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How Pastors Foster Trust in Ideologically Diverse Congregations

By
Derek McCollum

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 determine how pastors foster trust in ideologically diverse congregations so that such churches might flourish rather than fracture. In an age of increasing cultural and political polarization, congregations marked by ideological diversity often experience distrust, withdrawal, and division. While some churches pursue homogeneity to avoid conflict, Scripture calls for unity amid diversity, leaving pastors with the challenge of cultivating trust in environments naturally prone to suspicion and fragmentation.

This study utilized a qualitative design employing semi-structured interviews with eight pastors serving in ideologically diverse congregations across various contexts and denominations. The interviews explored three research questions: how pastors describe the challenges of ideological diversity, how they understand its benefits, and what pastoral practices cultivate trust within their congregations. Data were analyzed using a constant comparative method to identify recurring themes and patterns.

The literature review focused on three key areas: a biblical and theological framework for unity and diversity in the church, the political and relational nature of pastoral leadership, and the role of trust in organizational and congregational health. These areas provided a foundation for understanding both the necessity of diversity and the central role of trust in enabling healthy community life.

This study concluded that trust is the decisive factor determining whether ideological diversity leads to flourishing or fracture. Four primary findings emerged: when trust is high, diversity enhances discipleship; a pastor's trust in God and Scripture forms the foundation for congregational trust; relationships serve as the primary context

for building trust; and effective leadership balances clarity with openness. Key pastoral practices included gospel-centered preaching, consistent communication, relational presence and hospitality, and demonstrated humility and vulnerability. These findings suggest that trust is a cultivatable pastoral asset that transforms diversity into a means of spiritual growth. By adopting intentional practices that build relational and theological trust, pastors can lead diverse congregations toward unity, maturity, and deeper gospel witness.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Pastors today face fracturing in society at large and within the church. Harrington and Creech, in their book, *The Leader's Journey*, accurately describe the state of society and the church today:

Conflict rages between political parties, groups on opposite sides of hot issues, governments, terrorist organizations, and drug cartels. Distance grows to the point of cutoff as media figures, partisan political leaders, and politically active citizens polarize, choosing to speak about each other rather than with each other. People take refuge in the echo chamber of their favorite news source, hearing repeatedly what they already believe to be true. Society's seniors focus on the generations following, projecting anxiety on them—their children and grandchildren. They worry over falling test scores, nutrition, security, and rights. We entered the twenty-first century as recipients of the proverbial curse: may you live in interesting times.¹

Ideologically Diverse Churches Face Deep Challenges

In diverse communities, the realities described above are amplified further. John Inazu, in his book *Confident Pluralism*, honestly records the dangers and difficulties of living in a diverse community. Reflecting on research done by Robert Putnam, he writes:

Consider, for example, political scientist Robert Putnam's critique of "the optimistic hypothesis that if we have more contact with people of other ethnic and racial backgrounds (or at least more contact in the right circumstances), we will all begin to trust one another more." Putnam observes that most empirical studies suggest just the opposite: "for various reasons—but above all, contention over limited resources—diversity fosters out-group distrust and in-group solidarity." In fact, Putnam's research suggests that the problem is even worse than these studies

¹ Jim Harrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 92, Kindle.

suggest: diversity not only fosters out-group distrust, but “in-group trust, too, is lower in more diverse settings.” He concludes that “inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbours, regardless of the colour of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more, but have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to huddle unhappily in front of the television.”²

Diversity of any kind, as Inazu notes, makes community life difficult, and the church is no exception to this difficulty. All churches, but especially those which are ideologically diverse—churches in which different political, cultural, and even theological stances are held by members of the church—face the findings of Putnam and Inazu acutely. In churches in which a variety of ideologies are present, even if this variety fits well within orthodox Christian belief, the temptation is high to withdraw from others, increase “out-group distrust,” and treat those who differ with suspicion. Pastors of these congregations face a reality that is not simply “interesting,” as Harrington and Creech put it, but *dangerous*. Ronald Richardson, reflecting on this dynamic in his book *Creating a Healthier Church*, writes, “At some point, in every relationship and in every congregation, differences do become a problem. . . some of us find ourselves saying (perhaps only to ourselves), ‘We are just too different from each other to be able to get along.’”³ Diversity, the experts agree, is often dangerous.

² John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference*, enlarged ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 118, Kindle.

³ Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life*, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), loc 611, Kindle.

Is Homogeneity the Answer?

One answer to this difficulty would be to homogenize the congregation as much as possible in order to decrease the risk of fracturing. Though difficulty still exists in homogenous churches, decreasing diversity can limit some of the more acute symptoms of communal fracturing. This, however, is not the Bible's answer. Diversity and the potential for fracturing was present in the New Testament church, but the answer from the apostles was not to seek homogeneity but rather unity amidst diversity. As Paul writes in 1 Cor 12:12–14, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.”

Likewise, in Ephesians 4, Paul encourages unity amid diversity, writing, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”⁴

And in Romans 12, he states similarly, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”⁵

John Inazu, writing about the benefits of ideological diversity (what he labels “confident pluralism”) in society at large, states that, “Confident pluralism allows genuine difference to coexist without suppressing or minimizing our firmly held

⁴ Eph. 4:1–3 (English Standard Version).

⁵ Rom. 12:4–5.

convictions. . . . Confident pluralism allows us to function—and even to flourish—despite the divisions arising out of our deeply held beliefs.”⁶ According to Inazu and the evidence of the New Testament, there remains the possibility and biblical calling toward healthy, proper functioning within an ideologically diverse congregation—flourishing rather than fracturing.

Why Do Some Diverse Churches Flourish While Others Fracture?

Though ideological diversity has led many churches to fracture and fail, others have seen their differences produce a multifaceted beauty that has given them depth and deeper gospel-centeredness. These diverse churches have flourished amidst their diversity, even in light of broader cultural forces promoting division.

Exploring the myriad reasons for the success of some churches above others is beyond the scope of this paper, but some plausible options might include: a deeper level of self-sacrifice among members, an abundance of the spiritual fruit of patience, or even the general cultural tone of the particular location of the congregation.

This study, however, will limit its focus to one factor—trust. In congregations where trust is high, diverse thinking can be a benefit rather than a detriment. When the bonds of trust among congregants, and between congregants and leaders, are strong, the diversity of thought present in the congregation will lead to flourishing and spiritual growth. However, in congregations where trust is low, fracturing is the inevitable end. As Stephen M.R. Covey

⁶ Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*, 7.

writes, “When you trust people, you have confidence in them—in their integrity and in their abilities. When you distrust people, you are suspicious of them—of their integrity, their agenda, their capabilities, or their track record.”⁷ Where trust is high, Covey writes, flourishing is possible, and where suspicion reigns, the differences in the church will inevitably lead to fracturing.

Writing about managing conflict among staff in the workplace, author Craig Runde states that “Teams that create a climate of trust and safety have a much better chance of dealing frankly with differences and disagreements than teams that have not established a trusting environment.”⁸ This simple truth applies to congregations as well. Those who have established a climate of trust have a much better chance of flourishing among varied ideological differences than those congregations in which trust is low.

Purpose Statement

When trust among a congregation is high, diverse congregations can not only avoid fracture, but indeed flourish. The purpose of this research paper is to explore how pastors cultivate trust in ideologically diverse congregations. Again, Covey argues, “contrary to what most people believe, trust is not some soft, illusive quality that you either have or you don’t; rather, trust is a pragmatic, tangible, actionable asset that you can create—much faster than you probably think possible.”⁹ He then lays the existence of

⁷ Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 5, Kindle.

⁸ Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan, *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader: How You and Your Organization Can Manage Conflict Effectively*, 2nd ed (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 226, Kindle.

⁹ Covey, 2.

trust squarely on the shoulders of the organizational leader, in this case, the pastor. “Over time,” he writes, “I have come to this simple definition of leadership: Leadership is getting results in a way that inspires trust. It’s maximizing both your current contribution and your ability to contribute in the future by establishing the trust that makes it possible.”¹⁰ This study will explore how pastors of ideologically diverse churches can lead in the way Covey encourages, creating and fostering trust in their congregations.

Research Questions

The following questions will guide the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors describe the difficulty of ideological diversity in their congregations?
2. How do pastors describe the benefits of ideological diversity in their congregations?
3. What pastoral practices have cultivated trust in the congregations they pastor?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for leaders of ideologically diverse congregations and those whose congregations are more homogenous. This study can benefit those who read it in three major ways: It will help decrease fracturing in church congregations, foster the beauty and benefits of diversity in the church, and better enable Christians to more closely follow Jesus.

¹⁰ Covey, 40.

Decreasing Fracturing

If pastors and church leaders do not learn how to foster trust in their congregations, these congregations will become more fragmented and divisive, and the beauty of the church will be diminished. Knowing how to better foster trust will enable pastors to navigate the pitfalls of diversity and enable the congregation to better counteract the divisiveness of the broader culture rather than mimic it.

Fostering the Beauty of Diversity

When trust in a congregation is high, the benefits of congregational diversity will be able to shine. In a high-trust environment, the beauty of diverse, gospel-centered thinking will benefit the church rather than fracture it. When diverse perspectives—all held within the boundaries of orthodox Christian belief—are enabled to exist together, the congregation will receive broader and deeper categories for Christian belief and behavior. Patrick Lencioni, writing of the benefit of increased trust among organizational teams, assesses the benefits varying ideas within an organization in which trust is high:

Contrary to popular wisdom and behavior, conflict is not a bad thing for a team. In fact, the fear of conflict is almost always a sign of problems. Of course, the kind of conflict I'm referring to here is not the nasty kind that centers around people or personalities. Rather, it is what I call productive ideological conflict, the willingness to disagree, even passionately when necessary, around important issues and decisions that must be made. But this can only happen when there is trust. When team members trust one another, when they know that everyone on the team is capable of admitting when they don't have the right answer, and when they're willing to acknowledge when someone else's idea is better than theirs, the fear of conflict and the discomfort it entails is greatly diminished. When there is

trust, conflict becomes nothing but the pursuit of truth, an attempt to find the best possible answer. It is not only okay but desirable.¹¹

When pastors learn how to foster the trust Lencioni commends, the beauty of the body of Christ will be more clearly reflected.

Enabling Deeper Discipleship

When pastors foster trust in ideologically diverse congregations, the members of those congregations will see the fruit of the Spirit increase in their lives. Congregants, stretched by their neighbors with differing perspectives, will develop compassion, empathy, curiosity, and patience.

Other Potential Benefits

In addition to the three main benefits of this study, learning how to foster trust may also help pastors in other areas, such as achieving congregational commitment, deepening trust in God’s word and God’s appointed leaders, and tightening bonds among staff and ordained leadership. As Covey puts it, “High trust materially improves communication, collaboration, execution, innovation, strategy, engagement, partnering, and relationships. . . (as well as) excitement, energy, passion, creativity, and joy.”¹²

¹¹ Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 57–58, Kindle.

¹² Covey, 19.

Definition of Terms

Ideological Diversity: For the purpose of this study, “ideological diversity” will mean the diversity of thought among congregants, including but not limited to, political ideas, cultural practices, and diverse theological views. This diversity, however, is assumed to be held within an orthodox Christian perspective. For instance, the diversity of theological commitment may include differing thoughts on baptism, spiritual gifting, women’s roles in ministry, or church polity, but would exclude disagreements over the divinity of Jesus or the inerrancy of the Bible. Differences in political ideas would include party affiliation and policy desires but would exclude moral stances on which the Bible is clear. Likewise, cultural ideological diversity may include differences in educational approaches for children and various forms of cultural engagement, but would exclude cultural practices on which the Bible makes clear judgments.

Ideological diversity, therefore, is the diversity of ideas and practices that are held *within* historic, orthodox, Christian belief and practice.

Though racial and ethnic diversity often brings with it a sense of ideological diversity, it is not within the scope of this study to delve into the issues that arise when racial and ethnic diversity is high. This study will limit itself to fostering trust among ideologically diverse congregations, no matter their racial or ethnic makeup. Henceforth, when the word “diversity” is used in this study, the reader should assume ideological diversity as described above.

Trust: Though trust will inevitably be defined slightly differently by each interview subject, for the purpose of this study, trust will be broadly defined as the confidence one person puts in another. Emphasis is on interpersonal relationships that

move toward openness, confidence, and positive assumptions rather than suspicion and disengagement.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors of ideologically diverse congregations can foster trust in those congregations. The literature review will begin with a study of relevant theological categories and Bible passages about the benefit of diversity and the role of trust. Two other categories of literature will also direct our study: the political nature of pastoral leadership, and the role of trust in church and organizational health.

A Biblical Framework of Diversity and Trust in the Church

Theologians for centuries have written of the nature of diverse unity found in God himself. It is the diverse unity that we find in the nature of the Godhead that begins our discussion of diverse unity in the church.

Unity Plus Diversity Equals Beauty

In his book *Uncommon Unity*, Richard Lints argues that the tension between unity and diversity is built into both the character of God and the unique nature of humanity. It is what Lints calls “the theological imaginary,” arguing that “it is the deep structures of the Creator/creature relationship in which all of our lives are embedded.”¹³

Lints highlights that as a Trinity, God is himself both unified and diverse, a theological belief held by Christians for millennia. He continues, however, to note that as

¹³ Richard Lints, *Uncommon Unity: Wisdom for the Church in an Age of Division* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife Corporation, 2022), 114, Kindle.

those made in the image of God, human beings are both like their creator and unlike him—a reflection of the tension between unity and diversity that exists in their Creator. And as bi-gendered creatures, that God-image in humanity reflects both unity and diversity of the Creator. Unity and diversity, according to Lints, are built into the image of God in humanity.¹⁴

This unified diversity, as Irwin Ince writes in *The Beautiful Community*, is not only embedded into trinitarian theology and human image-bearing, but that it is also *beautiful*. “Fragmentation, division, disharmony, and disunity are our story, but they are not God’s,” Ince writes. “His is the story of beauty and it is most profoundly seen in his communal life . . . far from a dry, secondary, unimportant technical doctrine, God as Trinity—unity in diversity, diversity in unity—is the heartbeat of the Christian faith. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are perfectly united in beautiful community.”¹⁵

Ince continues by arguing that the mission of humanity was, in part, to spread this beautiful diversity. “The initial commission,” he writes, “was to cultivate the earth. Just as in creation the Lord brought order out of chaos, humanity as his image was to cultivate his world to his glory. God intended cultural diversity over the world even if sin had never entered the picture.”¹⁶

Though sin has marred the beautiful Image of God in humanity, the Cross restores it. In Ephesians 2:11–14, the apostle Paul writes that the cross has now reconciled diverse racial groups that were previously divided. This indicative of cross-centered

¹⁴ Lints, 141.

¹⁵ Irwyn L. Ince, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 25–27, Kindle.

¹⁶ Ince, 57.

reconciliation now provides the imperative for Christians to be reconciled with one another.¹⁷ As Miroslav Volf has written, “God’s reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model for how human beings should relate to the other.”¹⁸ The beauty of unified diversity is most clearly exemplified as enemies become friends.

The Diverse Ministry of Jesus

Jesus himself seemed to embody such unified diversity in his earthly ministry, providing a model of ideological diversity in the gathering of his disciples.¹⁹ The group of twelve consisted of men with diverse vocations, backgrounds, and political ideologies. Jesus, however, called them all together to lead his church. In each of the Gospel passages mentioned above, we see Jesus putting together regular, synagogue-going, tax-paying Jewish fishermen, Levi, a former tax collector, and even Simon the Zealot, a “fervent nationalist,” whose political convictions make him a direct opponent of Rome and “an unlikely recruit for a movement which consorted with (tax collectors).”²⁰

Frederick Dale Bruner, in his commentary on Matthew, writes, “A Zealot was as far removed from a tax collector as a leftist guerilla is from a right-wing conservative. That a “leftist” Zealot and a “rightist” tax collector would now find themselves in Jesus’ apostolate suggests the power of Jesus. He is able to take both liberal and conservative

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 5:20–21.

¹⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 100.

¹⁹ See Mark 3:13–19, Matthew 10:1–4, and Luke 6:13–16.

²⁰ Richard T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 163.

mentalities . . . (and) unite them to each other in a cause higher than either Left or Right.”²¹

Jesus’ closest disciples were themselves a diverse and unified group. They differed in gifting, personality, and even, it seems, political leanings. But Jesus joined this diverse group together for the purpose of building up his church.

Unity and Diversity in Church Life

New Testament discussions about how church life is to function follow then the example of the Trinity, the Image of God in humanity, and Jesus’ own actions in gathering his Apostles. New Testament authors write about the benefits of the diversity of gifts given to the Church and the way in which Christians should go about navigating such differences. The apostle Paul, writing in Romans 12, commends the multitude of gifts given to the church and encourages believers to receive God-given diversity with love and grace, writing:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.²²

John Calvin, commenting on this passage, writes, “(Christians) are called for this end, that we may unite together in one body, since Christ has ordained a fellowship and

²¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, “Matthew 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1–12,” rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 456.

²² Romans 12:4–8.

connection between the faithful similar to that which exists between the members of the human body.”²³

He continues to extol the benefits of unified diversity, writing “that as the members of the same body have distinct offices . . . so God has distributed various gifts to us.” Calvin’s conclusion is that this diverse variety of gifts has been given to “contribute to the common good of the body according to the faculties they possess.”²⁴

Paul picks up this same theme in 1 Corinthians 12, writing, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”²⁵ As Ben Witherington comments, “there is much debate as to whether the analogy with the human body is meant to stress the unity of the body to a fractured congregation or the diversity of gifts to a group enamored of one gift in particular . . . as the text progresses, it appears that Paul is concerned about both issues—both diversity in unity and unity in diversity.”²⁶ Even in such a fractured and divided church as that in Corinth, Paul does not condemn diversity but rather combines it with unity as a means to glorify God and build up the body.

²³ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library) online version.

²⁴ Calvin.

²⁵ 1 Cor. 12:4–7.

²⁶ Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1995), 254.

But it is not only for the church in Rome or Corinth that Paul commends unified diversity. In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul writes, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”²⁷

It is important to note that in this section of his letter, Paul is calling the church to maturity. And Paul says that one of the building blocks of a mature church is that it is unified *and* diverse. As Peter Obrien comments, “the diversity contributes to the unity of the body, since Christ’s giving different gifts to each is for the purpose of enriching the whole so that all are prepared for full maturity when they meet their Lord.”²⁸ Obrien also notes a similar emphasis in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. Lints adds that such unified diversity is key to building wisdom and godliness in the church:

Biblical wisdom is not interested in self-promotion but in the flourishing of the relationships in which one is embedded. Wisdom is confidently humble and able to glean insights from a variety of diverse sources. Wisdom resists listening only to those who reinforce one’s own opinions. It takes seriously the opinions of those who disagree. By this a wise person places the well-being of others ahead of his or her own self-interest. A wise person is also open to correction and yearns for deeper knowledge. Wisdom is not so much possessed as a goal for which one aims. Wisdom comes from the influence of wise people and resists the influence of foolishness. This entails that one be able to distinguish between wisdom and foolishness to begin with. As the book of Proverbs suggests, you need wisdom to understand wisdom (4:7). It is also important to realize that wise persons are sometimes foolish and foolish persons are sometimes wise.²⁹

²⁷ Eph. 4:4–7.

²⁸ Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2009), 286.

²⁹ Lints, 223.

God has blessed his church by giving a diverse set of gifts to different people. And when those diverse gifts are used for the building up of the church, and as Paul says here, for equipping the saints for the work of ministry, then great diversity in the church doesn't divide at all. In fact, it unifies.

According to Paul, mature, unified diversity builds the body. Humble diversity, practiced with gentleness and forbearance, increases, rather than decreases, both unity and the beauty of the church.

Trust amidst Unity and Diversity

The Bible does not say much about how Christians, especially diverse groups of Christians, are called to trust *one another*. The Bible does speak, however to the trust that Christians are to have in the Lord.

Mark Baker, in his book *Centered-Set Church*, while arguing for more diversity in the way pastors understand discipleship, writes that discipleship “is about trusting God. Everyone’s journey is going to be different. That does not mean hands off, ‘God’s got this.’ Rather, from a place of trust in God we can actively engage in discipleship free of the uptightness that comes from feeling it all depends on us.”³⁰ Discipleship, for Baker, is centered on trusting God.

Throughout the book of Exodus, the Lord is continually calling Israel to follow Him in trust (a calling they continually neglect). Standing on the banks of the Red Sea, with an Egyptian army behind them, Moses tells Israel, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the

³⁰ Mark D. Baker, *Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community without Judgmentalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 135.

salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent (Exodus 14:13–14, ESV).” God here invites his people to turn to him in trust, even in the times in which they can see no good outcome. He invites them, as Peter Enns writes, “[to learn] that their circumstances are not the final standard on which to view the work of God.”³¹

Furthermore, the Bible proclaims that trust is built when the people of God perceive that their leader himself trusts the Lord. As the leader demonstrates that he is being led by a trustworthy guide, the people he leads will deepen their trust in both the leader and the Divine Guide.

Douglas Stuart picks up on this theme as he comments on the actions of Moses in Exodus 14:13–14. Stuart writes, “This speech of Moses represents perhaps his finest hour yet in the leadership of Israel. He urged calm, commanded simple, patient waiting . . . reassured the people that what seemed to them a certainty that they would die in the wilderness was in fact the last, hopeless grasp of Egyptian hubris.”³²

We find a similar dynamic in Acts 27. Despite the dire circumstances of a shipwreck, Paul remained steadfast in his trust in God. In Acts 27, Paul tells the crew, “Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar.

³¹ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 273.

³² Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 336.

And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on some island.”³³ (Acts 27:22-26)

Paul’s trust in God allowed him to remain calm and confident, which in turn gave reassurance to those around him. The crew and soldiers, in fact, began to listen to him, and despite being a prisoner, Paul became the de facto leader of the ship. Paul’s deep trust in the Lord transformed him from a mere prisoner into a leader whose wisdom and faith others relied upon.

Maybe most importantly, trust is built upon the embrace of Scripture. When pastors believe in and preach the infallibility of Scripture, trust in the congregation rises because the people gathered trust the foundation they are standing on. When the leader appeals to a higher authority, trust increases.

The rejection of God’s authority is at the heart of the fall of Adam and Eve (as is the rejection of trust—“did God *really* say . . .”). Christopher Watkin, in *Biblical Critical Theory*, notes, “For Eve, to know what is good and evil is to usurp God’s authority and decide, on the basis of her own judgment, what is to be counted as good and what is to be counted as evil—which is precisely what she proceeds to do.”³⁴ The embrace of God’s authority, however, fosters trust precisely because it points that trust to a deeper authority. The Westminster Confession of Faith 1:4 states this: “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the

³³ Acts 27:22–26.

³⁴ Christopher Watkin, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2022), 112.

testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God,” or as Michael Horton, in *Pilgrim Theology*, summarizes, “The authority of the Scriptures does not depend on the decisions of the church or the individual to validate it.”³⁵

In delineating between inspiration and illumination, Horton notes, “The canon is inspired; the community is illuminated to understand, embrace, interpret, and obey it.”³⁶ Horton’s argument is that only *inspiration* provides infallibility and ultimate trustworthiness. Therefore, the greater the leader’s proclamation of the Bible’s inspiration, the greater the congregation’s trust in his illumination.

In summary, the Bible calls Christians to a unified diversity and a deep trust in the Lord and his inspired word.

³⁵ Michael Scott Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 2013), 53.

³⁶ Horton, 63.

The Political Nature of Pastoral Leadership

Ministry leadership is a political activity, and the fostering of trust will inevitably take place in the political milieu. “Ministry,” as Burns, Chapman and Guthrie write in *The Politics of Ministry*, “means working with people.” Politics, they write, “is the art of getting things done with others. . . . Therefore, ministry is political.”³⁷

Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie argue that not only ministry, but in fact, all of life is political, “incorporating the themes of power, interests, negotiation, and ethics.” “The only way to avoid it,” they comment, “is by being a complete hermit.”³⁸ In the interpersonal world of life and ministry, politics is unavoidable and must be embraced if trust is going to be fostered. Politics, for Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, is a “day-to-day experience of dealing with people,” and it is present in nearly every sphere of life.³⁹

Echoing a similar theme, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, in their book *Leadership on the Line*, comment that “one of the distinguishing qualities of successful people who lead in any field is the emphasis they place on personal relationships.”⁴⁰ Good political leaders give importance to “creating and nurturing networks of people whom they can call on, work with, and engage in addressing the issue at hand.” They continue, “Able politicians know well, from hard experience, that in everyday personal

³⁷ Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry: Navigating Power Dynamics and Negotiating Interests* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 5.

³⁸ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 17.

³⁹ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 18.

⁴⁰ Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 75.

and professional life, the nature and quality of the connections human beings have with each other is more important than almost any other factor in determining results.”⁴¹

As Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky write in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, “Small p politics exists in every group of human beings, from families to huge multinational corporations. Some people control resources and define goals, and individuals must negotiate to determine who gets what and who’s going to do what to achieve the desired goals. Thus, managing the politics in your organization, no matter how distasteful that may seem, is essential to leading adaptive change.”⁴²

Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie note the importance of drawing close to others. The role of pastoral leadership, they write, involves “listening carefully to those who have something to gain or to lose as a result of the planning decisions . . . ministry planners may find their work diminished, dismissed, or even terminated unless they take others’ interests into account and invite people with relevant interests to the planning table.”⁴³ They describe political action as the process of negotiating diverse interests. They argue that “people are constantly negotiating for their interests.” So, whenever people get together, they write, “they will be negotiating their interests. . . . Traditional hymns or contemporary choruses? Children in service or in children’s church? Immersion or sprinkling? Group meetings early morning or evening?”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 75.

⁴² Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 119.

⁴³ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 139.

⁴⁴ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 5.

Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie comment, “We need to get honest about just how messy it is to work with people in ministry. The process of managing differences of thought and expectations between people is complicated, unpredictable, and emotionally taxing.”⁴⁵ “Sometimes politics happens in quiet consensus,” they write. “At other times it occurs in the midst of uncertainty, anxiety, and conflict. Regardless of context, stakeholders will press their interests forward with their available power. Because of this, politics is unavoidable in ministry.”⁴⁶

Peter Steinke, drawing from Murray Bowen’s family systems theory, notes the important role that emotionality plays in the politics of ministry. In *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, he writes, “Relationships are played out in what [Murray] Bowen called ‘emotional’ processes. Bowen gave the concept of ‘emotionality’ a very specific meaning. Emotionality signifies what is instinctual in human behavior, what is imprinted in our nerves as innate, and what embraces the deep biological commands on how to live.” Steinke distinguishes emotions from feelings, writing that “emotionality refers to all the processes that guide individuals automatically.” Emotionality, he continues, “speaks about reactions and the interrelatedness of those reactions.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, Steinke notes the important role that anxiety plays in an emotional system and, therefore, in the politics of ministry. “Anxiety,” he writes, “is an automatic reaction to a threat, real or imagined . . . a natural reaction designed for self-preservation.

⁴⁵ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 12.

⁴⁶ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 31.

⁴⁷ Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 24.

. . . At one level, anxiety can make us alert, more self-conscious, and highly motivated to take action. At an elevated level, however, anxiety can be a paralyzer.”⁴⁸ Steinke remarks that anxiety alone “will not harm or endanger a system.” It is how anxiety is addressed by the leader, he writes, that will determine outcomes.⁴⁹

To add to the political challenge for the pastor, the diverse and competing interests in the church do not simply represent a choice between good and bad. Tod Bolsinger, in *Canoeing the Mountains*, writes that “it is relatively straightforward to decide between a good thing and a bad thing, a healthy behavior and an unhealthy behavior, a strategy that is working and one that is not. But when the choice is between two valuable ideas, plans or programs, the transformational work gets difficult because at the heart of adaptive work there is no win-win.”⁵⁰ Bolsinger hits on the most difficult part of the politics of ministry leadership—pastors often have to do more than just decide which option is better. They must, instead, do the difficult political work of getting things done with others in ways that necessitate trust.

Unfortunately, the trust-building process of political navigation often happens within some sort of conflict. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie lay out a four-quadrant view of relationships based on the degree of agreement and equality of power.⁵¹ Though pastors often have to negotiate in quadrant four (the quadrant where interests differ and power is unequal), the authors urge pastors to gently move the relationship into a

⁴⁸ Steinke, 4.

⁴⁹ Steinke, 7.

⁵⁰ Tod E. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, rev. ed. (Westmont, IN: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 139.

⁵¹ Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, Chapters 8–9.

different quadrant, emphasizing the importance of trust and relational connection again. They write that “the planning process will move out of cell four when healthy leaders use their capacities to consider the interests of those with less power and to empower them to engage the process well. These wise leaders value a trust-building, collaborative process more than the goal of merely gaining their own interests.”⁵²

Navigating the various interests present in a ministry environment takes patience. Tod Bolsinger gives a helpful cooking illustration when describing the benefits of faithfully and slowly getting things done with others:

Bringing good, healthy change to an organization, family, church or business, is like cooking a stew in a Crock-Pot. Every person is like a hard, raw vegetable or a firm piece of uncooked meat. Each has its own identity, opinions and beliefs. For the pieces of food to become a meal that will feed a hungry tribe, each bit must be transformed at least a bit. Each vegetable must be softened, the meat must share its flavor, and each morsel must contribute to a healthy sauce for all to share. When the components combine, we end up with something altogether different and tastier than if we were to cook carrots separate from the beef and separate from onions and then put them all together. . . . A leader’s job is to regulate the heat. The leader is like the thermostat on the Crock-Pot, keeping enough heat in the system so things begin to change, but not enough that individual parts get scorched.⁵³

⁵² Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, 138.

⁵³ Bolsinger, 140.

The Role of Trust in Organizational Health

Literature about the role of trust in organizational health can be broken into five subcategories: 1) The importance of trust in organizations, 2) Collaboration and empowerment, 3) Open and honest relationships, 4) Non-anxious leadership, and 5) Promoting safety.

The Importance of Trust in Organizations

Much evidence points to the fact that our brains are wired for trusting relationships. “Physicists speak of *resonance*,” writes Sue Johnson in *Hold Me Tight*, “a sympathetic vibration between two elements that allows them to suddenly synchronize signals and act in a new harmony.”⁵⁴ She explains that when human beings are in close contact with someone to whom they are attached, oxytocin is released in the brain, writing, “Studies indicate that giving humans oxytocin increases the tendency to trust and interact with others.”⁵⁵ Paul J. Zak’s research affirms Johnson’s conclusion. He writes in *Trust Factor* that “the brain synthesizes . . . oxytocin when we are trusted and . . . oxytocin causes us to reciprocate trust by being trustworthy.”⁵⁶

The release of oxytocin doesn’t just create good feelings but rather tighter relational bonds. Johnson, a couple’s therapist by trade, writes that “the key moments of change . . . were moments of secure bonding . . . forging a bond that can withstand differences, wounds, and the test of time. These moments shape safe connection, and that

⁵⁴ Susan M. Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*, 1st ed (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2008). 159.

⁵⁵ Johnson, 161.

⁵⁶ Paul J. Zak, *The Trust Factor* (New York: Harper Collins Leadership, 2022), 4.

changes everything.”⁵⁷ Johnson encourages couples to create “moments of engagement and connection” in order to deepen the bonds of trust between them.⁵⁸

The oxytocin-fueled bonds that high levels of trust create have a vast and important impact on organizations. One important organizational impact that trust has is in reducing destructive conflict while at the same time allowing for productive conflict. “When team members trust one another . . . the fear of conflict and the discomfort it entails is greatly diminished,” writes Patrick Lencioni in *The Advantage*. “When there is trust,” he writes, “conflict becomes nothing but the pursuit of truth, an attempt to find the best possible answer.” Conflict without trust, he argues, will lead to manipulation and self-promotion.⁵⁹

Stephen Covey, likewise, describes the deep importance of trust to organizational health, including conflict situations. When trust is built, he argues, detrimental conflict is greatly avoided. “Low trust,” in contrast, “causes friction,” he writes, “whether it is caused by unethical behavior or by ethical but incompetent behavior . . . low trust creates hidden agendas . . . interpersonal conflict, interdepartmental rivalries, win-lose thinking, defensive and protective communication.”⁶⁰

Ultimately, trust will have a deep impact on an organization’s performance. Zak writes, “My research shows that it is not just any culture but a culture of trust that

⁵⁷ Johnson, 47.

⁵⁸ Johnson, 142.

⁵⁹ Lencioni, 57–58.

⁶⁰ Covey, loc. 376.

generates powerful leverage on organizational performance.”⁶¹ He continues, “Trust profoundly improves organizational performance by providing the foundation for effective teamwork and intrinsic motivation. Trust empowers colleagues to meet objectives in the best way possible while committing them fully to the organization’s goals. Trust requires viewing those with whom one works as whole and complete human beings, not as pieces of human capital. When this occurs, those who work in high-trust organizations not only perform better at work, they are more satisfied with their lives outside of work, being better parents, spouses, and citizens.”⁶²

Sandra Sucher and Shalene Gupta, in their book *The Power of Trust*, support Zak’s assertions. “If you were to take the advice of scientists and researchers,” they write, “you would make trust a top priority. According to the data, trust has a sizable impact on the economy and people’s well-being ... after all, how can an economy grow if people don’t trust each other enough to exchange even basic goods and services?”⁶³

Covey writes that “just as the tax created by low trust is real, measurable, and extremely high, so the dividends of high trust are also real, quantifiable, and incredibly high.” He continues, “In a company, high trust materially improves communication, collaboration, execution, innovation, strategy, engagement, partnering, and relationships with all stakeholders. In your personal life, high trust significantly improves your excitement, energy, passion, creativity, and joy in your relationships with family, friends, and community.” Covey notes that trust leads to not only improved economics, but

⁶¹ Zak, 6.

⁶² Zak, 7.

⁶³ Sandra J. Sucher and Shalene Gupta, *The Power of Trust: How Companies Build It, Lose It, Regain It* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, Hachette Book Group, 2021), 23.

“greater enjoyment and better quality of life.” Covey concludes that “trust will either greatly increase or greatly decrease the productivity of an organization. . . . It’s the glue in making things work better.”⁶⁴

It is because of the performance benefits of trust that James Kouzes and Barry Posner commend leaders to foster a climate of trust in their organizations. “Exemplary leaders,” they write, “make trust and teamwork high priorities” by creating a climate of trust in their organizations.⁶⁵

Collaboration and Empowerment

The second subcategory relating to the role of trust in organizational health is the literature about collaboration and empowerment.

Many researchers and authors point to the benefits of collaboration, especially when describing the organizational leader’s trust-building role. Sucher and Gupta write that there is “overwhelming evidence that if you want to get power, you need to be someone who values others.”⁶⁶

Heifetz and Linsky note the importance of “Managing one’s grandiosity,” encouraging leaders to give up on the idea of “being the heroic lone warrior who saves the day.” They write, “Don’t begin to believe that the problem is yours to carry and solve,” advising leaders to pursue collaboration.⁶⁷ “Taking the work off your own

⁶⁴ Covey, 26.

⁶⁵ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, 6th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: The Leadership Challenge, a Wiley Brand, 2017), 289.

⁶⁶ Sucher and Gupta, 149.

⁶⁷ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 171.

shoulders,” they write, “is necessary but not sufficient. You must also put it in the right place, where it can be addressed by the relevant parties.”⁶⁸

In the book *Crucial Conversations*, a book about the importance of high-stakes conversations to organizational health, the authors note the fundamental role collaboration plays in relational dynamics. “At the core of every successful conversation,” they write, “lies the free flow of information. People openly and honestly express their opinions, share their feelings, and articulate their theories.”⁶⁹

Collaboration, however, needs to be built on. Giving freedom, not simply input, to those with whom you collaborate, is key in producing organizational health. Retired General Stanley McChrystal, in his book *Team of Teams* offers a lesson from the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain, a company known for its impeccable customer service. That service, argues McChrystal, is built on the practice of giving freedom to its employees. McChrystal writes, “Nearly fifty thousand executives from other companies have traveled to the Ritz-Carlton Learning Institute and Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center to learn how they too can achieve such quality of service. One might think that this is a result of careful oversight and exacting requirements drilled into the Ritz’s customer-facing employees—that outstanding service arises from a set of painstakingly detailed protocols. In fact, the company’s approach to HR is famous for the freedom it grants. Employees can spend up to \$2,000 to satisfy guests or deal with issues that arise.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 128.

⁶⁹ Joseph Grenny et al., *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2023), 25.

⁷⁰ Stanley A. McChrystal et al., *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), 210.

When collaboration and freedom are combined, the result is *empowerment*. Andy Crouch, in his book about power entitled *Playing God*, writes that “the most basic power in any institution is the power to *distribute* power.”⁷¹ Power, Crouch argues, is most effective when it is expanded through collaboration.

McCrystal, reflecting on his war-time military leadership, considers the importance of empowerment. “I began to reconsider the nature of my role as a leader,” he writes. “The wait for my approval was not resulting in any better decisions . . . so I changed the process. I communicated across the command my thought process on decisions like airstrikes, and told them to make the call. Whoever made the decision, I was always ultimately responsible, and more often than not those below me reached the same conclusion I would have, but this way our team would be empowered to do what was needed.”⁷² He continues, “I needed to shift my focus from moving pieces on the board to shaping the ecosystem. Paradoxically, at exactly the time when I had the capability to make more decisions, my intuition told me I had to make fewer. . . . Creating and maintaining the teamwork conditions we needed—tending the garden—became my primary responsibility.”⁷³

McCrystal notes that sometimes the necessity of empowerment can actually lead to a total restructuring of the leadership hierarchy. Reflecting on his time fighting against Al Qaeda, he writes, “In the course of this fight, we had to unlearn a great deal of what we thought we knew about how war—and the world—worked. We had to tear down

⁷¹ Andy Crouch, *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 186.

⁷² McChrystal et al., 209.

⁷³ McChrystal et al., 226.

familiar organizational structures and rebuild them along completely different lines, swapping our sturdy architecture for organic fluidity, because it was the only way to confront a rising tide of complex threats. . . . We dissolved the barriers—the walls of our silos and the floors of our hierarchies—that had once made us efficient.”⁷⁴

Echoing these themes, Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom argue not simply for increased empowerment but a decentralized organizational system. In their book *The Starfish and the Spider*, they pose that the absence of hierarchy leads not to disorder and chaos but to organizational health. “The absence of structure, leadership, and formal organization,” they write, “once considered a weakness, has become a major asset.”⁷⁵ Like McChrystal, Brafman and Beckstrom note the speed of decision-making that is present in a decentralized organization.⁷⁶

Brafman and Beckstrom define a decentralized organization as one in which “there’s no clear leader, no hierarchy, and no headquarters.” The absence of a central leader in a decentralized system “doesn’t mean that a decentralized system is the same as anarchy. There are rules and norms, but these aren’t enforced by any one person.” The power in such a system is “distributed among all the people and across geographic regions.”⁷⁷

Though extreme, the empowerment-to-the-limit of a decentralized system, does, in Brafman and Beckstrom’s view, foster deeper trust. As members of a decentralized

⁷⁴ McChrystal et al., 20.

⁷⁵ Rod Beckstrom and Ori Brafman, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (East Rutherford, NJ: Penguin Publishing Group, 2006), 7.

⁷⁶ Beckstrom and Brafman, 39.

⁷⁷ Beckstrom and Brafman, 20.

organization spend time together, they argue, “something fascinating happens: they begin to trust one another.”⁷⁸

Speaking in a way similar to how Sue Johnson describes “bonding” in a relationship, Brafman and Beckstrom see emotional connections as the building block to a healthy organizational structure. For such a structure, trust becomes even more important. They write, “with a flattened hierarchy, you never know what people are going to do. You can’t control the outcomes, and you can’t really reproach a member if he becomes errant. All you can control is whether people have personal relationships with each other based on trust.”⁷⁹

Brafman and Beckstrom are not alone in seeing the benefits of decentralization for organizational health. Along with McCrystal’s military-inspired insights, Heifetz and Linsky, in their book *Adaptive Leadership*, argue for “a culture that values diverse views and relies less on central planning and the genius of the few at the top.”⁸⁰

Open and Honest Relationships

A recurring theme in the literature was the importance of maintaining dialogue as a means toward building trust. The authors of the book *Crucial Conversations* stress the importance of continuing dialogue: “At the core of every successful conversation,” they write, “lies the free flow of information. People openly and honestly express their

⁷⁸ Beckstrom and Brafman, 90–91.

⁷⁹ Beckstrom and Brafman, 126.

⁸⁰ Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, 31.

opinions, share their feelings, and articulate their theories. They willingly and capably share their views, even when their ideas are controversial or unpopular.”⁸¹

Sucher and Gupta, in *The Power of Trust* agree. “You can’t just say, ‘Trust me,’ and expect anything substantial to result from your encouragement,” they write. “Trust is earned by listening and responding in an appropriate way to the concerns of others.”⁸²

John Inazu addresses the importance of dialogue (and of relationship-building in general) in his book *Learning to Disagree*. Inazu writes primarily about the role of dialogue in navigating differences, especially pertinent to our discussion of trust in the context of ideological diversity. Relationships, he argues, matter a great deal. “Think about your closest friends,” Inazu writes. “You can usually risk difficult conversations with them because you have built a reserve of trust over the course of living life together. And if you reach a point with a close friend where you can no longer have hard conversations, then take the time to reset the relationship with an ordinary experience before jumping into a heated argument. We can have difficult conversations, but context matters.”⁸³ The authors of *Crucial Conversations* agree, writing that at the core of all good relationships, “lies the free flow of information.” Trust-building dialogue happens, they argue, when people “openly and honestly express their opinions, share their feelings, and articulate their theories . . . even when their ideas are controversial or unpopular.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Joseph Grenny et al., 24.

⁸² Sucher and Gupta, 22.

⁸³ John D. Inazu and Tish Harrison Warren, *Learning to Disagree: The Surprising Path to Navigating Differences with Empathy and Respect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024), 64.

⁸⁴ Joseph Grenny et al., 24.

Openness and honesty, however, require vulnerability. Patrick Lencioni, in discussing executive team-building, describes not only the reality of vulnerability but its importance to trust-building:

Many people think of trust in a predictive sense; if you can come to know how a person will behave in a given situation, you can trust her. I've known Sarah for years, and I can trust that when she says she's going to do something, she'll follow through. As laudable as that might be, it's not the kind of trust that lies at the foundation of building a great team. The kind of trust that is necessary to build a great team is what I call vulnerability-based trust. This is what happens when members get to a point where they are completely comfortable being transparent, honest, and naked with one another, where they say and genuinely mean things like "I screwed up," "I need help," "Your idea is better than mine," "I wish I could learn to do that as well as you do," and even, "I'm sorry."⁸⁵

Mark Baker applies this idea into the context of the local church, noting the importance of vulnerability in the senior leader. He writes, "I asked several ministry leaders how they seek to create a sense of safety in their congregations. Often the first thing they said was, 'Be vulnerable yourself,' because that will display that it is safe to tell the truth, to acknowledge struggles, to seek help from others."⁸⁶ (We will see later in this literature review the importance of creating "safety.")

Daniel Coyle, in his book *The Culture Code*, also notes the importance of vulnerability in group cooperation and trust-building. He writes, "group cooperation is created by small, frequently repeated moments of vulnerability."⁸⁷ Expounding on this idea, he writes, "Normally, we think about trust and vulnerability the way we think about

⁸⁵ Lencioni, 4748.

⁸⁶ Mark D. Baker, *Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community without Judgmentalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 132.

⁸⁷ Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups* (New York: Bantam Books, 2018), 158.

standing on solid ground and leaping into the unknown: first we build trust, then we leap. But science is showing us that we've got it backward. Vulnerability doesn't come after trust—it precedes it. Leaping into the unknown, when done alongside others, causes the solid ground of trust to materialize beneath our feet.”⁸⁸

Sucher and Gupta note the same dynamic, recognizing that vulnerability is the act of giving up power. “When we choose to trust someone,” they write, “we willingly give them power over us, trusting that they will not abuse this power. Trust is a special form of dependence, and is predicated on the idea that we can be more than disappointed: we can be betrayed. . . . If there is no possibility of betrayal, then we are not talking about trust, we are talking about reliability, a simpler type of dependence that can lead to disappointment, perhaps, but not that terrible, wrenching feeling of having been betrayed.”⁸⁹

It's helpful to note that while much of the literature extolls the benefits of vulnerability and relationship-building, some writers warn that over-emphasis on sensitivity can lead to negative results. “The constant effort to understand (or feel for) another,” write Kouzes and Posner, “can be as invasive as any form of emotional coercion. . . . The focus on empathy rather than responsibility has contributed to a major misorientation in our society about the nature of what is toxic to life itself.”⁹⁰

Edwin Friedman, in his book *A Failure of Nerve*, concludes that “it has rarely been my experience that being sensitive to others will enable those ‘others’ to be more

⁸⁸ Coyle, 107.

⁸⁹ Sucher and Gupta, 19–20.

⁹⁰ Kouzes and Posner, 187,

self-aware, that being more ‘understanding’ of others causes them to mature, or that appreciating the plight of others will make them more responsible for their being, their condition, or their destiny.”⁹¹

Trustworthy, Non-Anxious Leadership

The literature broadly recognizes the unique role a senior leader plays in building trust in an organization, and the particular importance of that leader’s own trustworthiness. “Only when a leader is deeply trusted,” Bolsinger notes, “can he or she take people further than they imagined into the mission of God.”⁹²

In *The Power of Trust*, Sucher and Gupta write that “whether trust trickles or gushes through an organization is determined by its leaders since they have the power to set the tone for being trusted—or not.”⁹³ Noting a study of NCAA basketball teams, they conclude that trust in leaders has an outsized impact on team or organizational performance. “Researchers,” they write, “found that trust in a leader was more important to winning than trust in one’s teammates. Teams that trusted their coaches won seven percent more games than teams that didn’t.”⁹⁴

Key to a leader’s ability to build trust in his or her organization is the leader’s own integrity, differentiation, and self-regulation. In *A Failure of Nerve*, Edwin Friedman, borrowing from Murray Bowen’s systems theory, argues for leaders to be

⁹¹ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, ed. Margaret M. Treadwell and Edward W. Beal, 10th anniversary rev. ed. (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 190.

⁹² Bolsinger, 15.

⁹³ Sucher and Gupta, 145.

⁹⁴ Sucher and Gupta, 23.

differentiated, requiring a leader to “separate his or her own emotional being from that of his or her followers while still remaining connected.”⁹⁵ A well-differentiated leader, Friedman argues, can provide a non-anxious presence in the midst of the anxiety of others, thus building trust in the organization. Friedman writes “If lack of self-regulation is the essential characteristic of organisms that are destructive, it is the presence of self-regulatory capacity that is critical to the health, survival, and evolution of an organism or an organization. That is precisely the function of a leader within any institution: to provide that regulation through his or her non-anxious, self-defined presence.”⁹⁶

Creating a Healthier Church by Ronald Richardson takes much of the literature on emotional health, family systems, differentiation, and chronic anxiety and distills it for the church context. Richardson describes the purpose of the book as providing “1) a theory about human behavior that will help you understand how things can get out of control in the human community of the church . . . 2) a practical set of leadership ideas and behaviors that can prevent things from going (awry) . . . 3) some guidelines for how to behave in the midst of upsetting and conflictual circumstances in the church . . . and 4) some personal steps that (leaders) in the church, can take . . . to develop a healthier church community.”⁹⁷

In a similar way, Tod Bolsinger writes that “relational congruence (Bolsinger’s term for Friedman’s concept of differentiation) is a leader’s ability to be the same person

⁹⁵ Friedman, 41.

⁹⁶ Friedman, 208.

⁹⁷ Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life*, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 20.

in every setting, every relationship, every task. The personal maturity and emotional stability to make calm, wise decisions create the necessary health and trust in an organization that enables it to “let go, learn as you go and keep going.” When leaders function with relational congruence, they strengthen the bonds, deepen the affection and create the wellspring of trust needed to go off the map. Leadership becomes transformational through the integration of adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity is a leader’s ability to help his or her community “grow, face their biggest challenges and thrive.” It is the capacity to lead a process of shifting values, habits and behaviors in order to grow and discover solutions to the greatest challenges brought on by a changing world. And this is absolutely dependent on the leader’s own commitment to personal transformation.”⁹⁸

Creating a Culture of Safety

One area of literature related to the role of trust in organizational health centers on the concept of psychological safety. One of the leading researchers in this field is Amy Edmondson, who defines psychological safety as follows: “Psychological safety is broadly defined as a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves.”⁹⁹

A climate in which all feel personally safe, Edmondson argues, increases the overall level of trust in an organization. “An organization,” she writes, “where everyone can bring his or her full self to work,” will produce remarkable organizational results.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Bolsinger, 44.

⁹⁹ Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019), loc 362, Kindle.

¹⁰⁰ Edmondson, loc 439.

Key to psychological safety is the establishment of a climate in which it is safe to take emotional risks. Edmonson defines emotional risk-taking as “the experience of feeling able to speak up with relevant ideas, questions, or concerns.” Psychological safety, she argues, “is present when colleagues trust and respect each other and feel able—even obligated—to be candid.”¹⁰¹ Edmonson’s definition of psychological safety tethers well with Friedman’s definition of differentiation. The ability to stay both connected and separate allows a person to speak up without fear, whereas an organization that is an “anxious system,” as Friedman describes, limits safety and ultimately erodes trust. Ironically, Friedman argues for “boldness and adventure” rather than safety, but it is the internal safety that a well-differentiated leader creates that allows for boldness.¹⁰²

Edmonson argues that “trust and psychological safety have much in common,” but are not interchangeable concepts. Psychological safety, she argues, is experienced by a group and occurs when individuals are given “the benefit of the doubt” by the others in the group. Trust, she writes, “refers to interactions between two individuals or parties; trust exists in the mind of an individual and pertains to a specific target individual or organization.”¹⁰³ She continues, “One way to put this is that trust is about giving others the benefit of the doubt, and psychological safety relates to whether others will give you the benefit of the doubt when, for instance, you have asked for help or admitted a mistake.” But the two concepts go hand in hand. People are more likely to believe they’ll

¹⁰¹ Edmondson, loc 579.

¹⁰² Friedman, 59.

¹⁰³ Edmondson, loc 761.

be given the benefit of the doubt, she writes, “when they experience trust and respect at work.”¹⁰⁴

Dennis Mitterer and Heather Mitterer, in “The Mediating Effect of Trust on Psychological Safety,” agree that trust and psychological safety are related but separately defined. They write, “Psychological safety shares common elements with well-established conceptualizations of trust, but psychological safety has a different focus.” Echoing Sucher and Gupta in highlighting vulnerability, Mitterer and Mitterer note that “both psychological safety and trust potentially expose a person to vulnerability and interpersonal risk.” Employees, they argue, are not afraid of taking interpersonal risks “when they perceive a high level of psychological protection” because they believe that others, including management, will not take advantage of them. They conclude that “leaders need to develop strategies that promote psychologically safe climates and stimulate trusting interactions between individual employees and peers, individuals and managers, and individuals and leadership,” noting that “employees will feel more psychologically safe, experience less turnover intention, and have greater job satisfaction when managers actively create a safe and trusting work environment.”¹⁰⁵

One key way that the literature affirms that safety is built is through interpersonal connection. Mitterer and Mitterer note the importance of the connection between the leader and those led, writing “when employees have an emotional connection with the leader, characterized by trust, individual performance positively influences the mediating

¹⁰⁴ Edmondson, loc 762.

¹⁰⁵ Dennis M. Mitterer and Heather E. Mitterer, “The Mediating Effect of Trust on Psychological Safety and Job Satisfaction,” *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2023), 29–41.

effect of psychological safety.” When employees trust their leader, they write, “an emotional connection intensifies, providing staff with a higher degree of psychological safety, and allowing for an increase in openness and sharing of information with others”¹⁰⁶

Other authors, though not specifically highlighting psychological safety, note the importance of interpersonal safety in fostering trust. Sue Johnson, writing about the safe connections that bind couples together, argues that all relationships are about the “innate need for safe emotional connection.”¹⁰⁷ She writes that “if we have generally found others to be safe havens and have a secure bond with [them], then it is easier for us to keep our emotional balance when we feel vulnerable.”¹⁰⁸

John Inazu also highlights connection as the means toward building safety, specifically encouraging activities that create connection. He writes, “Maybe your thing is cycling, going on walks, or playing chess. Or perhaps you are into gaming, watching sports, or playing music. Whatever it is, find something to create ordinary moments in life. And then use that something to pursue the ordinary interactions with others that precede and sustain genuine friendship.”¹⁰⁹

Like Inazu, Heifetz and Linsky encourage connection as key to building trust and working through disagreements, writing, “we suggest you build structures of

¹⁰⁶ Mitterer and Mitterer, 40.

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, 5–6.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, 143.

¹⁰⁹ Inazu and Warren, *Learning to Disagree*, 153.

relationships to work the tough issues, establishing norms that make passionate disagreement permissible.”¹¹⁰

In *The Culture Code*, Daniel Coyle relates safety to “chemistry,” as experienced by sports teams and close-knit groups. He writes, “When you encounter a group with good chemistry, you know it instantly. It’s a paradoxical, powerful sensation, a combination of excitement and deep comfort that sparks mysteriously with certain special groups and not with others.” Coyle lists the elements of “chemistry” as the following: “1) close physical proximity, often in circles; 2) profuse amounts of eye contact; 3) physical touch (handshakes, fist bumps, hugs); 4) lots of short, energetic exchanges (no long speeches); 5) high levels of mixing; everyone talks to everyone; 6) few interruptions; 7) lots of questions; 8) intensive, active listening; 9) humor, laughter; 10) small, attentive courtesies (thank-yous, opening doors, etc.)”¹¹¹

Coyle writes that the safe connections that create good “chemistry” are made up of belonging cues. “Belonging cues,” he writes, “are behaviors that create safe connection in groups. They include, among others, proximity, eye contact, energy, mimicry, turn-taking, attention, body language, vocal pitch, consistency of emphasis, and whether everyone talks to everyone else in the group. . . . Their function is to answer the ancient, ever-present questions glowing in our brains: Are we safe here? What’s our future with these people? Are there dangers lurking?” “These cues,” Coyle writes, “add up to a message that can be described with a single phrase: You are safe here.”¹¹² Group

¹¹⁰ Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line*, 122.

¹¹¹ Coyle, 8.

¹¹² Coyle, 10.

performance, he writes, “depends on behavior that communicates one powerful overarching idea: We are safe and connected.”¹¹³

Writing specifically to church leaders in his book *Centered-Set Church*, Mark Baker writes about the importance of safety in maintaining church health. “While writing this book,” he notes, “I interviewed many pastors and church leaders. . . . Repeatedly, they mentioned the importance of creating a safe space. If people are going to move toward the center, they will need to seek the help of others to overcome barriers to that movement. Lack of safety, lack of sharing will impede progress.”¹¹⁴

Baker goes to great lengths to affirm the difference between safety and relativism (what he defines as “fuzzy churches”). Baker writes, “Safe space is a commonly heard term today. . . . An increasingly popular meaning of safe space parallels a fuzzy church. Like fuzzy churches, these societal safe spaces are a reaction to and a refuge from the exclusion and shaming of bounded groups and bounded churches. The safety comes by creating spaces without conflict and confrontation.” Healthy churches (what Baker refers to as “centered churches”), however, “are not totally absent of conflict or challenging content.” Baker argues that the safety of a healthy church “flows from trust—trust that others have my best interests in mind and will treat me with gentleness and compassion (Gal 6:2).” He writes that “the safety of a centered church is rooted in the presence of love and the absence of the self-righteous shaming.” Jesus, Baker writes, “was the

¹¹³ Coyle, 15.

¹¹⁴ Baker, 131.

epitome of safety.” Baker encourages biblical readers to “take note of the ways that Jesus created a safe space for others.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Baker, 131–132.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The assumption of this study is that when trust is high within a congregation, ideological diversity will produce flourishing rather than fracturing. The purpose of this study is to explore how the pastors of such congregations foster trust in their congregations. To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions will guide the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors describe the difficulty of ideological diversity in their congregations?
2. How do pastors describe the benefits of ideological diversity in their congregations?
3. What pastoral practices have cultivated trust in the congregations they pastor?

Design of the Study

This study will employ a qualitative research design and semi-structured interviews as the primary data-gathering source. Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, writes that “In its broadest sense, research is a systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging in the process.”¹¹⁶ Qualitative researchers, compared to quantitative

¹¹⁶ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 5, Kindle.

researchers, she states, “are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.” Merriam argues that the purpose of qualitative research is “to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience.”¹¹⁷

Participant Sample Selection

Participants will be chosen who meet the following criteria: 1) they are pastors of churches in which ideological diversity is present in some form; 2) these congregations seem to be flourishing rather than fracturing because of the level of trust among congregants.

Data Collection

This study will utilize semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering.

Merriam writes of the semi-structured approach:

In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a more structured section to the interview. But most of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. 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.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Merriam and Tisdell, 15.

¹¹⁸ Merriam and Tisdell, 110–111.

The flexible nature of the semi-structured approach will allow the researcher to respond and explore in the most helpful manner.

The interview protocol will contain questions similar to the following.

Intro Questions

- How would you describe the diversity of your congregation?
- Where does ideological diversity show up in your congregation?

Questions About the Benefits of Diversity of Thought in Their Congregations

- When the foundation of trust has been high in your congregation, where have you seen the benefits of your diversity show up?
- Can you give some examples of the discipleship benefit that diversity of thought has brought to your congregation?

Questions Ascertaining the Difficulties of Such Diversity

- Can you tell me about some of the challenges that have arisen in your church because of the diversity of thought present?
- When you felt like trust was low, what problems arose?
- When trust has been high, how have those challenges been navigated well?

Questions About Pastoral Practices Which Cultivate Trust in the Congregation

- What are some of the things you've done in your ministry in order to build trust in the church?
- What are the things that have built trust between you and the congregation, and what things have built trust between congregants?
- Can you tell me about some of your personal practices that you believe have fostered trust?
- Can you tell me about some of the systems or organizational programs that have worked to foster trust in your congregation?

Data Analysis

This study will utilize the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. As Merriam writes, “the constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences.”¹¹⁹ This method provides for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories. “The overall object,” as Merriam states, “is to identify patterns in the data.”¹²⁰ Such patterns will then direct the ongoing research in order to better align questions with the chosen patterns.

¹¹⁹ Merriam and Tisdell, 32

¹²⁰ Merriam and Tisdell, 32.

Researcher Position

Merriam states that “there is a particular theoretical framework or lens that informs a research study that the researcher makes visible. Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or ‘subjectivities,’ it is important to identify them and monitor them in relation to the theoretical framework and in light of the researcher’s own interests, to make clear how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data.”¹²¹ The researcher of this paper has “subjectives” that influence the research in these main ways: First, the researcher is a pastor of a confessional church (in the Presbyterian Church in America) and so shares the challenges that come with pursuing diversity within the bounds of confessionalism. Second, the researcher has seen many of the benefits of ideological diversity in his own congregation and therefore is influenced by the witnessed benefits that ideological diversity can bring. This bias affects much of the foundational assumption of this study—that fostering trust can turn danger into beauty in diverse congregations. And finally, the researcher lives in a time and within a denominational landscape in which division is widespread. Ideological differences do not normally lead to flourishing in this landscape. Such a context inevitably influences the researcher’s desire to discover ways in which division might be minimized and the beauty of the church promoted.

¹²¹ Merriam and Tisdell, 16.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how pastors foster trust in ideologically diverse congregations. This chapter provides the findings of eight pastoral interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. In order to address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research.

1. How do pastors describe the difficulty of ideological diversity in their congregations?
2. How do pastors describe the benefits of ideological diversity in their congregations?
3. What pastoral practices have cultivated trust in the congregations they pastor?

Introductions to Participants and Context

The researcher selected eight pastors to participate in this study. These pastors serve in different areas of the country, some in urban contexts and some in suburban. Seven of the eight are senior pastors in their congregations, and one is an associate pastor. Six serve in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), one in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and one in a Reformed, baptistic tradition. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect identity. Throughout the findings, they will be referred to as Taylor, Jason, David, Joseph, Barry, Roland, Gene, and Matthew.

How Do Pastors Describe the *Difficulty* of Ideological Diversity in Their Congregations?

Diversity, though biblically encouraged and practically beneficial (as we will see in the sections below), has its deep challenges. Most of the pastors interviewed mentioned struggles they face in pastoring ideologically diverse churches. These challenges can be organized into four subcategories: 1) Challenges of political diversity, 2) Challenges of theological diversity, 3) Challenges of racial and cultural diversity, and 4) Challenges in leadership diversity.

Challenges of Political Diversity

Though all the pastors interviewed mentioned a generally high level of health in their churches, many mentioned the nuanced difficulties that political diversity produced.

Gene, the senior pastor of a large, historic, suburban church in the South, commented that though the political extremes were relatively rare in his current congregation, they do have “people representing everything in between.”

He reflects, however, that “the majority would say that we’re generally conservative. We probably align ethically and economically more with the Republican Party and small government.” The congregation, however, is “nervous about the extremes they’re seeing—and deeply offended by some of the public statements and the general disregard for civil speech.”

Though most in his congregation are generally conservative, the current political atmosphere has necessitated, Gene reflects, the need for foundational worldview education—“the old Francis Schaeffer idea that all truth is God’s truth.” Those in his congregation “have been so affected by identity politics that they’ve been malformed in

their ability to think critically.” Congregants tend to think,” said Gene, “only in terms of ‘for’ or ‘against,’ and default to that binary way of seeing the world.”

Gene saw the need for more nuanced teaching. “What we want to communicate,” said Gene, “is that just because you disagree with someone in certain areas doesn’t mean that everything they say should be rejected.” Gene and his leadership team recognized that their political diversity, small as it was, revealed a need for “teaching our people to have a Christian mind and to think Christianly.”

Roland, the senior pastor of a mid-sized church in a city center, reflected on the confusion caused by political diversity both inside and outside the church. “Our congregation,” he noted, “is theologically conservative, but we have a lot of Democrats. When national rhetoric blasts ‘liberal cities,’ people here can’t square that with their lived experience—they see nice parks, families who love their kids, people just trying to live their lives.”

Roland sees a similar dynamic happening the opposite way in his congregation. “Some Democrats in our church assume that everyone in the South is racist or backward. But when you actually live in Birmingham or in Texas, you see people are simply living life there, too.”

David, the senior pastor of a large church in a university town, mentioned that in his congregation, “probably 70 percent of the congregation votes Democrat and about 30 percent votes Republican.” David notes that in politically tense times, the congregation becomes a bit more anxious because they are “a very engaged congregation politically, aware of the broader landscape of the city, city council, and mayoral candidates.” David mentioned that his church is filled with those who “resonate with our love for the city and

our desire to engage its different spheres,” and David and the leaders of the church encourage political involvement among their members, even though it sometimes causes tension.

The Challenges of Theological Diversity

Though all of the pastors interviewed pastor churches with stated doctrinal standards (all but one are from the Presbyterian Church in America, a confessionally-bound denomination), many noted the presence of theological diversity in their congregation. Many of those interviewed commented on the beneficial presence of such theological diversity. David, for instance, commented that although they have a growing number of people who specifically seek out their church for its denominational connection, historically, that has not been the main driver of their growth. Because of this, their theological diversity is wide. David notes commented, “we have people who grew up Catholic, Pentecostal, or non-denominational, and I think God has allowed different spiritual components to be woven into the fabric of our church life.”

Taylor, the pastor and church planter of an inner-city church, reflects on his experience with theological diversity in his church:

It’s interesting, because while we are a PCA congregation, the majority of our members did not grow up in the PCA. Most, like myself, are first-generation PCA. This makes for some unique dynamics. For example, when we have a baptism or receive new members, I pull out the Book of Church Order. Almost every time, someone says, “What is that? I’ve never seen that before.” There’s a learning curve, but also a richness in bringing together people from different traditions into the same body.

Even within confessional standards, theological nuances can create diversity within the local church as well as the denomination. Matthew, the pastor of a multi-site congregation in a large Southern city, mentioned that theological diversity in his

congregation is revealed in their view of women in leadership. They describe themselves as a “generous complementarian” church, believing that women should be allowed to do anything a non-ordained man can do. He comments that this practice “can be countercultural within the PCA.” Matthew said, “When we planted the church twenty-three years ago, we were more or less in the center-left of the denomination on this issue. Over time, as the PCA has moved further to the right, our stance now places us closer to the left margin when it comes to women in leadership.” Though this theological stance has not caused difficulty within their local congregation, it has led to some conflict within the presbytery and denomination.

Challenges of Racial and Cultural Diversity

The pastors interviewed also spoke of challenges that came with racial and cultural diversity, even amidst their efforts toward racial reconciliation and harmony.

Joseph, the senior pastor of a large, suburban church outside the PCA, spoke about the work their church does to intentionally engage multiple races and cultures, including periodic changes to their worship service. “It’s not uncommon,” he commented, “for us to sing a song in Spanish or to have Scripture read in different languages on particular Sundays.” He acknowledges, however, that those efforts come with challenges. “It’s still very much a work in progress,” Joseph commented, “and we recognize that for people from various cultural backgrounds, there will always be some gaps in how fully they experience church life. . . . Spanish-speaking members, for instance, are not going to feel as if our services fully reflect their home culture. They need translation for sermons, which we provide.”

For David, efforts to diversify the worship service have revealed a need for deeper integration. “The challenge,” said David, “has been moving from representation on Sundays to true diversity within staff, elders, and leadership across the board,” noting that there is a difference between “representation and genuine integration in the life of the church.” David noted that even after thirteen years, there remains a sense of “stuckness”—people not always feeling they can fully enter in. David recalled a particular example:

A Black family that has attended [our church] for some time has expressed uncertainty, saying, “I see it on stage, but it still feels really awkward for us on Sundays.” The gap between visible representation and deep integration still exists, making it harder for non-majority members to feel at home quickly. For them, it costs more to be part of our church, and that remains a constant challenge we are asking about and wrestling with.

Gene described a similar experience in his church—one in which African-American members appreciated the efforts toward racial unity but still had trouble trusting the church fully. He commented, “I don’t think anyone in our church would identify us as a typical White evangelical congregation, or they wouldn’t be here. But many of our African-American members have been around long enough, and they’ve been hurt enough, to think: when white people’s backs are against the wall, sometimes the true colors that come out can be deeply disturbing.”

In recalling a recent culturally charged national event, Gene remembered how the underlying tension had arisen. Some of the Black members of the church were reaching out to one of the Black pastors on staff “asking if it was safe to come to church—wondering if being in a predominantly White evangelical space would be awkward or hurtful.”

Matthew describes the challenges of cultural, rather than racial, diversity in his church, recognizing a tension between rural and urban cultures. On one side, he described, “are urbanites—major metropolitan professionals, world travelers, and intellectual elites.” On the other side are “Southerners rooted in the rural culture of South Carolina, with its deep ties to tradition and football, including ‘good ol’ boys’ who have found success and become part of the new money class.” It’s the interaction between these groups—the urban and the Southern—that, for Matthew, has created the primary expression of diversity in the congregation, as well as some of the most notable tension.

Challenges of Leadership Diversity

The final subcategory about the challenges of diversity involves challenges brought on not by appropriate congregational diversity but rather leadership misalignment. When existing at the leadership level—the level of staff and ordained officers—such ideological diversity can lead to disharmony and even fracturing.

Jason, an associate pastor in a wealthy mid-sized church, commented on his church’s struggles with theological diversity amid the leadership. “We absolutely have theological diversity in the congregation,” Jason commented. “I think what’s different here is it’s not only in the congregation, it’s in the leadership.” Among the ministry staff, Jason noted a broad range of perspectives, “ranging from charismatic to Wesleyan and Methodist,” noting that even among the eldership, Reformed particulars were “not really there.” Rather than a unified theological vision that drove the decision-making of the church leadership, Jason noted that decisions were “pragmatic and maintenance-oriented.”

Included alongside the diversity of views in the leadership was a suspicion of the denomination they were a part of. “I remember going to my first presbytery meeting and,” Jason noted, “and when I returned, someone asked me with a sneer, ‘So, you survived it? What stupid thing were they talking about this time?’” Jason realized that there had long been a posture of antipathy toward the denomination.

Jason commented that a lack of leadership clarity can actually lead to moralism. “When I first arrived,” Jason said, “one of my concerns was how easily our culture could drift toward moralism. There seemed to be a hesitancy to address the sharper edges of the gospel—the holiness of God, the reality of sin, and the seriousness of our need.” Jason notes a long pattern of people-pleasing that has seeped into ministry decisions. Too often, he reflected, the question had become, “What will keep people from being upset?” rather than, “What is faithful to the gospel?” Jason commented that such an approach “weakens our ability to speak clearly about the holiness of God and the seriousness of sin,” and consequently produces moralism rather than gospel-centered motivation.

Summary of the Challenges of Diversity in the Church

Those interviewed related how political, theological, racial, and cultural diversity, along with challenges in leadership misalignment, all contributed to the difficulty in leading their churches. The diverse churches they all lead present more leadership challenges than do homogeneous groups.

How Do Pastors Describe the *Benefits* of Ideological Diversity in Their Congregations?

The second research question sought to uncover evidence of the benefits of diversity to the discipleship efforts of pastors. The assumption listed in chapter three was that when trust is high within a congregation, ideological diversity will produce flourishing rather than fracturing. The second area of findings, then, describes this flourishing. Though most of the pastors interviewed reflected on the difficulties of ideological diversity, all confirmed that the presence of diversity in their congregations produced a discipleship benefit to the church.

As we have noted, the Bible commends diversity as not only a reflection of the image of God in creation but one of the Holy Spirit's means of redeeming sinful humanity.¹²²

The interviews highlighted four categories of discipleship benefit that diverse congregations enjoy: 1) Equipping congregants to think biblically about diversity, 2) Lowering the level of fear of "the other," 3) Enabling congregants to embrace others as image-bearers first rather than categories, and 4) Helping congregants differentiate between primary and secondary theological and cultural issues.

Equipping Congregants to Think Biblically

One of the benefits of ideological diversity that came to light in the interview process was the role that diversity plays in equipping Christians to think biblically about diversity. Two pastors interviewed noted the particular benefit of racial diversity present

¹²² See Romans 12:4–8.

in their congregations, telling of how such diversity enabled congregants to better embrace the Bible's vision for racial and ethnic diversity.

Taylor, a church planter in an urban, mostly African-American context, told the story of one church member, an older man in his sixties who grew up in a Pentecostal church. Taylor noted that "he first came to our church through a personal relationship and later gave a testimony about how profoundly moved he was by what he found here. He said it was the first time in his life he had ever worshiped in a church where Black, White, and Asian believers gathered together in one body. For him, it was literally a picture of heaven—a living glimpse of Revelation 7:9, where people from every tribe, tongue, and nation worship before the throne."

In Taylor's congregation, the physical experience of unified diversity helped to make the biblical images and ideals a tangible reality and build in the congregation a deeper longing for what the Bible proclaims and celebrates.

Joseph, pastoring a large, suburban congregation, also noted that "equipping people to think biblically about ethnicity is essential, especially today when the cultural noise around these issues is so loud," noting how both the presence of diversity and communication about it have aided his congregation. The idea that diversity is unimportant "overlooks the reality that God has a plan for ethnicity revealed in Scripture," he commented. "We continue to believe," he noted, "that reflecting God's heart for ethnicity and equipping people to discern these matters biblically is central to our calling."

In both instances, actual diversity has helped congregants better understand the Bible's teaching on the benefit of diversity.

Lowering the Level of Fear of “The Other”

A second discipleship benefit of ideological diversity for those interviewed was the way in which the presence of diversity enabled congregants to become more comfortable with the presence of difference, eventually seeing those with whom they disagreed as less of a threat.

Barry, a pastor of a medium-sized suburban church, noted that “inviting people into an environment where differences are present has a shaping effect. It trains our hearts to deal with those who are different without fear, and to love them well.”

By lowering the level of fear of “the other” in a congregation, congregants are trained to keep their “threat meters” low. “In many ways,” he commented, “multiculturalism has deepened our hospitality. People in our church are not afraid of differences. They are not put off by how someone talks, dresses, or expresses themselves in worship.”

Barry mentioned that many of the “sacred cows” of church culture—expectations of formality, sameness, or uniformity—have been dismantled simply by the presence of those who broke with those conventions. As a result, Barry noted, “even surprising or unconventional opinions are no longer seen as threats.” Congregants, instead, have learned to be comfortable with different views and to continue walking in fellowship with those who hold them. Barry noted that “this has lowered the sense of threat for many, creating a more open and gracious community.”

Gene, a pastor of a large, historic, suburban church in the South, noted that when people live in community with others who come from very different sociological and ideological backgrounds, the “human connection deepens, and the ideological walls begin to come down.”

“When they share meals at church suppers,” Gene commented, “or they tutor together in local schools, and they worship in the same pews, over time, they realize: you come from a very different section of town than I do; you grew up in a different economic and social world—but you’re a real human being.”

Gene noted the importance of face-to-face conversations about difficult subjects, like national flashpoints. “If those conversations happen online or across a divide between strangers,” Gene noted, “they just become flashpoints. But within genuine community, those same differences are held in tension longer. People stay at the table, seeking clarity because of their human bond—or better yet, their gospel bond.”

Gene concluded that diverse members of his church have “come to see one another first as human beings and grown to love each other in Christ.” A diverse church, then, “becomes like family,” as people are trained not to walk away from those they do not understand but rather to see them as family members.

Enabling Congregants to Embrace Others as Image-Bearers Rather Than Categories

Deeper even than lowering the level of fear or threat in the congregation was a third area that arose from the interviews— how ideological diversity helped congregants view one another as divine image-bearers to be embraced rather than categories to be rejected.

David, the senior pastor of a large church in a university town, explained how two examples of diversity, particularly ideological diversity, benefited his congregation by allowing “humanness” to be highlighted. David said:

From the beginning of our church until COVID, we included a moment in worship where anyone could stand and share prayer requests. The pastor leading the liturgy would gather these requests, write them down, and then

lead the congregation in prayer. Countless stories came out of that practice. For example, one elder—highly educated, with degrees from Princeton and Harvard—shared that one of the things that drew his family to the church was hearing Connell Green stand up and talk vulnerably about coming out of prison, starting a cookie business, and asking the church to pray for him. Encounters like that exposed people to real diversity—not just abstract ideological difference, but difference embodied in a person’s life and vulnerability. It moved people’s hearts, made diversity tangible, and reminded us of our common need before Christ. Those moments drew us together as a community. Many people still look back and say, “Why did we stop doing that?”

Another practice that David mentioned as deeply formative was what they call “City Fellowship.” For the past six or seven years, when their community groups pause for the summer, they have held a once-a-month gathering for the whole church to share a meal and talk together. “Those meals,” David noted, “have created a natural space where differences could surface in a humanizing way. People weren’t simply ideas or categories; they were friends sitting across the table.” David told the following story to illustrate this point:

One summer, leading into an election year, we devoted our gatherings in June, July, and August to the theme of civil discourse. We asked questions like: How do we have civil discourse as believers? How do we share why we believe what we believe while recognizing differences, and yet remain together without leaving, hurting one another, or growing angry? Those evenings gave people the freedom to be vulnerable, to see each other as human beings, and to remain true to who they are while still extending love across differences.

For David, opportunities to create human relationships instead of categories have increased the congregation’s ability to deal with difference, and people have become more loving as a result. Simply being in a relationship with another person has humanized those who might otherwise remain “the other.” David notes, “When you love and respect someone, and then discover they think differently, you don’t immediately

dismiss them as crazy. Instead, you begin to wonder, “Maybe that perspective isn’t so crazy after all. Maybe I could soften on this.”

Roland, the senior pastor of a mid-sized urban church, told of a similar benefit. He said, “Hospitality gives us the chance to see each other’s reality up close, not through caricatures, and that’s incredibly trust-building.” Bringing diverse groups together has allowed those in his congregation to loosen their grip on stereotypes. They conclude, he said, “Oh, you’re conservative—and yet you’re profoundly human. You love your children. You hug your wife. Suddenly, all the stereotypes and tropes people carry with such certainty begin to fade.”

Such diversity, and the practice of bringing these groups together, reminds the congregants of these churches of their shared humanity and reveals that they have far more in common than they might have assumed.

Roland summed the concept up well, saying, “In some ways, our diversity gives us the chance to practice the opposite of what our culture models. Instead of reducing others to enemies over political or cultural issues, we can say: We may be on opposite sides of this issue, but this person is still my brother or sister in Christ, and I will treat them with dignity.”

Helping Congregants Differentiate Between Primary and Secondary Theological and Cultural Issues

Finally, some of the pastors interviewed noted how important the presence of diversity in their congregation was for helping congregants differentiate between primary and secondary theological and cultural issues.

Joseph named this practice “theological triage,” drawing on the medical practice of discerning and diagnosing the primary issues before treatment. He commented, “One of the greatest benefits of ideological diversity in the church is that it helps people practice what has been called ‘theological triage.’ In other words, it trains them to discern which issues are central and essential according to God’s Word, and which issues are of lesser importance or have less clarity.”

Joseph mentioned Gavin Ortlund’s book *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, commenting that Ortlund captures this idea well by reminding the Church that many Christians expend enormous energy dying on the wrong hills. “Ideological diversity,” Joseph said, “forces us to face these questions and equips us to prioritize the truths that matter most. At the same time, it teaches us how to love across lines of difference, even when convictions vary.”

Joseph told the story of a family with six children who moved to his church from the UK:

Their father joined our staff team with the goal of eventually planting a church. Their triplets are the same age as my own kids, which gave us a natural connection. What stood out, however, was how differently this family viewed the American political scene. Their assumptions were simply not the same as those of most Americans, and at times they were perceived as far left. In reality, they just weren’t operating with the same political categories.

Noting a separate example of the benefit of diversity, Joseph relayed this story:

I spoke recently with a young man in the church who reflected on how his perspective has changed. He grew up assuming that if someone disagreed with him on an issue like the age of the earth, as an example, then they were suspect—someone to be viewed as “the other.” But now, some of his closest friends lean toward an old-earth position or are agnostic on the question, and he has realized that it is not a hill worth dying on. He told me the biggest change in his life over the past five years has been in how he disagrees with other Christians. He has learned to be gracious, to love others, and to distinguish between essential and non-essential matters.

Joseph noted how individuals in his congregation had better learned to distinguish between matters of doctrine and matters of opinion, remarking on one congregant who had once defended his position on global warming with the same intensity one would use to defend the divinity of Christ. That congregant, because of the presence of diverse thought in the congregation, had come to realize that, as Jason put it, “it is not wrong to have strong opinions, but we must also cultivate a sense of proportionality: How much does this issue truly matter to God?”

Matthew echoed Joseph’s comments, noting especially how his church encourages conversations around important matters where people may disagree. Matthew noted that a congregant might not be able to imagine why another Christian would “support Trump, or oppose vaccines, or wear—or not wear—masks.” But when that person talks with someone on “the other side,” and asks about why these beliefs are held, that conversation gives them a chance to learn. It reminds them that “they, too, live in an echo chamber.”

In these conversations, Matthew notes, we “discover that, despite our differences, we actually share more ethical and theological concerns than we realized.” What gets lost when we caricature one another or treat one another as outsiders, he noted, “can be recovered when we choose to listen. In this way,” he commented, “diversity allows us to enter the moral complexity of difficult issues. Instead of straw-manning or dismissing, we learn to disagree honestly, listen carefully, and discover shared values—all of which are essential for building trust and unity in the body of Christ.”

Jason, an associate pastor of a large, wealthy, urban congregation, told of an event that occurred in his church. “We had a member of the church,” he said, “who died very

suddenly of a cardiac event. It was a shock—he was active, fit, a golfer, the kind of person you’d expect to be in great health. He was a deeply conservative man from Wichita Falls, Texas, an outspoken ‘oil guy’ and a devoted Christian. But what he loved most about our church was that we prioritized Christ above everything else.”

“Despite his strong political views,” Jason continued, “he developed deep friendships with people in the congregation who were in very different places—some were anti-Trump and quite liberal. At his funeral, I spoke about this quality in him: Christ was supreme in his life, and that shaped how he related to others. On election day, some of his closest friends were canceling out his vote, but those friendships remained strong. That was a mark of maturity in him, but it was also what drew him to our church.”

Jason noted that the combination of strong biblical preaching and ideological diversity created in this man an ability to hold his views clearly but open-handedly, avoiding confusing his political or cultural ideals with the truths of Scripture. “Though he was known as a devoted Trump supporter,” Jason noted, “he recognized—and lived out—the conviction that politics was not the main thing. Christ was!”

For these pastors, the presence of diversity, rather than fracturing the church, actually built more unity around what was most important.

Summary of the Benefits of Ideological Diversity for Congregations

For the above pastors interviewed, the presence of diversity led to various discipleship benefits in their congregations, better enabling biblical understanding and leading to the sanctification of their congregants.

What Pastoral Practices Have Cultivated Trust in the Congregation?

The third research question addressed which pastoral practices or competencies have aided them in fostering trust in their congregations. When asked what practices or competencies created trust in their congregations, those interviewed mentioned four major categories: 1) Gospel-centeredness and personal faithfulness, 2) Good communication, 3) Personal relationships, hospitality, and community life, and 4) Vulnerability, humility, and openness.

Gospel-Centeredness and Personal Faithfulness

Many of those interviewed highlighted the importance of gospel-centeredness and faithfulness in multiple areas of their life and ministry. Jason mentioned the importance of Christ-centeredness in his preaching and leadership, saying, “We’re not here with some agenda other than preaching Christ and him crucified. That’s our agenda. And I think that is a part of trust-building.” That kind of laser-focus on the gospel, Jason said, “builds confidence in the message and trust in the messenger.”

Roland noted that he doesn’t “preach the news cycle at all.” He continued, “Some people ask how I stay relevant if I don’t, and the truth is—I’m not sure that I am.” Roland described a conversation with his elders after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, in which he agreed to address the issue in a long-form email rather than a sermon. Roland’s focus was not on “lining up with political categories or handing people talking points,” but rather to model trust in Scripture as our authority, even while acknowledging that we live with uncertainty about political outcomes.”

Gene related a similar sentiment, saying, “I don’t do topical preaching; I preach expository sermons. That gives me a kind of cover—I’m not chasing headlines or preaching hobby horses. I just turn the page and preach what’s next.”

In addition to faithful preaching, many of the pastors interviewed noted the importance of personal integrity and godliness when seeking to build trust. The simple activity of following through on promises established trust with those around them.

Barry, in particular, highlighted the importance of consistency in his interview, especially in the early stages of planting a church, noting that his consistency was “one of the main reasons” people trust him. He recalled encouraging his core group that the church would eventually grow. “People are going to come,” he told them, “If we just start inviting, people will come.” And sure enough, people came. This simple promise fulfilled affected deeper levels of trust for his core group as well, particularly around his desire to build a diverse congregation. “From the beginning, we said we wanted to be a diverse congregation, and hiring a Black music leader was part of that commitment. We have sustained the conviction that unity and diversity are possible together. We said it, and we backed it up.”

Those small fulfillments built, for Barry, trust is the fulfillment of the larger promises. These little building blocks helped his congregation answer positively the bigger question: “Can I trust you to take me somewhere closer to Jesus?”

Similar to Barry’s emphasis on consistency, Roland noted the importance of personal godliness as a means for building congregational trust. “1 Thessalonians 2,” Roland commented, “is a fascinating passage to consider. Paul talks about the role of a godly life—not simply as a way of pleasing God, but as a way of building trust. Most

people think of piety as ‘being good so that God likes you,’ but Paul frames godliness as something that makes his words believable. His life gave people a reason to trust him.”

Roland commented that he has experienced that truth at work in his life. “People often trust me,” he noted, “because they see my children, or because they notice that my wife is genuinely happy and not weighed down. As simple as it sounds, they look at her joy and conclude that I must be kind to my wife.” In such a way, godliness itself has become a mechanism for building trust in Roland’s congregation—his life and character have served “as a foundation for trust.”

Finally, Joseph noted the importance of the pastor’s personal godliness for fostering trust in the congregation. Joseph relayed, “Trust is built not only through what we teach but through how we live. Even when people don’t know all the details of our lives, they can still sense what Scripture calls an ‘aroma of godliness’—a desire to please the Lord and a concern for his glory above all else.” Joseph went on to note that “when you consider who is truly trustworthy as a leader, it is not simply someone who makes you feel a certain way, but someone who orients their life toward God.” Trust grows, Joseph commented, “when leaders are committed to pleasing the Lord, take his word seriously, and handle their authority with humility and care. Ultimately,” Joseph reflected, “the trust is not in the leader alone, but in the Lord who upholds his word.”

Good Communication

Interviewees noted the importance of good communication to the trust-building process. Taylor noted how important good communication was to his congregation, especially during a difficult time for them. He said:

One of the most significant experiences in our congregation this year was a pastoral transition. We had two strong candidates who could have stepped into the role—one African-American and one White. The session recommended the African-American candidate, and while the final decision was still up to the congregation, it became clear that we had to spend time explaining why we were putting him forward.

Initially, we assumed there was a level of trust that didn't need explanation. Because I had planted the church, people had trusted my leadership from the beginning. But a transition is different. Even though the candidate we recommended had already been with us for three years, the congregation's relationship with him was not the same as their relationship with me. We realized we had assumed too much and needed to slow down, communicate more, and rebuild trust through the process. What we once assumed people knew, we had to go back and explain again. The process reminded us that transitions shift the dynamics of trust, and clear communication about vision and values is essential to sustaining unity during those times.

Roland noted the importance of vision-casting as a part of good communication, especially in potentially anxious situations. "When elections are approaching and tensions rise," he said, "I'll often say something like, 'Dream with me. What if, while there's so much vitriol out there, in here we loved each other across our differences? What if we showed people a community that genuinely cares for one another, even when we disagree?' That kind of language helps people imagine something different."

Speaking of the pastor's participation in "prophetic speech," Roland drew on the Old Testament framework of prophet, priest, and king, paying particular attention to the prophet's role as an insider. "A prophet doesn't work for the king but calls him back to covenant faithfulness from within the community," he said. The goal, he noted, "isn't to throw darts at the other side but to offer faithful presence from within your own side."

Roland continued, "When people see others willing to critique their own team, it builds trust. It shows they're not blind to the sins of their own side, and that gives them credibility. So, I try to instill that mindset: we don't do hot takes; we don't lob grenades

at outsiders. Instead, we practice faithful presence, speaking truth from within.” That kind of approach, Roland noted, creates space for trust, change, and growth, “opening the possibility for people to love Jesus more deeply.”

Many of the pastors interviewed spoke not only of the importance of good communication but also of the need for talking about diversity itself. Pastors relayed both a structured and “ad hoc” approach to talking about diversity. Joseph commented that each January, he preaches two sermons that set the tone for the year—one on the sanctity of human life and the other on ethnic harmony.

“In our setting,” he recalled, “the sermon on the sanctity of human life never stirs up controversy. But the sermon on ethnic harmony has consistently been the most difficult to preach, not because the biblical teaching is unclear, but because people hear it through a political and cultural lens.”

Taylor embraces the structured approach as well, incorporating a Christian education class about diversity into his church’s annual rhythm. And each year, during the first two months, they run a core values series, including discussions about diversity.

For most of the pastors interviewed, the yearly schedule is balanced with a more flexible approach as well. David mentioned that for him, “it feels more like an art than a science.” David commented that “It’s less about following a formula and more about turning the volume up or down at the right moments. He noted the danger in making the wrong thing the main thing but also noted that “this emphasis is a core part of our identity as a church, and there are moments when turning up the volume is both right and necessary.”

Taylor noted a time in which he realized a greater need for communication about diversity. “For the most part,” he said, “conversations about diversity had only happened in our new members’ class. When we first launched, we were having meals together every week, and those gatherings provided a natural place to articulate our vision and values.” But over time, those conversations diminished, and the need for more discussion about diversity arose. “We simply assumed that people understood and shared our vision,” he noted. “We needed to go back and dig deeper,” he said, and consequently made intentional space to revisit the value of diversity in both worship and teaching.

And even amidst his yearly rhythm of preaching about diversity, Joseph mentioned the need for periodically addressing the issue. “When cultural events occur that disproportionately affect minority brothers and sisters in our church,” he noted, “we often include prayers in our pastoral prayer. At the same time, we are clear: we are not an ethnicity-centered church; we are a Christ-centered church. Our focus is on the gospel and the truths of our statement of faith. Yet, part of living out that gospel means valuing and intentionally pursuing ethnic harmony as an expression of Christ’s reconciling work.”

Personal Relationships, Hospitality, and Community Life

The importance of relational warmth, hospitality, and community arose in nearly every interview. For these pastors, the way they interacted personally with their congregants, welcomed them into their homes, and fostered community life in the church, was one of the primary ways they fostered trust in their congregations.

David reflected on the importance of relational warmth to trust-building success. “When I think about practices that have built trust in our congregation,” he said, “two

things come immediately to mind. First, I am relationally driven by nature. It's what I love, how I'm wired, and I believe it's a gift God has given me. I genuinely love knowing people, learning their names, and connecting with them personally. As our church grew, this became such a priority that our leadership realized I needed to be freed up specifically for relational ministry—spending time with people and being present with them.”

David's relational connections have built trust in simple but significant ways. He commented, “Something as small as remembering someone's name can communicate care and belonging. One couple told me that after visiting for the second time, they came forward for communion, and I spoke their names as I served them, saying, ‘Jesus's body broken for you.’ They said that moment meant the world to them. Small relational gestures like that build trust in profound ways.”

Barry reflected on a similar theme, noting that “relationship-building and hospitality are at the very heart of building trust in our congregation. I honestly don't think there's anything more important.” Barry said, “In some ways, I've taken for granted that people trust that I genuinely like them and enjoy being with them. Even my wife, who is naturally warm and relationally engaging, helps set that tone.” Barry commented that because of their warmth, members of his congregation feel that they can “bring friends and introduce me—I won't embarrass them but will instead welcome their friend warmly.” That kind of basic, entry-level trust, Barry noted, “has been a foundation for how people experience our church.”

Jason commented that “at the heart of building trust is simply being a relational pastor—paying attention to people and what is happening in their lives as best you can.”

He noted the importance of “communicating clearly that you are present and approachable, and that people can come to you for anything.” For Jason, such a posture of availability has been key to cultivating trust.

Though relational connection happens in many places, many of the pastors interviewed mentioned the importance of connecting with congregants on Sunday mornings. David noted that Sunday mornings are one of his favorite times to connect with people. “On weeks when I don’t have preaching or liturgical responsibilities,” he said, “I especially enjoy being free to mingle, greet, and spend unhurried time in conversation before and after the service. And even on Sundays when I am preaching, I try to be intentional about finishing my preparation early enough that I can be present as people arrive.” David noted that simply greeting, listening, and engaging with people as they arrive for worship has become a natural way of building trust within the congregation.

Barry noted that he gets to worship early just to “hang around.” And Joseph particularly noted the importance of Sunday-morning connections. “One of the most practical ways I build trust is through intentional presence before and after Sunday services,” he said. “For me, those times are some of the most important moments of the week. I refuse to spend the last minutes before worship frantically reviewing my sermon—it’s not going to improve at that point. Instead, I spend the remaining time available to greet and interact with people as they arrive.”

Joseph, like others, communicated that he often stands out front to welcome members and visitors as they come in. Then, immediately after the service, he heads toward the back to engage with a wide range of people rather than just the same few who

might naturally approach him at the front. These interactions may seem small, he noted, “but they are crucial. They demonstrate accessibility, warmth, and a willingness to be present. Over time, these consistent patterns of availability before and after worship have become a quiet but powerful way of cultivating trust in the congregation.”

Gene related his Sunday morning practice, especially noting that it does not come naturally for him:

I’m an introvert, and if I have the choice between going toward people or staying by myself, I’ll always choose to be alone. I love solitude. I’m not naturally the life of the party. But early in my ministry, I heard a seasoned pastor say, “Quit obsessing over that sermon that you think is going to change the world and get out among your people. Put your hands on them, tell them you love them, ask how they’re doing!” At the time, I thought that sounded like the worst possible advice. I was convinced I needed to be studying right up until the last minute because the sermon had to be perfect. But I started doing what he suggested, and it changed me.

Many of the pastors interviewed emphasized the importance of carrying these relational connections past Sunday mornings and into their own homes, noting the benefit of hospitality to their trust-building efforts.

“I don’t think there’s anything more important than relationship building,” Barry commented, “and for us, hospitality has been central to that.” Barry relayed that having people in their home has been the primary way they have cultivated relationships. Over the years, he said, hospitality has “been huge for building trust and connection in our congregation.”

Barry seeks to welcome many different groups into his home. “This fall,” he said, “we plan to try a community group specifically for new people, just to give them an easy on ramp into church life. I also make a point to host our leaders on a regular basis. My assistant keeps a running list of people I need to invite over, and my wife and I set aside one day each week specifically for hosting.”

Barry noted that in the early years of their church, people were at his house “constantly.” That kind of presence, he said, set a foundation of relational trust that has continued to shape their community.

David shared a similar story, noting that “hospitality has been central to building trust.” For years, he noted, he and his wife have opened their home to people from the congregation, regularly hosting meals, gatherings, and informal times of connection in their house. “These practices,” David said, “whether in our home or in everyday spaces, have created opportunities for genuine connection. Hospitality, in all its forms, allows people to feel welcomed into my life, not just into the church, and that kind of openness has been essential for cultivating trust.”

Joseph relayed that hospitality has played “a vital role in building trust.” He commented that “here is something uniquely meaningful about being in a pastor’s home, sharing a meal, or simply spending time together outside of formal ministry settings.”

Joseph recalled that a couple new to his church still remember the first Christmas Eve service they attended. “When my family had a small group of friends over afterward,” he remembered, “we welcomed them as well. It was a simple moment—they were just folded into an existing gathering—but it left a deep impression and helped them feel connected.”

Roland, likewise, commented that “hospitality is probably the single biggest tool in building trust.” He continued, “When people are in our home—when there are dirty dishes in the sink, laundry piled up, and the chaos of parenting is on display—something profoundly human happens. People see us as we really are, just ordinary people trying to survive. That kind of humanness disarms suspicion.”

Many of the pastors interviewed spoke of the benefits of being “just ordinary people” around their congregants. Joseph commented, “We sometimes talk about how we as pastors ‘humanize ourselves.’ It’s a funny phrase, because of course we are human, but what we mean is finding ways for people to see us not just in our professional roles.” Most of the time, Joseph continued, congregants see him doing what he’s trained and paid to do—preaching, leading, administering the sacraments. “In those settings,” Joseph said, “we are the experts in the room. But when people see us in other contexts—sharing a potluck meal, singing a lighthearted song together, or just spending time with them—they recognize that we are ordinary people too.” Joseph commented, “Those small, even goofy, moments help people say, ‘They’re just like us.’”

Joseph went on to say that his goal is that people encounter him first and foremost as a brother in Christ rather than “the pastor.” Without downplaying his leadership role, he went on to conclude that “more than anything, I want the church to feel like family, where hospitality, presence, and shared life communicate trust and love.”

Jason revealed a similar attitude, commenting on how he and his wife lead a community group and host it in their home. “That practice,” he said, “is meaningful not only for the group itself but also for the wider church, because it communicates that I’m not just orchestrating ministry programs from a distance—I’m participating in them.” And Roland took this concept even further, commenting that he and his wife are members of a community group but do not lead it. This practice allows him to meet congregants on their level, rather than as the leader.

Reflecting on this practice, Roland noted, “They all know I’m a pastor, and they know I’m not theologically edgy. What’s been fun for me, though, is surprising them by

not feeling the need to fix everything. I'm not constantly correcting theological statements or jumping in to solve every tension. I'm comfortable with silence." He continued, saying, "Because my life is more public than most, people usually know where I stand pretty quickly. They can identify me faster than someone who keeps their cards close. And so, when I don't use the script they expect from me—when I respond differently, more casually, or simply let things be—it surprises them. That surprise creates space for trust."

Jason reflected on another joy of his—meeting congregants outside of church settings. "On Saturday mornings," he said, "I often go to the farmer's market. It's something I enjoy personally, but it's also another layer of ministry because I inevitably run into church members. Those casual conversations—catching up, laughing, simply sharing life—become important touchpoints."

Jason revealed that his goal is often to "soften" or "eliminate" the boundaries that can easily separate pastors from their people. "I understand the need for healthy boundaries," he said, "but I also see the value of openness," concluding that he has "always loved roles where the lines between family, personal life, and ministry are blurred."

Jason also commented on his continued efforts to attend events he is invited to, stating that his goal is to "push back against the idea that I'm just the pastor who preaches on Sundays but is otherwise invisible."

In addition to the personal efforts at hospitality and relational warmth, many of the pastors interviewed expressed the importance of fostering community life within their congregations, highlighting its role in building trust within the church.

Barry commented on the benefits of “really great parties,” even revealing that they “don’t call them fellowship events or community gatherings,” but parties. “Framing them that way matters,” he continued, “because it signals that these events are meant to be fun, something your friend would actually want to attend.” For Barry, these parties have “created a deep sense of relational connection.”

Taylor recalled that “a great deal of trust” was built in the early days of his church through the simple act of sharing meals. “Because we met for worship at 4:00 p.m.,” he said, “we decided it would be natural to have a potluck dinner together every week. It turned out to be phenomenal. In a very short period of time, those weekly meals created deep relational bonds across the congregation.” He concluded, “The combination of shared meals and life together in homes has been foundational for fostering genuine community.”

Taylor also spoke of the benefit of “playing together,” commenting that “one of the more unexpected ways we’ve built relationships was through a simple kickball game in the park across the street from our church.” Taylor commented that “at first, we envisioned it as something for kids, but we soon discovered that adults wanted to join in as well. Over time, it became a regular event where we met many new people from the neighborhood.”

The lesson for Taylor was clear: intentional, visible practices in the community—out in the open and on a consistent basis—create natural opportunities for connection and trust. Something as simple as kickball and hot dogs became a powerful way to “extend hospitality beyond the church walls.”

Matthew spoke at length about the benefits of community life in fostering trust among congregants:

From the beginning, we made it clear that we would be a church of community groups, not a church with community groups. These groups meet nine months out of the year, four weeks each month, and generally have a life cycle of three to five years.

We emphasize that the goal of a community group is not simply to be a Bible study. Rather, it is a laboratory for relationships and the building of trust. The purpose is to cultivate friendships deep enough that people feel safe sharing what is truly going on in their lives—in their homes, in their heads, and in their hearts.

We want people to practice what Jesus described as coming into the light (John 1). That means confessing sins to one another, living openly, and allowing the blood of Christ to cover those sins. The vision is for each person to live a sin-conspicuous, grace-dependent life in the presence of brothers and sisters, without hiding. Community groups, grounded in hospitality, provide the context for that kind of vulnerable trust.

Matthew commented on his church's unique approach to fostering friendships, saying, "As part of cultivating community, we ask members once a year to vacation with someone else in the church. Beyond community groups, we encourage them to take at least one weekend—or even a week in the summer—to share life together in the same house. The idea is simple: see the good, the bad, and the ugly of life together. Over twenty-three years, that practice has built enormous social capital."

Matthew went on to say that the practice of vacationing together has created "lasting bonds" among church members. "Our people," he said, "genuinely love being together, and that has spilled into all sorts of affinity groups. There are group chats for soccer players, trout fishers, and skiers. Each year, these cohorts plan trips—like the trout fishing crew heading to Idaho in July, or the skiers renting multiple houses in Keystone every winter. They share meals, hear testimonies, and often invite non-Christian friends along, creating natural avenues for evangelism." What began as a simple call to vacation

together has blossomed into a culture in Matthew's church where shared life extends far beyond Sunday worship.

Vulnerability, Humility, and Openness

Many of the pastors interviewed recognized the importance of their own humility, vulnerability, and openness, noting that these qualities all aided in fostering trust among the congregation.

David noted that although he believes "there is such a thing as too much vulnerability from a leader, there is also an appropriate measure of honesty that makes me relatable." He continued, saying that "from the pulpit, I try to share both struggles and joys in the right balance." While recognizing that vulnerability can sometimes be overused, David mentioned that "genuine transparency has been a gift to our congregation."

David continued with this example:

When both my father and brother passed away in the same year, I stood before the congregation just two weeks later and I said, 'Here is what has happened in my life. The elders and Women's Council have decided to give me two months off from preaching, and I would appreciate your prayers.' I did not go into unnecessary details, but I shared enough to invite the church into my grief and need. Moments like that keep people connected to me as a person and remind them that our relationship as pastor and congregation is grounded in trust and shared humanity.

Barry commented that in his preaching, he tries to be transparent. "I'm naturally an honest person," he said, "and I think that's served me well, especially in a Southern church context. People often comment on it. They'll say things like, 'You talk a lot about your own struggles with whatever the passage is about, and I appreciate that—you're willing to be vulnerable.'"

Barry went on to tell this story:

One of the most memorable affirmations of this came from a couple who had been deeply involved in other PCA churches. The husband had served as an elder, and they had experienced a difficult ending at their previous church. When they first arrived at our congregation, they made it clear that they wanted to take things slowly. I assured them that was fine.

Over the next several months, I greeted them casually without pressing. Later, we shared coffee, then lunch, and eventually they attended one of our newcomer events. They had been to plenty of those before and already knew the PCA well. At the end of the evening, the wife—who is witty and engaging—was standing at my table eating when I asked her, ‘Darlene, why do y’all keep coming? With all your experience, what keeps you here?’ She laughed and said, ‘I’m going to be honest with you: it’s because you’re not an asshole. I’ve been around a lot of PCA pastors who think they know everything, but they don’t give you their full self. I’m really sick of that. I just need someone who’s not a blowhard.’

It was a blunt answer, but to me it underscored the importance of vulnerability and authenticity in leadership. People don’t just want teaching; they want to know their pastor is real.

Jason highlighted the importance of a “posture of repentance and faith,” noting that there are times he had to repent to congregants about various things and how important that was to the bond of trust between them. Jason went on to say, “One of the benefits of leading from a place of vulnerability is that people recognize you are not trying to protect yourself or exert power over them. Instead, you are entering into a place of humility, acknowledging that this is where Jesus himself is present—he operates in those spaces.” He continued, “Again and again, I’ve seen that posture bear fruit. It has produced beautiful things relationally, creating deeper trust and connection within the congregation.”

Matthew reflected on a conversation he had with the late Jack Miller. Matthew recalled, “Jack once told me, ‘You are most dangerous when you’re right.’ Being right makes us feel powerful and in control, and that intoxication is spiritually perilous.”

Matthew continued, “Jack’s counsel was that the moment you realize you’re right, you should immediately pray: ‘Lord Jesus, please come and save me right now, because I’m right.’ Why? Because when we’re right, the temptation is strongest to treat others with contempt—to call them fools, to murder them in our hearts, to mow over them simply because we crave the sense of victory that comes with being correct.” Matthew concluded, “Believing that truth creates space for repentance. It helps me remember that my calling is not to win arguments but to be the chief repenter, leading by humility rather than self-assurance.”

Roland, likewise, mentioned that one of the things he does is intentionally practice self-criticism. “I try to be public about critiquing myself,” he said, “modeling for others what it looks like to examine their own hearts. My hope is that this provides a kind of scaffolding—through imitation—so that others learn how to critique themselves as well.” He concluded, “Before I’m ever critical of someone else, I’m critical of myself. I try to articulate how much I need Jesus—how I’m saved by the blood of Christ, not by being right.”

Along with the beneficial practices of humility and vulnerability, Joseph mentioned the importance of openness with those who question. “We strive to be transparent about what we believe,” he said, “clearly laying out our convictions. But we also welcome questions.” During new members’ classes in Joseph’s church, participants are placed in small groups led by pastors where teaching is combined with conversation. “Those interactions are invaluable for building trust,” said Joseph. “We emphasize again and again our desire to be approachable, often saying, ‘If you have any questions, please come talk to one of the pastors.’ That openness,” Joseph said, “has had lasting effects.”

Matthew, as well, commented that such a process of involving and welcoming questions “builds more trust than the content of a decision,” commenting that “trust moves at the speed of relationship, love, and listening.”

Roland related how the simple act of saying “I don’t know” can go a long way in building trust. He concluded that “Saying, ‘I don’t know’ actually builds social capital” with his congregants. “Paradoxically,” he said, “admitting not knowing makes the moments when I do speak carry more weight.”

Finally, Joseph commented on the importance of transparency, especially in finances and major decisions. “Years ago,” he said, “before I became senior pastor, the elders considered changing the church’s name. The idea was carefully discussed among leaders but then brought to the congregation for input. The response was overwhelmingly negative, and so the change was never made. That experience communicated clearly: leadership not only shares its thinking but genuinely values congregational feedback.”

Summary of What Practices Have Cultivated Trust

Those interviewed expressed certain pastoral practices or personal competencies that aided them in building trust in their congregations. Among these were the importance of gospel-centeredness and biblical fidelity, good communication skills, personal warmth, hospitality, and community-building, and vulnerability, humility and openness.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined the challenges of ideological diversity in the church, the benefits of such diversity, and the pastoral practices and competencies necessary for fostering trust in these ideologically diverse congregations.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors foster trust in ideologically diverse congregations. By better understanding how to foster trust, pastors will embrace, rather than reject, diversity in their congregations, and adopt practices that build these diverse organizations into flourishing systems. The review of literature explored a Biblical and theological framework for both diversity and trust, as well as a review of the political nature of pastoral ministry and the importance of trust in church and organizational health. The eight pastors interviewed revealed strong arguments for the inclusion of ideological diversity in a congregation, as well as many foundational practices for fostering trust.

Three questions have guided this study:

1. How do pastors describe the difficulty of ideological diversity in their congregations?
2. How do pastors describe the benefits of ideological diversity in their congregations?
3. What pastoral practices have cultivated trust in the congregations they pastor?

This chapter represents the conclusions of this study. The research concluded that, while difficult, diverse congregations provide real discipleship benefit to congregants and certain pastoral practices can lead to flourishing in those diverse churches. This chapter concludes with recommendations for pastoral practice and further research.

Discussion of Findings

During the research, four major themes arose, complementing and confirming the literature analyzed. These categories are as follows:

1. When trust is high, diversity empowers discipleship.
2. The pastor's trust in the Lord is the foundation for congregational trust.
3. The pastor's relationships are the fuel for trust-building.
4. Clarity and openness must live side by side.

When Trust Is High, Diversity Empowers Discipleship

Diversity, the literature and the interviews confirm, is an asset, not a threat to the church. Though diversity does prove challenging at times, it is not a threat to spiritual growth, but rather a *means* toward it. In ideologically diverse churches, congregants learn to more substantially embrace the image of God in humanity, are shaped to be more humble, and develop deeper love and appreciation for those around them.

The literature, particularly the biblical and theological literature reviewed, affirms the sanctifying function of diversity in the church. Biblical passages such as 1 Cor. 12, Eph. 4, and Rom. 12 all speak of God's desire for unified diversity and His use of such diversity as a sanctifying agent. As Richard Lints writes, the tension between unity and diversity is built into both the character of God and the unique nature of humanity.¹²³ It is this divine nature—God's perfect combination of unity in diversity—that Irwyn Ince believes is the "heartbeat of the Christian faith."¹²⁴

¹²³ Lints, 114.

¹²⁴ Ince, 35.

And when Ince writes that “God intended cultural diversity over the world even if sin had never entered the picture,” he is affirming the benefit of diversity to the forming of Christian disciples.¹²⁵

The pastors interviewed were unanimous in their assertion that ideological diversity created a discipleship benefit in their churches. Among others, Roland commented how bringing diverse groups together has allowed those in his congregation to loosen their grip on stereotypes, enabling his congregants to begin viewing one another through biblical categories—human beings made in the image of God, broken by sin but redeemed by Jesus—rather than through cultural categories such as political views, cultural stances, or even theological convictions. He summarizes the concept well, saying, “In some ways, our diversity gives us the chance to practice the opposite of what our culture models. Instead of reducing others to enemies over political or cultural issues, we can say, ‘We may be on opposite sides of this issue, but this person is still my brother or sister in Christ, and I will treat them with dignity.’” Such a realization experientially confirms in these congregants the beauty of the doctrine of *Imago Dei*.

David also noted that “when you love and respect someone, and then discover they think differently, you don’t immediately dismiss them as crazy. Instead, you begin to wonder, “Maybe that perspective isn’t so crazy after all. Maybe I could soften on this.” And Jason commented on how the combination of strong biblical preaching and ideological diversity have created in his congregants the ability to hold their views clearly but open-handedly. Diversity, then, not only affirms the image of God in humanity, but

¹²⁵ Ince, 57.

also produces humility in God’s people, teaching Christians how to not only view one another properly, but also shaping a proper view of themselves.

And the practice of interacting regularly with those with whom you are different also grows in Christians a deeper *love* for others. Barry commented that “inviting people into an environment where differences are present . . . trains our hearts to deal with those who are different without fear, and to love them well.” The pastors interviewed all affirmed that as their congregants have lived their lives together with others—even those with whom they may disagree—God has formed them to be more motivated by love and less by fear.

There is a dynamic at work, however—for ideological diversity to be a discipleship benefit, congregational trust must be high. The consensus from those interviewed was that when trust is present, diverse congregations will flourish rather than fracture. Trust was, for these pastors, the “secret sauce” that enabled the beneficial elements of diversity while protecting from the divisive ones.

Much of the literature surveyed reinforces the importance of trust to flourishing organizations and relationships. Johnson and Zak note the biological and chemical realities at play as oxytocin creates tighter engagement and deeper trust, enabling more secure relationships. Zak writes that “trust profoundly improves organizational performance,” and that “those who work in high-trust organizations . . . perform better at work.”¹²⁶ Sucher and Gupta note that “if you were to take the advice of scientists and

¹²⁶ Zak, 7.

researchers, you would make trust a top priority.”¹²⁷ Kouzes and Posner also commend organizational leaders to foster a climate of trust in their organizations, noting that “exemplary leaders make trust and teamwork high priorities.”¹²⁸ The literature is clear that trust is key in creating organizations that flourish.

The organizational leaders interviewed here—pastors seeking to foster trust in their ideologically diverse congregations—all noted the importance that trust played in the health of their churches. They spoke at length about the practices that have created and fostered trust in their congregations, specifically a dedication to gospel-centeredness and personal faithfulness, good communication habits, deep personal relationships, hospitality, and community life, and a consistent practice of vulnerability, humility, and openness. Through these pastoral practices and capacities, these men watched the fabric of trust strengthen their congregations, turning what could have been a threat into a deep blessing.

The Pastor’s Trust in the Is the Foundation for Congregational Trust

The second major finding of this research is that the level of trust in the congregation is directly related to the pastor’s trust in God’s word as the ultimate guide for faith and practice. Mark Baker writes that discipleship “is about trusting God,” and

¹²⁷ Sandra J. Sucher and Shalene Gupta, *The Power of Trust: How Companies Build It, Lose It, Regain It* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, Hachette Book Group, 2021), 23.

¹²⁸ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, 6th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: The Leadership Challenge, a Wiley Brand, 2017), 289.

those who lead God’s people can only build congregational trust through the repeated embrace of the trustworthy word.¹²⁹

When pastors believe in and preach the infallibility of Scripture, trust in the congregation rises, because the gathered people trust the foundation they are standing on. When the leader appeals to a higher authority, his words automatically become more trustworthy.

Moses is a key example of leadership that fosters congregational trust by fostering trust in the Lord. Standing on the banks of the Red Sea, with an Egyptian army behind them, Moses tells Israel, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”¹³⁰ Stuart calls this Moses’ “finest hour,” demonstrating the kind of leadership that *instills* trust by *directing* trust toward the proper person.¹³¹

Many of the pastors interviewed spoke of this dynamic, with Jason, Gene, and Roland all noting that the primary agenda in preaching must be the exposition of the text and the elevation of Christ.

And in addition to biblically faithful preaching, many of those interviewed mentioned the importance of their personal holiness as a means for fostering trust in the congregation. Commenting on 1 Thessalonians 2, Roland noted that “Paul talks about the

¹²⁹ Mark D. Baker, *Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community without Judgmentalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 135.

¹³⁰ Exod. 14:13–14.

¹³¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 336.

role of a godly life—not simply as a way of pleasing God, but as a way of building trust. . . . Paul frames godliness as something that makes his words believable. His life gave people a reason to trust him.”

Roland’s full comments are worth repeating here. “People often trust me,” he noted, “because they see my children, or because they notice that my wife is genuinely happy and not weighed down. As simple as it sounds, they look at her joy and conclude that I must be kind to my wife.” In such a way, godliness itself has become a mechanism for building trust in Roland’s congregation—his life and character have served to foster trust among those he leads.

Joseph also commented that “when you consider who is truly trustworthy as a leader, it is not simply someone who makes you feel a certain way, but someone who orients their life toward God.” Trust grows, Joseph commented, “when leaders are committed to pleasing the Lord, take his word seriously, and handle their authority with humility and care. Ultimately,” Joseph reflected, “the trust is not in the leader alone, but in the Lord who upholds his word.”

The Westminster Confession of Faith is a helpful reminder here. Chapter 1:4 states that, “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.” I do not think it a stretch to say that the confession’s view is that those who promote trust in the Lord will consequently see trust grow in their churches.

Relationships Are the Fuel for Trust-Building

If fostering trust is an engine, relationships are the fuel that make the engine move. The authors of *Crucial Conversations* argue that trust-building dialogue happens when people “openly and honestly express their opinions, share their feelings, and articulate their theories.”¹³² In other words, trust happens in the context of relationship.

The importance of relationships arose in nearly every interview. Over and over again, the pastors interviewed spoke of the importance of relationships—both their own personal interactions and the community life of the church—to the process of fostering trust in their congregations. For these pastors, the way they interacted personally with their congregants, welcomed them into their homes, and fostered community life in the church, was one, if not *the*, primary way they fostered trust in their congregations.

Many mentioned how “relational warmth” has built a foundation of trust in their congregations. Barry commented that “relationship building and hospitality are at the very heart of building trust in our congregation,” and Jason said that “at the heart of building trust is simply being a relational pastor.” For every pastor interviewed, the small, consistent patterns of availability and relational warmth powerfully cultivated trust in their congregations.

Personal hospitality also works to “soften” the boundaries that can easily separate pastors from their people, blurring lines in good and appropriate ways so that real human connection is built. It is during these connections, Johnson and Zak have reminded us, that oxytocin level spike and the chemical process of trust-building go to work.¹³³

¹³² Joseph Grenny et al., 24.

¹³³ Zak, 4.

Many of those interviewed reflected on the importance of personal hospitality, noting that their practice of welcoming people into their homes was key to building a foundation of interpersonal trust, with Barry even saying, “I don’t think there’s anything more important than relationship building, and for us, hospitality has been central to that.”

David shared a similar story, noting that “hospitality has been central to building trust.” For years, he noted, he and his wife have opened their home to people from the congregation, regularly hosting meals, gatherings, and informal times of connection in their house. “These practices,” David said, “whether in our home or in everyday spaces, have created opportunities for genuine connection. Hospitality, in all its forms, allows people to feel welcomed into my life, not just into the church, and that kind of openness has been essential for cultivating trust.”

Joseph relayed that hospitality has played “a vital role in building trust.” He commented that “there is something uniquely meaningful about being in a pastor’s home, sharing a meal, or simply spending time together outside of formal ministry settings.”

Roland, likewise, commented that “hospitality is probably the single biggest tool in building trust.” He continued, “When people are in our home—when there are dirty dishes in the sink, laundry piled up, and the chaos of parenting is on display—something profoundly human happens. People see us as we really are, just ordinary people trying to survive. That kind of humanness disarms suspicion.”

Hospitality creates spaces for those who typically see pastors “up front” to see them “down low.” Joseph’s comments are helpful here: “We are (often) the experts in the room. But when people see us in other contexts—sharing a potluck meal, singing a

lighthearted song together, or just spending time with them—they recognize that we are ordinary people too.” Such “humanizing” creates bonds that preaching, teaching, and counseling—though tremendously important to the pastoral office—cannot.

But the importance of relationships to trust-building goes further than the pastor and his personal relationships. For trust to take root in a congregation, relational life must be shared *among* congregants as well. Many of the pastors interviewed spoke of the importance of community events, shared meals, and “really great parties” for fostering trust among the congregation.

Matthew’s focus on community groups is noteworthy: “From the beginning,” he said, “we made it clear that we would be a church *of* community groups, not a church *with* community groups . . . the purpose (of these groups) is to cultivate friendships deep enough that people feel safe sharing what is truly going on in their lives—in their homes, in their heads, and in their hearts. . . . Community groups, grounded in hospitality, provide the context for trust.”

The findings of this study, however, are that it is a *particular kind* of relationship, a particular kind of hospitality, that build trust—relationships and hospitality built around vulnerability. Lencioni writes that “the kind of trust that is necessary to build a great team is . . . vulnerability-based trust,”¹³⁴ and Baker sees personal vulnerability as the key to creating safety in a congregation.¹³⁵ Whether from pastor to congregant or between one congregant and another, vulnerability is key to forming trust-building relationships.

¹³⁴ Lencioni, 4748.

¹³⁵ Mark D. Baker, *Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community without Judgmentalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 132.

The pastors all spoke of the importance of their own humility, vulnerability, and openness, noting that these qualities all aided in fostering trust among the congregation. The refusal to project an image that is detached from reality, and the ability to be honest about one's own failings—what one pastor called “the practice of self-critique”—creates trust-building rocket fuel. As Coyle writes “group cooperation is created by small, frequently repeated moments of vulnerability.”¹³⁶ “Normally,” he writes, “we think about trust and vulnerability the way we think about standing on solid ground and leaping into the unknown: first we build trust, then we leap. But science is showing us that we’ve got it backward. Vulnerability doesn’t come after trust—it precedes it. Leaping into the unknown, when done alongside others, causes the solid ground of trust to materialize beneath our feet.”¹³⁷

The literature and interview data is clear: Relationships that include honesty and vulnerability will establish a bond of trust that is not easily broken, even by relational or ideological challenges. In the words of one pastor, “I honestly don’t think there’s anything more important.”

Clarity and Openness Must Live Side by Side

Much of the literature surveyed espoused the benefits of openness as a means of building trust. Grenny, et al, have written about the importance of collaboration, and

¹³⁶ Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups* (New York: Bantam Books, 2018), 158.

¹³⁷ Coyle, 107.

McCrystal, among others, has written about the importance of free decision-making for employees, a practice Crouch rightly labels as “empowerment.”¹³⁸

The pastors interviewed affirmed these conclusions, celebrating the simple habit of welcoming questions and making room for those who disagree. Roland helpfully remarked that the act of saying “I don’t know” actually built social capital and fostered trust in his church.

Many of the pastors interviewed noted the benefit of leveling the hierarchy of decision-making in their congregations, but none went so far as to affirm Brafman and Beckstrom’s move toward total decentralization.¹³⁹ In fact, one pastor even noted the problems when the elders in his church—those tasked with providing clear direction for the congregation—were on very different pages for important issues.

The power comes in the tension between clarity and openness, and Joseph’s comments are important here. “We strive to be transparent about what we believe,” he said, “clearly laying out our convictions. But we also welcome questions.” Joseph’s comments show that he embraces openness, even as he champions clarity. It’s this tension that builds trust in the congregation.

Other pastors seemed to agree, and the literature confirms the conclusion that when allowance for difference and humble leadership walk side-by-side with clear direction and an embrace of foundational truths, congregants come to realize two very important things: this church is moving in a particular direction, and I am being invited to join, sitting in the appropriate seat.

¹³⁸ Joseph Grenny et al., 24; McChrystal et al., 210; Crouch, 186.

¹³⁹ Beckstrom and Brafman, 39.

Consider the congregation as a bus. The bus is filled with a diverse group of people. The travelers on this bus feel that the drivers of the bus are open to questions, humbly recognize their limits and faults, and even give them the freedom to lead and serve in certain congregational spheres. But the drivers of this bus all share a clear, unified direction. No one is grabbing the wheel and pulling the bus in vastly different directions. The drivers of the bus are comfortable with the tension between clarity and diversity. It is this kind of organization that seems to bear substantial fruit.

Recommendations for Practice

Considering the findings described above, pastors would benefit from the following four habits and practices: 1) develop and embrace face-to-face third spaces, 2) preach and teach on the benefits of diversity, 3) open your homes and lives, and 4) embrace the tension between clarity and diversity.

Develop and Embrace Face-to-Face Third Spaces

Sociologists over the years have celebrated the benefits of “third spaces,” places outside of home and work where people can connect meaningfully with others. Churches have often been considered such places. But for pastors, simply inviting people to worship will not accomplish the desired results. People—especially those with diverse views—must be gathered in environments where they can experience one another in full. People must be able to interact with others, get to know what makes them tick, hear and understand their unique perspectives, and learn to see them as complicated and wonderful image-bearers if the hoped-for benefits of diversity are to take root in the congregation.

So, what are these places? Community groups, when done well, provide one such opportunity. But these groups, though gathered in the context of better knowing the Bible, must have as their main goal *knowledge of one another*. Real knowing takes place when these groups are, as one pastor noted, places where congregants can live “a sin-conspicuous, grace-dependent life in the presence of brothers and sisters, without hiding.” Listen again to how he describes the type of group that builds trust:

We emphasize that the goal of a community group is not simply to be a Bible study. Rather, it is a laboratory for relationships and the building of trust. The purpose is to cultivate friendships deep enough that people feel safe sharing what is truly going on in their lives—in their homes, in their heads, and in their hearts.

In these relationship laboratories, the Holy Spirit goes to work, using the diversity of those gathered to create humility, love and a deeper understanding of the image of God in humanity.

Pastors would also be wise to include meals in their search for good third spaces. Whether these meals occur in the midst of community groups, parties, or after-worship potlucks (or better yet, all of the above), gathering around food helps to break down walls and open pathways for conversation.

Pastors may even decide to gather their congregants for more focused events, for instance, a class created to discuss political or cultural issues. Such a class could be scheduled for a typical Sunday morning “Sunday school” hour, but might be even more fruitful if done midweek, gathered around a meal, and in a less formal environment. A time of presentation, then discussion, followed by a meal could create a good environment for discussion and understanding.

Whatever the chosen medium, it is imperative that discussions happen face-to-face. So much ideological disagreement today happens online and on platforms that do

not allow for nuance, understanding, or conversation. If people are going to be able to more deeply recognize the image of God in humanity, they must be face-to-face with another human.

Preach and Teach on the Benefits of Diversity

Though expounding the Bible should remain the primary goal for preachers, there can be proper times and places to emphasize the importance of ideological diversity to sanctification. In sermon application, and especially when preaching on the passages referenced in this paper, pastors would do well to highlight the benefits to Christian growth that diversity can bring. As mentioned above in the section on findings, ideological diversity is an asset to the church. This asset should be highlighted from the pulpit. Do congregants know that putting themselves in relationship with those with whom they differ can lead to spiritual growth? Do congregants know that, while easier, homogeneity is not necessarily more beneficial for them? If not, then tell them. Tell them in appropriate ways from the pulpit, explaining to them from God's word how the Holy Spirit works through diverse interactions to reveal himself more fully.

Open Your Homes and Your Lives

If there was a repeated refrain in this research it would be, "relationships build trust." Over and over, pastors mentioned how important personal relationships were to their ministry, and especially to the process of fostering trust. And at the center of the relationship-building process was personal hospitality. When pastors opened their homes and their lives to those in their congregations, trust in their congregations developed rapidly.

Personal hospitality provides the opportunity for a number of important things to happen. Not only do congregants feel the welcome from and personal connection with their pastor, but they are given a window into the regular lives of these men. They are allowed to see the dust that has accumulated in the (both physical and metaphorical) corners of his home, are given a window into how he and his wife relate to one another and to their children, and are given the opportunity to see their pastor triumph and struggle in normal ways.

It strikes me that Jesus spent much of his time eating and drinking with others. It was, in fact, the main objection the Pharisees had about him: “This man eats and drinks with sinners!”¹⁴⁰ I wonder if Jesus intentionally put himself in moments where his humanity was on full display so that those around him, especially those who had seen him perform miracles, might more accurately embrace the full humanity of the Son of Man. Though pastors are not like Jesus in his fully divine nature, they are often elevated by those they lead. Pastors would be wise to follow the lead of their Savior in modeling humble leadership by simply inviting others into their homes and connecting on the most human of levels.

Embrace the Tension Between Clarity and Diversity

The final recommendation is for pastors to intentionally live in the tension between clear leadership and openness to diversity. We might name this concept “soft edges and a solid center.” The idea is that the direction of the church is clear, and that those at the center—the ordained leaders and staff—are unified on the core beliefs and

¹⁴⁰ Matt. 9:11

values of the church, yet those on the edges, and even as they move closer to the center, are allowed to hold diverse opinions.

One way this can be accomplished is for churches to be dogged about teaching their theology and core values (though this is better done in a classroom rather than from the pulpit), especially when training future leaders. Such training allows for everyone to know clearly the direction of the church and for leaders to be trained to “drive the bus” in the right direction. At that same time, allowance should be made for those who are outside this narrow center, even making room for them to lead and serve in appropriate ways. For instance, a couple strongly committed to egalitarianism could still lead a community group in a complementarian church. Or a man committed to believer’s-only baptism could lead a team that serves the local elementary school or teach a Sunday school class on parenting. Though these people would not serve in ordained roles, they can be given the freedom to lead and serve without risk of directional clarity.

This approach—a softer grip on leadership outside ordained office combined with a tighter grip on ordination—can produce beautiful, trust-building fruit in the congregation as members see both clarity of vision and opportunity for a diverse service and leadership.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on how pastors foster trust in ideologically diverse congregations. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the research can be. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study could be highly valuable for the Church:

1. Further research could be done to focus more clearly on racial diversity, the benefit it brings, and the specific challenges that exist in building trust across racial lines. Though some of my research has touched on racial diversity, further study would benefit the church.
2. Though much of this study could be appropriately applied to larger organizations, like denominations, further study in this arena could yield fruit.
3. Further study could be done to determine what, other than trust, causes ideologically diverse congregations to flourish rather than fracture. Though this study has shown the importance of trust in the congregation, students might also be helped by a study unearthing what other pastoral practices and capacities might benefit ideologically diverse congregations.

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