry's argues emphatically that Calvin's understanding of the communion of saints was foundational to his ministry's outflow in pursuing broader social goods, such as hospitals, schools, and public sanitation.²³⁴

The literature agrees that those in the communion of the saints are to voluntarily enact the sharing of gifts. Various terms describe an offering, sharing, giving, and serving throughout. While still using such terminology, Leeman repeatedly uses the terminology of submission with regards to gifts and community.²³⁵ Lamirande and Nathan reflect the fault between Catholic and Protestant doctrine when they speak of meriting blessing for one another within the communion. Nathan describes the historical Catholic discussions of this belief, which Lamirande summarizes as applicable from below to souls in purgatory and from above in meritorious saintly intercession.²³⁶ Despite this divergence, authors of various theological stances agree that saints in glory are experiencing the fullness of the communion of saints.²³⁷

In addition, Luther, Bavinck, and Preus emphasize sharing in suffering as part of the communion of saints. Luther and Bavinck speak of bearing God's wrath in place of the brethren and sin-bearing as part of the work of the communion of saints,²³⁸ and Preus

²³³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:298; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 248; Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, 122.

²³⁴ Petry, "Calvin's Conception of the 'Communio Sanctorum,'" 236–37.

²³⁵ Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 199, 209–10, 340.

²³⁶ Nathan, "The Origin and Development of the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints," 164, 169; Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 138, 146–52.

²³⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:640; Speegle, "We Believe in the Communion of Saints," 95; Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, WLC 86.

²³⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:131; Luther, "A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament and Concerning the Brotherhoods," 12.

describes getting down into the muck and mire with neighbors.²³⁹ Luther gives a holistic description of the shared suffering along with shared benefits, writing:

To carry out our homely figure: it is like a city where every citizen shares with all the others the name, honor, freedom, trade, customs, usages, help, support, protection and the like, of that city, and on the other hand shares all the dangers of fire and flood, enemies and death, losses, imposts and the like. For he who would have part in the common profits must also share in the losses, and ever recompense love with love.....So, too, in our natural body, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians xii, where this sacrament is given a spiritual explanation: the members have a care for one another; whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; whether one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it.²⁴⁰

For Luther in particular, along with Bavinck and Preus, the sharing in suffering is an essential application of the communion of saints.

The literature also includes practical and active expressions of the communion through the giving of charity, sharing in property, and offering of service. A few authors suggest additional ministry applications of the doctrine. In addition to literature suggestions of helping those outside the communion, Frost adds that a proper understanding of the communion of saints leads to the development of public theology.²⁴¹ Also engaging cultural issues, Trozzo points to the biblical friendship within the communion of saints as an alternative to Confucian cultural limitations on intergenerational friendship or Western insistence upon egalitarian friendships.²⁴² Focusing more internally, Rupp argues that the nature of the communion of saints should

²³⁹ Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 125.

²⁴⁰ Luther, “A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament and Concerning the Brotherhoods,” 11.

²⁴¹ Will Frost, “A Lutheran Understanding of the Communion of Saints and Public Theology in Australia,” in *Communion of Saints in Context*, ed. Eric Trozzo, Cheong Weng Kit, and Joeferick Ating, Regnum Studies in Mission (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 45, 50.

²⁴² Trozzo, “Being Called Friends: The Friendship Metaphor for Saints in an Intercultural Context,” 22.

lead to the use of small groups within churches.²⁴³ Also speaking within the realm of the church, Gatawa explains the implication of the doctrine for ecumenical work, theologically and historically.²⁴⁴ With the exception of Rupp, these suggestions all appear in one work, indicating absence in the rest of the literature.

Communion of Saints and the Visible Church

This section reviews the literature on the communion of saints as it relates to the visible church with attention to the sacraments, governance, and discipline of the church.

The Visible Church and Sacraments

The literature presents various stances on the correlation between the visible church and the communion of saints, which corresponds in part to the earlier distinction between the phrases “holy catholic church” and “communion of saints.” Some authors present a strong tie between the communion of saints and the visible church. For Lamirande this applies to the Catholic church, saying, “Therefore, as with salvation in general, it may also be said: no communion of saints outside the Church. This is because the Church is the proper environment wherein supernatural realities are shared and where the relationship between persons resulting from this takes place.”²⁴⁵ This view echoes the *Catechism of the Communion of Saints* which places connection to the church through its

²⁴³ Rupp, *Last Things First*, 17.

²⁴⁴ Laurence Gatawa, “Unity and Diversity Among the Saints: Reflections on John 10:14-16, with Special Reference to the Confessions and Experiences of the Presbyterians in the Philippines,” in *Communion of Saints in Context*, ed. Eric Trozzo, Cheong Weng Kit, and Joeferick Ating, Regnum Studies in Mission (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 32–34.

²⁴⁵ Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 104.

sacraments as prior to one's union with Christ and communion with the saints.²⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer too, uses strong language associating the communion of saints with the visible church, stating, "A man who is not in the church does not live in communion with Christ; but a man who is in Christ is in both the perfected and the actualised church."²⁴⁷

Haymes notes the Baptist focus on individual profession of faith and voluntary membership, which correlates the communion of saints directly with autonomous local churches.²⁴⁸ So while the means of entry varies, these authors present strong identification between the communion of saints and the visible church.

Calvin, Bavinck, and The Westminster Confession distinguish the invisible church as the elect, who are known only by faith, and the visible church.²⁴⁹ Thus, only the regenerate elect have communion with Christ from which comes communion with the saints. Yet, this doctrine does not prevent these authors from describing a close approximation between the church and the communion of saints. Bavinck states, "The church is the communion of saints,"²⁵⁰ Commenting on the phrase "communion of saints" in the Apostles' Creed, Calvin writes:

Moreover, this article of the Creed relates in some measure to the external Church, that every one of us must maintain brotherly concord with all the children of God, give due authority to the Church, and, in short, conduct ourselves as sheep of the flock.²⁵¹

²⁴⁶ McHugh and Callan, *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 99–100, 105–6.

²⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, 116.

²⁴⁸ Fiddes, Haymes, and Kidd, *Baptists and the Communion of Saints*, 18, 20.

²⁴⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:291; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.I.7; Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 25.1-2, WLC 63.

²⁵⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:273–74.

²⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.I.3.

So, while these authors do not equate the communion of the saints with the visible church, they describe a close approximation.

Alternatively, Luther and Preus' description of Luther's theology describe a complete disconnect between the visible church as an institution and the communion of saints. Preus explains that Luther recognized only the invisible church, and what others call the visible church is only a manifestation of the invisible church gathered around Word and sacrament.²⁵² Luther elaborates this position when discussing excommunication, claiming that some may have spiritual fellowship but be under the ban, while others not banned may lack in spiritual fellowship.²⁵³

The literature's discussion of the sacraments and the communion of saints further describes the connection between the communion of saints and the church. The literature shares the importance of worship and the sacraments with regard to the communion of saints, echoing Barclay's contention that the communion meal is fellowship *par excellence*.²⁵⁴ However, authors disagree as to how they relate. For *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* and Lamirande, participation in the communion of saints comes through the sacraments.²⁵⁵ This view contrasts starkly with Protestant authors like Luther, Frost,

²⁵² Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 85, 89.

²⁵³ Martin Luther, "A Treatise Concerning the Ban," in *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes*, trans. J. J. Schindel, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, PA: A.J. Holman Company, 1915), 39–40.

²⁵⁴ Barclay, *The Apostles' Creed for Everyman*, 294.

²⁵⁵ McHugh and Callan, *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 105; Lamirande, *What Is the Communion of Saints?*, 121.

Calvin, Hodge, and Preus who see sacraments as signs and seals of covenant fellowship that already exists by faith.²⁵⁶

Authority and Discipline

The literature also discusses the relationship of the church to its discipline, discussing who has authority to govern the church and how that authority is to be exercised in discipline. Oden and Calvin explain that the church does not rightly exist without governance, but that the fellowship is spiritual governed.²⁵⁷ The ways that governance is described varies in the literature.

Whose Authority?

The literature agrees that Christ is head and king over the church, but the authors vary in how the authority of Christ is expressed in the governance of his church. *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* equates the rule of the Pope with that of Christ, with Christ as “the invisible head,” and the Pope as the “visible head,” asserting that “the visible head is necessary to establish and preserve unity in the Church.”²⁵⁸ Though varied in expression, the Protestant authors agree with Bavinck that Christ rules as king and

²⁵⁶ Frost, “A Lutheran Understanding of the Communion of Saints and Public Theology in Australia,” 48; Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, 324–25; Luther, “A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament and Concerning the Brotherhoods,” 11, 19; Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 29.1; Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 116.

²⁵⁷ Thomas C. Oden, *Corrective Love: The Power of Communion Discipline*, Concordia Scholarship Today (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 105; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.XI.1.

²⁵⁸ McHugh and Callan, *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 102.

“gave his church the power of government.”²⁵⁹ Bavinck explicitly connects this governance to the gifts of the church as the communion of saints:

We are all members of one another; we suffer and rejoice with one another; we have the ability and calling also to teach, admonish, comfort, and edify one another (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:11). There are gifts of guidance and government, which Christ by his Spirit distributes to the church and which he does not undo but keeps them on the right track by the offices (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:21).²⁶⁰

While agreeing with Bavinck about the church’s authority, Oden and Leeman describe different scopes of the authority of the church. Oden says it is a limited authority “to announce, convey, transmit, and effectively express God's own forgiveness to the truly penitent, or in the case of continued impenitence, to withhold the word of absolution.”²⁶¹ Leeman gives a more expansive description, delineating power to proclaim and protect the good news, affirm with joy those whose lives and faith indicate that they belong to Christ by uniting them to his body and family, unite believers to itself in embrace, provide oversight of children of God, bar and exclude imposters who would harm and degrade church.²⁶² While different titles of office and scope of ministry are offered for church governance, the Protestant literature describes such office bearers as authorized representatives of the church, not heads over it, with Bavinck, Calvin, and Oden particularly conveying this in the role of elder.²⁶³

²⁵⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:421.

²⁶⁰ Bavinck, 4:421.

²⁶¹ Oden, *Corrective Love*, 43.

²⁶² Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love*, 174.

²⁶³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:421; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.XI.1, IV.XI.6; Oden, *Corrective Love*, 154.

Matthew 16 & 18

The meaning and significance of Matthew 16 and 18, which both mention the church (*ekklesia*) and keys, figure throughout the literature's discussion of authority and discipline. In Matthew 16:18-19, Jesus says, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that the Church is built on Peter, and *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* clarifies that the authority Christ was given equally to the Twelve, but it was Christ's will "that it should be derived from one alone."²⁶⁴ Thus they present Peter as wielding the keys for loosing and binding. While Bavinck agrees that the keys are given to Peter in Matthew 16, he says it is only on the basis of his confession of Christ.²⁶⁵ Phillips offers a similar understanding, saying, "Peter is a solid rock for Jesus' building of the church only as he himself stands fast upon the great profession of faith."²⁶⁶ Preus says the authority of the keys given to Peter in Matthew 16 is not as Pope but as a representative of the church, and that the power of the keys is ultimately in the priesthood of believers, the communion of saints who offer gospel words of forgiveness upon confessions that Jesus is the Christ.²⁶⁷ Despite its dependence on Calvin and other

²⁶⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 141; McHugh and Callan, *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 103.

²⁶⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:339, 423–24.

²⁶⁶ Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Mark Dever, "Prologue: I Will Build My Church," in *The Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2004), 12.

²⁶⁷ Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 147, 162.

Reformed sources, The Westminster Confession alone claims with regard to church officers, “To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed.”²⁶⁸

Many authors build their argument that the authority of the keys of Matthew 16 ultimately belongs to the church on the practice of church discipline in Matthew 18. Calvin explains that the power of the keys to loose and bind is the power of God’s Word, but whereas it relates to preaching in Matthew 16, in Matthew 18 it “relates to the discipline of excommunication which has been committed to the Church.”²⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer likewise links Matthew 16 to Matthew 18, while adding in John 20:23. In so doing he grants the power of the keys to the communion of saints, saying, “No one can forgive sins but he who takes them upon himself, bears them and cancels them; thus Christ alone can do it. But this means that the church, as the *sanctorum communio*, can forgive sins.”²⁷⁰ While all the non-Catholic writers associate the power of the keys in Matthew 16 and 18 with the Word of God which the church proclaims, Bonhoeffer alone explains how the communion of saints functions to make this power effectual.

*Authority Exercised in Discipline*²⁷¹

The authority given to the church to bind and loose with regard to sin leads to discussion of how discipline is to be understood and enacted within the communion of saints. Authors present various purposes for discipline and its implications.

²⁶⁸ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 30.2.

²⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.XI.2.

²⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, 135.

²⁷¹ As this subsection must closely touches upon the subject of the overall research, the literature described is Protestant and primarily Reformed as according to the context in which the research is conducted.

Purpose of Discipline

A few authors connect the purpose of discipline to the relation of the communion of saints to the visible church. Bavinck, Hodge, and Sproul discuss the Reformed tendency to designate “holy living and church discipline as a key mark” for identifying churches faithfully expressing the spiritual reality of the communion of saints.²⁷² This mark is in addition to the two marks of the “word of God sincerely preached and heard,” and “the sacraments administer according to the institution of the church,” given by Calvin.²⁷³ However, Calvin’s contention that “the whole jurisdiction of the Church relates to discipline” would cohere with their opinion, though differently presented.²⁷⁴ And while not all authors use the language of holy living and discipline as a mark of true churches, they readily identify the holiness of the church and the individual saints within its communion as necessitating church discipline.

The authors present a variety of other purposes for discipline. Bird and Oden connect holiness and the church’s mission, necessitating discipline to maintain mission. As Oden writes, “Where admonition languishes, mission flounders.”²⁷⁵ Bavinck and Calvin add that the work of discipline is not just about maintenance of holiness but for the building up or edification of the church.²⁷⁶ Among the literature reviewed, The

²⁷² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:273–74; Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, 315; Sproul, *Truths We Confess*, 3:59.

²⁷³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.I.9.

²⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer, *The Communion of Saints*, 125.

²⁷⁵ Oden, *Corrective Love*, 136.

²⁷⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:423; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.VIII.1.

Westminster Confession presents the fullest set of reasons for church discipline, stating, “Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offences, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honour of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.”²⁷⁷

Exercise & Effects of Discipline

When it comes to the exercise of discipline, particularly excommunication, all but the Catholic authors clarify that discipline is not to be issued by any one person, per their discussion of the keys in Matthew 18. Other authors obliquely reference the idea, but Calvin and Oden overtly explain that the power to discipline is not coercive but declarative and dependent upon the power of God’s Word.²⁷⁸ Bavinck, Luther, Oden, Blue and White identify the importance of love motivating the administration of discipline.²⁷⁹ However, Luther emphasizes the goodness of excommunication enacted in love such that he writes, “It were indeed better if Christians were taught to love the ban rather than to fear it, as we are taught by Christ to love chastisement, pain and even death, and not to fear them.”²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 30.3.

²⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.VI.5; Oden, *Corrective Love*, 157, 206.

²⁷⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:421; Oden, *Corrective Love*, 154, 159; Luther, “A Treatise Concerning the Ban,” 47; John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded: The Costly Love of Church Discipline* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1985), 66.

²⁸⁰ Luther, “A Treatise Concerning the Ban,” 47.

Excommunication is generally the final and strongest censure of church discipline, wherein members are placed outside the fellowship, based upon Matthew 18:17, 1 Corinthians 5:2, and 2 Thessalonians 3:14. However, the understanding of what is accomplished by this act varies. Bavinck as well as White and Blue indicate the strongest sense of disjunction between the offender and the communion, with Bavinck describing it as the “termination of communion,” and White and Blue writing of the experience of “alienation” that should be different than a non-Christian would experience.²⁸¹ Luther presents a contrasting opinion, saying that excommunication can’t touch the fellowship with Christ and his saints, giving the illustration of prison wherein one may not enjoy outward companionship but still has the favor and friendship of others.²⁸² Calvin’s explanation of excommunication runs between the poles of Luther and Bavinck, when he writes that it “binds not by plunging into eternal ruin and despair, but condemning his life and manners, and admonishing him, that, unless he repent, he is condemned.”²⁸³ All authors agree that someone who has been excommunicated should not be admitted to the Lord’s Supper. While there is no contrary position presented in the literature, Luther insists that those under discipline have regular access to the preaching of the gospel.²⁸⁴

The literature argues that the hope of enacting discipline is restoration to fellowship and the Lord’s Table when “fitting acts of repentance and reparation are

²⁸¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:426; White and Blue, *Healing the Wounded*, 107.

²⁸² Luther, “A Treatise Concerning the Ban,” 39–40.

²⁸³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:IV.XI.2.

²⁸⁴ Luther, “A Treatise Concerning the Ban,” 54.

done,”²⁸⁵ in keeping with the authority to forgive sins. Yet, the literature generally lacks detail on the nature of restoration offered to those who have been excommunicated. Perhaps, because their work is the most practically oriented of the reviewed literature, White and Blue alone tease out further themes for restoration. They point to the need of the restoring communion to offer full reconciliation and engender freedom from fear for the restored.²⁸⁶

Summary of Communion of Saints

The literature shares an understanding that one saved by faith in Jesus experiences union with Christ and fellow saints. While there are more and less expansive definitions of who makes up the communion of saints, a mutual obligation of loving use of one’s spiritual and temporal blessings is expected because of this communion. The maintenance of the communion of saints comes through its governance and discipline, which is executed per authorial understanding of how Christ grants his authority among the communion of saints.

Summary of Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore how church members who have undergone church discipline and been restored describe their experience of the communion of the saints through the process of discipline and restoration. The literature review started with an examination of the development and impact of expressive

²⁸⁵ Oden, *Corrective Love*, 206.

²⁸⁶ White and Blue, *Healing the Wounded*, 39.

individualism. The second section included a review of literature discussing healthy community formation. Lastly, the theological concept of the communion of saints was investigated, including its implications for church governance and discipline.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how church members who have undergone church discipline and been restored describe their experience of the communion of the saints through the process of discipline and restoration. The assumption was that those who have been restored to church membership after discipline have an experience of church community and the communion of the saints that mitigates against the influences of expressive individualism in secular culture. Their church experiences presented opportunities to examine best practices for fostering the communion of the saints in an individualistic culture. Thus, a qualitative study was proposed as a means of gathering and examining the experience of such church members. To comprehend these experiences, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do church members describe their relationship to their churches prior to church discipline?
2. How do church members describe their relationship to God during the church discipline process?
3. How do church members describe their relationships to their churches during church discipline?
4. How do church members describe their relationships to their churches after the resolution of church discipline?

Design of the Study

In *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Sharan Merriam and Elizabeth Tisdell describe qualitative research as that which is “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience.”²⁸⁷ Merriam and Tisdell go on to identify qualitative research’s concern for meaning and understanding, the primacy of researcher as instrument, an inductive process, and rich description as key to qualitative research.²⁸⁸ Thus, qualitative research is well-suited to investigate the experiences of church members and how they determined and found meaning within a church community through challenging circumstances.

This study utilized a basic qualitative research approach, conducting semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data collection. Interviewing was selected since the researcher could neither observe the feelings or thought processes of people, nor be present for past events.²⁸⁹ This qualitative method of data gathering provided for in-depth access to thought processes, feelings, and experiences through disclosure from those who had gone through the phenomena of church discipline and been restored to the church community.

²⁸⁷ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Fourth edition, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 6.

²⁸⁸ Merriam and Tisdell, 15.

²⁸⁹ Merriam and Tisdell, 108.

Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants able to communicate in depth about their experiences and relationships in the context of a church as an expression of the communion of the saints. Therefore, participants were selected according to nonprobability sampling.²⁹⁰ The study sample consisted of seven members of Reformed churches who had been formally disciplined and been restored to membership in their church or denomination.

Participants were sought to represent a typical sample of adult members of churches who had been restored after church discipline.²⁹¹ Network sampling was utilized to identify and contact potential participants who met the typical sample criteria. Sample participants varied in age, gender, and geographic location within the United States to provide maximum variation in perspectives on community. A second tier of sample selection was used within the larger case sample.²⁹² The sample was also based on membership at a church in a Reformed denomination to minimize variables in the doctrine and principles of church discipline, since these variables are not a factor being examined, and thus to provide the data focused on the experience of the communion of the saints in these churches.

The research was reviewed to determine potential risk to participants and determined to present minimal risk to participants. The determination was made based on

²⁹⁰ Merriam and Tisdell, 96.

²⁹¹ Merriam and Tisdell, 98.

²⁹² Merriam and Tisdell, 99.

criteria of the exchange of personal information, the slight inconvenience of an hour interview, and the inquiry into participants' personal experiences, behaviors, and beliefs.

The participants were invited via an introductory letter, followed by a personal phone call. Invitees who expressed interest gave written, informed consent to participate. Each participant signed a "Research Participant Consent Form" to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants. They also received a demographics form to fill out (Appendix A).

Participant Letter

[Date]

To [Potential Participant]

As we have discussed, I have been working on a Doctor of Ministry at Covenant Theological Seminary during these last three years. I am now beginning research for the dissertation and am hopeful you will participate. My research topic concerns the communion of the saint in a culture of expressive individualism. I am particularly interested in healthy church discipline as a counter-indicator to expressive individualism. I am pursuing a qualitative study, meaning I will be analyzing interviews with people who have undergone church discipline and been restored discuss with me how they experienced about church community. I will then compare the interview information with published research on expressive individuals, healthy community formation, and church discipline as it relates to the communion of saints.

This research requires participants who have undergone church discipline in a Reformed church and been restored to full fellowship. I will interview those interested about their experiences related to church community before, during, and after the discipline and restoration processes.

To complete my degree in a timely fashion, I want to conduct during this month. When I have finished the research, I will be eager to share my results and conclusions with you, if you are interested.

If you choose to participate with me, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Complete the enclosed consent form
2. Complete a one-page demographic questionnaire
3. Discuss your experience of church community in the church in which you underwent discipline with me for an hour and a half in a recorded interview
4. Possibly review relevant sections of my written report to check for accuracy and completeness.

Participation is wholly voluntary, and participants are free to withdraw at any time. In order to provide participant anonymity, I will not report names with responses. Please be assured that any information that you provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Pseudonyms will be used in all written material in this study. Please contact me if you have any questions regarding this research. Thank you for your interest and consideration. Your assistance is crucial in helping me with this research. I appreciate your time very much! I will call in a couple of days to ask for your decision about participating.

Sincerely,

Ian G. Hard
319-855-2748
pastorianhard@gmail.com

**RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Ian Hard to investigate experiences of the communion of saints through church discipline and restoration for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of the research is to investigate church community in individualistic culture through the lens of church discipline.
- 2) Potential benefits of the research may include identification of best practices for the development of church community that expresses the communion of the saints and pastoral care for individuals undergoing church discipline. Though there are no direct benefits for the participants, there may be encouragement from sharing experiences with an attentive listener who is seeking to learn from those experiences.
- 3) The research process will include a single, hour-long, audio recorded interview with eight participants.
- 4) Participants in this research will share their experiences and observations about their church community and discipline process.
- 5) Potential discomforts or stresses: The interview may touch on memories and experience that are potentially uncomfortable for the participants.
- 6) Potential risks: Minimal – The participant may be inconvenienced due to the hour length of the interview and will be sharing personal information regarding their background, experiences, and beliefs.
- 7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
- 8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
- 9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

Printed Name and Signature of Researcher

Date

Printed Name and Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; ⁷⁴Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

Data Collection

This study used semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The semi-structured approach allows flexibility for the researcher to provide prompts and further questions to the respondents during the interview.²⁹³ The researcher designed the interview protocol to be open-ended to avoid non-descriptive answers, such as a simple yes or no.²⁹⁴ The researcher used prompts to elicit further details when there appeared to be more detail and description available from the participant.²⁹⁵

The literature provided direction for the original protocol. The researcher evaluated the questions in the interview protocol by conducting a pilot test and then adjusted for clarity and focus. As data analysis began using the constant comparison method, the researcher revised the protocol to better pursue pertinent data according to the data coding and categorization in process.²⁹⁶

The researcher interviewed eight participants for one hour each. The researcher coordinated with participants by phone and email to schedule the eight interviews within a six-week period. The researcher sought to present an open and nonjudgmental countenance during the interviews to put the participants at ease and not unduly introduce any sense of positional disparity (see Researcher Position below).²⁹⁷ The researcher digitally recorded the interviews with a voice recording application via cell phone. The

²⁹³ Merriam and Tisdell, 110.

²⁹⁴ Merriam and Tisdell, 202.

²⁹⁵ Merriam and Tisdell, 122.

²⁹⁶ Merriam and Tisdell, 197.

²⁹⁷ Merriam and Tisdell, 129.

researcher took jot notes during the interview, and then recorded further observations and field notes after each interview was complete.

The interview protocol contained the following questions and prompts.

1. Tell me about a time you felt connected to the church early on in your time there.
2. What are some of the events that were significant to your sense of belonging at your church?
3. What are some of the ways the church has helped your relationship to God?
4. What are some of the feelings towards God you experienced during the discipline process?
5. How did the leadership at your church first address the issue for which you were disciplined?
6. Tell me about a time during the discipline process that stands out to you.
7. What were some of your motivations to stay at your church after the discipline process was resolved?

Data Analysis

The recording of each interview was submitted the same day to be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Within a week of receiving each transcript back, the researcher reviewed the transcript while listening to a recording of the interview and made appropriate corrections to the transcript.

After each transcript was revised, the researcher began to analyze the data, using the constant comparison method. The researcher examined the transcripts for “recurring

regularities in the data.”²⁹⁸ The researcher identified and revised categories and subcategories upon reviewing each transcript. Informational units coded and cataloged in an Excel® spreadsheet according to categories and subcategories. After all the interviews were complete, the totality of the data was once more categorized using the constant comparison until saturation method, until no further categories were found to add to the scope of the research.²⁹⁹ The analysis focused on key similarities in various participant experiences and thought processes. Strong discrepancies and divergent categories were also noted.

Researcher Position

Researchers conducting interviews serve as primary instruments for data collection in qualitative research.³⁰⁰ Thus, it is salient to identify key factors of background and context that may introduce biases on the part of the researcher.

The researcher in this study grew up in a Reformed and evangelical denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America. He presently serves as an ordained pastor in that denomination. This gives him both affinity and knowledge of the context of those who were interviewed. This background includes knowledge of both doctrinal standards as well as approaches to formal church discipline. The researcher’s position as a pastor also introduced motivation to find best practices to support community and the communion of saints in the church.

²⁹⁸ Merriam and Tisdell, 203.

²⁹⁹ Christina Bader Johansson, “Introduction to Qualitative Research and Grounded Theory,” *International Body Psychotherapy Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 97.

³⁰⁰ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 122.

As a pastor the researcher also engaged in church discipline at the local church and presbytery level. This position gives the researcher insight into such processes. The researcher as church authority and the participants as those disciplined by church authorities introduce potential biases and assumptions, particularly in data analysis. It is possible that participants may have given answers shaped by this disparity in position and experience.

Study Limitations

As stated earlier, participants interviewed for this study were chosen from among those who had undergone discipline in a Reformed church and chosen to remain a part of the congregation. Therefore, the data collected is limited to the context of Reformed churches within America. Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other evangelical or elder-led churches in America. Churches with similar theology and structure in individualistic contexts outside of America may also find pertinence in some of the study's findings. The study results may also have implications for para-church organizations and ministries seeking to foster strong Christian community and mutuality, such as Christian schools or missionary agencies. As with all qualitative research, those seeking to apply the findings are in the best position to determine the situational similarities to determine transferability.³⁰¹

³⁰¹ Merriam and Tisdell, 254.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how church members who have undergone church discipline and been restored describe their experience of the communion of the saints through the process of discipline and restoration. This chapter provides the findings of the seven interviews and reports themes and observations pertinent to the research question. The following research questions guided the qualitative research, in order to address the purpose of this study.

1. How do church members describe their relationship to their churches prior to church discipline?
2. How do church members describe their relationship to God during the church discipline process?
3. How do church members describe their relationships to their churches during church discipline?
4. How do church members describe their relationships to their churches after the resolution of church discipline?

Introductions to Participants and Context

The researcher selected seven participants who had been disciplined by their churches and restored or remained throughout the process. They were all from churches in America with elder-led church polities and Reformed theologies of salvation. Their churches varied in size from under one hundred to over six hundred members, located in small town, suburban, and urban settings in New England, the Mid-Atlantic, South, and

Midwest. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect confidentiality. Those interviewed were at their churches from two years to over twenty years before their matters of discipline. The participants experienced various forms of discipline from formal admonition, through loss of ministry position, and as far as excommunication from their churches. The duration of their various discipline processes ran from a few weeks to multiple years. The participants ranged in age from mid-20s through 70s. Five of the participants were men (Josh, Mark, David, Brad, and Isaac), and two were women (Joy and Beth). Brad was the only pastor among the participants. He was disciplined by the presbytery, which served as his church, and the data collected relates to the presbytery and the church within which he served during his discipline and restoration.

Relation to Church Prior to Discipline

The first research question determined “How do church members describe their relationship to their churches prior to church discipline?” Participants were asked to describe ways they experienced love since believers are “united together in love” per the Westminster Shorter Confession’s discussion of the communion of saints. The interview data coalesced around time together, the types of people they had relationship with, and what was shared among the community of their respective churches.

Togetherness

All the participants regularly attended worship at their churches prior to discipline. While a few of the participants talked about phone calls and texts, they all included physical togetherness as significant in the way they related to their churches.

Though the amount of time the participants had been a part of the church varied, they all described their relationship to the church outside of Sunday mornings. As Isaac put it, he felt most connected to the church through “activities outside of worship.” Participants frequently used phrases like “with me,” “was there,” “hang out,” and the word “together,” to describe their relationship to church.

Invitation

Participation in the life of the church and time together was often based on invitation of others, echoing the literature’s thematic focus on hospitality and “making space” to form healthy community. These invitations were purely social at times. Mark spoke of being welcomed into an older friend’s apartment, and Beth spoke of multiple families “just talking with me, pursuing me, having me over.” When David was new to the church, he appreciated a leader who “made the effort to help me acclimatize to this life in the USA, taking me to soccer games and things like that.” Opportunities for social connection did not just happen but were the result of invitation and pursuit.

Time spent together in ministry and service was often the result of personal, invitation as well. Beth, David, Isaac, and Mark mentioned that they were invited by peers or leaders into ministry time with others. Mark noted how he might have been less involved if not “for that push” from one member just a few years older than him. By virtue of the numerous invitations, “He took me out of my comfort zone a lot, which was what I needed.” For some, like Mark, the invitation into ministry afforded connections that turned into friendship and other personal connection.

Individual & Corporate

The time spent with others in the church was consistently described as both individual and corporate, in-person in small groups and larger. When talking about his connection to the church, Isaac described the importance of time spent with an individual, working on a house together. “We did that night after night. For weeks...Of course, that time was filled with being together, and talking about things...It was just the two of us down there and doing this horrible job. It brought us quite close.” Joy and Brad highlighted time spent with individuals in the church, the pastor’s wife and pastor, respectively. However, they didn’t mention time with individuals exclusively.

Many of the participants mentioned time together with various sized groups. Isaac and Beth primarily mentioned times with very small groups and then large churchwide groups, without mentioning groups of medium size. Joy and Brad highlighted time with groups of three to five individuals. Josh spoke of time together with a gamut of people, from individuals to three or four men, to larger fellowship groups, and the whole of the church. While there was variety in the size of groups mentioned, no one focused exclusively on being with the whole church. This finding coheres with the literature’s contention that small groups are helpful for community formation, and that those small groups function well when existing within a larger group. The time together with individuals and variously sized groups shaped participants’ connection to the whole of the church body.

Presence: Embodied & Beyond

All the participants spoke of bodily presence as significant to their sense of relationship to their church community. The mentions of phone calls or texts did not

correspond with discussion of people being “with them” or “present.” The discussion was always of physically proximate togetherness, most frequently eating together. David, Joy, Beth, and Brad all mentioned getting coffee or sharing meals as points of connection. Physical activities were also commonly mentioned—walking by Joy, shooting guns by Mark, and construction by Isaac and Josh.

As participants mentioned the embodied presence of others, they often indicated the spiritual care they received through that presence. This was evident in the way participants often stressed the word “with” in tone and the weight given the word. Isaac said:

If a disaster happened in a family, like a miscarriage, or something like that, or if any event happened that was otherwise disruptive in the family, like the birth of a child. *The community was there.* They were right there, whether it was tragedy, or joy. They were right there, to share it with you.

For Isaac and the others, presence conveyed communion.

While time together with others was a consistent factor in connecting the participants to their churches, the amount of time did not seem to be a factor. Due the widely disparate time periods of attendance prior to discipline, the research does not indicate that longevity at a particular church was a necessary factor for their experience of and response to discipline.

Bonded by Character over Demographics

As participants described their relationships to their churches prior to discipline, they described connections shaped by shared experiences, that resulted in bonds beyond membership, which included individuals of influence and character,

Shared Experiences

Though the researcher did not ask questions about church demographics, age was mentioned often by interviewees. Joy, Isaac, and David primarily spoke of relationships with people close to their age. Mark, Beth, Josh, and Brad mentioned ages across a “broad spectrum,” as Mark put it. Yet, a further review of these demographic connections revealed that the participants all noted shared experience across ages and stages in life.

Some of the shared experiences were contemporaneous—whether the age was or not. Joy mentioned connecting to couples who were having kids at the same time and that “we had miscarriages, grief that we connected maybe on that level a little bit.” Isaac used the word “homogeneity” to describe his group, but the similarity he went on to discuss was experiential. “They were primarily men that were experiencing a lot of the same things that I was. And with whom I could share a lot about all the things—emotionally and mentally, and intellectually—that were going on in our lives.” But for Beth, her connection was to a member on the staff twenty years her senior. They shared a significant ministry event, which they often discussed long afterwards.

Some of the shared experiences were separated by time. Mark said that when he was younger, he connected with older students who had recently gone through similar life experiences, as well as with those who were twice his age. For David, a particular relationship was significant because of shared experiences an older pastor had with mental illness in his family. The shared experiences created bonds despite distance in time passed and ages of those involved.

More than Fellow Members

As participants described their connections to their churches, they spoke in language above and beyond that of shared membership. Many of them spoke of love from individuals and groups in their churches—consistent with the Westminster Confession’s definition of the communion of saints being united in love.

Many participants used familial language. While Isaac stressed the commitment of his membership vows, he did so by connecting it to the image of a marriage ceremony. Josh spoke of being fathered by older men in the church, and Beth described the church as a “third parent.” Isaac spoke of the church as his brothers and sisters, while Mark spoke of experiencing “genuine brotherhood.”

Beth experienced many bonds as a form of mentorship and mentioned more than once the experience of being invested in. Josh also used the language of being invested in. Their connection to the church allowed them to see themselves as worthy of people’s investment, with the attendant commitment to see growth and fruit.

Individuals of Influence and Character

All but one of the participants also highlighted the examples and character of significant individuals. For most, the influential figure was a pastor or staff member. They noted multiple attributes, but consistently these leaders were caring. Josh felt care through demonstrated faithfulness. For Beth and David, care came through investment of time and effort. For Brad, the influential pastor’s care came across as love: “What was most attractive was that he really loved people and I knew he really loved me.” The care of pastors and leaders connected the participants to the church as a whole.

Sincerity was a commonly mentioned character trait among individuals (leaders or laymen). Mark spoke of an individual who was “unashamed” of who he was. Joy and Brad highlighted individuals who were “real.” Participants used similar descriptors such as “honest,” “open,” “genuine,” “sincere,” and “transparent.” Joy and Mark pointed out that the sincerity of these individuals opened up connection because they were “relatable,” which Joy said, “makes you very comfortable to be yourself.”

The connection between union with God and fellow Christians in the communion of saints was evidenced in the influence of certain individuals of character. These key individuals modeled a relationship with God that shaped participants’ connection to the churches through their own strengthened faith. For Brad, he recalled his godly parents and grandparents, who prompted him to connect to similar Christians. Mark spoke of a “very-gospel centered” peer. And Josh identified multiple “godly examples” among the congregation and his pastor, who “was always very open about the gospel.” Brad summarized the effect when speaking of his pastor being “so committed to the gospel.” Brad said, “I just fell in love with him and ate up everything he would be dishing out to me.” As participants were pointed to God by others, they were better connected to their church community.

Mutual Edification

An additional factor mentioned by participants in connection to their churches was mutual edification. This building up came through mutual service and the giving of inward and outward gifts. Their descriptions comport with the Westminster Confession’s statements that saints by profession are bound “in performing such other spiritual services

as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities, and necessities.”

Service

Participants noted a few occasions in which they were served by people in the church, such as being helped after an injury or assisted with moving furniture when relocating homes. However, as participants described their connection to their churches prior to discipline they primarily emphasized their opportunities to serve the church, both the whole congregation and individual members

Service within the context of ministry and worship services was a common thread of connection. Josh spoke of cleaning and setting up chairs for their worship service. Beth and David mentioned volunteering in their youth programs. Service in music ministry connected David, Mark, and Isaac to their churches. Isaac served on the church’s music ministry team for decades and noted it was not just the service that mattered but the opportunity for closeness afforded by the mutual service. He stated, “The musicians were a little bonded group of their own, with their own shared experiences and delights and struggles.”

The connection through service went beyond bounds of worship and church ministries. Josh, Mark, and Isaac mentioned helping people in the church with various repair and construction needs. Isaac also mentioned the many times he helped people move homes and carry heavy appliances, because they could not afford to pay movers or pay for delivery fees. These opportunities to serve people, often alongside other members of the church community, built connection for these men.

A change of responsibility to serve also shaped connections for some participants. Beth, Josh, and Brad were staff or officers in their churches prior to discipline. Brad was hired to the church from outside as an assistant pastor. But Beth was hired, and Josh ordained as an elder in the churches in which they were already members. Beth and Josh both noted the change this had. Beth said, “Definitely being on staff deepens all those connections.” Josh stated, “When I became an elder, it was a whole other level of responsibility and knowing more intimate details of the families and the eyes that were on you.” The higher expectations for leaders resulted in more access and expectation of deeper connections.

Gifts and Graces

The participants also received tangible gifts and noted being blessed by the spiritual graces of others. Tangible gifts, such as those given at a baby shower for Joy, flowers to David’s wife, and meals brought to Mark when he was unwell, communicated caring fellowship. Others were blessed through indirect giving, largely financial. Josh mentioned people in the church that bought vegetables from his stall or just outright paid repair and utility bills. Giving occurred in response to overt needs and as unprompted expressions of care.

Spiritual gifts and graces also strengthened participants’ connections to their churches, consistent with the literature’s conclusions from Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12. Brad mentioned the gift of preaching and preachers from prior churches, as well as the one at which he served just prior to discipline. For Mark, the prayers of others were a spiritual gift he strongly valued and benefitted from. Beth noted her pastors’ joy, which shaped the vision and values of the church community, herself included. Spiritual graces

also came in response to needs of participants, most notably through forgiveness for Josh and Isaac. Josh noted the forgiveness he received from his wife after an affair, and Isaac spoke of the exchange of forgiveness within the music team. “People were just messing up or just being bad. What held us together was constant forgiveness... It required forgiveness, and forgiveness was always granted.” The exercise and giving of spiritual gifts by others strengthened the participants’ union to their churches.

While participants mentioned that they regularly attended worship, none described worship or celebration of sacraments as connecting them to their churches. The researcher offered no overt questions about worship or the sacraments, nor did the participants deny their significance. However, they never volunteered them as a category of spiritual connection to their churches.

Summary of Relation to Church Before Discipline

The participants related to their churches for differing amounts of time and intensity before their discipline. However, they shared multiple factors as significant to the connections they had. They stressed time together with others in the church, individuals, and groups of various sizes. Participants varied in how they related to the age and stage demographics of their churches but highlighted shared experiences with others. The exchange of service and gifts, physical and spiritual, also deepened participants’ bonds to their churches.

Relation to God During Discipline

The second research question sought to determine how participants described their relationship to God during their discipline. It explored how discipline as an act of

the church community through its representatives impacted participants' connection to God. The forms and duration of the discipline process varied. For some it was a matter of a few weeks, and for others, multiple years. This section reviews the participants' posture toward God, their perception of God's posture toward them, their pursuit of God, and their retrospective reflections on their relationship with God during discipline.

Posture Towards God

Participants had a range of thoughts and experiences about God during their discipline processes. None questioned the existence of God during their discipline. Even Joy who retrospectively questioned whether she was a Christian prior to the resolution of her discipline process, treated God as if he were real.

Most participants shared some form of confused or negative feelings towards God. These corresponded to the severity of the discipline. On the lesser side, Beth questioned what God had for her, and David mentioned "There was a couple days in there where my flesh, my sin was angry, and there was temptation to be bitter." Mark likewise expressed confusion, saying, "My view of God became very distorted" even though he also noted, "There shouldn't have been a question of who God was to me." David connected the confusion and anger together, saying, "And so, during that time, I think I really was questioning God, I was angry or confused." Joy, who was under excommunication for a number of years said that she "felt betrayed by God and angry." She went so far as to say she was "just livid." So, while the participants acknowledged God as real and present, they often were confused as to how they should feel about him, with those under the most severe discipline having the strongest negative feelings.

Perceived Posture of God

While some focused on their thoughts about God, others described their perception of God's posture toward them. Mark who had felt confused about God, also wasn't sure about how God felt about him. He felt as if their relationship was "very conditional," with Mark needing to earn his way back. He decided to take fewer risks that could lead to death because, he said at that time, "I can't be totally confident that I would be in heaven."

Isaac and Josh focused on how they thought God related to them. They felt assurance of God's loving presence and care. Josh shared, "I just had this image of God wrapping his arms around me like a kid, and holding me close and saying, 'Don't worry, I got this.'" The experience of discipline demonstrated God's care in Isaac's eyes, proof that God hadn't given up on him. "I don't want to deal with you anymore, you're too much trouble.' He never said that. I never thought he said that." The discipline process did not negate Isaac or Josh's sense of God's love for them, despite its profound difficulty.

Pursuit of God

Despite a range of confusion and negative feelings, most participants still valued and pursued the things of God during discipline, reflecting Luther's view on communion with God while under the ban. Many continued to avail themselves of spiritual practices commonly referred to "means of grace." Most frequently attended worship services (at their church or others) during discipline. Similarly, most noted that they prayed throughout the process. Josh said, "It felt wrong in so many ways to say, to be praying to God while you're drunk. And yet I didn't feel rejected." Mark mentioned that he read the

Bible during his discipline. Though Joy spent a long time away from public worship, after attendance of a service that prompted a desire for restoration, she spent time fasting, praying, and going to scripture while still under discipline.

In addition to taking advantage of the means of grace, participants also valued certain aspects of God's priorities. As Mark was going through discipline, he appreciated godly qualities he saw in other people. Speaking of the character of a young woman, he said, "This is something that I would—the Lord would have for me, in a wife someday." Obedience to God was still a quality he found worthwhile. While Joy was still in the midst of her discipline and not going to church, she recognized her need for counseling and pursued a Christian counselor to advise her. Though angry at God and not spending time in worship, she valued the perspective of someone else who did trust the Lord.

Retrospective Reflections

When asked about their relationship with God during discipline, participants frequently went back and forth between what they were experiencing at the time and how that experience shaped their relationship with God afterwards. It was often hard for them to distinguish between the two time periods. As these reflections were not based on their experience of restoration and communion with fellow saints after discipline but retrospective thoughts on their relationship to God through discipline, the findings are shared here.

God's initiative for their sake appeared throughout the participants' responses. Josh and Joy spoke of feeling as if God and the Holy Spirit were speaking to them as they approached turning points in their discipline, telling them what to do. Multiple participants described God at work, saying God "used" the circumstances and the process

to achieve something in their lives. As Mark reflected, it was not so much his activity that got him through but God's. He reflected, "I could have given up and lived a life totally contrary to—but like, the Holy Spirit wouldn't allow me to do that."

According to multiple participants, God used the process to deepen their trust in him. Brad spoke of being awoken from unbelief and Mark said, "I had to live out what I actually believe...trusting God to supply needs rather than men." The theme of God providing deeper trust came out in words like "faith," "rely," "depend," and "lean." Beth described the result of deepened trust as increased transparency before the Lord, similar to Mark's new dependence upon prayer.

Summary of Relation to God During Discipline

Despite being under discipline, participants continued to believe in the existence of God and related to him in a mix of attitudes. Some focused on their confused feelings towards God while others reflected on their sense of God's caring posture towards them. Looking back to their discipline, participants saw God at work strengthening their faith and trust in him.

Relation to Church During Discipline

The third research question explored the way participants related to their churches during discipline. This included the avenues of relation and their feelings about those relations. Some underwent public discipline with the whole church aware for multiple years, while others underwent more private discipline for a much shorter duration. The differing circumstances are reflected in their shared experiences. The analysis identified mixed feelings of connection among the participants, the importance of key players, the

value of communication, the weight of history in a church, and the significance of the presence of others.

Mixed Feelings

Though all participants were eventually restored to their congregations, they had a wide range of feelings about their churches and their church leaders during the process. Though temporarily tempted to blame others for his problems, Brad expressed a generally positive disposition toward his church and those in the Presbytery that disciplined him. Similarly, David struggled at times with the process of discipline, but said he was able to continue because “I never felt judgment from the guys.” While David and Brad’s experiences of discipline were relatively short, Josh’s long and public experience did not diminish his care for his church. While Josh attended a different church so as not to make it awkward and really didn’t want to go to worship, he said of the disciplining church, “They never stopped loving me. I’ll say that.” He recognized the multiple years of trying to help him prior to and during the discipline process.

Beth and Isaac held a generally positive posture toward the greater church body, while relating negatively toward the leadership of those congregations. As Beth shared her confusion and frustration with how the leaders and staff handled the process, she said, “I still loved the church as a whole.” Isaac had a similar split in feelings, but the disjuncture was more profound. With present regret, Isaac admitted that at the time he thought of the elders as “fools” and described a number of “fruitless, terrible meetings” with them.

Mark and Joy tended to have a more negative view of their churches and leadership. While Mark still felt connected to many at the church, he said he often felt as

if he “had a scarlet letter” and often felt resentment toward the church. That ambivalence extended to the leaders with a slightly more negative shade. Joy stands out as having consistently negative feelings, stating “the church made me upset,” which was reflected in her actively distancing herself from it and her faith for multiple years.

These responses towards the church during the discipline did not correlate with their eventual restoration. Some had generally positive feelings toward their churches, some were quite mixed, and others were negative.

A Few Key Players

When speaking about their relationship to their churches, participants often focused on a few individuals and certain interactions with those individuals as significant. For a few participants, these individuals shaped their disposition not only toward their churches but also toward repentance and restoration.

Encouragers

Participants used various forms of the word “encourage” to speak of individual interactions during their discipline process. For some, affirmational texts and phone calls relayed encouragement. David and Mark spoke of caring exhortation to continue to engage the discipline process. For Josh, this took the more overt form of well-meant threats. Speaking of someone with whom he went through addiction treatment, Josh said, “It’s like serving in a war together. You haven’t lived until your bunkmate tells you, ‘If you leave, I’m going to break your legs.’” Though Joy was negatively disposed toward her church and its leadership for many years, she spoke of one woman whose words stood out during her struggle. “All she wanted was to talk to me and let me know that

Jesus loved me. She was the first one in all this that told me, ‘Jesus loves you.’” These acts and words of encouragement from individuals stood out to participants as they recalled their discipline processes.

Bridge Builders

The interviews also revealed the importance of a few bridge builders. Some of these individuals were within the participant’s church and some were without, but they all helped the participants maintain connection when they felt disconnected. For Beth it was a couple who moved away from the church and listened to her but didn’t try to take sides. Mark spoke of one helpful individual in his church who served as “a middleman of sorts for that whole process.” David appreciated his dad, who was overseas, working with him so that he wouldn’t isolate himself or pull back from engaging with church leadership.

Broader Communion of Saints

Many of the significant individuals were not members of the participants’ churches, but other fellow Christians. Some of the individuals, like David’s father, were significant to helping them engage the discipline process. A number of “believers outside of the church” in the local community checked in on Mark and expressed concern for his spiritual well-being in ways he appreciated. Joy was helped by a Christian counselor who pointed her to the Psalms, particularly David’s laments. The same counselor invited Joy to a church service where she heard a sermon that convicted her to repent and seek restoration at her church. Many of the individuals significant to Josh were Christians at the addiction recovery program he went through. The service and gifts of these

individuals demonstrate the fellowship beyond the bounds of a local church discussed in the literature on the communion of saints.

Communication: A Two-Way Street

Communication was a consistent theme in the participant interviews. As participants reflected on their discipline, many shared significant conversations. Beth shared, “And so in talking and processing with him and his wife...I think that was huge in terms of feeling loved and cared for, and listened to and challenged, and all that.” Isaac, Brad, and Mark also mentioned having a few people with whom they could process. The conversation did not necessarily have to be deep or spiritual. David mentioned how much it meant to be with an elder, “just hanging out in his truck for a while just chatting about life.” Josh valued meeting with a friend, saying, “And we would just talk, even though I was a wreck. We would just talk.”

Communication also mattered because it was terribly painful when poorly done. Joy received a discipline letter from her elders requesting to talk with her about the situation. She said, “But then it didn't have like who I should call or at what number and then it made me upset because I thought, ‘Well, how come after a year they haven't called me? My number hasn't changed.’ There was no other, was no communication—verbally.” She concluded that the letter was disingenuous, which left her feeling more disconnected.

Participants often mentioned how much they appreciated others initiating conversation with them. David valued a conversation with an elder via phone, as well as the offer to talk any time. Josh had an elder come to his home to continue dialog. Mark appreciated that at the time, those who were “taking the initiative” meant a lot to him, and

that he was very open to answering people's questions. Others wished that they had been pursued more. Joy mentioned the year of silence from her elders, and Beth said, "I just wish they had said something rather than just giving me my space." In the midst of discipline, pursuit mattered to the participants.

The Weight of History

The history that some participants had with their churches factored in the way that they related to them during discipline. Participants often struggled to continue the process of discipline and eventual restoration. Not all the participants had been at their churches for long periods of time prior to discipline, but for those that had, they brought up the weight of that history in their engagement with the church.

Mark, Josh, Beth, and Isaac had all been at their churches at least twenty years prior to their discipline. Mark commented that longevity impacted his view of the church as well as the church's view of him. He shared how people engaged him, talking about the shared history, and seeing him grow up in the church. Josh's family, like Mark's, was a founding family in the church, and it was his church for almost all his life. Despite the long duration of his informal and then formal discipline, Josh said that coming back to the church "was never off the table." After decades of involvement, Isaac continued to remember his membership vows, feeling like he "didn't have a choice." Beth said she remembers thinking, "I don't want to leave this church, this is all I've ever known." And even though Brad was only at his church a few years, he too couldn't imagine starting over at another church.

Presence

Consistent with the findings of the first research question, participants valued presence with others as they related to their churches. Participants discussed presence with smaller groups and individuals after discipline, while larger groups featured more in their reflection prior to discipline. What remained, was the value of being physically proximate with others in their relation to their churches. Sometimes the presence was in the context of the conversations mentioned earlier. However, other experiences of presence were also highlighted by participants.

Mark valued the fact that he shared an apartment with a member of the church during his discipline. Josh experienced the benefit of presence in two ways. He benefited from other Christians who had gone through the residential rehab, as well as a visit of some of the leadership at his church. The visit demonstrated the pursuit mentioned above, and their presence let him better share what he was going through and how the program assisted him as he worked to overcome the sin and addiction in his life.

Some of the presence was purely about proximity and the solidarity it communicated. David and Isaac spoke of meaningful experiences of presence apart from dialog or discussion. When David was going through a particularly dark moment, the leadership was there physically. He said, “And those guys, the pastor, and the deacons, they showed up at my house...late at night. And they were in my driveway. They did not have to be, but they just showed up there.” For Isaac and Beth, a series of unspeaking presences mattered. They both had individuals that came to various meetings with their church leadership, merely to sit and be there with them. Recalling the discipline process, Isaac said, “He went to all the fruitless, terrible meetings with the elders, and sat and

listened. He didn't talk. But he was just always there." The import of physical presence came up negatively as well. Joy expressed the pain of showing up to a court hearing and seeing her pastor sitting on the side designated to the opposing party. Though Joy acknowledged it was done out of ignorance, and the pastor apologized, she shared how much his presence with her ex-husband instead of her affected her at that moment.

Summary of Relation to Church During Discipline

Participants had a variety of discipline experiences and thus related to their churches in diverse manners emotionally. Yet, as they processed their relationships to their churches, they shared how important a few key individuals and conversations proved to be, with the benefits of the communion of saints extending beyond their local churches. Their history with the disciplining churches mattered in persevering through difficult discipline experiences. Reflecting the literature's focus on gathered worship and sacraments, as well as physical interrelation, physical presence continued to be a significant factor in how participants felt connection to their churches.

Relation to Church After Discipline

The final research question determined how participants related to their churches after discipline. They reported on the immediate relations with the church as well as how their connection developed after the resolution of discipline.

Demonstrable Restoration

Due to the variety of discipline situations, some participants had undergone public discipline and others had discipline known only to the leaders of the church. However,

every participant noted events and efforts that demonstrated concern for full and ongoing restoration.

Shared Restoration

Though not all the congregants in their churches were aware of the discipline when it was happening, all but two of the participants had some form of public recognition of their forgiveness and restoration. They noted that it was significant to them and those present in their churches. Brad shared, “The church was very restorative to me and my family, and the presbytery too.” Commenting on the public ceremony, Josh noted that there “was not a dry eye in the place.” He then said, “Everybody was so happy...Everybody was just so, the mood of everything was so rejoice-full,” acknowledging he was making up words to describe the happiness of the moment. Joy stated, “And the reconciliation that happened with the church was so beautiful.” The congregants and participants came together sharing moments of beauty and joy.

These public events were more than restorative for the individual to the church. They also restored the churches to wholeness. Though Isaac’s discipline was not public while it was happening, he and the pastor held a time of mutual repentance and forgiveness before the congregation. While the nature of the sin remained vague, Isaac said, “I think that was a relief and encouragement to a lot of people.” The congregation was “glad that it’s resolved.” Similarly, public restoration was helpful for those at Mark’s church who were curious about where things stood.

Personal Wholeness

Most of the participants spoke of ongoing work to make them whole after the discipline. Many had ongoing conversations to promote resolution and pastoral care. Isaac and his pastor made mutual efforts to get together and rebuild their friendship. David appreciated his pastor calling, “still just checking in basically,” and Brad benefitted from the elders assigned to follow up with him in the months after the resolution.

Participants also reported efforts of their churches to care for them through tangible offerings, often financial. Beth’s church paid for counseling and Joy’s contributed finances to counseling classes at the nearby seminary. Brad had lost his pastoral position due to his discipline. He recalled, “The church saw our practical situation, finances, money, and all kinds of stuff. And they helped, they supported. They helped out here and there with our financial needs as well.” Brad also shared how much it meant for him to be “get the green light” from his presbytery to pursue a different pastoral call after discipline and a time of growth. Josh reported the support he felt when members offered to buy items necessary for the ministry that he became involved in. These generous gifts confirmed to the participants that their restoration to the church community was more than formal.

Bearing One Another’s Burdens

The process of discipline and restoration opened up new avenues of connection for multiple participants with their churches through shared experience of sin and forgiveness. Brad said that close to a dozen members of his church confessed sin to the pastor after his discipline was revealed to the church. Mark spoke of those who shared

similar struggles with him afterward. After Josh’s public restoration he was able to assist two other members who were struggling with addiction. God’s grace in the lives of those disciplined led others to share their burdens.

Many of the participants shared a new or renewed call to serve others in the church and among the greater communion of saints. Joy shared a desire for ongoing reconciliation and the need of others to be pursued, saying, “I need to be more intentional about pursuing relationship especially with other women.” Part of her pursuit of others was praying with and for them, never missing a prayer meeting. Brad shared how his experience deepened his love “for all people, all kinds of people, people that are ‘unlovable.’” Others recognized the transformation in Brad and saw it as a lesson from God that led to deeper ministry. Josh transitioned into working in addiction ministry and trying to share his testimony daily. Though not a particular ministry, Isaac spoke of renewed devotion to care for others, saying “I feel like since that time that I want to imitate Jesus in two ways—service and forgiveness.” The experience of God’s forgiveness and restoration to his people led participants to relate to their churches with invigorated calls to minister their gifts to others.

Increased Value of the Church

Multiple participants reported deeper connections to church after the resolution of their discipline. They shared enhanced relationships with specific Christians and the broader communion of saints. Along with enhance relationships, multiple respondents shared how their respect for church leadership increased after their discipline.

Greater Love Among Fellow Believers

Some of the deeper connections were individual, such as Joy's relationship with the pastor's wife with whom she was "better friends" than before. And even though Brad's senior pastor had fired him, they grew closer after the discipline process. David spoke of closer relationships and enhanced capacity for relationships. He said, "I have grown from my discipline. I think my ability to have real friendships, that has grown."

Joy and Josh shared about their growth in breadth of connection as well. After her restoration, Joy connected to new demographics in her church. "A few, especially older people have just like, just, they love me, you know." Josh's time in a Christian rehab and his choice to minister in that realm afterward expanded his sense of the broader church. "I got to see a much larger view of the body of Christ," he said. This led to new appreciation for the various denominations, acknowledging the need for them to fulfill different aspects of the work of Christ's kingdom.

Honoring Discipline and Those Who Exercise It

As participants reflected on their connection to their churches after discipline, several mentioned their newfound value for the importance of discipline for the sake of the church body. Brad and David particularly highlighted this point with David reflecting on his deepened respect for those who have gone through discipline, and Brad speaking of the good of the church and its discipline more broadly. He said, "So it has thoroughly reinforced in my mind, the benefit of church and that church discipline is good and positive." Not only did participants grow in grasping the good of discipline generally but also in their esteem for those who must enact it as church leaders.

Participants shared their increased respect for elders and the role of church polity in caring for the church, themselves included. Joy commented on the deep respect she has for the pastor who walked her through the reconciliation process and his care for those struggling with sin. Josh spoke of his renewed appreciation for elders and Presbyterian polity, for the accountability it offers to church members and church leaders. Isaac reflected on the way that elders are called and the way that he as a member now relates to them since his discipline:

I know I feel a lot more respect for the office of elder. Because here are these guys that are not very smart, stubborn, and kind of weak...But it gave me a lot more sympathy, and respect for the role of the elders in the church along with the fact of how serious you believe that God called these men to the office

Isaac's comments reflected how participants not only reconnected to their congregation, but also to their leaders, seeing the gift of God they are to the larger communion of saints.

Summary of Relation to Church After Discipline

All the participants experienced deeper connections to their churches in various manners. While responses to previous research questions resulted in answers that reflected a direction of connection from church to congregation, the responses focused much more on a movement of connection from the participant to their church. As participants experienced real restoration in formal ceremony and in practical acts of care, they turned to helping others, engaging in ministry, with a deeper appreciation of the communion of saints and those charged with its oversight and care.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined the experiences of the communion of saints had by church members who were disciplined and remained at their churches or were restored.

Participants were asked about how they related to their churches before, during, and after their discipline, as well as about their relationship with God during their discipline.

Prior to discipline, participants noted connection to their church through times of togetherness at the invitation of others, especially embodied togetherness. They felt connected within the church to those with shared experiences and to those who modeled character and demonstrated care for the participants. Mutual service and the exchange of practical helps bonded the participants to their churches.

Though under the discipline of their churches, participants continued to believe in the reality and presence of God. Though they often exhibited mixed feelings, they continued to engage in spiritual practices like corporate worship, prayer, and Bible reading. Most participants shared retrospectively how that period deepened their relationship with God.

Participants presented a wide variety of mixed feelings toward their churches during discipline. Often, it was a few individuals within the church or members of the broader communion of saints who helped participants wrestle through the process of being disciplined. Personal communication initiated by church leaders and congregants was paramount to people's feeling of connection during this time, and when it was lacking, it distanced participants from their churches.

Upon the completion of discipline or restoration, depending on the circumstances, participants found renewed connection to their churches. Restoration was confirmed to

them in public ceremonies and in practical care in the aftermath of discipline. Participants generally formed deeper connections to their churches and certain individuals within the congregation. Most participants grew more involved in ministry and had renewed respect for ministry leaders and the value of discipline for the body of Christ.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

This study was prompted by the growth of expressive individualism and its impact on culture and the American church. Expressive individualism “worships the freedom to express our uniqueness against constraints and conventions.”³⁰² Coupled with American communal disengagement and institutional mistrust, it undermines biblical understand of humanity and the good news of the gospel. As the church is the communion of saints bound together in Christ, it is important that churches examine themselves to see whether they are exhibiting that spiritual reality or whether they more closely reflect the values of the world in which they live. As expressive individualism places the self as the highest arbiter of moral agency and generally undermines institutional authority and accountability, churches which practice restorative biblical discipline may be indicative of communities in which the communion of saints prevails. The purpose of this study was to explore how church members who have undergone church discipline and been restored describe their experience of the communion of the saints through the process of discipline and restoration.

The following research questions guided the research:

1. How do church members describe their relationship to their churches prior to church discipline?
2. How do church members describe their relationship to God during the church discipline process?

³⁰² Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 28.

3. How do church members describe their relationships to their churches during church discipline?
4. How do church members describe their relationships to their churches after the resolution of church discipline?

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in the areas of expressive individualism, healthy belonging in community, and the communion of saints. Then analysis was made of interviews of seven members of Reformed churches who had been disciplined but remained or were restored to their churches.

The literature review of expressive individualism covered its development, influence on the American church, and ministry in light of the cultural phenomenon. While expressive individualism developed as a philosophical and artistic response to the rationalistic Enlightenment in ways that undermine biblical truth and authority, the literature also identified roots in Christian thought and history. It pointed to Augustine's examination of the self as a moral agent and the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on the laity and common life as laying the groundwork for the later development of expressive individualism. The literature affirmed that expressive individualism is within the American church as well as outside of it. As Taylor notes, "Born-again Christians in the United States cannot help being somewhat influenced by expressive individualism."³⁰³ This influence can be seen in the prominence of personal preference and experiential satisfaction operative among American Christians. At the same time, the

³⁰³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 497.

literature has little to say about how to minister in such a context apart from identifying expressive individualism as something to be aware of. Some initial suggestions include refocusing on community, emphasizing the significance of the physical body, and engaging pedagogical dialog for those seeking to explore the meaning of Christian faith.

The review of healthy belonging in community examined the challenges to such community, the process of forming such community, and characteristics of healthy community. Challenges to healthy community included viewing external issues as the problem, internal competition, too much focus on the past, treating people as clients rather than those in need of care, and controlling leadership. To foster the development of healthy community there needs to be a positive hope for the future, as well as intentional structuring to create the community that offers space, engages smaller groups, and a patient pace. The literature identified a shared sense of the common good, hospitality, and a culture of commitment and accountability as characteristics of healthy community.

The study analyzed literature on the communion of saints, exploring the overarching doctrine, and its operation within the exercise of authority and discipline within the church. The communion of saints describes the union Christians have with God in Christ as well as the fellowship they have with other Christians through Christ. While various doctrinal traditions differ on the parameters of the doctrine, they all include sharing in gifts and graces by those who are in Christ. And while Catholics and Protestants agree on the importance of deeds of mercy and charity, Protestant literature grounds it much more strongly in the implications of the communion of saints for those in the church and as a means of drawing others into the communion of saints. The literature also discussed the mutual responsibility of the communion of saints as

necessitating church governance and application of discipline. Whether a pope, elders, or other leaders, the authority given to the church is vested within a few for its exercise.

The interviews explored the ways participants experienced the communion of saints through how they related to their church before, during, and after their discipline, as well as the way they related to God during their discipline. Consistent with the literature's discussion on discipline, particularly the writings of Luther, discipline resulted in enhanced connection to God despite mixed feelings during the process. As participants reflected on how they connected to their churches at the different stages a few themes became apparent. Pursuit by others through invitation, hospitality, and initiated conversation made participants feel cared for by their churches. They felt connected to their churches when they were able to serve and received service and gifts from others who cared about them. Physical presence and time spent together was highly valued as a means of connecting to their church. Lastly, the actions and character of a few key individuals profoundly shaped how participants experienced the broader church community at the various stages discussed.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, the literature and interview research are compared to identify ways that the communion of saints may be manifested in churches ministering in contexts of expressive individualism. The takeaways included expected elements and surprises. Examination of the data indicated that such churches have a culture of participatory individualism, engage honestly, and remember that the church is a body of bodies.

Participatory Individualism

It may be tempting to think that churches resist conformity to an age of expressive individualism by stressing the communal or larger community, focusing on the forest rather than the tress. But while the participants expressed love and value for the whole of their church community, over and over they described their experiences and means of connection with individuals or a small group. Churches that manifest the communion of saints don't wrestle with the cultural pull by denying the importance of individuals but through a different consideration of their role and value. Rather than seeing the significance of individuals in freedom of self-determination and self-expression, individuals are valued through invitation into participation in the lives of others. Rather than expressive individualism, I see what might be called participatory individualism.

Individuals Make a Difference

Throughout the research interviews the participants mentioned individuals important to their connection to their churches—before, during, and after discipline. These individuals served various roles including friends, mentors, teachers, confidants, pastors, and more. Sometimes the connection was short, other times extended, but it was much more individuals than the whole church who defined participant connection. It is not that the participants didn't feel connected to the larger church, quite the opposite. The individuals who invited them into ministry, had them over for meals, listened to their problems, provided counsel, or simply sat with them – engaged in participatory individualism which powerfully connected participants to the greater church.

While the literature did not emphasize individuals in its discussion of communion of saints, there are hints of it in the biblical underpinnings. One of the foundational

passages for the doctrine states, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”³⁰⁴ This verse and those following speak of the unity of the communion of saints through the analogy of a human body. Following Paul’s sanctified logic, how are most parts connected to the body? They are not directly connected to every other part, but through a few adjacent parts. The hand is connected to the whole body, but the immediate connection is to the wrist. So was the experience of the research participants.

Sometimes the significance of the individuals is individual connection, but sometimes it is simply through influence and example that invite deeper spiritual connection to God, and thereby the community. Individuals of exemplary character helped Mark reconsider his choices during discipline. Though not directly connected to each other, Beth’s senior pastor emphasized fellowship and joyful celebration in a way Beth experienced through others. Individuals matter through their connections to each other, but also in the way that their particular gifts and examples influence others indirectly.

When confronted with cultural proclivities toward expressive individualism, church leaders may feel the need to address the whole church community through sermon series, vision casting, and similar efforts to affect a more communal sensibility. While there is nothing wrong with such efforts, my research indicates that this approach misses the power of individuals influencing other individuals while sharing fellowship in Christ.

³⁰⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:12 (ESV).

Inviting Participation

The significance of individuals was not just in how other individuals helped participants feel connected but also how they as individuals felt significant to their church. This sense of value came not in putting themselves forward, but in contexts into which they were invited.

Often this value was conveyed in simple offers of hospitality. Participants appreciated being invited out to coffee or over for dinner. Very often the participants had been invited into ministry and work within the church before their discipline or after their restoration. Josh, Mark, Beth, Joy, Isaac, and David all shared how they had been invited to work on the music team, serve with the youth, or other acts of service. Often they weren't invited because they had necessarily demonstrated some overt gift, talent, or interest. Mark spoke of being invited to do things he would never have done, and Josh had to learn how to do the various tasks necessary to help in the maintenance of the church. They were invited to participate in the already existent life and work of fellow members, families, and the church. In so doing, they felt valued and included through their labor and sharing of their gifts.

The spiritual and practical giftings of the body of Christ are not meant for personal glory or individualized expression.³⁰⁵ While expressive individualism calls us to look within to find our sense of identity and then go find a stage upon which to display it,³⁰⁶ the church is called to foster, recognize, train, and implement the gifts of individuals into the common life of the church for its common good unto the glory of God. And often

³⁰⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:4-7; Ephesians 4:11-15 (ESV).

³⁰⁶ Starke, "Going From Expressive Individualism to Performative Individualism."

this work is individual to individual, or among smaller groups. The participants did not reflect on their invitations into the life and ministry of the church through pulpit announcements or newsletters. Individual friends, mentors, and leaders invited them, challenged them, or just told them they needed to be a participant in the life of the church through their work and contributions.

Individuals and the pursuit to invite individuals into the work and life of the church fosters connection. It demonstrates that though we are distinct members of the body, we can't say (as expressive individualism implies) to other parts of the body, "I have no need of you."³⁰⁷ This care for individuals also reinforces God's care for them as those created and loved not just generally, but particularly. Inviting individuals to participate reflects what Kelly Kapic wants us in the church to remember. "You are connected but distinctive, adding your unique voice and actions to the universe. God delights in you as you use the particular gifts he has given. You are a child of the king. You are an irreplaceable member of the body of Christ."³⁰⁸ Valuing individuals by connecting one-to-one and pursuing their participation in the life of the body demonstrates the communion of saints.

Participatory Individualism & Expressive Individualism

Both participatory individualism and expressive individualism value the individual, but according to different frames of reference. Expressive individualism's call for individuals to find their true selves and express themselves accordingly implies that

³⁰⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:21 (ESV).

³⁰⁸ Kapic, *You're Only Human*, 36.

an individual's potential is unrealized until they accomplish self-discovery, expression, and recognition. This process may be ever ongoing as one's sense of self changes. In such a framework community is a dispensable commodity on the never-ending path to self-fulfillment.

Participatory individualism as described above does not facilitate the quest for fulfillment but declares that one's fullness is already realized and available in Christ. The communion of saints is meant to reflect that present reality. Invitation to participate in the life of the body is not what confers value nor facilitates self-fulfillment but declares through invitation that the invitee is already worthwhile in Christ. As invitees see their place in the church and contribute to the life of the body through their unique gifts, they are enabled to see their value confirmed in what God has already given to them rather than having to be constructed from within.

Honesty Breeds Opportunity

Participants valued sincere, genuine, and transparent people in their churches. Such honesty helped them trust these individuals and connect to them, and thereby the church. Participants also learned to be honest with their limits, sin, and needs. As discussed below, this honesty undercuts the implications of expressive individualism that we belong to ourselves and thus are ultimately responsible for our sense of meaning, purpose, and significance.³⁰⁹ Instead, in our union with Christ, we are restored to finding all these things in the God who made us and are joined to others for that selfsame purpose. As we speak honestly about who we are, what we've experienced, and ask

³⁰⁹ Noble, *You Are Not Your Own*, 3–4.

honest questions, we open up opportunities to manifest the communion of saints to and with one another.

Honest About Our Needs

The bond of love fellow believers have together in Christ should be expressed in “communion in each other’s gifts” and the performance of service “as to conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.”³¹⁰ Honesty about one’s limitations and needs opens up opportunities for fellow saints to help one another. This mutuality facilitates bilateral experiences of the communion of saints, as givers and receivers get to see how Christ provides for his people through the church. Honesty about our needs can be as simple as requesting help on a household project, requesting prayer when sick, or admitting a financial need to the deacons. When we admit our needs, the church can respond.

Honesty about our needs and limits also combats the anthropology of expressive individualism. American culture has consistently valued self-reliance, and expressive individualism amplifies that perspective, placing the onus of self-fulfillment upon the individual to determine what is good and right for their sense of self and to go out and find the means to express it. But God has made us to be contingent and relational. He made us to be dependent upon him and to rely on one another. When we confess our finitude and need for others, we reinforce a biblical anthropology and ecclesiology. This best practice seems particularly important for leaders. When a pastor or leader acknowledges need it dispels the illusion that leaders have attained their positions on

³¹⁰ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 26.1.

their own, or having reached such positions, are no longer in need of others. The communion of saints is for all the saints.

Honest About Our Sins

Churches that wish to maintain the communion of saints must honestly wrestle with sin. The governance and discipline of the church serve the communion of saints. As the literature discussed, the keys granted to the church are tied to the proclamation of the gospel. The church is not maintained by casting out sinners so much as declaring forgiveness in Christ to all who repent. As sins are confessed and pardon assured believers are tied more closely to one another and confirmed in their union with Christ.

Honest confession of sin positions believers for fresh experience of God's grace. And when the church demonstrates that grace through restoration consistent with God's forgiveness, then as the participants noted, they will be tied more strongly to one another. The cycle of repentance, forgiveness, and pardon reminds church members that the reason they are part of the community is not because of their spiritual attainment, good works, or any other outward characteristic—but what they share is their union to Christ through faith in him who saves them from their sins.

Honesty about sin should also include past sins. Fear of how people will respond often stands in the way of repentance and the seeking of help to overcome sin patterns. Honesty about our pasts, the forgiveness we've found, and the help we've experienced invites others to find the same. It also reminds others that they are not alone in their sin. One of the implications of expressive individualism's focus on our unique self-expression is the isolating belief that no one else can truly understand us. The story of God's grace to us in addressing past sin is a gift we can share with other saints.

Honest About Our Experiences

Study participants noted that shared experiences—both contemporaneous and asynchronous—connected them to others in their churches. Often these were difficulties or trials. Josh’s experience with addiction helped him minister to others going through the same struggle. David felt connected to an assistant pastor who shared experiences with mental health issues in his family. And Joy bonded with women who had suffered miscarriages. Many of the bonds described were across generations. When present circumstances may seem to divide generations, the honest sharing of past life events can reveal they are more alike than previously realized. Sharing of such experiences tears down walls of isolation and engenders deeper connections.

Honest sharing of experiences, particularly struggles, creates opportunity for ministry. Conversations about our experiences allow others to see us as a God-given provision for them in theirs. Those who have been through similar things understand what helps others may need—meals, finances, or connection to helpful resources. The help includes sharing in spiritual gifts. God has given his saints wisdom, knowledge, encouragement, faith, and prayer, among others. These can all be used to build up others amid difficult times. And when the experiences are happy, we are uniquely placed to manifest the communion of saints by rejoicing together.³¹¹

Honest Questions

Honesty helps the communion of saints not just through an honest volunteering of information, but in forthright question-asking. Joy valued the directness of the pastor who

³¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12:26 (ESV).

shepherded her through her restoration. Various participants commented on their appreciation of those who asked them questions, particularly during their discipline. Direct and genuine questions can serve as invitations. They demonstrate care for others in terms of the interest expressed, as well as inviting honest responses. And this dynamic undermines the assumptions of expressive individualism that says we are meant to go it alone. Noble writes, “The Responsibilities of Self-Belonging require godlike powers to sustain, leaving us exhausted, tired, burned out, and finally bored.”³¹² Honest questions remind others that they are not divine, and not meant to bear such burdens alone.

Not only do honest questions present opportunities for people to share their needs, confess sin, or talk about what they are going through, but they also invite self-examination. Jesus often used questions in his ministry to reveal the assumptions, attitudes, and thoughts of those to whom they were addressed. And while we do not know the hearts of others like Jesus, our questions can likewise invite introspection. Needs, sin, or struggles are revealed as people consider how to answer such questions. Honest questions then serve the communion in what they reveal as well as through the avenues of loving response they open.

Honesty & Expressive Individualism

Honesty breeds opportunity for individuals in community to confirm their value in Christ and to offer one another care in meeting needs, offering good news to sinners, and solidarity through shared experiences. The communion of saints affirms the lived experience of its members. Because individuals belong to God and to one another in the

³¹² Noble, *You Are Not Your Own*, 70.

communion, they are not expected to be self-sufficient, perfect, or exceptional. This contrasts with the burdensome presuppositions of expressive individualism.

The implied self-belonging of expressive individualism places the obligation on the individual, not only to discover and define their sense of meaning, purpose, and significance, but to then achieve and maintain the same. This suggests omnipotence alien to real life. Such expectation is doubly damning for it not only suggests an outcome unattainable by most, but then enslaves any who seem to reach self-fulfillment to find within themselves the means to sustain that identity. Despite its claims of authenticity expressive individualism's presumed autonomy invites us to be dishonest with ourselves and others. Honest participation in the communion of saints frees us to be what experience, biology, economics, and scripture tell us we are—inextricably dependent upon people and circumstances outside of our control.

The Church Is a Body of Bodies

Our embodied physicality runs like a thread throughout the literature and participant interviews. Burton, Kopic, and Trueman presented a renewed appreciation for embodiment as a challenge to expressive individualism's remaking of reality.³¹³ Location, proximity, history, and size all feature in healthy community formation. The spiritual reality of the communion of saints is expressed in corporate worship, tangible sacraments, and sharing of outward gifts and service. Each participant interviewed shared the meaningfulness of time spent physically with others for connection to their churches.

³¹³ Burton, "Postliberal Epistemology," 44; Kopic, *You're Only Human*, 71; Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 405.

Physical Worship

Biblical descriptions and historic practices of worship are embodied. People travel to places of worship, voices are lifted in song, heads bowed in prayer, the blood of Christ sipped and swallowed. Though the basis of our communion through our union with Christ is by the Holy Spirit, God has given us embodied responses to display and reinforce the spiritual reality. One day we will have a resurrected body like Jesus. The physical and the spiritual are to cohere, not compete.

Given how the literature on communion of saints emphasized gathered worship, particularly the sacraments, I expected it to feature more in the experience of research participants. Yet, on closer consideration, all the participants were regularly in gathered worship before and after their discipline, with most in regular attendance during their discipline as well. While they did not highlight experience of worship and sacrament as connecting them to their churches, it was present. As with architectural foundations, it seems gathered worship bears great weight while remaining generally out of view.

Regular togetherness in worship is fundamental to experiencing the communion of saints. Members should be encouraged to be present in worship often and regularly. While the recent epidemic of Covid-19 reveals that gathered worship is not always possible, caution should be undertaken in letting exceptions define normal practice. Allowing stopgaps like livestreamed worship or Zoomed prayer meetings to become the norm risks undermining the communion of saints.

Physical Togetherness

Repeatedly research participants experienced connection to their church through time spent in the physical presence of others. They shared meals, dug basements, walked,

and opened presents together. The presence of a friend sitting through discipline meetings, the visitation of elders to a rehab center, or an invitation to share a baseball game together were all signs of love that confirmed the belonging of participants to their churches. And such physical togetherness mattered, before, during, and after discipline.

Churches cannot dictate the schedule of members or control their attendance, but they should foster physical togetherness in multiple ways in, around, and outside of worship. While a women's group hike in the mountains, lunch at a congregant's workplace, or attending a student's high school drama performance can't replace the proclamation of the Word in gathered worship, they can all reinforce the truth of our relationship to God and one another in Christ.

Physicality of Our Fellow Saints

The physicality of fellow saints should feature in how leaders shepherd their flocks and how church members care for each other. In addition to what we might designate as the inward spiritual gifts, churches should recognize and cultivate the external gifts of the body. Those who work with their hands, are good at decorating, talented cooks, and gifted singers all have valuable contributions to the life of the church. Their fixing of patio steps, making of meals, and participation in the choir are more than met necessities—they are gifts of God's providence for each other's good as confirmation they are one family in Christ.

Similarly, church leaders should be sensitive to the physicality of their participants. As the pastors and elders instruct in the Word, pray, and shepherd, they should see to it that the physical needs of the flock are in view. The appointing of the seven to serve tables in Acts 6 was an act of spiritual care by the apostles, who saw that

the needy in their midst had enough to eat. The birth of a child, a cancer diagnosis, a natural disaster—these are all embodied realities into which the church is called to minister its gifts and grace, its services to the inward and outward person. God’s appointment of elders and deacons for the flourishing of his church takes the united spirituality and physicality of church members into account.

Physicality & Expressive Individualism

Honoring the physicality of others facilitates the manifestation of the communion of saints. As it does so, it confirms the present value of fellow saints as not contingent upon their intellect, fitness, beauty, or level of ability. In Christ, they can fully participate in the shared life of the communion whatever their physical circumstances. Because even that which is perceived as limit or need is supplied by one another as provided by God. In fact, the rest of the communion is obliged to let nothing hinder another from participating in the shared life in Christ. But expressive individualism’s participation in the good life is necessarily always future until physical limits can be transcended.

Expressive individualism suggests that physical boundaries must be transcended rather than accepted or even embraced. As one identifies their true self to be expressed freely, biological sex, age, health, time, and geography are often viewed as obstacles to be overcome rather than boundaries to be respected. Yet so many do not have the resources to overcome these. The lack of financial resources, education, opportunity, and time condemns those who cannot overcome them to unfulfilled lives. An artist whose genius is undiscovered or a cancer patient who can no longer run marathons are thus condemned to unrealized potential. Those in the past, who had even less recourse to technology, freedom of movement, and financial mobility stand judged as inauthentic.

Until the laws of physics are overcome, expressive individualism leaves perfect self-expression in the realm of imagination rather than realization. While the communion of saints allows present participation in the life of God with greater things to come at the consummation, under expressive individualism the good life remains forever out of reach.

Recommendations for Practice

Considering the findings described above the church is well advised to take practical steps to manifest the communion of saints through pursuing shepherds, clear communication, communal worship, and consideration of the larger communion.

Pursuing Shepherds

My research findings indicate that people value being pursued and being present with others. The implication is that those charged with shepherding the church should be active in initiating pastoral care and doing so in physical ways. This finding does not mean that every pastor needs to regularly meet with every individual in their church, though it certainly doesn't oppose it. But what it does mean is that church leaders should regularly be initiating pastoral contact with congregants. This might be done by pastors, elders, women's ministry leaders, or youth volunteers, but by regularly reaching out, they communicate the value of people to the church.

As much as possible, these pastoral check-ins should be in-person. The presence is valuable but also allows for people to take stock of the needs and conditions of those they are caring for. They can observe the condition of their health or home to which the ministrations of the church can be applied. Being physically proximate allows one to hear

the tone of voice and see the body language of the other in ways that texts, calls, and email do not. In such personal encounters, it is harder for people to avoid the forthright questions about their well-being. Those questions can open new avenues for the church to show its love to one another.

I have sought to apply my research by initiating more meetings with congregants apart from any agenda. While a lot of pastoring involves listening, it is often with a certain goal in mind, counseling, administration, etc. However, as time allows, I am trying to set up times for undirected listening. Merely inviting someone for coffee or lunch not only shows care but affords me opportunity to hear all manner of thoughts, experiences, and ideas I would never have thought to ask about.

Inviting Dialog & Clear Communication

Per the research, communication is valuable in and of itself to the communion of saints. Participants valued conversations with others through the experiences they discussed during the interviews. Churches can simply make time for conversation with built-in opportunities for congregants to talk to each other around church events. Listening to others and inviting their input demonstrates the facilitative leadership that fosters healthy communities.³¹⁴ This can look like church leadership inviting opinions from various congregants, or Christian education that invites dialog as much as it declares.³¹⁵

³¹⁴ Block, *Community*, 88–89.

³¹⁵ Stanton, “The Glory of Kings,” 38.

In addition to inviting dialog, church leaders need to be overt in their communication. Feeling left out of the loop can leave hurting people feeling isolated or worse. As Joy's experience demonstrated, knowing what is happening when it's happening, and why, as well as the avenues to contact others, would have meant so much in the midst of her discipline and the surrounding circumstances. Points and means of contact for mercy needs, counseling, pastoral care, and more should be clear to people in the congregation. Those in ministry can't initiate communication in all circumstances, but clear information about how to be in contact demonstrates an interest in the body of church being able to connect.

Reflecting the Communion in Worship

The importance of gathered worship has been addressed briefly above, but attention should also be given to how gathered worship is practiced. It is possible to come together in one place on Sunday morning (or other times) and still have individualism reinforced in overt and implicit ways. For instance, worship music can be done so that congregants are observers consuming and expressing style and performance preferences, rather than participating as part of the whole church.

While further research would be warranted, let me suggest a few ways to enhance the experience of the communion of saints in worship. One is through congregational singing. Whatever the style of music or nature of accompaniment, singing should be done in ranges and at tempos that invite the whole congregation to contribute their voice so that the worship in song is seen as an act of the body as a whole. Similarly, responsive readings give the congregation a voice and means to participate in worship. At our

church, we have recently introduced a responsive reading to better frame the significance of the Lord's Supper as it relates to the communion of saints:

Leader: When we eat this meal, we are reminded that we are not our own.

Congregation: But together belong to Christ, and in Christ belong to one another.

Rather than the officiant merely reminding the congregation of the what the meal signifies, the people participate in that work of regular remembrance.

Even for the Reformed theological tradition which reserves primary worship duties for ordained leaders, testimony is recognized as an element of public worship.³¹⁶ Giving space and time for laity to testify to God's work in their lives demonstrates the value of the various members of the church to the body. Corporate worship should also make space and celebrate the presence of children. While nurseries and kid-specific programs are useful, hospitality to children in worship communicates their value and belonging among the people of God. Lastly, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, commonly called Communion, should be frequent. It has been appointed to show our union to Christ and communion with one another. What better way to manifest a spiritual reality than the means Christ appointed for his church?

Recognizing the Larger Communion of Saints

The communion of saints is not limited to the local church but extends to all believers on earth and in heaven. Christians outside of their local church often encouraged participants' relationship to God and their own churches. Local churches

³¹⁶ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*, 21.5.

focused only on themselves risk the exceptionalism prevalent in expressive individualism. Rather than seeing themselves as unique members of a greater body, local churches can be tempted to conduct their ministries apart from consideration of other local churches. This can look like competitive versus cooperative ministry in the community, or isolation wherein one church's self-understanding is seen as the only valid form of following God.

There are lots of ways to encourage recognition of the greater communion of saints. Just as the Macedonian and Corinthian churches contributed to the needs of other believers, so our financial giving and support of missionaries can reinforce our place in the larger body of Christ and stir up mutual care.³¹⁷ Denominational involvement also reinforces the reality of the broader communion of saints through formal relationship and allows for its expression through preestablished avenues for sharing of gifts and graces. But perhaps most important is wise engagement with other Christians and churches in one's local context. The communion of saints is not limited to any local church, denomination, or theological tradition. All who profess faith in Christ are united with him and thus have the opportunity and obligation to support one another in service of their shared King.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on the way participants experienced the communion of saints according to how they described their relationships with their church and God, before,

³¹⁷ “Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, ² for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them.” 2 Corinthians 9:1-2 (ESV).

during, and after discipline. As with any study, there are limitations to how broad the research can be. The research invites consideration of several areas for further research on how to consider the doctrine of the communion of saints in a culture of expressive individualism. Four areas of investigation seem particularly pertinent – the relation of corporate worship to the experiencing of the communion of saints, how church congregations as a whole experience the communion of saints when going through trials like scandal or public discipline of a member, the experience of those who come from non-individualistic backgrounds worshipping in individualistic contexts, and best practices for developing understanding and use of one’s spiritual gifts as part of the communion of saints.

The literature on communion of saints consistently speaks of the importance of corporate worship and the sacraments to the communion of saints. As the design of this study and the response of participants did not focus on this, there may be rich findings on how worship practices, styles, and contexts shape one’s experience of the communion of saints. Such research could include the worship space and architecture, in keeping with the literature’s discussion of how place and space shape one’s sense of belonging in a community.

The research focused on the experience of individuals who did not display the habits of expressive individualism but remained at their churches despite the difficulties of discipline. It might be similarly helpful to examine the experiences of a whole group or congregation in similar difficulties. What does it look like for a congregation to cohere according to its union with Christ in the face of scandal, trial, or loss?

Inhabitants of a culture often have the hardest time discerning their cultural particularities. The interplay of the communion of saints in a culture of expressive individualism might be explored by those who engage it from different cultural background. A study on how those who come from more collectivist cultures experience the communion of saints amid an individualistic culture may be revelatory.

The literature on the communion of saints discussed the gifting of God by the Spirit for his church. This study mentioned the use of temporal and tangible gifts like property, time, and physical service, as well as the benefits received from the spiritual gifts of others. However, a more in-depth study of how churches recognize and encourage the use of gifts for the sake of the community would go a long way in equipping the broader church to manifest the communion of saints.

Appendix A

Demographic Information

This brief form is meant to supply some demographic background information for the research being conducted by Ian Hard. All the information provided will be kept confidential. The purpose of this information is for comparison of participant experiences based on certain demographics, as applicable.

Name: _____

Sex: _____

Please, answer the following questions in reference to the church in which you underwent discipline and restoration.

How long were you part of the church prior to discipline?

Approximate age you were when undergoing discipline:

Denomination of church (or “non-denom,” if applicable):

How long were you/have you been connected to the church after resolution of discipline?

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