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Engaging the Theology of Mission in Rural Ministry

By
Travis J. Shafer

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

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of rural congregations lead their congregants to have missional impact in their communities. The assumption of this study was that pastors and congregants in rural ministry need to engage their communities with the gospel. This requires the use of the theology of mission. It was assumed that missional theology would prove to be a helpful tool in aiding pastors and congregants in rural ministry contexts to engage their communities redemptively.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with four pastors who have experience in rural ministry. The interviews revealed seven challenges common to rural ministry: limited resources, lack of pastoral leadership, oversaturation of churches, congregations struggle when the community struggles, defining the role of the congregation in the community, confusion over theological language, and defining the role of the congregation members in evangelism and outreach.

The literature review and analysis of the four interviews focused on how the theology of mission can help inform and equip pastors of rural congregations to engage their communities with the gospel.

This study concluded that rural pastors often feel isolated and ignored. It also concluded that rural ministry is an area that needs attention from the wider church. Rural ministry is often over-looked, and this results in large areas of the United States being unreached by the gospel. If the church wants to remain faithful to the commands of Jesus Christ, the church must go intentionally to rural, suburban, and urban contexts to make disciples. To address these challenges, this study identified practices that should be implemented by rural pastors, congregation members, seminaries, and denominations.

Soli Deo Gloria

“Every village, community, crossroad, and town in North America is a location where people need to hear the gospel.”

— Mark Clifton, foreword to
Replanting Rural Churches.

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Abbreviations

CSB Christian Standard Bible

Chapter 1

Introduction

Christopher J.H. Wright, missiologist and Anglican clergyman, states that “God himself has a mission. ... And as part of that divine mission, God has called into existence a people to participate with God in the accomplishment of that mission. All *our* mission flows from the prior mission of God.”¹ The people God has called into being to participate in God’s mission is the church. John Frame, theologian and philosopher asks, “What is the church? Essentially the church is the people of God in all ages. Notice that the church is people, not buildings, although it is right that the people have buildings in which to meet. ... The Church is not, however, just any people. It is the people in covenant with God, through Jesus Christ.”²

Like Frame, David E. Fitch, author of *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission* points out that “the church is more than a space where some individuals gather to affirm they believe in something. It is the place where God’s people discern his presence and submit to Christ’s concrete rule.”³ Both Fitch and Frame point out that the church is not a building. The church is a gathered people. Beth Felker Jones, author and professor of systematic theology at Wheaton College, defines the church as “the people of God, called out to bear visible witness, in the body and as a

¹ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 24.

² John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2013), 1019.

³ David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), 32.

body, to the free and transformative gift of grace we have received in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁴ Jones, along with Frame and Wright identifies the church as a people called together by God for a specific purpose: to participate in God’s mission and to be in relationship with God.

Frame writes, “It is through the church that God’s kingdom comes to all the ends of the earth. The church is not the church unless it is in action, that is, unless it is in mission.”⁵ What is the mission of the church? J. Mack Stiles, pastor and author writes, “The church is God’s strategic plan for evangelism with one overarching mission: to go to all peoples to make disciples, teaching them to obey everything Christ has commanded – including forming new churches (Matt. 28:18-20).”⁶ Stiles points out that the church exists to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Pastors Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert put these elements from Frame and Stiles together. They conclude that the mission of the church is carried out by making disciples of all nations and gathering those disciples into churches. The mission of the church is also carried out “in the power of the Spirit.”⁷ Disciples are gathered into churches so that they may worship the Lord and live in obedience to his commands. In short, the church exists to be obedient and faithful to Jesus’ command in Matthew 28:16-20.

⁴ Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 195.

⁵ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1033.

⁶ J. Mack Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 71.

⁷ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), chap. 2, Kindle.

Christ commanded his disciples to go to all nations and told them that they would be his “witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”⁸ Throughout the centuries since Christ’s resurrection and ascension the gospel message has reached from Jerusalem to Russia, from Judea to Brazil, from Samaria to the arctic tundra of Alaska. The gospel message continues to spread through the efforts of evangelistic missionary organizations and local congregations that send missionaries. The gospel needs to go “wherever there is ignorance or rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁹

According to the U.S. Census Bureau there are 60 million people, around 19 percent of the population of the United States of America, living in rural areas in the United States.¹⁰ Brad Roth, author of *God’s Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church* states, “The global church would be incomplete without the rural church. In our ever more urbanizing age, rural has become marginal, and it is at the margins that the church discovers its identity and calling. The church identifies with the margins and commits to being present among ‘every nation and tribe and language and people’ (Revelation 14:6).”¹¹ Rural America, with a population of 60 million people, is a mission

⁸ Acts 1:8, CSB.

⁹ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 27.

¹⁰ “How Does the U.S. Census Bureau Define ‘Rural?’”, Rural America, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://gis-portal.data.census.gov/arcgis/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=7a41374f6b03456e9d138cb014711e01>.

¹¹ Brad Roth, *God’s Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), 31.

field that cannot be ignored. Brad Roth points out in his book that rural areas are often “either idealized or disparaged.”¹² He continues,

In both of these ways – idealizing and disparaging – we fail to meet rural communities and congregations on their own terms and to recognize the universality of human aspirations and fears. We need a new approach, one that sees rural communities not as places to pity or lionize but simply as *places*, places open to God’s goodness and in need of God’s grace.¹³

Rural America needs the gospel as much as any urban or metro area. According to a study published in 1990 by the Glenmary Research Center in Atlanta, Georgia “at least 40 percent of the people in rural America are unchurched.”¹⁴

Mark Clifton, Senior Director of Replant North American Mission Board, wrote the foreword in a book titled, *Replanting Rural Churches: God’s Plan and Call for the Middle of Nowhere*. In the foreword he points out that rural areas are often viewed as insignificant and are therefore ignored by those who live in cities and urban centers. Rural areas are regarded as contributing nothing to culture as well, and this renders them unimportant to many. Clifton writes that “every village, community, crossroad, and town in North America is a location where people need to hear the gospel.”¹⁵

¹² Roth, *God’s Country*, 15.

¹³ Roth, *God’s Country*, 17.

¹⁴ Shannon Jung, et al., *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 16.

¹⁵ Mark Clifton, foreword to *Replanting Rural Churches: God’s Plan and Call for the Middle of Nowhere*, by Matt Henslee and Kyle Bueermann (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2019), 11.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of rural churches lead congregants to have missional impact in their communities.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors describe their theology for the priority of leading congregants to have missional impact in their communities?
2. How do pastors preach to motivate congregants to have missional impact in their communities?
3. What challenges do pastors experience as they lead their congregants to have missional impact in their communities?

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for pastors of rural congregations that want to lead their congregants to have missional impact in their communities. The findings are relevant for pastors of rural churches, congregants, and lay leaders in rural congregations who seek to pursue church health. This study could equip rural pastors who desire to learn how to guide and equip their congregations to have missional impact in the communities in which they live. This study could also benefit congregants of rural churches who desire to work for the benefit and wellbeing of their local communities while also spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. This study could also be of benefit to mission agencies within denominations that have multiple rural congregations within their denomination. Leaders within rural churches could also benefit from this study by

gaining greater insight into the specific challenges that arise in rural ministry contexts. This study could also bring more attention to the specific needs that arise in rural ministry.

Definition of Terms

In the context of this study, the terms are defined as follows:

- Rural: for the purpose of this study, rural is defined as an area that is non-urban with a population of less than 5,000 people.
- Missional: for the purpose of this study, missional refers to the understanding that the identity of the church is tied to its purpose. The church exists to be God's missionary agent in the world.
- Missional Impact: for the purpose of this study, missional impact is defined as the impact a local congregation has on the community where it is located that comes directly from the local congregation's work to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of rural churches lead congregants to have missional impact in their communities. Three relevant areas of literature were reviewed to undergird the qualitative research. The first area focused on the biblical images of salt and light in Matthew 5:13-16 as descriptors of the identity of Jesus' disciples. The second area focused on the church as the gathering of Jesus' disciples into community. The third area focused on the mission of the church.

Salt and Light: Toward a Missional Reading of Matthew 5:13-16

To gain a deeper understanding of the mission of God's people in the world, it is helpful to give attention to Matthew 5:13-16. This section of Jesus' preaching is found in the context of what is commonly known as "The Sermon on the Mount." Pastor and author Earl F. Palmer states, "No part of the New Testament has received the same amount of scholarly attention as have the three chapters we call the Sermon on the Mount. This close attention began very early in the Christian church."¹⁶ The early church father, Augustine of Hippo described the Sermon on the Mount as "a perfect standard of the Christian life."¹⁷ The Sermon on the Mount has also had an impact on non-Christians

¹⁶ Earl F. Palmer, *The Enormous Exception: Meeting Christ in the Sermon on the Mount* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 16.

¹⁷ Quoted by R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), chap. 1, Kindle.

as well. For example, Gandhi, Nietzsche, and Ayn Rand were all influenced to some extent by Jesus' words recorded in the Sermon on the Mount.¹⁸

This section of material is the first of five major discourses in the Gospel of Matthew.¹⁹ It is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount because of the location of its delivery. Verses one and two of chapter five give us the setting and occasion of the sermon itself: "When he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him."²⁰ Matthew does not supply us with a specific location of this teaching.²¹ Matthew does, however, tell us that Jesus was seated while he taught. Teaching from a seated position was "the traditional posture of a teacher or rabbi."²² It is also noteworthy that Jesus' disciples sat around him while he taught. This casts Jesus "in the role of a rabbinic teacher; sitting was the posture for authoritative teaching (cf. 13:2; 24:3; 26:55), as he also did in the synagogue (23:2; Luke 4:20)."²³

There are two separate groups that are present for the teaching as well. There is the general crowd that was introduced in Matthew 4:25 as well as Jesus' disciples. The reason Jesus moved into the hills was due to the size of the crowd following him. The

¹⁸ Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount*, chap. 1, Kindle. See also, Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2019), 3.

¹⁹ Akin, *Exalting Jesus*, 4. For a more in-depth discussion of the Matthean Discourses, see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 8 – 10.

²⁰ Matthew 5:1, CSB.

²¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 157.

²² Akin, *Exalting Jesus in The Sermon on the Mount*, 6.

²³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 157 – 158.

teaching itself, however, is directed toward Jesus' disciples as the main audience of the sermon itself.²⁴

There is a distinction throughout Matthew between those who are Jesus' disciples, and those who are not. Simply put, a disciple is a student.²⁵ "A disciple is a follower, one who trusts and believes in a teacher and follows that teacher's words and example. Therefore, to be a disciple is to be in relationship...Consequently, being a disciple of Jesus Christ is being in relationship with Jesus – it is seeking to be like Jesus."²⁶

The term disciple draws a distinction between those who follow Jesus and those who do not. Although the discourse and content of the Sermon on the Mount is directed at the disciples (Jesus' followers), it is made clear in Matthew 7:28-29 that the crowd was listening in on Jesus' teaching.²⁷ It can thus be concluded that this sermon functions as an invitation to those who were listening to become followers of Jesus alongside the disciples.²⁸ The invitation implies that others may too become disciples.

The Sermon on the Mount "begins with a manifesto on the values of the kingdom of heaven which is carefully constructed for easy memorization and maximum impact."²⁹ The Sermon on the Mount starts with what is commonly known as the beatitudes. John R. W. Stott, pastor and theologian, points out that "the beatitudes are Christ's own

²⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 156.

²⁵ Anthony J. Carter, "What is a Disciple?" *Tabletalk* (June 2018), 8.

²⁶ Carter, "What is a Disciple?" *Tabletalk* (June 2018), 8.

²⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 156.

²⁸ Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 103 – 104.

²⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 159.

specification of what every Christian ought to be. All these qualities are to characterize all his followers.”³⁰ Stott argues that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ “own description of what he wanted his followers to be and to do.”³¹

The beatitudes, then, are to be understood as Jesus’ description of the character of his followers.³² The beatitudes are pronouncements of Jesus’ blessing on his disciples.³³ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, pastor, and theologian, points out that these are more than just pronouncements of blessing. In Matthew 5:3-12, Jesus had “been delineating the Christian character. Here at 5:13, Jesus moves forward and applies his description. Having seen what the Christian is, we now come to consider how the Christian should manifest this.”³⁴ What is it about these metaphors that warranted use from Jesus in describing the characteristics of his disciples? According to Lloyd-Jones, the use of salt and light help followers of Christ answer a crucial and urgent question: “What is to be the relationship of Christian people to society and the world?”³⁵

³⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 31.

³¹ Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 15.

³² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 129.

³³ Daniel A. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in The Sermon on the Mount*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2019), 5.

³⁴ Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 129.

³⁵ Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 130.

The Salt of the Earth

In Matthew 5:13-16, Jesus uses the provocative imagery of salt and light to describe his disciples. Jesus tells his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth,” and “You are the light of the world.” The images of salt and light used by Jesus are “an affirmation of the unique identity of the disciples, an identity that depends on the gracious activity of their heavenly Father.”³⁶ In the Greek, “You is emphatic and restrictive: Jesus is not talking about people in general but specifically about his followers.”³⁷ It is noteworthy that it is a “communal, plural address.”³⁸

The community of believers are both salt and light in the world. To effectively witness to the world, believers must do so in the context of the believing community: the church. Matthew 5:13-16 serves as a challenge for the Christian community “to fulfill its corporate mission of serving as salt and light for the world.”³⁹ This corporate aspect of salt and light, however, does not diminish the necessity of individual faithfulness to be salt and light. This corporate, communal aspect of being salt and light will be explored further in the next section.

³⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Volume 33A of World Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 33a:101.

³⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 104.

³⁸ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 1: The Christbook Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), Vol. 1:187.

³⁹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 44.

Salt and light both function by having an impact on something.⁴⁰ Salt will impact food that it is used on, while light impacts darkness. The specific type of impact that salt and light have are not made clear in this section of Matthew 5:13-16. This does not, however, hinder the imagery used by Jesus. There are various ways that Jesus' disciples may function as salt in the world. Jesus did not elaborate in this way. Instead, Jesus crafted this imagery of salt with a warning of judgement.

For those who fail to maintain their status as his followers, they will be like saltless salt: worthless and thrown out. Yet, even with this element of judgement, it allows readers to think carefully about how believers may function as salt in the world. Scot McKnight, professor of New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, points out that “the image begs the listeners to use its evocative powers for the various ways Jesus' followers can influence their communities.”⁴¹

Salt had a variety of uses in the ancient world.⁴² In the Bible there are more than thirty references to salt.⁴³ Debate exists among scholars as to the exact use that Jesus is pointing to in reference to his disciples. One of the most important roles that salt played in the ancient world is its use for preservation. In environments that do not have access to ice for preserving food, salt serves a significant need in meat preservation. Salt allowed meat to be stored for longer periods of time, thus allowing meat to be stored for later use.

⁴⁰ Scot McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 56.

⁴¹ McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 57.

⁴² “History of Salt,” Salt Works, Accessed August 24, 2021, <https://seasalt.com/history-of-salt>.

⁴³ “History of Salt,” Salt Works, Accessed August 24, 2021, <https://seasalt.com/history-of-salt>.

The use of salt as a preservative also helps bring clarity to Jesus' view of how his disciples will function in society.

An important aspect of salt's use for preservation is its ability to prevent decay. A new dimension of the church's role in the world comes into focus when thinking of salt's use as a preservative to prevent decay. The followers of Jesus are to impact the world in a way that prevents decay. John MacArthur rightly points out that "the world needs salt because it is corrupt and it needs light because it is dark."⁴⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount states that when salt is rubbed into meat, the salt serves to "preserve it against those agencies that are tending to its putrefaction."⁴⁵

The church, as well as individual Christians, are to impact the world around them positively. Surely the act of preservation is positive. The world is in a state of moral decay, and the Bible presents this fact clearly.⁴⁶ Sinclair B. Ferguson, pastor, and theologian, points out that society will "rot and deteriorate" when left to itself. He continues, "Without the influence of the gospel, society will suffer moral decay and become putrid, unfit for the consumption of good men and women."⁴⁷

Individual Christians are to serve as witnesses and as examples. To be "the salt of the earth" is to live into the kingdom ethics that Jesus presented in the beatitudes. Lloyd-Jones points out that Matthew 5:3-12 describes the character of a follower of Jesus, and

⁴⁴ John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1985), 237.

⁴⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 133.

⁴⁶ Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 132.

⁴⁷ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 57.

5:13-16 functions as an application of that description.⁴⁸ It is helpful to see the function of believers in light of salt's use as a preservative, but due to the amount of uses salt had at the time, as well as in our time, it may be best to refrain from singling out one use of salt and applying it definitively to the exclusion of other uses of salt that could inform how Christians are to impact their communities as "the salt of the earth." Grant R. Osbourne, in his commentary on Matthew, argues that the metaphor of salt serves as a reminder that Christ's disciples are "to make an impact on the world."⁴⁹

The Light of the World

Jesus' second description of his followers in this passage is that they are the light of the world. While the metaphor of salt carried a warning of judgment for those who fail to live faithfully as disciples (they will be thrown out), the metaphor of light is positive and viewed from multiple angles. John MacArthur points out that "whereas salt is hidden, light is obvious. Salt works secretly, while light works openly. Salt works from within, light from without. Salt is the more indirect influence of the gospel, while light is more direct communication."⁵⁰ As MacArthur points out, light is easily discernible in the dark. Even the smallest amount of light will have an impact on the darkness around it.

Jesus first uses the imagery of a city on a hill as an illustration of how the disciples are light in the world. A city on a hill is highly visible, especially at night when the lights are aglow. This imagery has an even greater impact when we remember the

⁴⁸ Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 129.

⁴⁹ Grant R. Osbourne, *Matthew*, Vol. 1 of Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), Vol. 1: chap. 12, Kindle.

⁵⁰ MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 244.

darkness that pervaded the ancient world. There were no electric lamps, no lights along the roads leading into cities, and light pollution was far from being a problem.

Ferguson points out that this imagery of a city on a hill impacts rural listeners differently than it would impact those from urban areas.⁵¹ Daniel L. Akin, pastor and author, adds that “God gives us an influential position, like a light on a hill that guides people safely home. This light is not for a few; it is for the world. It should attract. It should give direction. It should stand out near and far.”⁵²

The fact that the light is for many is also shown in the imagery of a lamp in a home. Jesus says in Matthew 5:15 that a lamp is lit in a house so that it “gives light for all who are in the house.”⁵³ No one would light a lamp, whose function is to produce light, and immediately put it under a basket so that its light is dampened. Akin points out that this is almost comical and nonsensical.⁵⁴ The purpose of the lamp is to give light. France also points out the absurdity of lighting a lamp and then placing it under a basket.⁵⁵ This imagery of a lamp in a home is connected directly to the life of Jesus’ disciples in view of the unbelieving world. “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 63.

⁵² Akin, *Exalting Jesus*, 20.

⁵³ Matthew 5:15.

⁵⁴ Akin, *Exalting Jesus*, 21.

⁵⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 176.

⁵⁶ Matthew 5:16.

Light itself is one of the most common symbols found in both Old and New Testaments.⁵⁷ In the Old Testament, Israel as a nation is viewed as a light to the nations.⁵⁸ As with this text in Matthew 5:13-16, many of the passages that view Israel as a light to the nations do so with a missional context. For instance, Isaiah 49:6 says that God will make Israel “a light for the nations, to be [God’s] salvation to the end of the earth.” This missional framework of Israel as a light to the nations fits nicely with Jesus’ view of his followers being both the salt and the light of the earth. Christopher J.H. Wright states that “the imagery chosen by Jesus undoubtedly echoes the task given by YHWH to Israel that they were to be ‘a light to the nations.’”⁵⁹ The light given off by the lamp on the lampstand is meant to give light to others. According to Jesus our good deeds are to “shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works and give glory to [our] Father in heaven.”⁶⁰

Good Works

As disciples live faithful lives, their good works will be a powerful witness to those around them. The light that shines forth from the life of Christ’s disciples will illumine the darkness of the unbelieving world. Some will be attracted to the light, while others will retreat into the darkness. John 3:19 reminds us that “[t]he light has come into

⁵⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, chap. 12, Kindle.

⁵⁸ See Isaiah 42:6; Isaiah 49:6; Isaiah 52:10; Isaiah 60:3; John 8:12; Acts 13:47; Acts 26:23; Colossians 1:12-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; 1 John 1:5-7.

⁵⁹ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 390.

⁶⁰ Matthew 5:16.

the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.”⁶¹

Jeannine K. Brown points out that “[t]hose who follow Jesus, in line with faithful Israel, are declared to be salt and light for the world. These images evoke the covenantal identity of God’s faithful people as well as their mission flowing from that identity.”⁶²

Christopher J.H. Wright also sees this text as missional in its scope.⁶³ The lives of Jesus’ followers are to attract “people ultimately to God himself, so that he is glorified.”⁶⁴ The good deeds are to bring glory to our God, not to ourselves. Theologian Douglas R. A. Hare states that “[t]he church’s good works are to function in the secular world as indelibly etched pictures of the Father’s love.”⁶⁵ This way of thinking (deeds that glorify God) is directly in line with passages from the Old Testament that view Israel as the light to the nations (see especially Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 52:10; 60:3).⁶⁶

Scott McKnight also sees Matthew 5:13-16 as missional in its force. According to McKnight, Jesus’ use of this imagery “anticipates the Gentile mission.”⁶⁷ Hare also sees an anticipatory aspect of this text: “These verses are an anticipation of the missionary

⁶¹ John 3:19.

⁶² Jeannine K. Brown, *Matthew*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015), 56.

⁶³ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 144.

⁶⁴ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 144.

⁶⁵ Hare, *Matthew*, 45.

⁶⁶ See, Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011) for a major discussion of the church’s missional identity considering the biblical story as a whole.

⁶⁷ McKnight, *Sermon on the Mount*, 58.

imperative with which the Gospel will close (28:18-20).”⁶⁸ The worldwide mission of the disciples is clearly in view in this text, even if the disciples did not yet fully understand that Jesus would send them out to the nations with the gospel.

It is clear from this text in Matthew that Jesus’ followers are to be different from those who do not believe in Jesus. Pastor and author Tullian Tchividjian, in his book *Unfashionable: Making a Difference in the World by Being Different*, points out that “Christians make a difference in the world by being different from it, not by being the same.”⁶⁹ It is precisely this distinctiveness of the disciples that allows Jesus’ followers to have an impact on the world around them. “You are the salt of the earth” and “you are the light of the world” imply that the disciples are both salt *and* light for the world around them.⁷⁰ Both “earth” and “world” point to non-believers that the disciples encounter.⁷¹ In other words, the community of Jesus’ followers are to live distinctive lives in order to make Jesus known to others. Christopher J.H. Wright points out, “Salt and light are distinctive, penetrating, transforming-utterly contrasting to corruption and darkness. That is what Christians are called to be.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Hare, *Matthew*, 44.

⁶⁹ Tullian Tchividjian, *Unfashionable: Making a Difference in the World By Being Different* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2009), 22.

⁷⁰ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 104-105.

⁷¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 104-105.

⁷² Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 125.

The intention of being “distinctive, penetrating, transforming”⁷³ is for the purpose of being “a distinctive people on display for the nations.”⁷⁴ Jesus directs his disciples to be outward in their living by telling them to “let [their] light shine before others, so that they may see [their] good works and give glory to [their] Father in heaven.”⁷⁵ Disciples are not to live in a way that is secretive or in a way that retreats from those who are not disciples. Michael W. Goheen points out that disciples “are not to retreat and live their lives in a corner far from the gaze of outsiders. They are to live as a community visible to the world. This is God’s design for them. God attaches his name to his people. They live before others, aware that the glory of God is at stake in their lives.”⁷⁶

Grant R. Osborne, professor and New Testament theologian, points out that “the evangelistic thrust” of Matthew 5:13-16 is clear in verse 16.⁷⁷ Osborne observes that “the essence of the Sermon on the Mount is stated here. The citizens of the kingdom must be salt and light, and their goal is to reach the world with the light of the gospel.”⁷⁸ Osborne and Goheen agree that disciples are not to be in isolation from the world, they are to be making a difference in the world around them.

⁷³ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 125.

⁷⁴ Michael W. Goheen, “A History and Introduction to a Missional Reading of the Bible.” In *Reading the Bible Missionally*, ed. Michael W. Goheen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 23.

⁷⁵ Matthew 5:16.

⁷⁶ Goheen, “A History and Introduction to a Missional Reading of the Bible,” 23.

⁷⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, chap. 12, Kindle.

⁷⁸ Osborne, *Matthew*, chap. 12, Kindle.

Summary of Salt and Light

Disciples of Jesus are meant to be agents of change in the world around them. They are to be unique and different from those in the world who are not disciples. The images of salt and light help Jesus' disciples understand their relationship to the world and society around them. Disciples of Jesus are called to be salt and light in and to the world. Jesus' disciples must remain distinct from the world or else they risk being useless to the world. The next section will explore the gathering of God's people into community: the church.

The Church: God's Gathered People

In Matthew 5:13-16 discussed above, Jesus tells his disciples that they are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” These images function as assertions “of the unique identity of the disciples, an identity that depends on the gracious activity of their heavenly Father.”⁷⁹ The fact that these images are a “communal, plural address” is also important.⁸⁰ If these images of Jesus' disciple as “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” are indeed communal, then what is the larger context of this community that disciples find themselves in because they belong to Christ?

⁷⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 101.

⁸⁰ Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 1: The Christbook. Matthew 1-12*, 187.

The Community of Disciples

Neil Darragh, a pastor, and theologian from New Zealand, states clearly that “[t]he ‘church’ is the community of the disciples of Christ.”⁸¹ There is no distinction in the Bible between Christians and disciples. The two are synonymous.⁸² To recognize the communal aspects of the images of salt and light employed by Jesus in Matthew 5:13-16 is to recognize that disciples of Jesus are called to belong to him in a specific context. That context is what we know as the church. Edward W. Klink III, pastor, and author points out, “Every Christian is not simply called by God in abstraction, free-floating in some mystical personal relationship, but divinely appointed and assigned to be an active, ministering member of a local church.”⁸³

Recognizing the church as the community of disciples of Jesus is a helpful starting place for defining the church. The study of the church is known as ecclesiology. This English term is derived from the Greek word that is translated as “church” in the New Testament.⁸⁴ The Greek term, *ekklesia* “occurs 114 times in the New Testament. No other Greek word is translated ‘church’ in English versions. But *ekklesia* was used in the New Testament period to describe more than the gatherings of Christians. The word was

⁸¹ Neil Darragh, *But What is the Church For?: What is the Mission of the Local Church?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021), chap. 1, Kindle.

⁸² Grant R. Castleberry, “The Mandate of Discipleship.” In *Tabletalk* (June 2018), 7.

⁸³ Edward, W. Klink III, *The Local Church: What it is and Why it Matters for Every Christian* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 36.)

⁸⁴ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 85.

often used in Greek cities to refer to assemblies called to perform specific tasks.”⁸⁵ The term *ekklesia* is used by Jesus only a few times as recorded in the Gospels, and each time it is in reference to the church.⁸⁶ This term is used by Paul to specifically “designate the communities that he established.”⁸⁷

This term has an important history of usage in the Old Testament, specifically the Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures known as the Septuagint (LXX). The Greek term *ekklesia* is used to translate the Hebrew term *qahal*.⁸⁸ “Paul pictured the Church in history from its beginning to his own day, as a single olive tree, from which some natural (Israelite) branches had been broken off through unbelief, to be replaced by some wild (Gentile) branches (Rom. 11:16-24).”⁸⁹ The use of the term *ekklesia* shows continuity between God’s promises and work in the nation of Israel, and God’s fulfillment and work through Jesus’ ministry and the formation and continuation of the church.

Schreiner concludes that “[t]he use of this expression with reference to Paul’s converts demonstrates that he conceived of the church as the true Israel, the new people of God, and the fulfillment of what God intended with Israel.”⁹⁰ While *ekklesia* was

⁸⁵ Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012), 7. See also, Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, “church, pictures,” in *A Concise Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), 35-36.

⁸⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Magnifying God in Christ: A Summary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 218.

⁸⁷ Schreiner, *Magnifying God in Christ*, 220.

⁸⁸ Schreiner, *Magnifying God in Christ*, 220.

⁸⁹ James I. Packer “The Nature of the Church”, in *Basics of the Faith: An Evangelical Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Carl F.H. Henry (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), chap. 36, Kindle.

⁹⁰ Schreiner, *Magnifying God in Christ*, 220.

clearly a word in use in the wider Greek speaking world of the First-Century A.D., the term became a clear way of describing the church for the New Testament authors.

The term *ekklesia*, however, is not the only term or image in the New Testament for the gathered community of Jesus' disciples. Mark Dever, in his book *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, makes a helpful observation regarding the images in the New Testament that describe the church:

God has inspired multiple images, each of which offers a different perspective, and none of which should so dominate our conception of the church that the depth and texture of understanding is lost. Though all are inspired, they are not interchangeable, nor are they all as comprehensive in their presentation of the nature and purpose of the church. The great images are familiar: the church as the people of God, the new creation, the fellowship or communion in faith, and of course, the body of Christ. The richness of descriptions of the church teaches us that no single image can comprehend all aspects of the church.⁹¹

These “image clusters” that Dever draws out of the Scripture are helpful in developing a more comprehensive definition of the church.⁹² After brief analysis of these “image clusters” found in the New Testament, Dever offers a definition of the church as “the *koinonia* or ‘fellowship’ of people who have accepted and entered into the reign of God.”⁹³ The people that have “accepted and entered into the reign of God” are Jesus’ disciples.⁹⁴ Thus, we can add to our definition of the church as the fellowship of the disciples of Christ who have accepted and entered the reign of God.

⁹¹ Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 10.

⁹² Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 10.

⁹³ Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 13.

⁹⁴ Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 13.

The Reign of God and the Church

The reign of God is another image in the New Testament that “refers to God’s rule or reign.”⁹⁵ O Palmer Robinson, in his book *Christ of the Consummation: The Testimony of the Four Gospels, Volume 1* states that “the church is the people of the Christ who have been constituted as an organized body of confessing believers (Matthew 16:18-19). The church is not identical with Messiah’s kingdom, but serves as the way of entrance into the kingdom as well as the community prepared to offer worship and service to their messianic King (Acts 2:42-47).”⁹⁶ Both Robinson and Dever make a distinction between the church and the kingdom of God or reign of God.

The kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven are two terms that are used synonymously in the New Testament and they both refer to “God’s sovereign reign and rule.”⁹⁷ Systematic theologian John M. Frame adds to this understanding of God’s reign and rule in his chapter on the kingdom of God in his book, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. Frame writes, “That God is King is a major theme of Scripture, from Exodus 15:18 on. The Psalms speak often of the rule of God. Psalms 93-99, especially, provide concentrated reflection on the fact that God reigns over all.”⁹⁸ Throughout Scripture, God is pictured as King, not only over Israel as his covenant people (Exodus 15:18; 1 Samuel 8:7), but also over all nations (Psalm 22:28).

⁹⁵ Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 12.

⁹⁶ O. Palmer Robertson, *Christ of the Consummation: The Testimony of the Four Gospels, Volume 1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022), 92.

⁹⁷ McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 154.

⁹⁸ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 91.

God's "kingdom is eternal (Ex. 15:18; Ps. 93:2), but also historical and temporal. God is King eternally by virtue of his divine nature. But the narrative of Scripture is a history of the coming of the kingdom."⁹⁹ It also clear that Jesus is the Messianic King, the King of the Jews. Jesus himself accepts this title during his trial under Pontius Pilate (Matt. 27:11).¹⁰⁰ The Book of Revelation identifies Jesus as "King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16; cf. 17:14)."¹⁰¹ Frame continues,

Since Jesus' ascension, the kingdom of God is the work of God through his people, bringing Jesus' kingship to bear on the whole world. It is bringing people to bow the knee to him, and every tongue confess his lordship. It is turning people into disciples, baptizing, and teaching them to observe everything that Jesus has taught us.¹⁰²

The work of the kingdom is carried out through God's people. The kingdom of God is God's sovereign rule and reign, but it is not identical with the church, the gathered community of God's people.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt Jr. states in his article, "God's Kingdom and the Scriptures," in the November 2021 issue of *Tabletalk* that "the biblical concept of God's kingdom is complex" but there are "three crucial facets of the kingdom that permeate the Scriptures: (1) God is the King of the kingdom; (2) creation is the place of the kingdom; (3) human beings are the servants of the kingdom."¹⁰³ God is King over all creation (Psalm 24:1). We also see that according to scripture all "human beings are the servants of God's

⁹⁹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 92.

¹⁰⁰ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 93.

¹⁰¹ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 93.

¹⁰² Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 93.

¹⁰³ Richard L. Pratt Jr., "God's Kingdom and the Scriptures." In *Tabletalk* (November 2021), 5.

kingdom. All kinds of people, doing all sorts of things, appear throughout the Bible. But above all, the Scriptures teach that human beings, in one way or another, will be used to bring about the spread of the kingdom throughout the earth.”¹⁰⁴

Palmer clarifies further the distinction between the kingdom of God and the church, “Though intimately connected with the kingdom of God, the church is not in itself altogether identical with the kingdom. The church may be regarded as the point of entrance for individuals into the kingdom.”¹⁰⁵ The kingdom of God is working through the church but is not identical with the church. This is to recognize that God’s work is not limited to the church alone. Because God is king – eternally and sovereignly – God’s work cannot be limited. “The Holy Spirit is active more widely and more unpredictably than just in the church.”¹⁰⁶

Ben Witherington III makes this point as well in his book *Imminent Domain: The Story of the Kingdom of God and Its Celebration*. Witherington III writes that we must be mindful that the kingdom of God is “a larger concept than either the church or Israel. God’s saving activity can happen outside either the Jewish or the Christian community.”¹⁰⁷ This differentiation is integral for the life of the church. Understanding that the church and the kingdom of God are not synonymous terms can help Christ’s disciples understand that the kingdom of God is not subject to their own denominational agendas, political agendas, or dependent upon the church’s success in its own strength.

¹⁰⁴ Richard L. Pratt Jr., “God’s Kingdom and the Scriptures.” In *Tabletalk* (November 2021), 6.

¹⁰⁵ Palmer, *Christ of the Consummation*, 113.

¹⁰⁶ Darragh, *But What is the Church For?*, chap. 6, Kindle.

¹⁰⁷ Ben Witherington III, *Imminent Domain: The Story of the Kingdom of God and Its Celebration*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 5.

Pratt Jr. is helpful in expanding this understanding:

But how can this divine plan ever succeed? Surely, sinful human beings will always fall short. Throughout the Old Testament, the faithful people of God longed and prayed for someone who would come and fulfill God's kingdom purposes. As New Testament believers, we [the church] know this person's name – Jesus of Nazareth. The eternal Son of the Father took on flesh and became one of us. As the perfectly righteous Son of David, He not only atoned for the sins of His kingdom servants on the cross, but He also rose from the dead and now sits on the heavenly throne of His father David. From there, He rules over all nations, pours out His Spirit on His people, and gathers more and more people into His kingdom through our proclamation of the gospel. When He returns in glory, Jesus will finish the task. He will spread the kingdom of God to every corner of the earth.¹⁰⁸

It is through Jesus Christ and his ministry that the kingdom of God has come to the earth and is now at work in the world through his people.

Thomas R. Schreiner, biblical theologian and author points out that “the unique element in Jesus' teaching about God's kingdom is its presence in Jesus' ministry.”¹⁰⁹ Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God contained both future and present elements. “In other words, the kingdom is already inaugurated but not yet consummated.”¹¹⁰ This means that while the kingdom of God has broken into this world through Jesus' first coming, the kingdom of God still has elements that will not be fully realized until Christ comes again.¹¹¹

The authors agree that the efficacy of the kingdom of God does not rely on God's people, but rather through the faithfulness of Jesus as the one who perfectly fulfilled

¹⁰⁸ Pratt Jr., “God's Kingdom and the Scriptures,” 7.

¹⁰⁹ Schreiner, *Magnifying God in Christ*, 22.

¹¹⁰ Schreiner, *Magnifying God in Christ*, 22.

¹¹¹ Schreiner, *Magnifying God in Christ*, 26.

God's kingdom purposes. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit is for the task of proclaiming the gospel (the good news of the kingdom) and for gathering more people through that proclamation into the kingdom.

The kingdom of God cannot be identified with the church as if the church were the only place that God's reign is being realized or expanded on earth. God's reign is universal and therefore God's reign, rule, and work extend far beyond the boundaries of Christ's church.¹¹² The church and the kingdom of God are not identical, but even so, they cannot be separated completely. Dever is again helpful when he says, "The relationship between the kingdom and the church can therefore be defined: *the kingdom of God creates the church.*"¹¹³ Systematic theologian Louis Berkhof, clarifies the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church writing:

[Believers] constitute a Kingdom in their relation to God in Christ as their Ruler, and a Church in their separateness from the world in devotion to God, and in their organic union with one another. As a Church they are called to be God's instrument in preparing the way for, and in introducing, the ideal order of things; and as a Kingdom they represent the initial realization of the ideal order among themselves.¹¹⁴

Although the church cannot simply be defined as the kingdom of God, and vice versa, there is significant overlap because Christians—those who belong to God through Jesus Christ—constitute the church and the church is part of the kingdom of God.

While the church and the kingdom of God are not identical, they should not be separated as the church is part of the kingdom of God. The church has an important role to play in the kingdom of God. These authors point out repeatedly that God has a plan for

¹¹² Wintherington III, *Imminent Domain*, 24.

¹¹³ Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 13.

¹¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 569.

the church to participate in furthering the kingdom on earth. In other words, the church exists for a purpose. The next literature section will focus on that purpose.

Understanding the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church is crucial for understanding the reason Jesus created the church as the gathered community of his disciples. Disciples of Jesus can be salt and light because the reign of God has come “into the inner lives of individual human beings and into the midst of the community of God’s people.”¹¹⁵

A Distinct Community

The call to discipleship comes from Jesus to individuals, even if those individuals are together fishing by the sea or mending their nets (Matthew 4:18-22). Those called to follow Christ as his disciples no doubt must decide to follow him on their own. As Jesus called more people to his side as his disciples, the group of disciples began to grow and become a gathered group of called individuals.

It is important to notice that the church was “only established with Jesus’ death and resurrection.”¹¹⁶ While it is true that the New Testament authors use the term *ekklesia* to refer to assemblies other than the church, the term is usually employed to speak directly of the church:

[T]he church in the [New Testament] represents those who belong to Jesus Christ. Sometimes [the church] is called the people of God, other times the body of Christ or the true Israel or the temple of God or God’s “assembly” (church) or synagogue. In every instance the church represents those who

¹¹⁵ Witherington III, *Imminent Domain*, 13.

¹¹⁶ Schreiner, *Magnifying God in Christ*, 217.

have experienced God's saving promises, who have repented of their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ.¹¹⁷

If the church is composed of "those who have experienced God's saving promises, who have repented of their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ," as Schreiner says, then it must mean that the church is distinct from those who do not have faith in Jesus Christ.¹¹⁸ Throughout the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, there is a divide between those who have faith in Jesus (his disciples) and those who do not have faith in him. Often those who do not put their faith in Jesus show themselves to be either indifferent or hostile to Jesus and his message.

There is a clear difference in the New Testament between the church and the world. Tchividjian's insight in his book, *Unfashionable: Making a Difference in the World by Being Different*, is particularly apropos here:

We need to remember that God has established his church as an alternative society, not to compete with or copy this world, but to offer a refreshing alternative to it. When we forget this, we inadvertently communicate to our culture that we have nothing unique to offer, nothing deeply spiritual or profoundly transforming.¹¹⁹

To recognize that the church is separate from the world, while still being in the world, is to recognize a fundamental element of what it means to be the church: "Christians make a difference in this world by being different from this world; they don't make a difference by being the same."¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Schreiner, *Magnifying God in Christ*, 224.

¹¹⁸ Schreiner, *Magnifying God in Christ*, 224.

¹¹⁹ Tchividjian, *Unfashionable*, 15.

¹²⁰ Tchividjian, *Unfashionable*, 9.

Mark Dever describes this distinction between the church and the world as integral:

The idea of a clearly defined community of people is central to God's action in both the Old and New Testaments. As demonstrated with Noah and his family, Abraham and his descendants, the nation of Israel, and the New Testament church, God has chosen to maintain a distinct and separate people for the purpose of displaying his character. God has always intended for a sharp, bright line to distinguish those who trust in him from those who do not. The lives of Christians together display visibly the gospel they proclaim audibly.¹²¹

God calls his people to be separate from the world and this theme is clearly present throughout all scripture.

The metaphors that Jesus used to describe his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:13-16, “the salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” both illustrate the fact that Jesus' disciples are not only distinct, as light is distinct from darkness, and salt is distinct from what is it used on, but are also to have a direct impact on the world around them. Both salt and light, as established above work by being different and impactful in how they are used.

Osborne states that “the kingdom people must make a difference in this world. Since believers are salt and light, they must be visible and change the nature of the world around them.”¹²² Jesus often used imagery in his teaching regarding the disciples that drew distinctions between the community of the disciples and those who were outside the community. For example, Jesus told his disciples that their love for one another would make them stand out, and in fact would mark them as belonging to him (John 13:34-35).

¹²¹ Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 40.

¹²² Osborne, *Matthew*, chap. 12, Kindle.

Although Jesus' disciples are called to be a separate community and distinct from the world, this is not to be exclusionary. Membership in this community is not closed off. Matthew 28:18-20 records Jesus' final words to his disciples as they were gathered on a hillside before Jesus ascended to the Father.

This section in Matthew is often called The Great Commission. We can see very clearly from Jesus' command to the disciples that the church was to be a community of disciples that made disciples. Jesus grounds the command in his authority, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth."¹²³ This command carries weight for all disciples in all places at all times because Jesus' authority is universal and eternal.¹²⁴ Jesus then commanded the disciples, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."¹²⁵

The church is open to people from all nations that will experience God's saving promises through the proclamation of the church and will repent of their sins and put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Therefore, the church can be defined as the people of God in all ages, called together in community, in obedience and service to God's kingdom reign, and sent into the world to be agents of change in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Disciples are to go to all people and make disciples. This requires evangelism.

¹²³ Matthew 28:18.

¹²⁴ Osborne, *Matthew*, chap. 122, Kindle. See also Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 18, Kindle.

¹²⁵ Matthew 28:20.

According to J. Mack Stiles, “Evangelism is teaching (heralding, proclaiming, preaching) the gospel (the message from God that leads us to salvation) with the aim (hope, desire, goal) to persuade (convince, convert).”¹²⁶ Evangelism then is telling others about Jesus with the intent of bringing others to repentance of their sins and faith in Jesus Christ. The community of disciples grows through evangelism.

The church is the people of God in all ages, called together in community, in obedience and service to God’s kingdom, and sent into the world to be agents of change in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Frame states, “It is through the church that God’s kingdom comes to all the ends of the earth. The church is not the church unless it is in action, that is, in other words, unless it is in mission.”¹²⁷ The mission of the church is how disciples live out their calling as “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” by being sent into the world as God’s kingdom agents.

Summary of The Church: God’s Gathered People

The church consists of disciples who have been called together and called out of the world through Jesus Christ. The church is God’s gathered people. It is through the communal life of the church that disciples unite to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” together in the world. God has called the church into existence through Jesus Christ. The church is sent into the world with a message for all people to hear. The church is called to be agents of change in the world in obedience and service to God’s kingdom and God’s mission in the world.

¹²⁶ Stiles, *Evangelism*, 27.

¹²⁷ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1033.

The Mission of the Church: The Church Sent

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of rural churches lead congregants to have missional impact in their communities. For pastors to lead their congregants to have missional impact in their communities, pastors must first understand God's purpose for the church.

The images of salt and light applied to the disciples by Jesus in Matthew 5:13-16 speak to the identity and function of Christ's disciples. Further reflection is needed on how disciples are to be salt and light in the world around them-particularly in the communities in which congregations are located. Theology of mission and the concept of missional church are helpful tools in understanding how disciples function as salt and light in their specific cultural context. This section is intended to help inform the reader on how to begin thinking about theology of mission and the concept of missional church and how it can relate to their own cultural context-whether as a pastor or congregant.

The Purpose of the Church: The Church Sent Out

The church is the people of God in all ages, called together in community, in obedience and service to God's kingdom, and sent into the world to be agents of change in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is a sent community. The Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 as discussed above shows that Jesus commanded his disciples to spread out from Jerusalem to go to the nations to make disciples. This outward orientation of the disciples (the church) is also evident in Acts 1:7-8. Like the Great Commission, this recorded teaching from Jesus was given to the disciples before Jesus ascended to heaven (the ascension is recorded in Acts 1:9-11). Jesus tells the disciples that they "will receive power when the Holy Spirit" comes upon

them, and that they “will be [Jesus’] disciples in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”¹²⁸

Jesus expects the disciples to go to the “the end of the earth.”¹²⁹ Jesus sent the disciples with a message.¹³⁰ Jesus sends the church as he was sent by the Father (John 17:18; 20:21) and the Father and the Son, after Christ’s ascension, sent the Holy Spirit to the church (John 15:26; 16:7). John R. Franke, author, and theologian, in his book *Missional Theology: An Introduction*, identifies this pattern of sending and being. Franke states,

The church is sent into the world after the pattern by which the Father sent the Son. The church is to be a sign of the kingdom of God through its proclamation of the gospel in word and deed, and as a community of persons who are committed both to practicing discipleship in the way of Jesus and to making disciples in keeping with Jesus’ last instructions to his followers in Matthew 28:18-20.¹³¹

The church is sent and indeed formed by Jesus for a purpose. Franke also rightly shows that the sending of the church is trinitarian. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are involved in the formation and sending of the church. “The sending of the Father and the sentness of the Son and the Spirit point to the being and action of the triune God as both sender and sent.”¹³²

¹²⁸ Acts 1:8-9.

¹²⁹ Acts 1:8.

¹³⁰ Ed Stetzer and David Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 39.

¹³¹ John R. Franke, *Missional Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2020), 45.

¹³² Franke, *Missional Theology*, 6.

Wright states that “[s]ending, in fact, is an activity of all three Persons of the Trinity. There is a missional dynamic within God himself in relation to the world.”¹³³ It can be rightly said that “God is, by God’s very nature, a missionary God. In a more classical theological rendering, it means mission is an attribute of God.”¹³⁴ Franke understands creation itself to be “a reflection of God’s expansive love, whereby the triune God brings into being another reality, that which is not God” and it is through creation that “the love of God expands beyond the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to include others.”¹³⁵

Wright and Franke rightly see the trinitarian nature of the mission of the church. Authors Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, in their book *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historic Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, highlight this as well:

God is a missionary God, and mission is rooted in the sending activity of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus’s statement to his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21b), is the most explicit biblical basis for this understanding. As the sending will of God was realized in the sending of the Son, so Jesus now sends the church. Through God’s sending of the Spirit, the church is empowered to become his agents of mission. Indeed, the whole story of the Bible can be understood in terms of God’s sending activity.¹³⁶

¹³³ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 210.

¹³⁴ Franke, *Missional Theology*, 1.

¹³⁵ Franke, *Missional Theology*, 18.

¹³⁶ Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, with Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historic Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 62.

The fact that mission is rooted in God's activity and that the church is sent by God to be agents of God's mission "relieves the church of the sense that the success of mission depends on human efforts and strategies."¹³⁷

The church is sent by Jesus with a message. Ott, Strauss, and Tennent point out, "In essence mission is continuing the ministry of Jesus. In a sense it is even more. Since the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have a yet fuller message of forgiveness, salvation, and reconciliation."¹³⁸ Understanding that the church's mission is rooted in God's missionary purpose in the world helps the church understand that it is not the church's message that is to be brought to the nations, but God's message. German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, in his book *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, offers a helpful corrective to the church's thinking about mission when he states, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill to the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church as it goes on its way."¹³⁹ The mission of the church is to be carried out through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴⁰

Ott, Strauss, and Tennent remind the church that "[t]he power of mission is the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. God, the Spirit, himself is at work empowering, witnessing, convicting hearers, performing signs, transforming lives, creating kingdom

¹³⁷ Ott, Straus, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 75.

¹³⁸ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 75.

¹³⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1977), 64.

¹⁴⁰ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 76.

communities, and gifting for service.”¹⁴¹ Jesus commanded his disciples not to leave Jerusalem until they had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-8). Ott, Strauss, and Tennent highlight the fact that the disciples were dependent on the Holy Spirit. “The very thought of Jesus’ original disciples, floundering and fearful as they were, boldly bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth in the face of persecution is absurd apart from the transforming and enabling power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴²

The church today faces persecution and opposition as it tries to bring the gospel to all nations. The church today needs to remain dependent on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Ott, Stauss, and Tennent caution the church to remain conscious of its dependence on the Holy Spirit’s power:

The church today has manifold resources unimaginable to the first Christians. Nevertheless, the thought is no less absurd that we should be able to advance the kingdom one millimeter apart from God’s enabling power. Jesus appointed us as his disciples to go and bear much fruit that will remain (John 15:16), but he could not have stated the importance of our total dependence on him more clearly: ‘apart from me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5b).¹⁴³

The church is a sent community. It is sent with a message, and it is sent by Jesus to the nations to make disciples of all nations.

The early church understood this as well. Goheen points out:

In the early church, we see something of a community that understood its identity as a people called to bear witness to the kingdom of God in the midst of and for the sake of the world. The early Christians lived in the story of the Bible and thus lived in contrast to the pagan culture surrounding them. Their alternative communal life was on the margins of

¹⁴¹ Ott, Strauss, and Tennen, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 76.

¹⁴² Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theolog of Mission*, 76.

¹⁴³ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 76.

mainstream society and yet was attractive to many and publicly challenged the reigning idolatry of the empire.¹⁴⁴

Why does the church exist? The church has been “called into existence” by God.¹⁴⁵ The church is the people of God in all ages, called together in community, in obedience and service to God’s kingdom, and sent into the world to be agents of change in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. The church exists because God has called his people together into a community, and God has called this people for a purpose. Edward W. Klink III explains that Jesus himself explained the purpose of the church. Klink III states:

Jesus gave three specific commandments that explain the purpose of the church: the first two are called “the Great Commandments,” and the third is called “the New Commandment.” These commandments teach the three reasons for which the church exists: to love God, to love neighbor, and to love one another. The church, then, has purposes that extend upward (toward *God-worship*), outward (to the *world-witness*), and inward (within the *church-nurture*). Everything the church does, every aspect of its life and ministry, is driven by and directed at these purposes.¹⁴⁶

Klink III’s description of the purpose of the church agrees with much of the missional theology reviewed for this literature area.

The love of God grounds the church in two ways. First, the love of God creates the church, for it is through the missional nature of the triune God that the church was created. Second, the love of God is also a reason the church exists. The church exists to love God. When the church loves God, it will love the things that God loves-including neighbor and the rest of the created world. Klink III’s definition of the purpose of the

¹⁴⁴ Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 8.

¹⁴⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 24.

¹⁴⁶ Klink III, *The Local Church*, 66.

church agrees with Dever's definition of the purpose of the church given in his book, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*. Dever frames the issue of the purpose of the church with the local congregation in view. He states, "The proper ends for a local congregation's life and actions are the worship of God, the edification of the church, and the evangelization of the world. These three purposes in turn serve the glory of God."¹⁴⁷

Although Dever and Klink III use different terms, their definitions correspond to each other. The love of God is expressed in the worship of God. The edification of the church involves nurturing the members of the church done out of love for one another. Evangelization of the world is done through witness because the church shows its love of neighbor through proclamation of the gospel. All of this is done, as Dever says, to serve the glory of God.¹⁴⁸

The church exists to bring glory to God by loving and serving God, loving and serving neighbor, and loving and serving one another in the fellowship of the church. The church loves and serves neighbor as Christians live out their identity as "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" in their individual as well as their corporate lives. How the church is to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" requires theological reflection. The theological discipline that helps the church to explore how it is to live out its purpose in the world is called missiology.

¹⁴⁷ Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 69.

¹⁴⁸ Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 69.

A Community on Mission

“Missiology is the study of missions.”¹⁴⁹ Missiology “seeks to identify the primary impulses in the Scriptures that compel God’s people into engagement with the world” and “seeks to define the church’s purposes in light of God’s will for the world. It also seeks to study the methods of achieving these ends both from Scripture and history.”¹⁵⁰ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent state that missiology “includes theology of mission as well as history of mission, anthropology and intercultural studies, mission strategy, world religions, church growth, religious demographics, and related fields of study.”¹⁵¹ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent caution, “Missiology apart from a sound theology is a dangerous and speculative undertaking. Not only does theology help us to correctly interpret the scriptures, but it also provides the larger framework of biblical understanding with which a theology of mission must be in harmony.”¹⁵²

The theology of mission has undergone drastic changes since the 1950s.¹⁵³ Since the 1950s there has been “a remarkable escalation of the word [mission]”¹⁵⁴ and the term was “gradually modified in the course of the twentieth century.”¹⁵⁵ One of the major shifts in the theology of mission came in the mid-twentieth century with the advent of the

¹⁴⁹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 277.

¹⁵⁰ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 277.

¹⁵¹ Ott, Strauss, with Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, xx.

¹⁵² Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, xix.

¹⁵³ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 1.

¹⁵⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1

¹⁵⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 2.

term and concept of *missio Dei*.¹⁵⁶ “Mission came to be understood as *God’s mission* (Latin *missio Dei*), that is to say, mission is rooted in divine initiative and character... Mission is God’s own undertaking, and the mission of the church is participation in God’s mission.”¹⁵⁷

This new understanding of mission came about through the theology of the Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council.¹⁵⁸ The term itself can be traced as far back as Augustine and Aquinas.¹⁵⁹ However, German missiologist Karl Hartenstein “is credited with coining the term” after the work of the 1952 Willingen Conference of the International Missionary Council.¹⁶⁰ After the Willingen Conference, the term *missio Dei* grew in popularity and “attempts to unfold the practical meaning and implications of *missio Dei* proved problematic.”¹⁶¹ The problems arose from the fact that “understandings of *missio Dei* moved in three different directions.”¹⁶²

Ott, Strauss, and Tennent point out that German theologians, Dutch theologians, and American theologians all diverged in their understanding of the term *missio Dei*. The Germans “took an eschatological, salvation-historical approach.”¹⁶³ The Dutch primarily

¹⁵⁶ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 62.

¹⁵⁷ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 62.

¹⁵⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 399.

¹⁵⁹ Eddie Arthur, “*Missio Dei* and the Mission of the Church.” Wycliffe Global Alliance, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.wycliffe.net/more-about-what-we-do/papers-and-articles/missio-dei-and-the-mission-of-the-church>. See also, Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 398-402.

¹⁶⁰ Franke, *Missional Theology*, 3.

¹⁶¹ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 63.

¹⁶² Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 63.

¹⁶³ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 63.

“saw God’s mission as the fulfillment of kingdom promises within history.”¹⁶⁴ The Americans “argued that the church responds to God’s dynamic activity in the present situation and aims for personal and social transformation.”¹⁶⁵ Due to such varying interpretations and understandings of *missio Dei*, critiques were levelled from both German theologians as well as from American Evangelical theologians.¹⁶⁶

These heavy criticisms led to the term being “nearly abandoned,” although “it has nevertheless retained a certain power in expressing the theological foundation of mission and continues to be used.”¹⁶⁷ *Missio Dei* has been embraced by almost all branches of Christianity, although each tradition has different nuances regarding the use of the term.¹⁶⁸ The term *missio Dei* has now given way to a relatively new term that has swept the missiological landscape of the last twenty-five years.

The term *missional* was first “introduced in 1998” with the intent to be “an invitation for people to consider a new way of being the church. It was intended to create a space in which [the church] could get a new imagination for what God wants to do in and through the church.”¹⁶⁹ It was first introduced through the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* edited by Darrell L. Guder. The publication of that book has “provided an explosion of other thinking and writing on the

¹⁶⁴ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 64.

¹⁶⁵ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 64.

¹⁶⁶ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 64-65.

¹⁶⁷ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 64-65.

¹⁶⁸ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 65.

¹⁶⁹ Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, Gen. Editor: Mark Priddy, *Introducing the Missional Church: What it is, Why it Matters, and How to Become One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), chap. 2, eBook.

subject.”¹⁷⁰ Franke points out that since the publication of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* “the notion of the missional church has become ubiquitous, spawning numerous conversations, networks, programs, and publications seeking to capture the dynamism inherent in the idea.”¹⁷¹ Martin Reppenhagen and Guder state that “the term ‘missional church’ has rapidly degenerated into a cliché that can mean everything and nothing.”¹⁷²

Defining the term missional can be difficult. Ed Stetzer is a professor and dean at Wheaton College where he is also the Executive Director of the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center. Stetzer has written extensively on missional theology.¹⁷³ In his article, “Missional and Missions: Getting Our Language Right (Part 1),” Stetzer recognizes that the term missional “is used to describe engagement in mission activity, a movement of like-minded churches, or one’s role as a missionary to his or her neighborhood.”¹⁷⁴ The wide usage of the term missional by different proponents of the term has led to the term itself becoming “an ecclesial Rorschach inkblot test. People see in it what they want, and sometimes miss what they need.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Scott Aniol, “A Brief History of the Missional Church Movement.” October 12, 2011. <https://religiousaffections.org/articles/articles-on-church/a-brief-history-of-the-missional-church-movement>.

¹⁷¹ Franke, *Missional Theology*, 34.

¹⁷² Martin Reppenhagen and Darrell L. Guder, “The Continuing Transformation of Mission: David J. Bosch’s Living Legacy: 1991-2011, in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 547.

¹⁷³ “About Ed Stetzer.” <https://edstetzer.com/about>. Accessed March 12, 2023.

¹⁷⁴ Ed Stetzer, “Missional and Missions: Getting Our Language Right (Part 1), May 14, 2021. <https://edstetzer.com/blog2/missional-and-missions-getting-our-language-right>.

¹⁷⁵ Ed Stetzer, “Missional and Missions: Getting Our Language Right (Part 1), May 14, 2021. <https://edstetzer.com/blog2/missional-and-missions-getting-our-language-right>.

The concept of missional church can also be hard to define. Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, missiologists, and co-authors of *Introducing the Missional Church: What it is, Why it Matters, and How to Become One* admit that it can be difficult to define the concept of missional church. In fact, chapter two is titled, “Just Give Me a Definition: Why Missional Church is So Hard to Define.” The chapter then focuses on reasons why defining the term “missional church” is difficult. The authors claim that the term is difficult to define because there is often confusion and misperception on defining the terms “mission” and “church.” The authors claim, “*missional church* has become a label used to describe practically everything a church does. For the sake of clarity and at the risk of being repetitious, we feel we need to point out some of the common definitions for *missional church* that are different from what we want to describe in this book.”¹⁷⁶

The authors then “lay out eight trends in the missional conversation that illustrate what [they] do *not* mean when talking about *missional church*.”¹⁷⁷ Roxburgh and Boren do not offer a concise definition of missional church in the book. Yet three years prior, Roxburgh co-authored a book with Fred Romanuk, an organizational psychologist, that includes a definition for missional church in the introduction to the book. Roxburgh and Boren state, “A missional church is a community of God’s people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God’s missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all creation in Jesus Christ.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, chap. 2, Kindle.

¹⁷⁷ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, chap. 2, Kindle.

¹⁷⁸ Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), xv.

Other missional theologians are not as reticent to offer a definition of missional. In his article, “Missional and Missions: Getting Our Language Right (Part 1),” Stetzer gives a clear definition of the term missional: “Missional is believer-focused. It describes believers and churches who live out the mission through the totality of embracing, embodying, and enacting God’s mission in the world. Christians are being missional when, as instruments of His kingdom, they join Jesus’ work of serving the hurting and saving the lost.”¹⁷⁹

Those who are living out their identity as God’s people can be described as missional. Stetzer’s definition does not offer specific criteria such as organizational principles or an overarching structure for Christians and churches to qualify as missional. Instead, Stetzer uses missional to focus on the identity of Christians and churches insofar as they are being faithful to who they are in relation to both Jesus Christ and Jesus’ mission to the world.

Wright in his massive volume, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, provides a clear definition of the term missional as well. Wright asserts that “missional is simply an adjective denoting something that is related to or characterized by mission, or has the qualities, attributes, or dynamics of mission. Missional is to the word *mission* what covenantal is to the word *covenant*, or fictional to *fiction*.”¹⁸⁰ Dick Weidenheft makes a similar point in his book *The Meaning of Missional*. He states,

The word missional is quite simply the adjectival form of the noun mission. To be missional is to be sent on a mission, God’s mission. To live missionally is, therefore, to live as a missionary sent by God to participate

¹⁷⁹ Ed Stetzer, “Missional and Missions: Getting Our Language Right (Part 1),” <https://edstetzer.com/blog2/missional-and-missions-getting-our-language-right>. May 14, 2021.

¹⁸⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 24.

in God's mission. To be a missional church is to be a missionary community sent by God. In a sense, then, every Christian and every church is already missional whether they realize it or not.¹⁸¹

In this understanding, to be missional is to be living out the identity of the church as a called, gathered, and sent community that is sent in obedience to God's mission in the world. Goheen claims that "to describe the church as 'missional' is to define the entire Christian community as a body *sent to the world* and existing not for itself but to bring good news to the world."¹⁸²

Authors Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch in their book *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* offer a succinct and clear definition of a missional church:

A missional church is one whose primary commitment is to the missionary calling of the people of God. As such, it is one that aligns itself with God's missionary purposes in the world. . . . The missional church is a sent church with one of its defining values being the development of a church life and practice that is contextualized to that culture to which it believes it is sent.¹⁸³

This means that for the church to be missional, it must be actively living out its role as God's sent people. The church must live in obedience to the kingdom of God. The church, to be missional, must be actively engaging the world as God's missionary people.

In addition to describing the church, the term missional has also been used to describe theology. Ott, Strauss, and Tennent explain, "Missional theology is thus concerned with providing an interpretive frame of reference by which we understand the

¹⁸¹ Dick Wiedenheft, *The Meaning of Missional* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), chap. 4, eBook.

¹⁸² Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 4.

¹⁸³ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 277-278.

message of scripture and the mission of the church in its entirety.”¹⁸⁴ Stetzer, like many others, points out that the church is God’s “missionary agent.”¹⁸⁵ Wright adds, “God himself has a mission.... And as part of that divine mission, God has called into existence a people to participate with God in the accomplishment of that mission. All *our* mission flows from the prior mission of God.”¹⁸⁶ Mission, then, “is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending,’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history.”¹⁸⁷

Critiques of Missional Theology

Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, in their book *What is the Mission of the Church?*, discuss the confusion regarding the terminology of mission and missions: “The ambiguity of the term mission is only augmented by the recent proliferation of terms like missional and *missio Dei*.”¹⁸⁸ With the proliferation of missional terminology has come confusion and wide variation regarding how the terms missional, missional church, and missional theology are used.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Ott, Strauss, Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, xvii.

¹⁸⁵ Ed Stetzer, “Missional and Missions: Getting Our Language Right (Part 1), <https://edstetzer.com/blog2/missional-and-missions-getting-our-language-right>. May 14, 2021.

¹⁸⁶ Wright, *Mission of God’s People*, 24.

¹⁸⁷ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 4.

¹⁸⁸ DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, chap. 1, Kindle.

¹⁸⁹ Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, chap. 2, Kindle. Also Wiedenheft, *The Meaning of Missional*, chap. 4, Kindle.

J. Todd Billings offers a critique of the missional language. Billings wrote the article within a decade of the term exploding into common theological discussion. He states that in the time since missional became popular:

[T]he market machine has spun out many conflicting definitions of ‘missional church.’ In general, these definitions share a sense that the church is not primarily about us but about God’s mission. But consensus breaks down over what God’s mission is and what it means to participate in it. In many cases, the phrase “missional church” simply puts new clothes on old trends, such as the seeker-sensitive movement, the church-growth movement, and so on. Often, the parties critiqued by the authors of *Missional Church* are now themselves claiming to be missional.¹⁹⁰

Billings points out that within a decade of its introduction, the term missional did not have a singular definition. This is still the case. Different advocates of missional thinking have different ideas and definitions of what it means to be missional and differing definitions and understandings of God’s mission.

Al Baker in his article “Mission or Missional?” also points out the varying usage of the term missional. “It depends a great deal on who is using the word, how they use the word missional to impact their ministry. For some, it seems to mean something very similar to mission, but to others, it means something very different.”¹⁹¹ Baker also points out that Stetzer “admits that he cannot really define the word [missional] since it means various things to various people.”¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ J. Todd Billings, “Being Missional in the Reformed Tradition.” May 1, 2009. <https://reformedjournal.com/being-missional-in-the-reformed-tradition/>.

¹⁹¹ Al Baker, “Mission or Missional?” accessed March 5, 2023. <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2017/mission-or-missional/#note-1>.

¹⁹² Al Baker, “Mission or Missional?” accessed March 5, 2023. <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2017/mission-or-missional/#note-1>.

Baker's biggest critique of the word missional is that it is being used "to convey social action in place of evangelism and discipleship, and this is something quite different and damaging to the work of the church of Christ."¹⁹³ The church is supposed to be the unique agents of God's mission in the world. The problem is that the term missional is being championed by those who advocate for social action above evangelism. Baker states the problem clearly:

The church is never commanded by Jesus to engage in social action. Deeds of mercy, yes, of course; but never social action or even worse, social justice. And due to the modern climate of political correctness and wanting to relate to the secularist, many tend to jettison direct evangelism and move forward with social action. To these people missional means moving into a community, feeding the poor, helping out with literacy programs, giving money to shore up the infrastructure of the local public high school, opening an art studio in the church, and getting behind social justice initiatives. This is a not so subtle shift in the mission of the church which is meant to make [the church] relevant to the culture around [the church], but actually promotes the very opposite.¹⁹⁴

Baker brings attention to the fact that some advocates of missional theology jettison any language of evangelism and instead advocate social action as the primary work of the church.

Ott, Strauss, and Tennent in their book *Encountering Theology of Mission* include a section that discusses the "missional church conversation."¹⁹⁵ In this section the authors briefly discuss the roots of the missional conversation and then include "affirmations"

¹⁹³ Al Baker, "Mission or Missional?" accessed March 5, 2023.
<https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2017/mission-or-missional/#note-1>.

¹⁹⁴ Al Baker, "Mission of Missional?" Accessed March 5, 2023.
<http://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles2017/mission-or-missional/#note-1>.

¹⁹⁵ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 197.

and “cautions” regarding missional theology.¹⁹⁶ They affirm the usefulness that missional terminology has had in helping mission return “to the center of ecclesiology.”¹⁹⁷ The authors agree that the missional movement has helped the church rediscover “its very identity in its participation in God’s mission.”¹⁹⁸ Another benefit that has arisen through the missional church movement is that it “rightly identifies the dangers of overly institutional understandings of the church, which tend to be self-serving and undermine its missionary calling.”¹⁹⁹ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent bring attention to many positive things that have arisen from the missional church conversation.

However, they also believe there are “several cautions [that] must also be raised regarding much of the missional church conversation.”²⁰⁰ The final issue that the authors have with the missional church conversation is perhaps the most important. Ott, Strauss, and Tennent bring attention to the abandonment of evangelization in the missional church movement. The authors state that “bringing the gospel to yet-unreached peoples holds very little place in the missional church discussion. Although the emphasis on the local witnesses of the local church in post-Christian societies is a welcome one, one searches the missional church literature almost in vain to find references to bringing the gospel to the nations.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁶ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 198-201.

¹⁹⁷ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 199.

¹⁹⁸ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 198-199.

¹⁹⁹ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 199.

²⁰⁰ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 199.

²⁰¹ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 201.

The church has been commanded by Jesus Christ himself to “make disciples of all nations.” If the missional church movement abandons evangelism at the local level or the world level, the missional church ceases to be faithful to the mission of God in the world. Pastors and congregants alike must use discretion when trying to contextualize theology of mission, especially missional theology, into their own communities.

Summary of The Mission of the Church: The Church Sent

The church is the people of God in all ages, called together in community, in obedience and service to God’s kingdom, and sent into the world to be agents of change in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is sent into the world to be God’s missionaries, continuing Jesus’ mission in the power of the Holy Spirit. The church needs to reflect theologically on how to live out its calling as God’s missionary agent in the world. Missiology aids the church in understanding how to be faithful in engaging the world with the gospel.

Summary of Literature Review

Jesus told his first disciples that they are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.”²⁰² This imagery brings clarity to the identity and function of Jesus’ disciples. Salt and light are agents of change. These images help disciples of Jesus understand their relationship to the world and society around them. Jesus’ disciples must remain distinct from the world to be agents of change.

²⁰² Matthew 5:13-14.

Disciples of Jesus are called into a distinct community called the church. The church is the people of God in all ages, called together in community, in obedience and service to God's kingdom, and sent into the world to be agents of change in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is sent into the world to gather others into the community of faith through evangelism. Evangelism is proclamation of the message of the kingdom of God to those who have never heard it. Evangelism includes proclamation as well as invitation. Those who hear the message of the kingdom are invited to become participants in the kingdom of God through repentance of their sins and profession of Jesus Christ as Lord.

The kingdom of God that was established on earth through the ministry of Jesus, is now at work in the world through the people of God, the church. Through God's people the message of the kingdom (forgiveness of sins and salvation have come through the death and resurrection of Jesus) is carried to the ends of the earth and to every nation. The church is part of the mission of God and has been formed by the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to serve as God's missionary people to the world.

The church is a sent community. The church is sent into the world to make disciples of all nations. The church is called to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." The church lives out its identity as salt and light by being God's missionary agent in the world. Salt and light are distinct elements and are agents of impact. The same is to be true of the church. The church is to make a difference in the world by being different. The church lives out its identity as salt and light in different ways.

Theology of mission is the tool that is employed by theologians, pastors, and congregants to understand how to be salt and light in their specific contexts. Jesus

commanded his disciples to make disciples of all nation by going to them, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey Jesus' commands. The church must engage in making disciples in both local contexts, where individual congregations are located, as well as focusing on making disciples around the world. The church must practice discernment when engaging in mission to make sure that the mission practices of the church and local congregations are in line with biblical principles and biblical truth about what God desires for the created world.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of rural churches lead congregants to have missional impact in their communities. The assumption of this study was that some pastors of rural churches have learned important principles involved in leading their congregants to have missional impact in their communities. Therefore, a qualitative study was designed and implemented to explore how rural pastors express their views and experiences on leading their congregants to have missional impact in their communities. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do pastors describe their theology for the priority of leading congregants to have missional impact in their communities?
2. How do pastors preach to motivate congregants to have missional impact in their communities?
3. What challenges do pastors experience as they lead their congregants to have missional impact in their communities?

Design of the Study

The study was designed and executed using the principles of qualitative research. A basic qualitative method was most suitable because “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct

their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.”²⁰³ This study employed a qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering.²⁰⁴ This methodology allowed for the richest descriptions possible in order to gain deeper understanding of how pastors of rural churches can lead their congregations to have missional impact in their communities.

Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants who can communicate in depth about leading congregations to have missional impact in their communities. The assumption of this study was that experienced pastors of rural congregations who have had successful missional impact on their communities have much to share about preaching, developing leaders, and training congregants to have missional impact. They would be able to provide the researcher with rich, detailed data. Therefore, the purposeful study sample was designed to consist of solo pastors who currently serve in rural congregations with more than seven years in their present congregation that self-identify and others identify as:²⁰⁵

1. Prioritizing the development of missional values and actions in their congregants, according to the given definition of “missional” by the researcher.

²⁰³ Merriam, Sharan B. and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 15.

²⁰⁴ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 110.

²⁰⁵ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 96.

2. Having a congregation that does have observable missional impact in their community.
3. Intentionally preaching to move their congregants to have missional impact in their communities.
4. Intentionally developing leaders within the congregation to help other congregants have missional impact in their communities.

It was the researcher's intent to select participants with variation in age and location to maximize the breadth of experiences and gain the richest data. The final study was conducted through personal interviews with four pastors who serve in rural congregations. The participants interviewed were invited to participate via an introductory email, 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 protect the human rights of the participants. The Human Rights Risk Level of Assessment is one of "no risk" according to the Institutional Review Board Guidelines of Covenant Theological Seminary.

To find research participants the researcher went through several steps. The first step was to reach out to local pastors in the immediate area where the researcher lives. There were no pastors that fit the researcher's qualifications within the researchers own area. Next, the researcher contacted colleagues that are of other denominations to ask them for help in finding qualified research participants within their denominations. None of the colleagues knew of any qualified candidates. The research participants that were ultimately interviewed by the researcher were recommended by staff at Covenant Theological Seminary.

In looking for qualified research candidates, the researcher ran into many difficulties. The greatest difficulty was the lack of pastors that fit the researchers proposed criteria. Many of the candidates that were found by the researcher through recommendations did not fit the criteria for the study. This led to the researcher not being able to answer the research questions that guided the research. Due to participant unfamiliarity with the word missional, the researcher had to alter some questions during the interview process for data collection. Although the researcher was not able to answer the research questions, the interviews and research yielded valuable insights into how pastors of rural congregations can equip their congregants to have missional impact in their communities.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. According to Merriam, this “format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.”²⁰⁶ Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.

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 but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing

²⁰⁶ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 111.

process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.²⁰⁷

The researcher interviewed four pastors who had experience in rural ministry in some capacity even though they did not fit the hoped-for criteria. Prior to the interview, the participants were given interview questions to prepare for the interview. Due to an inability to travel because of an ongoing pandemic, time and money restrictions, the interviews were conducted via Zoom. The researcher audiotaped the interviews with a digital recorder as well as recording the video interview. Each participant was told at the beginning of the interview that the interview would be recorded. Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview.

Data Analysis

As soon as possible, the researcher wrote summaries of each interview to assist in data analysis. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.²⁰⁸ When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed using open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.²⁰⁹

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

²⁰⁷ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 199.

²⁰⁸ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 228.

²⁰⁹ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 229.

1. What specifically have you done to explain the concept of “missional church” to your congregants?
2. Tell me about a specific strategy that you implemented to help your congregants see the importance of having a missional impact in their community.
3. What leadership techniques did you try for helping people have missional impact in the community?
4. What strategies did you employ to help your preaching motivate congregants to have missional impact?
5. As you implemented this type of preaching, what challenges did you face in your own sermon preparation?
6. In what ways has your church benefitted from your efforts?
7. How have you personally benefitted from this emphasis?
8. Tell me about congregants who have been opposed to this concept of missional impact in the community.
9. In what ways has the larger community that your church serves benefitted?

Researcher Position

Merriam states that in qualitative research “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis...However, the human instrument has shortcomings and biases that can have impact on the study.”²¹⁰ Therefore, it is important

²¹⁰ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 16.

for researchers to be aware of what biases they bring into the study from their personal beliefs, experiences, and the theoretical framework the researcher brings to the study.²¹¹

This study has been shaped by a few such positions. First, the researcher is an ordained minister currently serving in a rural ministry setting. Secondly, the researcher grew up in a rural ministry setting and has never served a congregation outside of a rural setting. However, this familiarity has helped the researcher to be able to understand the struggles, challenges, and hopes that the pastors interviewed as part of the study presented during the interviews. Thirdly, the researcher has lived in a rural setting for most of his life. The researcher is most familiar with life in rural areas and therefore does not have experience with ministry in an urban or suburban church. Lastly, this study assumed that the pastors interviewed shared a similar view on the importance of mission in the life of every congregation no matter the geographical setting.

Study Limitations

This study required interview participants with specialized criteria as described above. This study was limited to four pastors who could be identified as meeting many of these criteria. Geographic constrictions, cost, travel time, and an ongoing pandemic forced the researcher to conduct interviews via Zoom. Pastors in rural ministry settings in other areas of the United States may have yielded different insights and could have possibly provided a different shape to the study. Due to the limitation of resources and the need to minimize variables in the research, the pastors were all male and within the Reformed theological tradition. Further studies are needed to broaden the findings with

²¹¹ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 16.

pastors of other theological traditions. The study focused on pastors of rural congregations and how they lead their congregations to have missional impact in their communities. Thus, readers bear the responsibility to determine if the study's results are transferable or relevant to other ministry contexts.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of rural churches lead congregants to have missional impact in their communities. The following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors describe their theology for the priority of leading congregants to have missional impact in their communities?
2. How do pastors preach to motivate congregants to have missional impact in their communities?
3. What challenges do pastors experience as they lead their congregants to have missional impact in their communities?

This chapter provides the findings based on four interviews and draws out insights and experiences pertaining to the research questions above. The interview findings have been sorted and organized according to three categories that were commonalities that emerged in the four interviews.

Introductions to Participants and Context

Four pastors with experience in rural ministry were interviewed for this research. Every pastor is or has been a solo pastor in a small, rural church in the United States. Each pastor also serves in a Presbyterian denomination. Participants are from different states to diversify the data. To facilitate open and honest responses from each participant, the researcher made it clear that their identities would be concealed and that the

recordings and transcripts would remain confidential. Consequently, names and specific details have been changed to conceal identity.

Participant 1 is an ordained Presbyterian minister in his 40s currently serving small, rural churches as stated supply. He previously served a rural church for almost nine years until the congregation made the decision to close. He has had ministry experience with inner-city ministry in a large Midwestern town. Participant 1 currently resides in a suburban area, though he grew up in a rural area.

Participant 2 is an ordained Presbyterian minister in his 50s. He has been in his current pastoral role for over five years. His congregation is under 100 members. Although the town has a population of over 5000, the demographics of the area still fit a rural definition better than an urban or suburban definition.

Participant 3 is an ordained Presbyterian minister in his 60s currently serving a rural congregation. He has pastored this church for eighteen years and has been in ministry for over twenty years. He has ministry experience working in missionary training. Participant 3 lives in a small community with a population less than 1,000.

Participant 4 is an ordained Presbyterian minister in his 30s. He served a rural congregation of less than 100 members for four years. The community he lived in was less than 900 people. Participant 4 currently serves in a large membership church in an urban context. He has been in ministry less than ten years.

Due to the challenges of finding interview participants that fit the original study design, the data collection categories do not match the research questions. The categories of data collection were drawn directly from the interview process. The three headings—

rural challenges, preaching in rural contexts, and missionally-minded—are commonalities that appeared during the interviews.

Although the intended study design was not met fully due to the researcher's inability to find participants that matched the ideal criteria for best practices, much of the research criteria the researcher identified were still met by the pastors that were interviewed. This led to a collection of data that was different from what the researcher expected to find but still yielded insightful data regarding mission practices in rural congregations.

Rural Challenges

The first commonality that stood out to the researcher was the discussion of rural challenges. Each of the pastors have served, or currently serve, in rural settings with small congregations of under 100 members.

During the interview process, many challenges that face rural congregations came to the surface. These challenges are not unique to rural congregations, but they do have to be overcome differently in a rural congregation. The most common challenge that was discussed among the participants was limited resources. Participants 1 and 3 both shared that their salaries and compensation were points of stress. Participant 3 shared that he would not be able to be in his ministry setting if his wife did not work and carry their health insurance. The lack of finances available in a congregation of less than 70 people put a strain on the congregation's ability to retain a full-time pastor.

Participant 1 shared a similar experience. For the congregation to pay his salary when he first arrived, they had to sell off congregational assets. They were clear when they hired him that they could likely only retain him for one year and that if his pastoral

tenure continued, he would have to find another source of income. This caused the pastor to become bi-vocational and work at a different place of employment in addition to serving the congregation. Eventually, the congregation closed due to lack of financial resources.

The lack of resources not only affects the ability of small rural congregations to compensate their pastors, but it also directly affects the congregation's ability to fund outreach or mission work in the community. Participants 1, 2, and 3 each shared stories of ministries that had to end because of the limited financial resources available in the congregation. Participant 3 shared that the community he lives in is largely poor. The industries that used to make the area thrive are no longer lucrative. This has led to the young people leaving town for educational opportunities and not moving back into the area. The community itself is composed mainly of older citizens.

Participant 3 shared that at one point in the life of the congregation they had the ability to fund mission trips. They also had a diaconal ministry that helped build and supply handicap ramps for those in the community who were in need. He elaborated, "As the congregation aged, the outward-facing mission fell away. Committees were downsized and the session became responsible for more than they were used to." When a congregation is older in age, more people live on limited income and therefore cannot continue to increase giving each year to support more outreach or mission programs. It also becomes difficult to find leaders and volunteers. Every participant talked about the difficulty in finding leadership and volunteers in a small membership church.

Lack of resources can also lead to a lack of pastoral leadership. Participant 3 pointed out that rural congregations can experience longer periods of time where there is

no pastoral leadership in a congregation. The congregation he currently serves was without a pastor for two years before he was hired. This was due to several factors related to the lack of resources. First, the congregation could not afford to offer health insurance, and this directly affected their number of interested candidates. The second factor was the community demographics. This was a multi-faceted challenge that included a lack of jobs available for the pastor's spouse, the size of the school, and the prevalence of poverty in the area.

Participants 2 and 3 both shared that they have witnessed a direct correlation between the health of the community and the health of the congregation. When the community struggles because there is no work, many of the young people leave for college and never move back to the area. This leaves the community at a disadvantage. When there are few young families in the community, this leads to an older demographic. Participant 3 noted that due to the "age of the congregation, there is no children's Sunday school, or any kind of ministry to children at all. They just aren't there." He also shared that this has led many in the congregation to be disappointed and disheartened.

Another challenge that is common in rural areas is the oversaturation of churches. Participants 2 and 3 both expressed this as a challenge that their congregations face. Participant 2 shared that getting his congregation members to invite others to church has proven to be very difficult because of how many churches there are in the area. Many of the congregation members only have friends that are Christian and are already involved with other congregations. Reaching non-believers is difficult simply because they do not have frequent interactions with people who are not members of a local congregation.

This reality has led Participant 2 to become active in working alongside the other pastors in the area. “I’m a firm believer in the churches in the community working together,” he said. He shared that each congregation struggles with limited resources financially or in numbers of volunteers. By working together, they can do more for the community than they would if they were to work individually. Participant 2 also stressed that the other pastors in the area can become a strong network of support.

Participant 3 shared many of the same insights as Participant 2 when it came to the oversaturation of churches in rural areas. He said, “Everyone is affiliated with a church. In the community of 1,000 people there are five churches.” Participants 2 and 3 both agreed that this reality of oversaturation of churches in small communities can lead to competition between churches and, as Participant 2 put it, “sheep stealing.” Participant 2 said that it is difficult to invite new members because it can seem like you are stealing members from another local congregation, and this can lead to some unhealthy tensions within the community.

Participant 1 shared that defining the role of rural congregations in a rural community can be difficult. Are rural congregations supposed to act like hospitals to the community? Are they supposed to function like a headquarters where people learn to be evangelists? Or are rural congregations supposed to be focused mainly on nourishing the members of the congregation? Participant 4 also mentioned the difficulty of distinguishing between the church and the community. He pointed out that many small, rural congregations are comprised (or have been in the past) mainly of several families. Often these families were, and perhaps still are, prominent and influential in the

communities. When this happens, these families can become more influential than the pastor. Participant 4 saw this in the congregation he served.

When people in the congregation are related, it can lead to a fear of “stepping on other families” when conflict arises. Participant 4 experienced this when conflict arose and the leadership did not stand up for the pastor, even though they agreed with him on the issue. They did not want to offend the other families in the congregation, so they did not stand with the pastor in the conflict. Participant 4 also pointed out that family loyalty surpassed everything else. When conflict arose in his congregation, family ties proved to be more important to the congregation than biblical truth.

This familial component of small, rural congregations can also lead to awkward interactions in the community if members have left the congregation due to conflict. Participant 4 saw this happen in the congregation he served. After the conflict arose, and several members left the congregation, it made social interactions between himself and the former members awkward. It is common in a small community to see former members while at the grocery store, gas station, school events, or community events. While this can lead to awkward interactions, Participant 4 pointed out that it can also lead to gospel opportunities. These types of interactions create “an opportunity to love each other well.” He recognized that even if they are no longer members, they are still brothers and sisters in Christ.

Participant 2 shared that the theological language pastors are taught in seminary, such as the term “mission”, does not always find a welcome place in rural contexts. In many cases, members of rural congregations have never been to college and have not been exposed to theological language outside of what they hear from the pulpit.

Members can be weary when they hear theological terms and concepts that they do not find easily in the scriptures. There seems to be a gap between the academic training of pastors and the everyday task of pastors in rural contexts. Participant 2 stated that he must be careful not to introduce concepts that seem “ivory tower,” or highly academic. In his experience, terms like missional do not have much impact on the congregation members. Instead, ministry needs to be “on the ground.” Participant 2 has found that theological concepts and ideas do not have as much impact as leading by example.

Participant 1 shared another challenge that he experienced in the rural church setting regarding evangelism and outreach in the church. An attitude that was prominent in the congregation he served was the idea that the pastor was supposed to do all the work. Evangelism, outreach, and even inviting people to church was considered the work of the pastor, not the congregation. The congregation members are there to be fed and nourished by the pastor. In this view, the pastor is “the dispenser of goods” while the congregation members are “merely receivers or consumers.” Participant 1 pointed out that when this attitude is prominent among members, the congregation stifles because the congregation has turned inward and closed themselves off to guests. It is difficult for a congregation to grow and have missional impact on the community if the members do not engage the community alongside the pastor.

Summary of Rural Challenges

Many challenges that arise in rural congregations are not specifically unique to rural congregations. The difference in rural contexts is that the challenges must be met in different ways. Rural congregations face population and resource issues that differ from

what urban or suburban congregations face. Many churches in rural contexts have been around for decades, and this can lead to deeply held cultural traditions and attitudes that may hinder the congregation's health without the members being able to notice.

There are some challenges, however, that are unique to the small, rural context. For example, the lack of resources in rural areas often leads to difficulty finding pastors who can move to the area. If the church cannot support the pastor and his family financially, the pastor's spouse may have to work. In some rural areas, finding a job for a pastor's spouse may present to be an obstacle due to lack of jobs available.

In addition to lack of resources, six other challenges arose in the interviews. The challenges discussed above are lack of pastoral leadership, oversaturation of churches in rural areas, community struggles become congregation struggles, defining the role of the congregation in the community, confusion over theological language, and defining the role of the congregation members in outreach and evangelism.

Preaching in Rural Contexts

The second commonality that Participants 1, 2, and 4 discussed was preaching in rural contexts and some challenges that they had experienced regarding preaching.

Participant 1 noted that when he first arrived at the congregation, he noticed that the term "gospel" was not being used consistently throughout the congregation. For the first few years of his ministry in the congregation, he was intentionally focused on defining the gospel. Two questions were consistently incorporated into his sermons: What is the gospel? Why is the gospel good news? These questions drove Participant 1's preaching for the first two years to incorporate apologetic aspects into his preaching.

In addition to defining and reinforcing the biblical definition of the gospel in his preaching, Participant 1 focused on preaching the foundations of faith through expository sermons. Participant 1 explained that his preaching was aimed at forming the faith and discipleship of the congregation. Preaching was one of the main ways that Participant 1 was able to introduce his congregation to the concept of being missional. Participant 1 did not use heavily academic or technical language in his preaching.

Participant 2 relayed similar experiences in his preaching in the congregation he serves. Participant 2 stated that the concept of being missional, or an everyday disciple, influences his preaching. When he started as the pastor, the first sermon series that he preached was on the characteristics of a disciple. After that series he preached through the Gospel of Mark and said that Mark 8:34 has become highly influential in how he prepares his sermons. Asking “What does it mean to pick up your cross, deny yourself, and follow Jesus every day?” while preparing sermons on other texts has been immensely helpful for Participant 2.

Participant 2 explained that preaching must be tied to the lives of the congregation members. Preaching should be encouraging to the congregation. It should convict, if necessary, but overall preaching needs to be directed toward encouraging the members to continue in their discipleship. This conviction that preaching needs to be tied directly to the lives of congregation members has led Participant 2 to listen to the congregation’s feedback regarding preaching topics. Regarding receiving feedback from the congregation, Participant 2 acknowledged that when a pastor can get the congregation excited about the gospel, especially through engaged preaching, they will take that excitement with them into their daily lives. Because of this conviction, Participant 2

pointed out that pastors need to be mindful of who they are preaching to, not just what they are preaching about.

It is evident that Participant 2 is passionate about the preaching role of pastoral ministry. Regarding formation of the congregation through preaching he stated, “I am utterly convinced that if I get up there and I am consistent and true to preaching and that I am faithful in preaching the whole counsel of God and showing how it applies to us in our lives as disciples, the Spirit is going to use that.” This statement regarding the fruitfulness of preaching shows that Participant 2 recognizes that the Holy Spirit is responsible for the long-term effects of the proclamation of scripture.

While the preaching experiences of Participants 1 and 2 have been largely positive in their contexts, Participant 4 had a different experience where he pastored. Participant 4 faced many challenges, some already discussed above, and his preaching ministry was not left unscathed from push-back and challenge. The biggest challenge that Participant 4 faced regarding preaching in his rural context was his style of preaching. He said that the push back “came largely from the older folks who had been there for a long time.” The pastor that had been there previously had a distinctly different preaching style and Participant 4 received critique in comparison to the previous pastor.

The previous pastor did not preach expository sermons as was the habit and practice of Participant 4. The previous pastor’s style, stated Participant 4, could be described as “stand-up comedian.” His sermons were “a mix of moral truths, jokes, and short lessons.” Participant 4 explained, “This language of sitting in the depths of our sin and our need for Christ was not a regular part of their diet. [Their previous] diet over time is why they began to spit stuff out.” Any time there was a challenge in the text regarding

gospel application, Participant 4 received push-back. Preaching, according to the congregation, was not to be confrontational. “Any attempts to get under the surface was met with heavy resistance.” The congregation did not see any need or desire to listen to a new style of preaching. Quite simply, they were entrenched in their beliefs and did not appreciate any challenges that the sermons may have presented.

Summary of Preaching in Rural Contexts

The participants agreed on the importance of preaching in the pastoral work of a rural pastor. Sermons need to be mindful of the needs of the congregation, but a preacher must also be faithful in preaching the whole counsel of God. Sermons that are encouraging can influence the congregation to be missional in their communities when they see the connection between mission and scripture through consistent, faithful preaching.

Missionally Minded

The main question driving this research was how do pastors of rural congregations equip their members to have missional impact in their communities? To that end, many of the interview questions focused on the impact of missional theology on the participants and their ministries. Although the research participants did not match the ideal participant criteria of the study, due to their lack of focus on a missional impact of their church in the local community, the research questions still drove the interviews with the participants.

All four participants were influenced by missional theology to some extent. Participants 1 and 4 expressed more positivity regarding the term missional and the place

of missional theology in their ministries. (Participant 4 is no longer in a rural context, but the interview process looked at how missional theology influenced his pastoral role while serving a rural congregation.) Participant 3 admitted that he had heard the term, but he does not consider it to be “an active part of his vocabulary.” Although Participant 2 also admitted that he does not use the term missional, he is still driven toward helping his congregation have a missional mindset so they may impact their community with the gospel.

Participant 2 reported that he has some apprehension toward the term missional. He said that missional theology seems to be “mainly focused on growth” in the books that he has read on the subject. When asked to elaborate, he said that the missional books that he has read seemed to use missional theology in a way that was only oriented toward growing the size of the congregation in terms of numbers and not necessarily in terms of the spiritual growth of members. He also stated that missional theology is “ivory tower,” meaning that it is a term that does not relate well to those outside academia.

Although Participant 2 does not see the term missional helpful in his everyday ministerial duties, he did say that he agrees with the fact that the church has a mission. To him, overly missional language does not relate well to the equipping of congregation members to have missional impact in their communities because it seems overly complicated. Because of this, Participant 2 likes to focus on equipping his congregation members to be “everyday disciples.”

The concepts of missional theology are influential on Participant 2 even if he disagrees with some of the theological jargon associated with missional theology as well as some of the advice given by missional theologians on creating missional

congregations. Participant 2 explained that for him being missional means “consistent witness in the community. Evangelism and witness need to be consistent and deliberate.” For a congregation to have missional impact on the community, they must be engaged with the community.

Although missional language may be absent from everyday usage in the congregation that Participant 2 serves, the congregation is engaged in missional practices and outreach in the community. There are two main outreach ministries that have missional impact on the community. The first is a diaconal ministry. The community that the congregation is located within has a lot of poverty. This has encouraged the deacons to have an outreach ministry focused specifically on the need to help those experiencing poverty. As people in the community come for help, the deacons share the gospel with them.

Another missional outreach that the congregation has is a ministry that helps pregnant women. The ministry is run out of a trailer in the church’s parking lot. The ministry was started to serve a need that was prevalent in the community. Those who come to the church for help are exposed to the gospel intentionally by the volunteers who run the ministry. The missional impact of these types of ministries may be hard to measure in some ways, but the congregation has come to be known for these ministries in the community and they are looked on favorably.

When asked to specifically address ways in which he equips the congregation to have missional impact in the community, Participant 2 shared that when he first arrived as pastor he began working with the elders and deacons to reevaluate their mercy ministries through an officer’s retreat. This officer’s retreat yielded good results as they

were able to ask insightful questions regarding the outreach they were doing, what they needed to be doing, and what they could stop doing. It also yielded a vision statement and a mission statement that have become highly influential on the officers as well as Participant 2. For example, he stated that as he is preparing his sermons, the mission statement is “always in the back of [his] mind.”

Participant 2 emphasized that to equip congregation members to have missional impact in the community, the congregation members must be encouraged to be actively engaged in the community in multiple ways. He shared that he has become actively engaged in the local community theater as well as other groups such as Kiwanis.

Participant 1 expressed a similar belief. Participants 1 and 2 both share the conviction that pastors of rural congregations need to be involved in the community and lead by example. Participant 1 joined groups in the community to make relationships within the community. This provided multiple opportunities to share the gospel. He also encouraged his leadership to join different groups in the community to form relationships outside the confines of the church building. The reputation of the church grew in the community because of their involvement in these groups.

Another aspect of engaging the community that Participant 1 shared was that their congregation did as many things as possible together. They wanted to be visible in the community and give those outside the church different ways of interacting with the congregation other than Sunday morning worship. One example he gave of a successful event was a bonfire and picnic on the beach. The members intentionally brought extra food to the event so that they could invite others on the beach to join them. This was a

way to share a common experience with those outside the congregation and begin to form relationships. It offered many opportunities to share the gospel.

Participant 1 believes that the congregation's attitude toward evangelism played a significant role in their outreach. The congregation did not view evangelism as "recruitment." Instead, their view was that evangelism "is sharing with others what God has done for your life. Everybody has a story. You have a unique story to the world, and you are helping people get to know God through your life." Participant 1 was then asked to share some ways that he helped his congregation develop this view of evangelism.

Participant 1 shared that when he first came to the church as pastor, the congregants were inward-facing and did not hold this view of evangelism. When he arrived as pastor, the congregation was trying to understand their identity. The congregation was asking a lot of questions about what it meant to be a church. Some of the questions that the congregation were asking were, "What is the role of a small-town, rural congregation? Are we supposed to be focused on nourishing our flock? Are we supposed to act like a hospital to the community? Are we supposed to be like a headquarters where we are learning to be evangelists?"

These questions, and many more, helped Participant 1 and the congregation define their roles as pastor and as congregation. Although the congregation was wrestling with these questions on what it means to be the church, Participant 1 reported that the congregation was inward-focused when he first arrived. Many in the congregation were convinced that evangelism was the work of the pastor, not the congregation members. The congregation was there to be fed and nourished. This reality led Participant 1 to the conviction that he needed to make sure that every single member could communicate the

gospel effectively. This is why the first few years of his preaching ministry within the church focused on defining the gospel and the foundations of the faith.

Eventually, through preaching and teaching, Participant 1 was able to help the congregation begin to form a healthier view of evangelism and help them form a desire to engage the community around them through outreach. As a result of the congregational emphasis on community engagement, the congregation saw many adults come to faith in Christ. It also helped them form new outreach programs that are still active even though the congregation has since closed. Two ministries were a direct result of the congregation's desire to be missional. One ministry serves foster children in the area. The second ministry provides backpacks and supplies for returning to school. Each child that is helped receives a Bible as well.

Each Participant agreed that the church has a mission. Participant 1 stated, "The church is a launching pad. The church is a training ground. First, and foremost, we are there to serve Christ." The church is not just about the members and their needs. Participant 1 explained that the church is not only a place for believers to be nourished in their own faith, but it is also the place that trains and encourages believers to invite others into the church as well. As church members grow in their faith, they begin to have the desire for others to know Christ as they do.

Summary of Missionally Minded

Interview data revealed that missional theology impacts rural ministers in different ways. Congregations are unique and pastors must understand the personalities of their congregations to equip them to have missional impact in their communities. Equipping congregations to have missional impact in their communities takes strong

leadership, patience, and endurance on the part of the pastors. Congregants may take years of training and encouragement before they are able to engage their communities effectively. Congregants and pastors alike must be patient as they experiment with ministries in their communities. Building relationships in rural areas is integral for the ministry of local congregations. Building relationships within the community helps trust build between the community and the congregation.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined the findings of how pastors of rural churches lead congregants to have missional impact in their communities. Although the participants in the study did not meet all the criteria determined by the researcher in the initial design of this study, the interviews yielded insights and themes that were common to the experiences of all four participants. The data was categorized according to three main commonalities that emerged from the interviews with the four participants. First, there was discussion of the challenges that pastors and congregations often face in rural contexts. Second, preaching in rural contexts was discussed. The last category was the missional theology and mindset of both the participants and their congregations.

Each participant recognized the need for rural pastors to encourage and equip their congregants to be engaged in the community in which their congregation is located. The extent of the impact of missional theology on each participant varied from little impact to significant impact. Each participant clearly has a passion for the rural church, regardless of their current ministerial context. Each participant relayed that rural ministry presents unique challenges. The challenges that rural pastors and rural congregations face

are important, unique, and present learning opportunities for the larger church to better understand how to help pastors be more effective in rural ministry.

Chapter 5

Missional Mindset in Rural Wisconsin: Reflections on Ten Years in Pastoral Ministry

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of rural churches lead congregants to have missional impact in their communities.

The following research questions guided the research.

1. How do pastors describe their theology for the priority of leading congregants to have missional impact in their communities?
2. How do pastors preach to motivate congregants to have missional impact in their communities?
3. What challenges do pastors experience as they lead their congregants to have missional impact in their communities?

Introduction to Context

For the past ten years, I have served as pastor of a small, rural congregation in Wisconsin. The town has a mainly agricultural history, with more industry moving in since the 1960s. Farming is still a large part of the economy of the town, but, with the growth of nearby urban areas, more people can travel outside the town to find work. The population of the town is around 3,500 people.

The congregation I serve has a long history. It was formed in May 1851. Over its many years of activity, the congregation had helped start and run the community food pantry as well as a thrift store. Neither are currently run by the congregation, although

they are supported by the congregation in many ways, including a monthly collection for the community food pantry.

Due to financial constraints, I was hired for twenty hours a week when I first started pastoring the congregation. This led me to see that preaching was going to be my main point of contact with congregants and the main method of spiritual formation for most of the congregation. This also meant that most of my discipling would have to be from the pulpit. I quickly realized that to introduce change to the congregation, I would have to work with the leadership first. The congregation had a better chance of change if the leadership led the change alongside me. It did not take long for me to notice that the congregation was inwardly focused with no mission or outreach to the community.

One of the main misconceptions that the research participants observed in their communities was also something I struggled against in my context: the belief that any contact with the community was outreach regardless of any discussions of the gospel. The congregation was used to hosting several events during the year. They held an annual craft fair in September. The congregation had previously run a kid's carnival during the Fourth of July celebrations downtown. Another event they held annually was a meal in December. The meal was open to the public and money from ticket sales went to the general fund.

Many of the congregants believed these were all outreach because they involved the community. When I asked if they were engaging people with the gospel, the answer was no. I believe that two main factors led to this omission. First, there was misperception about our area being Christian. Second, my congregants did not know how to engage people with the gospel. I knew right away that this was something that would

have to be changed cautiously and with wisdom. Preaching and leadership formation were going to be vital for helping the congregation turn toward the community.

I was not familiar with the language or concept of “missional theology” until I began doctoral studies through Covenant Theological Seminary. I had read books about evangelism, leadership formation, and preaching for change but something always seemed to be missing. As I did my reading for a class with Dr. Michael Goheen, I realized that this was a concept that could be immensely helpful for me in my context as well as being helpful in preparing my congregants to have missional impact in our community.

Since becoming familiar with the concept of being a missional congregation, I have tried to integrate this concept into my leadership in the congregation. The congregation is older in population, with many of the members having served on various committees and boards throughout their membership. Over the last five years, we have seen a decrease in our membership. Confirmation classes are typically years apart, as we do not have many young families. It has become increasingly difficult to find leadership due to the demographics in the congregation. Our budget has also increased in areas that were formerly volunteer based. As the congregation has gotten smaller, our volunteer and leadership numbers have suffered alongside a drop in income. This has ended up putting more strain on fewer people covering the same amount of work.

Examples of Missionally-Minded Sermons

Preaching is the main point of contact that I have with most of the members of the congregation that I serve. As I began to think missionally, and about how to introduce this concept to the congregation, I knew that preaching was going to be the main way to

introduce missional theology and missional language to the congregation. Knowing that theological terminology does not always translate to the pulpit, I knew that I would have to preach scriptures that were expressly missional. The following three sermons are examples of expository sermons that highlight the mission of the church. Each sermon will have a brief introduction, the full manuscript of the sermon as preached to the congregation, and a brief reflection.

“Everyday Salt and Light.” Sermon on Matthew 5:13-16.

“Everyday Salt and Light” was part of a sermon series called, “The Purpose of the Church.” The sermon series consisted of five sermons that focused on different aspects of the church. My goal in this series was to give the congregation a greater grasp of what the church is, why the church is vital to the Christian’s life, and the purpose of the church. The sermons themselves were organized around what Dever calls “the proper ends for a local congregation’s life and actions.”²¹² All five sermons were focused on scriptures that emphasized one or more aspects of the purpose of the church. Dever defines the threefold purpose of the church as worship of God, edification of the church, and evangelization of the world.²¹³ “Everyday Salt and Light” explores and explains the last purpose given by Dever: evangelization of the world.

“Everyday Salt and Light” focuses on Matthew 5:13-16. I designed this sermon to be split between exposition and practical application. I aimed to give the congregation a better understanding of what Jesus meant by describing His disciples as salt and light. For

²¹² Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 69.

²¹³ Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible*, 69.

the practical application I divided the sermon up into spheres of influence: home, work, public life, congregational life, and private life. In each of these categories I gave examples of how to be salt and light.

Sermon Manuscript: “Everyday Salt and Light.”

This morning we are going to continue our look at the purpose of the church. This is sermon four in this series. After I read this scripture, I will review the previous sermons. Our text this morning is Matthew 5:13-16. This passage is part of the “Sermon on the Mount” in Matthew chapters five through seven. I preached on this passage this past February, and you heard me mention this passage at our annual meeting, and there's a reason for that. You're going to keep hearing about this passage, because I've been studying this passage for about a year now. I have researched this passage quite heavily for my dissertation. I think it is an extremely helpful passage to learn about the purpose of the church.

Let us pray. Your Word, O God, is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. May your Word be for us today, life and action, both beacon and gavel. In the name of the Living Word, we pray. Amen.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It's no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ Matthew 5:13-16.

Over the last few weeks, we have looked at the purpose of the church. Last week we named the purpose of the church. Quite simply, the church exists for the glory of God. Now this is a multifaceted purpose, and there are many ways in which we bring glory to God. We have looked at different ways to glorify God in this series, and we will explore practical examples at the end of this sermon.

We started this sermon series by looking at the foundational confession in Mark chapter eight that Jesus is the Christ. He is the promised Son of David. He is the promised Savior. He is the promised Son of Man that Daniel saw and recorded in his book in Daniel 7, and Jesus is the Lord of the church. We defined the church this way: the church is the people of God in all times called out of the world through Jesus Christ. We are called out of the world through Jesus Christ. The images of salt and light help us understand what it means to be called out of the world. This morning our focus is on being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We are going to look at practical ways to be salt and light in the world.

Jesus uses these two images or metaphors to describe our identity. He does not say you are going to be the salt of the earth and you will eventually be the light of the world. He says you are, and you are now. In the Greek, the word “you” is emphatic. Which means you, and you alone, are the salt of the earth. You, and you alone, are the light of the world.

Salt and light were extremely important in the ancient world. How many of you have ever been to a remote area where there is no light pollution? Can you imagine trying to walk through town at night without any lighting? The disciples lived in a world

without streetlights, electric lights in their homes, or even the convenience of a flashlight. Traveling at night was dangerous, especially travel outside of a city.

Light and salt were extremely important. Have you ever heard the phrase, “not worth his salt?” Hopefully you have not heard anyone using that phrase to describe you, but that phrase comes from when people were paid in salt. That phrase arises from that particular use of salt. If you were not worth your salt, it meant you were not worth what you were being paid. “He's not worth his dollar” would be an updated version.

Salt and light are important today, and they were important throughout biblical times as well. Salt was used in many ways. For instance, salt was used in covenant rituals in ancient Israel. It was used in meat preservation, cleansing, and flavoring of foods. It was even used during childbirth. After a child was born, the baby would be cleaned with olive oil and salt.

In our modern world we still depend on salt and use it in many ways. How many of you enjoy salt being on our roads in the winter? We do not like what it does to the underside of our cars, but we like that it helps melt ice on the roadways. Salt is still used to preserve, cleanse, and flavor. Have you ever had a sore tooth or gum? Salt and warm water can help cleanse and offer pain relief for sore teeth and gums.

Light, of course, is also integral to life today. It was integral in ancient times as well. Light is one of the most used metaphors or images in the Bible. In the Book of Isaiah, we are told that the Son of Man, the Servant of God, will end up being the Light of the World. In fact, Jesus himself stood up in the temple, and he claimed, “I am the light of the world.”²¹⁵ If Jesus is the Light of the World, then how are we the light of the

²¹⁵ John 8:12.

world? Think of the sun and the moon. The moon does not produce any light of its own. Moonlight is a reflection. We are the light of the world only insofar as we are in Christ. We reflect his light. We are not producing our light; we are reflecting light from Christ to the world so that by our works we will bring glory to our Father.

Jesus followers are salt and light. Think about the importance of salt in cooking. Have you ever followed a recipe, forgot the salt, and then took a bite? Salt can be very important, even if it's only a pinch of salt like some recipes call for.

Salt is separate and distinct from that which it seasons. The same can be said of light. Both metaphors function in that way. They are separate and distinct from what is not light and not salt. We are called to be separate and distinct from the world around us. We are not called to take over governments. We are not called to take over society. We are called to let our light shine before others, so God will get the glory.

I want you to notice that the salt imagery has an element of warning. If salt loses its saltiness, it is worthless. This is a warning of judgment for worthless disciples. This means that disciples who do not obey Christ are viewed as worthless and will someday be thrown out. This is a stark warning. Do not take the responsibilities of discipleship lightly.

How can salt lose its taste? How can salt not be salty? We should avoid pushing this metaphor too far. Jesus was not giving a chemistry lesson. He was giving us a metaphor. Salt can be diluted to the point of uselessness. Think of a single grain of salt on the road in the middle of winter. It would not do any good. Think about the image that I just used of salt water as a rinse for sore teeth or sore gums. If you do not put enough salt

in a warm water rinse, it will not function as a cleanser and will do no good. The salt would be diluted to the point of being useless.

Jesus says the same thing about his disciples, and we can apply that to the church. If the church is not functional salt or light, then it is not good for anything other than to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. Salt can be diluted to the point of being useless.

It is likely that the salt available at the time was not as stable as the salt we have today because their source was the Dead Sea. As you can imagine, something called the Dead Sea does not produce pure salt. The salt they had available was already compromised. If disciples are not preserving, cleansing, flavoring, then they are good for nothing. While this is negative in function, and serves as a warning, the metaphor of light is positive.

No matter how dirty your hands are, you can never spoil a beam of light. You can block it, but you can never grasp it and spoil it. You can snuff out the lamp, but you can never actually spoil that light itself. While salt can be diluted, light cannot be spoiled. But to function properly, light must be visible.

Salt and light are agents of change, the smallest amount of light will always chase any darkness away around it. It may not light up a whole room, but even the smallest flame would be seen in a large room. We would be able to see and follow that light. We might bump into some things on the way. But if there was a tiny little beacon of light in the front of the room, and we were standing in the back and it was pitch black, we would be able to see that light. The light would stand out against the darkness. Disciples of Jesus are called to purify and preserve and illumine our world with the gospel of Christ.

This calls for consistent, visible living. Jesus says no one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but instead sits it on a stand so that it can light up the whole room. As the Sunday school song says, “This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine. Hide it under a bushel? No. I'm gonna let it shine.”

In the same way that someone puts a lamp on a lamp stand, let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Our good works are meant to bring glory to God. We cannot be the church if we live our life only in the church building on Sunday morning between 9:00 and 10:30 a.m. We are called to be visible agents of change in the world.

Think about how amazing that is. God works through each of our lives to illumine the darkness of others. Now as we see so much strife and division in the world around us, it can be tempting to keep our conversations about Jesus to ourselves and within the church. After all, Jesus is a divisive figure, and always has been. John 3 records Nicodemus going to Jesus at night. Nicodemus represented the Pharisees; he was one of them and came to Jesus in the dark. Nicodemus did not understand who Jesus was and he went to Jesus for clarification while the other Pharisees plotted to kill Jesus.

Jesus has always been divisive. When the church is functioning as salt and light, there will be pushback. This will make some people unhappy. Pushback can make it difficult to continue living out our identity as salt and light. Fear is one of the big hindrances to evangelism, to making disciples, and to inviting people. We are afraid of rejection. But we should take courage, knowing, as Jesus says, that they are not really rejecting us, they are rejecting him. When we seek to be salt and light, we must remember God's promises.

Many people in this world promote the idea of self-reliance and dependance upon oneself. This idea can seep into the church. Things then become about us and what we can do. We can begin to think that we will grow the church. We will come up with some inventive way, program, or event to get people here. But we really must rely on the grace of God. You see, the Lord has promised us that people will come to faith through the witness of his church. The work of conversion, which is the transforming of hearts, is the work of the Holy Spirit.

You and I, no matter how much we argue on Facebook, will never transform someone's heart. The work of conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit. And yet, God works through us, and maybe we do not fully understand how, but our words can awaken someone or even confirm someone's feelings toward God.

Paul states in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away and see the new has come. Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." God has reconciled everything to himself through Christ and has given the church the task of carrying out a ministry of reconciliation.

Paul says that God, in his grace, saved us from our sin, and now he has given us that message to carry to others. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ. Since God is making his appeal through us, we plead on Christ's behalf for others to be reconciled. That is our plea. We are reconciled to God. He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. When we live out our identity as salt and light, we live as ambassadors for Christ.

Ambassadors represent their country. It worked the same way in the ancient world, and that is why Paul uses the imagery of Christians being ambassadors for Christ. We are ambassadors for Christ together in this congregation. Our congregation should be a place where people can walk through those doors and see the kingdom of God invading the kingdom of darkness.

Jesus has called us to a mission: the spread of the gospel. I want to end with some concrete ways that we can be faithful to the Great Commission and to be salt and light in our own areas of impact. We have our spheres of influence in our daily lives. Home is a sphere of influence. Are you a parent of young children? If you are a parent of young children, what are some ways that you can be salt and light to them? Bring them to church, pray before bed, and read the Bible to them. There are some really good resources out there for parents.

Are you a parent of older children? Invite them. Pray before your meals with them. Share with them how your faith has made a difference in your life. Talk with them about their faith. Ask how they are doing. Invest in your adult children's lives. It does not matter if they are twenty years old or sixty years old. Invest in them.

Another big sphere of influence is our work. Work can be difficult because it can be hard to broach the subject of faith in that kind of environment, depending on where you work. Work can be restricting regarding what is appropriate. So how can we navigate and be salt and light? How can we work well as salt and light in our everyday jobs? Treating people with kindness. Helping others when you are able is an excellent way to be salt and light in the workplace. Another way to function as salt and light in the

workplace is to refuse to take part in office gossip. Always be respectful of your co-workers and your boss. If you are the boss, be respectful of your employees.

It can also be as simple as talking about going to church on the weekend when people ask you what you did over the weekend or if you have any plans for the weekend. Think about how simple that is. If somebody asks you every Monday what you did over the weekend, how often do you mention going to church Sunday? Talking about going fishing, watching the game, or going shopping are typical replies to that question. But why do we not mention church? Think about the impact it might have on co-workers, friends, or family to hear you talk about consistent and faithful church attendance. They would eventually get curious about why you spend so much time at church. That curiosity could possibly result in being able to invite them to church or at least share the gospel with them.

We now turn to considering a third sphere of influence, which is our public life. Everybody sees us. How can we be salt and light in public? Be conscious of how you treat others. If an opportunity arises in a conversation to talk about Jesus, take the time to do so. That does not always happen with strangers, but there are many missed opportunities to witness simply because we think it is not appropriate. We need to remember that sharing Jesus is always appropriate. Jesus is always King. Jesus is always Lord. Jesus is always Savior.

There is never an inappropriate time to talk about Jesus. If we are an ambassador of Christ and people see us driving in our car with only one finger in our wave, then people are going to assume that all Christians are the same way. This will, and has,

chased people away from hearing the good news of Jesus. Our behavior in public, at work, and at home can have a big impact on how people view the church.

This brings us to another sphere of influence: our communal life within the congregation. How can we be salt and light in the congregation? Seek to help those younger than you grow in their faith. Provide an example of Christian maturity to those in the congregation. Seek to be a leader. If you have the gifts of leadership, volunteer. Pray about how you can contribute to the life of the congregation and the gifts that God has given you. We know that God has given each one of us gifts and talents. Look for ways that you can share those gifts and talents within the congregation. What are things that you are passionate about?

Finally, the last sphere of influence we are going to talk about is our personal life. This is foundational for all the other spheres of influence. Who are you when no one is looking? Pursue godliness in your personal, interior life when no one is looking. Seek to be a person of integrity. Seek to be salt and light even when no one is watching. Pray for the city you live in. Pray for your family. Pray for your friends, the government, and the world. Pray that God uses you and the congregation to do his work.

Last week, we talked about making disciples. Many people think that they cannot make disciples because they have not received any formal training. Sometimes we think that to be faithful to the Great Commission we must go somewhere else instead of being faithful wherever we live in our normal lives. The reality is that if you are a follower of Christ, you are a missionary at home, at work, in public, in the local congregation, and in your personal life.

We have more influence than we think we do. Live purposefully and with awareness that the world is watching. You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Remember that you are an ambassador for Christ because God has reconciled you to himself through Christ. Go out in the knowledge, and confidence, that you are salt and light.

Reflection on “Everyday Salt and Light.”

I was drawn to this text for the biblical-theological section of this dissertation because of the intriguing imagery that Jesus uses to describe disciples. Although our world has changed dramatically technologically since the time of Christ’s earthly ministry, salt and light are still essential to daily life throughout the world. This imagery is universal in scope because no matter where you live in the world, salt and light are integral to our lives.

This text speaks to identity as well as function regarding what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Two sermons in this series explored the purpose of evangelism or missional impact in the community. Although I do not use the term “missional impact” itself while preaching, when I prepared this sermon, I had that end in mind. The main question that I wanted the congregation to wrestle with was “how does this imagery of salt and light help us engage and impact our community?” Reflecting on this sermon, I realize that I did not actually ask that question within the body of the sermon itself. If I had, I think the application section would have been more clearly defined from the exposition of the text.

As I continue to lead the congregation to engage the community more with the gospel, I know that reliance on scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit is essential.

One of the aspects of this text that I find intriguing is the fact that Jesus did not tell the disciples that they would be salt and light, but rather he said that as his disciples that was already part of their identity. Instead of promoting a culture of work, this text helps produce a culture of gratitude. Christ has already made us new, and we can live out that identity now. I wanted to be able to help the congregation members see that what they do every day in their personal and professional lives is indicative of their identity.

Looking at the division of the text, I did not give enough of a bridge between the exposition of the text and the practical application to show the congregation how that application grows out of the imagery of salt and light. A section between the exposition and the application that explores our identity as salt and light would have made this sermon stronger. I am happy with the application that I used in this sermon because I wanted to encourage the congregation by showing them that we are making an impact on the community. I want the members to know that they can make a difference as individuals in the lives of those with whom they have regular contact.

The practical application section of this sermon was divided into what I called spheres of influence. Discussing evangelism or outreach can cause many people to think of mission trips as going far away to tell people about Jesus. The way that mission trips were carried out in the past in the congregation reinforced that idea. If there was an opportunity for service, it involved travelling and serving in a different city. This reinforced the common belief that everyone in our community were believers and attended worship regularly. Due to finances and lack of youth in our congregation, these traditional traveling mission trips have not happened for a long time, although there have been opportunities for our youth to serve in different ways.

By using these different spheres of influence, I addressed another misconception regarding evangelism I have run into throughout my pastorate. Many members think that the only way to evangelize is to talk with strangers. This is common thinking, and it makes most of the members nervous. Whenever I ask them to think about family members or friends that they could invite to worship, it seems to take them off-guard. This concept of inviting family members that do not go to church seemed like a foreign idea to most when I first mentioned it. My intention was to get the congregation members to think about who they encounter on a regular basis and begin to question if those people are active in a congregation. There are many people that we have regular contact with that do not attend worship regularly or who simply have never been told the good news of the gospel.

Although this sermon could have been stronger, I am happy with this sermon overall. It sparked several discussions with members. One member told me that her and her husband talked about this sermon for several hours after worship.

“The Joy of Discipleship.” John 10:11-18, 27-30.

This sermon was the final sermon in an eight-part series on discipleship. The goal of this sermon series was to help the congregation understand what it means to be a disciple of Christ in today’s world and to equip them with practical ways to live out their identity as disciples. It can be easy for us to think of being a disciple as simply being taught by Jesus and leaving out the call to bring others into the kingdom and to be disciple makers ourselves. The previous sermon was on the cost of discipleship, and I used Luke 14:25-35 as my main text. I aimed to finish the sermon series on a note of encouragement. My focus was on Jesus as the joy of discipleship. While I was planning

this sermon, I planned to show that obedience to Jesus' commands is not a burden; it is a joy because Jesus' commands are good for us. Jesus' commands lead us to abundant life.

When planning out a sermon series, I ensure that the topic is something that is directly scriptural. When I preach topical sermons, my method is expository. I decided to preach a series on discipleship because I realized that when I used this word from the pulpit, there was some confusion among members on what I meant. I did not know if this was relegated to just a few members or if this confusion on what it means to be a disciple was something that permeated most, if not all, of the congregation.

Sermon Manuscript: "The Joy of Discipleship."

This morning we are going to conclude our series on discipleship. Although this is the last sermon in this series, remember that anytime we gather as a church and anytime we read our Bible individually or communally, we are looking at what it means to be a disciple and being formed as disciples. The simple definition of a disciple is a learner. So, if you are learning about Christ and following him, then you are a disciple, and this is a lifelong endeavor. This is not something that you graduate from in your Christian life. We are always disciples of Christ. Anytime we gather in the church individually or corporately, and we hear the word preached, or study scripture at home, we are being formed as disciples. Therefore, anytime I preach, I'm preaching on discipleship.

The sermon this morning is focused on the joy of discipleship. Last week we looked at a text from Jesus where he speaks of counting the cost of following him. There was a large crowd following Jesus, and Jesus turned and said some very provocative things. He told them that they cannot be his disciples unless they hate father and mother, sisters, and brothers, even their own life. They cannot follow him unless they are willing

to bear their own cross. They cannot follow him unless they are ready to give up and renounce everything they have. We saw that Jesus' use of the word hate is a Semitic hyperbole, meaning it is an exaggeration to prove a point. However, we do see family strains when some people come to faith in Christ, especially in places like the Middle East where being a certain faith is who you are as a people group. In some cultures, coming to faith in Christ can make it seem like you hate your family.

We must remember as we read the gospels that Jesus spoke in ways that were common at the time. He used Semitic expressions because he was part of that culture in the first century A.D. In our passage this morning, from John 10, we are going to see something similar. Jesus uses the imagery of a shepherd. This would have resonated deeply with the Jewish audience. Those of us living in rural areas may understand shepherding more than someone living in the inner-city who has never seen a farm. We will explore the imagery of the Good Shepherd to look more closely at what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. This imagery will also help us see the joy of discipleship.

Disciples are called to active participation in Jesus' mission. When Jesus called Peter, James, John, and Andrew and the other disciples, he called them to not only follow him but to become participants with him in his mission. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he gave the church a commission, known as the Great Commission, recorded at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. Disciples of Jesus are called to obey Jesus in our everyday lives. Jesus commanded the church to go into all the nations to make disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus has commanded.

Through our sermon series we have also seen that disciples of Jesus will bear fruit consistent with Jesus' command. Our obedience will bear fruit. We have seen that

disciples are called to love scripture and seek to be informed and transformed by it. Jesus' disciples show the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. When we bear fruit in our lives it is the result of the Spirit within us, empowering us. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control will be evident in the life of all believers because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Jesus' disciples.

Disciples will have their minds set on the things above. We will not have a worldly view. We are not going to have a worldly view of other human beings, of work, or of possessions. We find our life in Christ. Disciples of Jesus do not find life in possessions, status, power, or any other thing. Disciples are called to live lives that glorify God.

Last week, looking at the text from Luke about the radical demands of discipleship, we see that disciples are called to a radical and total commitment to Jesus. We will love Jesus so much that, by comparison, it does not look like we love anything else. This morning as we look at the text from John 10, we will see that disciples are known, fed, led, and protected by Jesus because he is our Good Shepherd.

Before we hear the Word read, let us pray: O God, by your Holy Spirit, open our minds to the transforming power of your Word that we may see the world through the mind of Christ and live in the world as a foretaste of your new creation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. The Scripture this morning is John 10:11-18 and 27-30. Please note that this entire section is Jesus speaking.

I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, since he is not the shepherd and doesn't own the sheep, leaves them, and runs away when he sees a wolf coming. The wolf then snatches and scatters them. This happens because he's a hired hand and doesn't care about the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the father knows me and I know the father. I

lay down my life for the sheep. But other sheep that are not from the sheep pen, I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock, one shepherd. This is why the father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command from my father.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one will take them out of my hand. My father, who has given them to me, is greater than all. No one is able to take them out of the father's hand. I and the father are one.²¹⁶

When Jesus was preaching, he often used imagery that he knew his audience would understand. He also used imagery that built on the Old Testament, as is the case here. Throughout the Old Testament, God is viewed as a shepherd. In many places God promises to one day come and be the shepherd of his people. David wrote in Psalm 23 that God is his shepherd: “The Lord is my shepherd, I have what I need.”²¹⁷ David himself was a shepherd turned king. Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel are pictured in a lot of different ways, and one picture is that of sheep that belong to the Lord. Jesus fulfilled many of the Old Testament expectations of the people in his ministry.

For example, think of the feeding of the 5,000. If you read that text with Psalm 23 in mind, you can see Jesus fulfilling Psalm 23. When Jesus saw the people, he saw them as sheep without a shepherd and he had compassion on them. He instructed them to sit on the green grass and he fed them. In that act, he was acting like a shepherd.

Shepherding was a common sight in this area at the time. In fact, if you go to the Middle East today, you can still see shepherds shepherding in ways that are very similar

²¹⁶ John 10:11-18, 27-30.

²¹⁷ Psalm 23:1.

to what they did at the time of Jesus. Shepherds lived with the sheep. Shepherds would build stone walls to form sheep pens that would be a safe place to gather the sheep at night. These pens would only have one entrance. Shepherds would lay at the gate to keep the sheep in the pen and to keep watch for danger.

What do we learn from this imagery? What is it that we learn about Jesus when he tells us that he is our Good Shepherd? Jesus protects us. It was common for shepherds to fight off wolves and bears and lions. In fact, David boasted that he had killed bears and lions while defending his sheep. The slingshot he used against Goliath was probably something he used in fending off predators while in the fields. When we think of Jesus as our shepherd, we should see that he is our protector.

Notice also that this is an intimate image. Jesus reassures us that he knows the sheep. Jesus knows those who belong to him. As human beings we long to be in relationships where our friends, family, or spouse know us. To be known by someone is a wonderful feeling; it gives us comfort. Think about how wonderful this statement from Jesus is. He knows his sheep. He knows you. He knows me. He also knows those who are waiting to hear about him from us.

The good news does not stop with being known by Jesus either. Not only does our shepherd know us, but we also know him. We hear his voice, we recognize his voice, and we follow him. Those are important things to notice in this text. A shepherd who oversees sheep knows his sheep and is responsible for feeding his sheep, for leading the sheep, and for protecting the sheep. And as Jesus says these things about himself, we see that he does those same things for his people. Jesus knows us and feeds us. This is a spiritual reality for us.

Jesus leads us by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and by the scriptures. Jesus protects us. Jesus laid down his life for us. The Holy Spirit fights temptation for us as we are also called to fight temptation. In Jesus' actions, we see how Jesus functions as our shepherd. For example, the Good Shepherd laid down his life for us. Don't miss that in this text. The Good Shepherd laid down his life, and he says in verse 17, "I lay down my life so that I may take it up again."

We see immense authority and power with this shepherd. If David would have been killed protecting his sheep, David would have been dead. Period. He did not have the power or authority to lay down his life and take it back up again. This is exclusive to Jesus. Jesus says that he has immense authority and power and yet he lays down his life for the sheep. The Good Shepherd gives his people eternal life. Think about that for a second. Jesus says he gives his people—his sheep—eternal life. And how does he do that? By laying his life down for us, he gave us eternal life.

The Good Shepherd leads his people. He does not just command us to do something; he leads us. A shepherd needs the sheep to follow him. Otherwise, the sheep will wander off. Jesus leads us. Jesus does not stand behind us whipping us to move us. He doesn't stand behind us, scaring us into going the way he wants us to go. He leads the way. This includes the way into suffering; Jesus leads us to the cross. The Christian life, the life of a disciple, is cruciform. It will take the shape of the cross. We may be called to suffer. Maybe we will not suffer the same way our brothers and sisters do in other places in the country or even the world, but there will be places and times where we will suffer in some way, shape, or form for our faith.

Even when we suffer, the Good Shepherd holds us securely. He makes that very well known. Jesus gives us eternal life, and no one will take us out of his hand. Jesus reassures us that his Father, who has given the sheep to Jesus, is greater than all. No one can take them out of the Father's hand. So, we are doubly secure. Not only does Jesus, our Lord and Savior, have us, but our Father holds us safely and securely. Jesus and the Father are one. They are one in mission; they are one in purpose.

Knowing Jesus as the Good Shepherd helps us bring together all that we have learned about discipleship. Last week our sermon focused on the cost of discipleship, and we looked at Luke 14:25-35. Jesus challenged the crowd around him to count the cost of following him. He wanted the crowd to count the cost of following him and see how much following him is worth. Jesus wants his disciples to understand that following him is worth everything.

The reality is that the life of a disciple is challenging because we follow one who moved directly into trouble himself. Jesus did not get crucified on accident. He moved with determination toward Jerusalem. When he predicted his death, he did not say that it was a possibility that he could get arrested and killed. He said it was a fact. Jesus said that it was necessary for him to be betrayed, arrested, and killed. Jesus was never secretive about what it would cost to follow him. He never hid the dangers or the trials from his disciples. He told them many times that they would have to give up everything to follow him.

Jesus knows his sheep. He knew that his disciples would abandon him on the night of his arrest. He knew that their strength and resolve would fail; however, he would not fail them. He loved them. Before he was arrested, while they were still eating the

Passover meal together, Jesus promised the disciples that after he ascended, he would send them another helper. He would send them the Holy Spirit. In fact, he promised to pour out the Holy Spirit on all believers. The Holy Spirit empowers disciples for ministry and the life of faith. We can make it through temptations, trials, and the challenges of everyday discipleship because we are encouraged, strengthened, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. One way the Spirit encourages us and strengthens us as disciples is through the study of scripture.

We can love God's word and seek to be informed and transformed by it because of the presence and the power and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We find our life in Christ because of the Holy Spirit. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, we can live to glorify God, we can obey Jesus in our everyday lives, and we can live a life of radical and total commitment to Jesus. Another of the main ministries of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer is to point to Jesus. The Holy Spirit helps us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and not on the desires of the flesh. Jesus gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us, to equip us, and to transform us.

We must understand that a life of radical and total commitment to Jesus may end up being uncomfortable at times. Jesus told his disciples that this life would bring trouble. It may arise from persecution or trial because of our faith. It may arise from temptations both from within us, which would be our disordered desires, or temptation from the outside world—the culture hammering away at us to abandon the ways of God. Our faith may lead us to suffer for a short period of time or even an extended period. To be a follower of the suffering servant is to be willing to suffer alongside him. God has not left us alone in any of this.

No matter what we are going through, we are united to Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit. One of the aspects of discipleship that we have talked about is that we are called to participate in Jesus' mission. Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. Following that command is a promise from Jesus. "I am with you always even to the end of the age." Following the command, he promises his presence. Jesus is still with us. We are called to give up everything if we must so we may follow Jesus. We can give up everything because, as Paul says in Colossians, Christ is our life.

We are called to obey Jesus' commands and to bear fruit in our lives as his disciples. Jesus sent us the Holy Spirit to transform us and to empower us to obey him. He has also called us into his church, the body of Christ, to live life together. We are not alone. We have the presence of Christ dwelling in us through the Holy Spirit. We are part of a divinely ordained and empowered community: the church.

Jesus told the crowds following him to count the cost of following him. We must do the same. In counting the cost of discipleship, we are led to the joy of discipleship. Now this joy, the joy of discipleship, was in front of the crowd that day. The joy of discipleship was in front of the Pharisees and others who rejected Jesus and had him killed. The joy of discipleship was in front of the rich man who could not part with his wealth to follow Jesus. The joy of discipleship is Jesus.

The joy of discipleship, the joy at the center of who we are as a people, is Jesus Christ himself. Jesus is what makes every trial, temptation, persecution, hardship, sacrifice, and act of repentance worth it. Jesus himself, his presence with us eternally is

the joy of discipleship. When we are united to Christ through faith, we are known, loved, led, fed, and eternally protected.

Following Jesus as a disciple is going to be hard. The world around us will try to sway us, tempt us, and break us. Christ has not left us alone in that fight. He not only died for us, but he rules over us and is with us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. We can have joy as disciples because we belong to Christ. Count the cost but rejoice and give thanks for the absolute joy of knowing and being known by Jesus. Our savior. Our shepherd. Our Lord. Praise be to God. Amen.

Reflection on “The Joy of Discipleship.”

As I reflect on this sermon, the first thing I notice is that it is too much packed into one sermon. I am happy with the sermon overall, and I did receive positive feedback regarding this sermon and the sermon series itself, but reading it allows me to see that this could have been edited more before preaching or it could have been divided into two different sermons. My goal for this sermon series was to help the congregation develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ today and to equip them with practical ways to live out their identity as disciples.

I wanted to avoid the sense that discipleship is based on following rules. I designed this sermon to serve as a wrap-up to the series where I connected to other sermons in the series. I think my introduction and connection to the rest of the series was too long. I did not realize it at the time, but I spent too much time on an introductory section before I even read the scripture. I also realize that the text that I chose that focuses on Jesus as the Good Shepherd was not the best text for the focus of the sermon. Knowing Jesus as our Good Shepherd does provide us with joy, but I think that this

sermon could have been better and more effective if I would have chosen a different text to highlight the joy of being a disciple.

My main goal with this sermon was to get people to see being a disciple as a joyful reality in their life and to see that we should be excited about inviting others to have this joy as well. Being faithful to the Great Commission—to make disciples of all nations—should be a joyful thing. As disciples of Christ, we have been transformed, and our lives have been radically changed. One of the main claims of Christianity is that life in Christ leads to transformation. If this is true, it should be visible (bearing fruit in our lives), and it should be something that we desire for other people who do not know this joy.

I do not regret preaching this sermon because I know that it did impact a few congregation members positively. However, upon reflection, I believe that it was too much in a short amount of time. Looking back at the sermon series, I think that the whole series would have benefited from having a section on the joy of discipleship in each sermon instead of trying to focus one sermon on the joy of discipleship. I should have highlighted the joy of discipleship from each text that I preached in this series.

“Extending Mercy” Sermon on Matthew 14:13-21

This sermon was preached on Compassion Sunday. Our congregation sponsors two children through Compassion International. Each year we take part in Compassion International’s Compassion Sunday. During our worship service we collect money to send to Compassion International for children who do not have sponsorship. Many members in our congregation sponsor children, and the congregation has supported Compassion International for many years. The purpose of Compassion Sunday is to show

that our brothers and sisters around the world are in need and that we can help them through the ministry of Compassion International.

Sermon Manuscript: “Extending Mercy.”

Before we hear the Scripture read this morning, let us go to God in prayer. Living God, may your word enter us by the power of your Holy Spirit, so that we who have not seen may believe. Amen.

When Jesus heard about this, he withdrew from there by boat to a remote place to be alone. When the crowds heard this, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a large crowd had come back, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. When evening came, the disciples approached him and said, “This place is deserted, and it is already late. Send the crowds away so that they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” “They don’t need to go away,” Jesus told them, “You give them something to eat.” “But we only have five loaves and two fish here,” they said to him. “Bring them here to me,” he said. Then he commanded the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves and two fish, and looking up to heaven, he blessed them. He broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. Everyone ate and was satisfied. They picked up twelve baskets full of leftover pieces. Now those who ate were about five thousand men. Besides women and children.²¹⁸

I am sure for most of you this is a familiar text. Most likely you have read this before or heard it before in the context of a sermon. My goal this morning is for us to get to know this text more deeply. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record many of the same miracles, but the only two miracles in the life of Jesus that are mentioned and talked about by all four gospels are the feeding of the 5,000 and the resurrection of Christ.

Each gospel records the event of the feeding of the 5,000 a little differently. They are not contradictory; they are complementary. They are eyewitness accounts and

²¹⁸ Matthew 14:13-21.

Matthew has a specific interest in how this miracle impacted the disciples. In John 6, John is most interested in Jesus' teaching and records a huge section of Jesus' teaching about how he is the bread of life. Mark and Luke also give us different details and perspectives. For example, we find out there is a servant boy present, possibly part of the entourage of Jesus and his disciples. Remember that the twelve were not the only ones that followed Jesus exclusively. We also know about the women, so it could have been one of their sons. We know that these are loaves of barley bread because of John. We also know that the grass was green, giving us the time of year. There is a lot of detail when you look at Matthew's report of this event.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was seeking solitude. He was trying to find somewhere to be alone. What prompted this? He was exhausted. He knew that people were after him, including Herod. In Matthew 14:1-12, we learn that Jesus went into the wilderness after he had heard that John the Baptist was executed by Herod. There is no doubt in my mind that Jesus knew what was going to happen to John. I think Jesus was trying to take time to grieve. I believe he went to escape the attention of Herod because his time had not yet come.

When the crowd heard that Jesus went to the other side of the lake, they followed on foot from the towns in the region of Galilee, and they all came together in one place. When Jesus came to shore, the crowd was there. Matthew records that it was a large crowd. Matthew 14:21 records that "those who ate were about five thousand men besides women and children."

To be clear, we are not sure exactly how many people were in attendance. We do, however, know that it was a large crowd. It was a large enough group that the disciples

were not able to provide food. They also did not think it was their responsibility to feed the crowd. Matthew records the death of John the Baptist and the feeding of the five thousand next to each other, allowing the reader to contrast the two feasts. Herod had his palace and his feast of debauchery turned to murder. Jesus, however, held a feast in the wilderness that was full of compassion and healing. Herod's feast brought death and grief, while Jesus' feast brought life and joy.

The original audience probably understood what Jesus was doing more deeply than we do today. They were sitting on a hill in the wilderness listening to a teacher reminiscent of Moses. They were hungry. We are told that Jesus commanded the crowds to sit down on the grass, and then he fed them. Jesus' ministry stands in line with Israel's past. It is reminiscent of the wilderness feedings during the Exodus. It is also in line with the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, as God used both men to provide food miraculously. Elijah resided with a woman, who was not even an Israelite, and her son, and the Lord provided oil and flour for them during the entire length of a drought. God takes ordinary means and provides extraordinary results: miracles. Those who were in the crowd listening to and being fed by Jesus would have understood that Jesus was acting as a prophet.

I cannot help but think of Psalm 23 whenever I read this section from Matthew. Think about what Psalm 23 tells us about the Lord. "The Lord is my shepherd; I have what I need."²¹⁹ Because the Lord is my shepherd, he gives me provision. "He lets me lie

²¹⁹ Psalm 23:1.

down in green pastures.”²²⁰ Matthew tells us that Jesus commanded the crowd to sit down in the green grass and then provided a feast for them.

This crowd was possibly over 10,000 people. Most of the villages in Galilee would have been dwarfed by this crowd. Think about Omro, population 3,500. Would we be able to host a crowd that large? Imagine the crowd that comes to a huge air show in Oshkosh if Oshkosh had no hotels. Would we be able to provide the crowd with enough food or shelter? I do not think we could handle that size of a crowd. Omro is about the same size as most of the villages in Galilee at the time. So, all these nearby villages that the disciples wanted to send the crowd to would not have been able to provide for a crowd this large either.

The Gospel of John records that the amount of food needed to feed this crowd would have been over eight months’ wages. Yet, Jesus told the disciples to feed them. The disciples were confused. They only had five loaves and two fish. The disciples already recognized there was a problem, but what they failed to recognize was that the solution was standing in front of them.

The Gospels do not tell us how the miracle worked. Did the loaves multiply in the basket? Did they multiply as they were being handed out? Did they multiply when Jesus gave thanks? We do not know. What we do know is that this was a bounteous feast. There were twelve baskets of bread left over. It was a common expectation in the first century for the host of a banquet to have leftovers. Leftovers showed that the host was gracious and had provided enough for their guest. Jesus shows he is a gracious host by feeding the crowd. He also showed that he is powerful and able to provide for his people.

²²⁰ Psalm 23:2.

Matthew focuses on the response of the disciples because they obeyed Jesus. He instructed the disciples to bring the bread and fish to him. Jesus blessed and broke the bread and sent the disciples to serve what he had provided. When Jesus first tasked them with feeding the multitude, they recognized that they didn't have the resources to do so.

The disciples learned at least two things from Jesus and this miracle. First, they learned to reflect Jesus' compassion. The disciples' initial reaction to Jesus telling them to feed the crowd was that it was not their responsibility. "It's getting late. The crowd is going to be hungry. Send them away and they can fend for themselves." Jesus did not want to send the crowd away. Jesus tasked the disciples with something greater than they could do. Not only did they learn to reflect Jesus' compassion toward the crowd, but they also learned to rely on Jesus' provision. He supplied what was needed. The result of Jesus' provision was a large volume of leftovers. The fact that we have no record of the crowd's response, leaves us with a question, did they even see what Jesus had done for them? Did they miss the miracle?

As we read this text, we should see that Jesus provides for us as well. We would do well to remember that Jesus meets our needs. He is more than sufficient to meet the deepest needs in our lives. He is our sustainer and our redeemer. He also tasks us with meeting the needs of others, just as he commissioned the disciples to feed the crowds that day. He commands all disciples to serve and show his compassion. Jesus' compassion led him to action. It did not lead to pity. It led him to do something. It led him to feed the multitude and to heal the sick among them.

Christ's compassion also led him to give the disciples a task to assist in his ministry of compassion. They initially saw the needs of the multitude, and they withdrew.

We must not be too hard on the disciples for their reaction because we know that feeling. There is a great need in the world today—not only physically, but a massive spiritual need. This need can be overwhelming. One of the responses we have is to shut off.

When we see this overwhelming and massive need, we can be tempted to turn away and say that it is not our responsibility. We can be tempted to be depressed by the amount of need in the world and to convince ourselves that we cannot do anything about it. We know that we cannot meet every need, but we are called to serve as we are able. Jesus doesn't call us to the task as Christians to solve the problems. He tells us to meet needs. He does not instruct us to fix the country's government. Jesus tells us to meet the needs of the citizens. When the nation of Israel was in exile in Babylon because of their sins, God instructed them to work for the good of the city and to be good citizens even while in exile. They were to work for the good of the people who were their captors. That was a massive challenge for the Israelites in Babylon.

When we are on task, Jesus' promised presence is with us (Matthew 28:20). We cannot meet every need, but we can serve as we are able. We may not be witnessing food multiplication or miracles in the same way that disciples did, but the Lord has provided us with much. We must ask ourselves two questions: Am I reflecting Jesus' mercy and compassion in my daily life? How can I serve with what I've been given by the Lord?

Think about the constant need of refugee relief right now. How many Ukrainians have been displaced? We cannot go to Ukraine and fight or go physically help refugees. How can we help? We can give to places like the Presbyterian Disaster Association because they have frontline workers. We know that the Presbyterian Disaster Association is a reputable source of help.

There are many people in the United States that need help as well. Some are here in our town. Many Americans need help with food. How can we help those who need food? Give to places that help feed those in need. Give food or monetary donations to the local food pantry. Every time you go to the grocery store, buy a few extra cans of vegetables or other food, and donate that to the local food pantry. We cannot overlook the little things and the impact they can have. If you clean out your closets, do not throw clothing away. Give it to the thrift store or places like Cherith International in Oshkosh that provide women clothing for job interviews.

When it comes to facing the needs that we see every day around us and in the world, I think we underestimate the power of God. We also underestimate, or ignore, the role that God has given us as his people. Because God has called us to this task, he will help us. He will provide for us and through us. It can be easy to underestimate the resources and the amazing things that God has given us. This is something I have struggled with in my own life.

Another resource and gift that we can underestimate is the power of prayer. We should never underestimate the power of prayer, but I think we do that more than we are aware. If you are convinced that you cannot do anything about the crisis in Ukraine, are you praying? The letter of James reminds us that there is power in the prayer of a righteous person. If you are in Christ, then you have been made righteous by his blood. Therefore, there is power in your prayer. Prayer should be our first course of action when we see a need.

It is also easy to underestimate the power of God working through his people. We do that a lot in Western culture. There are many books that are published that claim the

church is dying, and then offer ways that we can prevent the dying of the church. Are we forgetting what Jesus said about the church? Jesus said that he will build his church and that the gates of hell won't prevail against it. Think about how powerful that is. The church is not dying. People are leaving the church because they do not believe in Jesus, but the church is not dying. Individual congregations may be getting smaller, but that is not always the best measure of the church's health. Conversion is God's task. Our task is to preach the gospel.

We may not be able to provide every need. I would not be able to send 167 kids back to school, but this congregation and this community did just that in August because we all came together. Never underestimate the power of prayer and never underestimate the power of God working in and through his people, because with God all things are possible. That is a promise in scripture.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we ask that you root us in your Word. Show us how to reflect Jesus' compassion and mercy and how to be extensions of his compassion and mercy here in our individual lives and our life together as a congregation. Fill our hearts to overflowing. Show us how to serve and teach us to pray without ceasing. It is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

Reflection on "Extending Mercy."

I chose this passage for Compassion Sunday because it shows that compassion for others should lead us to action. I also wanted to emphasize that our lives as Christians should be modeled after Jesus' example. The application of this sermon is that God has tasked us with serving as we are able to serve. We may not be able to meet every need in this world, but there are many ways we can extend mercy to our neighbors. Near the end

of the sermon, I tried to give many practical examples of how we can extend mercy in our own communities as well as worldwide. There are many businesses and non-profit organizations in our area that can help meet the needs of those in our communities. By giving concrete examples of giving in our local area, I hoped to show the congregation that there are many opportunities to serve our community as well as surrounding communities.

As I reflect on this sermon, I see that my goal of providing practical examples of extending mercy in our community could have been a stronger section. There are many non-profit organizations and businesses that I could have named in my sermon to help the congregation see how many opportunities there are to serve our neighbors. I also realize that I could have made a list of these organizations, along with a short description of what they do and contact information, and provided that with the bulletin.

When I delivered this sermon, one of the big concerns globally was the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops in February 2022. I addressed the need for refugee help because some of our members had family that lived in Russia at the time and needed to move out of Russia to Germany. Thankfully, the family was able to relocate. The refugee crisis hit close to home for us while I was preparing this sermon.

Overall, I am happy with how this sermon turned out. I have had members concerned over the apparent decline of the church in the United States. This topic has come up many times in our weekly Bible study. I thought addressing the reliance of the church upon Jesus and his provision would be helpful considering the amount of need in the world – both spiritual and material. When Jesus told his disciples to feed the multitude, they did not think they had enough because they were focused on their own

power and were not relying upon Jesus as their source of strength. I wanted to stress that this tendency—to rely upon ourselves and not Christ—is something that we can easily fall into.

I planned this sermon to be encouraging and thought-provoking. Throughout the sermon I aimed to let the scripture guide by asking questions about how we are showing compassion as Christ's disciples. I also wanted to highlight that we are called to serve as individuals as well as a community of believers. I know many of my members were feeling overwhelmed coming out of a pandemic, seeing rising gas prices, and seeing the threat of global war with the Russian invasion. I knew this scripture could encourage the congregation and help them think about what opportunities of service they have in their lives.

Discussion of Missional Practices

As a congregation, we have tried several ways to engage the community. This section will focus on practices that have not been fruitful in impacting the community. In this section I will first discuss blind spots that existed in the congregation that were limiting community engagement. I will then discuss ways in which I began to lead the congregation toward community engagement. Next, I will compare missional practices that have not been successful in impacting the community and missional practices that have been successful in impacting the community. Finally, this section will close with lessons learned from the missional practices that the congregation has attempted.

Blind Spots in the Congregation

Due to the number of individuals in the congregation that have lived their entire lives in Omro, convincing the congregation of the need for outreach was not easy. Outreach can be difficult and intimidating, particularly when it has not been part of the congregation's culture. When I began to press the issue of community outreach and engagement, there was push-back. Most of the members, due to their community ties, did not see a reason to reach out to the community. Many of the members are already part of outside groups like Kiwanis, 4-H, Omro Women's Service League, and the Omro Bowhunter's Club.

Some of the members have served on city council or the local library board, and one member was the mayor for two terms. There was already some community engagement by default, but the community was not being engaged with the gospel. There was not any intentionality when it came to inviting people to church on Sunday mornings. The invitation to worship was considered open. Many assumed the community knew they were invited already. This blind spot led to an inward-facing culture, although turning inward was not intentional.

Another blind spot that existed in the congregation was the belief that "everyone I know already belongs to a church." Like many rural communities, there is no shortage of churches in our community. Church membership is affiliation. If you were a member of a church at some point in your life, it is hard for people to understand that membership carries responsibilities and requires you to continue to be part of that congregation's life. One example of this was a request I had from a local funeral home. I received a phone call that one of my congregation members passed away. This shocked me. When I asked

who, they gave me a name I did not recognize. The family had given them our congregation as this person's church of membership. They indeed had been a member for one year but had not attended the church in almost four decades.

This type of affiliation with a congregation caused many in the congregation to question the need for inviting others to worship. As one of the research participants said, this was seen as "sheep stealing." Inviting others, even if they had not regularly attended a church in a decade, was not acceptable because it was viewed as a boundary that was not to be crossed.

A final blind spot in the congregation was the belief that our area is already Christian. Mission is something that is done somewhere else. "Everyone I know already goes to church," was a common thought and belief. The concept of unchurched people in our community had not really occurred to some of the members of our congregation. Even after ten years as pastor, I still run into all three of these blind spots when I talk about mission in our community.

At first, these blind spots were not apparent to me as I began my pastorate. Within the first year, I noticed these areas of difficulty when I started asking about outreach and evangelization of our community. I had many members, including leadership, confused on why I wanted the congregation members to actively engage the community by inviting them to worship. Some responded with saying that before we could grow, we would have to build. This response confused me because our worship attendance was not at near maximum capacity. We had plenty of room for guests in our sanctuary.

Leading Toward Community Engagement

Starting in August 2013, I began to realize that I needed to focus on leadership development and guide our leadership into creating a mission statement for the congregation. The congregation had a mission statement that had been written in the 1990s. It had not been reviewed or talked about in decades. Because I was only twenty hours a week, I knew that my main work would be with the leadership in a retreat setting outside of our regular business meetings. I started planning the retreat in August and began reading books on leadership to prepare. I also knew that I needed to grow as a leader, so I chose books that would guide me as well as my leadership into having a clear understanding of why our congregation was needed in our community.

I worked my way through several books to lead a leadership retreat. In October 2013, the session and I went through the material that I found compelling and challenging and began the conversation about our vision and mission statement. After two retreats, each held on a Saturday afternoon, we came up with a mission statement that also serves as our vision statement: Welcome. Worship. Witness.

Once we had developed our mission statement, we began promoting it to the congregation and making sure the members knew that the session was asking important questions and trying to lead in new ways. Since then, our mission statement has been at the forefront of many conversations. We review it and ask in what ways we are being faithful to the mission statement and ways we can improve. This has helped us clarify our role in the community. Once we had a mission statement clearly articulated, the session began to ask questions about how to live it out.

Missional Practices That Did Not Bear Fruit

Ideas about how to reach the community in new ways grew out of this mission statement. We also sought ways to reform the events that were already held by the congregation. Two events that were suggested by congregation members are worth noting. Even though the events failed to bring in new members, we learned a great deal from them.

Outdoor Worship and Corn Roast

The first outreach event that stemmed from the discussion of reaching the community was an outdoor worship service followed by a free corn roast. Prior to settling on a corn roast, many ideas revolving around food were suggested. Many of the ideas were not financially possible, but the brainstorming led us to think about worship and fellowship. This led to the idea of providing a corn roast. From there it morphed into being an outdoor worship service held in a park that would serve as neutral territory where people in the community would already feel comfortable. The corn roast would follow a worship service focused on inviting people to follow Jesus.

We held this event for two years. We never had a single visitor from the community show up. This frustrated many of the leaders and members. After much discussion, it was decided that this was not going to be the way we reached the community. My next step as pastor was to get the session members to analyze why they thought it failed. Some of the reasons that we think it failed is that the invitations were impersonal (advertisement in the newspaper), it seemed like a gimmick, and there was only an invitation to the worship and corn roast. We did not separate the two events and give two times, because we wanted people to come worship with us.

It may have been beneficial to include a time for worship as well as a start time for the corn roast. This could have led to conversations with people in a relaxed setting. We thought having the worship service outside the church building would be more inviting, but we failed to realize that worship itself can be intimidating to those who are not yet believers. We also failed to realize that an advertisement in the newspaper was not personal. This led the session to another idea that we thought would eliminate the need for people to come to us and would also lead into the possibility of conversations.

Fourth of July Water Giveaway

The Fourth of July parade in our community is a large draw, typically bringing in thousands of visitors to our town. The parade is held on Main Street and the foot traffic throughout the day is impressive. We decided to meet in a member's yard and give away Bibles, small toys, pamphlets, and bottles of water. We were hopeful that the congeniality of the day would help facilitate discussions and conversations that could turn into personal invitations to worship.

The first year of this event, we discovered how hard it is to get people to take free things. Many were skeptical of our offer and walked away without taking the free water or even looking at our table that had toys, Bibles, and pamphlets. We only handed out 200 bottles of water that first year. Although there was some discouragement after the event, we decided to hold the event the next year. The following year, we handed out several Bibles, many toys, and almost 400 bottles of water. Several of our members had conversations with people, and some people joined us to watch the parade from the yard. Despite that year being successful in handing out more water and making connections, we did not see any visitors to our congregation.

The Fourth of July water giveaway lasted for five years. We started the event in 2016. After missing 2020 because of the pandemic, we had fewer volunteers in 2021 who came to help. This led to the decision to no longer do the water giveaway.

This event, though it failed in some ways, was not a total failure. After the first two years, we had people seek us out to get water from us. We were able to have simple conversations, but many of the people we talked to were either from out-of-town or were already members of other churches. This event did not leave us as frustrated as the corn roast did. As the leadership reflected on the event before it was decided to not continue it, many were happy that we had tried to engage the community. The most frustrating aspect of the event was the inability to engage people in long conversations because of all the other activities going on. All the conversations we had were simple and very short.

Although these events did not have the outcomes we had hoped for, we have grown from the experience. We are now able to ask better questions as we look for other ways to have a missional impact on the community. These discussions helped our leadership begin to seek the best way for our congregation to serve the community. Was there a need in the community that our congregation could meet? This led to a new outreach idea that has had missional impact on our community.

Reflection on Missional Practices That Are Fruitful

The committee that oversees outreach, our Church Life Committee, started asking more questions after deciding to discontinue the outdoor worship service and corn roast. We had many conversations about finding opportunities to serve the community.

Back to Books Luncheon

An event that our congregation has held since 2011 is a Back to Books Luncheon, where we host the staff and teachers from our local school district. Our building is located directly across from the elementary, middle, and high schools. In 2011, the congregation provided a meal to the teachers and staff of the schools during the month of August when the staff and teachers return to the school to prepare for the new school year. This meal has been hosted by our congregation every year since 2011, except for 2020.

The Back to Books Luncheon usually serves between 100 to 130 people. It is hosted entirely by our congregation. We do not ask for any donations from the school. All the food is prepared by the congregation members and is served potluck-style. Each year, our youth helps with this event. We have not gained members through this event, but it has been a way for our congregation to serve our community and to gain a reputation as a congregation that serves the community.

We are a congregation that values hospitality. During the event we have many opportunities to converse with the teachers and staff. They are always invited to come to worship. We know that we are making a difference in the community by showing service and hospitality.

Back-to-School Store

Expanding on this service to the teachers and staff, two of our members—who are also teachers in the local school district—came to the session with an idea on how to serve the children of our school district. In 2017, a new ministry of the church was

launched as our congregation began our Back-to-School Store. The members who initiated this ministry idea saw a need in our community that they thought our congregation could meet. Many of the students in our school district came to school without the necessary items needed for the school year.

The members brought this ministry idea to our attention because they knew that we were looking for ways to engage and serve our community in meaningful ways. Knowing there was such a profound need in our community not being met prompted our leadership to support the idea right away. Although there were many questions on how to fund such an endeavor, the leadership did not hesitate to support this outreach. Many of the congregation members grew up in this school district, and many had children that graduated from this school district as well. This led to a strong desire to help the families that need assistance.

The two members that brought this idea to the leadership have done an amazing job at organizing this outreach. Many hours were put into this event by the two members, and their passion for this outreach soon spread to the entire congregation. This outreach is funded completely by donations. Many businesses in our town and the surrounding areas donate to this event. Many area churches support this outreach. Although it is a ministry of First Presbyterian Church, we cannot fund the Back-to-School Store without the generosity of the congregation and the community.

It was not difficult to find support for this event. Many people felt that this was a much-needed outreach and service to the community. The first year of the Back-to-School Store, we sent 67 children back to school with everything they needed to start the school year. We provide all the school supplies that the students need to return to school.

They are also provided with clothing when we raise enough money. We also provide free haircuts.

It is hard to describe the joy we witness when the children come into our building and pick out their own backpack and fill it with supplies. It takes many volunteers to make this outreach possible. Alongside our congregation members, we have volunteers from other churches and people from the community. One thing that makes this outreach impactful is the personal interaction that we get during the event.

Each student is led by a shopper. A shopper is a volunteer that helps the children find what they need. Each student has a piece of paper with what grade they are in, the teacher's name, and what school supplies each student needs. It also lists clothing sizes so that they can get the right articles of clothing. Students who are in adult sizes are given a gift card so that they can pick out their own clothing. As the shopper takes the students around to pick out their supplies, it creates an opportunity to build a relationship. By shopping with the students, instead of pre-packing bags, it gives the students and their parents the opportunity to be treated with respect and dignity. This process shows the families that we care about them when we spend time with them.

Our volunteers for this event are comfortable talking with others and inviting the students and their families to worship on Sunday morning. However, not every student or parent engages with the shoppers in a meaningful way. It can be intimidating and challenging to come into our building and ask for help. We saw this challenge more in the first year. When I tried to engage some of the parents with questions about how they were doing, they were not willing to enter a deeper discussion with me. I asked several people how we could pray for them and there was no answer. I am not sure if that was

because they were not believers, or if they were not used to being prayed for by a stranger.

We were even able to provide this outreach during the pandemic at the start of the school year in 2020. Although we were not able to host the event in person, we were able to provide school supplies to 170 students in August 2020. It is the biggest number of students that we have served.

We consider this outreach to be successful because we can see missional impact in our community. This outreach was not started to recruit new members or grow the church's attendance. This began because there was a need in the community that our congregation could meet. It started because our members love our community and saw neighbors in need. This outreach is our way of helping the community thrive.

The missional impact on the community was not noticeable right away. We began hearing people in the community talking about the Back-to-School Store in public after year three. Then we began to realize our impact on the community. We have become known in the community for this outreach. Although invitations to Sunday school and worship are given to every person who comes through the Back-to-School Store, we have only had one family in six years join the congregation as members.

I think the greatest impact on the community can be seen during the event itself. Watching the families come through and talk with volunteers is wonderful. We get to see people making connections that they otherwise might not have made. By hosting this outreach in person in our sanctuary and being able to interact with the families that come for help, we get to show them love and compassion. The biggest missional impact that

this outreach has on the community is showing our neighbors that they are loved, and people care about them.

Even though our event is held once a year, the Back-to-School Store is a year-long ministry. The school district knows that if someone moves into the area during the school year and needs help, we can help no matter what time of year it is. The organizers shop year-round and drop off other supplies to teachers throughout the school year. The Back-to-School store has helped our congregation become more aware of what is going on in our community. It has helped our leadership ask better questions about our role in the community.

Lessons Learned from Missional Practices

Some of the results from our outreach attempts were expected. We understood if we did this outreach correctly, we could impact the community in a positive way. We also understood that this outreach had the potential to be a way for us to share the gospel with our neighbors who would otherwise not come into our sanctuary. However, a few outcomes were unexpected. For example, it helped many of the members who did not grow up in the community feel more connected to the community as a resident. It also helped to reconnect many members of our congregation who have not had children in the school district for many years. Another unexpected outcome was that it helped us redefine our understanding of success regarding outreach.

Our outdoor worship and corn roast, as well as our Fourth of July outreach, were considered unsuccessful outreach. Our desire was that we would have guests come to worship with us, and those guests would potentially come to Christ and join our congregation as active members. We did not see that happen. As the leadership reflected

on those events and why they failed to produce the results we desired, our outlook began to change regarding what is or is not to be considered successful outreach. It also helped redefine our goals regarding outreach ministries of our congregation.

Our metrics have changed regarding how we understand the success of a particular outreach or event. The Back-to-School Store did not result in any guests for the first three years. This frustrated some of our leaders. As we discussed this in our session meetings, we were able to process through how we felt about the event itself. Better questions began to be asked about why this ministry exists in our congregation. The main purpose of the Back-to-School Store was not to gain members. The main goal is to show the love of Christ to the members of our community that need help and to be able to build stronger relationships with our neighbors. As we began to reflect on the success of the Back-to-School Store with those goals in mind, it was clear that those goals are being met.

Although we did not know it at the time, I can see now that by not treating the Back-to-School Store as a membership program it gave us freedom in the planning. The pressure of growth was not there. The goal was to love our neighbor and to meet a need in our community. It was not initiated as an attempt to grow our declining membership. That allowed us to measure our success differently. The success of the Back-to-School Store can be clearly seen in the faces of those who come to the event and get their supplies for school. It can be seen in the classrooms of the teachers who now see their students coming to school prepared. The success can be seen because we are being faithful in showing God's love to the community where we live.

Chapter 6

Discussion and Recommendations

I have spent all my life in small-membership churches. I grew up in a small town with a population of 350 people. Aside from living in a town of 65,000 during college and seminary, my whole life has been lived in a rural setting. The congregation where I was nurtured as a child, teenager, and young adult is a small-membership, rural congregation. Many members of my home congregation were farmers. Although the congregation I served as student pastor was not rural in its setting, many of the members were farmers.

As mentioned, I live in a rural community in Wisconsin and serve a small-membership church with a long history in the community, having been established in May 1851. I have friends that are pastors in suburban and urban areas, and the challenges that I face in a rural context, only eight miles from my friends' churches, are very different. Throughout my pastorate, I have read books on church growth, discipleship, and other pastoral challenges. I typically find myself having to translate whatever is said in those books into a rural context. It is rare that I come across literature that is written by or for rural pastors and small-membership churches. This has led to much frustration in my pastoral leadership. It is also what led me to want to explore rural ministry in a research project.

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of rural congregations lead congregants to have missional impact in their communities. In Chapter Two, the literature review showed that Christians are called to be Jesus' witnesses and messengers of the gospel in the world.

The following research questions guided the research.

1. How do pastors describe their theology for the priority of leading congregants to have missional impact in their communities?
2. How do pastors preach to motivate congregants to have missional impact in their communities?
3. What challenges do pastors experience as they lead their congregants to have missional impact in their communities?

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study was carried out with the assumption that there are pastors who serve rural congregations who have recommendations for leading their congregants to have missional impact on their communities. It was carried out with the assumption that missional theology is a helpful tool for rural pastors in leading their congregants to have missional impact in their communities. For the purpose of this study, missional refers to the understanding that the identity of the church is tied to its purpose. The church exists to be God's missionary agent in the world. The literature review and the interviews, however, revealed challenges regarding missional theology and its usefulness in rural ministry contexts. Many rural pastors struggle in leading their congregants to engage their communities effectively.

Rural congregations struggle with oversaturation of churches in small areas. Rural congregations also struggle with ingrained cultural practices and beliefs that limit the congregational desire and ability to engage their communities in effective ways. As rural congregations struggle with low membership, financial strains can lead not only to the

closing of rural congregations but can also lead to rural congregations becoming focused on surviving instead of impacting their communities in meaningful ways.

Chapter Two focused on three relevant literature areas. The biblical-theological section focused on Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:13-16. This section of Jesus' teaching is from a larger section that covers Matthew 5-7 and is known as the "Sermon on the Mount". Matthew 5:13-16 focuses on Jesus' use of two metaphors that describe Jesus' disciples. In this section of teaching, Jesus tells his disciples that they are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world."

These two metaphors are instructive for the church today. They help us understand our function and our relationship to the world around us. Salt and light are distinct. Salt and light are agents of impact. Salt is used to cleanse, purify, and preserve, among many other uses. Light is integral for life as it helps us see and understand the world around us. The images of salt and light are also communal. This means that the disciples, both individuals and corporately, function as "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world."

Disciples are called and gathered into community. The community of disciples is known as the church. The church is the people of God in all ages, called together in community, in obedience and service to God's kingdom, and sent into the world to be agents of change in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is called to be God's agents in the world. Through the communal life of the church, disciples of Jesus live to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." The church exists to be God's missionary agent in the world. As such, the church is called to be visible in the world and to impact the world around it. The church is a sent community. Jesus has

called his disciples together into the church and has given them a command to be his witnesses and a blessing throughout the world. The church is a community with a purpose.

The literature review showed that the church has a purpose, or calling, to fulfill in the world. Disciples of Jesus are called to be salt and light in this world. How the church is to function as salt and light often takes theological reflection. Theology of mission helps the church understand how it is called to be God's missionary agent in the world. Congregations should view theology of mission as a tool to help discover how to be God's missionary agents in their local neighborhoods. Pastors should also view theology of mission the same way. Pastors should engage the theology of mission so they can lead their congregants to have missional impact in their communities.

The interviews showed that rural pastors often struggle with leading their congregants to engage their communities with the gospel. There are many reasons that this is a challenge. Financial constraints can often lead a congregation to turn inward and not engage the community around them. Lack of membership can contribute to a lack of volunteers who are able to engage the community. Long held beliefs also contribute to a lack of community engagement in rural congregations.

The interviews showed that strong pastoral leadership can help a congregation successfully break long-held beliefs and attitudes toward community engagement. The interviews showed that pastoral leadership strongly impacts a congregation's willingness and ability to engage its community with the gospel. The interviews showed that consistent and faithful preaching has an impact on congregations' views and can lead to healthier congregations.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, the literature and interview research will interact along with the researcher's experience. It is my hope that this section will prove beneficial and encouraging to both pastors and congregations in rural areas.

Salt and Light

The images of salt and light are beneficial in helping pastors equip their congregants to engage and impact their communities. They were effective images in Jesus' preaching because they are earthy and understandable. No matter the size of the congregation, or the cultural context, the importance of both salt and light is easily understood. The imagery of salt and light can help Christians understand how they are called to be distinct and separate from the world around them. Understanding the role of the church in the community as well as the world is integral in our current cultural climate. I have had many discussions with congregants, and other Christians, in the last ten years about the role of the church in our current culture.

The church struggles with its role simply because we have taken our attention away from biblical images, such as "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world," and focused instead on words and phrases that are popular, trendy, and new. There has been a shift from biblical language to cultural language to describe the church. This has come from misguided attempts to stay relevant to the culture. This does not lead to relevance; it leads to dilution. When the church loses its saltiness, it becomes worthless and has nothing unique to say to the world, or do for the world and therefore is irrelevant and useless.

Pastors who study Matthew 5:13-16, along with the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, will be better equipped to guide their congregants in their understanding of what it means to be Jesus' disciples today. After completing this study and the literature review, I am fully convinced that, regardless of church size and location, if pastors want to lead their congregants to have impact on their communities, they must return to the images employed by scripture to describe the identity, function, and purpose of the church. The church can only be agents of change in the world if they stay distinct from the world while working in the world to bring the gospel to all people.

The Church Sent Out: Mission Mindset in Rural Contexts

The challenges present in bringing missional theology or the concept of missional church into a rural congregation are numerous. One of the biggest challenges that pastors could face is the established culture of the congregation. Many rural congregations have existed in the same community, sometimes the same building, for decades. I have experienced this first-hand. The congregation I serve has a culture that is very different from any other church I have been a part of. This culture dictates many things in the life of the congregation, from the way potlucks are held to the way outreach is viewed. The way a congregation worships and the way a congregation makes decisions are often very hard to change. Changing the culture of a congregation is difficult and takes wisdom and insight on the part of any pastor or leader desiring to bring change to the congregation. It also takes wisdom to know which parts of the culture are worth changing and which ones are not.

It also takes discernment for pastors and leaders in congregations to know on which issues not to compromise. One of the participants in my study showed that the

pastor may have to stand up for issues that he feels strongly about, even if this means conflict and eventually having to leave the congregation if the congregation refuses to change.

Missional literature seems to be geared mostly to churches with larger budgets and higher membership. A small-membership, rural church does not have the ability to shift their budget in some of the ways that were prescribed by some of the authors who wrote about creating missional churches. The authors lacked experience in small-membership churches or rural churches. The emphasis on spending money to serve the community was heavy and surprising. Many authors did not seem to think about other ways to serve the community.

I designed this study with hopes that missional theology would be a helpful tool in leading my congregants to have impact in our community. Instead, missional theology seems to be lacking a great deal in practice. Much of the literature reviewed focused on unrealistic methods for small-membership congregations, especially in rural areas.

Missional theology and the concept of creating missional communities do not seem to be easily transferred into an established congregation that is part of a denominational structure. Much of the literature is geared toward church planting or growing communities that are already able to be overhauled completely. This does not transfer easily into established congregations with a long history and developed culture.

The literature revealed that the term missional can vary widely in use from one author to another. This came out in the interviews as well. The four participants interviewed varied in age. The older the participant, the less likely they were to have

familiarity with the term “missional”. Only three participants were familiar with the term missional, and only two of them were influenced by missional theology in their ministry.

Missional is still a relatively new term. It has also proven to be decisive. The critiques that I came across during the literature review are important for ministers in the Reformed theological tradition to consider before trying to incorporate missional theology concepts into their congregations. The critiques pointed out that evangelism is something that is starkly absent from some missional literature, especially evangelism of the world. When the church removes evangelism from being a priority, both locally and globally, they are not being faithful to Jesus’ commands before he ascended.

Missional theology has had positive impact in other ways. I agree with authors Ott, Strauss, and Tennent that missional theology has helped the church rethink its priorities when it comes to mission. Missional concepts have helped the wider church recover its identity as God’s missionary agents to the world. Understanding that the church’s mission comes from God, not denominational or cultural agendas, is of utmost importance. If the church loses sight of who God has called us to be in this world, we will be as worthless as salt that has lost its saltiness or a burning lamp under a basket. Pastors who want to lead their congregants to have impact in their communities need to be Christ-centered in their approach to leadership and ministry.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the literature review, interview data, and my own experience in rural ministry, I have recommendations for practice for those who may enter rural ministry, rural pastors, congregation members, seminaries, and denominations.

Those Entering Rural Ministry

My recommendations for those who may enter rural ministry is for both seminary students who are not yet ordained, and those already ordained. My first recommendation is to research the area you may serve. This research should include things that will impact your work with the congregation, community, and your family. Research the cost of living, the school system, crime rates, demographics, and nearest towns. It is also important to research the stores and restaurants in the area. Something as simple as how often you go grocery shopping can be greatly impacted by how far away the nearest store is from your home. If you are married and have a family, involve them in the research and keep track of the things that your spouse or children may need. Remember, when you move to a rural area, so does your family.

My second recommendation is to learn about the history of the area and the congregation. Find out how long the congregation has been in the community. Inquire about the role of the congregation in the community. Learning about the community's economy and demographics will help you understand the culture of the community and the congregation. Ask questions about the demographics of the congregation to determine if people travel from the surrounding area to attend worship, or if the congregation is mainly attended by local community members. Ask about the relationship dynamics in the congregation. For example, asking about how many members of the congregation are related, or family units can help you further understand the culture of the congregation.

My third recommendation is to find out about the pastor's expected role in the community. There may be established traditions that other pastors have started that you will be expected to continue.

Rural Pastors

My recommendations for practice for rural pastors are fourfold. First, be a constant student of your context, your congregation, and scripture. Second, look for needs in the community in which you serve to see if your congregation can meet that need through the talents, time, and money available. If you feel passionately about a need in the community, and you do not feel your congregation can meet the need on its own, look for creative ways to meet the need. Look for ministry partners in the area that can help with time, talents, and money to meet the needs in the community that have been identified. Third, if you have significant experience in rural ministry, consider writing a book. Your experience could greatly benefit and encourage others in rural ministry. Finally, get involved in the community. Do not spend your time locked away in your home office or your office at the church building. Find ways to serve your community through outside groups that will not cause you to compromise your convictions.

Congregation Members

My recommendations for congregation members is also fourfold. First, help your pastor look for and identify needs in your community that your congregation may be able to meet. Even if you are not in a leadership position within the congregation, look for ways to serve your community. If you have the gift of leadership, then seek ways to lead that make sense within your tradition. Second, be open to new ways and new ideas that your leadership may suggest. Help create a culture of openness and biblical conviction in your congregation. Third, pray for your pastor and leadership. They need it. They may

not always ask, but they need your prayers. Pray that God gives them wisdom and strength to lead the congregation in a biblically faithful manner. Fourth, get involved in your community, and pray for your community.

Seminaries

My recommendation for seminaries is as follows. First, offer courses, either required or elective, on understanding cultural contexts. Students that are training for the pastorate may end up being called to a different cultural context than what they have experience with. Train your students for success before they leave your classrooms. Give them tools for understanding and navigating cultural contexts. Second, be careful of gearing all your programming and conferences toward urban, suburban, and large membership churches. Listen to the rural voices and invite them to speak at conferences. Consider hosting rural ministry conferences that are specifically created to nurturing, encouraging, and strengthening rural ministry. Do not expect rural pastors to travel to the city for these conferences every time. Host rural ministry conferences in rural areas that may attract rural pastors who otherwise would not be able to attend your conference in the city where the seminary is located. Finally, invest in rural ministry training.

Denominations

The final section of recommendations is for denominations, or other large church structures. This can be applied to non-denominational congregations as well. First, do not forget the rural church. Rural ministries in your area may be weak or even non-existent. Denominations, particularly Presbyterian and Reformed denominations with presbyteries,

need to invest in, encourage, and strengthen the rural congregations within their bounds. Like seminaries, denominations should not gear all their programming and conferences toward large membership churches and urban and suburban congregations. Equip your rural ministers as well as you equip urban and suburban congregations. Lastly, invest in rural ministry training, support, and encouragement. Do not neglect the rural pastors and rural congregations in your area.

Closing Thoughts on Recommendations for Practice

Considering the findings described above, the church is well advised to make efforts to understand the needs of the pastors that are serving or will serve in small-membership, rural congregations. The research showed that the rural United States has a population of 60 million people.²²¹ Out of those 60 million people, it is estimated that 40 percent of people in rural areas are unchurched.²²² This means that the church in the United States must be intentionally ministering to people in rural areas.

Perhaps the best practice that this research can offer to pastors who want to lead their congregants to have missional impact in their communities is to be faithful to their calling “to equip the saints for the work of ministry”²²³ and “be ready at any time to give

²²¹ “How Does the U.S. Census Bureau Define ‘Rural?’”, Rural America, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://gis-portal.data.census.gov/arcgis/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=7a41374f6b03456e9d138cb014711e01>.

²²² Shannon Jung, et al., eds., *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 16.

²²³ Ephesians 4:12.

a defense to anyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you.”²²⁴ Preach the gospel. Live the gospel. Be salt and light. Be faithful.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on how pastors of rural congregations equip their congregants to have missional impact on their communities. One recommendation for further research is to expand this study to pastors of churches of various sizes. Exploring how pastors in churches of various sizes equip their congregants to have missional impact in their communities could yield significant data that would help pastors in different geographical settings.

Another recommendation for further research is to design a qualitative research study that avoids using the term missional. While conducting the interviews I noticed that, depending on the age of the participant, missional language may or may not be known or relevant. Avoiding missional language may result in finding more pastors of rural churches that have led their congregants to have missional impact in their communities.

A final recommendation for research is to explore the role of the church in the community or neighborhood. This subject arose during the interview process.

²²⁴ 1 Peter 3:15.

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