



COVENANT  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

# Electronic Thesis & Dissertation Collection

J. Oliver Buswell Jr. Library  
12330 Conway Road  
Saint Louis, MO 63141

[www.covenantseminary.edu/library](http://www.covenantseminary.edu/library)

This document is distributed by Covenant Theological Seminary under agreement with the author, who retains the copyright. Permission to further reproduce or distribute this document is not provided, except as permitted under fair use or other statutory exception.

The views presented in this document are solely the author's.

# **The Role of an Ecclesiastical Network Leader in A Secular Age**

**Exploring Missional Leadership of Transgenerational Churches That Reach  
Dechurched and Unchurched People with the Gospel of Jesus Christ**

By  
Russ Kapusinski

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2022

# The Role of an Ecclesiastical Network Leader in A Secular Age

By  
Russ Kapusinski

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry.

Graduation Date      May 13, 2022

Dr. Robbie Griggs  
Faculty Advisor

---

Dr. Bob Burns  
Second Reader

---

Dr. Joel Hathaway  
Director of DMin Program

---

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore how ecclesiastical network leaders (ENLs) equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people. The problem this study addresses is the broad scale disaffiliation and consequent decline of the Christian church in the U.S., especially among younger generational cohorts.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with six ENLs from diverse parts of the U.S., in large metropolitan regions, representing different denominational traditions. The interviews focused on gaining data with three main research questions: how do ENLs describe their role within an ecclesiastical network? How do ENLs equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people? How do ENLs describe the mission of the local church? In addition, ENLs were asked how they equip pastors with knowledge of current culture, generational thinking, epistemology, and Christology.

The literature review focused on four key areas that provided relevant and foundational knowledge to understand the context and critical work of ENLs. The four areas were: the enmeshment of generational theory and culture, the contours of a secular age, the apologetic appeal of covenant epistemology, and missional ecclesiology.

This study concluded that the causes leading to mass generational disaffiliation are a complex amalgamation of the dynamics of an increasingly secularized culture, the church's loss of missional identity resulting in loss of respectability and relevance among younger generational cohorts, and the fragilization of the Christian faith through a myriad of factors. To address these challenges, this study identified commitments and practices

of ENLs that address the crisis of disaffiliation. These commitments and practices involved the church's recovery of its missional identity marked by the following characteristics: a renewed eschatological vision for shalom, holistic ministry addressing the needs of dechurched and unchurched people, the functional unity of the church in a geographic region, and missional contextualization of gospel proclamation and ministry. The study revealed the role of ENLs as instrumental in effectively addressing the crisis of disaffiliation, and the church in decline, through the establishment of citywide networks of missional churches.

To Dick and Liz Kaufmann whose pursuit of Jesus and leadership of the Harbor network in San Diego continues to bless the lives of many, including my own.

A church (or group of churches) with movement dynamics generates its own converts, ideas, leaders, and resources from within in order to realize its vision of being the church for its city and culture...It will reproduce into other churches that reproduce themselves for the same reasons. The more ideas, leaders, and resources that are pooled and deployed, the more the movement dynamic strengthens and snowballs. As long as the reproducing churches keep a unified vision, the movement can build steam and grow steadily, even exponentially.

— Tim Keller, *Center Church:  
Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered  
Ministry in Your City*

# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Abbreviations .....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Chapter One Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Statement of the Problem.....	2
The Problem of a Secularized Cultural Context .....	4
The Problem of Epistemology .....	6
The Problem of Ecclesiology .....	8
The Problem of Christology.....	10
Purpose Statement.....	12
Research Questions .....	13
Significance of the Study .....	13
Definition of Terms.....	14
<b>Chapter Two Literature Review.....</b>	<b>19</b>
The Enmeshment of Generational Theory and Culture .....	19
A Secular Age .....	36
The Apologetic Appeal of Covenant Epistemology .....	50
Missional Ecclesiology .....	74
Summary of Literature Review.....	95
<b>Chapter Three Methodology.....</b>	<b>97</b>
Design of the Study.....	97
Participant Sample Selection .....	100
Data Collection .....	104



Data Analysis .....	106
Researcher Position.....	107
Study Limitations.....	108
<b>Chapter Four Findings.....</b>	<b>110</b>
The Role of an Ecclesiastical Network Leader (ENL) .....	111
Equipping Network Pastors .....	122
The Mission of the Local Church .....	152
Summary of Findings.....	159
<b>Chapter Five Discussion and Recommendations .....</b>	<b>161</b>
Summary of the Study and Findings.....	161
Discussion of Findings.....	165
Recommendations for Practice .....	184
Recommendations for Further Research.....	196
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>197</b>

## Acknowledgements

From the beginning of this doctoral program through its completion, Diane, my wife, has been a source of strength and encouragement. There is no way I could have finished this without you! Thank you for your patience, love and support. Our children -- Joshua, Caleb, and Kate -- have cheered me on throughout this process. Thank you for all the ways you bring joy into my life and for how proud you make mom and me daily.

I'm so thankful for our doctoral cohort and the chemistry we had from day one. I learned so much from you—you all made this program worth the price of admission. Thank you, Tasha Chapman, Mark Ryan, and Zack Eswine for your leadership and care.

I am so thankful for the leadership of Harbor Church San Diego for creating the opportunity for me to do this doctorate. Thank you, Todd Leshner, Chet Zygmunt, Kara Gordon, Brian Sah, and Allan Kwan. I also want to thank our congregation and amazing church staff that strengthened me in so many practical ways. Thank you, Brent Baber, Kelsie Howze, Amy Ginzler, Kevin Waczek, and Michael Bottomley.

I'm so grateful to Jean Kim, Headmaster of The Cambridge School. Thank you for supporting me in this work and for modeling the kind of leadership most needed today. Orange Team—you're the best! Thank you, Jeff and Leslie Yoder, Jenni Helj, Melissa Gingrich, Cara Francisco, and Amy Tollefson. Thank you for creating space for me and for all the extra work you had to bear in my absence.

My mom, Geri Kapusinski, gave me a vision for education and tirelessly pressed me into the halls of academia when I was a reluctant student. I thank God that you persevered with your stubborn son so that, as you would say, "You will have more to offer the people God calls you to serve." I know this milestone would bring a smile to your face. To my sister, Mary Margida, thank you for your timely counsel, support, and love during this process.

Bob and Lisa Yund, thank you for the many ways you supported our family and me during this program. Your generosity, hospitality, and deep care for Diane and me was life-giving. Thank you for over 30 years of mentoring and friendship, Bob.

Steve and Trudy Johnson, thank you! Steve, your support, counsel, friendship, generosity, and prayers meant more than you'll know. Cathi and Matt Armitage and my sister, Linda Briggs—thank you for praying me through the finish line.

Thank you to all the people whose prayers and words of encouragement carried me during this project: John Egidio, Jeremy Swift, Luke and Vicki McDonald, Matthew Hooper, Adam and Laura Smith, and Kyle Aaron.

Thank you, Raymond Lee for your technical assistance, Susan Thomas for your editing prowess, and Steven Cooper for filling the pulpit in my absence.

## **Abbreviations**

DIY	Do-it-Yourself (in reference to spirituality/religiosity)
D Min	Doctorate in Ministry
DNA	Fundamental and distinctive characteristics of something
ENLs	Ecclesiastical Network Leaders
MDiv	Master of Divinity
PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
SBNR	Spiritual but Not Religious

# Chapter One

## Introduction

In 2013, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, warned that the Church of England was “one generation away from extinction.”<sup>1</sup> He reasoned, “So many churches have no ministry to young people and that means they have no interest in the future.”<sup>2</sup> Lord Carey’s words have a prophetic ring for the Christian churches in the United States of America. Young people are leaving the church, Christianity, and ostensibly Christ himself at an alarming rate.<sup>3</sup> The North American church is confronted with a similar trend toward extinction.

This study will explore this trend more closely. More specifically, it will examine generational disaffiliation from the Christian church, along with the corresponding implications for society. It will also focus on the experiences of ecclesiastical network leaders (ENLs) who have been addressing this disaffiliation. For the purposes of this study, churches that are “effectively addressing” the issue of disaffiliation are defined as ones maintaining a transgenerational membership while simultaneously drawing dechurched and unchurched people into their congregations.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Sentamu (PA), “Church of England is one generation way from extinction, says Archbishop of York Dr. John Sentamu,” *Independent*, November 19, 2013, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/church-england-one-generation-away-extinction-time-end-arguments-says-archbishop-york-dr-john-sentamu-8949686.html>

<sup>2</sup> John Sentamu, “Church of England is one generation way from extinction”

<sup>3</sup> Gregory A. Smith et al., “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

The research will further examine disaffiliation through a nexus of interwoven cultural obstacles. Each complicates all the others by creating an American cultural ethos that views Christianity as increasingly implausible. The nexus of the interwoven problems fits into four categories: an increasingly secularized cultural context, epistemological challenges, ecclesiastical compromises, and Christological heterodoxy. Therefore, this research probes these four contiguous problems that are exacerbating and accelerating generational disaffiliation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In October 2019, the Pew Research Center released an article entitled *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace* highlighting disaffiliation from the church.<sup>4</sup> Its data reveals the rise of individuals who describe themselves as “atheist, agnostic,” or “nothing in particular,” or, “religious nones.”<sup>5</sup> Dr. Ryan P. Burge, theologian and social scientist at Eastern Illinois University, confirms these findings.<sup>6</sup> Burge works with data amassed by the General Social Survey (GSS), what he calls the “gold standard in measuring religious change in America.”<sup>7</sup> The findings of the GSS, as of 2018, reveal that “religious nones” are the same size statistically as “both Roman Catholics and Protestants,” respectively.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, the data also indicates that the

---

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Smith, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace”

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Smith, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace”

<sup>6</sup> Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, And Where They Are Going* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 1-2

<sup>7</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 1-2

<sup>8</sup> Burge, *The Nones*, 2

younger generational cohorts, identified as Millennials and Generation Z, are disaffiliating from Christianity in disproportional numbers.<sup>9</sup>

The impact of disaffiliation in the United States has far-reaching and profound implications. The April 2013 report from *Governing*, a cohort of professionals founded in the 1980s that “provides news, analysis, and insights for the professionals leading America’s states and localities,” reveals community impact data consistent with this trend.<sup>10</sup> *Governing* estimates that as many as 26 percent of church buildings will close their doors as sites of religious worship in the next few years.<sup>11</sup> The primary cause of church closures, according to documented poll data, is that “less than half of all Americans consider themselves to be church members, down from more than 70 percent in 2000. Contributions have dwindled accordingly.”<sup>12</sup> According to *Governing*, this loss is profound for city planners and for the faith communities that once anchored neighborhoods spiritually, socially, morally, and relationally.<sup>13</sup> To be clear, *Governing* is not reporting that the central problem is the redistribution of ecclesiastical real estate but the disappearance of churches that had been life-giving in these communities.

*Christianity Today (CT)* reported similar findings in 2021, in “More Churches Closed

---

<sup>9</sup> Melissa Deckman, “Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Show,” *Religion in Public: Exploring the Mix of Sacred and Secular*, February 10, 2020, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/>

<sup>10</sup> “About Governing,” *Governing: The Future of States and Localities*, eRepublic, <https://www.governing.com/about>

<sup>11</sup> Rick Reinhard, “Churches Are Closing. It’s A Challenge for Local Governments” *Governing: The Future of States and Localities*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.governing.com/community/churches-are-closing-its-a-challenge-for-local-governments.html>

<sup>12</sup> Reinhard, “Churches Are Closing. It’s A Challenge for Local Governments.”

<sup>13</sup> Reinhard, “Churches Are Closing. It’s A Challenge for Local Governments”

Than Opened in 2019. Then Came The Pandemic.”<sup>14</sup> *CT*, using research derived from Nashville-based Lifeway Research, noted the following: “In 2019, approximately 3,000 Protestant churches were started in the U.S., but 4,500 Protestant churches closed.”<sup>15</sup> The consequences are far reaching, according to Rick Reinhard, a consultant with the Lakelands Institute, whose mission is to educate pastors and churches for a new generation of church ministry.<sup>16</sup> The data compiled by *Governing* concludes that church closures, made possible through disaffiliation, come fraught with corresponding costs.

### **The Problem of a Secularized Cultural Context**

Researchers identify one of the primary causes of church disaffiliation in the U.S. as the pluralistic, postmodern, post-Christian, and secularized culture.<sup>17</sup> As noted, the research reveals that “the unaffiliated as a whole are getting even younger, the median age being 36.”<sup>18</sup> Louis Menand, 2002 Pulitzer Prize recipient for history, maintains that changes in culture itself are the more preeminent factor for disaffiliation rather than the

---

<sup>14</sup> Aaron Earls, “More Churches Closed than Opened in 2019. Then Came the Pandemic,” *Christianity Today*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/may/lifeway-church-close-open-2019-planting-revitalization.html>

<sup>15</sup> Earls, “More Churches Closed than Opened in 2019. Then Came the Pandemic”

<sup>16</sup> Reinhard, “Churches Are Closing. It’s A Challenge for Local Governments”

<sup>17</sup> Ryan Taylor, “Postmodernism, secularism have increasing influence over Americans’ decision-making: report,” *christianpost.com*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/peoples-choices-influenced-by-postmodernism-secularism-report.html>

<sup>18</sup> Michael Lipka, “A closer look at America’s rapidly growing religious ‘nones,’” *pewresearch.com*, May 13, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>

converse of generational cohorts changing culture.<sup>19</sup> The converse, in the instance of disaffiliation, is that generational cohorts intrinsically bear innate characteristics that consequently shape culture.<sup>20</sup> Menand does not deny generational distinctions and their resultant impact on culture but states that it requires a “leap of faith” to conclude that these distinctions are innate to particular generational cohorts.<sup>21</sup> Menand’s research agrees with early emergent church leader, Doug Pagitt. Pagitt, in an interview with *CT*, explains the challenge of discerning the mission field in the United States as more than a “generational divide” but as “a larger shift in western civilization...that ran under the banner of postmodernism.”<sup>22</sup> Freelance writer and editor of *The New Inquiry*, Malcom Harris, agrees with Menand and Pagitt when he argues that a generational division is really just a marker of a significant change in society as a whole.<sup>23</sup> These three researchers agree that grasping the essence of the current cultural moment cannot be reduced to understanding the characteristics of generational cohorts and their imprint on culture. Therefore, one consideration of this study is to identify the broader cultural factors leading to disaffiliation while simultaneously seeking to understand the disproportional disaffiliation of younger generational cohorts.

---

<sup>19</sup> Louis Menand “It’s Time to Stop Talking About ‘Generations:’ From Boomers to Zoomers, the Concept Gets Social History Wrong,” *The New Yorker*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/18/its-time-to-stop-talking-about-generations>

<sup>20</sup> Louis Menand, “It’s Time to Stop Talking About ‘Generations’”

<sup>21</sup> Louis Menand, “It’s Time to Stop Talking About ‘Generations’”

<sup>22</sup> Mike Cospers host, “Boomers, the Big Sort, and Really, Really Big Churches,” June 29, 2021, episode 2 in *The Rise & Fall of Mars Hill*, podcast, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/mars-hill-podcast-boomers-big-sort-hybel-warren-driscoll.html>

<sup>23</sup> Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days: The Making of Millennials* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2017), 3.



## The Problem of Epistemology

The literature also acknowledges the challenge of epistemology as another cord in the nexus of interwoven problems. The Scottish-American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre points out that the problem of epistemology lies in the epistemological shift that has re-centered the locus of authority to within the subjective self.<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre characterizes the problem of epistemology as emotivism, which he defines as, “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference.”<sup>25</sup> MacIntyre explains emotivism as an epistemology in which there is nothing objectively true outside of a person’s own interpretation of reality. Therefore, when Christianity poses truth claims, moral or propositional, epistemological emotivism reduces Christianity to an individual’s preference. One result of this epistemological shift is that U. S. society no longer has an agreed-upon metanarrative to define life and to which everyone agrees.<sup>26</sup> This loss of the possibility of an over-arching epistemological metanarrative is a main characteristic of a postmodern mindset.<sup>27</sup>

Dr. Tara Isabella Burton has a doctorate in theology from Trinity College, Oxford, and her book on the postmodern West is described by one peer reviewer as “the

---

<sup>24</sup> Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 11-12.

<sup>25</sup> Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 11-12.

<sup>26</sup> Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 129-130.

<sup>27</sup> Veith, *Postmodern Times*, 130.

most thoughtful analysis of our current spiritual crisis anywhere.”<sup>28</sup> Burton affirms MacIntyre’s position and takes his thesis a step further. She connects MacIntyre’s emotivistic epistemology to what she tags “intuitional religions.”<sup>29</sup> Burton defines “intuitional religions” as religions whereupon “their sense of meaning is based in narratives that simultaneously reject clear-cut creedal doctrines and institutional hierarchies.”<sup>30</sup> She further states that intuitional religions “place the locus of authority on people’s experiential emotions, what you might call instinct.”<sup>31</sup> But her analysis extends further than MacIntyre’s by explaining that “institutions, credited authorities...rules of conduct—all of these are generally treated not just as irrelevant, but as sources of active evil.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, Burton affirms the new epistemology’s radically subjective center, adding that “institutions and credited authorities” are seen “as sources of active evil.”

To take seriously Burton’s conclusions is to place the institutionalized church within the category of a “source of active evil.” Such a thesis, if true, would shed light on disaffiliation and the rise of the “religious nones.” Burton lives and writes in the United Kingdom (U.K.), whose secularity by many accounts exceeds that of the United States.<sup>33</sup> Notwithstanding, a host of North American scholars and theologians would

---

<sup>28</sup> Tim Shriver, quoted in “Strange Rites,” Tara Isabella Burton (personal website), accessed May 10, 2022, <http://www.taraisabellaburton.com/strange-rites.html>

<sup>29</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020), 33.

<sup>30</sup> Burton, 33.

<sup>31</sup> Burton, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Burton, 33.

<sup>33</sup> Ryan Burge, host, “The Rise of the Religious ‘Nones’ (And What It Means for Society),” November 1, 2021, *Art of Manliness*, <https://www.artofmanliness.com/character/behavior/rise-of-the-religious-nones/>

argue that Burton’s assessment also applies to the factors leading to disaffiliation in the United States, e.g. Russell Moore, Rod Dreher, Kaya Oakes, Dave Zahl, and Frank Fukuyama.<sup>34</sup> According to these scholars, her research is not unique to the U.K. and applies also to the US.

The aforementioned researchers concede that the shift to an epistemological subjectivism creates a significant challenge. This analysis of epistemology reveals an ever-increasing challenge for people in this cultural moment to embrace a biblically defined Christianity and the church that embodies it.

### **The Problem of Ecclesiology**

Existing research acknowledges the problem of ecclesiology as yet another cord in the nexus of interwoven difficulties leading to church disaffiliation.<sup>35</sup> Specifically, the ecclesiastical problem related to the over-contextualization or under-contextualization of church ministry.<sup>36</sup> Over-contextualization is when the church ceases to be a robust witness of the kingdom of God and has over-contextualized itself to accommodate the culture in the main, or some segment of it.<sup>37</sup> Thus, over-contextualization causes the church to become indistinguishable in any meaningful way from society. When the church under-contextualizes itself, it is giving into its own idols, rather than the idols of

---

<sup>34</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, “Praise for Strange Rites,” (personal website), accessed May 10, 2022, <http://www.taraisabellaburton.com/strange-rites.html>

<sup>35</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1991), 3-4.

<sup>36</sup> Dick Kaufmann, “The Challenge of Personal Inculturation” (lecture, Harbor Church Planting Center, San Diego, CA, November 12, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> Kaufmann, “The Challenge of Personal Inculturation”

the dominant culture, and as a result becomes irrelevant to society.<sup>38</sup> Idols, in this context, are the extra-biblical and/or extraneous traditions the church has adopted that create barriers between it and the surrounding culture. Ed Stetzer holds the Chair of Church (Ecclesiology), Mission, and Evangelism at Wheaton College and speaks to the problem of under-contextualization.<sup>39</sup> He asserts that “unchurched persons in North America remain generally untouched by this evangelical subculture and abide in darkness because the evangelical subculture is not providing a culturally relevant gospel witness.”<sup>40</sup> Stetzer is stating the reality of under-contextualization and how it makes the church inaccessible for the culture at large.

Conversely, political commentator and Harvard Law School graduate David French, in his recent publication entitled *Did Donald Trump Make the Church Great Again?*, asserts the problem of over-contextualization.<sup>41</sup> His research points to the conflation of Christianity with conservative politics.<sup>42</sup> Evangelicalism is often used as a synonym for Christianity, and French describes how evangelicals, a synonym for Christians, have become a powerful political voting bloc in the United States.<sup>43</sup> French suggests that the conflation of evangelicalism with politics has created something different from biblical Christianity and consequently different from anything that

---

<sup>38</sup> Kaufmann, “The Challenge of Personal Inculturation”

<sup>39</sup> Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*

<sup>41</sup> David French, “Did Donald Trump Make the Church Great Again? How Unchurched Evangelicals Are Helping Create a God-and-Country Lifestyle Brand,” *The Dispatch*, September 19, 2021, <https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/did-donald-trump-make-the-church?>

<sup>42</sup> French, “Did Donald Trump Make the Church Great Again?”

<sup>43</sup> French, “Did Donald Trump Make the Church Great Again?”

resembles a biblical church.<sup>44</sup> According to Russell Moore, director of the Public Theology Project at *CT*, this conflation of politics with Christianity is one of the leading objections among the younger generation of potential church goers.<sup>45</sup>

The research contends that both errors, over-contextualization and under-contextualization, distort biblical ecclesiology and lead to a generational disaffiliation from Christianity. The research also indicates the church's loss of missional identity is a problem in the realm of ecclesiology contributing to disaffiliation.

### **The Problem of Christology**

A final consideration is the problem of the historical development of Christology in the United States, wherein the Son of God has been recast as the "American Jesus."<sup>46</sup> Stephen Prothero, an American scholar of religion and professor of religion at Boston University, explains how the biblical Jesus has been recast to conform to the pragmatic purposes of any group without concern for biblical orthodoxy.<sup>47</sup> In other words, Jesus has become an authoritative, pliable mascot whose identity is formed by the needs of individuals or groups claiming allegiance to him. Prothero writes:

...to see how Americans of all stripes have cast the man from Nazareth in their own image is to examine, through the looking glass, the

---

<sup>44</sup> French, "Did Donald Trump Make the Church Great Again?"

<sup>45</sup> Russell Moore, "Culture: Losing Our Religion," russellmoore.com, April 15, 2021, <https://www.russellmoore.com/2021/04/15/losing-our-religion/>

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 7.

<sup>47</sup> Prothero, 7-9

kaleidoscopic character of American culture... The American Jesus has been some kind of a chameleon.<sup>48</sup>

This dynamic explains how, when Jesus is appropriated for political purposes, people disaffiliate from Jesus, the church, and Christianity. To rephrase, according to Prothero, it's not the biblical Jesus who is ideologically aligned with some political party, but the "chameleon" Jesus made possible by the Christological distortions prevalent in the U.S. According to the research, there is something happening in the field of Christology that is exacerbating the problem outlined in this study.<sup>49</sup>

Dr. Stephen J. Nichols, president of Reformation Bible College and professor of apologetics, concurs with Prothero's analysis.<sup>50</sup> Nichols elaborates on the connection between the conflation of American ideals and Christology when he asserts, "American Christology is shaped in many ways by distinctly American ideals, such as rugged individualism or an ethic of consumption."<sup>51</sup> Additionally, Nichols asserts that being shaped by these "American ideals" impacts the way that "we read the Gospels, adding distinctive color to the picture of the Jesus that emerges."<sup>52</sup> In other words, the cultural values of "American ideals" shape people's view of Jesus more than a straight reading of the biblical text. So, according to Nichols, a different Jesus materializes, and, as a result, Nichols and Prothero write, a crisis of Christology occurs, which leads to a crisis of the

---

<sup>48</sup> Prothero, 7-9.

<sup>49</sup> Prothero, 7-9

<sup>50</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to the Passion of the Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 12-13.

<sup>51</sup> Nichols, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Nichols, 13

gospel message itself. This culture-wide confusion in Christology and the corresponding absence of a biblical Christ poses an immense challenge to the church today.

Peter Leithart, president of Theopolis Institute for Biblical, Liturgical, & Cultural Studies in Birmingham, Alabama, acknowledges this problem of Christology by stating that the contemporary categories for Christ and Christianity actually “confine, when they do not actually deform” them.<sup>53</sup> Leithart is contending that new Christological and gospel categories have replaced the more historically accurate, biblical descriptions of Jesus. He explains that this theological distortion is doing a great disservice to the church. If Prothero, Nichols, and Leithart’s conclusions are sound, then it raises the question: is the rejection of a radical misrepresentation of “Christianity” really a rejection of Christianity? This is an important question and may offer a glimmer of hope.

### **Purpose Statement**

This study examines disaffiliation through a nexus of interwoven problems that complicate one another by creating an America cultural ethos that makes Christianity increasingly implausible. The nexus of interwoven problems consists of secular culture, epistemological distortions, ecclesiastical compromises, and heterodox Christology. However, within this cultural ethos, churches and ecclesiastical networks are successfully reaching dechurched and unchurched people with the gospel, including the younger generational cohorts. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how ecclesiastical network leaders (ENLs) equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people.

---

<sup>53</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 8.

## **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do ENLs describe their role within an ecclesiastical network?
2. How do ENLs equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people?
  - a. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of current culture?
  - b. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of generational thinking?
  - c. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of epistemology?
  - d. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of Christology?
3. How do ENLs describe the mission of the local church?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study has significance for church leaders in the United States whose churches are plateauing, in decline, or are losing connection with their surrounding community. The study findings could better equip church leaders in their ministry context and help ministry leaders to establish trust, in the place of mistrust, with the dechurched and unchurched in their communities. The findings could also help churches to understand the current cultural context and, therefore, serve their communities better. As a result, disaffiliated communities might become receptive to the church's message. By gaining deeper understanding of the topics under study, the church could become better equipped to retain future generations of young people growing up in the membership and minimize future disaffiliation.



Part of this equipping involves providing insights to assist churches to better understand the culture and cultivate a more missiological approach to ministry. The findings may also help the churches address issues of contextualizing the gospel in light of new epistemological commitments, developing commitments to pre-evangelism, becoming a missional church, and preaching the historical, biblical Christ in a Christologically confused society. Another benefit may be to raise awareness under these headings (i.e., epistemological commitments, biblical Christology) by providing evaluative tools for needed theological adjustments. This evaluation process in turn could produce a more biblically oriented, missional church. The study findings may facilitate the progress of churches to embrace the new postmodern mission context and a renewed commitment to the *missio dei*, the mission of God. Embracing a new missional approach could benefit churches, parachurch ministries, Christian schools, parents, and the communities where they reside. Finally, this study's research on the informal church polity exercised by ENLs may yield insights into a form of church polity better suited for mission contexts.

### **Definition of Terms**

Baby Boomer— the generational cohort for those born between 1946 and 1965.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Bobby Duffy, *The Generation Myth: Why When You're Born Matters Less than You Think*, (New York: Basic Books, 2021), 13.

Cartesianism — the epistemology of objectivism promoted by Rene Descartes that pressed for certainty in knowledge that led to the dehumanization of the individual person.<sup>55</sup>

Christendom — "In the West for nearly 1,000 years, the relationship of (Anglo-European) Christian churches to the broader culture was a relationship known as 'Christendom.' The institutions of society 'Christianized' people, and stigmatized non-Christian belief and behavior. Though people were 'Christianized' by the culture, they were not regenerated or converted with the gospel."<sup>56</sup>

Church — the Christian church rooted in the historic, apostolic faith, that is universal in nature and represented in many denominational institutions.

Culture — the intersection of (1) "the formal ideas that are directly passed on to others," but "much broader than just beliefs," it includes, (2) precognitive, tacit assumptions which are passed on and "inherited through, (3) the social and physical dimensions of life — the institutions, symbols, customs, and practices of a group of people."<sup>57</sup>

Cultural Anthropology — the study of diverse cultures that "proceed from insights that humans live in worlds they create for themselves, worlds in which they invent and discover meaning."<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Esther L. Meek, *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 18–19.

<sup>56</sup> Keller, *The Missional Church*

<sup>57</sup> Josh Chatraw and Karen Swallow Prior, *Cultural Engagement: A Crash Course in Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 23.

<sup>58</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, eds., *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, Cultural Exegesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 24.

Dechurched — individuals who used to go to a Christian church but not anymore and who know people who do attend church.<sup>59</sup>

Demographic Replacement and/or Demographic Metabolism — the lives and deaths of one generational cohort being replaced by a new birth cohort.<sup>60</sup>

Disaffiliated — people who once belonged to the Christian church but no longer do so.

Disaffiliation — the process wherein people who used to participate in a Christian church stop participating.

Disincarnation — defined by Gabriel Marcel as the dehumanizing approach to knowledge that views “detachment as the basis for all cognition.”<sup>61</sup>

Ecclesiastical Network Leader (ENL) — a pastor who leads or oversees a network of churches or multisite venues.

Generational Thinking — the theory that the era in which a person is born affects their development of their view on the world.<sup>62</sup>

Generationalism — seeking to determine the critical beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of individuals based on generational codification, i.e. Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, Generation Z.

Generation Z — the generational cohort those born between 1996 and 2012.

---

<sup>59</sup> Zach Eswine, “Summary of Apologetic Communication” (lecture, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO, June 6, 2019).

<sup>60</sup> Norman B. Ryder, “The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change,” *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (December 1965): 843–44.

<sup>61</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 20.

<sup>62</sup> Graeme Codrington, “Detailed Introduction to Generational Theory,” *Tomorrowtoday*, August 6, 2008, 1–16.

Gospel Ecosystem—the holistic gospel-centered ministries developed by an ecclesiastical network that address the spiritual, social, and cultural needs of a city.

Hyper-modernity — a synonym for postmodernity.

Interpersonhood— a component of covenant epistemology that understands “personhood itself as interpersonal, or interpersoned; and that we should see this interpersonhood as the context and the central nerve of human knowing.”<sup>63</sup>

Millennials — the generation cohort born between 1981 and 1995.

Missio dei — the mission of God. “God working out his purposes through each passing year and as generations come and go.”<sup>64</sup>

Neo-Calvinism — a strand of the Christian tradition wherein individuals and the church at large have a different vision for every aspect of life focusing on the renewal of the whole of society.<sup>65</sup>

Neo-Calvinist — an adherent of neo-Calvinism.

Postmodernism— the epoch of history following modernity characterized by heightened individualism, increasing secularity, relativism, no over-arching metanarrative defining life for humanity, and a rejection of much of the tenets of the Enlightenment; used interchangeably with the term, post-Christian.

---

<sup>63</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 216

<sup>64</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 63.

<sup>65</sup> Michael W. Goheen, “My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism” (Lecture, Cultural Apologetics & Communication, Covenant Theological Seminary, January 7-9, 2021), 64–65.

Religious Nones or Nones — "people who identify as atheists, agnostics or describe their religion as 'nothing in particular.'"<sup>66</sup>

Secular<sub>3</sub> — "focuses on the conditions of belief where there has been a shift where belief in God is unchallenged and unproblematic to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."<sup>67</sup>

Silent Generation — the generational cohort those born between 1928 and 1945.

Social Gospel — when the mission aspect of the Christian church is reduced to addressing important social issues in any culture and omits an "aggressive program of evangelism" calling people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>68</sup>

Social Imaginaries — the "unthinking assumptions about the nature of the good life embedded in our commercial brands and our sense of self."<sup>69</sup>

Transgenerational Churches — local churches comprised of people from every generational cohort.

Unaffiliated — same as "religious nones."

Unchurched — individuals who have never gone to church but know someone who does.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Aidan Connaughton, "Religiously Unaffiliated People More Likely Than Those with a Religion to Lean Left, Accept Homosexuality," Pew Research, September 28, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/28/religiously-unaffiliated-people-more-likely-than-those-with-a-religion-to-lean-left-accept-homosexuality/>

<sup>67</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3

<sup>68</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Reprinted (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 136.

<sup>69</sup> John Seel, *The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 5.

<sup>70</sup> Eswine, *Summary of Apologetic Communication*

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how ecclesiastical network leaders (ENLs) equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches reaching dechurched and unchurched people. Four topics will be reviewed: the enmeshment of generational theory and culture, disenchantment in a secular age, covenant epistemology, and missional ecclesiology.

#### **The Enmeshment of Generational Theory and Culture**

The relationship of generational theory to culture is a complex one to be sure.<sup>71</sup> Cultural anthropologists, sociologists, and generational theorists wrestle with the enmeshed nature of these distinct but intricately related fields of study.<sup>72</sup> Accordingly, a host of questions arises around the complexity of this relationship. What makes one generation distinct from another? How do researchers explain the characteristic differences between generational cohorts separated by as few as twenty years?<sup>73</sup> Does cultural change shape new birth cohorts so as to explain the generation gap? And, if so, what brings about the observable reality of cultural change itself? Do younger generational cohorts serve as a catalyst for cultural change on account of their innovative receptivity to new ideas, mores, and ideologies? These questions reveal the relevance of the topic while simultaneously highlighting the complex relationship between

---

<sup>71</sup> Ryder, "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change," 861.

<sup>72</sup> Vanhoozer, Anderson, and Sleasman, *Everyday Theology*, 21–27.

<sup>73</sup> Codrington, "Detailed Introduction to Generational Theory," 2.

generational theory and cultural change. Another consideration under closer scrutiny is whether or not younger generational cohorts cause cultural change, solely embody it, or simultaneously participate in its causation and embodiment. Understanding this enmeshed relationship between generational theory and culture will significantly facilitate the work of ENLs as outlined in this study.

Of particular interest is the fact that Millennials and Generation Z comprise a disproportional percentage of those who now self-identify as “religious nones.”<sup>74</sup> The American Religious Survey revealed that 73 percent of “religious nones” grew up in religious homes and have become “de-converts,” creating a generational gap in churches especially.<sup>75</sup> This particular survey focused on the 20 million adults in younger generational cohorts that disaffiliated from Catholic or Protestant Christian denominations.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, when considering the ENL’s role of equipping pastors to lead transgenerational churches reaching dechurched and unchurched people, these younger generational cohorts require particular attention, if, for no other reason, than their generational cohorts comprise one of the largest domestic mission fields in the U.S., demographically-speaking. Additionally, the disproportional departure of the aforementioned generational cohorts threatens the church’s transgenerational nature.

---

<sup>74</sup> Melissa Deckman, “Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Show,” *Religion in Public: Exploring the Mix of Sacred and Secular*, February 10, 2020, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/>

<sup>75</sup> Barry A. Kosmin et al., “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population,” A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey (Hartford, CN: Trinity College, 2008), 6–8, [http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES\\_08.pdf](http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_08.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Kosmin et al., i.

Therefore, this area of literature review also examines the relevance of an ENL's understanding of generational cohorts, along with the dynamic enmeshment with, and embodiment of, contemporary culture. The intricate relationship of generational theory and culture are important to the specific work of an ENL under consideration and are referred to as a dynamic enmeshment.

### *The Reality of Enmeshment*

Dr. Neil Howe, known for his work on generational theory, in collaboration with Dr. William Strauss, emphasizes what he refers to as the “full circle of causation.”<sup>77</sup> Howe states that a generational cohort is born from and thus shaped by the society of its origin; consequently, society causes or shapes the newly arrived generational cohort.<sup>78</sup> But, as generational cohorts “age together,” they reflexively shape culture, thus becoming agents of causation for cultural change.<sup>79</sup> Dr. Norman B. Ryder, professor emeritus of sociology at Princeton University and a renowned demographer, preceded Howe and Strauss by two decades and wrote on this enmeshment dynamic.<sup>80</sup> Ryder proposes that each new cohort makes “fresh contact with the contemporary social heritage and carries the impress of the encounter through life.”<sup>81</sup> Ryder is emphasizing that this “fresh

---

<sup>77</sup> Neil Howe, "What the Generational Cycle Theory Can Tell Us About Our Present Age," (podcast interview), hosted by Brett McKay, September 20, 2016, <https://www.artofmanliness.com/character/behavior/podcast-236-generational-cycle-theory-can-tell-us-present-age/>.

<sup>78</sup> Howe, What the Generational Cycle Theory Can Tell Us About Our Present Age."

<sup>79</sup> Howe, What the Generational Cycle Theory Can Tell Us About Our Present Age."

<sup>80</sup> Ryder, "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change," 843–44.

<sup>81</sup> Ryder, 844.



contact” with culture shapes the new generational cohort; thus, culture itself is shaping the new generational cohort with its existing symbols, ideologies, institutions, and tacitly held commitments. Ryder then elaborates that “demographic replacement provides the opportunity for social change to occur.”<sup>82</sup> He explains: “They (generational cohorts) do not cause change; they permit it. If change does occur, it differentiates cohorts from one another, and the comparison of their careers becomes a way to study change.”<sup>83</sup> By “demographic replacement,” Ryder simply means the birth of a new generational cohort that will eventually supplant the generations that preceded it.

Notably, Ryder does not state his case as confidently as Howe regarding demographic replacement being a necessary cause for cultural change. However, Ryder’s appeal to the work of Dr. Robert Morrison MacIver, renowned sociologist and author of *The Challenge of the Passing Years*, reveals that he believes the shaping of culture caused by a new generational cohort is more than just mere happenstance.<sup>84</sup> In other words, Ryder’s appeal to MacIver betrays a deeper commitment to the causal relationship between new generational cohorts and cultural change. Case in point, MacIver highlights the confrontation between generational differences and the language of the “innovative and conservative forces in history.”<sup>85</sup> New generational cohorts innovate in a multitude of ways, bringing about cultural change that no longer conserves the existing order. Ryder cautiously applies the “innovative force” component of MacIver’s theory to new cohorts,

---

<sup>82</sup> Ryder, 844.

<sup>83</sup> Ryder, 844.

<sup>84</sup> Ryder, 844.

<sup>85</sup> Robert M MacIver, *The Challenge of the Passing Years: My Encounter with Time* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 110–11.

explaining how these rising generations catalyze cultural change through their experience within their “stream of history.”<sup>86</sup> Consequently, as one examines the literature regarding the enmeshment of generational theory and culture, it becomes apparent that such an enmeshment exists.

Malcolm Harris, an American journalist and editor at *The New Inquiry*, agrees with Howe and Ryder regarding this enmeshment.<sup>87</sup> Harris states, “To understand the consequences of a generational shift, we need more than just the proximate causes of new culture and behavior; we have to pull apart the tangled nest of historical trends where they are hatched.”<sup>88</sup> Harris is portraying the enmeshed nature of generational theory and culture by causally connecting the “consequences of a generational shift” with their origins in “historical trends.”

Harris agrees that the new cultural reality has a shaping influence on new generational cohorts. But he argues that researchers have to understand these new cultural realities from the “tangled nest” from whence they arose. Harris continues, “No one chooses the historical circumstances of their birth” that ultimately shapes their lives.<sup>89</sup> However, it is this “tangled nest,” or enmeshment, that should be considered when seeking to understand the changes we see in generational cohorts. Ryder uses the language of the “changing content of formal education, peer-group socialization, and idiosyncratic historical experience” to explain the generational shift, and its

---

<sup>86</sup> Ryder, “The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change,” 844.

<sup>87</sup> Malcolm Harris, *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 2017), 4.

<sup>88</sup> Harris, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Harris, 4.

corresponding consequences.<sup>90</sup> In summary, deciphering cultural change through generational thinking theory is a common theme in the literature and a means by which ENLs can better discern their mission context.

### *Generational Thinking Theory*

Dr. Karl Mannheim, the Hungarian sociologist, is one of the fathers of generational thinking theory.<sup>91</sup> Mannheim states, “The social phenomenon ‘generation’ represents nothing more than a particular kind of identity in location, embracing related ‘age groups’ embedded in a historical-social process.”<sup>92</sup> So, for Mannheim, “related age groups” must be contextualized within their geography and rooted in a historical-social process with a high degree of uniformity. Graeme Codrington, the South African generational thinking theorist, agrees with Mannheim and explains, “The era in which a person was born affects their development of their view on the world.”<sup>93</sup> Codrington sees that the formative experience described by generational thinking theory causes a person to view the world in a particular manner. However, the discipline of generational thinking theory is not an entirely unified field of study.

Bobby Duffy, author of *The Generation Myth* and professor of public policy at King’s College in London, is concerned with reductionistic approaches to generational

---

<sup>90</sup> Ryder, “The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change,” 843.

<sup>91</sup> Duffy, *The Generation Myth*, 4.

<sup>92</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (London: FB & c Ltd, Dalton House, 2018), 292.

<sup>93</sup> Codrington, “Detailed Introduction to Generational Theory.”

theory that don't legitimately build on the seminal insights of Mannheim.<sup>94</sup> Duffy is invested in the field of generational thinking theory because he believes this field of study yields profound insights for understanding societal change and future implications.<sup>95</sup> Duffy develops Mannheim's seminal work through his explicit codification of the three effects impacting the development of generational distinctions: "period effects, life-cycle effects, and cohort effects."<sup>96</sup> Duffy is so confident with this codification of generational thinking theory that he claims the following: "Every change we see in societal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors can be explained by one or, more often, a combination of these three effects."<sup>97</sup> Duffy argues that most generational analysis goes awry when it tries to explain age cohort distinctions as being caused solely by what he calls "cohort effects."<sup>98</sup> According to Duffy, cohort effects are "the distinct attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors a generational cohort has been socialized into that differ from those conditions of other generational cohorts."<sup>99</sup> He believes this approach is reductionistic and ignores the two other foundational factors that comprise the triad of "true generational thinking,"<sup>100</sup> namely, period effects and life-cycle effects. Period effects are the "attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that impact a society consistently across all generational cohorts and occur in response to major events like pandemics, wars, and economic crises that affect

---

<sup>94</sup> Duffy, *The Generation Myth*, 4–7.

<sup>95</sup> Duffy, 5–6.

<sup>96</sup> Duffy, 7–9.

<sup>97</sup> Duffy, 9.

<sup>98</sup> Duffy, 9.

<sup>99</sup> Duffy, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Duffy, 7.

everyone.”<sup>101</sup> Life-cycle effects occur as people within a generational cohort age or as the result of such events as “leaving home, having children, or retiring.”<sup>102</sup>

But generational theory is not without its contrarians. While Duffy is concerned with overly simplified, reductionistic approaches to generational thinking theory, his generational cohort contemporary, Louis Menand, calls into question the integrity of the entire discipline.<sup>103</sup> For starters, Menand doubts the discipline-wide appeal to Mannheim as one of the fathers of contemporary generational thinking theory. He states that the sociologist was not interested in generational trends within the broader population.<sup>104</sup> Menand appeals specifically to an essay Mannheim authored in 1928 that uses the term “generational units” to refer to political figures, artists, and writers who “self-consciously adopt new ways of doing things,” along with an uncontextualized reference of Mannheim regarding “peasant communities” that do not change.<sup>105</sup> It is difficult to further explain what Menand means because he simply does not make it clear. Regardless, it’s important to note that Mannheim, in his essay entitled “The Sociological Problem of Generations,” makes it clear that he is interested in the broader population when referencing generational trends.<sup>106</sup> Mannheim makes a distinction between “class location that can be

---

<sup>101</sup> Duffy, 7–8.

<sup>102</sup> Duffy, 8.

<sup>103</sup> Louis Menand, “It’s Time to Stop Talking About ‘Generations,’” *The New Yorker*, (October 11, 2021), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/18/its-time-to-stop-talking-about-generations>.

<sup>104</sup> Menand, “It’s Time to Stop Talking About ‘Generations.’”

<sup>105</sup> Menand, “It’s Time to Stop Talking About ‘Generations.’”

<sup>106</sup> Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, 292.

explained in terms of economic and social conditions” and “generation location.”<sup>107</sup> Mannheim states, “Generational location is determined by the way in which certain patterns of experience and thought tend to be brought into existence by the natural data of the transition from one generation to another.”<sup>108</sup> Perhaps Menand’s reference to peasant communities would be categorized under Mannheim’s “class location” moniker, which would seem appropriate given the class distinction of a peasant, but he’s not clear enough in his critique for a confident conclusion. If true, Mannheim’s other category of “generation location,” that Menand dismisses altogether without substantive evidence, appears to be the categorical home of Mannheim’s generational theory.

Menand’s targeted critique of Duffy’s work similarly challenges the whole discipline of generational thinking theory. It appears that Menand has either misunderstood Duffy’s “three effects” or fails to accept Duffy’s proposal that the three effects, considered together, provide a wholistic methodology that mitigates against some of Menand’s concerns, such as reductionistic theories, poor sociological research and methodology, and a capitalistic economic driver for the growing interest in generational theory.<sup>109</sup> Either way, Menand patronizes Duffy as he concludes one section of his critique by stating, “for he (Duffy) thinks that his three factors explain everything.”<sup>110</sup> Menand’s skepticism of the entire field of study no doubt colors his wholesale rejection

---

<sup>107</sup> Mannheim, 292.

<sup>108</sup> Mannheim, 292.

<sup>109</sup> Menand, “It’s Time to Stop Talking About ‘Generations.’”

<sup>110</sup> Menand, “It’s Time to Stop Talking About ‘Generations.’”

of generational theory. And, while his aforementioned concerns seem legitimate, his wholesale rejection of generational theory is a minority voice in the literature reviewed.

### *Culture and Generational Cohort Differentiation*

Tomes have been written seeking to define culture, its dynamism, how it morphs over time, and how it shapes the people under its formative power. Considering the expansive topic of culture, the literature review will consider the formative power of culture to shape new generational cohorts and provide an explanation for generational differentiation. It has been aptly stated that “culture is notoriously hard to define,” and yet, the multiplicity of definitions provides a frame of understanding for this complex reality.<sup>111</sup> For the purpose of this study, culture is defined as:

...an ecosystem of institutions, practices, artifacts, and beliefs, all interacting and mutually reinforcing. Cultures are rarely entirely homogeneous or consistent, but generalizations about specific cultures are nonetheless possible. Despite their complexity, cultures can have an overriding ethos.<sup>112</sup>

So, culture is more than an individual society’s commonly held beliefs, whether embraced explicitly or tacitly, but certainly not less than these beliefs and the worldviews they construct. Culture is complex, communal, communicates meaning, shapes the desires of the heart, and replicates itself.<sup>113</sup> And yet, the way culture reproduces itself is not uniform and adapts over time. Additionally, questions abound as to whether culture

---

<sup>111</sup> Chatraw and Prior, *Cultural Engagement*, 23.

<sup>112</sup> Ken Myers, *All God’s Children & Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1989), xviii.

<sup>113</sup> Chatraw and Prior, *Cultural Engagement*, 22–31.

changes from the elites, top-down, or from the general populace, bottom-up.<sup>114</sup> The clear fact is that cultural change takes place regardless of its class origin.

Dr. Joshua Chatraw, director of New City Fellows in Raleigh, NC, and Dr. Karen Swallow Prior, professor of English literature at Liberty University, in their research on apologetics and cultural engagement, explain how culture is “both inherited and adapted through time.”<sup>115</sup> Chatraw and Prior explore how culture replicates itself through inheritance from preceding generations, what they described as “vertical” replication, and how it morphs through “horizontal” interaction “across geographic regions and demographic groups.”<sup>116</sup> Culture stability through vertical replication and cultural adaptation through horizontal interaction with diverse cultures is an idea that Ryder himself embraced, albeit articulated differently in “The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change.”<sup>117</sup> In fact, Ryder postulates that “stability is a more likely institutional goal than innovation” for aging generational cohorts because “it is simpler and safer,” at least until that society is posed with a threat that needs more innovative solutions.<sup>118</sup> Threat, for Ryder, appears to be a broad category of society-wide challenges that “threaten” a future generational cohort’s flourishing.<sup>119</sup> These challenges expose a

---

<sup>114</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6–31.

<sup>115</sup> Chatraw and Prior, *Cultural Engagement*, 29.

<sup>116</sup> Chatraw and Prior, 29.

<sup>117</sup> Ryder, “The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change,” 843–44.

<sup>118</sup> Ryder, 844.

<sup>119</sup> Ryder, 844.



previous generational cohort's "fixed set of solutions" as a "liability."<sup>120</sup> For example, Chatraw and Prior raise the "threat," or new generational issue, of "globalization spurred on by modern technology" that creates a "world more connected than ever before" that produces the "rapid transmission of culture."<sup>121</sup> Perhaps Ryder could not have imagined the intensive impact of globalization and the power of modern technology in the mid-1960s, but, in principal, he did anticipate such a challenge. His theory of "demographic metabolism" foresees such a challenge and provides an explanatory framework to elucidate the basis for generational cohort differentiation.<sup>122</sup>

"Demographic metabolism" is Ryder's term for generational replacement: the inescapable life-and-death cycle by which a new generation is born and the older generation dies.<sup>123</sup> Ryder builds on "demographic metabolism" in stating that every member of a society is born into a culture whose institutions and "agencies of socialization" give the new member a particular shape appropriate to the societal design."<sup>124</sup> This aspect of Ryder's theory is affirmed by Chatraw and Prior's "vertical" dimension of cultural replication. However, Ryder says that the members of new birth cohorts arrive in society at "their unique location in the stream of history, a "stream of history" that has morphed incrementally via the "horizontal" dynamics of cultural change

---

<sup>120</sup> Ryder, 844.

<sup>121</sup> Chatraw and Prior, *Cultural Engagement*, 29.

<sup>122</sup> Ryder, "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change," 843–44.

<sup>123</sup> Ryder, 843.

<sup>124</sup> Ryder, 844.

described by Chatraw, Prior, and even Ryder himself.”<sup>125</sup> Ryder then expounds on how this metabolism establishes generational cohort differentiation, observing:

Because it embodies a temporally specific version of the heritage, each cohort is differentiated from all the others, despite the minimization of variability by symbolically perpetuated institutions and by hierarchically graduated structures of authority.<sup>126</sup>

By “specific version of the heritage,” Ryder is speaking of the “vertically” inherited culture received from the previous generation that has morphed incrementally from the prior iteration of it. Of course, when society experiences radical changes, oftentimes brought about by “horizontal” adaptation, that “specific version of the heritage” can look radically different from the previous “version” of it. For Ryder, this “specific version of the heritage” becomes “embodied” in the new generational cohort, creating “differentiation” from other generational cohorts. Chatraw and Prior would agree with Ryder’s analysis, while expanding on its applications in an increasingly globalized, technologically advanced society where that differentiation is correspondingly accelerated. In Ryder’s analysis of generational cohort differentiation, he also notes that “institutions” and “structures of authority” are slower to reflect the cultural changes manifesting through peer-group socialization of younger generational cohorts.<sup>127</sup>

According to James Davison Hunter, sociologist and professor of religion, culture, and social theory at the University of Virginia, Ryder’s view of how culture changes has been the predominant view but, according to Hunter, the incorrect one.<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> Ryder, *The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change*,” 844.

<sup>126</sup> Ryder, 844.

<sup>127</sup> Ryder, 844.

<sup>128</sup> Hunter, *To Change the World*, 6–17.

Hunter's thesis, in his work entitled *To Change the World*, posits that culture predominantly changes through "dense networks and the new institutions that are created out of those networks."<sup>129</sup> By "dense networks," Hunter is underscoring their "active" and interactive" nature, which increases cultural influence, resulting in "where the stuff of culture and culture change is produced."<sup>130</sup> Either way, cultural change is a reality, and as it becomes institutionalized in a multiplicity of cultural institutions, it creates generational cohort differentiation. Also, whether cultural change arises from grass-roots movements, or from societal elites, culture adapts over time. The literature researched is united around both cultural stability and adaptation. Likewise, the literature reviewed is unified around the claim that the new ideologies, social imaginaries, and worldviews intrinsic to cultural change become embodied in new generational cohorts.

### **New Generational Cohorts as Cultural Signposts**

Ryder makes an explicit connection between a new generational cohort's "fresh contact" with an adapting culture and to consequently its being shaped by that contact.<sup>131</sup> This "fresh contact" results in the adoption of a differentiated approach to life that the new generational cohort embraces and lives out over the course of their lifetime.<sup>132</sup> Therefore, for Ryder, culture is "causing" new generational cohorts to be shaped by the adapting culture thus establishing the effect of this cohort's beliefs, values, and behaviors

---

<sup>129</sup> Hunter, 38.

<sup>130</sup> Hunter, 38.

<sup>131</sup> Ryder, "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change," 844.

<sup>132</sup> Ryder, "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change," 844.

in society. Ryder's language of the "impress" of culture on a new generational cohort can be equated with the embodiment of that same culture.<sup>133</sup> So, the new generational cohort becomes a signpost for the essence of culture, cultural change, and a prognosticator of the cultural change on the historical horizon.<sup>134</sup> Duffy agrees that new generational cohorts not only embody culture but serve as a signpost for the cultural moment, including the dynamics of "how societies change."<sup>135</sup> Dr. Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State with a discipline emphasis on researching generational differences, agrees wholeheartedly:

...when you were born dictates the culture you will experience. This includes the highs and lows of pop culture, as well as world events, social trends, economic realities, behavioral norms, and ways of seeing the world. The society that molds you when you are young stays with you the rest of your life.<sup>136</sup>

Harris, too, agrees with the idea that new generational cohorts serve as cultural signposts, although, for Harris, a radical pessimism pervades his research.<sup>137</sup> He observes that the culture shaping new generational cohorts, and the cultural signpost on display in these generations, point to a "full-fledged dystopia," based on the observable distress in Millennials and Gen Z in regards to economic opportunity, the rise of mental health disorders, and the impact of the functional abandonment of these generations.<sup>138</sup> For

---

<sup>133</sup> Ryder, 844.

<sup>134</sup> Duffy, *The Generation Myth*, 7.

<sup>135</sup> Duffy, 217.

<sup>136</sup> Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled and More Miserable than Ever Before* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>137</sup> Harris, *Kids These Days*, 3–12.

<sup>138</sup> Harris, 3–12.

Harris and others who draw different conclusions regarding the current and future state of generational cohorts, the methodology is the same. They make observations that distinguish one generational cohort from another and then investigate the historical circumstances that created these distinguishing features.<sup>139</sup>

For example, the work of Dr. Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist and professor of ethical leadership at NYU, and Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), discerns cultural trends through observed behavior in new generational cohorts.<sup>140</sup> In Haidt and Lukianoff's book entitled *The Coddling of the American Mind*, both researchers began to notice significant shifts in the behavior of students on college campuses beginning in the early 2000s.<sup>141</sup> According to Haidt and Lukianoff, Millennial and Generation Z cohorts were manifesting a psychological fragility markedly different from previous generational cohorts, and this condition was altering the culture of university campuses.<sup>142</sup> Terms such as “trigger warnings,” “triggering,” “safe spaces,” and “callout culture” filled the lexicon of this shifting culture and thus became embodied in the lives of these younger generational cohorts.<sup>143</sup> Derogatory terms like “snowflake generation” were born out of this cultural milieu, further confirming that a generational shift was underway. A variety of interpretations tried to explain the cultural underpinnings of these broad scale

---

<sup>139</sup> Harris, 10–11.

<sup>140</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 1–15.

<sup>141</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 5–15.

<sup>142</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 5–15.

<sup>143</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, 5–6.

observations.<sup>144</sup> Haidt and Lukianoff’s interpretation eventually was reduced to statements they codified as the “three Great Untruths: the Untruth of Fragility, the Untruth of Emotional Reasoning, and the Untruth of Us Versus Them.”<sup>145</sup> Haidt and Lukianoff’s research identified the cultural change embodied in the new generational cohorts attending university and then addressed what they deemed harmful to the human personality as a result. They observed trends in new generational cohorts as cultural signposts that reveal changes in the broader culture, perfectly illustrating this methodology. So, whether or not one agrees with Haidt and Lukianoff’s interpretations of the data, their methodology has wide acceptance by the literature reviewed.

The literature reviewed in this area also establishes the importance of generational theory and its relationship to understanding culture and cultural change. The literature established strong evidence that new generational cohorts embody the cultural milieu of the emerging culture out of the existing one. The fact that there is an emerging culture highlights the importance of understanding that culture is dynamic and that its dynamism is catalyzed by new generational cohorts. Since the emerging culture becomes embodied in younger generational cohorts, an examination of the trends, beliefs, ideologies, artifacts, and social imaginaries yields helpful insights into the cultural setting in which an ENL leads others. Therefore, an ENL’s knowledge of trends revealed in new generational cohorts is of importance in leading transgenerational churches reaching dechurched and unchurched people. Another important component of understanding the

---

<sup>144</sup> Roberta R. Katz et al., *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 160–61.

<sup>145</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 4.

cultural context in which ENLs carry out their mission is the broader cultural trends that have shifted over decades and even centuries. The next area of literature review will examine the secular age.

## **A Secular Age**

This area of literature review will examine the cultural milieu of a secular age. Since the release of *A Secular Age* in 2007, Canadian philosopher Dr. Charles Taylor has become a docent for many ecclesiastical and parachurch leaders regarding the American cultural context.<sup>146</sup> Taylor’s 874-page tome describes the early twenty-first century West, including the United States, as a secular age.<sup>147</sup> The purpose of this comprehensive volume is to know what it means “to say we live in a secular age.”<sup>148</sup> Dr. James K.A. Smith, professor of philosophy at Calvin University, states, “Charles Taylor has a story meant to help us locate where we are, and what’s at stake.”<sup>149</sup> Smith continues, “I am an unabashed and unapologetic advocate for the importance and originality of Taylor’s project. I think *A Secular Age* is an insightful and incisive account of our globalized, cosmopolitan, pluralist, present.”<sup>150</sup>

---

<sup>146</sup> James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), vii–xii.

<sup>147</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, First Harvard University Press paperback edition (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>148</sup> Taylor, 1.

<sup>149</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, ix.

<sup>150</sup> Smith, x.

Taylor’s work, as described by Smith, provides a lexicon to better understand the cultural moment in which ENLs exercise their leadership.<sup>151</sup> Smith adds, “Such a guide makes sense of our situation, not by didactically explaining it, and certainly not by explaining it away, but by giving us the words to name what we’ve felt.”<sup>152</sup> Taylor’s names for “what we’ve felt” is the abbreviated lexicon for a secular age. Dr. David John Seel, cultural renewal entrepreneur and social-impact consultant, states that “little is being done currently to equip pastors for this task” of reaching people with a postmodern social imaginary.<sup>153</sup> Taylor’s lexicon is exceedingly helpful in addressing Seel’s concern. Taylor’s definition of a secular age and the resultant fragilization of faith commitments address this concern. Therefore, this area of literature review will examine the contours of a secular age through Taylor’s abbreviated lexicon.

### **Defining a Secular Age**

Taylor’s description of a secular age is set within the contextualized and epochal frame of postmodernity.<sup>154</sup> He distinguishes between three types of secularity with significance in the present cultural moment.<sup>155</sup> Taylor’s first definition (secular<sub>1</sub>) carries with it the more “classical definition of the secular, as distinguished from the sacred—the

---

<sup>151</sup> Justin Ariel Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics: The Beauty of Faith in a Secular Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 8.

<sup>152</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 4.

<sup>153</sup> Seel, *The New Copernicans*, 68.

<sup>154</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2–4.

<sup>155</sup> Taylor, 1–4.



earthly plane of domestic life.”<sup>156</sup> Secular<sub>2</sub> is the society-wide secularity resulting from a change in “religious belief and practice” wherein “people (are) turning away from God and no longer going to church.”<sup>157</sup> In this sense, secular<sub>2</sub> is identified as the “rough metrics of church participation.”<sup>158</sup> Finally, there is secular<sub>3</sub>, “closely related” to secular<sub>2</sub>, “and not without connection to” secular<sub>1</sub>; but, primarily distinguished from the other two in its emphasis on the “conditions of belief.”<sup>159</sup> Taylor observes:

The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.<sup>160</sup>

In secular<sub>3</sub>, the conditions for belief no longer favor belief in a transcendent being or realm. As a result, the conditions are just as favorable for a person to reject belief in God as it is to embrace the reality of a divine being.

Dr. Peter Berger, sociologist and Protestant theologian, made a similar observation in the 1960s when he wrote:

Whatever the situation may have been in the past, today, the supernatural as a meaningful reality is absent or remote from the horizons of everyday life of large numbers, very probably of the majority, of people in modern societies, who seem to get along without it quite well.<sup>161</sup>

---

<sup>156</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 142.

<sup>157</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2.

<sup>158</sup> Phil Ford and J.F. Martel, “Weird Studies,” *Living and Dying in a Secular Age: On Charles Taylor and Disenchantment*, n.d., <https://www.weirdstudies.com/93>.

<sup>159</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2–3.

<sup>160</sup> Taylor, 3.

<sup>161</sup> Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 5–6.

Berger highlights unbelief in the supernatural realm of the general populace. Additionally, he states that this rejection of the “supernatural as a meaningful reality” does not impact the quality of people’s lives in any observable manner. According to Berger, society appears to be flourishing in this new secular age.

Berger’s description of the West’s rejection of the supernatural forty years before Taylor touches on two other critical definitions Taylor describes: exclusive humanism and the immanent frame.<sup>162</sup> Berger describes the “empirical sphere,” which “became both all-encompassing and perfectly closed in upon itself.”<sup>163</sup> Berger’s explanation is synonymous with Taylor’s immanent frame. Taylor’s definition of the immanent frame is robust, but he explicitly states it is “where rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular,” and it “constitutes a natural order contrasted to a supernatural one.”<sup>164</sup> Smith summarizes Taylor when he refers to the immanent frame as “a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order.”<sup>165</sup> The immanent frame emerges logically from what Taylor describes as exclusive humanism.<sup>166</sup>

For Taylor, exclusive humanism is the social imaginary that assumes the attainment of a meaningful and flourishing life without any reference to God or

---

<sup>162</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19–20, 539–44.

<sup>163</sup> Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 94.

<sup>164</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.

<sup>165</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 141.

<sup>166</sup> Ford and Martel, “Weird Studies.”

transcendence.<sup>167</sup> Berger agrees with Taylor's definition of exclusive humanism in its rejection of the supernatural order and the possibility of human flourishing.<sup>168</sup> Dr. Philip Rieff, a cultural critic and professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, concurs with Berger and Taylor's exclusive humanism under the heading of what he calls "third world cultures."<sup>169</sup> For Rieff, "third world cultures (contemporary Western cultures) sever the connection between the sacred order and social order, limiting the 'real' world to the visible and locating moral authority in the self."<sup>170</sup> Rieff asserts that "exclusive humanism" paves the way for the preeminent "psychotherapeutic view of modern man" with all of his psychotherapeutic distortions produced by the severing of the sacred and social order"<sup>171</sup> For Rieff, the sacred no longer serves as the metaphysical foundation for the social order of the natural world.<sup>172</sup> He argues, "The third culture notion of a culture that persists independent of all sacred orders is unprecedented in human history."<sup>173</sup> This "unprecedented" epoch "in human history" is also the claim of Taylor, who asks, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even

---

<sup>167</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19–21.

<sup>168</sup> Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 5–6.

<sup>169</sup> Philip Rieff and Kenneth S. Piver, *My Life Among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority, Sacred Order/Social Order*, v. 1 (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 1–18.

<sup>170</sup> Bruce Riley Ashford, "A Theological Sickness unto Death: Philip Rieff's Prophetic Analysis of Our Secular Age," *Themelios* 43, no. 1 (April 2018): 37.

<sup>171</sup> Ashford, 34–35.

<sup>172</sup> Rieff and Piver, *My Life among the Deathworks*, 2.

<sup>173</sup> Rieff and Piver, 13.

inescapable?”<sup>174</sup> So, what historical dynamics have given rise to this cultural shift, and what relevance do these changes have for an ENL’s ministry context?

### **The Historical Moorings for a Secular Age**

Taylor identifies three historical features in the pre-1500 world that made the transcendent world and the existence of a transcendent being(s) an undeniable reality.<sup>175</sup> These three features were: a universal mindset that apprehended transcendent causes for immanent occurrences, societal institutions that propagated belief in the transcendent, and a widespread belief that humanity lived in an enchanted world.<sup>176</sup> Taylor’s first and second features are likened to Rieff’s sacred order as the foundation for all social institutions. It is the “enchanted world” feature that contrasts with the current cultural moment, so that Taylor labels this age, “disenchanted.”<sup>177</sup> The term “disenchantment” is “a description of our modern condition,” borrowed from the German sociologist and historian, Dr. Max Weber.<sup>178</sup>

Weber, in the summer of 1917, gave a series of lectures at the University of Munich in which he spoke of the “disenchantment of the world.”<sup>179</sup> Weber spoke of disenchantment (the German word, *entzauberung*) as increased “rationalization and

---

<sup>174</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

<sup>175</sup> Taylor, 25.

<sup>176</sup> Taylor, 25–26.

<sup>177</sup> Taylor, 25.

<sup>178</sup> Taylor, 25.

<sup>179</sup> Max Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. Chad Wellmon and Paul Reitter, New York Review Books Classics (New York: New York Review Books, 2019), 18.

intellectualization of the conditions we live under, a condition that, according to the German word *entzauberung*, strips the world of certain forms of magic and mysteries; *entzauberung* de- or un- magics.”<sup>180</sup> Weber demonstrates how this disenchantment has religious and secular sources.<sup>181</sup> In fact, Taylor calls the Protestant Reformation “an engine of disenchantment,”<sup>182</sup> Weber’s influence on Taylor. Weber’s criticism of the Reformation is summarized in the preface of his *Vocation Lectures*: “But intensely pious Calvinists helped to disenchant the world by denying the Catholic sacraments their ‘magic.’”<sup>183</sup> Extreme statements like these, indicting the Reformation church’s role in the rise of cultural disenchantment, are not isolated critiques.

Dr. Peter Leithart, theologian and president of Theopolis Institute, develops a case that “since about 1500,” the church has adjusted its beliefs and practices to the core tenets of modernity.<sup>184</sup> Leithart’s critique is arrestingly severe, asserting that the church has adapted the “gospel” to modernity and allowed the secular world to define it.<sup>185</sup> Leithart continues by stating that the church’s capitulation to secular society has created the following reality: “Christianity is biblical religion disemboweled and emasculated by (voluntary) intellectualization and/or privatization.”<sup>186</sup> Taylor, Weber, and Leithart agree that intellectualization and privatization lead to disenchantment and a secular age.

---

<sup>180</sup> Weber, 18.

<sup>181</sup> Weber, xiii.

<sup>182</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 77.

<sup>183</sup> Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment*, xiii.

<sup>184</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>185</sup> Leithart, 17.

<sup>186</sup> Leithart, 17.

Weber understands intellectualization as man’s ability to master the world, given enough time—a world that possesses “no mysterious incalculable forces intervening in our lives”—a definition amenable to Leithart and Taylor.<sup>187</sup> But privatization is handled differently by Leithart than by Taylor. Leithart uses a more communal definition of privatization in the aforementioned quote.<sup>188</sup> He believes it is more communal in the sense that the privatization of faith is still a community-wide acceptance of the Christian faith, whereas Taylor accentuates the individual over the communal in his term “expressive individualism.”<sup>189</sup> Expressive individualism encourages people to “find their own way, discover their own fulfillment, ‘do their own thing.’”<sup>190</sup> According to Taylor, this aspect of the secular age originates historically in the Romantic period but has “utterly penetrated popular culture only in recent decades.”<sup>191</sup>

Dr. Tara Isabelle Burton assigns the historical origins for Taylor’s expressive individualism to the Enlightenment ideals of governance.<sup>192</sup> She argues that the Enlightenment ideal of separation of church and state adopted by America’s Founding Fathers has actually served to advance DIY (Do-It-Yourself) religious expressions.<sup>193</sup> Burton states that the “idea that religion should be personal, not social, is encoded in our

---

<sup>187</sup> Weber, *Charisma and Disenchantment*, 18.

<sup>188</sup> Leithart, *Against Christianity*, 15–17.

<sup>189</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

<sup>190</sup> Taylor, 299.

<sup>191</sup> Taylor, 299.

<sup>192</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Hatchett Book Group, Inc., 2020), 34–36.

<sup>193</sup> Burton, 35–52.

nation's DNA."<sup>194</sup> Additionally, Burton highlights the secular sources and the Christian sources leading to this crucial feature of a secular age.<sup>195</sup> Burton's appeal to Thomas Jefferson's metaphysical deism provides the philosophical and theological basis for a DIY religion. In other words, if God is so distant so as to provide no immediate and functional aid for humanity (deism), then the only option for humankind is individual or communal effort. Burton argues that these dynamics, along with a "growing popular distrust of the American Anglican Church" (organized religion), and the "individualistic path pioneered by Martin Luther during the Protestant Reformation" advance society toward Taylor's expressive individualism.<sup>196</sup> These historical movements have led to what Phil Ford and J.K. Martell, co-hosts of the Arts and Philosophy podcast "Weird Studies," refer to as the atomized self.<sup>197</sup>

### **The Atomized Self in a Secular Age**

The atomization of the self is a sociological term that explains how and why individuals are becoming more isolated, lonely, and disconnected from the outside world, especially relationships.<sup>198</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre's emotivism, wherein "all evaluative and moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, attitude, or feeling,"

---

<sup>194</sup> Burton, 36.

<sup>195</sup> Burton, 34–36.

<sup>196</sup> Burton, 37.

<sup>197</sup> Ford and Martel, "Weird Studies."

<sup>198</sup> Willow Liana, "All the Lonely People: The Atomized Generation," *Erraticus*, March 11, 2020, <https://erraticus.co/2020/03/11/atomized-generation-community-atomization-loneliness/>.

highlights the radically subjectivized nature of the atomized self.<sup>199</sup> MacIntyre points to the atomization of the moral self that has no reference to an external source, transcendent or otherwise. Burton’s articulation of the atomized self is codified in her “intuitional religions,” which place humankind’s locus of authority on an individual’s “gut instinct” and “experiential emotions.”<sup>200</sup> Taylor’s version is the “buffered self,” as opposed to the “porous self.”<sup>201</sup> Smith summarizes Taylor’s lengthy definition of the buffered self as follows: “In the modern social imaginary, the self is sort of insulated in an interior ‘mind,’ no longer vulnerable to the transcendent or the demonic.”<sup>202</sup> Taylor’s pre-secular<sub>3</sub> age self was porous, a characteristic of living in an enchanted world, where “the source of its most powerful and important emotions is outside the ‘mind.’”<sup>203</sup> The porous self was susceptible to forces that were transcendent, enchanted, and vulnerable to “benevolence or malevolence, which is more than human, which resides in the cosmos and even beyond it.”<sup>204</sup> Taylor explains the buffered self: “such as that the things beyond don’t need to ‘get to me,’ to use the contemporary expression. That’s the sense to my use of the term ‘buffered’ here. This self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it.”<sup>205</sup> Taylor’s description of the buffered self is the grand point of agreement

---

<sup>199</sup> Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 11–12.

<sup>200</sup> Burton, *Strange Rites*, 33.

<sup>201</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 37–42.

<sup>202</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 140.

<sup>203</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

<sup>204</sup> Taylor, 36–38.

<sup>205</sup> Taylor, 38.



with MacIntyre and Burton. The atomized self makes meaning apart from any influence outside the boundaries of the individual ‘mind.’ Additionally, Taylor asserts Rene Descartes’ philosophical work leads to a functionally disenchanting world and thus a buffered, atomized self.<sup>206</sup> Rieff, too, asserts that historical agents and the arc of history have led to a cultural moment centered on the self “in love with life and destructive of it.”<sup>207</sup> Rieff’s statement, “in love with life and destructive of it,” points to his view of the destructive nature of the atomized self.

Nevertheless, Rieff is cautiously optimistic that this “post-communal culture may never be achieved” because “there are safeguards, built into human nature and culture, limiting the freedom of men to atomize themselves.”<sup>208</sup> These “safeguards...built into human nature and culture” provide a glimmer of hope against the wholesale and irrevocable atomization of the self in a secular<sub>3</sub> age.

Taylor shares a similar hope in a mini-lexicon of related terms: the buffered self, haunted immanence, cross-pressure, and the nova-effect that leads to fragilization.<sup>209</sup> This mini-lexicon establishes what Taylor, and his interpreters, call the malaise of modernity, the angst or restlessness of the postmodern age.<sup>210</sup> Haunted immanence creates a restlessness in a person that causes them to be “tempted by belief, by intimations of

---

<sup>206</sup> Taylor, 130–42.

<sup>207</sup> Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, 40th anniversary ed. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 4.

<sup>208</sup> Rieff, 8.

<sup>209</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 3–17.

<sup>210</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299–304.

transcendence,”<sup>211</sup> whereas being “cross-pressured” describes the simultaneous resonance of transcendence bound by the shackled prison of the “buffered self.”<sup>212</sup> Therefore, Taylor’s haunted self is one that cannot live consistently, or comfortably, in a buffered (atomized) state. As a result, transcendence crosses the boundary of the buffered self without an invitation, creating what Taylor calls the “nova-effect.”<sup>213</sup>

This “nova-effect” is one of the primary features of a secular age and creates within the buffered self a longing for a third way, an alternative to the deep dissatisfaction with one’s current existential state. Taylor claims the “nova-effect” is the multiplication of many third ways created by the unceasing assault of being cross-pressured.<sup>214</sup> Ford and Martell refer to Taylor’s mini-lexicon as a “phenomenology of what it is to live in a secular age.”<sup>215</sup>

So, Rieff’s “safeguards built into human nature and culture” against an atomized state finds support in Taylor. Taylor’s description of the cross-pressured, buffered self, experiencing the nova-effect, is one of Rieff’s “safeguards.” It’s a Rieffian safeguard because of the volatility it creates within a person’s existential experience of life. According to Taylor, this kind of “spiritual instability” cultivates the fragilization of all faith commitments creating opportunity to move towards or away from Christianity.<sup>216</sup>

---

<sup>211</sup> Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 4.

<sup>212</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300–303.

<sup>213</sup> Taylor, 302.

<sup>214</sup> Taylor, 299–304.

<sup>215</sup> Ford and Martel, “Weird Studies.”

<sup>216</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 302–4.

## **Fragilization in a Secular Age**

Fragilization refers to the weakening of one's faith commitment due to the multiplicity of other equally plausible beliefs.<sup>217</sup> According to Taylor, these other faiths become more plausible "through increased contact, interchange, even perhaps intermarriage, (so that) the other becomes more and more like me, in everything else but faith."<sup>218</sup> The relational connectedness born out of similar tastes, a shared vocation, or even a favorite sports team causes an otherwise disinterested person to embrace a new receptivity to other faiths.<sup>219</sup> Taylor refers to this relational connectedness as homogeneity.<sup>220</sup> As respect grows for the other, it correspondingly grows for their beliefs, even if radically different from one's own belief system. In this way a person's existing belief system is fragilized. As a result, this homogenic expression of religious and ideological pluralism leads to mutual fragilization of both party's beliefs. Burton's category of "spiritual but not religious (SBNR)" is a group of "religious hybrids" who practice a spiritual fluidity that aligns with Taylor's fragilization thesis.<sup>221</sup> Spiritual fluidity adopts aspects of other belief systems and incorporates them into one's own faith commitment, to the point of religious syncretism.<sup>222</sup>

---

<sup>217</sup> Taylor, 303–4.

<sup>218</sup> Taylor, 304.

<sup>219</sup> Taylor, 304.

<sup>220</sup> Taylor, 304.

<sup>221</sup> Burton, *Strange Rites*, 18–23.

<sup>222</sup> Burton, 23.

Seel's assessment of a fragilized secular<sub>3</sub> age describes the impact of this abbreviated lexicon of terms in Taylor's work: "What we experience in secularism<sub>3</sub>, rather than an antipathy toward faith, is a renewed openness and explosion of many modes of believing, all of which are contested and held with a more humble, open hand."<sup>223</sup> Seel's "more humble, open hand" is the fragilization of all belief systems in a secular<sub>3</sub> age. Seel also notes the "renewed openness and explosion of many modes of believing." For Seel, a secular<sub>3</sub> age is not an age of rampant atheism but of a DIY spirituality, replete with opportunities for ENLs. Taylor, Rieff, and Burton would agree.

The salient findings for the work of ENLs begin with an understanding of their secular<sub>3</sub> context. The assumptions of a Christendom social imaginary are eclipsed by a new secularity that fragilizes existing faiths while simultaneously multiplying the faith options available. The relative relational homogeneity of the current culture creates a powerful ethos to fragilize all faiths, establishing a religious pluralism with a transcendent appeal for post-moderns. This fragilization may explain the increased disaffiliation rate in this cultural moment, especially among younger generational cohorts. Additionally, this secular<sub>3</sub> age isn't fostering a hard atheism but rather a DIY spirituality whose authority is rooted in the atomized, buffered self. This buffered self is also fortified by the cultural institutions that have strengthened the "cult of self" over the last few centuries. Finally, an abbreviated lexicon for this cultural moment assists in understanding and knowing how to engage the culture, especially in discerning how postmodern people gain knowledge about anything. This acquisition of knowledge is the purview of the field of epistemology.

---

<sup>223</sup> Seel, *The New Copernicans*, 96.

## **The Apologetic Appeal of Covenant Epistemology**

The work of an ENL involves the persuasive element of communicating the truth of the gospel in a compelling manner and equipping pastors to do likewise. This area of literature review is examining the apologetic appeal of covenant epistemology. In an ENL's work equipping pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people, this area of literature review is of foundational importance because the apologetic appeal of covenant epistemology aims at the winsome and persuasive communication of the gospel in an epistemic mode that connects with younger generational cohorts. The following themes will be examined under this area of literature review: connecting apologetics and covenant epistemology, covenant epistemology and personhood, defective epistemic systems, and the need for epistemological therapy.

### **Connecting Apologetics and Covenant Epistemology**

Justin Bailey, in his book entitled *Reimagining Apologetics*, contends that the apologetic method most needed in the current cultural moment involves a more wholistic epistemic approach than the traditional, "brain on a stick" methods.<sup>224</sup> Bailey codifies this "brain on a stick" method as "uppercase apologetics" built upon a foundationalist theory of knowledge.<sup>225</sup> Bailey continues by asserting that this uppercase apologetics "creates epistemic obligation" by revealing what "a person should believe on the basis of

---

<sup>224</sup> Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 5–8.

<sup>225</sup> Bailey, 5–8. "Foundationalism is a proposal about the nature of knowledge, proposing that we must have knowledge of two kinds: one is the all-important foundation of self-evidently certain claims, the other, all claims that can be derived from the foundation." Meek, *Loving to Know*, 54.

objective and moral grounds.”<sup>226</sup> Bailey contends that this approach to apologetics, built upon Enlightenment foundationalism, forces the “apologist to speak to a diminished version of the human person, i.e. a “brain on a stick.” Stephen Nichols, president of Reformation Bible College, raises a similar concern regarding how evangelicals take a foundationalist approach to epistemology that functionally excludes the subject, or knower.<sup>227</sup> Esther Meek shares Bailey’s and Nichol’s epistemological concern.

Correspondingly, Meek opens her landmark project on covenant epistemology, entitled *Loving To Know*, with the observation that humankind’s “defective epistemic setting goes against the grain of our humanness.”<sup>228</sup> According to Parker Palmer, philosopher and educational guru, knowing is foundational to being human.<sup>229</sup> This human-side of knowing is one of the primary concerns of Meek’s covenant epistemology. Therefore, when people are reduced to a “brain on a stick,” it diminishes their humanity by placing value only on the intellect. Covenant epistemology, at its core, conceives of human knowledge with the whole human person in mind.

Meek’s own journey into covenant epistemology was influenced by Dr. Michael Polanyi, the twentieth-century chemist and sociologist at the University of Manchester.<sup>230</sup> As the twentieth century progressed, Polanyi had a growing concern that the epistemic

---

<sup>226</sup> Bailey, 5.

<sup>227</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to The Passion of the Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 11.

<sup>228</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 7.

<sup>229</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*, 1st HarperCollins pbk ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 6.

<sup>230</sup> Esther L. Meek, *Longing to Know* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 9–10.

“ideal of scientific detachment” was exercising “a destructive influence in biology, psychology, and sociology, and falsifies our whole outlook far beyond the domain of science.”<sup>231</sup> This is Bailey’s “brain on a stick.” Polanyi sought to “establish an alternative ideal of knowledge,” which he coined, “personal knowledge.”<sup>232</sup> This emphasis on the whole person attracted Meek to Polanyi. Polanyi identified the scientific definition of “true knowledge” (truth) as “impersonal, universally established, objective.” As a result, Polanyi argued that this so-called “true knowledge” of science lays the foundation for the dehumanization of epistemology.<sup>233</sup> Polanyi’s new term, “personal knowledge,” created an epistemological approach that restored the “personal participation of the knower in all acts of understanding.”<sup>234</sup>

Meek shares Polanyi’s deep concern over the dehumanizing effect of a scientifically detached approach to epistemology that de-forms humankind, the world, and the knowing process.<sup>235</sup> Consequently, Meek’s covenant epistemology was born, in part, out of Polanyi’s seminal insights in *Personal Knowledge*. However, pursuant to a better understanding of Meek’s covenant epistemology, it’s important to note its intrinsic relationship with apologetics.

Apologetics and covenant epistemology are intricately related. As Bailey reimagines apologetics, he begins by identifying an epistemological roadblock. The

---

<sup>231</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), vii.

<sup>232</sup> Polanyi, vii.

<sup>233</sup> Polanyi, vii.

<sup>234</sup> Polanyi, vii.

<sup>235</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 17–20.

roadblock of Enlightenment foundationalism, i.e. “brain on a stick” epistemology. Bailey’s “lowercase apologetics” challenges Enlightenment foundationalism through a more wholistic approach to epistemology.<sup>236</sup> His lowercase apologetics addresses the whole person, not just the intellect. For example, the imagination, to name one oft-neglected source of knowledge, according to Bailey and Meek, is a critical aspect of lowercase apologetics. Bailey explains, “I do not seek to pit the imagination against the intellect; my model supplements rather than replaces more analytical approaches.”<sup>237</sup> Meek might respond to Bailey’s method by directing him to a similar approach called the “daisy of dichotomies.”<sup>238</sup> In this metaphor, Meek shows how a foundationalist, “brain on a stick,” epistemology is privileged over and against the equally important epistemic portals of the imagination, faith, and the emotions.<sup>239</sup> Meek’s “daisy” exposes the defective epistemic default that claims the “hard sciences are the ideal of knowledge.”<sup>240</sup> Meek’s disclosure of this reductionistic approach is a legacy she received from Polanyi.

This intricate relationship of apologetics and epistemology has profound implications for the work of ENLs. The heart of an ENL’s work involves apologetics and equipping others in it. Interestingly, Bailey argues for the discipline of “lowercase

---

<sup>236</sup> Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 7.

<sup>237</sup> Bailey, 9.

<sup>238</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 8–12.

<sup>239</sup> Meek, 8–12.

<sup>240</sup> Meek, 10.



apologetics as a ministerial necessity, an approach that would undoubtedly be met with approval by Meek.”<sup>241</sup> Bailey writes:

It (that is, *lowercase apologetics* as a *ministerial necessity*) is an unavoidable part of the Christian mission: it is concerned with attending to the particular questions that are being asked in our context, with a view to the ways that those concerns allow the gospel to flower forth in new ways.<sup>242</sup>

For Bailey, the difference between the lowercase approach to apologetics and the uppercase approach is that the latter is tethered to an epistemic foundationalism. This foundationalism creates the felt difference between human connection and detachment, attentiveness to human need versus inattentiveness, and a focus on “theological discernment of God’s active presence and not a tactical defense of Christian truths.”<sup>243</sup>

Presence, embodiment, personhood, connection, restoring humanity, and healing are just a few crossover terms between Bailey’s apologetics and Meek’s epistemology.

Ultimately, for the purposes of this study, the relevance of an ENL’s grasp of apologetics and epistemology is critical, according to Meek, Polanyi, and Bailey. So, this area of literature review highlights aspects of the apologetic appeal of covenant epistemology. Sometimes this apologetic appeal is stated, and in other instances it is tacitly assumed. However, the focus is on the personal and humanizing element of covenant epistemology supporting the work of an ENL.

---

<sup>241</sup> Bailey, *Reimagining Apologetics*, 7.

<sup>242</sup> Bailey, 7.

<sup>243</sup> Bailey, 6.

## Covenant Epistemology and Personhood

Covenant epistemology is rooted in the character of a personal God who is the source of the personhood of humankind. As such, it is an epistemic approach that assumes the humanity of people worthy of dignity and respect. Therefore, the emphasis of this section will explore the “interpersonhood” nature of covenant epistemology.

### *A Personal Epistemology Characterized by Humility and Confidence*

“Interpersonhood” is a term coined by Meek as a central feature of covenant epistemology.<sup>244</sup> Covenant epistemology asserts that “the paradigm for all acts of knowing is the unfolding, covenantally constituted, interpersonal relationship.”<sup>245</sup> For Meek, the “unfolding” nature of knowing highlights the reality that as finite beings, people are always “on the way” in their epistemic musings. There is an intrinsic humility to this “on the way” characteristic of knowing. Humankind’s finitude, expressed in knowing, means that people don’t attain perfect knowledge of anything in this life. Yet, as Polanyi observes:

Only affirmations that could be false can be said to convey objective knowledge of this kind...in every act of knowing there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing and what is being known, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection but a vital component of his knowledge.<sup>246</sup>

Polanyi’s “coefficient” is the dynamic interplay between the knower and the known, and the “no mere imperfection” refers, in part, to the finitude and fallibility of the knower.

Interestingly, this finitude contains an intrinsic apologetic appeal.

---

<sup>244</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 44–47.

<sup>245</sup> Meek, xiv.

<sup>246</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, viii.

Dr. David Seel identifies the desire for epistemic humility, and the “explorer” posture of the knower, as a significant point of apologetic appeal for dechurched and unchurched people.<sup>247</sup> Meek’s “unfolding” nature of knowing dovetails wonderfully with Seel’s and asserts a critical approach to knowing for younger generational cohorts. Additionally, Seel observes that the “brain on a stick” approach to knowledge is repulsive to younger generational cohorts. Seel contends that the attitude of the Christian community operating out of a foundationalist epistemology that “holds their convictions with a closed fist” have no apologetic appeal to those outside of the institutional church. For Seel, it’s the difference “between those who have it all figured out and those who continue to learn.”<sup>248</sup> Meek would agree. Seel states that Millennials “embrace epistemological humility.”<sup>249</sup> Likewise, the “explorer posture” of younger generational cohorts sees all of life as a journey. This “life as a journey” posture connects powerfully with Meek’s “on the way” epistemology.

To clarify, Meek’s “on the way” language should not be equated with skepticism, a lack of conviction, or with a subjectivism theory of epistemology. Her avoidance of epistemological skepticism is expressed well by Polanyi, who describes knowing as “objective in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality.”<sup>250</sup> So, knowing is concerned with discovering a reality outside of one’s self. Commenting on Polanyi’s objective sense of knowledge, Meek observes that his view might be summarized as, “I

---

<sup>247</sup> Seel, *The New Copernicans*, 47–53.

<sup>248</sup> Seel, 48.

<sup>249</sup> Seel, 49.

<sup>250</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, vii.

responsibly profess truth with universal intent.”<sup>251</sup> This profession of truth with “universal intent” involves a knower, something hidden that has become known, and the dynamic of knowing, whereas, according to Meek, skepticism states that “knowledge isn’t possible.”<sup>252</sup>

This “unfolding” or, “on the way” component of covenant epistemology, is further expressed by missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, who states, “The truth claims of scientists are thus not irreformable and indubitable claims to possess the truth; rather, they are claims to be on the way to the fullness of truth.”<sup>253</sup> Newbigin, like Meek, makes this observation while reflecting on Polanyi’s stance that scientific knowledge, and all knowledge for that matter, involves a personal commitment with “a universal intent.” In this sense knowledge is always “unfolding” or “on the way” because as a finite being, a person’s knowledge is reform-able and dubitable.

### *A Personal Epistemology Rooted in the Person of God*

The “covenantally constituted, interpersonal relationship” aspect of covenant epistemology refers to Meek’s epistemic commitment to the reality of humankind as created in God’s image and for relationship with him. Since God is personal, and the creator of all things, knowledge of anything is based in the real existence of this personal God. Consequently, for Meek, the reality of a personal creator God causes the whole of

---

<sup>251</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 12.

<sup>252</sup> Meek, 11.

<sup>253</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1995), 43.

the created order to be in a state of “interpersonhood.”<sup>254</sup> Graham Tomlin, author and bishop in the Church of England, states, “The church is to be the arena in which people can be transformed into full humanity, the image of God.”<sup>255</sup> Therefore, according to Tomlin, any epistemology that fails to move people in the direction of a more fully expressed humanity is working at cross purposes from God’s plan for humankind. Meek and Tomlin wholeheartedly agree with this statement — Meek, the philosopher, and Tomlin, the ENL.

C.S. Lewis, in his work *Mere Christianity*, argues that the personhood of humankind is derived from the “super-personal” God who created all things. Lewis contends that the “Christianity idea is the only one on the market” that explains personality in the universe.<sup>256</sup> If true, it would follow that Tomlin’s arena (the church) is here for people to become more fully human. Any epistemology that de-personalizes humankind lacks logical congruity with the existence of personal Creator God.

### *An Epistemology for Everyone*

Meek’s covenant epistemology is an approach to knowing that is for all people regardless of their belief, or lack of belief, in the Christian God. According to Meek, the Triune God’s covenant relationship with his creation is the foundation and source of covenant epistemology. Therefore, one’s belief or rejection of this God does not alter the

---

<sup>254</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 45–47.

<sup>255</sup> Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church* (London: SPCK, 2002), 113.

<sup>256</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity: A Revised and Enlarged Edition, with a New Introduction, of the Three Books, the Case for Christianity, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality* (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1986), 119–29.

reality of covenant epistemology.<sup>257</sup> If true, the work of evangelism, central to the mission of ENLs, emerges in a comprehensive, new light. Tomlin asserts that evangelism must constantly bear in mind its call to people outside the church to come and be progressively transformed into a fuller expression of their humanity. Covenant epistemology is well-suited for this evangelistic task due to its emphasis on personhood. Evangelism, in this scenario, is an invitation for humankind to come and experience the flourishing delights of restored personhood. This understanding of evangelism is profoundly different from what is often believed and proclaimed to the culture as evangelism.<sup>258</sup> It beautifies evangelism.

Yet, the benefits of Meek’s epistemology are not only evangelistic in nature. For Meek, “all acts of knowing are forms of the implicit love of God” for his creation,<sup>259</sup> making the benefits of covenant epistemology manifold. Palmer captures these manifold benefits well as he contends, “The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds. A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself.”<sup>260</sup> Palmer speaks here of the healing power of a knowledge, born of love, that possesses a healing intent. If true, it’s hard to imagine a stronger apologetic appeal for covenant epistemology, that is, a personal God whose grand design is for the joyful restoration of creation and all its inhabitants — past, present, and future.

---

<sup>257</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 199–205.

<sup>258</sup> Tomlin, *The Provocative Church*, 71–86.

<sup>259</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 289.

<sup>260</sup> Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, 8.

## Defective Epistemic Systems

The apologetic appeal of covenant epistemology is enhanced when compared to the defective epistemological theories that leave human brokenness in their wake. The two main epistemic theories with which ENLs must contend are subjectivism (also called epistemological relativism) and objectivism (also known as rationalism).<sup>261</sup>

### *Subjectivism or Epistemological Relativism*

Dr. Ed Stetzer has served as an ENL in various contexts in the U.S. and has contended firsthand with the epistemological challenges confronting pastors.<sup>262</sup> In Stetzer's guide for church planters, he quotes an anonymous church planter in Portland, Oregon, to drive home his point:

Postmodernity is the water our people swim in, and the lenses they see the world through. They have, whether willing or unwilling, adopted a new epistemology. Therefore, we are always challenged to look for redemptive windows of this culture through which the gospel can shine.<sup>263</sup>

Stetzer is underscoring the importance of an ENL's understanding that "a new epistemology has been adopted" in the U.S. and that this reality should alter the missiological approach of these church leaders. The "new epistemology" referenced in this quote is a form of subjectivism, also known as epistemological relativism.<sup>264</sup> Stetzer

---

<sup>261</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 30th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 27–29. Meeke, *Loving to Know*, 17–20.

<sup>262</sup> Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), xv–xvii.

<sup>263</sup> Stetzer, 115.

<sup>264</sup> Stetzer, 127.

agrees with Meek that epistemology must be taken into consideration by pastors in their mission context. In other words, it's not business-as-usual in an ENL's mission approach.

Dr. Francis Schaeffer, theologian and founder of L'Abri Fellowship, also emphasizes the absolute necessity for ministry leaders to understand the "world-spirit," his word for the present cultural context, in order to adjust one's ministry practices.<sup>265</sup> Schaeffer's observation and appeal to adjust ministry practices is the sentiment Stetzer captures: "We are always challenged to look for redemptive windows of this culture through which the gospel can shine." According to Stetzer, this "new epistemology" poses a threat to the gospel and consequently to the mission-critical work of an ENL, and Schaeffer and Meek are convinced that epistemological commitments are vital for pastors seeking to reach people with the Christian message.

Schaeffer, writing in late 1960s, describes this shift to the "new epistemology" as the "loss of antithesis."<sup>266</sup> He states that "historic Christianity," and any truth claim for that matter, "stands on the basis of antithesis."<sup>267</sup> For Schaeffer, epistemological antithesis is the supposition that if something is true then its opposite is necessarily false.<sup>268</sup> According to Schaeffer, a "loss of antithesis" approach to epistemology enables two contradictory statements to be embraced as truth at the same time even though antithetical. Meek refers to Schaeffer's "loss of antithesis" as "extreme subjectivism" that

---

<sup>265</sup> Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 31.

<sup>266</sup> Schaeffer, 28.

<sup>267</sup> Schaeffer, 28.

<sup>268</sup> Schaeffer, 28.



can be summarized in the phrase, “I know only my point of view.”<sup>269</sup> In other words, truth is formed solely from the perspective of the subject, or knower. For Schaeffer, this extreme subjectivism is an example of the “new epistemology.” Schaeffer expounds on the implications of a society that functions with a “loss of antithesis” epistemology: “The basic thesis is that God objectively exists in contrast (in antithesis) to his not existing. Which of these two are the reality, changes everything in the area of knowledge and morals and in the whole of life.”<sup>270</sup> Schaeffer’s bold claim is that the “loss of antithesis” in epistemology changes everything of any significance in life and ultimately leads to human despair, a despair described as being “trapped in a large round room with no doors and no windows, nothing but complete darkness.”<sup>271</sup>

Dr. Stanley Grenz, Christian theologian and ethicist, agrees with Schaeffer’s assessment of the “new epistemology.”<sup>272</sup> Grenz states, “Post-moderns feel comfortable mixing elements of what has traditionally been considered incompatible belief systems.”<sup>273</sup> Schaeffer’s “loss of antithesis” can be equated to Grenz’s “incompatible belief systems” that “post-moderns feel comfortable mixing.”<sup>274</sup> For Grenz, post-moderns hold totally incompatible beliefs with no sense of cognitive dissonance. Grenz elaborates on the social implications of this approach to epistemology by what he describes as

---

<sup>269</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 398.

<sup>270</sup> Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 28.

<sup>271</sup> Schaeffer, 28-31.

<sup>272</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1996), 14–15.

<sup>273</sup> Grenz, 15.

<sup>274</sup> Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 12.

“postmodern relativistic pluralism.”<sup>275</sup> The concept of truth in this epistemic approach is “local” in nature, according to Grenz, in the sense that “beliefs are held to be true within the context of the communities that espouse them.”<sup>276</sup> In other words, the collective community defines and submits to its own truth, as opposed to some objective standard. As a result, these communities are not concerned about proving themselves “right” and others “wrong.”<sup>277</sup> Rather, they live by the creed: ““what is right for us might not be right for you”” and ““what is wrong in our context might in your context be acceptable or even preferable.””<sup>278</sup>

This widespread category of epistemology described by Meek, Stetzer, Schaeffer, and Grenz in its individual and communal forms is epistemological subjectivism and is what Meek would call a defective epistemic system.<sup>279</sup> Yet, according to Meek, it’s not the most insidious epistemology that an ENL must be prepared to address.

### *Objectivism, Rationalism, Foundationalism or “Cartesianism”*

Dr. John Frame, professor of systematic theology, refers to this more insidious epistemology by its more traditional name: rationalism.<sup>280</sup> According to Frame, rationalism’s “chief concern is certainty” and “is the view that human knowledge

---

<sup>275</sup> Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 15.

<sup>276</sup> Grenz, 15.

<sup>277</sup> Grenz, 15.

<sup>278</sup> Grenz, 15.

<sup>279</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1987), 119–20.

<sup>280</sup> Frame, 110.

presupposes certain principles that are known independently of sense-experience and by which sense-experience is governed.”<sup>281</sup> Rationalism’s press for “certainty” and its deleterious impact on the knower, the known, and the knowing endeavor is addressed by Meek’s covenant epistemology.<sup>282</sup>

Meek makes the bold claim that “if one wants to proclaim the gospel in the West, one must first challenge what I have been calling the default mode if one expects the gospel even to be heard.”<sup>283</sup> The “default mode” is the epistemology of rationalism, the legacy of Rene Descartes, the seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician.<sup>284</sup> Meek uses the term “Cartesianism” for rationalism,<sup>285</sup> but, whether the defective epistemology is subjectivism or “Cartesianism,” according to both Stetzer and Meek, the missiological challenges they create must be addressed. Meek claims that the defective reigning epistemology of “Cartesianism” must first be “challenged” in terms of priority. Then, when it has been sufficiently “challenged,” according to Meek, the gospel may be heard.

Meek contends that the Cartesian rationalism is the biggest epistemological threat to society because it goes “against the grain of our humanness.”<sup>286</sup> She emphasizes that this Cartesian default mode is systemically defective, de-humanizing, and reductionistic

---

<sup>281</sup> Frame, 110–11.

<sup>282</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 402–8.

<sup>283</sup> Meek, 478.

<sup>284</sup> Meek, 17–20.

<sup>285</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 110.

<sup>286</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 7.

in its disregard of the multiple epistemic modalities involved in knowing.”<sup>287</sup> As previously stated, Meek maintains that this dehumanizing epistemic default mode is the unintentional legacy of Descartes.<sup>288</sup> Descartes’ “disembodied mind” as the “supreme position of knowing” is the critical conclusion that dehumanizes his epistemology, according to Meek.<sup>289</sup> As a result, knowledge is impersonal, and humankind accordingly “should keep our emotions, our selves, out of the information, as you would strive to keep contaminates out of a water supply.”<sup>290</sup> Meek castigates such thinking as “damaging to ourselves, our world, and our knowing in any endeavor.”<sup>291</sup>

The work of French philosopher, existentialist, and playwright Gabriel Marcel provides insight into the epistemic default mode as described by Meek.<sup>292</sup> Marcel posits a concept he calls “disincarnation,” a detachment of subjective selves in contemplation. Marcel states that this “detachment is the basis for all cognition,” even though “it’s essentially illusory.”<sup>293</sup> The illusion is that of certainty, the vivacious relic of Descartes epistemological methodology. Marcel refers to it as “the very basis of all cognition” in reference to its scope as a culturally accepted epistemic default mode. Marcel argues that to be incarnated, and thus not objectified, involves the radical integration “between my

---

<sup>287</sup> Meek, 3–34.

<sup>288</sup> Meek, 18–19.

<sup>289</sup> Meek, 18.

<sup>290</sup> Meek, 12–13.

<sup>291</sup> Meek, 39.

<sup>292</sup> Myron B. Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 88.

<sup>293</sup> Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, 19–26.

body and me,” in other words, no “disembodied mind” or “brain on a stick” epistemology.<sup>294</sup> He continues that “bodies,” and personhood, are “forced” to be reduced to an object when they are “construed as one body among an unlimited number of bodies.”<sup>295</sup> The “subject” or “knower” becomes lost in a sea of objects, indistinguishable within that sea as one “object among many.”<sup>296</sup> Thus, people are reduced to “a thing that thinks,” and is therefore, objectified.<sup>297</sup>

Dr. Myron Bradley Penner, pastor of Trinity International Church in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, in his work entitled *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context*, calls what Marcel has been describing, “the objectivism of abstract modern epistemology.”<sup>298</sup> People are objectified and reduced to “things,” or objects. He explains the epistemological dynamic of “disincarnation,” writing, “In addition to ourselves and the world around us, we treat *other persons* as though they were essentially absent from their bodies. We think and act as though others were *things* that belong to us and are at our disposal.”<sup>299</sup> Penner agrees with Meek’s assessment that the defective default epistemic mode in the West has led to dehumanization and its logical conclusion: disposable people. According to Meek, the epistemological therapy needed must therefore, first and foremost, re-humanize and restore personhood.

---

<sup>294</sup> Marcel, 20.

<sup>295</sup> Marcel, 20.

<sup>296</sup> Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 88–89.

<sup>297</sup> Penner, 88.

<sup>298</sup> Penner, 88.

<sup>299</sup> Penner, 89.

For Meek, epistemology is rooted in “interpersonhood.” She believes that personhood itself is the “context and central nerve of human knowing.”<sup>300</sup> Penner concurs with Meek’s interpersonal approach to knowing and maintains, “Rather than the abstract, theoretical categories of epistemology, a person’s subjectivity or personhood, one’s being as a subject, is the starting place for reflection on beliefs.”<sup>301</sup> Penner, with Meek, asserts that knowledge resides within the only agent capable of reflection, i.e. a real person. For Meek, this real person is tasked with determining what’s really real, or, to use another phrase coined by Meek, “inviting the real.”<sup>302</sup>

Consequently, Meek believes that the most important issue in epistemology is accessing and aligning one’s life to what is really real, which, for Meek, includes belief in the Christian God revealed in the Bible.<sup>303</sup> The existence of this covenant-making God is central to what is really real in the universe, and the word that describes the nature of the existence of this God is ontology. Ontology is the branch of philosophy that deals with existence, reality, and being and wrestles with the issue of “what it means to be.”<sup>304</sup>

Dr. James Sire, professor of philosophy and theology, provides an insightful connection between ontology and epistemology. He claims that “ontology precedes epistemology,” which, according to Sire, anchors all of reality in the character of the personal creator God revealed throughout history and in the scriptures of the Old and

---

<sup>300</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 216.

<sup>301</sup> Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 84–91.

<sup>302</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 425–28.

<sup>303</sup> Meek, 398.

<sup>304</sup> James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*, Second edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 71.

New Testament.<sup>305</sup> Sire contends that if the order is reversed, that is, if “epistemology precedes ontology,” then the results are devastating, because epistemology becomes untethered from its ontological moorings in a personal God and is placed in the hands of autonomous humankind. Consequently, humankind becomes the determiner of ultimate reality through the process of their finite musings and autonomously formed epistemological paradigms. According to Sire, the “epistemology precedes ontology” approach locates its origins in Descartes’ radical subjectivism.<sup>306</sup> In a strange twist the legacy of Descartes leads to both objectivism and subjectivism. Ultimately though, for the purposes of this study, the unintended consequence of Descartes’ method is an epistemology that no longer anchors itself in a “covenantally constituted, interpersonal relationship.” Conversely, ontology is now in submission to epistemology.

Additionally, the role of hermeneutics complicates this defective epistemological construct. Sire contends that the reversal doesn’t begin with epistemology leading to ontology, but with hermeneutics leading to ontology via epistemology as the delivery system. Sire states, “We might easily imagine that a worldview could be defined primarily in relation to semiotics or hermeneutics. If this happened, then ontology would collapse into hermeneutics.”<sup>307</sup> Ontology collapsing into hermeneutics means that what is real in the universe begins with the interpretations within the mind of man. Thereby, epistemology becomes the vehicle by which humankind imposes an autonomously, self-determined interpretation of reality, whereas reality in Meek’s covenant epistemology is

---

<sup>305</sup> Sire, 71.

<sup>306</sup> Sire, 77–78.

<sup>307</sup> Sire, 91.

anchored in a personal, loving God who elicits an interpretation of things in light of this interpersonal covenant relationship. Meek claims that covenant epistemology addresses the disastrous effects of these defective epistemological methods. Furthermore, Meek calls this work of addressing defective, default epistemological methods, “epistemological therapy.”

### **The Need for Epistemological Therapy**

According to Meek, “epistemological therapy” is essential work in this cultural moment and, by way of logical inference, is critical to the work of an ENL.<sup>308</sup> Meek contends:

I want to argue that most of us get it wrong about what knowing is...getting it wrong about knowing — as a culture, over centuries, and as individual participants in that culture — turns out to be damaging to ourselves, our world, and our knowing in any endeavor.<sup>309</sup>

Therefore, the need begins with an exploration of what can be done to bring about renewal in the area of epistemology.

So, what is “epistemological therapy?” Meek writes, “Epistemological therapy is my personal effort to help people reform their default epistemological settings in a way that brings health, hope, and productivity.”<sup>310</sup> She exposes the current defunct approach to knowing, challenging it, and replacing it with a thoroughgoing covenant epistemology.<sup>311</sup> Explicit Cartesianism is the enemy, along with its tacitly embraced

---

<sup>308</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 478.

<sup>309</sup> Meek, 4.

<sup>310</sup> Meek, 5–6.

<sup>311</sup> Meek, 5.



epistemology. Meek calls this tacitly held entrenchment the “subcutaneous epistemological layer.”<sup>312</sup> Meek compares this epistemological posture to a computer preset to function a particular way.<sup>313</sup> Therefore, epistemological therapy begins with the awareness of this defective epistemology and how it distorts all facets of knowing.

Another proactive step in Meek’s epistemological therapy involves anchoring all truth in the “personed event” of God walking into the room,<sup>314</sup> in other words, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Meek, by her own confession, leans heavily upon the work of missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, saying, “My work to develop covenant epistemology can be seen as a response to Newbigin’s summons.” Newbigin summoned the church by writing, “Jesus the Truth must challenge and reshape our epistemological vision.”<sup>315</sup> He explains that “there is a new starting point for all human understanding of the world” because of God’s personal intervention in history. He continues by stating that in the Incarnation, ultimate reality was no longer unknowable.<sup>316</sup> As previously noted, epistemology is concerned with aligning one’s thoughts and life with reality, or as Meek puts it, “inviting the real.” As a result, the Incarnation cannot be retrofitted into the plausibility structure of a defective epistemology like Cartesianism. According to Meek and Newbigin, the central reality of God’s coming in Jesus is the foundational building

---

<sup>312</sup> Meek, 5.

<sup>313</sup> Meek, 5.

<sup>314</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 10–11.

<sup>315</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 40.

<sup>316</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 4–6.

block for epistemology, and consequentially, must establish what is ultimately plausible. Covenant epistemology is built on this foundation.

Palmer, another mentor of Meek, paints a vivid picture for epistemological therapy. Palmer explains, “Truth is not a concept that ‘works’ but an incarnation that lives.”<sup>317</sup> Palmer then adds texture to this concept by contending:

we come to know the world not simply as an objectified system of empirical objects in connection with each another, but as an organic body of personal relations and responses, a living and evolving community of creativity and compassion.<sup>318</sup>

Epistemology as an “organic body of personal relations and responses” is a polar opposite reality from the detached and dehumanizing result of Cartesianism. Covenant epistemology centers knowing in organic, communal life, as opposed to detached, lifeless epistemic acts that atomize humankind. On the contrary, Palmer asserts, “Our spiritual tradition claims the origin of knowledge is love” and therefore, the act of knowing is an act of love.<sup>319</sup> Love is at the heart of covenant epistemology. In this paradigm of knowing, shared by Meek and Palmer, humanity was given minds “to raise to awareness the communal nature of reality, to overcome separateness and alienation by a knowing that is loving, and to reach out with an intelligence to acknowledge and renew the bonds of life.”<sup>320</sup> This epistemological approach leads to one of the most restorative aspects of covenant epistemology, Meek’s concept of “knowing for shalom.”<sup>321</sup> Meek borrows the

---

<sup>317</sup> Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, 14.

<sup>318</sup> Palmer, 14.

<sup>319</sup> Palmer, 8.

<sup>320</sup> Palmer, 8–9.

<sup>321</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 469–80.

concept of “knowing for shalom” from Nicolas Wolterstorff, American philosopher and theologian.<sup>322</sup>

Meek contends that “knowing for shalom” is an “unfolding and mutual relationship wherein when we behave covenantally; both knower and known should be healed, transformed, and blessed.”<sup>323</sup> Meek draws from the insights of Dr. Michael Williams, theologian and professor of systematic theology, regarding the covenantally based blessedness of knowing responsibly. And for Meek, knowing responsibly brings blessing, whereas knowing irresponsibly brings curse. This central aspect of covenant epistemology is more fully developed in Palmer’s concept of “truth as troth.” To know in truth, for Palmer, is to become betrothed, “to engage the known with one’s whole self, an engagement one enters with attentiveness, care, and good will.”<sup>324</sup> This kind of engagement of the known by the knower is essential to the therapeutic power of covenant epistemology and its responsible “stewardly action in the world.”<sup>325</sup>

This stewardly action aligns with the biblical notion of the cultural mandate, according to Meek. The cultural mandate is the Christian doctrine of creation stipulating that God’s created image bearers engage the world to bring about a blessed flourishing. This blessedness in all of the created order is captured in the term, shalom. Shalom means peace, a comprehensive peace. Reflecting on shalom, Meek states that “knowing should

---

<sup>322</sup> Meek, 473.

<sup>323</sup> Meek, 210.

<sup>324</sup> Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known*, 31.

<sup>325</sup> Meek, *Loving to Know*, 474–75.

heal — both the knower and the known.”<sup>326</sup> Meek summarizes her entire articulation of covenant epistemology with this kind of shalom that, of necessity, doesn’t begin in humankind’s epistemic act, but in the epistemic act of God.<sup>327</sup> In other words, the non-negotiable feature is to be known by God. Being known by God establishes the possibility of knowing personally, in conformity with reality, and bringing healing to the knower and the known. Such is the vision of Meek’s covenant epistemology.

This area of literature review highlights the apologetic appeal of Meek’s covenant epistemology. The humanizing, and re-humanizing, emphasis of covenant epistemology is at the heart of its apologetic appeal. Covenant epistemology’s wholistic approach to knowledge, rather than a truncated objectivism reducing the human person to a “brain on a stick,” opens the door to the imagination, emotions, faith, and intuition, long neglected under the reigning Cartesian model. However, at its core, covenant epistemology is anchored to the central truths of the Christian faith, the salient tenets being the creation of the world by a personal trinitarian God, the Incarnation of the Son of God, and Jesus’ redemptive work on behalf of humankind. Finally, covenant epistemology pulsates with hope for shalom. It’s relational, “inviting the real,” and cares for the whole of the created order, delighting in being known by the Author of knowledge. As such, the apologetic appeal of covenant epistemology resides in the beautiful vision of knowing and its fruits. This appeal is central to the mission of the church, or, missional ecclesiology.

---

<sup>326</sup> Meek, 473.

<sup>327</sup> Meek, 476.

## **Missional Ecclesiology**

The theological section of this project is the exploration of missional ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is central to the work of ENLs because, by definition, they are ecclesiastical network leaders. Moreover, ENLs equip pastors to lead churches that maintain their transgenerational membership while simultaneously establishing ministries reaching dechurched and unchurched people. Furthermore, the work of an ENL is to advance the mission of God in and through a network of churches in a particular geographic region. Therefore, the work of an ENL is principally an outworking and application of missional ecclesiology. Three themes will be reviewed: the controversy of missional ecclesiology, the missional church, and the goal of missional ecclesiology.

### **The Controversy Surrounding Missional Ecclesiology**

Missional ecclesiology is a theological term that elicits both detractors and adherents.<sup>328</sup> As such, it is important to understand the controversy so that the biblical truth associated with the term might be discovered, embraced, and wholeheartedly applied to the church. Dr. Cornelius Niemandt, professor of religion and missiology, states, “Missional ecclesiology has emerged as one of the significant trends in mission studies and ecumenical discussion” in recent years.<sup>329</sup> Niemandt’s “recent years” are referring to the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, although

---

<sup>328</sup> David Horner, *When Missions Shapes the Mission You and Your Church Can Reach the World* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 3.

<sup>329</sup> C.J.P. Niemandt, “Trends in Missional Ecclesiology,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 1 2012: 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i1.1198>.

the seeds of this conversation were sown as far back as the late nineteenth century.<sup>330</sup> So, while the term may be novel in “recent years,” Niemandt contends that missional ecclesiology is rooted in a biblical understanding of mission and the church from its inception.<sup>331</sup> Dr. Michael Goheen, like Niemandt, argues the biblical foundations of the church’s missional identity.<sup>332</sup> They agree that missional ecclesiology is not an avant-garde theological concept of postmodernity. Quite to the contrary, its adherents would argue that missional ecclesiology is central to the Bible’s teaching regarding the nature of the church.<sup>333</sup> However, not all theologians and pastors agree with this assessment of what is called “missional ecclesiology.”

Dr. David Horner, executive director of Equipped for Life, observes that for younger evangelical leaders, one “badge of relevant thinking that marks them as particularly insightful” is a specific lexicon “describing the purpose and direction of the church.” He explains:

By using the words mission, missions, and missional correctly, a leader can raise his credibility among his peers and set himself apart as one who possesses an advanced level of understanding and expertise on matters related to church vision and emphasis.<sup>334</sup>

This is especially true when the word “missional” is invoked. Horner contends that a “church can be missional and yet miss the breadth of the command of Christ to take the

---

<sup>330</sup> Steven Rutt, “An Analysis of Roland Allen’s Missionary Ecclesiology: Would He Still Have Anything to Say to Us Today?,” 29, no. 3 (July 2012): 200–213, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378812449976>.

<sup>331</sup> Niemandt, “Trends in Missional Ecclesiology,” 1–9.

<sup>332</sup> Goheen, “My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism,” January 7-9, 2021.

<sup>333</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22–25.

<sup>334</sup> Horner, *When Missions Shapes the Mission You and Your Church Can Reach the World*, 3.

gospel to the nations.”<sup>335</sup> He argues that the missional movement, under the heading of “missional ecclesiology,” places a disproportional emphasis on the church’s focus on local ministries to the exclusion of the Great Commission.<sup>336</sup> Goheen agrees with this critique stating, “Sadly, in the U.S., the missional church literature has lost sight of the Great Commission’s call to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.”<sup>337</sup>

### *Confusion Surrounding the Church’s Mission*

Some evangelical theologians are wary of “missional ecclesiology” because of its historic connection with the ecumenical movement in the early twentieth century and this movement’s agenda to synthesize Christianity with other religions to “form a world faith.”<sup>338</sup> Additionally, in the 1960s, the World Council of Churches developed a theology of the “‘servant church,’ affirming that the church does not have a mission, but is mission: that the church exists only in mission.”<sup>339</sup> The theology of the ecumenical “servant church” held to a form of soteriological universalism,<sup>340</sup> the view that all of humanity is saved and that this salvation just needs to be announced to humankind. This view is radically different from the evangelical and historically orthodox soteriology that requires a response of repentance and faith in Jesus to gospel proclamation. In the

---

<sup>335</sup> Horner, 3.

<sup>336</sup> Horner, 1–8.

<sup>337</sup> Goheen, “My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism,” January 7-9, 2021, 77.

<sup>338</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 155.

<sup>339</sup> Clowney, 155.

<sup>340</sup> Clowney, 155–56.

orthodox view, the salvation of the hearers is contingent upon an acknowledgement of one's sin and need of the grace of God freely offered in Christ. For the sake of clarity, Dr. John Stott, Anglican cleric and theologian, calls the heterodox group "ecumenical Christians" and their orthodox counterparts, "evangelical Christians." The implications for any kind of mission's work is profound. If the whole of humankind is saved irrespective of a response to the gospel, then world missions is superfluous. Stott unapologetically addresses this heretical view of salvation as unbiblical.

Similarly, Stott is also critical of evangelical Christians. He contends that "evangelical Christians" exchanged biblical missions for a mission conflated with cultural trends divorced from biblical revelation. For example, Stott is critical of the establishment of the religious right in the 1970s that conflates Christianity with a conservative political agenda.<sup>341</sup> According to Stott, the ecumenical and evangelical distortions of the gospel have led to much confusion about the mission of the church and therefore, missional ecclesiology. He contends that both of these polarized groups have much to learn, and re-learn, about the nature of mission and the church's role in it.<sup>342</sup>

Stott, in his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, communicates a biblical vision for the mission of God and the church's role in that mission. He calls the church to assess these doctrines biblically and to reopen the lines of communication among polarized ecumenical and evangelical Christians. He is dogmatic regarding the non-negotiable authority of the Old and New Testament in determining the nature of the

---

<sup>341</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 88–92; Randall Balmer, "Evangelical: Religious Right Has Distorted the Faith," interview by Linda Wertheimer, *Morning Edition*, on NPT, June 23, 2006, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5502785>.

<sup>342</sup> Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 12.



missional church, a standard he unapologetically affirms. “My chief concern, therefore, is to bring both ecumenical and evangelical thinking to the same independent and objective test, namely that of biblical revelation.”<sup>343</sup>

*Missional Ecclesiology and Importance of Defining Our Terms*

The field of linguistics is Stott’s starting point to clear the way for a biblical understanding of missional ecclesiology.<sup>344</sup> Stott uses the “wisdom of Alice — of Alice in Wonderland,” as his linguistical starting point. He reflects on a conversation between Humpty Dumpty and Alice on the nature of language. Humpty Dumpty proves to be a genuine postmodern thinker in that he claims meaning resides in each individual speaker. Alice questions this approach, and Stott claims that Humpty Dumpty is “entirely wrong to imagine he is the master of words and could impose meaning on them arbitrarily, according to his own whimsical choice.”<sup>345</sup> Stott then observes that this “Humpty Dumpty-like approach” has created the missional morass plaguing the contemporary church. He writes, “Yet (dare I say it) some modern theologians appear to be as perverse as Humpty Dumpty in their use of biblical words.”<sup>346</sup> So, Stott highlights two linguistic challenges framing the discussion on the missional church.

The first is the aforementioned abuse of the historical-grammatical method of biblical interpretation. In other words, biblical words and concepts have an intended

---

<sup>343</sup> Stott, 12.

<sup>344</sup> Stott, 12–14.

<sup>345</sup> Stott, 12–13.

<sup>346</sup> Stott, 13.

meaning and the task of the interpreter is understanding the author's intent behind the words. Second, the nature of linguistics is that the meaning of words changes over time. Stott states that "no living language can be timeless," and to assume that language could be is like claiming there can be a "motionless river."<sup>347</sup> Both observations identify the controversy surrounding missional ecclesiology, that the theological conversation around the missional church is derailed by poor biblical exegesis and a failure of linguistics. According to Stott, the good biblical language regarding mission has become identified with disconcerting doctrines and movements within Christianity. He begins his teaching by claiming that all church leaders have something to learn from this important theological conversation. But first, they must return to biblical definitions.

### **The Missional Church**

Ecclesiology is the study of the church and a cornerstone of systematic theology.<sup>348</sup> It teaches what the church is to be and how it should function: "its nature, its purpose, its hopes, its structure, and practices."<sup>349</sup> The Bible presents several metaphors for the church: God's family, the body of Christ, God's people, and his holy temple, to name a few.<sup>350</sup> But in recent decades, a number of biblical scholars have placed a priority on the moniker "missional ecclesiology" for the missional church. What then is missional ecclesiology? And, why does the term "missional" receive such a privileged place? What

---

<sup>347</sup> Stott, 13.

<sup>348</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 14.

<sup>349</sup> Paul Hooker, "What Is Missional Ecclesiology?," August 2009, 2.

<sup>350</sup> Wim A. Dreyer, "Missional Ecclesiology as the Basis for a New Church Order: A Case Study," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (June 10, 2013): 2.

are the trends that led to the rise of missional church language at the turn of the millennium? Theologians such as Tim Keller examine some of the historical problems that have led church leaders to restore the missional language of the church.<sup>351</sup>

### *Christendom and the Loss of a Missional Identity*

Keller contends that the church lost its missional identity over a thousand-year timeframe of Christendom.<sup>352</sup> Christendom refers to the period from the 400s through 1800.<sup>353</sup> Keller states that Christendom blurred the lines between the unbelieving culture and the church in the West. Christendom, according to Keller, established a situation wherein the “institutions of society ‘Christianized’ people.” These “Christianized people” oftentimes were nominally Christian and not regenerate or converted to Christ in the biblical sense of these terms. As a result, the great need of the church became to help these “unconverted ‘Christians’” to become the genuine article. Keller states that the church’s mission became to challenge people into a “vital, living relation with Christ.”<sup>354</sup> Authors Wes Roberts and Glenn Marshall, in their book *Reclaiming God’s Original Intent for the Church*, affirm Keller’s analysis on the distorting influence of Christendom regarding the church’s mission.<sup>355</sup>

---

<sup>351</sup> Timothy Keller and Dick Kaufmann, *The Gospel and the Heart* (San Diego, CA: Harbor Church Planting Center, 1999), 50–53.

<sup>352</sup> Wes Roberts and Glenn Marshall, *Reclaiming God’s Original Intent for the Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004), 20–29. Niemandt, “Trends in Missional Ecclesiology,” 1–2.

<sup>353</sup> Joseph Pearce, “What Is Christendom?,” *The Imaginative Conservative* (blog), August 10, 2014, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2014/08/christendom.html>.

<sup>354</sup> Keller and Kaufmann, *The Gospel and the Heart*, 50.

<sup>355</sup> Roberts and Marshall, *Reclaiming God’s Original Intent for the Church*, 17–29.

Roberts and Marshall highlight the profound differences between the historic apostolic church with its profound sense of mission and the historic institutionalized church that lost its missional character when it became conflated with the broader culture. They argue the conflation of church and secular society is one of the primary characteristics of Christendom. They also postulate that if everyone born into society were considered a Christian, there is no need for mission, at least not local missions. As a result, “missions” becomes a specialized field performed by specialists in far-away places. Roberts and Marshall contend that if everyone in society is “a ‘Christian,’” then “mission is relegated to foreign lands—the fringes of the empire—and accomplished by specialists who traveled to far-off places to proclaim the good news.”<sup>356</sup> In Christendom, living missionally became irrelevant in the church’s immediate geographic context. Roberts and Marshall contend that the church is still experiencing the fallout of the bifurcation between missions out there and missions right here.<sup>357</sup> They also contend that few Christians in the U.S. think about mission in their local context, i.e. “mission as something done where they live, or something they have any personal involvement or investment in.”<sup>358</sup>

### *The Theological Distortions of Christendom*

Goheen would agree with Roberts and Marshall’s assessment. Additionally, Goheen explores the distortion of the doctrinal formulations that led to these conclusions.

---

<sup>356</sup> Roberts and Marshall, 25.

<sup>357</sup> Roberts and Marshall, 25.

<sup>358</sup> Roberts and Marshall, 25.

He states that Christian theology was formulated in a highly “tribal way” for more than a thousand years as a result of Christendom.<sup>359</sup> These “tribal” formulations are not intrinsically bad or heretical but became problematic because they are woefully incomplete. Likewise, Newbigin states, “We have lived for so many years in the ‘Christendom’ situation that ministerial training is almost entirely conceived in terms of the pastoral care of existing congregations.”<sup>360</sup> Newbigin is not saying that the training of pastors to care for congregations is a bad thing. Rather, the problem is the utter omission of training pastors for mission as a primary identity marker and calling of the church. By default, the “mission” of the church became the care of congregations, thus creating an inward focus that lacks a missional vision, resulting in a distorted ecclesiology. Newbigin states that this inward focus severed the church from its missional identity and contends that the modern church is marked by this profoundly distorted Christendom legacy, a blind spot ignoring a core identity marker for the church.

Some of the more explicit theology during Christendom are its creeds and confessions. According to Goheen, these ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions reveal an utter absence of missional ecclesiology – no mention of mission as a requirement for being the church.<sup>361</sup> It’s simply not present in any significant or even explicit form. Instead, the doctrinal priorities of Christendom emphasized theology for a church in a privileged position of power in Western Christianity.<sup>362</sup> Consequently, the

---

<sup>359</sup> Goheen, “My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism,” January 7-9, 2021.

<sup>360</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 235.

<sup>361</sup> Goheen, “My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism,” January 7-9, 2021.

<sup>362</sup> Keller and Kaufmann, *The Gospel and the Heart*, 50.

confessions and creeds suppressed biblical teaching with truncated tribal theological formulations. Even though they served key purposes, some critical doctrines, like the missional nature of the church, were suppressed for over a millennium.<sup>363</sup> But in recent decades, this missional nature has returned, evidenced by its newfound adherents.<sup>364</sup> According to Dr. L.J.S. Steenkamp, the church is recovering its missional identity because Christendom's ecclesiology is dead due to its irrelevance for the twenty-first-century Western context.<sup>365</sup>

*The Rebirth of Missional Ecclesiology and the Eschatological Lynchpin*

Consequently, missional ecclesiology has become a priority topic in nearly all denominations and theological communities in recent decades.<sup>366</sup> Even among biblical scholars wary of the language of missional ecclesiology, there is agreement regarding the church's missional character.<sup>367</sup> Theologians like Dr. David VanDrunen would be an example of a biblical scholar wary of the neo-Calvinist brand of missional ecclesiology. Yet, VanDrunen identifies the church as a "missionary body."<sup>368</sup> That being said, VanDrunen's understanding of the church as a "missionary body" and the neo-Calvinists understanding of the church as a missionary body are significantly different. For neo-

---

<sup>363</sup> Goheen, "My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism," January 7-9, 2021.

<sup>364</sup> Niemandt, "Trends in Missional Ecclesiology," 1.

<sup>365</sup> Dreyer, "Missional Ecclesiology as the Basis for a New Church Order: A Case Study," 2.

<sup>366</sup> Niemandt, "Trends in Missional Ecclesiology," 1-2.

<sup>367</sup> David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010), 20-24, 144-46.

<sup>368</sup> VanDrunen, 20-24, 144-46.

Calvinist's, missional ecclesiology plays a role in the “comprehensive scope” of the renewal of the whole created order, according to Goheen.<sup>369</sup>

This “comprehensive scope” of missional ecclesiology is the renewal of the whole of creation, including culture, through the redemptive work of Jesus, not solely the salvation of humankind's souls.<sup>370</sup> In other words, through the redemptive work of Jesus, the church's mission reengages the cultural mandate given to humankind prior to the Fall to renew the whole of creation. VanDrunen departs from neo-Calvinists missional thinkers like Goheen and instead argues for a two-kingdom perspective. VanDrunen views this more “comprehensive scope” of salvation as inconsistent with the doctrine of justification as articulated by the Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century.<sup>371</sup> VanDrunen thinks that missional ecclesiology, as promoted by Goheen and other neo-Calvinists, is an eschatological over-reach.<sup>372</sup> Herein lies one of the critical doctrines associated with missional ecclesiology: eschatology.<sup>373</sup>

### *The Eschatological Missional Church*

Dr. N.T. Wright, New Testament scholar and Pauline theologian, argues for a cosmic salvation that is eschatological to its core. He contends:

The created order, which God has begun to redeem in the resurrection of Jesus, is a world in which heaven and earth are designed not to be separated but to come

---

<sup>369</sup> Michael W. Goheen, “My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism” (Covenant Theological Seminary, January 7-9, 2021), 38–39.

<sup>370</sup> VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*, 16–27.

<sup>371</sup> VanDrunen, 21.

<sup>372</sup> VanDrunen, 26.

<sup>373</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 189–232.

together. In that coming together, the ‘very good’ that God spoke over creation at the beginning will be enhanced, not abolished.<sup>374</sup>

N.T. Wright’s eschatological position affirms a radical continuity between this present world and its eventual consummated state. The “already” and “not yet” of the kingdom of God are enmeshed so that the present redeeming work of Christ through his church, and individual Christians, is “building for the kingdom.”<sup>375</sup> He argues that every act of service performed by Christians “will find its way, through the resurrecting power of Jesus, into the new creation that God will one day make,” and he refers to this connection as “the logic of the mission of God.”<sup>376</sup> VanDrunen disagrees with N.T. Wright, Goheen, and other neo-Calvinists, regarding their eschatological optimism and consequently how it shapes the church’s mission. VanDrunen states his eschatological position as follows: “As a foretaste of the last day, the flood indicates that the products of the present human culture are doomed to destruction with the natural order itself.”<sup>377</sup> For VanDrunen, the artifacts of culture are doomed to destruction along with the church’s role in cultivating that culture, reducing the mission of the church to saving souls. This traditional, or Christendom, view of missions solely as soul-saving is not the position that adherents of missional ecclesiology promote as the biblical norm.

---

<sup>374</sup> Wright, 259.

<sup>375</sup> Wright, 207–32.

<sup>376</sup> Wright, 208.

<sup>377</sup> VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms*, 68.



*A Robust Neo-Calvinist Missional Ecclesiology*

Dr. Christopher Wright, Anglican clergyman and Old Testament scholar, in his tome *The Mission of God*, argues for the primacy of missional ecclesiology. He explains his rationale, “The whole Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of God’s whole creation.”<sup>378</sup> He is contending that God’s mission to the world through his people, the church, is the central storyline of the Bible. Wright further explains that the role of the church should be preeminently understood in light of God’s mission. He states, “It’s not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, but that God has a church for his mission in the world.”<sup>379</sup> This clever turn of phrase emphasizes missionality at the center of the church’s identity. Niemandt states that “ecclesiology follows mission” because “the church does what it is and then organizes what it does.”<sup>380</sup> In other words, the church does mission because mission is central to the church’s identity.

According to missiologist Richard Bliese, the church derives its missional identity from the character of God himself. He contends, “God is a missionary God, and so the church is to be a missionary church.”<sup>381</sup> His appeal is rooted in the ontological nature of God, who possesses the character attribute of missionality within himself. Likewise, Niemandt contends that the missional nature of the church is ontological and derived through “participation in the life of the Trinity.” Niemandt asserts, “Mission is an

---

<sup>378</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 51.

<sup>379</sup> Wright, 62.

<sup>380</sup> Niemandt, “Trends in Missional Ecclesiology,” 3.

<sup>381</sup> Richard Bliese, “The Mission Matrix: Mapping Out the Complexities of a Missional Ecclesiology,” *Word & World* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 239.

extension and amplification of God's very being. Missional theology builds on the understanding that God is Trinity and missional. Mission is participation in the life of God."<sup>382</sup> He argues that the missional aspect of God's character is a shared ontological reality with the church.

Dr. Cristian Sonea, professor of Orthodox Theology at Babes-Bolyai, reflecting on this ontological reality, states, "The life of God enters the life of mankind through the Risen Christ."<sup>383</sup> Sonea argues that the risen Christ is transforming the church, and because the life of God has entered the church through Christ, the Triune God continues his mission through it.<sup>384</sup> For Christopher Wright, this mission originates in the personal will of God, revealing that "the God revealed in the Scriptures is personal, purposeful, and goal-oriented."<sup>385</sup> The agenda for God's stated mission expands to redeeming the world through his church. Therefore, missional ecclesiology is the church taking its part in the gospel story for the renewal of creation including the salvation of the souls.<sup>386</sup>

### **The Goal of Missional Ecclesiology**

The goal of history, according to the Scriptures, is captured well through the words of the prophet Habakkuk, "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory

---

<sup>382</sup> Niemandt, "Trends in Missional Ecclesiology," 2.

<sup>383</sup> Cristian Sonea, "Missio Dei: The Contemporary Missionary Paradigm and Its Reception in the Eastern Orthodox Missionary Theology," *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 9 (January 25, 2017): 11.

<sup>384</sup> Sonea, 80–81.

<sup>385</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 63.

<sup>386</sup> Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005), 119–43.

of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”<sup>387</sup> According to Habakkuk, God’s mission is nothing less than the manifestation of his glory throughout the whole of creation, establishing the shalom of the entire cosmos, including the redemption of his people. Christopher Wright, commenting on Habakkuk, observes that it reflects “God’s will and purpose” and “is the mission of God.”<sup>388</sup> Thus understood, comprehensive shalom is the state of the consummated kingdom of God resulting in the perfected, restored, and renewed state of all things under the gracious reign of God. The mission of God, according to Christopher Wright’s interpretation of Habakkuk, is the comprehensive shalom depicted by the prophet’s poetic prophecy. Accordingly, God’s mission is to display his glory throughout the whole of the created realm, and the church’s role is to participate in that glorious task until history arrives at that destination.

“Arrival at that destination” is the language of eschatology. Goheen argues that “eschatology encompasses the whole of New Testament systematic theology categories.”<sup>389</sup> Christopher Wright interprets Habakkuk 2:14 as a vision of the eschatological destination of the mission of God and for the church. For Goheen, mission is the “reason for the ‘already, not yet’ epoch of the kingdom of God,” and he boldly states, “Any eschatology that does not have mission as a central component is a false eschatology.”<sup>390</sup> The point is that the eschatological goal of missional ecclesiology is

---

<sup>387</sup> *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), Habakkuk 2:14.

<sup>388</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 122.

<sup>389</sup> Goheen, “My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism,” January 7-9, 2021, 49.

<sup>390</sup> Goheen, 42.

Habakkuk 2:14. It's comprehensive in nature, enveloping the whole of the new heavens and the new earth.

Johan Herman Bavinck, Dutch missionary and theologian, in his “threefold aim of missions,” states that “the glorification of God is undoubtedly foremost,” followed by the “establishment of his church,” and finally, “the conversion of the heathen.” Bavinck is restating the vision of Habakkuk as the first aim of the church’s mission and explaining that all three aims are aspects of the “single purpose of God,” which he defines as “the coming and extension of the kingdom of God.”<sup>391</sup> Bavinck is essentially reframing Habakkuk’s prophecy in the terminology of God’s consummated kingdom, a consummated kingdom with eschatological implications that will be manifested at the end of the present “already, not yet” epoch, ushering in the full expression of the kingdom of God. These eschatological implications are why Goheen states that “the *missio Dei* is eschatological.”<sup>392393</sup>

Like other neo-Calvinists, Newbigin contends that missional initiatives are an action of God first and then an action of the church. For Newbigin, “Mission is the action of God, the triune God — of God the Father who is ceaselessly at work in all creation and in the hearts and minds of all human beings whether they acknowledge him or not, graciously guiding history toward its true end.”<sup>394</sup> Newbigin establishes God as the primary agent in missions, at work “in all human beings whether they acknowledge him

---

<sup>391</sup> J. H Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing), 155–56.

<sup>392</sup> Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 70.

<sup>393</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 116–27.

<sup>394</sup> Newbigin, 134–35.

or not.” For Newbigin, God is “the primal reality in mission and the rest is derivative.”<sup>395</sup> Newbigin acknowledges theological abuses in connection with the doctrine of the *missio Dei*, specifically, heresies that bypass the church and bypass the name of Jesus, leading to a social gospel.<sup>396</sup> Regardless, Newbigin is adamant that failure to make the distinction that God is the primary agent in missions leads to two wrong concepts deeply dividing the Christian community.

According to Newbigin, the first wrong concept is the “exclusive emphasis on the winning of individuals to conversion, baptism, and church membership.”<sup>397</sup> The second wrong concept is the omission of aggressive evangelism, because it may further upset a culture mired in interreligious strife. This second wrong concept places emphasis of doing works of social justice without gospel proclamation, clearly a heterodox position from a biblical and historical position. In contrast, Newbigin states that the first error neglects the power of demonic principalities that absolutize aspects of creation over and against God himself.<sup>398</sup> Newbigin addresses both errors when he asserts, “Evangelism which is politically and ideologically naïve, and social action which does not recognize the need for conversion from false gods to the living God, both fall short of what is required.”<sup>399</sup> Newbigin’s understanding of the principalities and powers, in heavenly places, that have been disarmed through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of

---

<sup>395</sup> Newbigin, 134–35.

<sup>396</sup> Newbigin, 135–36.

<sup>397</sup> Newbigin, 134–35.

<sup>398</sup> Newbigin, 135–36, 198–210.

<sup>399</sup> Newbigin, 210.

Jesus Christ, anchors his commitment to missional ecclesiology. Furthermore, Newbigin believes it is naïve to think that the effects of individual evangelism will bring about the reformation of society.

The missional church's reformation of society is captured in Wolters' term, "creation regained."<sup>400</sup> Wolters argues that God, in redemption, is redeeming his original creation to its appointed destination by means of his sovereign power and through the instrumentality of the church. The church proclaims a bold, biblical gospel and continues the work of the original cultural mandate given by God in Genesis 1-2.<sup>401</sup> Goheen identifies Wolters as one of the critical scholars and catalysts for the renewal of missional ecclesiology.<sup>402</sup> Specifically, Goheen identifies Wolters' chapter on creation in *Creation Regained* as critical in the recovery of missional ecclesiology.

According to Goheen, American Protestant evangelicals struggle with missional ecclesiology because they "have no doctrine of Creation."<sup>403</sup> He continues that these evangelicals have "little sense of, and in, the goodness of God in creation, in vocation, and in all of life."<sup>404</sup> Many evangelicals formulate their understanding of mission in Genesis 3 after the Fall, as opposed to Genesis 1-2. As a result, the missional orientation of these evangelicals is primarily negative. American evangelicals focus on the nature of a fallen world and concentrate primarily, if not exclusively in many cases, on the

---

<sup>400</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 41–51.

<sup>401</sup> Wolters, 41–51.

<sup>402</sup> Goheen, "My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism," January 7-9, 2021, 56–57.

<sup>403</sup> Goheen, "My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism," January 7-9, 2021, 54.

<sup>404</sup> Goheen, "My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism," January 7-9, 2021, 54–86.

rebellion of humankind. According to Goheen, this focus is a lop-sided approach at best and an utter distortion of the church's mission at worst.<sup>405</sup> Missional ecclesiology begins with a high view of creation while simultaneously holding it in tension with the tragic nature of the Fall and its distortion of the created order. Wolters claims that a more balanced appreciation of Creation changes the entire way that the gospel is contextualized across many cultures.<sup>406</sup>

According to Wolters, contextualization tailors the gospel to a particular culture so that the people of that culture are challenged by it even as the church simultaneously works within that culture to advance the cultural mandate.<sup>407</sup> He asserts that contextualization of a missional church is seen through its solidarity with the culture it serves through a partnership with it in its pursuit of the cultural mandate.<sup>408</sup>

Obviously, the broader culture does not identify its cultural work as obedience to God's call to cultivate the cultural mandate. At the same time, according to Wolters, the church opposes the culture and is involved in a contextualization process that exposes its idolatry through gospel proclamation.<sup>409</sup> Dr. Dick Kaufmann asserts the challenge of such an approach to contextualization as over-contextualization and under-contextualization. Under-contextualization is a church yielding to its own idols, detaching from the broader culture through isolation and irrelevance. In contrast, over-contextualization is the church

---

<sup>405</sup> Goheen, "My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism," January 7-9, 2021, 54–86.

<sup>406</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 135–40.

<sup>407</sup> Wolters, 135–36.

<sup>408</sup> Wolters, 136.

<sup>409</sup> Wolters, 135–36.

giving into the idols of the broader culture and thus failing to be the distinct expression of God's kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. Both errors destroy the health and vitality of the church and her effectiveness in mission.<sup>410</sup> Wolters agrees with this assessment yet expands on the underlying dynamics through what he calls the "unbearable tension."<sup>411</sup>

Consequently, an "unbearable tension" arises from the following two factors. Wolters asserts that the culture is living out a radically different story than that of a missional church. So, the first point of tension within the church arises because it is situated in the idolatrous cultural story. This idolatrous story shapes every aspect of life within that culture and thus creates tremendous tension within the missional church abiding inside that cultural story. The second factor creating tension is the fact that the church is rooted in another story centered in the gospel. The "unbearable tension," according to Wolters, "emerges because of the 'two embodiments' in the life of God's people."<sup>412</sup> The missional church is being shaped by both stories, which can be the source of fruitful mission and health or destructive collaboration with the idolatry of that cultural story. This idea expands on Kaufmann's view of over- and under-contextualization in the missional church's purposeful "embodiment of both stories." Wolters' bold claim is that "to embrace the tension, and to seek to resolve it in a way that does not compromise the gospel, is the goal of contextualization."<sup>413</sup> It is from this place of "unbearable tension" that the church performs its life-giving and kingdom-advancing missional work.

---

<sup>410</sup> Dick Kaufmann, *The Challenge of Personal Inculturation*

<sup>411</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 136.

<sup>412</sup> Wolters, 137.

<sup>413</sup> Wolters, 137.



The “unbearable tension” is the place the missional church determines the cultural idolatry to avoid through Wolters’ distinction between “structure and direction.”<sup>414</sup> Wolters states that in every cultural product there is “something good of God’s creational structure,”<sup>415</sup> an extremely important doctrinal commitment for missional ecclesiology. This feature of “creational structure as good” is what Goheen identified as missing from the doctrinal commitments of American evangelicalism. Wolters also states that at the same time, all of this good creational structure is to “some degree misdirected by a shared cultural idolatry.” According to Wolters, “The mission of God’s people is to discern and embrace the good creational insights and structure, and at the same time to reject and subvert the idolatrous distortion.”<sup>416</sup> This paradigm of “structure and direction” is critical to missional ecclesiology. Wolters places it at the heart of the mission of the church.

This area of literature review focused on missional ecclesiology and its relevance to the work of ENLs. The neo-Calvinist expression of missional ecclesiology places a strong emphasis on both global and local missions. Missional ecclesiology proclaims a strong gospel calling humankind to repent and place faith in Jesus Christ for personal salvation, whether locally or globally. There is an evangelistic fervor in a missional church coupled with a concern for the kingdom of God to find tangible expression in the social concerns of justice and mercy in society. This commitment to the healing of the social fabric of society is rooted in an eschatological commitment to the kingdom of God and the restoration of all things under the reign of Christ. Missional ecclesiology presents

---

<sup>414</sup> Wolters, 137.

<sup>415</sup> Wolters, 137–40.

<sup>416</sup> Wolters, 137.

a holistic vision that embraces a robust understanding of the doctrines of creation and redemption. The missional church also possesses a framework to live within the “unbearable tension” of embodying the gospel story and the cultural story. The missional church’s faithful living within this tension works alongside the broader culture and against it through a discerning application of structure and direction. This framework of direction is foundational to fulfilling the cultural mandate and the Great Commission. Finally, a missional ecclesiology remains rooted in the Scriptures, witnesses to culture-saving grace, and works all for the glory of God.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

In light of the literature examined, a handful of themes are important for ENLs in their leadership of an ecclesiastical network that focuses on equipping pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people. The insights of generational thinking highlight the reality that culture and cultural change is embodied in younger generational cohorts. Duffy’s tri-perspectival lens of period effects, life-cycle effects, and cohort effects is a helpful paradigm, remembering that broader cultural factors, Duffy’s “period effects,” are a key factor of generational disaffiliation from the church.

Consequently, the secular<sub>3</sub> age sets the parameters for lives and ministry. Knowledge of this secular<sub>3</sub> cultural context in language that communicates the existential experience of the people ENLs are ministering to is extremely important. Taylor’s abbreviated lexicon of this secular<sub>3</sub> age provides great diagnostic language. This age is characterized by a secularity far from hard atheism. A secular<sub>3</sub> age is an era of renewed interest in spirituality, but of the do-it-yourself (DIY) kind. The radical individualism of

the moment perpetuates the “cult of self” and further atomizes people even in their spirituality. The fragilization of all faiths, including Christianity, and the dynamics that lead to it, is another important takeaway.

An ENLs understanding of how the people they serve have been impacted by the reigning epistemological paradigms will strengthen their ministry to pastors. Covenant epistemology aligns itself with the reality of who God is as Creator and Redeemer of humankind. It’s an approach to knowledge that is personal, wholistic, covenantal, rooted in love, and concerned with the flourishing of the whole of the created order. As a wholistic approach to knowledge, covenant epistemology taps into the many aspects of knowing -- emotions, imagination, intuition, and faith. There is an apologetic appeal to this kind of knowledge in this current cultural moment. Ultimately, covenant epistemology is rooted in a God who can be known and who extends himself to know his people in Christ.

Finally, the theological section of literature review focused on missional ecclesiology. The contours of missional ecclesiology describe God’s mission. The overarching call of missional ecclesiology to proclaim the biblical gospel with boldness and to labor for the healing of a community’s brokenness as a result of sin is paramount as is living in the “unbearable tension” with gospel grace, and equipping others to do so. Wolter’s paradigm of “structure and direction” is also an excellent tool for contextualization of ministry.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how ecclesiastical network leaders (ENLs) equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people.

To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do ENLs describe their role within an ecclesiastical network?
2. How do ENLs equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people?
  - a. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of current culture?
  - b. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of epistemology?
  - c. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of Christology?
3. How do ENLs describe the mission of the local church?

### Design of the Study

This study employed a basic qualitative research design using *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* by Sharan Merriam, professor emerita of Adult Education at the University of Georgia, and Elizabeth Tisdell, professor of Adult Education at Penn State University Harrisburg.<sup>417</sup> According to Merriam and Tisdell,

---

<sup>417</sup> Sharan B Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2016)

qualitative research offers practitioners access to practical knowledge in one's field of practice that leads to the improvement of one's craft.<sup>418</sup> Consequently, Merriam and Tisdell believe "that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives."<sup>419</sup> They continue, "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences."<sup>420</sup> Four characteristics distinguish it from quantitative research.<sup>421</sup> "The following four characteristics are identified by most as the key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive."<sup>422</sup> As such, the qualitative research focuses on how ENLs equip ministry practitioners to lead transgenerational churches reaching dechurched and unchurched people.

The first feature of qualitative research is the process, understanding, and meaning that ENLs constructed to interpret their own experiences as ecclesiastical network leaders. What were the practices they employed and why? What led them to certain leadership decisions and not others? In contrast to quantitative research, which requires interpretation of the available data, interpretation is integrated into the qualitative

---

<sup>418</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 1.

<sup>419</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 1.

<sup>420</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 6.

<sup>421</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 15.

<sup>422</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 15.

analysis approach. In other words, detailed interpretation of information provided by ENLs was possible because of the qualitative research approach.

The second feature of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument and could follow-up on critical insights using probing questions and redirection in areas of key insights salient to the research. Alan Peshkin observes, “That subjectivity can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected.”<sup>423</sup> The researcher’s findings provide further insights to relevant audiences as a result of the qualitative research methodology. The potential shortcomings and biases that characterize the subjective nature of the qualitative approach were mitigated by a clear statement of the “researcher’s position.”

The third feature of qualitative research is the utilization of an inductive process. This aspect of qualitative research enabled the researcher to move from the particular themes derived from the interviews to the general insights that transcend the ENLs distinctive context.<sup>424</sup> As a result, qualitative research leveraged the insights of the ENLs’ experience to better understand the issue.

The fourth feature of qualitative analysis is the richly descriptive nature this method of research yields. “Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon.”<sup>425</sup> Quotes, interviews with ENLs,

---

<sup>423</sup> Alan Peshkin, “In Search of Subjectivity—One’s Own,” *Educational Researcher* Vol. 17, No. 7 (October 1988): 18.

<sup>424</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 17.

<sup>425</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 17.

and stories added important details that yielded a highly descriptive portrait that enabled the researcher to better “build toward theory.”<sup>426</sup>

Thus, the qualitative research method allowed for an in-depth understanding of the practices and experiences of ENLs directed toward the desired outcome of this study and was thus the optimal approach.

### **Participant Sample Selection**

The nature of this study involved a criterion-based selection process for interview participants.<sup>427</sup> A criterion-based selection process selects participants who possess the crucial attributes salient to the overall purpose of the study.<sup>428</sup> The critical criterion required that an ecclesiastical network leader be able to articulate experiences of equipping pastors who have proven effective at leading transgenerational churches reaching dechurched and unchurched people. The phrase “transgenerational churches” clarified that the church’s membership required representatives of all generational cohorts in the network churches. This criterion emphasized one of the concerns of this study, that the generational cohorts identified as Millennials and Generation Z would also be present in these churches. The presence of proportional numbers of Millennials and Generation Z in these churches met the generational cohort requirement regardless of entry point into the church. The researcher allowed for the internal reporting of the churches through the ecclesiastical network leader as sufficient evidence. The researcher concluded, and

---

<sup>426</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 17.

<sup>427</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 97.

<sup>428</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 97.

confirmed with research participants, that churches with this kind of membership growth were readily observed and subsequently recorded formally or informally. Therefore, the purposive study sample consisted of people from the population of pastors who led some form of an ecclesiastical network and who have been successful at reaching dechurched and unchurched people while maintaining a transgenerational ministry.<sup>429</sup> The ENLs involved participants engaged in church planting networks, presbytery leadership, and local churches that have planted churches that meet the criterion of the study sample.

Participants represented a variety of geographical contexts throughout the United States. An additional geographic criterion required that these networks be either in urban centers or geographically adjacent to urban centers to mitigate for the “heartland effect” and thus minimize variables not relevant to the focused study.

The theological criterion for participants asked that they meet the basic apostolic conditions for Christian orthodoxy as contained in the ecumenical councils of the church, the Apostle’s Creed, the Three-Forms of Unity, The Westminster Confession of Faith, and/or The Baptist Confession of 1689. Various soteriological aberrations that represented an Arminian view were also accepted from the participants of this study. The important criterion as it related to the theological standards was that the churches within the network submitted to a statement of faith that was clearly functional in the life of each church. This criterion limited the theological possibilities of participants to focus on participants whose theological stances did not reflect the social imaginary of the secular<sub>3</sub> mission context. This study utilized a catholic spirit that embraced a broad spectrum of Protestant churches typically described as evangelical.

---

<sup>429</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 96.



For participant churches, the phrase, “reaching these dechurched and unchurched generational cohorts” is defined as follows: churches in which a person from outside the church makes a profession of faith that includes the sacrament of baptism, a tangible commitment to engage in Christian discipleship, and participation in the mission of the church. So, the qualitative research sought to first examine the outcomes of the network leader’s ministry in conjunction with the ministry practices that led to those results. The selection of a particular ecclesiastical network leader was contingent upon whether or not the churches were, in fact, reaching dechurched and unchurched people and grafting them into transgenerational churches. The researcher did not require formal documentation to validate the results of the ecclesiastical network leaders but relied on the testimony of those network leaders, including any internal and external ministry reporting conducted by the network leader, along with the testimony of others reporting on the network leaders’ impacts. However, the researcher did inquire about any quantitative data gathered by the network leader, and this data was made available upon request.

The final study was conducted through personal interviews with six ecclesiastical network leaders chosen with the above criteria. They were invited to participate via an introductory letter, followed by a personal phone call. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate. In addition, each participant signed a “Research Participant Consent Form” to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants. The researcher, having completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements for human rights in research concluded that the “Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is ‘no risk’ according to Seminary IRB guidelines.”

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

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by *RUSS KAPUSINSKI* to investigate *ecclesiastical network leaders that equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that reach dechurched and unchurched people* 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: to investigate how ecclesiastical network leaders equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching unchurched and dechurched people.
- 2) Potential benefits of the research: although there are no guaranteed direct benefits for participants, I hope they will be encouraged by the experience and potentially gain helpful insights for their ministry through findings and research synthesis.
- 3) The research process will include four ecclesiastical network leaders interviewed separately with the audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed as part of the research for the final thesis. All participants will remain anonymous.
- 4) Participants in this research will review research questions for 30 minutes prior to participating in a 90-minute interview (ideally in-person) to be recorded, audio only.
- 5) Potential discomforts or stresses: None.
- 6) Potential risks: None.
- 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; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.
--

## Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering, consisting of open-ended interview questions. This methodology facilitated the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues to explore them more thoroughly.<sup>430</sup> Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variety of participants.<sup>431</sup>

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature consistent with the purpose statement of this thesis but evolved using the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.<sup>432</sup>

The researcher interviewed six ecclesiastical network leaders for 90 minutes each. To accommodate participant schedules, the researcher scheduled the interviews several weeks in advance. The researcher audiotaped the interviews with a digital recorder. The researcher completed the data gathering in three weeks. Directly after each interview, the

---

<sup>430</sup> Miriam and Tisdell, 109-111.

<sup>431</sup> Miriam and Tisdell, 202.

<sup>432</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 199-221.

researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview time.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. What are some critical leadership qualities for pastors in our cultural moment and mission context?
2. What is the vetting process for congregational pastoral candidates?
  - a. What are key character traits?
  - b. What are key theological commitments?
  - c. What are key ministry skills?
3. What is your structure to provide ongoing support, friendship, accountability, equipping for network pastors?
4. What are some of the mission-critical practices habits to the ongoing health of a network of churches working together to advance the Kingdom of God in a geographic region?
5. What are some of the important aspects of our cultural context in the United States that are critical for church leaders to know?
6. What are some of your criteria to determine the health of the churches in your ecclesiastical network?
7. What are some of the ministry practices necessary to reach dechurched people?
8. What are some ministry practices necessary to reach unchurched people?
9. What ministry commitments are necessary to maintain a transgenerational membership?
10. What do you think are the reasons for the statistical rise of the “religious nones” in the growing departure of the younger generational cohorts from Christianity in the U.S.?
11. How much does knowledge of the characteristics of Millennials and Generation Z impact ministry design programs in your churches? (Give examples)
12. What are the cultural challenges facing the church in our day?

## Data Analysis

Merriam and Tisdell state the following regarding the important work of data analysis:

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of the data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read — it is the process of making meaning.<sup>433</sup>

“Making meaning,” according to the authors, is the process used to answer the research questions. To have data to “make meaning,” the researcher hired a professional to transcribe the interview. The researcher then listened to the audio with the transcribed text to determine the accuracy of the transcription, as soon as possible and always within one week of each interview. This process allowed for thorough analysis of the responses to the qualitative questions given by the research participant. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process.<sup>434</sup> This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.<sup>435</sup>

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed using a manual coding method. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying (1) common themes, patterns, and insights across the six ecclesiastical network participants; and (2) similarities and congruence between the various participants.

---

<sup>433</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 202.

<sup>434</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 32.

<sup>435</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 201-202.

## **Researcher Position**

The researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis through transcribed interviews. Therefore, the researcher's perspectives and values influenced this study. The researcher was a dechurched person who returned to a local church in the 1986. The researcher's conversion experience produced a special interest in dechurched and unchurched people. As a result of the researcher's conversion experience at the age of 20, the researcher then sought employment with a parachurch ministry called Young Life. Young Life's stated mission is to reach dechurched and unchurched teenagers. The training received from Young Life's was formative to the researcher's understanding of ministry and the importance of reaching dechurched and unchurched people. The vocational experience as a Young Life Area Director further shaped the researcher's commitment to reaching people outside local church membership.

The researcher is also a seminary trained, ordained pastor in a theologically conservative Protestant denomination with decades of experience serving in local church, parachurch ministries, and Christian schools. One of the most relevant experiences for the researcher was serving in an ecclesiastical network called Mission San Diego for over a decade. The researcher worked closely alongside the network's ecclesiastical leader, serving as a church planter with the goal of starting a church by reaching dechurched and unchurched people. This network eventually disbanded, and the dynamics surrounding the network's dissolution shaped the researcher's knowledge of regional networks and their role in reaching dechurched and unchurched people. These experiences created a bias in the researcher regarding the importance of churches united under a gifted

ecclesiastical network leader. They also provided the researcher a deep empathy and insider understanding for many of the possible issues arising in the interview data.

### **Study Limitations**

Due to limited resources and time, this study is limited to the best practices of a few ENLs and the churches they lead in geographical settings categorized as urban or adjacent to urban centers in the United States. The study also focused on ecclesiastical networks that started separately from existing ecclesiastical bodies, presbyteries, or mission organizations. Other studies would be needed to focus on gifted women in such roles and to focus on such experiences within ecclesiastical bodies. Due to the researcher's interest in the formation of transgenerational churches under the direction of an ecclesiastical network leader, churches will be omitted from possible research participation due to this criterion. Therefore, further research is needed to broaden the insights of the kind of churches that meet the criterion of being transgenerational and reaching dechurched and unchurched people and yet are not connected to a broader network of churches. Further study of individual churches would yield important insights into ministry practices and strategy that would serve the North American church for greater mission impact. The geographical limitation of studying ecclesiastical networks in or adjacent to urban areas excludes rural or suburban churches whose ministries still must take into account the "heartland effect."

As stated in the previous section, participants interviewed were limited to those serving in positions of ecclesiastical network leadership. Therefore, some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar contexts. Further research is needed to determine whether the proliferation of the types of ecclesiastical networks under

examination are an important mission strategy for the church in the United States as the twenty-first century progresses. Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions on the role of ENLs should test those aspects in their own context. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context.<sup>436</sup> The results of this study may also have implications for theological institutions such as seminaries whose primary task is to prepare pastors for vocational ministry.

---

<sup>436</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 256.



## **Chapter Four**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore how ecclesiastical network leaders (ENLs) equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people. The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do ENLs describe their role within an ecclesiastical network?
2. How do ENLs equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people?
  - a. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of current culture?
  - b. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of generational thinking?
  - c. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of epistemology?
  - d. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of Christology?
3. How do ENLs describe the mission of the local church?

### **Introductions to Participants and Context**

The researcher selected six ENLs to participate in this study. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect the identity of each ENL. The ENLs who participated represented different Protestant denominations, and all six of the ecclesiastical networks are in urban contexts or the surrounding suburbs. The networks varied in size from ten to more than 100 churches. The ENLs selected for this study have served for at least a decade and are either still serving in that capacity or

recently retired. The research revealed ecclesiastical networks as diverse as the different ENLs with their corresponding strengths and weaknesses. Consequently, the researcher sought to understand what functions of an ENL transcend mission context, network type, and the specific gifting of the ENL.

**Table 1**

**Research Participants Demographics**

Name	Gender	Race	Years in Ministry	Education Level	Years as ENL	Churches in Network
John	Male	White	41	Master of Divinity; Master of Arts Theology; Master of Philosophy	15	40
Nick	Male	Hispanic	20	Master of Divinity	13	80+
Ron	Male	White	45	Doctor of Ministry	19	30
Grant	Male	White	30	Master of Divinity	21	20
Carl	Male	White	31	Bachelor of Arts	10	15
Luke	Male	White	45	Ph.D. in Psychology; Master of Divinity	25	25

**The Role of an Ecclesiastical Network Leader (ENL)**

The first research question determined how ENLs described their role within the ecclesiastical network. First, the ENLs reported details of their personal ministry journey in becoming a network leader. Additionally, common characteristics of an ENL, central to fulfilling the role, emerged. Long-term ENLs reported as visionary strategists with

healthy self-knowledge who also described their role as being the collaborative leader of a high-functioning team and the cultivator of a gospel ecosystem.<sup>437</sup> They began their answers with their sense of call to serve in the role of an ecclesiastical network leader.

### *Called to Serve as an ENL*

ENLs described their life and ministry experience as critical to their call. Their personal ministry experiences formed convictions that grounded them and became the basis of their understanding of the role of an ENL. These common convictions were a burden to strengthen other pastors born out of their own struggle, the desire to see the kingdom of God transform a specific geographic region, and an abiding conviction for unity across denominational affiliations leading to more effective kingdom witness and service to the city.

The first conviction was the burden to strengthen and equip other pastors born out of their own struggle. After several years of serving in a local church context, Grant, a veteran church planter, received the call to serve as an ENL out of his “own pain, discouragement, and God’s faithfulness.” Grant described a dual burden. One burden was to see God’s kingdom advance in a geographic region. The other burden was to encourage, support, and equip church planters also called to do this “extremely difficult” work. As he reflected on his own church planting experience, Grant reported a desire to help other church planters learn from his mistakes and keep the work “from becoming more difficult than it has to be.” Luke’s call came after several years of church planting

---

<sup>437</sup> A gospel ecosystem is defined as holistic gospel-centered ministries developed by an ecclesiastical network that address the spiritual, social, and cultural needs of a city.

and pastoring. He seriously considered leaving the ministry altogether, and for a season he stepped away to pursue his Ph.D., writing his psychology dissertation on burnout and depression among clergy. Eventually he returned to full-time pastoral ministry with a renewed vision for the local church and a desire to care for and equip other pastors. His desire to equip other pastors has resulted in a multi-decade network that has strengthened pastors, their marriages, and the fruitfulness of several local congregations. A common theme was the call to serve born out of the pain, hardship, and the suffering of one's own personal ministry journey.

A second conviction regarding the call to serve as an ENL was a passion to see the kingdom of God transform a specific geographic region. When Ron was identified as a church leader capable of leading an ecclesiastical network, he chose to serve in a city that he loved and had been home to his family for multiple generations. He had developed deep affections for the region along with a corresponding desire to see it renewed by the gospel. Grant, too, described the love of the city he served. This passionate call was reflected in Carl's desire to see many cultures coming together and "the kingdom of God growing and flourishing out of that." Carl's love for the city was also reflected in the disproportional amount of time spent on training new church planters in the history and cultural dynamics of the city. Each ENL also identified love for the city as critical vetting criteria for new church planters. In hindsight, Carl stated that this intense discerning process may have been a "little weird." Regardless, he said it revealed how important the love of a city was for long term effective service and a sense of call. Interestingly, the ENLs had deep familial and relational roots to their city of service. This love for the city was a dominant theme in each ENL interviewed.

The ENLs also possessed an abiding conviction for unified ministry that transcended denominational affiliations. Nick’s burden to see God glorified and the city transformed by the power of the gospel compelled him into his role as an ENL. Nick was “captured by the idea of a city church,” a vision of the church cooperating across denominations to transform the city through gospel preaching, caring for the disenfranchised, and marketplace ministry. Nick’s particular vision compelled him to step into the role of ENL. He recalled one particular network gathering where the power of this unity was palpable as pastors from different denominations prayed for one another. One pastor was leaving the region to serve in another part of the country. As other network pastors laid hands on him and prayed, there was an emotional outpouring of affection. Nick recalled the tenderness of the deep unity God had established within their ecclesiastical network. Similarly, Luke’s call to serve as an ENL was born out of a vision for a unified city church. He asserted, “You know that we live in a cancel culture world, but Protestants, we have been cancelling each other for a long time.” The burden of a unified church loving the city together was central to Luke’s call. The personal testimony of each ENL involved these three convictions along with the desire to see God glorified and people made whole by the gospel.

### *The Profile of an ENL*

The profile of an ENL lists the common character traits that emerged from the interview process. The predominant character profile included the following traits: humility, heightened self-knowledge, gospel-rooted confidence, visionary capacity, and a catalytic entrepreneurial spirit. All of these traits were present in each ENL interviewed to varying degrees.

Humility was the most evidenced character trait in the ENLs surveyed. To be clear, the ENLs interviewed did not boast of their own humility. However, the trait emerged from the self-effacing personal assessments of their service as network leaders. For example, Grant spoke with great candor of his first church planting experience, “and through a convergence of my own arrogance...and my cluelessness about how to do it...about how to plant a church...I realized I made it a lot more difficult than it needed to be.” Honest, self-effacing comments like this were plenteous among all six ENLs interviewed and reflected maturity grown from hardship, owning one’s shortcomings, and lack of experience. Ron commented:

I’m not a superstar church planter. If anything, I’m an average church planter who planted an average church and made a contribution to the greater work of the kingdom of God in my city and beyond. Church planting involved some real hardship for me, and I nearly didn’t survive it professionally. But I did survive, and out of that experience of hardship I came to know something more about the gospel and me.

All the ENLs interviewed self-assessed as being an ordinary minister with the opportunity to serve in an extraordinary role as an ENL. The aforementioned quote by Ron highlights another related character trait shared by each ENL: heightened self-knowledge. A notable feature of this self-knowledge was that it was viewed through the lens of the gospel. Ron stated, “I came to know something more about the gospel and me.” This kind of self-knowledge was the source of growth in humility and confidence.

Confidence, born out of an identity deeply rooted in the gospel, was another character trait observed in each ENL. Coupled with a mature, self-effacing humility, each ENL demonstrated a confidence born out of the difficulties described by Ron. The intense hardship experienced in ministry ultimately drove each ENL into a deeper experience of the gospel that resulted in greater self-knowledge. Grant testified that his

own journey was characterized by a maturing self-awareness. When Grant reflected on his call, he made the following observation: “What I didn’t see at the time, mostly because I really wasn’t ready to see it in the context of my own lack of maturity, was the element that emerged later. All this brokenness was just a formative part of the leader.” Grant was reflecting back on his own immaturity and the fact that this immaturity rendered him incapable of rightly assessing himself and the circumstances of his life and ministry. Grant called this the “formative part of the leader.” He described his own experience as a leader being formed over time. He saw character growth that included the result of that formative process of gaining an ability to assess himself more clearly. According to Grant, growth in this kind of self-knowledge leads to greater humility and confidence. All of the ENLs interviewed possessed a refreshing candor and this mix of humility and confidence. Each ENL’s confidence was also closely related to another equally common trait, being a visionary.

ENLs possessed visionary traits, in varying degrees, that served the ecclesiastical network they led. The interviews revealed that ecclesiastical networks were primarily launched out of vision, relationships, or opportunity, but more so by some combination of all three. For example, Nick’s ecclesiastical network began as a body of tight-knit relationships between church planters learning how to love the city together. It involved vision and opportunity, but if not for the catalyst of the existing relationships, the network wouldn’t have started. John’s ecclesiastical network had a tremendous opportunity element in its founding. The opportunity involved a ready-made, high-functioning team that was well-funded and connected to another flourishing ecclesiastical network. These ENLs possessed a blend of three common character traits: visionary, opportunist, and

friend (the ability to build and sustain life-giving relationships). The trait of visionary was dominant but not to the exclusion of these other critical traits.

A final common character trait that consistently emerged was the ENL as a catalyst. The combination of the ENL's calling and character traits worked synergistically with the ability to serve as a catalytic leader to launch an ecclesiastical network. A catalyst is described as a self-starter with a clear view of what needs to be done along with the corresponding inner drive to figure out a way to make it happen. A recurrent theme for each ENL was that while there was no job description for the position, there was a clear commission to establish an ecclesiastical network to transform a densely populated metropolitan region. Ron described his entry process: "No one had ever done it before, and no one really knew how to do it. I think there was a general belief that if anyone could do that job, whatever it was, it was me." Carl agreed when he stated, "So my job really at the outset was to design the entire thing, to think deeply about its goals and strategies." Each ENL reported possessing an entrepreneurial spirit, the willingness to take calculated risks and forge into a worthy endeavor, even if it involved a high degree of ambiguity regarding how to get the job done. The catalytic leadership each ENL provided gathered other capable leaders to form an ecclesiastical network with the aim of transforming a city with the gospel.

### *Collaborative Leader of a High-functioning Team*

ENLs described the importance of the ability to lead a high-functioning citywide leadership team as critical to their role. Similarly, the interview process revealed the need for a particular kind of leadership, either individually or in the aggregate, for a flourishing citywide ecclesiastical network. This leadership had three primary functions: visionary,



facilitator, and caregiver. A particular leadership codification familiar to each ENL was the prophet-priest-king paradigm: the prophet as visionary, the priest as caregiver, and the king as facilitator.

The “king-facilitator” function was the ability to execute on vision, build systems and organizational structures, and manage the operations of the network. For example, Grant identified himself as a strong “prophet-visionary” and a strong “king-facilitator.” With regards to the “priest-care-giver” function, Grant stated, “You know the priestly element was always kind of left-handed work for me.” John understood the limitations of an ENL to possess all three of these functions as strengths in equal measure and how this would impact the network. He asserted, “If you don’t have any kingly gifts in you, you need to find someone who does, and keep them close.” This description captured ecclesiastical network leadership in the aggregate. In other words, ENLs identified that healthy ecclesiastical networks need multiple leaders with complementary gifts. Each ecclesiastical network began with more than one leader praying and strategizing its inception, even though the network later identified one person as its ENL.

The ENLs’ ability to establish and sustain a high-functioning leadership team is critical to the health, longevity, and reach of the ecclesiastical network. Herein was the connection to self-knowledge. The ENLs’ ability to “know thyself” with humility and confidence enabled them to staff for the health and success of the network. Nick articulated knowing from the outset that the sheer size and scope of their citywide vision would require a full-time “king-facilitator.” Consequently, the first full-time hire for the ecclesiastical network was not Nick but a person with the capacity to facilitate ministry citywide on behalf of the network. Likewise, Grant reported that the first hire for the

ecclesiastical network he initiated was a “king-facilitator” who developed the systems necessary to sustain the network long term. Each ENL reported the importance of assessing the needs of a forming network in light of its vision and then of staffing appropriately. Grant described this critical role of network leadership when he stated, “What I had to do was develop a job. There was plenty of work to do, but there was no framework or intentionality about how this part of the work related to that part of the work, and, you know, what else the ministry needed that it didn’t have.” This statement summarized the challenge of each ENL in forming the network. Grant’s response was to hire the first full-time, and now “longest tenured employee,” of the network—a “king-facilitator” to bring organizational order out of the chaos of no existing blueprint. All of the ENLs reported that a high-functioning citywide leadership team that provided vision, systems for network health, and a caregiving function was a mission-critical component for a flourishing ecclesiastical network. The ENLs role in recruiting and leading this team was non-negotiable for the ecclesiastical network to flourish.

The ENLs of the largest ecclesiastical networks reported an ability to scale their leadership team to increase the scope of the citywide ecclesiastical network. The ability to scale the vision was identified by Nick as what makes a leadership team “high functioning.” Beginning with one central ecclesiastical network meeting, Nick’s network grew their reach by growing their leadership team and establishing regional gatherings. He stated, “We began to regionalize our gatherings.” Then, the network could better fulfill its vision in several ways. Nick’s network was able “get larger and smaller at the same time.” They grew in their impact numerically and regionally while maintaining a size that enabled substantial mentoring, coaching, equipping, and friendship, while

simultaneously providing effective caregiving for network pastors. The regionalization of their network also enabled better contextualization of ministry in a diverse metropolitan region with varied needs. All these benefits originated from a high-functioning leadership team that learned how to multiply itself, starting with two people and growing to fifteen. The fifteen people were part of network churches and served between five to ten hours per week in their network leadership roles. According to Nick, recruiting from within the ecclesiastical network helped to maintain the DNA of the network vision and the deeply shared ministry values, built on long-lasting trust.

Grant, too, identified internal leadership recruiting as critical to the health and growth of their network. He utilized the metaphor of a “farm system approach” to building a championship team versus a “free agency approach” from the realm of athletics. Free agency, in Grant’s metaphor, is hiring leadership from outside their ministry context, which led to people prematurely leaving their post in the network due to a lack of connection to the city. Carl reported a similar reality:

we were certainly looking for people who had a love or an interest in having a love affair with our city...to think about this as a lifetime investment... a twenty-year lifespan in this space, because that’s what it’s going to take to plant churches that last for a long time.

The answer to Carl’s desire and Grant’s leadership dilemma was to recruit and develop people already living in the city that they loved and understood. Nick’s ecclesiastical network was exemplary in this regard.

### *The Cultivator of a Citywide Gospel Ecosystem*

A citywide gospel ecosystem was the descriptive term used by several of the ENLs to describe the cultivation of gospel-centered ministries that addressed the spiritual,

social, and cultural needs of a city. According to John, his ecclesiastical network borrowed the language and concept from Tim Keller and the Redeemer Church Planting Network in New York City. A gospel ecosystem, according to John, is characterized by:

a community of like-minded church leaders, theological depth, gospel-centered church planting, gospel pace setters (individual Christians equipped in gospel-centered discipleship), faith-work initiatives, justice-mercy-reconciliation advances, targeted outreach (especially colleges), unity among ecosystem leaders, movement intercessors, and a commitment to world missions.

Each ENL expressed varying degrees of commitments to the development of these features of a gospel ecosystem.

The ENLs had a lead strategic role in the cultivation of a contextualized gospel ecosystem for their particular citywide ecclesiastical network. ENLs reported serving as a chief architect for their gospel ecosystem through a collaborative effort with other like-minded network leaders. One ENL reported a failure to collaborate with the network leadership team members initially that resulted in the need to rework the gospel ecosystem blueprint. Like a biological ecosystem, a gospel ecosystem is designed for the flourishing of life within the ecclesiastical network to serve and bless the metropolitan region with the gospel. The ENLs reported that the cultivation of this gospel ecosystem was central to their role as an ecclesiastical network leader.

### *Summary of the Role of an ENL*

The role of an ENL was described as an intricate compilation of an ENL's calling, character, gifting, visionary-capacity, strategic architectural planning, leadership qualities, and ability to lead others. The role of an ENL began with a call to serve in this capacity. The subjective aspect of this call was coupled with a handful of personal characteristics: a love for God and people in a particular city as a realm for kingdom

service and a passion for unity across denominational affiliations to avoid the tribalism that hinders citywide gospel impact. The ENLs' personal suffering in their ministry journey equipped them with the desire to see other ministers supported, well-trained, and experiencing genuine friendship in an otherwise lonely calling. ENLs possessed a high degree of self-knowledge that resulted in a unique mix of deep-seated humility and confidence born out of their personal experience of the gospel. Each ENL interviewed possessed the quality of a visionary leader to varying degrees. All of the ENLs demonstrated an entrepreneurial spirit with a high tolerance for ambiguity.

An ENL's ability to establish a high-functioning citywide network ministry team was identified as central to the role. ENLs acknowledged their personal limitations that required the establishment of a citywide leadership team for a citywide gospel ecosystem. ENLs described themselves as team players and team builders who share a citywide vision, deep friendship, and complementary gifts with the teams they lead. The ENL, as the primary architect and visionary leader, described the importance of knowing the condition of leaders within the network and the network itself to maintain a flourishing gospel ecosystem for the sake of the network's mission to the city.

### **Equipping Network Pastors**

The second research question sought to determine how ENLs equipped pastors to lead transgenerational churches reaching dechurched and unchurched people. The question allowed for ENLs to respond in the broadest possible manner and to address critical equipping practices. Subsequently, the researcher narrowed the focus of equipping network pastors around four topics: current culture, generational thinking, epistemology, and Christology.

## *General Themes of Equipping Network Pastors*

Four themes arose under the broad heading of how ENLs equip pastors to lead: just-in-time coaching, the development and implementation of systems, a focus on leadership sustainability and succession, and strengthening the marriages of pastors and their spouses.

### *Just-in-Time Coaching and the Monthly Meeting*

The monthly ecclesiastical network gathering was the first critical element identified by each ENL in the cultivation of a citywide gospel ecosystem.<sup>438</sup> Luke reported that the monthly gathering led to life-giving friendships. (Luke was the ENL who did his Ph.D. work on pastoral burnout and depression.) He stated that the monthly network gathering provided a benefit critical in preserving the fruitfulness and longevity of pastors. The monthly gathering provided support, encouragement, prayer, and what John called “just-in-time” coaching. This “just-in-time” coaching focused on critical ministry decisions wherein network pastors heard wisdom from peers on how to proceed in their given context. In actuality, these monthly gatherings provided “just-in-time” everything: “just-in-time” encouragement, prayer, friendship, equipping, support, and a host of other intangibles. Luke reported that in this collaborative leadership venue, “pastors are learning concepts from each other but they’re also exchanging phone numbers and going out for coffee and lunch together between meetings combating the loneliness that pervades pastoral ministry.”

---

<sup>438</sup> The language of a “citywide gospel ecosystem” is being utilized interchangeably with a “citywide ecclesiastical network.”

The monthly network gathering was a learning community with a shared platform of leadership. This shared leadership platform allowed pastors within the network to present mission-critical topics to all network churches. Ron commented similarly, “We would find someone within that network who was competent to speak about a relevant topic on the level of experience, not expertise.” Ron was highlighting the fact that the equipping content wasn’t an abstract lecture, but concrete training born out of real-life ministry. All ENLs had a similar practice in their monthly network gatherings. They reported that this kind of equipping from a ministry practitioner in the trenches profoundly benefited all network pastors. Each ENL reported that the formal monthly gatherings led to many informal side meetings that strengthened the DNA of the ecclesiastical network citywide. These formal, “just-in-time,” monthly meetings were identified by all ENLs as foundationally critical to the health of the network and the development of a life-giving gospel ecosystem.

### *Equipping Through Mission-aligned Systems*

ENLs also identified the development of ministry systems as foundational for the cultivation of the gospel ecosystem. The research revealed that all of the networks provided diverse systems to advance the citywide vision. Although some of the systems differed, all the ENLs shared the goal of a healthy network and the implementation of systems that would support mission goals. The systems indicative was the monthly gathering, a mechanism for coaching and mentoring, provision of formal and informal resources to strengthen network participants, and a place to turn for crisis intervention. ENLs who reported that the development of systems was not their strength staffed accordingly to make sure this mission-critical aspect was developed. Regardless of

gifting, an ENL's role as primary architect of the network involved collaborating with other leaders to implement the systems needed. ENLs reported developing critical systems within their ecclesiastical network as part of their leadership role.

For example, John was the architect of a citywide central services component that handled accounting, financial reports and budgets, church branding, legal issues and contracts, and a host of other administrative responsibilities. John created a "church planting for dummies" ecosystem where church planters could focus on ministering to people and developing ministries that blessed the communities of their service. The systems developed in John's ecclesiastical network were robust and required a 5 percent financial buy-in based on general offerings from participating churches. Nick was the architect of a network-wide discipleship system. This discipleship system made a profound impact on churches citywide and blessed many within those churches. Nick, in collaboration with other network leaders, also systematized theological education within their ecclesiastical network. In a recent network meeting, he noted the following dynamic: "I remember looking around the room, and if there were 150 people in the room, seventy of them either are graduates or current students within our theological training program." He stated, "There is a 'symbiotic relationship' between the ecclesiastical network gatherings and the theological training program, and one does not exist without the other." For Nick, and the ecclesiastical network he serves, these particular systems are foundational for transforming their metropolitan region with the gospel. In the same way, all the systems developed under an ENL's leadership were critical to the cultivation of a gospel ecosystem for the health of the network. The architectural role of cultivating a gospel ecosystem was central to the role of an ENL.



### *Equipping for Sustainable Leadership and Succession*

The development of a leadership pipeline, leadership sustainability, and leadership succession was another critical ENL role. All of the ENLs spoke of their desire to establish Grant's aforementioned "farm system approach" for the development of a leadership pipeline internal to each network. Nick's ecclesiastical network established a leadership pipeline that recruits and equips developing successful young leaders within citywide network churches. The other ecclesiastical networks utilize a combination of a "free agency approach" while simultaneously developing a healthy "farm system approach" for future network pastors.

The cultivation of systems that enhance leadership sustainability was identified as a critical component in the development of a healthy gospel ecosystem. Luke stated, "Healthy pastors lead healthy churches." All ENLs interviewed agreed with this assessment. The commitment to leadership sustainability involved any pastor or ministry leader in the network and the citywide network leadership team. Every ENL also mentioned personal benefit from these network resources: monthly gatherings, theological training, network retreats, mentoring, gospel friendship, and a host of other resources designed to strengthen the sustainability of all network leaders.

Another important component of enhancing leadership sustainability was the ability to diagnose the health of their citywide leadership team and network pastors. ENLs posed a handful of relevant questions. Are leaders flourishing in their position in the midst of the challenges of ministry or are they wasting away? Are ecclesiastical network leaders spiritually healthy? What is the state of their marriages and family life? John stated, "The role of an ENL is to know the pulse of the leaders within the network along with the general health of the network itself." There is a strong correlation between

the two, according to John. He asserted, “You need to find people who can do that, and see that room, and hear what’s not being said. They can see it differently and follow through with pastoral care. And that will keep the organization functioning as a team.” John is speaking to the “priest-caregiving” gift that reads people well, connects with them deeply, empathizes, and shepherds the network leadership team holistically. This work also includes the “priest-caregiving” provided to network pastors. If an ENL is not a gifted “priest-caregiver,” according to John, someone must staff this critical area, or the network will become filled with pain and dysfunction. Consequently, the gospel ecosystem will suffer accordingly.

Leadership succession is another critical component of the long-term health and fruitfulness of an ecclesiastical network. Several ENLs stated that succession planning in their network currently needed attention. Nick’s ecclesiastical network had the most developed succession plan. None of the ENLs reported to have successfully “passed the baton” of network leadership to the next generation for a variety of reasons. Some ecclesiastical networks are still led by the first generation of leadership; others are in the succession process; and still others were not able to successfully thrive after the founding ENL retired. Ron, at the time of the interview, was in the succession process and was hopeful of a healthy transition. John stepped out of his role as an ENL, and the network he led matriculated into other ecclesiastical networks. Carl’s ecclesiastical network followed the same path as John’s. Nick, Grant, and Luke are still leading their networks and have the most fully developed succession plans. All ENLs interviewed articulated the importance of a viable succession plan for citywide ecclesiastical networks.

### *Equipping to Strengthen Network Pastor's Marriages*

ENLs identified healthy marriages and family life as critical to transgenerational churches reaching dechurched and unchurched people. In a culture that needs examples of healthy marriages and home life, ENLs reported equipping to this end.

Luke, in his service as an ENL, observed that dysfunctional marriages led to lack of fruitfulness in mission. He addressed this issue by providing retreats for network pastors and their wives to strengthen their relationships. He raised \$50,000 annually from “kingdom investors” to host an annual marriage retreat for network pastors and their spouses. Luke detailed the all-expense-paid excursion to an exclusive resort, including spa treatments, and a therapist who spoke on strengthening marriage relationships. Of one pastor and his wife, Luke said, “He came out to this marriage retreat, and God just really touched his marriage, and it was completely transformed.” Luke recounted how this pastor’s marriage was rescued through the retreat and the vulnerable relationships established over the years. As a result, Luke reported that the mission of Jesus continued in and through that pastor’s church with greater power. Some of the ecclesiastical networks hired a mature woman to mentor, support, and encourage staff pastors’ wives in the network. ENLs said that the reason for this staffing commitment was the intense isolation that pastor’s wives experience. Other networks provided counseling free-of-charge to network pastors and the ministry couple. All ENLs saw this commitment to strengthen the pastor and his family as a mission critical ministry in light of the state of marriages and families in the broader culture.

Nick’s ecclesiastical network further strengthened the home for mission by providing a multiple-year cohort experience for ministry couples. A group of pastors and their wives met weekly for three years while serving in full-time ministry. These cohorts

strengthened their marriages, families, and the mission of the entire network. This commitment of ENLs to strengthen marriages and the family life of network pastors advanced the kingdom of Jesus through the witness of a healthy home dynamics.

### *Equipping Pastors with Knowledge of Current Culture*

Three types of equipping emerged from the responses of the ENLs: equipping for respectability and relevance, equipping for a holistic kingdom ministry, and equipping for contextualization of mission.

#### *Equipping for Respectability and Relevance*

ENLs identified the need to equip network pastors for the cultural reality that the Christian church is no longer respected culturally or seen as relevant to dechurched and unchurched people. Thus, pastors need equipping in damage control, bridge-building, and the establishment of relevance. According to Grant, the privileged place the church once occupied in the United States is no longer a reality, and all pastors serving in any context must factor this change into their ministries. Grant states:

the first thing that men and women coming out here need to know is that we no longer, the church no longer has a seat at the table in terms of cultural, political, and social influence. You know, 100 years ago, we set the table, and then we made the invitations and picked the menu...we need to understand we're now in different space, we're now outsiders. And people will tolerate us as long as we stay in our lane; it basically means keep to ourselves.

As pastors begin the arduous kingdom work in their geographic region, Grant said, they must grapple with the culture's attitude, stating that "staying in our lane" was not an option for gospel work. "Staying in our lane" means not blessing the city with the words and deeds of the gospel. Grant said he instructs network pastors to figure out how to

“engage and provoke, but that shouldn’t be your aim—but just to love until the truth might provoke.” Network pastors are equipped to lead with love and service. Training modules, coaching, and mentoring in Grant’s network equips its members for this cultural reality and consequently how to minister within it.

Another significant cultural hindrance cited by ENLs was instances when the church was captured by the same idols as the dominant culture. Such affiliations, according to the ENLs, turn the church into a hindrance to mission. Nick said he walks network pastors through a year-long curriculum examining cultural idols and the church’s entanglement with them. He asserted, “The main idolatries of our culture are often the ones that are most appealing to you as pastors, as you’re thinking about pastoring and church planting.” The idols of individualistic consumer culture, the church gods of success, and so many others derail pastors. As a result, the churches derail gospel-centered mission. For Nick, formal training combined with ecclesiastical network gatherings provided the opportunity to wrestle with these important issues. Equally important, these network gatherings allowed pastors to be authentic, transparent, and vulnerable with their struggles as part of the equipping process. Luke described the ethos of network gatherings as a place where permission is given “not to be good.” In other words, network pastors can confess their sin, wrestle with it, and find freedom from it. All ENLs interviewed provided this kind of ethos at their monthly network gatherings. The equipping goal connected with “permission to not be good” was that authenticity and transparency translated into each pastor’s ministry, establishing connection with dechurched and unchurched people. ENLs highlighted genuine humility, freed from self-righteousness, as especially attractive to dechurched and unchurched people.

Luke, in his “permission to not be good,” equipped pastors not to be flippant toward sin and idolatry, but rather, quite the opposite. For example, he wanted to avoid becoming a network of “progressive churches.” He defined “progressive churches” as those who have abandoned God’s Word, which enables them to express truth, blessing, and healing. According to Luke, when the church yields to the culture’s idols, or ideologies, the power for ministry dissipates. Luke explained, “I probably spend more time trying to help pastors trust the power of the Word of God.” For Luke, when pastors are trusting in the power of the gospel to transform individual lives, and a city, they experience the fruit of that commitment. But this practice doesn’t mean bludgeoning dechurched and unchurched people with the truth, according to Luke.

For example, during the peak of the COVID epidemic, the majority of “Bible-believing” churches in his city were “yelling at the governor for taking away our freedom of religion.” Luke saw this behavior as a massive hindrance to the mission of Jesus. So, in contrast, Luke led his network in providing N95 masks for ICU doctors and nurses who were in short supply. Luke said that their churches “provided meals for medical personnel who were working 15-hour days...so we were going there to provide meals, encourage them, you know, the frontline, because that’s what the church did historically during plagues.” He grieved over the hindrances to the gospel created by many churches, and, along with all the ENLs, lived out biblical truth in genuine acts of love in a spirit of authentic humility to restore the reputation of the church in their city.

The poor witness of disunity within the Christian church was another training component of the cultural context. One of Ron’s mentors described the city where he led an ecclesiastical network as “the city that invented the segregation of the church.” As a

result, a homogeneity of ethnicity and class marked the church citywide in a cultural milieu where such segregation is increasingly intolerable. Ron reported that more than 90 percent of the city he serves is unchurched and irreligious yet spiritual and open to spirituality. In Ron's mission context, the church has been a hindrance to mission by not leading the way in breaking down the walls of segregation by the power of the gospel. For Ron, equipping pastors in his context involved establishing relationships with pastors across ethnic and cultural barriers and inviting them to the leadership platform in his network. For Ron, to neglect to address the cultural fallout around the disunity of the Christian church would perpetuate a legacy that imperils effective gospel communication and mission to their city.

In Carl's mission context, the reputation of the Christian church has been smeared with a disproportional number of scandals. According to Carl, these scandals "tore the fabric of communities and precipitated in a lot of ways the movement toward the rise of the 'religious nones.'" For Carl, and the ecclesiastical network he serves, training involves dealing with the cultural trauma and fallout of these scandals and the employment of a kingdom strategy that understands this backdrop of ministry. One such strategy is hospitality — what Carl calls "persevering hospitality, always inviting, always inviting, and trying to figure out ways to invite." This kind of hospitality grows friendship, builds trust, and listens empathetically for a long season before speaking. Carl's mission context highlighted why meta-cultural issues must be addressed along with local and regional issues that have damaged the church's witness. All ENLs understood, addressed, and equipped pastors with these global, regional, and local distinctions in mind.

Each ENL interviewed discussed ways the church served as a hindrance to mission. As noted, part of the equipping was naming how the church was a hindrance to mission, re-establishing respectability and relevance as an ecclesiastical network, and employing a citywide mission strategy to directly address the failures of the church. Interestingly, each ENL observed that owning the church's failures has advanced the mission to their city. All ENLs agreed such a posture made the churches within their networks more attractive to dechurched and unchurched people.

### *Equipping for Holistic Kingdom Ministry*

A second theme that emerged under the heading of equipping pastors with cultural understanding was their commitment to formal and informal training for holistic kingdom ministry. Holistic ministry is seeing the beauty of the gospel prior to or in tandem with gospel communication. In a culture where the church's reputation needs repairing, each ENL articulated that holistic ministry was mission critical. ENLs equipped network pastors for holistic ministry through training modules, modeling its practice, and through collaboration with network leadership to create pathways for this type of ministry.

All the ENLs provided some kind of training for holistic kingdom ministry through a curriculum appropriate for their mission context. Holistic kingdom ministry, according to Nick, equips pastors for what Jesus meant when he said, "The kingdom of God is at hand." For Nick, the entire first year of their formal training focuses on this type of equipping, the word and deed implications of Jesus' public ministry continued through his church. Luke described it as bold proclamation of the gospel coupled with "compassion for the poor...believing in the pneumatic to pray for the healing of the sick,



healing marriages, and the reminder that Christian salvation is a holistic salvation.”

John’s network started several non-profit ministries committed to the rescuing of women and children from human trafficking, foster care and adoption ministries, marketplace ministries, and a charter school to name a few. These non-profit organizations strengthened the holistic ministry training component for network pastors as directors of these ministries would equip at monthly network meetings. Several of the ecclesiastical networks launched separate non-profit organizations committed to the ministry of Jesus. Each ENL demonstrated a commitment to equipping for holistic kingdom ministry, whether accomplished through network churches, separate non-profit organizations, or a combination of both.

The formal equipping for a holistic kingdom vision, in Nick’s ecclesiastical network, extended over a nine-month time period and focused on “the core gospel dynamic.” This core gospel dynamic consisted of four factors that “together are the core of the Christian faith, they are the gospel of the kingdom, biblical story, God’s missional people, and God’s missional people having an encounter with the culture that it is living within.” This curriculum defined the gospel of the kingdom as the holistic healing of the whole creation under the Lordship of Jesus. In this paradigm, holistic ministry is a non-negotiable and cannot be severed from gospel proclamation. All the ENLs communicated this theological commitment. In Nick’s curriculum for holistic ministry, Jesus is the hero of both history and God’s story. As hero, Jesus began the work of bringing a new creation out of the old through his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus continues his work, after his resurrection and ascension into heaven, through a missional people, the church. The churches in Nick’s ecclesiastical network, along with any genuine Christian church, were

the churches that the ascended Christ continues to do his work through. All ENLs identified their network churches as part of Jesus' missional church that is now part of God's story of redemption.

Ron used a similar equipping framework built around the four words: kingdom, gospel, city, and church planting. Both Ron and Nick commented that these biblical themes transcend denominational affiliation and break down the tribalism among Christian churches. They have enabled these ecclesiastical networks to appeal to an extremely broad swath of Christian traditions around the city, thereby creating greater kingdom impact. All the ENLs expressed the commitment to equip network pastors for holistic ministries to restore the brokenness in their mission context.

#### *Equipping for Contextualization of Mission*

A third theme under the heading of equipping pastors with cultural understanding was their commitment to equip for the contextualization of mission. Kingdom work must be understood within a particular culture so the gospel can be contextualized accordingly. For example, Carl required an "understanding of mission context" in the job description for network pastors stating, "So wherever a guy was dropped in, wherever his church was, his job was always to scout out the land and seek to understand the space." Carl's ecclesiastical network equipped pastors with specific tools for decoding a geographic region to determine critical cultural commitments of that particular place. Grant addressed equipping for contextualization in the recruiting phase. He called this preemptive equipping "saturation equipping," explaining that "saturation equipping" began by recruiting church leadership from within the ecclesiastical network's geographic bounds. Grant observed:

If somebody from outside of our metropolitan region wants to plant a church, we'll talk to them, and we'll see if they're a fit, but that's not our strategy. We'll answer that call, but that's not the call we will make. So, we want to cultivate people who grew up in this world, who understand the culture that they're in, that they've been navigating for decades as a Christian.

Other ENLs saw recruiting as an important factor for contextualization too. So, the first feature of Grant's "saturation equipping" involved growing up and living in the mission context where that pastor had been called to serve. The second feature of Grant's "saturation equipping" involved being a student of one's mission context constantly. In other words, there is always an opportunity to gain a greater acumen for the mission context in which a pastor or Christian leader serves.

Another aspect of equipping for contextualization of mission was the ENLs' use of vocabulary that preserved a mission mindset. John was careful to use a vernacular that supported the second feature of Grant's "saturation equipping." As an ENL of an ecclesiastical network that was growing in size and impact, John was often invited to mentor other ENLs. He recounted one instance where the importance of the network's vernacular made the difference between churches remaining missional or losing their missional edge. All the pastors who John equipped within his ecclesiastical network were identified as church planters. As he consulted another ecclesiastical network he was struck by the "nomenclature" that they used. They talked in "terms of pastors and church planters." In the other network's nomenclature, ministers who were further along in their church's development were called "pastors," and those in the earlier stages were called "church planters." As John reflected back on this experience, he made the following observation:

I think it relates to the whole dechurched and unchurched thing. Often you make this shift as a church planter, kind of a default trap where you can get into

thinking that this chapter is all about unchurched people, bringing them in. But once we get established as a local church we move on, and then it's about being a pastor and taking care of the flock.

John continued, "So we tried as best we could not to use language that would get guys thinking along those lines." According to Carl, this non-missional nomenclature caused some of the early churches in his ecclesiastical network to lose their missional edge. The nomenclature further imbedded non-missional network habits. Carl observed that a very subtle shift happened in churches wherein the missional focus shifts from the external to the internal operations and ministries of that local congregation. John's equipping addressed this challenge using the intentional nomenclature of the network and through the constant vision reminders built into network systems. All the ENLs used vocabulary to strengthen the mission of their ecclesiastical network.

Another approach used by network leaders was 360-degree leadership. John described it as being coached by someone ahead of a pastor in the process of church leadership (a "Paul"), a peer at a similar stage in the process (a "Barnabus"), someone behind the pastor in the process to coach (a "Timothy"), and a cross-cultural pastor (a "Cornelius"). The pastor's "Paul" spoke into their life and ministry with maturity in accordance with the DNA of the ecclesiastical network. This person strengthened the pastor in the vision and practical outworking of the network's mission. The pastor's "Barnabus" encouraged and supported when challenges in missional pastoral ministry arose. The pastor's "Timothy" provided a "teach once, learn twice" experience of coaching, growing as a result. Finally, according to John, the pastor's "Cornelius" would "kind of knock you off balance a little bit," forcing the leader to grow in cross-cultural sensitivities and mission acumen. A handful of ENLs acknowledged the danger of

ecclesiastical networks being, or becoming, homogeneous “echo-chambers without representatives of all ethnicities and cultures within the metropolitan region.” Every ENL sought to address this danger in some way or another. For each ENL interviewed, the monthly ecclesiastical network meeting addressed this danger of lop-sided homogeneity and fulfilled the equipping roles of a “Paul,” “Barnabus,” “Timothy,” and “Cornelius,” to some degree. John’s network formalized it as part of the equipping for the robust contextualization of mission.

All ENLs interviewed were based in major metropolitan areas and expressed the desire to manifest a multicultural and multiethnic contextualized mission. Nearly all of them attested to the need for a more robust multicultural and multiethnic expression of mission. However, many pointed to limiting factors outside of their control, like the tradition and patterns of segregation passed down through denominational structures, part of the very nature of American evangelicalism. As a result, the ENLs identified pioneers who are cultivating kingdom ministry that reflects and reaches all the ethnicities and cultures of the city. Practically speaking, each ENL expressed a commitment to a missional ecclesiastical network that resulted in the hiring of leadership from a diverse expression of ethnicities and cultures.

### *Equipping Pastors with Knowledge of Generational Thinking*

ENLs acknowledged equipping pastors with knowledge of generational thinking as an important aspect of their leadership. However, a common initial response was this observation by Grant: “We’re not good at that...I’d say we’re not doing that very well.” However, when probed further, the ENLs were doing much more than they initially realized. Varying degrees of equipping ran the gamut from a few training sessions and

coaching during monthly meetings to more intensive work on generation theory. Nick responded, “My initial thought is, I don’t know that we do that very intentionally or very well. Then, the second thought that comes to mind is, in some way, that’s how our entire network got started.” In other words, Nick stated his ecclesiastical network was birthed out of generational theory.

### *An Ecclesiastical Network Formed on Generational Theory*

Prior to stepping into ecclesiastical network leadership, Nick recounted how the senior pastor (Frank) of a large church approached him with a proposal for his succession plan. Frank was a Baby Boomer and about 60 years old at the time. The succession plan involved passing the mantle of leadership to Nick and Allan. Nick and Allan (Gen Xers) were in their late twenties at the time. Both Nick and Allan expressed no interest whatsoever in Frank’s idea and instead planted a church with a small group of thirty-five people. Frank, who was already struggling to reach younger generational cohorts, asked if Nick and Allan would be willing to gather some of their ministry peers together on a monthly basis, stating, “I don’t understand your generation; you’ve got to explain this to me.” Grant employed a similar approach as an ecclesiastical leader in his context, a method he referred to as, “reverse mentoring.”

Reverse mentoring refers to older generational ministry leaders learning about younger generational cohorts by investing deeply in relationships with younger pastors, listening to their stories, and applying the ministry insights learned. Grant’s “reverse mentoring” is what Frank put into place in his mission context. Frank became part of Nick’s ecclesiastical network, and Nick noted that as a result of “reverse mentoring,” Frank made significant generational adjustments within his pastoral staff. Frank, at the

age of 60, redistributed his senior pastor authority equally with another man in his 40s, and three in their late 20s, or early 30s. The church began to flourish multi-generationally along with reaching unchurched, younger generational cohorts.

*Generational Theory and a Pastor's "Natural Span of Influence"*

John too was aware of his generational limitations as an ecclesiastical network leader. He identified himself as a “solid Boomer who experienced his most fruitful ministry with his peers and people within a 15-year window of his own age.” John adheres to the belief that most pastors are most effective with what he calls “the natural span of influence for a pastor or a ministry leader.” For John that “natural span of influence” is from ten years younger to five years older than the ministry leader. Consequently, John discussed that if generations are now defined in fifteen to twenty-year timeframes, a “pastor’s sweet spot is going to be his own generation.” All the ENLs agreed with this idea of greater “natural” effectiveness with one’s own generation. As a result of this “natural span of influence” principle, the majority responded that one of the most effective ways of reaching people across generational cohorts was through hiring staff within that particular age cohort.

Luke, who works with a number of smaller churches, stated that staffing to those particular generations was a critical strategy but needed to primarily be done through volunteerism and equipping pastors with a mentoring mindset across the generational divides. In other words, he found those who represent the younger generational cohort and invested deeply in discipleship so that they in turn reached their own generational cohort. In like manner, ENLs mentioned that intentional succession plans were important for churches within their network and for network leadership. The succession plans

mentioned involved the equipping of younger generational cohorts for pastoral leadership. At least two of the ecclesiastical networks in this study identified the lack of a generational succession plan as critical to the disbanding of the network altogether.

### *Generational Dynamics That Shape Network Mission Strategy*

The ENLs interviewed identified how generational dynamics shaped strategic elements of their citywide mission. In Carl's mission context, when young urban couples began to have children, many moved out of the city center to the surrounding suburbs. Carl's ecclesiastical network saw this as an opportunity to plant churches in the suburbs of their metropolitan region — a strategy their network employed with some degree of success. Carl noted that these church plants took root because of the generational demographic factor. The generational demographic factor involves the homogeneity of the founding families of the church. In this case, their homogeneity was based on age and stage in life. The challenge was to mature over time to become a transgenerational church. Luke's ecclesiastical network encouraged a similar approach to church and network multiplication, that is, planting a church with strong generational demographic moorings and helping it mature into several generational cohorts.

Luke explained a metaphor that he has used for assessing the transgenerational health of churches. The metaphor is that of an escalator. The escalator has the youngest generational cohort at the ground level stepping on the conveyor belt and the oldest generation at the top preparing to exit. Luke commented that over the course of his work as a pastor, and network leader, he paid attention to the whole escalator to find any generational gaps that needed to be addressed. All the ENLs shared this practice with



Luke. In his case, he saw a gap between the ages of 18-32, so he started NextGen ministry to address the issue and to learn how to strengthen other network churches.

Each ENL articulated some kind of curriculum and coaching for generational thinking. For a few ENLs, generational thinking was foundational in the development of their network's mission strategy.

### *Equipping Pastors with Knowledge of Epistemology*

Each ENL interviewed articulated the practical importance of equipping pastors with knowledge of epistemology. The responses reflected a view of epistemology that was imminently practical—not an abstract philosophical concept. A handful of themes emerged as ENLs wrestled with this question. One theme was the complex relationship between epistemology, idolatry, and clear communication of the gospel. A second theme was the epistemology of story. A third theme was the critical connection between the power of healthy relationships in shaping the epistemic act.

### *Epistemology, Idolatry, and Communication*

John articulated the complex relationship between epistemology, cultural idols, and clear communication of the gospel in light of that relationship. He quoted Keller, who often appeals to the Waylon Jennings' song "Too Dumb for New York City" to explain the importance of knowing how to communicate in one's mission context. One of the stanzas in Jennings' song states, "I'm too dumb for New York City and too ugly for L.A." John, like every ENL, regardless of denominational affiliation, has been influenced by Keller's approach to gospel communication. John's argument, in mentioning Keller's reference to Jennings, was that Manhattan ministry doesn't automatically transfer to other

mission contexts. According to John, this lack of transferability is a combination of epistemology, culture, and the cultural idols of a given geographic region. So, in Manhattan, John stated, “They want you to prove the truth you’re talking about.” However, in John’s mission context, “The goal is not credibility like New York, but relevance.” Ron mentioned something similar about his mission context. He, too, had been shaped as a leader by Keller’s apologetic and gospel communication resources. Ron, not unlike John, claimed Keller’s Manhattan epistemological approach was “too sophisticated and professional for our context. We need something more gritty, messier, and less structured.” Nick concurred with cultural idols shaping epistemic commitments but was also concerned about the idolatry connected with reigning epistemological approaches among Christian thinkers.

Nick’s concern was with a Christian form of epistemological objectivism that places too much emphasis on theological teaching that has been reduced to propositions. Nick called these propositions “gospel reductions.” He stated that this approach may have been effective back in the 1950s, but the church in U.S. cities has changed dramatically since then. Old habits die hard, however, and he noted that the church still relies on epistemic gospel reductions. He observed, “It’s not that saying these things are wrong; you’re just reducing the gospel.” In as much as churches still embrace these outdated modes of gospel communication, he wondered if some religious idol was the root cause of their refusal to adjust their practice. The recurring theme among ENLs was that idolatry in any form, religious or irreligious, impacts epistemological commitments and thereby alters gospel communication for better or for worse.

### *The Epistemology of Story*

Nick's approach to the epistemological contextualization of gospel communication placed emphasis on the power of story. Nick stated, "If you're going to try to communicate the gospel as ideas by way of propositions, you're already not working from the epistemology of an 'advanced modern' or 'postmodern' culture." Consequently, the pastors in Nick's ecclesiastical network are equipped in gospel communication by way of story. All pastors read *The Drama of Scripture* or the *True Story of the World* (co-authored by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen) as part of their training. The network pastors communicate the gospel through the six acts of the redemptive story with Jesus as the hero of the story, according to Bartholomew and Goheen's paradigm. According to Nick, this equipping of network pastors involves how God's story differs from other metanarratives that are power plays to wield control over people. As a result of this training, evangelism to the dechurched and unchurched is taught as an invitation to be part of a larger story where God is redeeming all things. Nick described this as a "kingdom-of-God focus to equipping pastors." He was confident that this epistemological approach to gospel communication enables younger generational cohorts to find access roads into God's story: caring for the marginalized, involvement in ecological concerns, and engagement with cultural issues of injustice, to name a few. Each ENL interviewed agreed with this gospel of the kingdom approach to equipping and training pastors within their network.

Grant did pose a caveat to this epistemological approach by way of God's story. While Grant saw the effectiveness of Nick's approach, he warned that "the whole world is kind of drunk on story." Grant's concern was that story without "prophetic grammar...and the didactic element of the New Testament Epistles" tends to "dissolve

into self.” Grant asserted that it often “begins with God and ends up being about us,” with humankind at the center of the story and not God. He was more concerned with this generation of church leaders falling into the “story ditch” as opposed to the “Turretin ditch.” The “Turretin ditch” is a reference to a seventeenth-century scholastic theologian and signifies an over-emphasis on systematic theology or propositional truth. It appeared Grant was countering the epistemic story-equipping approach of network pastors that Nick said was foundational to their network pastor curriculum. To clarify, Nick also shared Grant’s concerns. At the end of the day Nick and Grant were not far apart in terms of leadership practice, because Nick’s story approach was also epistemologically driven.

Nick was addressing sound bite theology driven by propositional maxims that no longer communicate in postmodern urban centers. He explained:

So, it worked for Billy Graham, that epistemology worked, and it made sense to them; it appealed. But more and more, that doesn’t appeal to my kid’s generation—that approach is answering questions they’re not asking.

He wanted to avoid a theologically truncated gospel that doesn’t do justice to the biblical gospel of the kingdom. Grant shared this concern but came at the issue differently.

Functionally, his concerns were shared by each ENL, as all of them articulated the need for sound theology rooted in the scriptures, articulating the gospel in their postmodern mission context.

The epistemology of story was tethered to confidence in God’s Word and the work of the Holy Spirit to bring about change in the hearts of dechurched and unchurched people. Luke stated that even though he spent a lot of time considering epistemological and cultural challenges, the primary work he did with network pastors was to mentor them in “trusting the power of the Word of God.” Each ENL interviewed held to a high

view of the scriptures and the power of the Word of God to change the minds of dechurched and unchurched people. John mentioned John Frame's triperspectival approach to knowledge. In this paradigm, the "normative perspective" is God's Word, the "situational perspective" is the mission context, and the "existential perspective" is the giftedness of each pastor. John said that this paradigm was a central one in equipping network pastors. And, in agreement with Luke, the "normative perspective" of a commitment God's Word was a non-negotiable component of network pastor equipping in the area of epistemology.

#### *The Power of Healthy Relationships in Shaping the Epistemic Act*

Another theme that emerged under the heading of equipping pastors with knowledge of epistemology was the importance of cultivating relationships with dechurched and unchurched people. Ron commented that the context of the ecclesiastical network he led was "the second or third generation of unchurched people, you know, the great grandchildren of people who didn't go to church." As a result, Ron committed to a program of equipping network pastors that begins with "friendship where the gospel is not even mentioned at first." Carl wholeheartedly agreed. Carl stated, "We're in an entirely new space," referring to his mission context. Carl also equipped network pastors in the art of relationships, listening, asking good questions, and "winning hearts simply by asking people: what are your spiritual questions?" In this radically new mission context, characterized by a "do-it-yourself" spirituality, Carl equipped pastors to capitalize on that "spiritual openness" by establishing great relationships. Each ENL reflected that this relational component was a critical part of their equipping of network pastors as an epistemological factor.

## *Equipping Pastors with Knowledge of Christology*

Three primary themes emerged as ENLs responded to the question of equipping pastors with knowledge of Christology. The first theme was the importance of Christological training for network pastors due to the centrality of the person and work of Christ in gospel communication. A second theme was the challenge of Christological communication in each of their mission contexts. A third theme was the equipping need for contextualized Christological curriculum for their mission context.

### *The Importance of Christological Equipping for Network Pastors*

All ENLs relied upon theological training in Christology from within their denominational tradition, combined with further equipping by the ecclesiastical network. Ron stated, “In my tradition, we equip men in theological seminary with sound Christology.” Ron, John, and Grant shared a similar denominational tradition. They acknowledged a common approach to formal Christological training beginning prior to network participation. Likewise, Luke’s tradition also has formal theological training as a requirement for network pastors. But it was also clear that much training in Christology came through network meetings and coaching. John commented, “The emphasis on Christological preaching, I think, is maybe the one thing that we spend a lot of time on, and gospel-centered preaching.” For each ENL, the intimate connection between Christology and gospel proclamation was a foremost priority in equipping pastors.

### *The Challenge of Christological Communication*

ENLs identified the challenge of Christological communication in each of their mission contexts as an equipping need for network pastors. Carl captured this challenge

when he explained, “Christology, or an understanding of Jesus, is always connected with bigger and deeper cultural things.” Carl highlighted that cultural considerations needed to be taken into account as Christ is proclaimed to dechurched and unchurched people. John also captured this theme well when he said, “I think it’s also a matter of us saying that the applicability of your Christology to the problems you’re confronted with in your culture.” In other words, John was highlighting that Christology has many applications, and the most needed application is often determined by one’s cultural context. Each ENL described the intense challenge created by an increasingly secularized culture with its many “versions of Jesus.” Ron called this “equipping pastors in the complexity of Christology.” Grant absolutely agreed. He included the additional exhortation of making sure that network pastors get biblical Christology right.

Therefore, Grant said he equips network pastors with an “understanding of the relationship between transcendence and incarnation so we can encounter a Jesus who is much bigger than ourselves.” Grant further asserted:

My personal view is that the origin of 'our stupid' is that our vision of Christ has been diminished, and we don't have a Jesus who is so glorious and so big that I'm actually more afraid not to take up my cross than I am to take it up.

Christology has been reduced to Jesus being just a “little better version of ourselves,” he explained. So, they spend a lot of time examining the life of Christ and his ministry with all of its “abrupt, awkward, uncomfortable, and provocative” content. The scriptures portray a glorious Christ, and, according to Grant, it is this Christ that network pastors must “seed the network with.”

Luke agreed but spoke additionally about his equipping of network pastors regarding their own experience of Christ. Luke’s coaching of network pastors involved

the frequently asked question, “How do you know when you have been in the presence of Jesus?” In other words, Luke said he desires an orthodox Christology coupled with a personal experience of Jesus, the existential component. He stated that in his work with network pastors, being in the presence of Jesus is marked by humility and love. In other words, is Jesus simply a doctrine in one’s head, or is he the risen Lord who is personally encountered in such a way that a pastor’s ministry is marked by humility and love? Both Grant and Luke spoke explicitly about emphasizing the network pastor’s existential experience of Jesus in their training, and each ENL made strong allusion to it.

### *The Contextualization of Christological Curriculum*

Finally, each ENL equipped network pastors in the knowledge of Christology through a curriculum contextualized for their mission context. Nick’s contextualized curriculum involved a Christology that emphasized Jesus as “the hero of the biblical story.” This equipping included training in the six acts from the *Drama of Scripture*—creation, sin, Israel, Christ, church, and new creation. Network pastors participated in five-day intensive training sessions where they became fluent in the six acts pointing toward the Christological hero, Jesus. Nick told how this approach to Christology and the way it shaped his evangelism to dechurched and unchurched people was transformative. Compared to the older approaches of proclaiming Christ through propositional “gospel reductions,” he said, the story approach is much less awkward and more invitational. The approach involves a declaration that the Bible’s account is the true story of the world with Jesus as the peerless hero, and it invites others to find their place in this story. Christ is proclaimed so that the whole story of humankind surfaces: history, evil, redemption, purpose, and destiny. Nick emphasized the eschatological aspect of this story and that



history is heading toward a known destination. In equipping network pastors, Nick stated that this final word gives Christians an identity as God's missional people. Other ecclesiastical networks also spoke of Christology within the context of story but not with as much intentionality as Nick's network.

Many of the other ecclesiastical networks used language with Jesus as prophet, priest, and king and how he fulfills each of those roles. This prophet, priest, and king paradigm was central for John's ecclesiastical network, and the pastors within that network cultivated a fluency with it, wherein the prophetic component is gospel-centered proclamation centered on Jesus, the priestly element is care for the marginalized and poor of society, and the kingly component addresses the systemic structures of oppression and injustice. Ron, Grant, Luke, and Carl also used this Christological framework of equipping network pastors outlined by John.

### *Summary of Equipping Network Pastors*

The equipping of network pastors is one of the primary functions of an ENL. ENLs reported under the broadest possible heading of equipping pastors the foundational need for a regular cadence of training, support, and accountability. This equipping need was met in a monthly network pastor's meeting characterized by an ethos of vulnerability and transparency. The establishment of network-wide systems equipped pastors in mission-alignment and kingdom advancement within their mission contexts. ENLs reported intentionality to nurture leaders, develop leaders, and plan for leadership succession for ongoing flourishing of the network and its mission. ENLs also equipped network pastors with resources to strengthen their marriages and family life.

ENLs equipped network pastors with knowledge of current culture, generational thinking, epistemology, and Christology. ENLs also equipped pastors in cultural thinking through highlighting the need to establish ministries of integrity that built respectability and relevance in their mission contexts. Often, the ways to establish this respectability and relevance was through holistic ministries that served the needs of the broader community. ENLs expressed the need to continue to equip for cultural understanding to be more effective in their mission context.

ENLs also addressed the generational distinctions to reach different generational cohorts. Mission strategies were based on generational thinking. In addition, ENLs reported equipping for epistemology that considered cultural idols important for gospel communication. ENLs examined the church's own idolatrous epistemological tendencies and equipped network pastors for greater ministry effectiveness through an awareness and adaptation away from these idolatrous methods. The power of relationships in shaping the epistemic act was another area that ENLs highlighted to strengthen gospel communication.

Finally, ENLs stated the importance of equipping in knowledge of Christology. ENLs emphasized formal training in Christology coupled with an ongoing contextualizing Christological application in varied mission contexts. In a mission context where distortions of Jesus abound, the ability for network pastors to navigate that terrain was an equipping concern of ENLs. The pastors' knowledge of Christology and their experience of the risen Christ were also aspects of this equipping curriculum.

## **The Mission of the Local Church**

The third research question addressed an ENLs description of the mission of the local church. Given the primary responsibility of an ENL to equip pastors to lead transgenerational church that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people, this inquiry was of critical importance. Ron responded that the mission of the local church is to “glorify the name of Jesus by making and multiplying disciples and churches around the world.” This broad statement of mission was embraced by each ENL. The ENLs brought up three themes concerning this mission: a theology of place, a contextualized approach to reaching dechurched and unchurched people, and a holistic kingdom approach to mission that blesses the entire city.

### *A Theology of Place*

A theology of place was communicated by each ENL as a critical component of the mission of the local church. Ron referred to it as “working together to advance the kingdom of God in a geographic region.” John referred to it as a “parish” that “might be five square blocks and for others five square miles.” All the ENLs communicated a commitment to a specific geographic region as central to the mission of a local church. Therefore, a theology of place is a commitment to live out the life and do the work of the kingdom within a particular community, neighborhood, or geographic region.

John compared a “parish-oriented church and a regional church.” The critical issue for John, along with all ENLs, was the kingdom impact of the church in the region that church occupied. John asserted that oftentimes regional churches ignore the needs of the community where they meet for public worship, since congregants are driving from all over the city for the “religious services” provided by larger churches. John mentioned

many of these churches are “programmed to the hilt,” creating a consumer ethos in the congregation as opposed to a service mindset.

Nick agreed with this assessment of a parish-oriented approach but used the language of “house churches” or “missional community church.” He commented that 10,000 people might be attending network churches citywide, but the work is to maintain a “smaller” community “functioning like a house church.” This structure allows for effective mission to specific communities. Ron said many churches could exist in the same region of a city or community, given this model since the needs of cities are so great. Ron observed, “I’m a big believer that you could plant multiple churches in the same place, as long as they are differently aimed, and they would all have the opportunity to prosper.” By “differently aimed,” Ron was referring to how different churches can meet different needs of communities. All the ENLs mentioned the power of small churches and parish-like house churches as a critical strategy to fulfill its mission in a metropolitan region.

Ron’s quote captured another important theological commitment for this theology of place: functional catholicity and cooperation across denominational affiliations. Again, since the amount of kingdom work is overwhelming, a commitment to catholicity can bring about the kingdom in word and deed more effectively to a geographic region. Luke mentioned that the unity alone is a powerful witness to dechurched and unchurched people “turned off by divided Christians.” Luke quipped, “I always felt sorry for Jesus that God never answered his John 17 prayer. I say that jokingly, but in the world’s eyes, it’s a bit shameful that in a cancel culture, Protestants have been cancelling each other for a long time.” Every ENL had a practical commitment to express this catholic unity, and it

often found expression in some combined effort to right a social wrong, feed the poor, or embrace the disenfranchised in some tangible way.

One practical way that this catholicity is expressed, according to ENLs, is through trans-denominational intercessory prayer gatherings in which diverse church leaders pray for the geographic space they share in mission. Nick recounted that the prayer gatherings in his context have deepened unity across denominational lines and have deepened authentic friendship among Christian leaders in the city. They have also provided deeper connection for pastors who already share a love for a part of the city or community. The shared love of a region strengthened the bonds of unity and mission among Christian leaders from different tribes. Luke told a story of a network meeting with a new pastor in the city Luke has served for decades. Luke told this new pastor that whatever resources he needed in his new venture their church would be glad to provide. As a result of Luke's sincere generosity, a deep friendship and partnership in the gospel was formed. Subsequently, when this pastor's church plant failed after a few years, Luke hired him on his church staff. ENLs shared incredibly difficult stories along with great stories of God's kingdom advancement through a commitment to catholicity within their place of mission.

#### *A Contextualized Approach to Reaching Dechurched and Unchurched People*

The second theme described by the ENLs interviewed was a contextualized approach to reaching dechurched and unchurched people. This theme is closely related to a theology of place. A particular region of the city, neighborhood, or community has unique challenges specific to that context the local church must take into account, along with those issues that transcend their geographic region. Nick's approach to local church ministry was to start with these specific challenges of "context."

Nick stated, “Let’s start with mission” when considering the mission of a local church. He described a scenario where all the elements of a healthy biblical church begin with mission—worship, community, discipleship, and so on—everything that the local church does is a “resource to help you live as a family of serving ambassadors,” on mission. John asserted a similar conviction and commitment. Local churches considering their mission asked different questions than churches who see mission as an “addendum program” among the church’s many programs—questions like: how does the church contextualize worship in this community or part of the city? Nick asked, “How do we need to pray together as we live in this mission together?” Another question was, “How do pastors equip congregants to be faithful and fruitful disciples of Jesus?” Contextualization was the common theme for all of these questions, according to the ENLs. They equipped network pastors to contextualize all the ministries of the local church for effective mission.

One example impacting all ministries was the contextualization of discipleship. Carl commented that contextualized discipleship involved “spending time with people, sharing your faith, and imparting to people everything that you know about Jesus...always framed in the contextual language of your space.” For Nick, it involved a robust vocational discipleship piece that equips followers of Jesus to be more effective ambassadors of God’s kingdom in their places of work. Nick referred to this vocational discipleship as the church’s “scattered calling” because so much of a follower of Jesus’ time is spent apart from the church gathered. Contextualized discipleship, according to Nick, also meant getting in front of the cultural conversation on issues like racism, gender, transgenderism, and sexuality to equip pastors to show that “the Bible tells a

better story on these things.” Discipleship was described as knowing the scriptures thoroughly within a mission context and taking seriously the ethnic, class, and diversity challenges to break down the typical homogeneous nature of churches. It was described as building “authentic friendships” with dechurched and unchurched people to establish trust over a long period of time. According to John, these “authentic friendships” led to greater contextualization as people shared their stories across various divides.

In addition to this type of discipleship, all ENLs communicated that a contextualized approach to reaching dechurched and unchurched people involved a commitment to planting new churches that are nimble and can quickly contextualize to a place. Nick commented that church planting keeps the “sent” nature of the church to a broken world at the forefront of the church’s mission. The theology of each ENL demonstrated a knowledge that God “sends” his church into the world on mission.

#### *Holistic Kingdom Ministries to be A Blessing to the City*

The third theme described by the ENLs was a holistic kingdom approach to mission that blessed the entire city. Grant summarized this holistic approach to mission when he stated, “It’s making Christianity visible so people can see it.” Luke asserted that this holistic mission of the church to bless a geographic region was “to be Jesus to that community in every way imaginable.”

He explained that this “every way imaginable” approach involved both the words of Jesus, gospel proclamation, and the deeds of Jesus, gospel demonstration. According to Luke, a holistic approach to mission involves a ministry to the arts, providing counseling for distressed individuals and marriages, the church “offering ourselves to educational and city officials, and the business community.” Luke communicated that in

“offering ourselves,” the church serves and blesses these sectors of society. Nick’s ecclesiastical network started a vocational podcast now with a broad listening audience inside and outside the church to bless people in the marketplace. The host interviews laypeople in network churches who have been through missional discipleship and vocational training. This emphasis on vocational discipleship dignifies work and places it within a larger biblical story giving it meaning and purpose. Luke described this approach, saying, “There is always some kind of secondary thing that we can offer people to eventually get to the issue of the gospel.”

At the same time, John warned that ENLs had to help pastors in their network remain vigilant to their missional commitments. He said that churches have a tendency to drift away from their missional commitments if there isn’t an intentionality to remain mission true. He explained that churches begin to get shaped by non-missional concerns and that pastors suddenly realize, “This is what the church I’m pastoring has become, and this is what I’m doing with my life.” This comment captured what John meant by pastors drifting from the mission and realizing that they are spending the majority of their time managing internal church programs for Christian consumers. Ron mentioned that part of this mission drift occurred when the church conflates its mission with a political agenda. Grant described this challenge as over-contextualization—when the church loses its missional commitments due to its syncretism with some non-biblical agenda outside of the church. Grant also warned that mission drift can cut both ways, and in an effort to avoid syncretism with the broader culture, the church has isolated itself, becoming functionally irrelevant.



Each ENL also articulated that the mission of the local church was to make an impact. The two primary impacts of dechurched and unchurched people converted to become disciples of Jesus and transforming a geographic region to reflect the values and likeness of God's kingdom. In other words, there should be tangible evidence of God at work in those places because of the presence of a local church on mission. According to John, "Mission is kingdom impact!" According to Nick, the holistic mission of the local church is reaching people outside of the church and not just providing a place where disciples of Jesus can swap membership. Each ENL interviewed expressed a longing to see these kinds of churches on holistic mission blessing their geographic regions.

### *Summary of Lessons Learned*

ENLs broadly described the mission of the local church as glorifying the name of Jesus, multiplying his disciples, and transforming their mission context to reflect the values and likeness of God's kingdom. ENLs described the importance of a theology a place. A theology of place was depicted as a local church working cooperatively with other Christian churches in a specific geographic region to bless all sectors of human life. This blessing of a theology of place included the bold and loving proclamation of the gospel. It involved the church organizing itself for holistic kingdom ministries for maximum impact. According to the ENLs interviewed, the mission of the local church included a thorough contextualization of all church ministries in order to reach dechurched and unchurched people. Mission shaped every aspect of a local church's ministries and as such required contextualization. Finally, the biblical mindset of a local church on mission was to bring the blessing of God to its geographic place. The church's

mission was to make an impact wherein all people of that geographic region are blessed in some way by the presence of that local church.

## **Summary of Findings**

This chapter examined how ENLs equip network pastors to lead transgenerational church that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people. ENLs identified their placement in this ministry position of network leadership as a combination of calling and characteristics that enabled them to effectively take on this role. Characteristics that formed a profile of an ENL were someone who possessed a unique blend of humility mixed with gospel-confidence, a collaborative team-builder, and a visionary with a catalytic entrepreneurial spirit. The ENLs interviewed possessed an ability to thrive in ambiguity and to lead other leaders in the cultivation of a citywide gospel ecosystem designed to bless the city through gospel proclamation and holistic kingdom ministry. These ENLs were gifted in equipping network pastors with knowledge of the current culture, generational thinking, epistemology, and Christology. ENLs equipped pastors through a cadence of monthly meetings, individual coaching and mentoring, the development of network-wide systems that strengthened network pastors, and a host of other mechanisms to edify and support.

ENLs understood the cultural context of the church's mission that required pastors to be equipped to establish respectability and relevance in their respective places of ministry. Respectability and relevance were sought through holistic kingdom ministries that blessed every sector of the community outside of the church.

ENLs equipped pastors in generational thinking through a variety of strategies that took seriously generational differences and acknowledged the "natural span of

influence” of network pastors. Generational thinking was the impetus for the beginning of one ecclesiastical network, and that network has flourished as a result of this missional approach to kingdom expansion.

ENLs’ equipping for the epistemological challenges of their mission contexts remained in the imminently practical realm. The reality of culture, cultural idolatry, and its impact on epistemology was a central concern of ENLs as they sought to equip network pastors. The power of story as epistemology was embraced as a missiological tool for gospel communication by ENLs in their network leadership. ENLs were also concerned with the relational nature of epistemology and its impact on reaching dechurched and unchurched people.

Finally, ENLs equipped with knowledge of Christology through a variety of means. This area of equipping included gospel communication flowing from an intimate relationship between Christology and the gospel. ENLs equipped network pastors through formal monthly meetings, coaching, and mentoring in the application of Christology to their mission context. ENLs, aware that distortions of Christology abound, labored in ecclesiastical network contexts to equip pastors accordingly. Equipping in Christology also included an experiential component. ENLs diligently strove to equip for theological purity, contextualized clarity, and existential delight in the area of Christology, the existential delight of Jesus being experienced as more than a doctrine to network pastors.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to explore how ecclesiastical network leaders (ENLs) equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches reaching dechurched and unchurched people. The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do ENLs describe their role within an ecclesiastical network?
2. How do ENLs equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people?
  - a. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of current culture?
  - b. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of generational thinking?
  - c. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of epistemology?
  - d. How do ENLs equip pastors with knowledge of Christology?
3. How do ENLs describe the mission of the local church?

### **Summary of the Study and Findings**

This study reviewed relevant literature in four areas and analyzed interview data from six ENLs. The areas of literature review were foundationally relevant to the role of ENL as described in this study. The areas of literature review were the enmeshment of generational theory and culture, the contours of a secular age, the apologetic appeal of covenant epistemology, and missional ecclesiology.

## *Generational Theory and Culture*

The literature review showed that the intricate relationship between generational theory and culture is significant for the work of an ENL. This relationship is described as enmeshed because of its complex nature. The work of Norman Ryder explains that enmeshment by showing how younger generational cohorts embody shifting cultural trends more readily than older cohorts. Karl Mannheim asserted, “The era in which a person was born affects their development of their view on the world.” Therefore, a person born in a postmodern secular age will be shaped by that culture and its “view on the world.” The literature suggests that generations growing up in an increasingly secularized culture are more likely prone to disaffiliation.

The generational theory of cohort differentiation indicates that ENLs will also need to adapt their ministry methods. One-size-fits-all ministry is not effective when ministering to unchurched Baby Boomers and unchurched Generation Z. Younger generational cohorts are leaving the church at an alarming rate, and the literature reveals that they are not going to attend church as college students or adults without a compelling reason. This reality is being lived out every day in the U.S. in increasing measure. So, the call of an ENL to equip pastors to lead “transgenerational” churches is a significant challenge. As a result, ENLs must better understand generational contextualization of ministry to address this crisis.

Insights like the distinction between Duffy’s “period effects, life-cycle effects, and cohort effects” are helpful diagnostic tools for strategic ministry to all age cohorts. Chatraw and Prior’s “vertical replication” and “horizontal adaptation” of culture transmission are other helpful terms for ENLs. The dynamic of “vertical replication” produces cultural stability through the primary means of cultural transmission of older

generations to the younger ones, i.e. grandparents/parents to children. In a pre-industrialized, pre-technological, pre-globalized world, this transmission was effective, but its influence is waning. In contrast, “horizontal adaptation” is less stable because it introduces new ideologies and religious commitments and leads to the “rapid transmission of culture.” This “rapid transmission” destabilizes “vertical replication” and creates an ethos of constant shifts. Thus, “horizontal adaptation” is phenomenologically similar to Charles Taylor’s “nova-effect.” It is disorienting, and it weakens the impact of “vertical replication.” Therefore, ENLs need to consider ways to equip network pastors to strengthen the impact of “vertical replication” within their churches that lead to a strong transgenerational membership. The literature proved helpful with insights and tools for the work of an ENL and the network pastors they equip.

### *The Contours of a Secular Age*

The literature review on this secular age revealed that knowledge of the current culture is non-negotiable for ENLs and provides a rich lexicon in their work of equipping network pastors for missional leadership. Taylor’s work is especially relevant. His lexicon provides a “phenomenology of what it means to live in a secular age.” He describes what it feels like for a people living a “haunted” existence in a secular age, an existence that he describes as the “malaise of modernity.” Taylor’s work is important for empathy cultivation for network pastors and knowledge of cultural context. It is also helpful for an ENL’s understanding and emotive engagement with people in their mission context. The insights address important theological, philosophical, historical, ideological, sociological, and existential themes that are characteristic of dechurched and unchurched people.

### *The Apologetic Appeal of Covenant Epistemology*

The literature covering covenant epistemology highlighted a biblical approach to knowledge well-suited for the missional churches. The apologetic appeal of covenant epistemology is located in its emphasis on Meek's "interpersonhood" and the re-humanizing of the person. The defective epistemic approach of Enlightenment objectivism reduces people to "brains on a stick." This approach dehumanizes people because it ignores their multi-modal epistemic capabilities. Covenant epistemology is fully human and considers all the important facets of knowing including the emotions, intuition, and faith.

There is also an apologetic appeal to covenant epistemology based on its rootedness in the character and redemptive acts of God. Palmer and Meek's writings are rich with metaphors that focus on knowing as a loving act and deeply relational. Both authors talk about "knowing for shalom," which gives insight into the telos of all knowing, the telos of knowing God. It is highly relational, humanizing, and non-reductive in its approach to knowledge. Meek's *Knowing to Love* should be required reading for ENLs and the pastors they serve.

### *The Missional Church*

The literature review on the missional church provided a history lesson on the controversy regarding missional church language. ENLs committed to missional theology need to understand the reasons why some Christian leaders are wary of it. The historic division among Christians involves a rejection of the biblical gospel that uses "missional" language. However, missional churches that embrace biblical authority also reject that heresy and its historical expression. Nonetheless, there still remains suspicion around

churches that invoke missional language. John Stott's call to re-examine the biblical foundations of the missional church is a good starting place to restore unity.

The neo-Calvinist literature is a powerful testimony to those biblical foundations and how they can be applied to advance the gospel of the kingdom. Wolters' contribution teaching on the strong theology of creation and his work on contextualization are also important for ENLs. Specifically, Wolters' creation paradigm of "structure" and "direction" serve as critical tools to affirm God's good creation and how to assess humanity's idolatrous or faithful response to it.

### *ENL Interviews*

The interviews confirmed that the problem of disaffiliation, especially among younger generational cohorts, is a reality in their mission context. The ENLs affirmed that secular culture, epistemology, ecclesiology, and Christology are intricately related in addressing the crisis of disaffiliation. According to the ENLs, the issue of the increasing secularization of culture, coupled with a church that has lost its missional identity, posed the greatest threat for disaffiliation. ENLs were optimistic that a missional church can restore the respectability and relevance that can facilitate the establishment of transgenerational churches reaching dechurched and unchurched people.

## **Discussion of Findings**

My research began with the significant decline of membership in the Christian church across denominational affiliations in the U.S. Analysis of this condition revealed a disproportional percentage of those disaffiliating were from the younger generational cohorts codified as Millennials and Generation Z. This growing demographic is identified



as “religious nones.” A “religious none” is someone who identifies as “agnostic, an atheist, or nothing in particular.” This demographic increased from 10 million to 34 million between the years 1990 to 2008. Recent studies (2018) on “religious nones” reveal that this demographic is now the same size statistically as Catholics and Protestants, respectively, and continues to grow at alarming rates. The statistics and data are disconcerting and, if the trend is not remediated, it will lead to a radically diminished Christian church in the U.S.

The cost is more than loss of church members. One independent research group stated the cost of disaffiliation astutely. “This loss is profound for city planners and for the faith communities that once anchored neighborhoods spiritually, socially, morally, and relationally.”<sup>439</sup> The cost includes the loss of all the vital ministry that a church brings to people living in a geographic region along with the receding impact of God’s kingdom and the corresponding loss of human flourishing. The cost is massive, comprehensive, and touches all aspects of human life. These statistics are well documented in the literature and experientially substantiated by all six ENLs interviewed.

My findings revealed that the diminishing of Christianity is complex and multi-faceted. The complexity of the issues means that I had to choose a starting point imminently relevant to the topic. So, culture, epistemology, ecclesiology, and Christology became my starting points due to their inter-relatedness and causal relationship to disaffiliation. These four areas of study were initially placed under the label of “problem,” i.e. the problem of secular culture, the problem of epistemology, etc.

---

<sup>439</sup> Rick Reinhard, “Churches Are Closing. It’s a Challenge for Local Governments,” *Governing: The Future of States and Localities*, April 13, 2021.

However, my thinking shifted to consider how these themes might, in actuality, reverse the problem of disaffiliation. In other words, I began to ask different questions. Can an accurate assessment of secular culture put the church in a better position to reach dechurched and unchurched people? Could a better understanding of the reigning epistemic practices of secular people assist in understanding how postmodern people process the world around them? Can knowledge of epistemology actually make the church more effective in gospel communication? Could an honest analysis of ecclesiology yield insights into some of the causes of the generational exodus from the church by younger generational cohorts? In other words, might the church be inadvertently exacerbating the problem of disaffiliation? Finally, the multitude of non-biblical versions of Jesus in the U.S. further complicated the issue of reaching dechurched and unchurched people. Is there a better way to proclaim the biblical Christ in a sea of imposters?

These four themes proved to be an excellent way to gain insight into the crisis of disaffiliation, and the qualitative research confirmed these themes as a critical part of the solution. However, the solution needs to rely on more than academic analysis and to include experiences in the life of a missional church.

The findings revealed that the renewal of missional churches led by missional leaders is an effective way to address the problem of generational disaffiliation. Therefore, an ENL is a critical component of the solution. I chose the leadership of ENLs to address this problem because of the disproportional impact of their ministry. An ENL leads several pastors who, in-turn, touch an entire congregation in a geographic region, or parish. So, the strategic nature of an ENL leading a network of citywide churches became

the centerpiece of my dissertation. I asked what role this type of leader might play in addressing the condition and cost of Christianity in decline, a diminishing Christian church, disaffiliation, and the loss of kingdom influence in the U.S. As I interacted with the literature and interviewed ENLs, I became convinced of the relevance of my topic, and the insights this study would yield. The following represents the critical findings of this multiple month journey into the world of an ENL and the adjacent literature that gave me new eyes to view their ministry.

### *The Dynamics of Disaffiliation*

The dynamics of disaffiliation refer to the causes for the significant exodus from Christian churches in the U.S. They repel people from the church, especially younger people. The literature examined and the interviews conducted provide a lucid diagnosis of disaffiliation among younger generational cohorts.

The causes for disaffiliation and the church's inability to reach dechurched and unchurched people are intimately related. The causes that drive younger generational cohorts away from the church are the same causes that keep them from coming into it from the outside. The findings on disaffiliation revealed the following causes.

#### **A Secular Age**

One of the most significant causes for disaffiliation is the postmodern, secular age as the mission context for the church in the U.S. Duffy called them "period effects." According to Taylor, belief in God is no longer axiomatic, and the U.S. has "moved from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to

embrace.”<sup>440</sup> Peter Berger stated that one of the main tenets of a secular age includes the lack of plausibility for belief in the Christian God. People can believe in God if they choose to do so, even though that choice defies rationality. The ENLs had interacted with postmodern people outside and inside the church and agreed with this conclusion. Their unbelief is strengthened daily through the artifacts, institutions, and “elites” of culture. And, as culture goes, these beliefs, or un-beliefs, become tacitly held by those who are immersed in it. The implications of Taylor’s secular age are far reaching and extremely salient when considering the disaffiliation *en masse* of younger generational cohorts.

A significant byproduct of the secular age is the rise of DIY religion and spirituality. DIY religion is coherent within the framework of a secular age. It is also compelling for those aiming for an expression of autonomy in their lives. Younger generations and cultural elites fit in nicely within the “cult of self” indicative of American culture. Tara Burton calls this large portion of the younger generational cohorts the “SBNRs,” the “spiritual but not religious.” Burton also contends that DIY spirituality and the postmodern distrust of metanarrative power plays are exceptionally damaging to the perception of the church. She asserts that the metanarrative of the church’s message, like all postmodern metanarratives, is an attempt to control people and is evil, not just irrelevant. In other words, the message, and the church that proclaims it, are evil. These factors lead to a better understanding of the cultural causes for disaffiliation.

---

<sup>440</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

## **A Non-missional Church**

The non-missional church is arguably the most damaging cause for disaffiliation and the failure to attract dechurched and unchurched people into the membership of the church. Ed Stetzer asserts that the disaffiliation of younger generational cohorts is the result of the church “not providing a culturally relevant witness.”<sup>441</sup> A culturally relevant witness is what Luke (ENL) described as “being Jesus to the community in every way imaginable.” The context of Luke’s quote was in reference to the church carrying out holistic kingdom ministries to the entire city. These holistic ministries involve caring for the marginalized, feeding the poor, caring for the abandoned, and addressing any need that presents itself in the community.

John (ENL) observed that a missional church engages in holistic kingdom ministries in ways that non-missional, consumer-oriented churches do not. According to John, a non-missional, consumer-oriented church is a nuisance to its community. For example, Luke (ENL) shared how many churches in his city were “yelling at the governor” during COVID for their “rights” as opposed to caring for the sick, the medical personnel laboring long hours, and serving “in the midst of the pandemic.” These Christians were concerned about their “rights,” but not their witness and care for a community in distress.

Demanding one’s rights is antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians who posture themselves to get their rights are only attractive to other Christians demanding those same “rights.” This non-missional behavior destroys the Christian church’s respectability and relevance. “Rights” is the vernacular of the consumer. John

---

<sup>441</sup> Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, 9.

spoke of how many churches have fallen into the trap of producing consumer products for their religious customers, Christians. Consequently, the mission devolves into providing for the comfort of church members. Relevance matters to all people, especially younger generational cohorts. Younger generational cohorts are characterized by their aspirational desire to make a difference in the world and invest in an important cause. This “make a difference” mentality of younger generational cohorts equates to relevance. Therefore, a church caring for its own needs to the exclusion of others has become irrelevant, and disaffiliation increases when the church becomes irrelevant.

The two words that emerged from the interviews with ENLs regarding their equipping with knowledge of current culture were respectability and relevance. Respectability is defined as being respected from the perspective of the other. In other words, do dechurched and unchurched people find the church respectable and relevant by their criteria? Each ENL interviewed discussed the need for extensive restoration of the church’s reputation culturewide and stated that respectability could be earned through deeply caring for one another, modeling humility, and genuinely serving people outside the church.

ENLs said respectability and relevance are also restored by “telling a better story.” Nick (ENL) spoke about the church’s inability, or lack of concern, to deeply engage with the critical issues in the broader culture such as: sexuality, racism, transgenderism, and critical race theory. Nick spoke of how the “Bible tells a better story” regarding all of these issues. The Bible’s better story begins with the “creational good” found in Genesis 1-2 prior to being confronted with the distortion of that “good” in Genesis 3. Christians that begin the Bible story in Genesis 3 tend to be combative around

these issues because they “have no doctrine of creation,” according to Goheen. Telling the Bible’s better story begins with God’s good design for humanity in creation, Wolters’ “structure.” The missional church builds bridges with dechurched and unchurched people through gospel proclamation that “tells the true story of the world” faithfully and winsomely.

In many ways the literature and interviews presented the church as its own worst enemy, even though it tells the best story. It has failed to tell that story well. The church also has the best mission and fails to live it well. Disaffiliation is, in large part, due to a church that has lost its missional identity.

### **Fragilization**

Fragilization is Taylor’s term describing the “weakening of one’s faith commitment due to the multiplicity of other existing beliefs that appear equally plausible.”<sup>442</sup> The landscape of the American religious scene is one marked by pluralism, tolerance, and the sovereignty of the self — making it ripe for fragilization. In this religious climate, Taylor’s concept of fragilization deserves attention. Duffy’s “cohort effects” are a factor in fragilization. “Cohort effects,” according to Duffy, “are the distinct attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors a particular generational cohort has been socialized into that differ from those conditions of other generational cohorts.”<sup>443</sup> There exists, within a generational cohort, a natural affinity with one’s peers. This natural affinity, when combined with the weakening of familial bonds, causes a more powerful

---

<sup>442</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 303–4.

<sup>443</sup> Duffy, *The Generation Myth*, 9.

“cohort effect.” This “cohort effect” applies more pressure to the fragilization of the Christian faith.

The ENLs attested to fragilization leading to disaffiliation. Each ENL had an awareness that the church’s pluralistic context posed the threat of fragilization to one’s faith. Grant described the church’s loss of influence on a grand scale in terms of it no longer having “a seat at the table” in the U.S. He said:

the church no longer has a seat at the table in terms of cultural, political, and social influence. You know, 100 years ago, we set the table, and then we made the invitations and picked the menu...we need to understand we’re now in different space, we’re now outsiders. And people will tolerate us as long as we stay in our lane; it basically means keep to ourselves.

As “outsiders” now, the church needs to think differently about its missional identity. The challenge Grant (ENL) identified is the intolerance of the gospel along with the difficult doctrines and moral judgments that don’t sit well with dechurched and unchurched people, doctrines like the holiness of God, judgment, hell, and so on. The likelihood of being fragilized increases when the Christian faith appears intolerant, exclusive, and unbending in its truth claims. To the extent that the church hasn’t handled its truth with gentleness, dignity, and respect, fragilization has increased, and disaffiliation is understandable.

### *Critical Characteristics of a Citywide Missional Church*

A missional church embraces mission as foundational to the church’s identity. Christopher Wright asserted that the church is commissioned to continue the mission of Jesus until he returns at the end of the age. Neo-Calvinists, like Goheen, state that the entire purpose of the “already, not yet” of the kingdom epoch is mission and that the church is God’s appointed vehicle for that mission. The findings in this study revealed



that the crisis in the American church regarding membership loss, especially younger generational membership loss, and its reputation of irrelevance is intimately related to its loss of missional identity. The loss of missional identity is a central cause of disaffiliation.

An impact of a missional church is significant in light of the literature reviewed and the interviews conducted. A missional church proclaims the gospel with winsome boldness and serves the city's deepest needs. The missional churches of the ENLs started the following ministries: sex and human trafficking rescue, foster care and adoption, small business development among the working poor, alleviation of hunger and poverty, substance abuse recovery, domestic violence prevention and care, homeless care, charter schools in urban centers, and the list goes on. A missional church has respectability and relevance, relevance that is not divorced from its calling "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." The findings included in this section are not exhaustive by any means but reflect critical elements of a missional church from the research conducted.

### **Be Engaged in the Right Mission**

The research revealed that being on the right mission is critical to maintain transgenerational membership and reaching dechurched and unchurched people. The following competing missions were found in the literature examined and from the ENLs interviewed: membership comfort, political activism, preserving generational idols, and hair-splitting theological purity. Some alternate missions also appeared under the previous topic of a non-missional church. They are not just non-missional components of a church, as if it were missing something. Rather, they are alternate missions because they create enthusiasm that leads to greater disaffiliation. I will address generational idols

and hair-splitting theological purity because member comfort and political activism were already addressed as characteristics of a non-missional church.

Preserving generation idols refers to the non-missional, and often non-biblical, ministry practices of aging church leadership that alienate dechurched and unchurched people. These practices are not bad things intrinsically but become idols when they are prioritized before glorifying God and loving neighbor. For example, the style of music can become an idol, as well as a church program, and any other aspect of the church's culture. These generational church idols are often referred to as "sacred cows" and preserving them can become the church's mission. These idols are of no interest to younger generational cohorts nor for dechurched and unchurched people and often give credence to arguments against the benefits of the church.

Hair-splitting theological purity is the mission of some churches, and especially Reformed Protestant traditions, that have a tendency to turn non-essential theological differences into the Diet of Worms.<sup>444</sup> The literature on missional ecclesiology discusses the importance of sound, biblical theology as critical to the health of any church. John Stott's appeal to bring Christians together to better understand the division in the church around missional language upheld a high view of theology and mission. Yet, the ENLs viewed leaders arguing for non-essential theological purity as a hindrance to mission and Christian unity citywide. Church leaders that turn this kind of super-theological purity into their mission soon discover they have a shrinking mission field. The literature and interviews revealed the need to not pit theology against mission. The churches that do

---

<sup>444</sup> The Diet of Worms is the council wherein the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, defended the Doctrine for Justification by Faith alone in Worms, Germany in 1521.

this are guilty of under-contextualization and become irrelevant to dechurched and unchurched people, along with the young people in their congregations.

According to the literature and interviews, no missional church is executing the mission without error. However, many missional churches are bearing kingdom fruit as they faithfully live out their eschatological mission as best they can.

### **An Eschatological Vision for Shalom**

“The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”<sup>445</sup> The missional church has a theological commitment to an eschatological stance that establishes continuity between the “already, not yet” epoch and the consummated kingdom of Jesus. N.T. Wright asserts:

The created order, which God has begun to redeem in the resurrection of Jesus, is a world in which heaven and earth are designed not to be separated but to come together. In that coming together, the ‘very good’ that God spoke over creation at the beginning will be enhanced, not abolished.<sup>446</sup>

The eschatological vision for the missional church views the “created order” as the theater for redemption. Creation is being redeemed, and that reality will be conducted through the ministry of the church until the inauguration of the consummated kingdom. In contrast, pessimistic eschatological views portray the earth awaiting a fiery holocaust and bringing an end to its present form and any artifact of culture produced therein. In this pessimistic view, the new creation will not be contiguous with the present created order. Therefore, the eschatological stance that articulates the new created order

---

<sup>445</sup> Habakkuk 2:14

<sup>446</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 259.

beginning with the resurrection of Jesus offers a double motivation to the missional church. First, and foremost, the church obeys in the care of God's creation and in vocational endeavors out of a love for God. Second, the motivation to serve the world is an investment in the encroaching shalom of God's kingdom through the "already, not yet" missional church. The findings revealed the eschatological view held by ENLs and the churches they serve to be a critical characteristic of a missional church.

### **Holistic Kingdom Ministry—Word and Deed Ministry**

The missional church is theologically committed to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, the whole counsel of God, and do holistic kingdom ministry. The ENLs interviewed had a deep conviction to proclaim the biblical gospel. Luke (ENL), in his equipping ministry of network pastors, articulated that his primary curricular agenda was to nurture a deep "trust in the power of the Word of God." John (ENL) spoke of how the primary equipping of knowledge in Christology was to better equip network pastors for powerful gospel preaching. In the literature reviewed and the interviews conducted, there was a consistent theme for sound, biblical proclamation of the gospel. The ENLs were firmly committed to preaching the biblical gospel and doing the deeds that biblically accompany that gospel.

"Holistic kingdom ministry" is the term that captures the church's mission to be the hands and feet of Jesus for the healing of the nations while still proclaiming the gospel. Jesus proclaimed the gospel and ushered in the kingdom through miracles, ministering to the outcast, and caring for the poor. He calls his church to do the same. The ENLs reported that holistic ministries were part of the core identity of network churches. In other words, holistic kingdom ministries were not a program of the church

but an essential part of the church's missional identity. The churches led by ENLs did holistic ministry because that kind of ministry was in the DNA of their churches. Ministering to the lonely, feeding the hungry, visiting widows in their distress, adopting the fatherless, and an indescribably long list describing ministries to address the brokenness of humankind comprised the options for holistic ministry. The findings revealed that a missional church embraces holistic ministry and gospel proclamation.

### **One, Holy, Apostolic Church Unity**

The missional church seeks unity across denominational bounds while maintaining apostolic creed orthodoxy. This commitment to unity is also sought within the congregations of each local church in the network. The ENLs discussed how this was a theological commitment and a strategic, mission-critical feature of their mission to the city. The need for thoroughgoing gospel proclamation in a large metropolitan region with diverse people groups requires the one, unified church of Jesus that transcends tribal groupings so indicative of American Christianity. Luke (ENL) mentioned in a rather tongue-and-cheek way that he “felt sorry for Jesus that God didn't answer that prayer in John 17 for unity” among Christians. The reality of Christians competing for members in a geographic region has become the norm, according to Nick (ENL). This kind of mindset doesn't lead to unity but to a competition confusing and repugnant to dechurched and unchurched people. Unity is non-negotiable for Christians. Yet, it is often lacking in any tangible way. The missional church seeks unity for the sake of obedience, witness, and mission to the city.

The kingdom work described by the ENLs through the church working together across denominational affiliations is inspirational. This is the point—the church inspiring

those within view with amazing deeds accomplished through the collaborative effort of a citywide, unified church. This kind of unity yields respect and an acknowledgment of relevance. Therefore, unity is necessary for the breadth and scope of holistic kingdom work in a large metropolitan region. Unity is needed to support one another in the face of the corporate challenges facing the church doing mission in a secular age. Unity is a core value and functional commitment of a missional church. In a citywide ecclesiastical network under the leadership of an ENL, the church shares the same mission, the same geographic space, and most importantly, worships the same Lord. The findings revealed that unity advanced the mission of God's church through missional churches committed to their city, their place.

### **A Theology of Place**

The research revealed that a missional church possesses a healthy theology of place as the focus of gospel ministry, to usher in the shalom of God in increasing measure. The articulation of a theology of place and a commitment to its implications begins with the vision of ENLs infused with a vibrant love for the city of their missional presence. Reminiscent of John Knox's famous prayer, "give me Scotland, or I die," these ENLs possessed a similar passion for the place of their mission focus. As a result, recruitment to serve as a network pastor was vetted according to whether a candidate demonstrated a genuine love for the place. ENLs observed that the God-ordained love of a place strengthened a pastor's resolve for difficult service and the suffering that accompanies all gospel ministry. Love of place also enabled ENLs to think through ministry to specific communities in a more strategic way.

John (ENL) talked about how a theology of place strengthened his network leadership in helping pastors to have a “parish mentality.” John’s “parish-oriented” equipping of network pastors encouraged them to draw a circle on the map and be a worshipping, gathering, and serving expression of the kingdom of God within those geographic bounds. Nick (ENL) discussed the “strategy of house churches” to better love and serve the needs of specific communities within the city with a laser-like focus. He led his ecclesiastical network with a strategy to get “bigger and smaller” at the same time. The church network might be 10,000-members citywide yet distributed in smaller “house churches.” The distribution into “house churches” and commitment to “get smaller” allowed for more directed ministry to the needs of dechurched and unchurched people in specific neighborhoods.

This commitment to a theology of place is intimately connected to the eschatological expectations of missional churches and their leaders. If the vision of Habakkuk 2:14 is to increase in its fulfillment, “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the water cover the sea,” then specific zip codes must become “filled” with this reality. A missional church takes this ushering in of the kingdom, and the shalom of God, seriously through a theology of place.

### **Kingdom-advancing Contextualization**

According to Al Wolters, contextualization is tailoring the gospel to a culture so that the people of that culture are challenged by it even as the church works within that culture to advance the cultural mandate. Wolters describes how the church is called to live in the “unbearable tension” between the culture’s story and the gospel story.

Kingdom-advancing contextualization, according to Wolters, requires that Christians

embody both stories faithfully. He states, “To embrace the tension, and to seek to resolve it in a way that does not compromise the gospel, is the goal of contextualization.” This “unbearable tension” was the experience described by the ENLs in their citywide network leadership. Carl (ENL) described it as befriending the dechurched and unchurched in authentic friendship, while faithfully living out the gospel story consistently. Luke (ENL) described the “unbearable tension” when he led his churches into the culture’s story, in the name of Jesus, during the COVID pandemic, to serve exhausted medical personnel. In so doing he was criticized by many churches outside his network that interpreted his actions as “capitulation to Caesar.” Biblically aligned contextualization brings the gospel with culturally adept relevance to dechurched and unchurched people, giving them the opportunity to respond to Jesus’ call to faith and repentance. The missional church prays, seeks discernment, and labors to bring a contextualized gospel to its mission context. It avoids the over-contextualization of yielding to the culture’s story and idols. Yet, it also avoids the under-contextualization of yielding to its own idols thus losing respectability and relevance.

### *The Need for Missional Ecclesiastical Network Leaders*

The findings of this study revealed that missional ENLs are necessary to maximize the impact for gospel ministry in large metropolitan regions. Restricting this research to large metropolitan regions, the researcher concludes that ENLs serving in non-urban settings would strengthen kingdom advancement in those locales too. A coordinated citywide kingdom-advancing effort requires consistent, intentional, strategic, administrative, pastoral, and visionary leadership that can serve and lead pastors citywide. The missional focus of this leader is foundational, with many necessary



characteristics supporting that focus. However, in reflecting on the findings of this study, three came to the forefront: humility coupled with gospel confidence, visionary leadership, and a catalytic builder of a gospel ecosystem.

### **Humility Coupled with Gospel Confidence**

An effective missional ENL possesses a unique blend of humility mixed with gospel-confidence. This humble-confidence is felt throughout the network, beginning with the ethos of network gatherings. There is safety to be authentic, transparent, and vulnerable because of the leadership of the ENL. The humility is apprehended in shared leadership, in the acknowledgement of frailty, and the ability to function in strengths and staff to weaknesses. This humble-confidence is not threatened by the gifts of others. It has the ability to work across denominational lines and learn from others. In regard to understanding and reaching younger generations, this leader can employ Grant's (ENL) practice of "reverse mentoring." The ability to "check one's ego at the door" was demonstrated by the ENLs interviewed for this study and is mission critical to a successful citywide network.

### **Visionary Leadership**

Visionary leadership emerged as a non-negotiable element for leadership of an ecclesiastical citywide network. This attribute is intimately related to the humble-confidence rooted in the gospel. Casting a citywide kingdom vision is risky, audacious, and grueling, especially in terms of what will be required of the leader. Each ENL described the suffering that led them to their calling as an ENL and prepared them for

that kind of kingdom leadership. Ron (ENL) reflected, capturing both the humble-confidence of an ENL and the suffering required:

I'm not a superstar church planter. If anything, I'm an average church planter who planted an average church and made a contribution to the greater work of the kingdom of God in my city and beyond. Church planting involved some real hardship for me, and I nearly didn't survive it professionally. But I did survive, and out of that experience of hardship I came to know something more about the gospel and me.

Ron's quote captures how the gospel shaped him for the role of an ENL along with the corresponding suffering that refines a person for this kind of leadership.

The visionary leader required for a missional ecclesiastical network consistently understand and operate out of the tenets of missional ecclesiology. They must be tireless in living the vision, communicating the vision, and defending the vision. Missional ENLs must be maniacal in the application of the vision to themselves, network leaders, network pastors, and non-profit leaders who function within the gospel ecosystem of the citywide network. A critical foundation of a missional ENL's visionary leadership is a culture of prayer, dependence, and genuine authenticity within the citywide network. The vision must also be a vocational outworking of who God has called the ENL to be as a person.

### **A Catalytic Builder of A Gospel Ecosystem**

The missional ENL is also a catalytic builder of high-functioning network leadership teams, systems that serve the network, and the chief architect of the citywide gospel ecosystem. The findings revealed three primary leadership roles of a missional ENL: visionary, facilitator, and caregiver. These functions corresponded to a leadership codification familiar to each ENL known as the "prophet-priest-king paradigm," wherein the prophet is the visionary, the priest is a caregiver, and the king is a facilitator. A

catalytic builder of a citywide leadership team exercises self-knowledge well to build a team that fulfilled all these roles for the health of the citywide network. As the primary visionary, the missional ENL led a collaborative leadership team that facilitated the cultivation of a gospel ecosystem that enabled sustainable health for network leaders. The gospel ecosystem consisted of all the elements that enabled the vision to take root citywide, for network pastors to flourish, and the kingdom to advance through word and deed ministries. Monthly network gatherings, vocational discipleship, citywide holistic ministry, ongoing theological training, creation of missional discipleship material, coaching and mentoring, and so much more comprise the gospel ecosystem. The missional ENLs provided the catalytic leadership that empowered a citywide team to accomplish the many and varied chores required for the functioning of a life-giving gospel ecosystem that ultimately enables ENLs to equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches reaching dechurched and unchurched people.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The purpose of my research was to examine how ecclesiastical network leaders equip pastors to lead transgenerational churches that are reaching dechurched and unchurched people. All recommendations for practice are applicable for ENLs. However, due to the topics covered throughout this study, the recommendations for practice expand into the realm of pastors and ministry leaders regardless of whether they serve as an ENL or not. Topics such as generational theory, disaffiliation, the contours of secular culture, epistemology, ecclesiology, Christology, and the missional church have broad appeal and application for any ministry context. Included under recommendations for practice is a brief section for the ministry structure and habits of presbyteries. This form of church

polity has been my ecclesiastical home and tradition for the last three decades. My research raises questions and offers tenuous insights about the practice of presbytery as a functioning ecclesiastical network.

### *Equipping Pastors with A Generational Thinking Method*

Equipping pastors with a generational thinking tool method can strengthen transgenerational membership and evangelism to dechurched and unchurched people. The method begins with a “don’t get mad, get curious” mindset that addresses generational differentiation by reestablishing fruitful conversation with younger cohorts. The findings revealed a generational gap in the ministry and mission priorities between older generation church leaders and younger generational cohorts. The tendency was for the older generation leaders to be frustrated with the lack of commitment they perceived in younger generational cohorts. In the church, this lack of commitment was perceived when younger church leaders expressed no enthusiasm for their elders’ ministry initiatives. Nick’s (ENL) mentor (Frank) “got curious” about the differences in ministry priorities between his Baby Boomer peers and younger Generation X and Millennial pastors. Frank’s curiosity led to a “reverse mentoring” that grew his church’s transgenerational expression and increased their outreach to younger generational cohorts. The key was Frank’s humility as a leader and a willingness to examine his generation’s idols.

Al Wolters argues that the ability to reach dechurched and unchurched people becomes possible when pastors and churches contextualize gospel ministry out of the “unbearable tension.” Wolters’ “unbearable tension” occurs when a Christian lives out God’s story and the culture’s story without abandoning either one. The “unbearable

tension,” according to Wolters, “emerges because of the ‘two embodiments’ in the life of God’s people: the embodiment of God’s story and the culture’s story.<sup>447</sup> According to Wolters, this is the starting point for effectively contextualizing the gospel in one’s mission context. Wolters’ “structure and direction” is a critical tool for the missional church when coupled with an understanding of living in the “unbearable tension.” “Structure” refers to the good structure of the created order. “Direction” refers to whether one’s behavior, or a culture’s values, are distorting the creational good or embracing it. Frank had the humility to understand every generation has its own idols. His curiosity led him to examine what ministry practices might be a distortion of creational good or simply his own personal idolatry. In this way, the younger generational cohorts provided an opportunity for the older generational cohorts to examine their ministries for existing blind spots of idolatry. Frank’s humility made it safe for the younger generation of church leaders to examine idolatry in their own ministry commitments. As a result, the entire church was strengthened in its transgenerational composition and its mission to younger generational cohorts. This “reverse mentoring,” coupled with Wolters’ tools to examine contextualization and idolatry, leads to a fruitful missional church.

The “don’t get mad, get curious” mindset forms the heart of the *Generational Thinking Tool Method*. This method emerged from the research as a way to strengthen effective ministry to younger generational cohorts. The method has seven identifiable steps in its present form: 1) Observe distinctions in generational cohorts, 2) “Don’t get mad, get curious,” 3) Be humble and teachable fruit of gospel living, 4) Ask good questions, listen, and reflect, 5) Apply Wolters’ “unbearable tension” contextualization

---

<sup>447</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 137.

posture and “structure/direction” to identify idolatry, 6) Make applications based on assessment, 7) Equip pastors in the ecclesiastical network to do likewise.

### *Equipping for the Fragilization Effect*

The findings also revealed fragilization as a significant cause of disaffiliation among younger generational cohorts. Taylor refers to fragilization as a sociological reality, making fragilization ongoing at a tacit level whether we realize it or not. So, how does the church equip for the fragilization effect in light of Taylor’s description? The following recommendations emerged from the interaction with the literature and the ENLs interviewed. An ENL’s equipping for the fragilization effect involves the five following features: acknowledgement is power, all stories aren’t created equal, learning to love and respect in Wolters’ “unbearable tension,” praying for a robust faith, and turning the tables on fragilization for mission.

“Acknowledgement is power” simply identifies Taylor’s fragilization thesis and its dynamic, to some degree, at work in every Christian. Naming something demythologizes it. Fragilization is not something that should be feared but acknowledged so as to see its impact on the individual faith of every believer and the weakening of the church’s mission. Knowing its dynamics enables followers of Jesus to be aware of its subversive strength and stand against it.

The fact that “the Bible is the true story of the world” and tells “better stories” is a powerful anecdote to fragilization. Christians need to immerse themselves in the Christian story with Jesus as its hero and be disciplined into how the Bible tells a “better story” regarding all the issues that can fragilize faith. Why is Jesus the hero of God’s story and not Mohammad? How does the Bible tell a “better story” regarding human

sexuality that ultimately leads to human flourishing? Nick (ENL) equipped his network pastors to winsomely and graciously do evangelism by simply asking dechurched and unchurched friends, “What do you believe is the true story of the world?” The comparison between the Bible’s answer and other religions and philosophies of the age is starkly different. There is a beauty in a God who departs heaven on a rescue mission for his beloved people. There is no story comparable to it. The power, beauty, and truth of God’s story strengthens Christians against the effects of fragilization.

The posture of Wolters’ “unbearable tension” that the Christian is called to embody is another bulwark against fragilization. Wolters “unbearable tension” is a phenomenological reality for the Christian this side of heaven. Fragilization is the cultural story side of the tension. Christians who feel this fragilization are positioned where God can use them to reach and minister to dechurched and unchurched people.

The reality of fragilization should lead Christians to depend more and more on the Holy Spirit through prayer. Feelings of fragilization can become the opportunity to draw close to God and experience his strength in weakness. This is one of the ways to turn the tables on fragilization.

The other method of turning the tables involves advancing the gospel in the lives of others. Taylor’s fragilization teaches that all faiths are fragilized through cross-pressure and the people we love who believe differently are also experiencing fragilization. The weakening of the false belief systems of our friends and neighbors through Christian witness poses an incredible opportunity for the gospel to be advanced in their lives.

## *Paradigm Shifts for Greater Missional Impact*

The findings revealed three paradigm shifts for advancing the missional church movement under the leadership of an ENL. The three paradigm shifts are captured in the following phrases: every pastor an ENL, the missional church is the church, and called to the people in a parish.

### **Every Pastor an ENL**

The first paradigm shift is the call for all pastors to function like an ENL in their mission context. Specifically, pastors in their community can be intentional about building unity with Christian pastors across denominational lines. God has called Christians to cultivate our parishes for his glory, kingdom renewal, and conversion of dechurched and unchurched people, using visionary leadership. “Every pastor an ENL” means gathering pastors and Christian leaders from each parish for prayer, support, the identification of needs in the community, and beginning the work of holistic kingdom ministries together. It is being a catalytic leader in initiating the establishment of a gospel ecosystem in each parish. Every pastor an ENL would hold monthly ecclesiastical network meetings for learning together, authentic friendship, support, peer coaching, and prayer. It means serving as the risk-taking convener of a kingdom movement that demonstrates the powerful witness of the unity of the body of Christ. Every pastor an ENL embraces this paradigm shift as an essential part of their calling for the health of the local church they serve and the greater advancement of the kingdom in their parish.



## **Called to a Parish and Its People**

The second paradigm shift views all the people within the geographic bounds of the parish as those entrusted to a pastor's spiritual oversight. This conviction functionally lived out forces a more realistic geographic region as the parameters for one's ministry. John (ENL) stated that it might be "five city blocks or five square miles," but it should be delineated. This paradigm shift forces the following changes in the habits and cadence of ministry leadership. First, the pastor's home and neighborhood become a base of kingdom operations. Hospitality and care of one's immediate neighbors becomes primary. This strategy models the practice of contextualized gospel ministry with a geographic focus on the people God has providentially called us to live alongside.

Second, friendship evangelism and holistic ministry become a central feature of the pastor's ministry, evangelism because many of the people within the focus of a geographic ministry are dechurched and unchurched people and holistic because getting to know people at a deeper level reveals their spiritual, relational, and varied needs.

Third, it reshapes the strategic kingdom initiatives so that the focus of discipleship becomes equipping God's people for living on mission within the parish.

Fourth, it compels pastors to function like an ENL (see previous first paradigm shift) given the intensive relational and specified geographic focus of their ministry. The establishment of a gospel ecosystem with like-minded Christian pastors in the parish strengthens all churches, advances holistic kingdom ministries for the needs of the community, and establishes respectability and relevance among unchurched people.

Lastly, it enables the church in a parish to "get bigger and smaller" at the same time. The church in a parish becomes all baptized Christians who worship in local Christian churches. Pastors are called to people in a parish and work to strengthen that

larger expression of the body of Christ while simultaneously ministering with greater impact to fewer people within a legitimate span of care.

### **The Missional Church is the Church**

The church in the U.S. is experiencing an identity crisis not limited to but worsened by the loss of its missional identity. The literature reviewed and the interviews with ENLs made this explicitly clear. This paradigm shift involves the following inquiry. Is it theologically accurate to refer to the church without the adjective “missional” preceding it? According to Goheen, Wolters, and several of the ENLs interviewed the answer is no. Is it ever theologically appropriate to refer to the church as non-missional?

Ecclesiology is a main heading in systematic theology. But, is it misleading, or worse yet, unbiblical, to codify the doctrine of the church simply as ecclesiology and not as: missional ecclesiology? According to Goheen, mission is the reason for the “already, not yet” epoch of the kingdom. So, is ecclesiology ever non-missional ecclesiology? It’s a provocative question and a relevant question based on the state of the church in the U.S.

There is no such thing as a non-missional church after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and prior to his second coming. So, to codify the church simply as “the church” in this epoch is to continue to strengthen a non-biblical view of the church through the power of linguistics. The theological faithful nomenclature is missional church, and it is a paradigm shift.

## *General Recommendations for ENLs, Pastors, & Ecclesiastical Networks*

### **Strengthen Missional Discipleship for Covenant Families**

The research revealed that disaffiliation among younger generational cohorts is accelerating and the causes come under the broad heading of respectability and relevance. Younger generational cohorts, according to generational theory, are shaped by “period effects, cohort effects, and life-cycle effects.” There is a natural affinity for one’s own generation (cohort effects), and each successive generation is more consistently embodying the shifting ideologies of postmodernity (period effects) than their elders. These factors enhance the probability of disaffiliation without the powerful witness of respectability and relevance from the generation that precedes them. Nick (ENL) attested to how the integrity of older pastors, not in his generational cohort, increased respectability even if he questioned the relevance of the church’s ministry initiatives. Parents of covenant children, if they possess respectability, can serve as a strong deterrent to generational disaffiliation. The combination of relevance with respectability increases the likelihood of a transgenerational community in the local church.

Missional discipleship and practices of older generational cohorts display the respectability and relevance needed to maintain the church’s transgenerational membership. The “vertical replication” that has been the mainstay of passing on culture from one generation to the next for millennia has been greatly compromised in a globalized, technologically advanced society. Ideologies that once took multiple generations to spread are communicated across cultures at a dizzying pace. This “horizontal adaptation” approach passes on culture, but not necessarily one’s culture of origin. Parents who are discipled in missional living, vocation, and ministry provide a

compelling witness to the next generation. “Vertical replication” is strengthened by the respectability of parents living on mission, engaged in holistic kingdom ministry, and displaying a healthy marriage. Churches should invest in the missional discipleship of their adult members. This missional discipleship should include robust vocational equipping. This kind of investment guards against generational disaffiliation, equips adults to reach their unchurched and dechurched neighbors, and serves to advance the kingdom in manifest ways.

### **Discipling the Missional Church in the “True Story of the World”**

Discipleship in the church using the *Drama of Scripture* is a way to understand and communicate the gospel in a secular age. This approach to discipleship, deeply rooted in the scriptures, and supported by systematic theology, strengthens the church in a sense of identity as God’s missional people. The Bible as the “true story of the world” is the Christian’s story, but it is also a non-offensive way to evangelize people. This “story” approach to evangelism can then ask, “What do you think the true story of the world is? Who is Jesus and how does he fit into that story? Which story is more appealing to you? Why?” Additionally, focusing on Jesus as the hero of this story brings clarity amidst the many versions of Jesus being promoted in a secular age. Christological truth can thus lead to conversations about any person’s history, character, and stated purpose in life.

This approach to discipleship equips God’s people to show that the Bible tells a “better story” for every aspect of life and avoids the “gospel reductions.” The “gospel reductions” are often characteristic of a list of propositional spiritual truths. As one ENL stated, “If you’re going to try to communicate the gospel as ideas by way of propositions,

you're already not working from the epistemology of an 'advanced modern' or 'postmodern' culture." This approach used by previous generations has lost its effectiveness. Christians need new paradigms of understanding and communicated the timeless truth of the gospel in an epistemology fit for a secular age.

### *Recommendations for Presbyteries*

Presbyteries by their very nature are regional ecclesiastical networks comprised of local expressions of God's kingdom. The following recommendations are applications of the findings from the study of ENLs and the ecclesiastical networks they serve.

The first recommendation is that presbyteries budget for the hiring of a missional ENL. The presbyteries I've known over the last three decades have consisted of a group of faithful men who are overworked, exhausted, and barely able to function as a regional ecclesiastical body. Our work is mostly reactionary, due to the demands of local church ministry. Presbyteries rarely, if ever, collaborate in citywide efforts to advance the kingdom. The one exception to this rule is church planting and, more often than not, it is more effectively done through the local churches in the presbytery. If a presbytery is ever going to function with the degree of impact indicative of the ecclesiastical networks in this study, an ENL is required. An ENL functioning in the manner outlined in this research could transform the health, growth, and kingdom impact of regional presbyteries.

Second, presbyteries need a paradigm shift to see themselves as "missional presbyteries." Presbyteries unite around theological stance and convictions, not mission. Theology and mission are not mutually exclusive and don't need to be tacitly pitted against each other. But presbyteries tend to "do missions" and are not "essentially

missional” in their corporate identity. Functionally, presbyteries serve as gatekeepers for “network pastors,” preserving the theological tradition of the denomination. Theological acumen is of utmost importance and is a priority as asserted by the ENLs interviewed for this research. Yet, this commitment should not eclipse the priority of mission.

Third, the structure of presbytery as a regional church establishes structural challenges that work against best practices of healthy ecclesiastical networks. Unless particular pastors in a presbytery have a strong theology of place, a desire for catholic unity across denominational affiliations, and a parish mentality for holistic ministry, the presbytery won’t foster these missional practices. In other words, presbyteries either need to change the way they structure themselves or, more realistically, work with great intentionality with the current structure to cultivate missional practices. A full-time ENL could facilitate this kind of intentionality.

Fourth, presbyteries rooted in their historic practices should embrace the foundational principle of *semper reformanda* (always reforming) from their tradition as a catalyst to become a missional presbytery.<sup>448</sup> The principle to be “always reforming” is a call to return to sound biblical doctrine and practice. Presbyteries, by their constitution, can have a disproportional kingdom impact in a geographic region if they align their doctrine and practice with missional ecclesiology. The “reforming” work of presbyteries includes restructuring as a regional body to be more effective in their citywide mission.

Fifth, presbyteries need to consider what components of their current form is biblical and what aspect is negotiable, given the changing mission context of the U.S.

---

<sup>448</sup> Kevin DeYoung, “Semper Reformanda,” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), October 27, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/semper-reformanda/>.

Presbyteries should distinguish the biblical convictions of their polity from components derived from common grace governing authorities for the sake of greater kingdom witness and impact. Presbyteries should identify non-missional “sacred cows” and make mission-aligned, biblical decisions to reshape polity practices for more effective mission.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings revealed that further research is needed to examine the relationship between covenant epistemology and missionality. The research revealed that ENLs who embraced covenant epistemology led with a more consistent missional posture. Further research in the area of discipling pastors and ENLs in covenant epistemology could potentially lead to more robust missional leadership and kingdom impact.

Second, a lot of work on generational theory has been done without a robust biblical lens. The discipline of generational theory is one that needs the Christian voice to cull for insights that would facilitate the church in understanding the implications and needed ministry practices for generational differentiation.

## Bibliography

- Ashford, Bruce Riley. "A Theological Sickness unto Death: Philip Rieff's Prophetic Analysis of Our Secular Age." *Themelios* 43, no. 1 (April 2018): 34–44.
- Bailey, Justin Ariel. *Reimagining Apologetics: The Beauty of Faith in a Secular Age*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020.
- Balmer, Randall. "Evangelical: Religious Right Has Distorted the Faith." Interview by Linda Werthheimer. *Morning Edition*, NPR, June 23, 2006.  
<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5502785>.
- Bavinck, J. H. *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*. Phillipsburg, NJ.: P & R Publishing.
- Berger, Peter L. *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970.
- Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Bliese, Richard. "The Mission Matrix: Mapping Out the Complexities of a Missional Ecclesiology." *Word & World* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 237–48.
- Burge, Ryan, host. "The Rise of the 'Nones' (And What It Means for Society)." November 1, 2021. *Art of Manliness*. Podcast,  
<http://www.artofmanliness.com/character/behavior/rise-of-the-religious-nones/>.
- Burton, Tara Isabella. *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*. New York: Hatchett Book Group, Inc., 2020.
- Chatraw, Josh, and Karen Swallow Prior. *Cultural Engagement: A Crash Course in Contemporary Issues*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019.
- Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church*. Contours of Christian Theology. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.
- Codrington, Graeme. "Detailed Introduction to Generational Theory." *Tomorrowtoday*, August 6, 2008, 1–16.
- Cosper, Mike, host. "Boomers, the Big Sort, and Really, Really Big Churches." June 29, 2021. Episode 2 in *The Rise & Fall of Mars Hill*. Podcast.  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/mars-hill-podcast-boomers-big-sort-hybels-warren-driscoll.html>.
- Deckman, Melissa. "Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Show." *Religion in Public: Exploring the Mix of Sacred and Secular*, February 10, 2020.



<https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/>.

DeYoung, Kevin. "Semper Reformanda." *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), October 27, 2016. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/semper-reformanda/>.

Dreyer, Wim A. "Missional Ecclesiology as the Basis for a New Church Order: A Case Study." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69, no. 1 (June 10, 2013): 5.

Duffy, Bobby. *The Generation Myth: Why When You're Born Matters Less than You Think*. New York: Basic Books, 2021.

Ford, Phil, and J.F. Martel. "Weird Studies." *Living and Dying in a Secular Age: On Charles Taylor and Disenchantment*, 2012, <https://www.weirdstudies.com/93>.

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God. A Theology of Lordship*. Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co, 1987.

Goheen, Michael W. "My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism." Lecture presented at the Cultural Apologetics & Communication, Covenant Theological Seminary, January 9, 2021.

———. "My Journey to Missional Neo-Calvinism." Covenant Theological Seminary, January 7, 2021.

———. *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

Grenz, Stanley J. *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1996.

Harris, Malcolm. *Kids These Days: Human Capital and the Making of Millennials*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2017.

Hooker, Paul. "What Is Missional Ecclesiology?," August 2009, 9.

Horner, David. *When Missions Shapes the Mission You and Your Church Can Reach the World*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011.

Howe, Dr. Neil. "What the Generational Cycle Theory Can Tell Us About Our Present Age." Podcast. Hosted by Brett McKay, September 20, 2016. <https://www.artofmanliness.com/character/behavior/podcast-236-generational-cycle-theory-can-tell-us-present-age/>.

Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

- Katz, Roberta R., Sarah Ogilvie, Jane Shaw, and Linda Woodhead. *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021.
- Keller, Timothy, and Dick Kaufmann. *The Gospel and the Heart*. San Diego: Harbor Church Planting Center, 1999.
- Kosmin, Barry A., Ariela Keysar, Ryan Cragun, and Juhem Navarro-Rivera. "American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population." A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey. Hartford, CT: Trinity College, 2008. [http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES\\_08.pdf](http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/NONES_08.pdf).
- Leithart, Peter J. *Against Christianity*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.
- Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity: A Revised and Enlarged Edition, with a New Introduction, of the Three Books, the Case for Christianity, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality*. New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1986.
- Liana, Willow. "All the Lonely People: The Atomized Generation." *Erraticus*, March 11, 2020. <https://erraticus.co/2020/03/11/atomized-generation-community-atomization-loneliness/>.
- Lukianoff, Greg, and Jonathan Haidt. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.
- MacIver, Robert M. *The Challenge of the Passing Years: My Encounter with Time*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971.
- Mannheim, Karl. *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*. Edited by Paul Kecskemeti. London: FB & c Ltd, Dalton House, 2018.
- Marcel, Gabriel. *Creative Fidelity*. Translated by Robert Rosthal. New York: Fordham University Press, 2002.
- Meek, Esther L. *Longing to Know*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003.
- . *Loving to Know: Introducing Covenant Epistemology*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011.
- Menand, Louis. "It's Time to Stop Talking About 'Generations.'" *The New Yorker*, October 11, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/18/its-time-to-stop-talking-about-generations>.

- Myers, Ken. *All God's Children & Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1989.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1995.
- . *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Reprinted. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996.
- Nichols, Stephen J. *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to The Passion of the Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008.
- Niemandt, C.J.P. "Trends in Missional Ecclesiology." *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68, no. 1, 2012: 9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i1.1198>.
- Palmer, Parker J. *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.
- Pearce, Joseph. "What Is Christendom?" *The Imaginative Conservative* (blog), August 10, 2014. <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2014/08/christendom.html>.
- Pearcey, Nancy. *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018.
- Penner, Myron B. *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013.
- Polanyi, Michael. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Reinhard, Rick. "Churches Are Closing. It's a Challenge for Local Governments." *Governing: The Future of States and Localities*, April 13, 2021.
- Rieff, Philip. *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*. 40th anniversary ed. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006.
- Rieff, Philip, and Kenneth S. Piver. *My Life among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority*. Sacred Order/Social Order, v. 1. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006.
- Roberts, Wes, and Glenn Marshall. *Reclaiming God's Original Intent for the Church*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004.
- Rutt, Rev. Steven. "An Analysis of Roland Allen's Missionary Ecclesiology: Would He Still Have Anything to Say to Us Today?" *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*. 29, no. 3 (July 2012): 200–213.

- Ryder, Norman B. "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change." *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (December 1965): 843–61.
- Schaeffer, Francis A. *The God Who Is There*. 30th anniversary ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998.
- Seel, John. *The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2018.
- Sire, James W. *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*. Second edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015.
- Smith, James K. A. *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.
- Sonea, Cristian. "Missio Dei: The Contemporary Missionary Paradigm and Its Reception in the Eastern Orthodox Missionary Theology." *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 9 (January 25, 2017): 70–91.
- Stetzer, Ed. *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003.
- Stott, John R. W. *Christian Mission in the Modern World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. First Harvard University Press paperback edition. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018.
- Tomlin, Graham. *The Provocative Church*. London: SPCK, 2002.
- Twenge, Jean M. *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled and More Miserable than Ever Before*. New York: Free Press, 2006.
- VanDrunen, David. *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J., Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Slesman, eds. *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*. Cultural Exegesis. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.
- Weber, Max. *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*. Edited by Chad Wellmon and Paul Reitter. New York Review Books Classics. New York: New York Review Books, 2019.
- Wolters, Albert M. *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005.

Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006.

Wright, N. T. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. New York: HarperOne, 2008.