

THE ACTS 15 INITIATIVE

A professional project submitted to the Theological School of
Drew University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree,
Doctor of Ministry

Advisor: Carl Savage, Dmin, Ph.D.

Geoffrey S. Kohler
Drew University
Madison, New Jersey
May 2011

UMI Number: 3462603

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

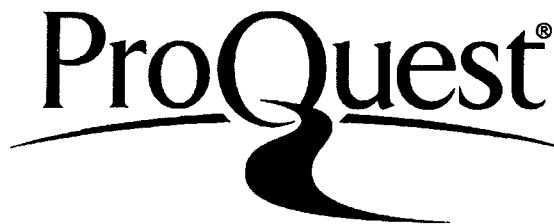
In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI 3462603

Copyright 2011 by ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This edition of the work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.



ProQuest LLC
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ABSTRACT
THE ACTS 15 INITIATIVE

Geoffrey S. Kohler

Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church
Tampa, FL 33629

In this thesis I present different stories by which to understand my own journey in hearing God's voice and direction in my life and in the life of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church. I offer accounts of listening for and listening to God as a young adult, as a pastor, as a fellow disciple of Jesus with other believers and as the organizer of a church study. My argument is that God does speak and that we, as human beings, have the capacity to hear but that the means of this communication are varied and must be carefully approached so that God's message may be understood plainly.

Journeying between four different moments in my life, I juxtapose my initial experience of being called and being (initially) dissuaded of this by an older believer, the dissolution of a church I felt called to found which helped me discern my true sense of call, my experience of receiving what seemed like a new call into a new ministry by my head of staff when I was not prepared for it and then the process of seeking a community wide understanding of God's call to the church about the church's present and future ministry. Through each of these, and by laying them alongside each other, issues involved in listening to God and listening to each other as human beings come into focus and are addressed. Listening is presented as an activity that requires a full engagement of

the total person. I trust in the leadership of Emmanuel Levinas, John Wild, and Dallas Willard in philosophy and theology as guides in this process. In order to further engage in responsive listening as a community I utilized Appreciative Inquiry for the study. This allowed the church to hear its own story. This built on the example of the early church found in Acts 15 where, in response to a crisis of call, the leaders of the community stopped to listen to stories in order to hear the word of God.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with a deep sense of gratitude that I thank Pamela Sullins, Kevin Mineer, Reed Conley, Virginia Johnson and Candace Watson who comprised my Local Advisory Council for their assistance, insight, and encouragement, the community of interviewers who came through with fine work and careful participation in the project, my friend and colleague, John DeBevoise and the Staff and Elders of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church for their support. Thank you also to Sara Winston who took on extra work and did it diligently. Most of all, thank you to my wife, Beckie, for standing with me.

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
INTRODUCTION	6
CHAPTER 1. LISTENING FOR GOD’S HEARTBEAT	9
CHAPTER 2. WHEN HAS GOD SPOKEN	27
CHAPTER 3. LISTENING WELL	41
CHAPTER 4. TELLING OUR STORY TO OURSELVES	50
CHAPTER 5. TELLING OUR FUTURE TO OURSELVES	73
CHAPTER 6. REFLECTIONS ON THIS STORY AND THE NEW STORY	77
APPENDIXES	85
A – INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	85
B – SECOND SET OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	86
C – DIAGRAMMED ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS	87
D – DRAMATIC SCENES	107
E – DESIGN MAP	110
BIBLIOGRAPHY	111

The Acts 15 Initiative

Geoffrey S. Kohler

Introduction

How do you hear God's voice in your life?

Christian Author, Dallas Willard tells the story of his wife's grandmother, lingering with the family at the dining table after Sunday dinner, pondering the pastor's morning message of God speaking to him in a vision for a new church building. "I wonder," she said quietly, "why God never speaks to me like that." Willard writes that her comment, which rattled him as a young man, was God speaking to him.¹

God gives a vision. God brings a dream. God speaks through one believer's comments into another believer's heart. God places a voice in an ass. God shows up in a bush that flames but does not burn. How does God speak to you? How does God speak to the Church? From prophetic proclamations, to whispered voices in silence to dreams, to the sky ripping open with a thunderous voice, to angels (however they are described), to the casting of lots, to the council of elders, people have found God speaking to them in a host of ways.

This is not a study of the nature of God's communicating with us, but because of the significant role God's communication does play it must be mentioned first. I have come to this place (even of writing) because I believe I am following God's direction. So I need to share how I understand one of the means God uses to speak to me.

¹Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1999), 15.

One of my clearest impressions of God saying something to me was when he called me into ministry. It was a pleasant summer evening and I was standing in the front yard of a home in Dix Hills, NY on Long Island, waving good-bye to the last group of Junior High students as a parent drove them from the evening youth program. I stood in the warmth of both the ending of the day and the ending of a great program. In my senior year of high school I'd been invited to help with the Junior High youth group. It was in that moment of quiet that I heard a voice say, "I want you to do this for the rest of your life." It was as clear as any voice I'd ever heard, as if someone spoke from beside me in the empty yard and I responded. I asked, "Really?" There was a moment of hushed anticipation and realization that I was in the presence of God who was directing me into ministry.

Immediately, I walked into the backyard to find God's man in my life at that moment, my youth pastor. He and another counselor were cleaning up from the evening's program. As I came through the gate I said, "I think I know what I want to do with my life." He looked up and said, "Well, I sure hope it's not ministry, Kohler." I was surprised but made the quick comment, "Huh." (It's served me as a great rejoinder.) But then I asked, "Why not?"

"Because, Kohler, you're the worst choice for ministry I can think of."

I expected God to speak through this man. I counted on that. I didn't ask, why did you invite me to do youth ministry this summer? Or, why did you trust me in the lives of kids? I just took in the plain face of this evaluation because I treasured this man's direction at that time. He was a creative, young, sharp and dedicated believer who was opening up a new cultural expression of faith that made sense to me. I wanted to be

loved by him and he seemed like a stabilizing force up until that point in my life. I didn't realize that he didn't really care for me at all. I was just useful. So, discounting the experience on the other side of the house just moments before, I started a 10 year detour away from ministry right then. Eventually, we did meet and came to a new understanding but that single comment inhibited my work for many years.

So, how does God speak to you and when you hear it, how do you know it is God? At that moment, I had to choose between my own experience as a 17 year old and the word of a seminary trained, ordained believer; - someone I trusted. At that point, I figured, "Well, I sure got that wrong." Distinguishing between a true word of God spoken to my soul and the word, even the seeming wisdom, of another believer is an achievement of discernment. It wasn't my greatest skill at that age. It is however a crucial skill to develop because therein lies a trusted reality.

CHAPTER 1

LISTENING FOR GOD'S HEARTBEAT

God's visits to Adam and Eve in the Garden, Enoch's walks with God and the face-to-face conversations between Moses and Jehovah are all commonly regarded as highly exceptional moments in the religious history of humankind. Aside from their obviously unique historical role, however, they are not meant to be exceptional at all.¹

Narrative of Concern

If I was making a documentary of this project it would include a trailer and the framework of my narrative of concern – the starting point of my project.

We open with a traveling shot lifting our focus and eyes to the blue sky, beautiful, giant cumulus clouds and the image of a brick, white-steeped sanctuary building pointing us upward. The view shifts to the gardens, fountains, memorial wall with brick sized plaques, a 25 foot Celtic cross hanging on the building bridging the space between the sanctuary and a large educational facility.

Overall it is 1940's construction but this central space is was constructed to replace a breezeway with a new three-story building after a fire some 10 years ago. We now see a new gym,



Window in Sanctuary
Palma Ceia Presbyterian
Church

¹Willard, 18.

classrooms and meeting rooms and people inside them. Indeed, the halls, breezeway, corner coffee center, are bustling with energy, children, parents, elderly all mingling comfortably. There are four congregations using two styles of worship meeting here now and shifting scenes present joyfully comfortable faces at different times and in alternative expressions of worship.

Two groups move to the celebratory sounds of a rock band, raising hands and following along with the words that appear on a screen; - faces lifted and smiling. The other two groups stand in the rows of pews, focused on books and paper programs, following the guidance of the black robed leaders at the front of a room. Behind the leaders in this setting, the physical center of attention is an 18 foot stained glass window of Jesus knocking at a thorn encroached door. There is a “typo” at the bottom of the window, where, instead of quoting the Scripture (Rev. 3:20) from which the image comes, it reads “Behold I stand at Thy door and knock”. Someone noticed the error when the window was installed, but the pastor at that time called for it to be left as it was. As people explain the impression - this image and these words have on them, the personal nature of its expression seems borne out. As will be seen people seem to take it to heart.

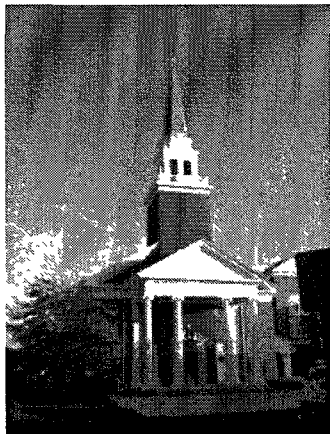
The pastor-leaders of these different communities - the head of staff and one of the associate pastors, have breakfast every Tuesday morning. In our film trailer, the scene now shifts to one of these, a couple of years back, where the head of staff, in response to some comment by the associate, launches into a emotionally charged and energetically positive statement on how the contemporary worship community should be launched as its own church. The associate is surprised because he is unsure how his comment elicited this response and has never seen this man so thoroughly emotional

before. With arms extended, he explains how he loves this idea, has always supported new church growth, how he enjoys the heritage of his father, also a pastor, who sent off six new church starts. He is fully behind such a movement, joyful in seeing this as part of his ministry's work as well.

The associate asks, "John, are you telling me my ministry here is done?"

Our trailer ends there in the drama of that moment and with the questions "Is this the voice of God? Is God speaking into this moment from one believer to another?" We will take up the reality of this dialogue and some of these questions later.

Context



Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church is part of South Tampa, a brick and white steeple church and the largest congregation in the Presbytery. It is a dominant feature of the neighborhood and located directly across the street from H. B. Plant High School which is proclaimed as one of the top 100 high schools in the country and the home of two state champion football teams. This reflects the upper middle to upper class community that is the center of the peninsula, -the top of which is the city of Tampa. The community has clear, colloquial boundaries. Kennedy Blvd is the northern divide. It is the direct road into downtown Tampa and the route taken by President John F. Kennedy on his way in the other direction to the airport and his final destiny in Dallas. To the South is Gandy Boulevard, just south of which is less affluent housing and Mac Dill Air Force base – Central Command for the war in Iraq. There are jokes about “not

crossing the borders”, particularly south, but the jokes are fading because this lower income area is now changing with new and costlier construction.

In between Kennedy and Gandy is an enormous amount of wealth. The church is not brimming with funding, but when there is a significant need, whether in mission or in plant operation, usually a “hero” comes forward to make it happen. Prominent leaders of the State and Local community have for years been members of the Palma Ceia church. Whether they have been Gubernatorial candidates, Senators, Congress people, State representatives, owners of national corporations, local business owners, presidents of area universities, directors of non-profits, lawyers, teachers, heads of PTA’s, Boy Scout troops or community volunteers, leaders of every type have inhabited this church since its inception. It is a leadership community whose fingerprints can be found on every major mission activity in the local community. These are people who are conscious of both their faith and general wealth as expressions of God’s grace and as calls to participation in life. In describing the impression made by the image of Jesus knocking that is so centrally located in the sanctuary; almost no one interprets it as Jesus wanting to enter someone’s life. Most people say they think it is Jesus calling a person out *into* life and *into* ministry. “He’s calling us to *do* something,” is a typical explanation.

Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church did not need me to open itself up to its community and the world. It is a church that has held onto an evangelical nature [in the best sense of that word] since it began. Back in 1927 it was a Sunday School that met in an old wood building they referred to as the Log Cabin - an outreach from First Presbyterian Church of Tampa. That church was the “downtown church” and downtown was never farther than two to five miles from any part of this area. Business people

regularly walked to work in the “old days”. The church grew as the outreach began to include parents of the Sunday School students and then it continued to grow along with the burgeoning community. At one point in the nineteen forties, the Elders decided not to host an evangelistic crusade because they “were doing all right on their own”, recording that in the past ninety days a hundred people had joined the church through profession of faith and baptism. Needless to say, throughout the sixties, seventies and eighties the church continued to grow.

Palma Ceia established a pre-school on its property that blended typical children and children with special needs that became a national model. The School was recently assessed by an independent, university based and internationally knowledgeable committee as one of the four best preschools in the world. The church helped establish ministry to migrant farm workers in the southern end of the county, and then encouraged and supported a Spanish speaking member of the congregation to go to seminary in order to become the pastor to that community. As one of four churches working on an ecumenical front, it helped in the establishment of a feeding center to reach out to the homeless and those at risk. The church helped in the creation of ongoing ministries to abused women, women in crisis pregnancy, housing and job training for the indigent and those who were at risk of losing their homes. Essentially, every major local mission has had this church’s fingerprints on it.

When I arrived it appeared that I was in a very rich church that was struggling to involve others different in worship style from themselves. They wanted me to help them start a “contemporary worship” service and almost immediately I discovered two camps of people – those for and against traditional or contemporary worship. The fact that I was

called to start the new service led me to spend the first two years of my ministry building bridges between these camps. I asked for a weekly breakfast with the head of staff so we could stay in touch and the swap of pulpits once a month. Initially he wanted me to do all the preaching, but I suggested that the new contemporary community still saw him as their pastor and would feel abandoned. At the same time the traditional community needed to learn that I was one of the pastors and that I also understood about robes, liturgical colors, the lectionary and how to conduct a communion service in an orderly fashion. At the conclusion of each of the traditional services when I preached I was regularly chastised for the worship style of the service in the gym. “Drums” were always mentioned but words like “loud,” “noisy,” “odd,” “guitars,” “rock and roll” were sprinkled in as well. It was good that the beloved pastor was upstairs in the gym leading the contemporary services those days and that I could point that out and allow them to infer what his presence there meant. As the new-comer and leader of this new venture, I was the easy target and got challenged to explain why we were going in this direction when it had so many “dangers”.

This kind of conversation is not a remarkable experience for me. I understand being chewed on by multiple voices bringing up anger and fear and frustration about contemporary work. I am used to it being difficult for many people. Throughout my entire professional life I have tried to explain the new or untried, field concerns about change and assist people to try to accept alternative approaches to ministry. In that, I have been the first one through the door in most situations. I learned early in my career to listen carefully, without fear and to locate the legitimate concern each person held. I also learned that if I acknowledge that legitimacy and can empathize with it, then usually

I am able to converse about it. People expressed their anger over the volume of the music, their fear over splitting the church (more than just creating multiple congregations with different worship times), the loss of children in the traditional setting, and the dismissal of substantive historical expressions of faith in hymns and liturgical colors and seasons as well as simple elements of local heritage. These are not inappropriate fears for someone to carry and they needed to be addressed with encouragement to see the total picture of what was happening.

One particular eighty-three year old woman ranted for about twenty minutes as I listened. When I said her concerns were the kinds of things she should worry about she was surprised, and this quieted her. She listened as I pointed out how many children came to the “Sermon Story” in the service. Also, in her case, I brought up the issue of missions. I said I believed she would be a person who thought missions and missionaries were important. She agreed definitively. I suggested that if I was her missionary, whom she had sent off to a mission field that she would expect me to learn the language of the people, learn the culture of the people and to seek the best ways by which to share the Gospel of Jesus. She again agreed with vigor. I then told her that was what we were doing upstairs. I verbally painted a picture of my growing up in the church, just like the church of her youth and my singing in the youth choir on “hymn sing” nights. I shared how my heart ached for those who didn’t come to church and so sought ways to make God accessible to them. Her posture softened and she stopped blinking behind her glasses. I reached out and touched her arm and said, “I want to make Jesus accessible to people who would be uncomfortable coming into our sanctuary but still wonder about

God, wonder whether he loves them.” We finished the conversation with her nodding and thoughtful.

The following Sunday I was surprised to find her and her husband seated in the back of the gym at the end of our service, in chairs against the wall and near the door. She waved me down and I came across the room. She was saying, as I walked up, “I get it. I get it. I’m never coming back, but I get it.” Her husband thanked me for doing this. I was never sure if this was for doing the service or for speaking with his wife.

As we grew I also learned what people thought I needed to learn as the new person and new pastor. The people who usually handled Christmas decoration or the logistics of baptism in the traditional setting would not extend these services to the new worship community. There were some divisions I could talk people through, but when I couldn’t I found new help for those areas. But what concerned me most was that this didn’t seem to bother anyone except me.

The new work included the development of multiple groups to handle various aspects. There were teams created to handle Hospitality – the preparation, distribution and clean up of food and beverages, Greeting – welcoming to the campus, guidance to our upstairs gym, handing out of bulletins and help in finding seats, Set up – the weekly set up of chairs and staging and breaking it down so the gym could be used for “gym” purposes, Tech – the handling of the audio and visual aspects of our worship. When we began we were able to locate a large group of volunteers to help with each of these aspects, the smallest of which was the seven Techies. I gave a thorough description of how each team might work, but I also gave permission for them to organize as they desired. I explained that I was more interested in the work being accomplished than how

it was accomplished. How people decide to run a program once I give them ownership is impossible to guess. I'm willing to take that risk, but there needs to be a continual conversation. Without conversation people can disengage from the process. People move from deciding how to organize to how to run the entire program. I learned I needed to continually promote the conversation. However, there was another conversation going on in which I wasn't included.

I arrived in September of 2002 and we started our initial service on the first Sunday of October. We organized the teams and the support staff for the service which enabled it to grow into regular patterns of participation with a schedule for the whole year. However, I did not know that there was discussion going on about the teams remaining in place throughout the year and in particular, working throughout the summer months. Along with the four main Teams running the different aspects of the service I created an Administrative Team to help me run everything. This small team of three women told me that they had decided that "I didn't know 'the South' (as a Northerner) and that I didn't really know Palma Ceia (as an outsider)." They "knew" that "everyone goes away for the summer" and so I couldn't expect that the teams would be able to continue functioning. So, they had just taken on the responsibility of including a new Hospitality team, including new leadership.

They arranged an alternative Hospitality team and schedule for June, July and August. I came to worship one Sunday at the beginning of June and walked in on a totally different group of people who would set up our food among other things. All of whom were trying to figure out how things worked, where things could be found and

when exactly things were supposed to happen. As I helped them with all of that I learned in gently probing, friendly conversation that these new folks were the “summer team”.

As it turned out, the trouble over understanding was on the part of the administrative team. Although very active in the church prior to this service and in organizing it, they didn’t understand the demographic of the newly developing community. Our attendance didn’t really change over the summer. The teams that were not overhauled kept running. But, because of the shifts of personnel, the Hospitality team couldn’t regroup effectively in the fall. There was a sense of being “let go” that couldn’t be overcome. As these people moved through the summer without any participation they simply agreed to other volunteer commitments. In short, life moved on for the team members who didn’t have to work. What began as a flourishing community of participants gradually diminished until only two women were doing all the work on Sundays. I described this to our contemporary congregation a couple of times, seeking to recruit both up front and personally, but there was never a full renewal. So I called it quits, sharing how unfair it was to make two people carry the entire burden of providing all the food for everyone else. We didn’t actually need food to worship God. It was just an act of celebration.

When a new child arrives in a family the older child “explains the rules” or demonstrates how things should be done. In a real sense the Connection (our contemporary service whose name I’ll comment on later) was the new child and its older sibling struggled to adjust. In a lot of families, the role of second child can be described as “other”. It is their “job” to be different from the first child. That can be truly frustrating for a first child who “knows how life works.” It is not unusual for the older

child to express “when is this one going back to wherever it came from.” It takes time for the new child to grow into full acceptance. In some ways the contemporary worship needed to grow to a point where it was its own self, recognized as not leaving, but also seen fully as part of the family.

Following the struggles with the Hospitality Team, I decided to take a passive stance in response to similar issues that developed. I felt like a “foreigner” as well as a new comer and it seemed best to get quiet and learn what I could about the community. I looked to discover what was “known” but not true in practice, what was not talked about but demonstrated in practice and what was plainly evident to all. Because of the shifts in the Hospitality Team people on other teams questioned their own participation. The other teams, including the Administrative Team, began to struggle to remain consistent and ultimately most of them faded. The only team that remained was the Tech team, and people have come and gone from that. Still, even with the demise of teams the Connection grew.

The church, in fact, grew overall. We grew in numbers, in depth of worship expressions and the different communities in the church grew into an affirmative tolerance of one another. Unfortunately, that meant we also grew more distinct and separate. This didn’t damage the church and there were events that pulled people together – church picnics, concerts, special holiday events. And although there are congregants who “travel” (sometimes each Sunday) worshipping in either setting week by week, we became essentially two communities under one roof.

Then, after five years, I saw a turn in the nature of complaints. Up until then I was used to hearing questions and even occasional, slightly derogatory comments from

traditional worshippers about how we were doing things in the gym. But at this point, those voices seemed to quiet and regular attendees at the Connection began to ask whether we were always going to be in the gym. They began to criticize the noise the traditional choir members made as they moved through the hallway outside the gym on their way to the 11 am service in the Sanctuary. They asked why children couldn't just be kept in Sunday School classes if "our" service ran a little long. They started writing letters to the elders which, somehow, I was able to intercept with the promise of bringing the concerns to the elders through the appropriate channels. I brought the issues to the Worship Committee in order to have them take ownership of the full worship experience of the church.

I experienced this growing dissatisfaction and viewed the open speculation over the future of the Connection as a concern. As I mentioned at the outset of this paper, I brought it up at breakfast one day and the senior pastor launched into his "vision" of a new church start. I asked, "Are you telling me my ministry is over here?" because what he described was, essentially, a new call to a different ministry, a call to start a new church. I was very hesitant at simply accepting another believer's direct word as guidance from God on my life at this point. He responded in general terms about calls and new ministry, about how we could be "called to glory" or simply move to new positions. I was dumbfounded at first, but over the next weeks we discovered that he had never experienced my pattern of movement in ministry. His experience was more job-like. He was used to moving on in a career pattern. God's call was connected to increased ability and responsibility. Ultimately I learned that he thought he was just being friendly and supportive of a colleague who might have a new opportunity. But

right then I was struggling in whether or not I was hearing God. I was used to being called to a new ministry in a completely different way.

God Interrupted

So, was I hearing the voice of God in my colleague's words when he threw his hands in the air over our breakfast and exclaimed his excitement over the possibility of sending me off into a new church start? This wasn't how God had spoken to me in the past. It threw me into a dilemma. Was this some new way of God bringing me his word? Was I supposed to receive this as a new call to ministry? I need to share more of my personal story at this point.

The Reintroduction of an Old Lesson or What I Learned from My Past

When I went to college I left my youth pastor to continue his work at our church. He grew from that ministry into the establishment of a nationally known youth work that included at least one book, regular speaking engagements and youth ministry conventions. Meanwhile, I wandered for about a decade, wondering what God might make of the "worst choice for ministry." But I went off to try to find it. I knew I wanted to serve. I just didn't know how to do it without actually getting into the ministry.

At the time of his evaluation of me in ministry I was a pretty damaged kid but who was on the mend. In the 1960's, my family lived through the early pregnancy and marriage of one of my sisters and made choices that included the receiving of this child. She was fifteen and her husband was eighteen. Without belaboring that story (that includes a solid marriage, family harmony, more children and grandchildren), I was the public face of our family at that time because I had to go to school every day in our small

community and confront the ridicule and disparagement of other kids. I learned to be as invisible as much as possible and I also learned not to let my emotions show; in short, I began to shut down inside.

The thing I can point to that brought me to wholeness was coming to Jesus and finding the love of God. As a senior in high school, I came fully into the faith in which I was raised and was altered. I was so transformed that other students, whom I didn't even know, stopped me in the halls at school to ask what happened to me. Following the call of God to help others find him was the most natural of choices.

At the same time, I was still pretty self-centered and immature, not vastly different from most seventeen year-olds. But shutting down emotionally for years requires some time for growth and inward healing. There can be consequences to illness even after one is healed. I felt like I was getting better but in some ways I was simply in the right direction. In almost all of life I was insecure. Hearing I was the worst choice for ministry from the person who I *knew* to be God's guide in my life was a significant indicator that rattled me to my core. *Obviously*, I had not heard God. I had to find another route, so I went off to find it.

I got married and then, from college, I followed an interest in the Old Testament and the Jewish heritage of my Christian faith and went into seminary. I went for an MA in Theology, thinking, perhaps, I might get a PhD. and then teach the Bible, specifically, the Old Testament at the college level. I figured I'd get close to doing ministry but actually stay at arm's length, maybe even teaching the truly qualified. I'd still be serving God but not messing around with my clear shortcomings, whatever they might be. As I came to the end of my studies for my first Masters, working part time helping as an

assistant to a youth pastor with his junior high program, I began to pray for God to lead me. I explored Christian Education, mission work and then I was offered a position in a Christian drama company. I was always bent toward dramatic things and used drama as a regular expression in church and at school. I came on as the writer of the company and stayed for a few years until it became clear that this expression was coming to an end. Again we prayed for God to reveal where ministry would open next. Before the drama company shuttered, my wife and I were stunned to receive three unsolicited requests to consider non-ordained youth ministry positions in three different churches in three different parts of the country. We chose one in Pennsylvania.

This seemed like a call, but with true hesitancy I moved into another non-ordained ministry. I began to recognize and trust God's voice within me again and, overall, this became the pattern of my hearing and response to God and to ministry. It was also during this time that I met up with my former youth pastor at a national youth worker convention. He was an organizer, member of the leadership team and a speaker. The youth ministry I lead was thriving and we chatted comfortably about life and ministry work but then I brought up the conversation. He remembered it and said, "I was obviously wrong."

Wrong?! Wrong?!

Years later I recalled this moment when Dr. Benjamin Spock, the preeminent child-rearing expert of the 20th century, shared in books, interviews, and magazine articles the same sentiment about his guidance on bringing up children. The trust of our nation's mothers of that earlier generation was no greater than mine in my youth pastor.

"Why did you say that?" I asked.

“Well, I thought you were immature,” he responded.

“I was 17,” I said, leaning forward, “that’s part of the job description.”

Did you ever hear an answer that you don’t believe is the full answer? You can’t really challenge it, but it leaves you with a couple of grains of sand in your teeth. Your brain tries to spit out, dislodge, the feeling that shouldn’t be there. That’s how I left our conversation that day. It was good to hear his words, but I didn’t find true satisfaction. I felt there was something more or something missing and so I did not really let go of the early evaluation. Although it didn’t rattle me as it once did, it was still rattling around in me.

From that point on my work had developed a pattern. I stayed with a ministry to which I was called until it seemed explicitly clear that my work was done. Then I prayed for God to reveal my next call.

Calls came and, still reluctantly, I moved from youth ministry into ordained work in youth ministry and Christian Education. This was a process that included going to seminary for a Christian Education degree and then finally feeling like I had no choice if I was going to do everything I wanted to do in ministry. Through each step I felt like I was getting away with something I wasn’t supposed to be doing and fooling people into letting me do this. There was a continual drum beat in the back of my mind: – “the worst choice, the worst choice.” I left this first step into ordained ministry in order to work in an inner city mission – teaching urban churches how to establish youth programs. Then I went on to establish a new church, and then to contract work in a six month interim position, helping a church redesign its organization pattern and develop a hiring plan. And finally, I came to Tampa to start the Contemporary Worship at Palma Ceia

Presbyterian Church. Each of these steps followed the pattern of being called to a ministry and then working until I was done with whatever the call entailed, ready for someone else to take it on. Then opening myself up to another call in whatever and to wherever it might be.

This pattern is what got interrupted at the breakfast table that morning. I didn't have a sense that I was done with the initial call here yet. Was this suddenly a new way of God speaking to me? How much was I to listen to a fellow believer or was I to listen to the voice of God; as God was present with me in a different way in the past?

Listening with Other Ears

Just around the time of this conversation I was starting the process of my Doctor of Ministry program. It was in conversation with the faculty and students that my breakfast conversation became my narrative of concern and reason for my research. As other people learned of my situation, different questions arose, beyond my next step in ministry. Was I simply being asked to leave the church? What would be the future of the Connection service? Would it remain as part of the church? What part would any possible discussions, decisions and plans play in the greater ministry of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church?

There's nothing like naming your problem "everybody's problem", and then it isn't yours to carry around. You're sharing a joint concern. So through the Doctor of Ministry program I turned the issue back to the church. And the issue changed from my personal future to the future ministry of the Church. How do we see our life and work as a congregation? We have a great thing here and great work happening. In fact, it is growing to the limits of the space. People are coming and they are telling us that they are

experiencing God, experiencing spiritual healing and spiritual growth. They are finding community and they want to stay and participate in its life. What does that mean about our ministry? Do we simply continue doing what we're doing or do we plan for a future with more ministry for more people? Is God calling Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church to do something new? If so or if not, how can we discern what God is telling us together?

CHAPTER 2

WHEN HAS GOD SPOKEN?

Scripture as a Field Trip

Sometimes we need to go to the place where the exhibits live, where the original ground can still be surveyed or where we can touch or handle the elements of history. We try to get in touch with the past in order to learn how to move into the future. We seek a greater accuracy for the feelings, understandings and assessments we make by doing this.

Bundling the kids up in the busses, we head off to the museum so that they grow in their identity and knowledge of what came before them and jolt them into understanding that they aren't the beginning of the world. One reason we go to the Bible is to get in touch with the places and times where God has demonstrated God's presence and direction, to recognize that God's work began long before we ever came along. For some this is also where they hope to get to the "thin place", the spot where the world of our reality gets so close to the spiritual realm that God's actual presence can be felt and understood.

To answer the questions about the ministry and the work of the Connection we turn back to Scripture for guidance and example. Where has God spoken before and in what ways? This is my personal practice as well. I go to Scripture for this help. I expect to hear God's voice for the present and future by exploring the heritage and demonstrations of the past. Not only do I expect that Scripture is trustworthy enough to

allow me to get close to God's work in the lives of others, but also that I will hear God speak into my life as well. I expect that as I listen to the stories of those who have gone before I will be able to speak a new story of what may be in the future. Perhaps even speak it into a preferred future.

Flannel Graph Fuzziness

I want to get as real as I can get in this study, so I must be careful to understand what the people and times were actually like. When I was a child I enjoyed the flannel graph stories in Sunday School. It was a gentle thrill to be invited to put the felt-backed characters onto the large, light blue felt covered board on the easel in front of the class as a story from the Bible unfolded. It was even better to be let loose to move the characters around, to make Peter stand on the pile of fish or to leave the disciples hanging upside down in their fishing nets.

But these, now ancient tools, were fuzzy in their depiction of life, including life in Bible times. The characters were usually Anglo-Saxon images, unmoving except in a stiff-jointed march induced by the teacher or a fellow student to represent walking from one side of the blue background to the other. They were stationary puppets of a menial form always facing in one direction. It was easy to make them do what we pleased. We must be careful not to handle God's word in this manner. It doesn't help one hear God's voice and it creates a false assurance that we know what the Bible says and shows. That can easily move into our feeling in charge of what it says and how it should be understood.

Going from this stylization and interpretation to reality can be jarring. I “knew” from all the lessons of Sunday School that Jesus lived in a very flat, evenly contoured place. When I visited Israel I was simply surprised to be surrounded by rolling hills, mountains, cliffs and the deepest of valleys. Listening for the voice of God in Scripture should include this kind of surprise of reality, a sense of tangibility. We need to intersect our lives with God’s living activity, which is my description of the movement of the Holy Spirit.

In order to get closer to hearing God’s voice we seek to experience the closest sense of what has happened. We seek to know the story in its moment of being told and hopefully learn the genealogy of the ideas that fill it and the genealogy of ideas that have grown from it into our lives today.¹

How Did Jesus Hear and How Do We Hear Jesus?

The Bible presents Jesus as a Jewish construction worker who grew up in a home with a Jewish construction worker for a father figure. Though born in a small village, he grew up in another equally small place which surrounded a well.² Within a few miles was the city of Sepphoris, a city that celebrated the presence of the Romans and where construction work abounded throughout his lifetime.³ The son of Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, made Sepphoris his capital and the most natural expectation is that Jesus and his family found work there. It is also easy to expect that in such a setting, even in Galilee

¹ Carl Savage, William Presnell *Narrative Research in Ministry*, (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2000), 37.

² Dolores Cannon *Jesus and the Essenes*, (Huntsville: Ozark Mountain Publishing, 2000), 110.

³ Alan Millard, http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Millard_Jesus.htm, access. Dec. 17, 2010.

(the greater region of his home) Jesus was able to grow up experiencing a life of mixed cultures and classes of society intermingling with each other.

If Jesus grew up as a boy of his time then he would have learned how to read and write,⁴ he would have handled the Scriptures as a child of the Synagogue and he would have learned the trade of his father. All this seems consistent with the image presented in the New Testament. He grew up with the voice of God experienced in his community initially as a written heritage.

The claim of the New Testament is that Jesus moved past the written heritage. Scholars of his time argued over the Scriptures to understand their meaning and to find God's purpose and guidance. Jesus lived an experience of God's interaction in the lives of humanity. It is this listening to God in fullness, the full individual experiencing the fullness of God that lead his disciples to ask for teaching about it. What appears in the life of Jesus is an expectation that God will speak in the same manner that God spoke to those in the recorded heritage. His example suggests that God continued to speak to human beings in the same manner, that is, person to person. Not only does Jesus have the word of the God in written form, which he often quotes, but Jesus also speaks with God in prayer,⁵ and he hears the voice of God, sometimes quite audibly.⁶

The example then is Jesus conversing, speaking with and listening to God. The question is did this and does this continue with Christ's followers? Did this dialogue between Jesus and God as such become the example followed by all believers?

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mark 1:35.

⁶ John 12:27-28.

How Did the Church Hear?

The earliest Christ followers felt that Jesus gave them the words of life.⁷ They had Jesus speaking God's truth to them and they had Jesus interpreting the Scriptures which they used as concrete expressions of God's truth for all time and in every detail. (One manner of its use which should be an invitation as well as a challenge to postmoderns is the understanding that if God said it, it was always true. Passages used by Paul out of their context but nevertheless true in their content, demonstrates the belief that they were always true whether in context or not.⁸) They also had their traditions and so we find them turning to "casting lots" to receive guidance from God in choosing a replacement for Judas to fill out the number twelve.⁹ They expected that God would communicate to them in their present moment. Then, as promised, they received the gift of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the gift they were told by Jesus would reveal the truth of God within them and remind them in the fullest sense of the meaning of what they had been taught.

As we read the New Testament we find that Christian communities continued to expect God to reveal his guidance to them. They expected words of prophecy, words of knowledge from within their worship and fellowship experiences. They seem to have expected God's truth to also come to them through the letters of the Apostles. We would not have churches established throughout the known world nor a New Testament if this were not true. The basis of this claim for truth was understood to be the work of the Holy

⁷ John 6:68.

⁸ Romans 4:22-24 is just one example of Paul taking a line out of a story or portion of Scripture and applying it to himself and his community as it stands. It seems that if God said it, it is true always and in every instance.

⁹ Acts 1:12-26.

Spirit through the written word and in the individual and communal lives of believers.

The written record tells us that the Church heard God speaking.

The Church listened as a community for a great period of time until “right thinking” took precedent over “right practice”¹⁰, that is when doctrine became the guiding force of faith as opposed to ministry as the common denominator. From the letters of Paul, the stories in the book of Acts and from historical accounts we find the community of Jesus to be engaged in living active lives that reflected this understanding. There may have been an expectation that Jesus was coming back soon and so they needed to be about living life as he did. But as time moved on and people began to discuss what Jesus meant and what should be allowed or not allowed in following Jesus and how do we work out differences between believing communities, the “concepts” associated with believing took precedence over the “activity” associated with believing. Obedience to God shifted into obedience to dogma: a struggle that ran throughout the first few centuries of Church history. It can be seen in the issues between the Celtic and the Roman churches over tonsure and the dating of Easter - issues that became critically important in their day. Early insular communities of Britain and Ireland were faithful, living expressions of hospitality, simplicity and worship – practices that expressed faith. But leaders from Rome challenged conceptual issues, holding these up as more important than the practical work.¹¹

So the struggle over differences saw right practice gradually losing hold until the fifth century when the Emperor Marcian convened the Fourth Ecumenical Council “in

¹⁰ Dr. Catherine Peyroux, *Approaching Celtic Christianity*, presented in a lecture, June 17, 2009.

¹¹ George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 41.

order to determine, and then codify, what was, and was not, correct doctrine.¹² Doctrinal Order (essentially right thinking) took precedent and the tracks were laid for division over doctrine between east and west and, much later, the reforming of the church which caused separation into Protestant and Catholic. Throughout all these years various individuals (some famous among the mystics, the saints and the leaders of the church) lifted up the presence of God in life, calling for right practice in prayer, in meditation and in service to those in need. However the primary teaching of the church about hearing the guidance of God was in the book and in the traditions concomitant with being in agreement with the church.

One change the Reformation brought about was a call for more of a personal engagement with God, taking hold of the “spiritual experience” of life that once seemed to abide in the hands of the clergy. The Reformers encouraged the people to open the book themselves, hear the word and respond in action. They were to know the Bible themselves and to converse with God in the manner of Jesus.

Leadership in the church became a little less centralized and lay leaders were admonished to seek God’s wisdom in guiding the church. And it is to God alone that they were admonished to speak and it is from God they expected to hear guidance. We move away from the intercession of saints and angels and come directly into the presence of God. Prayer is seen in the reformers’ words as obedience to the command of God, as building on the intercession of Jesus and as an act of gratitude. There was to be a response to the expected word of God.

¹² Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 23.

In a general way, it may be stated that according to the explanations of the Reformers themselves – that is, what they say in their writings, their preaching, and their actions – prayer is at once word, thought and life.¹³

In the Reformation we were called back to personal response to a personally engaged God.

Since that point the church in all its forms has grown, flourished and expanded expressions of a genuine response to personal interaction with God. The issue that rose with this vast and variegated style of worship, piety and discipline was how to tell when we were actually hearing the voice of God and responding to it. But this has been a recurring issue since the beginning.¹⁴

Listening to Life

What was it like when the church of Jesus began? How did the earliest community seek God's guidance? From the beginning of the church of Jesus the community's purpose has been to listen well to God's Spirit so as to be enabled to deliver God's Word and Truth to the world. Through spoken word or caring action the community of faith was called to communicate God's message of new life in Jesus. The record in Scripture tells us that the earliest followers did this intentionally, focusing their lives and resources on sharing this Good News.

They began to move out into the world but in time the community began to discover that the direction in which they were headed was also bringing them to places they didn't expect. In Acts 15 we learn the story of a crisis in the thriving, vibrant early church. People in the field bring back news that God is at work in new and unexpected

¹³ Karl Barth, *Prayer*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 27.

¹⁴ 1 John 4:1.

ways that challenge the initial vision of the community. The earliest Christian missionaries went into the world to tell the dispersed Jewish Community that Messiah had come, but, instead of this being good news just to Jews, gentiles were hearing the story and also responding with acceptance to the same Good News.

Concern rises. How should we handle this new ministry? Is this what God desires? How do we treat people who come from outside the parameters of our expectations or practices? Those on the frontier find themselves challenged by those who represent tradition. So they turn back to the home church leadership for guidance. How should we proceed?

If there is a moment when they need a clear voice from God it is now. The response of the elders in this crisis of understanding and wonder is to listen to stories. Peter refreshes their memory of his story with the Roman (Gentile) Centurion Cornelius and his household. He brings to their minds the images of the Holy Spirit coming upon people who were “outside” the group – the Jewish followers of Jesus. Again, they evaluate and discuss but then stop once more to listen to stories as Paul and Barnabas bring them the news of the frontier church at Antioch and other mission settings, and tell about what God is doing there.

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. (Acts 15:12)

It is through stories that the elders discern the new work of God and it is through stories that the elders seek to gain a greater wisdom for what God is calling them to do. They seem to believe that it is within story that the Holy Spirit presents truth so that this truth can be understood by all. They come to the conclusion that the banquet celebration

of God's Love and Salvation they know in Jesus is a party that is open to more people than they expected. It is also available to non-Jews. So they respond by opening the door to welcome in the others who were so obviously invited as well.

Using this pattern, Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church moved to listen to the stories of the community, stories from the new community of those gathered by ministry and those who have been long established in their ministry, to hear and respond to God's guidance.

The Aligning of Storied Moments

As I followed the pattern of God's revelation in my life, as I understood it, I left my first ordained position and went to work in a mission located in the inner city Philadelphia. I spent two years there teaching urban churches how to build youth ministry programs and bringing college students into ministry opportunities. As that work came to a conclusion, I, once again, sought out the guidance of God for the next ministry calling. It came unexpectedly. In my own form of "casting lots" I included the standard process of circulating a dossier in the Presbyterian Church (USA) system. It was then I learned that a new church project in my presbytery was being abandoned even before it began. This surprised me because I thought it was a good idea. When I investigated I learned that the reason to shut it down was that there had been no vision. I suggested a couple of ideas about the project to the Associate Executive of the Presbytery to whom I had been speaking, and he asked if I'd write down those ideas and bring them to a recently formed "New Church Development" sub-committee meeting the following Thursday night. Because I hadn't planned anything for that evening I agreed to attend.

I wrote out my ideas on one sheet of paper and delivered them with some description and elaboration. At the conclusion of the meeting that evening came this comment from one committee member "... this could work." I agreed and said that they should feel free to keep it, file it and pull it out if they were to approach the idea in the future. On Monday I received a call saying the committee had discussed the idea at length after I left and had decided to move to reinstate the project, but that they would only go ahead if I agreed to be the New Church Development Pastor. And so I was called.

I started a new church in a rented space in a shopping center with eighteen folding chairs, a receptionist's desk, my own desk and a filing cabinet. Because this new church was built on my concept of how a church should work, the work itself hooked well into my professional and personal identity. I was creating something from scratch to which I could find no comparison. There were churches for seekers and churches in shopping centers, but this was a church for people who truly thought God had no interest in them. I started this for people who needed to honestly struggle with their heritage, their doubts and their gravest concerns. I went looking for people who left any other Christian venture or who were seeking an experience of worship and faithfulness that matched the struggle of their lives.

A primary aspect of worship included dealing openly with questions of faith every Sunday morning. At the end of each worship service, we invited the congregation to just sit down "if you'd like to be part of a Question and Answer time." A young atheist, upon discovering this aspect of our community, started sitting in the front row of each service so she could ask her questions. She initially came because she wanted her son to attend

our Sunday School program, seeking, in her words, “some moral education for him.” She wanted to pay for his participation and, when she learned that we wouldn’t accept payment, she started attending worship *as* payment, she said. Her engagement and the abundance and directness of her questions caught people’s attention and soon others also asked more direct questions and almost all the adults stuck around each week.

It was a church for people who didn’t *like* church but *were interested* in God. The plan was to stay in the center and take over more space. Eventually we had 150 people in membership and the vision statement of the church was “We want to say the Good News so people can hear Jesus and to live it so they can find him.” The church drew people who ranged from different ethnicities to different personalities to different countries of origin and language. Guys in Dockers sat next to guys in leather and studs and piercings and new immigrants from Africa came in alongside born and bred American white folks. There was a lot of group leadership, small groups included 65% of the church and there was also plenty of alternative music and worship expressions. This was a new approach to church growth and development that was not really understood by the Presbytery.

It was also misunderstood by members of the congregation. A small group agitated for the church “to become a real church” and to stop paying attention to all those people “out there.” They complained that the mission of the church did not include a statement on how we will take care of ourselves. For some reason they could not understand that “taking care of ourselves” was not a mission but was inherent in the carrying out any mission. I began to hear repeated requests for clearer, more frequent or simply more information. I worked to get messages out by email, e-blasts, hard copy letters, newsletters, announcements from the pulpit and even personal phone calls.

Finally I turned to a list-serv for new church leaders and asked for some guidance. Was there some form of communication I was missing? The response I got was that “needing more information” was code for wanting more control. Five different pastors shared this perspective separately. They suggested I ask the complainers to express what they were or weren’t hearing and what else they thought we should add for the sake of better communication.

I began to make more personal phone calls and visits. I was told that the emails were too long to read and that e-blasts weren’t personal, not everyone was in church on Sunday to hear verbal announcements and hard copy letters cost too much and simply added to the pile of mail people already received. When asking what else to add I learned that no one had any clear ideas. The amount of information I delivered didn’t matter because, as I did discover, they weren’t really looking for information; they wanted more control over the nature of the place. When they realized that I wasn’t going to change and neither was the direction of the church, they left and their departure left a gaping hole in our finances, our leadership and something like spiritual maturity.

The church struggled seriously to deal with this loss. Suddenly having less people and even fewer who spoke from a background of faith (even when arguing) that remained the community fell into jeopardy financially, in leadership and in security in its identity. The elders determined that the church should (1) not try to survive on debt, (2) not place anyone into leadership who was not spiritually mature¹⁵ and (3) not change its mission statement. With these three criteria, the elders went into a time of prayer for guidance and wisdom, and then sought to develop changes that would meet the needs inherent in

¹⁵ “Not spiritually mature” meant someone who had just come through the door and was wondering whether there was a God and/or that God was interested in them. We had a lot of “new” people.

these issues. We also made overtures to move to share space with an older and more established church. We explored renting a different kind of space near the shopping center. We explored with small group leaders, most of whom were our present elders as to who they might suggest for other elders. We tried to cut costs in every possible area. Ultimately, as the three criteria could not be met, the elders petitioned the Presbytery that we should be dissolved as a congregation to which the governing body agreed without hesitation or question.

The combined neglect by the governing body from without and rejection of the church's mission by the agitating group from within created a personal isolation with which I battled continually. Instead of recognizing that this issue was about the church's identity, internally, it was all about my own. This wasn't just a job; it was me. I may have been able to survive, but I was beaten down severely through the process. And the drum beat simply grew louder and louder in my soul; I had screwed everything up. I had actually gone ahead and gotten ordained and now I was found out as being exactly what I had been told – the worst choice for ministry. My hair fell out. My finger nails grew soft. My weight increased. I was debilitated with sciatica and excruciating (“out of the cross”) spasms of back pain. At times I could not get off the floor and almost all the time I could barely move one foot in front of the other. Aching pain shot through me every Sunday as I simply stepped onto our platforms to speak. Where was God? He was off with the better choice people, somewhere with those true ministers, the ones who should be in ministry.

CHAPTER 3

LISTENING WELL

When Listening and Hearing are Two Different Things

There's a moment in the stories of Sherlock Holmes where Watson expresses his frustration with Holmes' ability to recognize things he doesn't.

He exasperates, "I believe my eyes are as good as yours." To which Holmes rejoins, "You see but you do not observe."¹

Watson sees the same things that are in front of both he and Holmes, but Holmes observes them. Hearing and actually listening is something of the same thing. Listening can be taken to the point of heeding, and that opens up an understanding that the difference here is significant. This difference plays a part in all relationships whether between friends, lovers, spouses, parents and children, church members, community residents or humanity and God. We should consider this concept before we explore the research and even the methodology used in this project.

Benedict Groeschel, OFM, makes the difference plain.

Let us start with listening in its most obvious sense: it is the perception of sound with our ears. There are many sounds around us that we do not perceive because we do not respond to them. We ignore them: the ticking of a clock, the distant sounds of wind in the trees, a bell ringing. But when we listen, there registers in

¹Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes, in A Scandal in Bohemia*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1930), 162.

our minds: “ticking, wind, a clang,” and we say to ourselves: “a clock, a breeze, a bell.” Then, and only then, have we *listened*.²

...It is a well-known axiom of the psychology of perception that we succeed in listening only if we respond in some way to what we hear. Like all perception, listening is a two-way street. If I do not respond, at least within myself, I don't really hear. But often we are not inclined to respond to God's voice within us. In that case, no matter what ideas or images fill our minds, we do not pray in reality.³

Listening and hearing in any relationship becomes fundamental to whether a relationship actually exists.

So how does one listen well?

We all know when someone isn't listening although they may be hearing us. In our age of multi-tasking we can find numerous moments when people tell us “I'm listening” but because of all the other things they're doing – rearranging papers on their desk, talking on the phone, texting, doing dishes – chances are they are hearing us, but not listening. In order to discover the truth about someone we need to pay attention and listen. Tragically (and fortunately), we are used to life working even when we don't pay much attention to others. Consider this retelling of a moment by two women who experienced it. The dramatic scenes tell the same story from two different perspectives.

Scenes from “The Thread” by Geoff Kohler (2005)
(Full monologues in Appendix D)

Ruby:

I was sitting in Starbucks crying into my coffee and this girl gets up and comes over. She's in black and has this big, black bag over her shoulder and she rips off this big sheet of paper from this huge pad she's got. She says, “I was watching. I'm sorry. I hope you don't mind.” And then she kind of stammered something. Not sure, but she held out the paper and says, “here... sell it to someone. It'll help.”

And it was this picture of me. It was like with three different colors, like pencil and then red ink and then blue ink, but it was me, coffee cup, thin as a rail but... I remember the

²Benedict J. Groeschel, *Listening at Prayer*, (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), 7.

³ Ibid., 3.

eyes. It was like she could see everything, inside me. I looked at it so long. I couldn't believe... I mean... before I walked in that store I was thinking about selling myself... to anybody... just some way to get food. And when I looked up she was already gone.

Rachel:

And that's it. At least that's usually it. I remember one day I was sketching people in the Starbucks area. People just waiting for the bus outside the window, or people reading the paper. There was this girl. She was sitting there sipping her coffee. She looked like a model, you know. She's probably in there like every day. She probably meets like everybody she knows there. But I couldn't take my eyes off her. And I kept feeling like I had to draw her. It wasn't like when I was just sketching everybody else. It was like I just knew I had to draw her. And I just went nuts, working as fast as I could, but she wasn't moving. I kept waiting for her to take a sip of coffee and it was like she was sipping once every 5 minutes or so. She was so still.

And all of a sudden she was crying. Tears were just full in her eyes, but not spilling out. And I just drew it all. [thinks] So weird. And then... I was thinking. Something's really wrong. She looks perfect, but something is really wrong.

Who knows? But I'm just hanging on, you know. But I sure thought that she needed to talk to someone. And I'm sitting there looking at this picture I drew and I thought, okay, now I have this picture. So I just got up and gave it to her and apologized.

[responding] Huh? I don't know. I felt kind of weird watching her, you know. But I said, "Tell it to somebody. It'll make you feel better." I didn't think I was the one she needed, but I figured if she just got it out to someone, you know? So, I gave her the picture. People seem to like to have pictures of themselves. I hope it made her feel a little better.

The first young woman, Ruby, happens into an opportunity to sell the drawing immediately after not being able to find the artist. Through this second encounter Ruby finds hope and a new life. Rachel, the second young woman, thinks that this was, most likely, a strange encounter that meant almost nothing to the subject of her work. For any number of reasons we don't listen, we don't observe, and yet, somehow life can move into graced moments. However, when we have the chance to bring attention to bear we must do it with our whole selves. We reveal the importance of the relationship by the level of attention we pay. We bring all of what is in us to the moment of listening and it would be silly to pretend we can dismiss it outright.

If we don't bring ourselves fully, we may not be fully attentive. We want to bring everything we are into a conversation, so that, as we listen, we reply with our deepest abilities of response. The reply is part of the listening, whether we listen to God or another human being.

The first action is to pay attention. The French Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in his book *Totality and Infinity* describes a philosophy that chooses to see the unknown in another person as ungraspable fullness that can only be shared in conversation, where the other shares him or herself with the listener. We need to focus our attention and listen so we can actually understand something we cannot know without it being revealed to us. If we decide what another person is like, how she or he will respond or think then we are claiming that our imaginations can set limits on someone outside of us whose thoughts and motivations we can never ascertain. The person needs to explain her or his parameters to us and even as they do so we should realize that we haven't reached this person's outer limits. In his introduction to the book, John Wild, professor and American philosopher, describes it this way:

This other-oriented mode of speaking and thinking will pay less attention to things as they appear to the separated self, and more attention to the search for what they are in themselves, in their radical otherness, even though this is less certain and always more difficult to find. This may mean less interest in conceptual constructions and a greater readiness to listen and learn from experience.⁴

If we allow the person to reveal his or her true self to us, we discover that there is no end to understanding and appreciating them. We can't decide the totality of another for they are separated from us. We can only approximate or even prejudge a person if we attempt a total description of them such as saying that because they are part of this group or wear

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1989), 16.

those kinds of clothes or have that color hair they will act or think a certain way. We might create limits that have nothing to do with reality. But, if we allow the other to share what is in them, then we might begin to experience the infinity of the other's real nature. We are separated from them and the distance can only be bridged by conversation; truly listening and replying. But, just because we're that separated doesn't mean we can't have a relationship.

Levinas himself writes,

The exteriority of being does not, in fact, mean that multiplicity is without relation. However, the relation that binds this multiplicity does not fill the abyss of separation; it confirms it. In this relation we have recognized language, produced only in the face to face; and in language we have recognized teaching. Teaching is a way for truth to be produced such that it is not my work, such that I could not derive it from my own interiority...

In effect, the being who speaks to me and to whom I respond or whom I interrogate does not offer himself to me, does not *give* himself so that I could assume this manifestation, measure it to my own interiority, and receive it as come from myself. The exteriority of discourse cannot be converted into interiority... The relationship between separated beings does not totalize them; it is a "unrelating relation," which no one can encompass or thematize... The relation between the "fragments" of separated being is a face to face, the irreducible and ultimate relation.⁵

We must get into conversation with others and we must listen with our full selves because if we try to set them aside, we pretend that somehow we have the ability to take in, to "interiorize" another person or to understand the totality of them.

This is important to understand as we consider doing research with human beings. If we interrogate or simply interview another human being we need to heighten all our senses, consider all our experiences and listen with a hopefulness to catch similarities between what they are expressing and what we have experienced. As we respond out of our full selves we demonstrate our powers of listening. We must hear what is going on

⁵ Ibid., 295.

inside of us even as we listen to the other. Are we offended by what we hear, made curious, enlightened, challenged? With what emotions do we respond? What made us remember *that* story while we listened? Reflexivity refers to this experience of recognizing the effects the conversation has on ourselves, particularly the one we initiate in our study. As Ethnographer, Mary Clark Moschella describes:

...we cannot escape the need for reflexivity in research, nor the ethical demand for self-awareness. We need to take time to reflect on what bothers us, causes us to judge, or otherwise captures our attention. We do this not only in order to be able to recognize our biases and blind spots, but also so that we can learn something more about the interactions that we witness and in which we take part.⁶

Recognizing what is going on within us makes us more intentionally present to the other person. It can awaken us to a fuller sense of what we're being told. As we feel (and perhaps even track) our emotions and reactions we can question ourselves, examine why we respond this way. That opens up possibly greater understanding and perhaps more questions for clarity. Moschella refers to this as a "totalist" approach, not in a totalitarian manner but in the fullness of a whole self being present.

This might be called a totalist approach to reflexivity, analogous to the totalist approach to counter-transference in pastoral relationships. Our approach is "total" in the sense that it encompasses all of the researcher's responses to the ethnographic experience and considers them valuable to the research and to the theology and ministry at hand.

Such practices of introspection help us stay clear and genuinely present in ethnographic pastoral relationship.⁷

As we observe ourselves we also need to pay attention to the other person as much as possible. We need to observe posture, clothes, the movement of extremities – particularly the movement of feet, hands, fingers and to consider the movement of

⁶ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 106.

⁷ Ibid., 106, 107.

eyebrows, eyelids and mouth muscles. These will help us recognize tension, relaxation, a depth of anger, boredom, enjoyment or disengagement among other emotions that are displayed physically. Observations of this sort can help us discern lies and truth or their approximation.

The person who is listening must be interested in learning about the other and we need to see that this is one of the greatest gifts we can give to anyone.⁸ A parent learning her child, a spouse learning his partner, a teacher learning his student, a boss learning her employee, in any relationship one of the greatest gifts we can give another is our learning them. It means allowing another the full opportunity to express and even further to discover thoughts and values. At the same time we need to recognize our anxiety over words that are used, the concern we feel over our heritage that seems to be trampled by a comment, our physical stiffness or increasing emotional rigidity, the tapping of our pen, the sweat beading above our brows, the moment that makes us laugh but doesn't include any laughter from the one speaking, not even a smile.

Doing this with each other in a faith community can be very, very hard but it can be where we have the best opportunity. Faith communities can be too completely absorbed in style, regularity and ritual, and we can end up telling people what to think instead of listening to who they are and listening for what God is saying to and through them. This is why the Acts 15 passage is such a dynamic moment, if not central to the entire book of Acts. The people of God turn to each other and listen.

⁸ I came to this personally in conversation with a parent at a church where I worked in Pennsylvania in the 1980's. I encouraged a parent to "learn" their child and not simply to plan this other person's life without discovering what this person actually had within them. It became a regular aspect of my teaching.

They listen to each others' stories, but they are listening for God's story. They are listening to hear God's voice within the story, within the experience of another, and so they have to pay attention to the storytellers. They give over to the tale as it is told and to the teller. Each has authority that comes from within them. Still, as listeners they keep their own authority as well. They must listen within their own beings for the ring of truth, a consistency of texture, an assurance of soundness. This is the basis of the research done in this project.

Ethnography is research done from within a community as a participant. We are seeking to understand what is going on within individuals but also within the collective. I found that the community of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church is not afraid to study itself and will spend serious time, money and effort clarifying best choices and understanding. In good Presbyterian fashion they like to see it done "decently and in order." Because I am an intuitive person, it became evident that I needed to learn this strategy, slow myself down and consider each person with whom I spoke individually, learning the person and learning from the person how he or she viewed life in the church.

I am practiced in paying attention, but I recognize that there are times when I simply stop because I get into the movement or excitement of what's happening. It is not unusual for me to be seen as a person who "runs with scissors." I can get ahead of myself if I'm excited or pleased with where things are headed or begin to feel confident, even very confident about the direction of movement. So, I studied the history of PCPC. I talked over various experiences with the heritage of the church because Palma Ceia is a generational church – a community where multiple generations and offshoots of the same families abide. I both chatted in passing and went out for meals with people to be

intentional in my desire to learn the movement of ministry and life that members have experienced here. I also looked through the studies that were previously undertaken because in the same way that we listen to an individual, we need to listen to an organization. But I still got ahead of myself.

CHAPTER 4

TELLING OUR STORY TO OURSELVES

What's Appreciated about Inquiry (and what isn't)

Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church concluded a 2-3 year study, decided to create a contemporary worship experience and called me at that time to be Associate Pastor in order to lead it. When I arrived I was given a list of names they had chosen for the service. I told them it was just worship and why not refer to it by the time, like the other services. The assembled group all clamored that it had to have a name and so I was the one who chose the name “The Connection” from a list of possibilities I was given. Of the choices this was the one that seemed least flashy or catchy but most hopeful (with regard to what people might find should they choose to attend). They also had t-shirts made. It made me feel a bit like I wasn't leading worship but something else. But I was new and didn't want my choices to be the only ones. If this was how the church viewed its new worship experience who was I to argue. So I got to work. My responsibilities also include the mission and youth work of the church (I supervise a full time youth director).

I came to Palma Ceia worn and weary from my previous experience but ready to start new work in a new place for a similar purpose. I wanted to reach those who are seeking access to God but find the church unhelpful in its traditional presentation. Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church opened the door for a new ministry and provided space for a

new community within itself. My intention has been to keep it as part of the church but as we have seen things began to change with the conversation over breakfast with the head of staff.

In the same year as this particular breakfast, the church was finishing a Long Range Plan. Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church studied their ministry, brought in advisors from the Alban Institute and created a Long Range Plan. This gave the church the chance to determine its core values and beliefs. The purpose was to answer the question “What does faithfulness look like?” Answering this question is, also, the essential vision for the church Head of Staff and has been regularly repeated by him as such. It is now written into the introduction of the Long Range Plan Report. The intent of the study and the plan then is to “discern the direction of faithful obedience to Christ’s call.”

The Long Range Planning Team used both qualitative (Appreciative Inquiry and surveys) and quantitative (Percept-demographics and U.S. Congregations-survey) research to determine the Core Values and Beliefs of the church. After an initial study they found that the people of the church looked upon themselves as a community where people of all ages feel “at home”, that we were led by a gifted staff & congregational role models, and were a congregation with “heart” nourished by comfortable relationships. They believe the church to be mission driven and that included, as one aspect, diverse music represented through multiple services.

Their final determination was that PCPC (is or desires to be):

- Scripturally centered
- A Congregation whose character seeks to model the character of Christ
- Following Christ’s call to service
- Welcoming and compassionate in the pattern of Jesus
- Valuing the lives, faith, minds, characters and future of children and youth
- Valuing servant leadership in its clergy and congregation

It was also recognized that the church was planning from a position of strength and that these strengths came into focus as they did their research. Included in the report is a list of these strengths.

- Excellence in Worship
- Leadership
- Music programs
- Relational church
- Mission
- Children and Youth
- Location
- Heritage
- Finances

This is a healthy, thriving church that is enjoying a prosperous present and an expectation of continued good work in the future. From that vantage point, the LRP Team developed five recommendations for “Achieving God’s Mission at PCPC”. They both listed the recommendations and created suggested actions for following through on them:

1. Stimulate and nurture “faith development” so that members are assimilated into the body of Christ knowing they belong.
2. Increase our members’ involvement in missions of the Church, in our community and in the world.
3. Create a “culture of generosity” that understands that stewardship involves the “whole” of life rather than just one particular season or merely financial giving.
4. Accommodate the future growth of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church.
 - a. Including developing commissioning alternatives as growth outpaces physical facilities
5. Improve the administration of the Church, fostering greater efficiency for Clergy and Staff to enhance their creative and spiritual leadership roles, while improving essential operations of our Church.

These recommendations will impact the congregation as each becomes an initiative which hopefully will lead to action steps for various areas of the church. The growth, strength and the resulting challenge of the Connection Worship experience in the life of the church became simply the first area of the church’s ministry in which the Long

Range Plan came to fruition. The focus of the project then became part of this strategic work and the core of this study became exploring recommendation #4 in relation to the Connection Services and through that exploration to discover part of the Church's future story.

The Connection has grown into a healthy, life-giving expression of worship and community in the life of PCPC. It regularly "maxes-out" its space, the multi-purpose room or gym. Our fire marshal has given us a capacity of 243 and if all the regular attendees showed up together we would more than overwhelm this space. Of course, we see examples of this on Easter and Christmas, but also on various Sundays through the year. What seems to be happening is an "accordion" experience of filling the space and then watching it drop down and then filling it again after a few weeks.

So we face a "good" problem in a thriving setting. The growth issue seems to pose an opportunity that needs to be solved – how do we deal with the issue of growth? However the issue of the health and well-being of the Connection is intricately woven with the life of PCPC. What is the future of the Connection service? How does the ministry of Palma Ceia Presbyterian expand or incorporate greater works and should it? Is that what we are being called to do? Or do we simply acknowledge it is a good thing and allow it to live within the space and no more?

It poses a dilemma. So, problem-solving seems appropriate, but problem-solving speaks to shape, size and numbers within PCPC. However, what might be more helpful is a deeper look at the life and mission of our church. What does faithfulness look like when it involves ministry to those who are not looking for a Sanctuary or, perhaps, even

worship, but want to know God better. As with all issues, crises and problems we stand at a juncture of various opportunities that allows us to consider our future with new eyes.

Storytelling as Research

Appreciative Inquiry is a robust research tool that focuses on the positive core of what we are about and builds a future from that.¹ It can be used in venues as diverse as marriage counseling or in corporations of 30,000 people. It is highly flexible while utilizing a standard pattern of engagement in such different settings. It also uses stories as the tool of exploration. Instead of focusing on what's wrong and bringing everyone's attention to discovering and then fixing what is broken or might need repair, it looks at what is best, what works and is succeeding and builds preferred futures from that. Instead of problem solving it develops new strength from present strength. So, I took a step back from the initial narrative of concern in bringing my problem to the rest of the community and invited them to seek to discover how God might be speaking to us today.

AI was created and developed by Suresh Srivastva and David Cooperrider out of Case Western Reserve University's School of Management. It has a distinct understanding and purpose.

Human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about, and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated. The single most important action a group can take to liberate the human spirit and consciously construct a better future is to make the positive core the common and explicit property of all.²

¹ Diana Whitney & Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003), 15.

² David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005), 9.

Essentially it is a means of telling our story to ourselves, reminding ourselves of what has happened in the individual lives that make up “us”, so that we can follow where that story leads us. It seeks to build on strengths in order to accomplish a unified and hopefully vibrant future. It is like hearing an orchestra practice individual instruments, so that we recognize the talented and positive elements before we experience the fullness of the symphony and open ourselves up to inspiration of a community developed expression.

Here’s where I got ahead of myself as I began this process. Before I was ready to begin with Appreciative Inquiry, I began to get together with individuals and couples and explain to them that we were going to do a study in order to discover the future of the Connection service. Without really thinking about the impact of having one’s pastor share untethered possibilities, I simply opened my mouth. I told people the story of my breakfast conversation with the Head of Staff. I shared my anxiety over it but also an excitement if God was calling us to a new venture. All of this was done with the knowledge of the Head of Staff who commented on this or that individual being someone he knew or didn’t know and that he, she or they seemed like good people to talk with if he did. He never commented on the value of what I was doing.

I continued on, asking for prayer, asking for initial thoughts and asking for ideas. The ideas included emotional energy as people shared that they didn’t want to see the Connection move to become a new church or even leave the property and others who thought it was “high time.” There were people who thought we should build a parking garage with a worship center on its top and there were people who thought we should simply leave the Presbyterian Church (USA). The possibilities I was sharing included

near-by churches or church buildings that were in severe decline or even empty. I am very open to simply scanning through ideas and I forget sometimes that people don't all think like me. When I was in the process of moving to Tampa I had two days to survey houses for a new place to live. I made the real estate agent take me to twenty-eight different homes in various areas so I could clearly evaluate alternative choices quickly. I don't mind evaluating everything, but some people want a bit simpler level of choice. My mistake was that I just opened up the trunk of possibilities that I carry around in my head and started trying on different "outfits" in front of these people. "If we did it this way, what would you think of this? If we approached from this angle, how would this look? Would you be okay with this?" I realize that I can come off as the Cat in the Hat on a rainy day. I just have to remind myself that, although it can be fun in some settings, this is not always helpful in gathering people into collaborative efforts.

After six to eight conversations I realized that I was making a serious mistake. I didn't have any process of inquiry through which to lead people. I was really only expressing my own anxiety and personal style to problem-solving. I wanted them to be involved but I was not thinking that they might feel obligated to tell me what they thought I needed to hear. I began to recognize that sometimes people spoke out of their sudden fear that the church they loved was going to dissolve into pieces and sometimes they just let loose on their frustrations with governmental structures.

These conversations produced damage instead of inspired imagining. The Head of Staff watched about twenty people arrive and take up regular attendance in the Traditional services as I saw about twenty regular attendees in the Connection leave. We talked it over at breakfast one day and confirmed that we had had a shared experience in

this regard. A group of people had resettled themselves from one worship community to the other. I needed to take better care of the members of the congregation, to respect them as individuals and to demonstrate respect for the church's mission and ministry. I also needed to refine and be more aware of what I was asking them to do. This wasn't going to be simply speculation or brainstorming and I certainly wasn't just chatting with them. I was exploring and interviewing them even if casually. I forgot the kind of power this gave me.

As researchers Swinton and Mowat point out, as the person with the question and the agenda I have particular power.

The interviewee on the other hand has considerably less power... He is, to a greater or lesser extent, dependent on the interviewer to represent him accurately, to record and interpret his words faithfully and to produce a report which, whether he likes it or not, in some sense resonates with their experience. The interviewee is therefore in a position of vulnerability which the researcher needs to be constantly aware of.³

Appreciative Inquiry opens up a clear pathway to both explore and to respect the people involved in a living organization.

I followed the process designed at Drew University and gathered a Local Advisory Council. I needed to take a step away from the process of interviewing, so that people could share more easily and honestly. Having the LAC created a small community of people to lead the actual information gathering and analysis with me. This provides a safeguard to both the people of the church and to me, increasing the possibility for more honest and relaxed responses to the research, and making it (and me) less of a target of concern. I believe it actually allowed them to become more a part of the project study and the future as the results unfold.

³ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, (London: SCM Press, 2007), 65.

The creation of the Council went through a couple of stages as I invited an initial group and explained what was involved, giving people the chance to opt out. A few chose to do that once they learned the nature of the research, the time commitment, and the realization that this wasn't going to be simply a dissertation committee to read chapters, comment and edit: and so, I was able to find replacements.

Eventually, I ended up with five members who were a good representation of the church. Three of them were regular attendees of the Connection services, one was committed to traditional style worship and one moved between the both worship settings. We discovered that these differences, plus our preferences regarding how we individually desired to participate in groups and our different approaches to research study all benefited the group at large.

One played in the band and had a more engaged relationship with the entire worship experience. Another one had been involved in the initial study done by the church in the development of the Contemporary service. Two were management consultants, one who had previously studied and utilized AI. One had a bright and engaging sense of humor. Two were more anxious than the rest in using a process based in qualitative research instead of quantitative research. ("If we can't add up numbers, how do we know if we got the right answer?") They were used to analyzing data and were less equipped to evoke and analyze a story.

I, on the other hand, love stories. I am a playwright (since I was seven) who began to learn how to type by age eleven. Thinking through stories, analyzing stories, explaining life through stories, vividly dreaming what seems like entire motion pictures and recalling them clearly has been part of most of my life. I preach through stories and

regularly hear, even from my more quantitative friends who will make comments like, “I relax when I hear you say the words, ‘Let me tell you a story...’” And so, quite naturally, I turned to narrative-based Appreciative Inquiry as a tool to study the congregation. The Council needed to understand it and be able to use it comfortably. So, we began teaching it to them. Because one of the members had studied and used it as well, I had both a partner in educating the team and a collegial voice of encouragement for the rest.

Seeking to Communicate

As Cooperrider and Whitney explain,

Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative, co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives life to an organization or a community when it is most effective and most capable in economic, ecological and human terms.⁴

Appreciative inquiry is a tool for progress within an organization. The creators would love to see it become more than that.

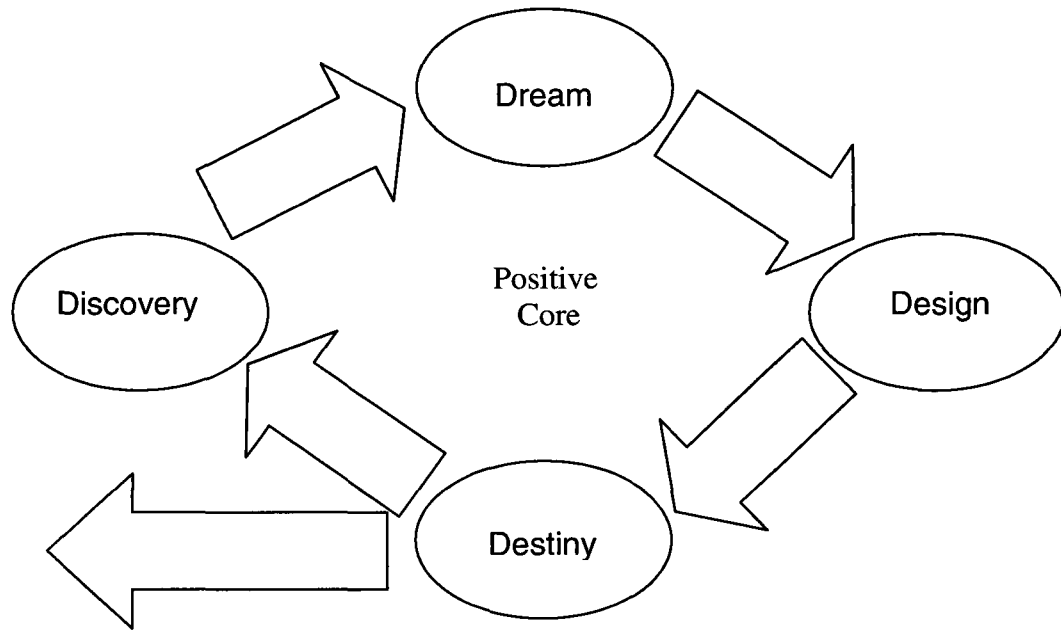
Appreciative Inquiry is essentially a four part process: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny.

Discovery: In the Discovery stage we seek to simply find out what is and what works. What is the best of the life of the organization? And in our case, what is the best in the Connection Worship service? In Discovery we allow people the chance to remember a moment when “it all came together” for them and we ask them to put that moment in the form of a story. We encourage them to relax, to remember the day, the time of the service, the people who were sitting around them, even the weather outside the windows.

⁴ Cooperrider and Whitney, 8.

At what point in the service did this take place. Was it throughout the entire service?

Was it a particular element within the service? After thinking through the pieces involved, we encourage them to tell their story.



The 4-D Cycle

Dream: The storytelling begins grounded in particular moments of reality. It never loses its ties with those realities. It never becomes simply speculative, but it does ask people to imagine. What might happen if we used those strengths that you describe in your story, if we built on them and created an experience where the kind of moment you tell about happens all the time? What would that look like? The Dream stage is where the storyteller creates a picture, an image of strength that is built on strength they already experienced. They are not giving opinions. They are creating a possible future.

Our interview process came to an end at this point, and it also brought the project itself to its conclusion. In the Presbyterian Church, the ruling Elders of the community

determine the future. We look to the elders to manage the future of the church, to make decisions for its well-being and to develop its advantages. There is no issue with the Elders seeking information, guidance or assistance from the congregation, but it is the elders who make the final decisions with discerning deliberation and prayer. So, when I brought this project to the Elders to ask permission from them to study our church, I confirmed that the project would move through the Discovery and Dream stage and then come back to the Elders to determine the next steps. Before going into what was determined, let me finish describing the parts of the 4-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry.

Design: The community gathers and shares its dreams of possible futures that are grounded in present realities. Some small group work has to take place to determine themes, values and directions that relate to each other from the dreams. These need to be collated and brought back to the larger community in a form that can be used to determine a clear direction. One useful tool is a Design Planning Map. An example of this can be found in Appendix E. It was used in the Appreciative Inquiry Summit that took place as a follow up to what was seen and understood in the project.

The group considers the themes and areas of work that have been collected through the analysis of the dreaming stage. Then individuals “assign” or find themselves on the map or within the list of themes, picking out areas where they would be willing to work or participate in producing a possible future. From the grounded realities a future begins to come into being. Growing out of the positive core of what is working right or best in the present, the group develops a strategy on how this could happen in a future reality. A design is developed through the participation of all the stakeholders, and it is a design with people ready to create it because they designed it.

Destiny: This is the phase where the nuts and bolts of how to make the design live get connected. The Destiny is the moving of the design into reality. The Summit that followed up the project was, again, able to move the community through the Design phase, bringing together representative stakeholders to create a plan that was then brought back to the Elders. In our setting the Elders will be the ones to determine into what Destiny we move. This would be the place where the Elder may decide to establish a new Task Force, one that would do a cost/benefit analysis and develop a proposed budget from the proposed design and then move, with approval, to the implementation of it.

Tell Me a Story

Everybody has an opinion. Ask a question and people will give you an answer. But what if you don't want an opinion? What if you want to hear a story? The point of the Discovery stage of Appreciative Inquiry is to gather stories and to learn from them "what is." It can be very hard to get someone to tell you a story. To do the work of the project I recruited thirty people to go out and find the stories of five other people. The intention was to gather a hundred and fifty stories of people of the church, to gain as large a group of stories as possible. In order to do that, they had to be trained.

Training included a three to four hour program that introduced the Biblical Story (and chief metaphor of the project) of Acts 15 – the first Jerusalem Council, my own story, why we were doing this, the church's story in line with the Long Range Plan, and then the nature of stories including the kinds of stories we were looking for them to find. At this point in the training, I included a presentation by a local journalist.

A member of our church was a former journalist who spent eighteen to twenty years working at the nationally recognized St. Petersburg Times. He did a fine presentation to our volunteer interviewers on how to help people relax, how to pay attention and the kinds of “outside” questions that would help people focus, get calm or remember elements of their story. It was an excellent addition to our program because it provided people with a simple confidence. The journalist gave straight and practical answers to the questions they asked for clarification. As the Interviewers left the meeting they said that was a very helpful part of the training and a number of them stopped to tell our presenter the same thing.

The rest of the training included the introduction of Appreciative Inquiry, the 4 D-cycle, why we aren’t going to approach our Connection issues in a “problem solving” manner. I described this last piece as the difference between fixing what we have and building the future. If we just wanted to fix what we have then we don’t really need to hear people’s stories or get them involved. We just have to point out the variety of things that might be of concern to many and simply ask for money. The air-conditioning/heating is too loud, the sound system is in need of serious overhaul, the doors slam when they close, there is noise coming in from the hall that could be baffled, the direction signs around the building could be better, there are a group of things that could simply be “fixed.”

Instead we want to consider the future of our ministry as a church in this particular setting. With all the various issues, we know that God is moving in people’s lives and people are hearing about the church, its work and this worship service. They appear to be able to find it regardless of its location in a second floor gym with poor

signage. God seems to be at work, so let's find out how and, if so, explore whether this is leading us to new efforts to create a better atmosphere for this work to continue to grow. Essentially, it described "us" like a person who has an address in their phone and a GPS to get there. Up till now we've been walking in the direction we believe we should go, but we've hit a point that appears to need discernment – this way or that way? We have the answer in our hands (really "within us"). We just need to pull it out and get our bearings so we can move confidently. The guidance we needed was in the GPS/directions that God was speaking into each of us. We just needed to turn up the volume and follow them.

So, I gave the Interviewers a list of questions by which to get stories. They tried this out by interviewing another person in the room. Since they were doing five interviews this took care of one immediately and gave them a chance to practice and to ask questions about how they were doing it.

I gave them about forty-five minutes to complete an interview (before switching and being interviewed/ interviewing) as they were primed with information, but suggested that they give themselves two hours to complete each of the rest of the personal interviews as the new people would be coming at this cold. I instructed them to let the interviewees know that they had plenty of time to complete the process in order to collect their narrative. I also instructed them to choose four people whose stories they wanted to hear. Later, as the LAC looked at the roster of interviewers it seemed clear that we had a wide sampling of the church and thought that if they just asked those who caught their attention we could again find the same thing. (Ultimately, we did.)

Out of the 150 interviews hoped for, we were looking for a breakdown along these numbers:

- 80 – regular attendees of the Connection
- 50 – regular attendees of the Traditional Services
- 15 – high school students
- 5 – middle school students

PCPC is not a very racially diverse community, mostly Caucasian with about fifteen to twenty African American attendees (all in the Connection). One or two other ethnicities are represented in the congregation overall. However the diversity of ages, political stands and income levels are all strong. On a big Sunday (but not a holiday) we could see eight to nine hundred people in worship and another couple of hundred of children in Sunday School throughout the morning.

One hundred and fifty interviews gave us the possibility of hitting about 10% of what might be considered our strongest showing of regular attendees (members or not). The largest group was to be a third of the Connection congregation, the stories of those who have the greatest personal interest in the future of this particular worship setting. The second largest group came from the traditional setting; those who don't attend the Connection but may see it as part of the ministry and mission of the church and may have voted and encouraged it into existence.

The third group is a regularly unheard (or should I say “unasked”) population, high school and middle school students. This group crosses both the contemporary and traditional settings more than the rest. Parents and grandparents take their students to church with them and they will end up in either place without a choice. Because of my

personal involvement with the youth program I get to know these students outside of worship. Even those who don't regularly attend have an interest in what we're doing "upstairs". I remember one particular Sunday seeing a student watch our worship through the open door without coming in. Her parents were against the contemporary expression and disappointed that the church chose to encourage it. That may explain something of why this young woman was interested enough to stand for an hour and just watch. The youth Sunday School rooms are on the same floor as the Connection worship and occasionally, because of a certain topic or theme, the youth director will bring all the students to worship. As we talk about the future it is important to hear these voices.

The only stipulations we gave the interviewers on choosing their interviewees was that they had to get special permission to interview students (they were also required to get consent forms signed by both students *and* parents) and they needed to run their list of choices by me to just make sure that someone else hadn't already chosen anyone on their list. Otherwise, they were free to pick any member or regular attendee of the church. The other request we made of them was that they complete one or two interviews and get the transcripts/responses back to the Local Advisory Council so that we could see how the questions were doing, whether we were eliciting the right kinds of information. As it turned out we needed to make some changes in the questions so that we could assist the interviewers to obtain stories more easily.

Working Against Communication

This is when things started to break down in a serious way. We got a good response back from the initial interviews. Most, but not all, of the interviewers were at the initial training but that just meant that a second and then a third meeting had to be

held to train the remaining members of the group. So, we had several who were just getting to their interviews as the LAC was already reviewing the questions and the initial results. We told the later arrivals to only do a second interview after the training and then to hold off until we returned with any revisions to the questions that might be necessary.

The Administrative Assistant helping with my work and on this project had a discrepancy in the email list she used and three major communiqués were mishandled. The list of email addresses did not include all of the interviewers, not even half, although she believed it was complete. When we came through the first two weeks an email of encouragement and direction was sent out. It told them that the LAC was reviewing responses in order to see if any changes to the questions were needed. It encouraged the interviewers to give their own feedback to any changes they felt should be made. And it encouraged them, generally, in getting underway in an important project in the life of the church. We assured them that the LAC would bring back any changes promptly.

The same email list was used when, within a week and a half, the second set of questions was sent with details and reminders of how to use the questions, emphases to make and how to elicit stories instead of opinions. The list was used again to communicate a second note of encouragement and to remind the interviewers of the time schedule which should have given them plenty of time to complete all their work.

It was about the beginning of the next month when I asked one of the interviewers how things were going and the person asked me if there were any changes to the questions. When I brought up the emails they didn't know what I was talking about. I went on to another interviewer and found they knew and were using the questions in their

new format. Double checking further I asked a third interviewer and got the same responses I did from the first person, mostly a blank look.

I came back to the Administrative Assistant and asked about the emails and had the dates and mailings reconfirmed. Each time she sent off an email she sent me a confirmation saying “Done”, essentially. I shared about the people who did not receive their emails and we went into the list immediately. That was how we discovered that, just like my personal experience, two thirds of the interviewers had not received any follow-up information since the early part of the first month. The list was vastly incomplete.

Taking the matter in hand, hard copies of all the messages, plus a personal letter from me went out within the day to every one of the interviewers. We, the Admin and I, worked together to bring home a clear apology, support and new encouragement to see the project through. But people moved on during the month. Life continued and other commitments and issues were now the focus of their attention. Drawing them back into the work and back into enthusiasm became another month and a half of cajoling, encouraging and pleading. Eventually, a hundred and three interviews were completed. Like the breakdown that happened with the initial teams in the Connection, one of the things we learned through this experience is that church members have full and meaningful lives, and projects need to be carried through with clarity and timeliness. If an unforeseen break interrupts the plan, there are plenty of pieces of a regular, demanding life schedule ready to take its place.

The LAC was involved in praying for and speaking personally with the people doing the interviews. All but one of them were also involved in the interview process

and identified with the issues of the mishandled emails and the changes in questions. Because of the prominence of the LAC in the process their names were on the original list that was used, so they had received all the emails, but they'd also been in on their drafts and, obviously, helped develop the new questions.

Having gotten back on track, felt that a hundred-plus interviews were more than adequate and went into analysis of what we received. The most positive result was that we felt that the stories really did come through and that the percentages from each of the groups of participants lined up well with our plan even if we didn't hit the full number. We did clear 10% of the total attendees and so were comfortable that we had enough to responsibly represent the community. So the LAC and I went to work analyzing the data to see what we could hear.

Extending our Ears

In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* we are introduced to the imaginary and magical listening devices called "extendable ears."⁵ Great tools, they allow a person to put a string to their ear and to simply tell the other end to "go" and it moves to where the person was thinking, allowing them to listen in on voices in another room. Here we are as qualitative researchers seeking to listen in on conversations that happened in other rooms and to learn from them things we would otherwise never know. We extend our ears to listen in on the interviews and conversations held between two members of the church and we hope to hear not only the ideas, thoughts and experiences of at least one of them, but also to hear God's voice within this shared story of impactful moments. Our

⁵ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, (New York: Scholastic Press, 2003), 76.

greatest hope is to find information that will be transformative and will help us to move to a new place. So the question comes around – can we hear God in this process?

Christian Researchers, John Swinton and Harriet Mowat in *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* suggest we can if we use what they call *critical faithfulness*.

Such a form of faithfulness acknowledges the divine givenness of scripture and the genuine working of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of what is given, while at the same time taking seriously the interpretive dimensions of the process of understanding revelation and ensuring the faithful practices of individuals and communities.

It also enables us to be realistic about the interpretive nature of our grasping after divine revelation and to recognize that truth is, at least to an extent, emergent and dialectic...⁶

What I find most helpful is how Swinton and Mowat theologize a pattern of engagement in study that reflects or at least resonates with the 4-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry. There is a similarity that I don't want to press too hard, but still recognize.

Their four steps include:

1. A study of the current practice of a situation that requires reflection and critical challenge
2. Study of the Cultural/contextual – seeking meanings within the situation
3. Theological reflection in the light of Scripture and tradition
4. Formulating revised practice

It should be clear that this is not a direct correlation, but as stated above, a similar pattern that should provide guidance to extending our ears into the province of God's revelation. We pray, listen and respond.

Getting our Stories Straight

The LAC came away from the analysis with some clear determinations. They felt that even though we were only moving through the Dream phase and then turning over to the Elders there was enough data from the interviews to call for continued dialogue and

⁶ Swinton and Mowat, 93, 94.

expansion of the study. It was also clear that we could not simply step off in any clear direction from the analysis and conclusions they found. Regardless of how clear some people were about next steps of the Connection, the community needed to be involved in visioning the true future. They saw a clear need for further strategic development.

Stories: Our Strengths is the first section of analysis where the stories of the congregation explain either their participation in the Connection Worship services or their knowledge of it as an aspect of the ministry of Palma Ceia. Through these stories the LAC hoped to glean insight into the strengths of the community and also to hear something of God's movement in the lives of those who attend or who appreciate the ministry of the Connection. They discovered that the Connection has a vital and important part in the spiritual lives of newcomers, regular attendees and those who move between the two worship settings. Essentially they learned that the music drew people in and the message made them stay. Overall, the people who don't attend the Connection expressed appreciation for the way the Connection reached people who were not interested in the traditional worship experience.

The LAC described the next responses as *The Dream: What Has Happened* and considered how the stories developed into an image of what the Connection could become in 5 years. The images held out hope for a strong outreach into the greater community. The hope also included a continued "connectedness" by participants. People looked for dedicated space that was still connected to the present PCPC site, but saw a new community developing with diversity, a missional attitude that reflected a dual emphasis of traditional, local ministry in other parts of the world, as well as the need for continued spiritual formation.

Dreaming: How it Happened was the section wherein the interviewees shared their thoughts on how we were able to develop what they imagined. This was where spiritual formation took a major emphasis. People saw the way ahead as including a growing depth of their relationship with God and with other people which would include the greater community. A good number of people also shared a desire to see the two worship styles brought together, where traditional attendees and contemporary attendees would share their worship in the same space and time. These people described themselves as regular (a few to several times a year) to special events (once in a while) but not as a regular blending of worship styles on Sundays. But what was clearly captured in this section was the desire of regular Connection attendees to be in Sunday School or Bible study groups hosted by the church.

CHAPTER 5

TELLING OUR FUTURE TO OURSELVES

Turning the Stories over to the Elders

The next step in the project was to present the results and insights from the project results to the Elders of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church. As I already mentioned, this was to be the conclusion of the project and any further steps to design a new future would come through the decision of the Session (the body of Ruling Elders). At a stated meeting in May, 2010, I made this presentation with the LAC present to assist me and to answer any questions that the Elders might raise.

This presentation included a brief history of the project and my work at Drew University, a narrative from the Bible story found in Acts 15, a brief description of Appreciative Inquiry as the research tool. We also reiterated the role of the Session who agreed to this study. The report concluded with a brief analysis of the data.

We presented three essential features from the analysis and the stories themselves. They were (1) the people of PCPC seem to like the Connection, including, curiously, those who didn't regularly attend or had never attended, (2) the belief that it will grow and thrive further and (3) that this will mean that something will probably have to change, which included a sampling of the variety of changes suggested.

The stories included in the presentation can be found in Appendix D but the way we presented them was to hand out written copies of individual stories and to have members of the Session read them out loud to rest of the body. This way the Elders got a taste of the power of the personal story as it was shared in interviews. Each of the stories was an anonymous voice designated simply as either male or female.

At the conclusion of the presentation there was a discussion and the Elders determined that further study was necessary, following the format of Appreciative Inquiry. They called for the formation of a Task Force to lead the follow-up work. This group was comprised of those who volunteered as well as those who agreed to participate at the invitation of the Head of Staff and myself. This was the conclusion of the study but the beginning of first steps of a new story in the life of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church.

Listen for God's Heartbeat

About a year and a half before the church I founded folded, I walked my dog out into a cold, sharply crisp winter night. Movement was the only thing that relieved the pain in my body. I could barely put one foot ahead of another without some shooting pain in my back, but sitting or lying down or being still in any fashion was worse. It caused my muscles to cramp up. That was followed by spasms of sometimes rocketing pain. Because we lived at the bottom of a hill, the walk up was a tedious chore, especially with an active Jack Russell pup. I had her on a long leash which gave her plenty of play, but occasionally she was ready to pull me faster than I was able to move

comfortably. We passed the cross street without traffic which was a relief because that meant stopping.

On the next block there was an old school yard whose school buildings had been turned into office space. Houses on the other side of the street were dark with the night. It was late. My heart ached and as I walked in that moment I began to apologize to God. “The worst choice for ministry. The worst choice for ministry. The worst choice for ministry...” drummed inside me. The church was collapsing from within and the same thing was happening to my body as well. I apologized for ever thinking I could do ministry. I apologized for starting a church or even trying. I apologized for getting ordained. I stopped and just stood in the darkness. The sky was full of stars and the fir trees at the edge of the old playground were edged with snow. My dog danced around me, skirting over to the grass and coming back, winding her leash around my legs and then unwinding. My eyes had filled with tears in my apology but now they stung in the cold as I took in what was around me on this empty night. I felt very cold.

That was the moment when I heard God’s voice again. Just as if someone were standing with me in that empty street. The voice asked, “Who called you?” I stood for a moment and then replied. “You did.” And then it was empty and silent and night again. I waited, waited for something else to be said. And then I thought, “So what does that mean?” I stood for a moment more and then I realized I was called. The truth was suddenly vivid. I might be the worst choice for ministry. I might be the very bottom of the list but I was on the list. I was called. No other voice mattered in this than the one that called me. No other love was necessary than the love I had received and wanted to

share with others and was trusted to share by the one who called. That was the moment when my body started to heal.

Within a month I was able to move without pain. I was able to lead the church through the process of closing, including laying before the Lord the request for guidance from the three stipulations held up by the Elders of that church. I did not seek another call. I did not look for another job. I simply worked until the work was done and trusted that when it was I would be called to a new work. When we closed the church we were debt free and even gave the Presbytery some remaining funds. I left that position and have not been in that kind of pain since.

CHAPTER 6

REFLECTIONS ON THIS STORY AND THE NEW STORY

Evaluation

What can we learn from a story and can we hear God's voice in the story? Stories are one of the important ways human beings share truth. Business consultant and author, Stephen Denning writes,

One reason is that narrative is integral to the way we make decisions. Rather than making decisions by careful intellectual effort or following cues, we make most of our conscious decisions through narrative. We cannot decide what to do until we decide what story or stories we see ourselves living.¹

In a story we receive a plane of imagination where we can either see ourselves or not. When we imagine ourselves within the story we are more likely to accept the story as "true," and then make decisions based on that story. One day I stood in a parking lot waving goodbye to a family with whom I was meeting to plan an activity at the church. I suddenly realized that I had change in my pocket that belonged to them. The mother had given me money to pay for a meal we shared. As I watched the car a few thoughts sprang together in my mind.

"I should return the money. The car will turn around the parking lot island and come back to the end of the lot not far from where I am standing... Abraham Lincoln."

¹ Stephen Denning, *The Secret Language of Leadership*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 105.

I took off running, caught the car as it came back and returned the money, for which the mother was very appreciative. As I walked back to my office I thought, “What made me think of Abraham Lincoln?” As I walked I even laughed at myself and shook my head, but I thought about it and then I remembered a story I heard as a boy of Mr. Lincoln returning some money and walking a considerable distance to do it. I remember seeing myself in that story doing the same thing; that this was the right thing to do. Little things were important. I know I didn’t start running until the thought “Abraham Lincoln” sprang into my consciousness. I was in a story even as I created a new story.

Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church did not need me to join the staff in order to open itself up to the local community and the world. This was brought home to me in my reading of the church history, but even more so as I read the Long Range Plan and by talking with members of the church who were here long before me. When people in the traditional sanctuary look at the picture of Jesus that is the center focus of the room, they see someone calling them into ministry. This is the interpretation most people of the traditional congregation find in the image and the words “Behold I stand at Thy door and knock”. Jesus is at their door knocking calling them out to do something. I suggest that they do not see themselves in need of new cleansing, new healing, or new repentance. They are people who see themselves as faithful and are looking outward for ways to express that faithfulness. They walk in the vision of the Head of Staff and seek to demonstrate faithfulness. At the same time they bow their heads each week to confess their sins with everyone else in a community prayer. They are not saints except in the simple definition of true believers and in the sense that they believe they need Jesus.

This personal understanding or identity of the community is found distinctly in the first descriptive sentences that follow each of the Core Values listed in the Long Range Plan:

“We are a community that gathers around the Word of God.”

“With a spirit of humility we acknowledge the Sovereignty of God.”

“We are responsible to hear the Spirit’s call to serve the needs of others in the name of Jesus.”

“We seek to practice Christian hospitality.”

“We are committed to providing a congregational environment that nurtures faith in children and youth, supports families in their Christian journey, building Christian character, reaches out with Christ’s love to hurting children, teaches the Scriptures, and in worship rejoices before the Lord for the gift of children.”

“We honor and appreciate the traits of leaders who are energetic yet gentle; who are initiating, competent and effective, yet humble; who are learned, yet accessible; who are educated, yet still learning; who serve as an example of someone who is a servant of God – faithful, visionary and filled with grace.”

These are things that should not change. They are also things that we needed to keep in mind as we considered the efforts, personal understanding and directions of ministry of this community. With any shortcoming we may find in meeting these “goals” must come the corrective that these are a desired hope, a path to follow. This is not just an explanation; it is a crucial underpinning for our ministry together. These statements must be seen as more than the listing of the values and their descriptions, but as statements of direction and purpose. They are not just as a rule by which to measure success or failure.

It also means that we need to trust each other, in the traditional worship setting and in the contemporary setting as joining forces and sharing ministry. We need to trust each other as partners and not as people who need to be guided into *real* faith and *real* faith expressions. We need to learn each other daily and trust in our attempts at faithfulness.

When I hear these words they both challenge and humble me.

Pastoral ethnographers who are working for transformation and hope must be open to being transformed, moved by the persons and stories that they encounter.²

One of the things I recognize coming from this study is my continued hesitancy in simply making friends. People think I'm shy but in reality I'm wary. I have a son who is a gregarious and well-loved man. I realize that I was once like him. But emotional beating is the same as any other kind of beating and in the words of Bruce Springsteen – “You end up like a dog that's been beat too much, 'Til you spend half your life just covering up”³. Working my way back into being myself is a chore, but it is worth it. When I come to moment like this it feels like another layer of dragon skin has been peeled away and I can see that someday I'll be a real boy again, but changed, like Eustace Grubb.⁴ I can tell I've changed.

The church has changed too. The process has brought out the sense of separation that many people in the Connection felt, in particular. We could point at changes in the acceptance of the “new child” as part of the family and new relationships that were established in the church. There are multiple moments where members say, essentially, “Don't forget we need that in both services” or “now, how can we make sure that happens in the whole church.” But, this reaction against separation created a movement that included two elements of ecology – our space needs to be dedicated space, but it also needs to part of one church. Savage and Presnell remind us that

² Moschella, 109.

³ Bruce Springsteen, “Born in the USA,” 1984.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 90, 91.

Traditionally the ecological approach is employed when determining how a society relates to its physical environment.⁵

And, even though we are in our contemporary context we will be using this traditional understanding. From our interviews, there was a clear emphasis on enhancing the experience in the gym physically and audibly, even if there was to be a future that included dedicated space. Discussion rose about the changes needed. And one of the intriguing questions that came up reflecting on the character of our gym space was about any new dedicated space not being too “churchy”. Conversations flourished around about “exactly what are we talking about.” One man said,

“When we first came to the church we went to the Traditional service. We heard there was this other service, but it wasn’t until we had a Sunday where we all had trouble getting up that we came to the Connection. But when we got in here, we looked at each other and said, ‘Ah, this is home.’ I’m hearing about possible changes and I just want to make sure we’re not going to make it all fancy, are we? I like the feeling of just being in a space and I’m afraid we’re going to make a big deal out of everything again.”

The Task Force recognized these concerns and similar issues regarding what kind of space or changes might come early on when they received the analysis and had a personal meeting – one team handing off to the next team – with the Local Advisory Council. The issue of space was carried forward toward what became an Appreciative Inquiry Summit.⁶

The discussion about the nature of one church and space and the importance of continuing to reach those who were not interested in traditional elements of worship revolved around what might be changed now and what had to wait until we saw how change manifested itself. The Elders are still in charge and must make final decisions.

⁵ Savage and Presnell, 128.

⁶ Savage and Presnell, 128.

The decision to form the Task Force leads into the future. The Task Force at this point, although not a part of this project, is ready to return with results and recommendations to the Elders. The Summit was a resounding success.

But the changes that came before that include a movement from the Presbyterian Women to assist in the decorating of the gym. Members of the church who moved their worship location (the group of about twenty who seriously made a transition to the traditional setting) came back. Not all and none continually, but many are now part of the group who go back and forth between services. The Head of Staff who has been deeply concerned that the nature of our Presbyterian heritage, specifically the role of the Elders (and Appreciative Inquiry's, seemingly, "congregational" nature) not be lost in the use of AI, grew in his

"appreciation of the need parishioners have for some shared sense of participation from clergy leadership in the different worship experiences, and the way that communicates for them belonging in the body as a whole."

He goes on to comment,

"I saw the value parishioners place in their participation in the process of discernment, including the conversations and discussions surrounding it. In addition to valuing the opportunity to introduce their own content into the discussion they value their perception that the body is experiencing unity, harmony and faithfulness in the process. I came to a deeper appreciation of the value parishioners have for a sense of belonging or commitment to the whole body, or whole fellowship regardless of which service they participate in. I came to a deeper awareness of the value parishioners have for the body as a whole, and their valuing in some way of the nurturing of the connectedness of that body."

Another voice to hear comes from a young father who participated in the entire process including interviewing people. He said,

"Through the process of doing the interviews and sifting through the results, I felt we were making a big difference by bringing to light some successful parts of the ministry. I thought the work was penetrating deeper into the church community that often misunderstands our worship service. This still may be true, that a

positive impact has been made in that area, but my cynical side still sees an older conservative majority of our church body that doesn't know our ministry very well.

"The greater change, as you suggested, is in me. I have a greater awareness of the political identity of our congregation. The bigger players who have more influence, as do exist in any organization. I am a little more discouraged about the time it takes to effect change. I am a little more encouraged by values our churchgoers have in common as we discover our unity. I have had a bond with our worship service for a while. I think it has deepened through this process as I take more ownership in my church community."

It seems like there is a new conversation going on that may move people out of being two congregations in one building. People are asking how to include information about other groups, ones in which they don't participate, in newsletters, on the website, in e-blasts. Traditional worshippers are talking with contemporary worshippers even to ask simply, "How's it going?" The pattern of conversing about "our" worship is growing into "OUR" worship and "OUR" Elders and "OUR" church.

At about the end of the interviewing I was invited to preach in the traditional services (8:30 a. m. and 11:00 a. m.). As a main illustration in my sermons that day I spoke about the window of Jesus, so prominently displayed behind me. I shared what I'd learned in conversation and how this depiction was experienced. Toward the end I mentioned that there are people who came to Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church who had never seen this window. I said that there are members of PCPC who have never been in the sanctuary. There is a whole community of folks, I said, "whose whole understanding of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church is the gym." I got an audible gasp from each of the traditional congregations at that point in my sermon.

At the end of the service, a woman came to me with a suggestion. "I think," she said, "that one Sunday we should shift all the traditional worshippers at 8:30 upstairs and have all the contemporary worshippers come down here, so they can each experience

what the other one does.” There was a moment and then she continued, “I wouldn’t do it. But I think that’s what we should do some time.”

And then, a couple of months later I noticed she signed up to come to the Summit.

APPENDIX A

ACTS 15 INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your experience with the Connection.

(1a. It's okay if you haven't had much personal experience in the Connection, tell me about your experience with the Connection in the life of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church.)
2. Looking at that experience with the Connection, recall a time when you felt like you were part of something that was exciting, engaging, or that made a difference in people's lives. What made it moving experience?
3. Imagine that it is five years from now and the Connection has expanded and enhanced its ministry. What do you think would be happening? What would it look like?
4. Imagine that your dreams for the Connection have come true. Specifically, what three to five changes would have taken place from this initiative that you are most proud of and pleased about?
5. Imagine that it is two years from today and we are making better progress than we could have hoped toward the fulfillment on your ideas, what did we accomplish and how did we accomplish it?

APPENDIX B

ACTS 15 SECOND SET OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

First we are going to look at the Connection today, and its impact on the life of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church over the past five years.

1. Tell me about your experience with the Connection.

(If direct experience, move to Q2. If no experience with Connection, move to 1a)

1a. If you haven't had much personal experience in the Connection, tell me about your knowledge or perception of the purpose of Connection within the life of Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church? (Move to Q3)

2. Looking at your experience with the Connection, recall a significant moment or an encounter in the Connection that you feel made a difference in your life, or the lives of others.

What made it moving or significant experience for you?

3. I am now going to ask you to dream a bit - to look to the future.

Imagine that the Connection has grown or expanded into a worship community that consistently initiates significant moments or experiences for those within PCPC and within the greater community. What would that look like?

4. If the Connection worship community continued to grow for the next five years what do you think would be happening?

What would it look like?

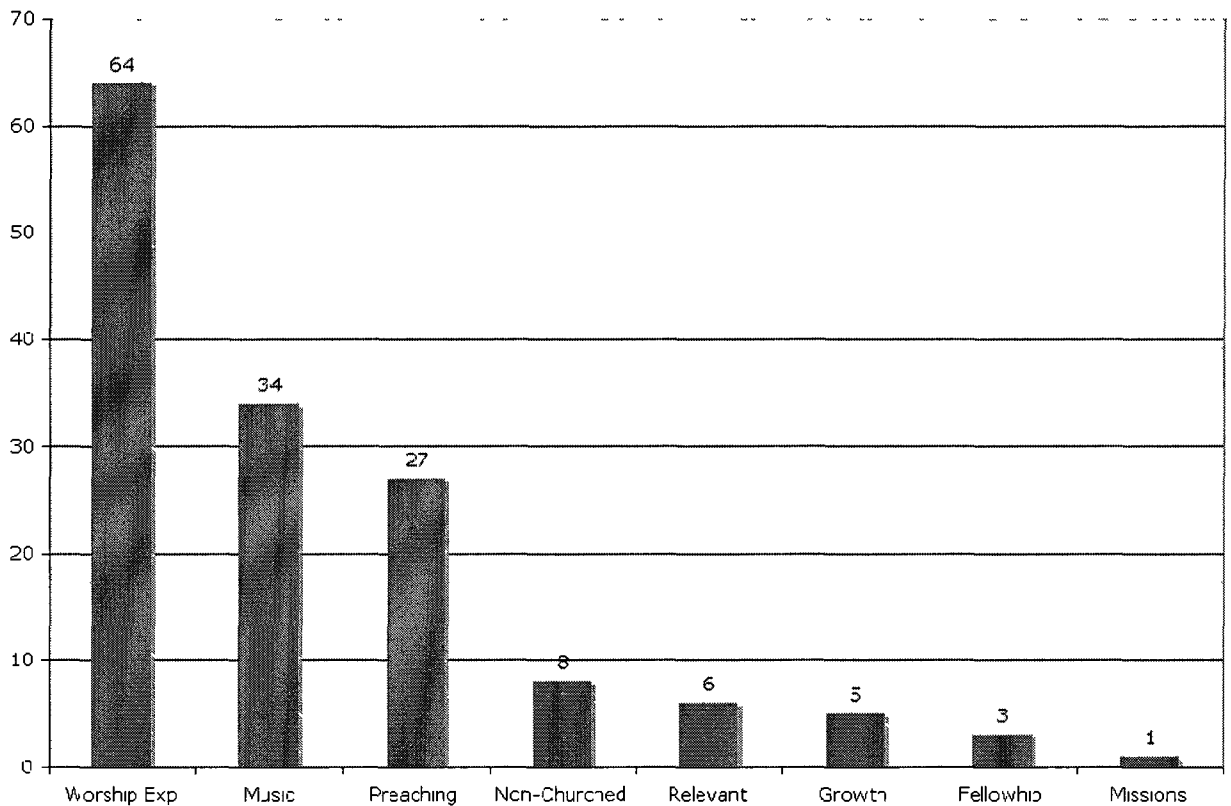
How would it make you feel?

5. Imagine that these dreams for the Connection have come true. Specifically, what three to five changes would have taken place from this initiative that you would be most proud of and pleased about?

6. Now, moving back a bit closer to today, imagine that it is two years from today and we are making better progress than we could have hoped toward the fulfillment of your ideas, what did we accomplish and how did we accomplish it?

APPENDIX C

DIAGRAMED ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

**Stories: Our Strengths*****Worship Experience***

- I was comfortable with both Connection and Traditional services, but my husband found an immediate connection with Connection service.
- My husband was able to feel comfortable and involved, and has since gotten involved in more aspects of the church, children's Sunday school and VBS.
- Like giving their children the experience of two different services.
- Asked to speak where God has made His presence known in her life and when she looked out at the familiar faces, she realized it was there, in the faces of the people she knew that she saw the presence of God. Realized what God was doing in her life and in their lives.
- The first time we attended, we were "church shopping", looking for a place to be comfortable. It was in the gym and there was food there.

- A special thing happened, the bread was moldy inside. People brought up croissants. It was a very special time, Spirit was moving among us, God communicating through the incident.
- At times I have felt very much a part, other times detached.
- Visited 4 times, enjoying each; especially on behalf of others who would not be in church if we only offered traditional services.
- Young families together in worship, want to worship together.
- Likes quiet/ability to talk before service.
- Service requires more involvement from congregation.
- Positive casual relaxed atmosphere, kids are comfortable.
- Casualness of service, or teenage boys like it best.
- Children and family enjoy service.
- Gets sense of family and connection.
- Being more involved (in production of service) allows the interviewee to be intensely connected.
- Enjoy multi-facetedness.
- Connection makes the people surrounding the interviewee at the service very happy.
- Because of getting family prepared, likes the convenience of the 10:00 service.
- She is always looking forward to the shared fellowship.
- Presented a set of slides and discussion on Christmas in Uganda with Emmanuel Ofumbi....The Connection uses technology like slides and such to really touch people. It really gets a Christian message across that a traditional service can't.
- His daughter and her husband enjoy the connection.
- Kids love it.
- Friendliness and a coexisting with different opinions that she feels from the church in general.
- The connection is a comfort zone it can help us deal with problems by being genuine and caring and keeping focus on God.
- There is a freedom to worship how you feel most comfortable...
- Preferred service.
- Likes casual atmosphere.
- Seems to attract former alcoholics and druggies.
- The breakfast times where we sat with people we didn't know... the bread was moldy.
- Values: 1) adult education (we are hit or miss on that); 2) something for the kids; 3) service.
- Wanted to be part of "new-energy" & started to attend C at its inception. It is a "funky place" - different. Likes the social aspects.

- Experienced the power of the Holy Spirit during one service. Brought a friend who cried because the message and songs were powerful.
- Praise and worship helps us celebrate as a family.
- Feel called to help as a prayer leader.
- Dynamic leadership in Geoff & in youth group.
- Joined church after confirmation. G answered her many questions during confirmation & then encouraged her to settle a conflict with a friend, which she did.
- Attends 9:45 Connection or 11:00 Traditional. Prefers Connection but doesn't always wake up for it.
- Most exciting moment was Christmas Eve service when everyone had to go find someone that told about Jesus' birth. Gave people a role and kids liked it because it was interactive.
- This year just came to church for confirmation and then came back in the evening for youth group. Two hours of church plus youth group is one day too much. Confirmation was "cool" - had a good meaning to it. Joined church afterwards and during confirmation dinner, felt part of the church.
- Attended 8:30 C & friend had passed away. Was moved and cried (though not usually a church crier). Sang a song & felt the Holy Spirit & that everything would be ok.
- Lives far away and teaches SS. Goes to T but would prefer C.
- When it comes together & doesn't feel like just a church service but a community of people (e.g., activities & feeling plugged in).
- Only knew T & didn't like it. Felt bland. C everyone was sitting up, clapping, more relaxed atmosphere.
- Geoff showed video of Hoyts, father & son who do triathlons. Sacrifice & love father showed towards son was moving and powerful. Geoff used video as a launch into his sermon & tied it to God the father & Jesus the Son and the ultimate sacrifice.
- Likes that people of color now attend. Bothered when we were all white.
- Husband went on mission trip. While he was gone 3 people I barely knew reached out to support me. "I was so touched & moved & felt like I was part of a big family."
- Family loved Friday night concert series - suggests doing it once a month.
- Fell in love with Connection service when they were "shopping", Daughter has big connection with the youth group and enjoys it immensely.
- Leaves the service feeling like a better Christian.
- Involved since the beginning, enjoyed seeing the service develop and grow over time.

- Volunteers as a greeter, feels we need to be more aware of visitors at the service.
- Moved by Sara Winston testimonial, and touched by Geoff explaining meaning of kids' names at baptism.
- Liked atmosphere.
- At ease, happy, fulfilled.
- Enjoys carefree atmosphere created by the beautiful and inspiring music in the Connection service.
- At times in the Connection service he has found himself lost in the moment and to him, when that happens it is a great part of his spiritual growth.
- I sometime think about a morning of Connection, Church School and Traditional when I don't have other responsibilities on Sunday morning .
- The format of the Connection with the music, screen and visual images are very pleasing to him, although he cannot make the service and attends Traditional due to scheduling.
- Feels the Connection brought the church to another level of fellowship, especially the youth.
- Likes the casualness of the service and the surroundings. Sharing stories are important.

Music

- Liked music, was inspirational but sometimes too heavy for my taste.
- Worship and music draws her closer to God.
- Enjoyed Bell Choir when they came.
- Jeff Jinks sang fabulous song that brought back memories of songs sung in Catholic Church when he grew up.
- Passionate for music and finds that both services offer he and his family a total spiritual and musical experience that gives them an especially enriching basis for their lives. Exemplary musicianship of David Matthews, Nancy Callaghan will keep him at Traditional.
- Has no quarrel with Connection music but doesn't like seeing the lyrics without the music.
- Loves music.
- Music is primary reason for wanting to come back.
- Enjoyed the music.
- Standing, and clapping and some of the music.... accepting because "the kids like it" including own children.
- Loves the special music.
- Likes the praise music.

- When first started coming to connection... was sick in her body... music was so uplifting.
- In addition that day the music was joyful and upbeat with a mood of celebration.
- Didn't listen to contemporary music before, now it is normal.
- Mostly prefers the music of the Connection.
- Continued to go for the music.
- Son attends C and likes the music but he has a problem with the loud music and acoustics.
- Music helps me to feel closer to Jesus and can see impact on others as well. A song sung by Janette & Roger about redirecting your life to Christ. Brought tears to my eyes. The song filled my heart with faith, understanding of God's love for us.
- Roger's lyrics have helped me connect with spirituality.
- The music opens her heart and her husband's. Went to 1st C service when Sally, Cummings was leader. The music resonates inside. It helps for a wonderful worship, experience.
- When Belinda Womack sang, cried the whole time.
- Sally was there when started attending. She introduced a "pushier" form of worship,
- Music is tremendous part of worship ,
- Likes the upbeat music.
- Likes music - "really cool".
- Main focus has to be music. It has to sound good & people doing it need to be good. Needs to be dark so people focus on God & don't look down on you.
- Attend because of band - more comfortable in T service but loves the music.
- Loves Roger and the music.
- Music is too loud, but likes it anyway.
- Touched by Jeff Jinks memorable song.
- Remembered singing an inspirational song that spoke to him and his situation that day and had the space to move, felt more "connected" than in the traditional service.
- The music at Connection is more entwined in the service because the words relate to the rest of the services.
- The music fills me and keeps me going in the week ahead, not only the sound of the music, but the live band "singing their faith". Likes to read the lyrics and still see the band.

Preaching

- Some sermons were phenomenal.

- Truths that are taught make her think and challenge her walk with God.
- More receptive to JDB's sermons than GK except for one he could remember in which he felt GK was touching and meaningful - a common thread to JDB.
- Bible-based teaching.
- Geoff connects well.
- Sermons are often debated, brings up good family discussion.
- Sermon more relaxed.
- Has always enjoyed Geoff's message .
- Loves Geoff's sermons...Bible based, doesn't soft peddle around Jesus.
- Likes the message.
- Likes preaching.
- The sermon that week was on loving your neighbor and seemed to speak about her current situation.
- She often hears what she needs to in the Connection. ...likes how the preaching shows where in the Bible things come from.
- Message often more personally challenging as a Christian.
- Geoff is a great story teller.
- Geoff starts at pulling it together & challenging us.
- Knows Geoff personally & likes listening to him.
- Geoff has good message and does a good job of relaying it. Traditional gets boring, just sitting there and listening. Geoff keeps us more engaged. John's sermons are more Biblical, but Geoff relates it to stuff that happens in everyday life.
- Geoff and style of preaching.
- Likes subject-based sermons better than sermons built on lectionary where they try to fit it to a subject.
- Loves Geoff and his messages.
- Likes Geoff and style of preaching.
- Geoff does great job and we are blessed to have him.
- Considers Geoff to be highly intelligent and knowledgeable and a perfect fit for PCPC, complements John, excellent preacher with different style than John.
- Liked message.
- Likes the different approaches and presentations in preaching.

Non-Churched / Witness

- Because of my husband's experience, I invited my father and step-father. Both found they were comfortable and were able to let down their guard, relax and actually take in the message. Both have periodically come back to Connection.

- In all scenarios, C has allowed people that have traditionally not felt a connection with the music and sermon of church to get there, connect with people and the message and on personal growth, not the ritual. The atmosphere and energy keeps them interested.
- Brings in a large variety of people which allows our church community to grow.
- Mission work - hands on, love, prayers, gifts...all making a difference.
- Is touched by the church's outreach to a variety of populations that are often ignored...FED ministry, Created, Faith café.
- Recognizes how programs at the church like VBS and Upward have been instrumental in bringing in un-churched. Connection is where they may feel comfortable.
- There is a welcoming atmosphere... neighbor across the street didn't think she would "fit the mold"... felt welcomed and at ease... couldn't believe it was church.
- The witnessing.

Relevant

- Based on life as it is - relates through musicians, stories.
- Geoff understands the biblical perspective, translating into our time, based on life as it is - relates through musicians, stories.
- Geoff willing to touch on sensitive issues.
- Enjoys the service because it is not a worship service in the traditional sense nor Sunday school but something deeper.
- Loves the message, finds it very relevant and believes it connects to the 20 and 30 somethings.
- Geoff's presentation is very modern service that is more "every day", more 2000. calls it a "generational" service.
- Likes that it's so attractive to others in his demographic (30ish with young kids) His kids love it.
- Stories that are often told are relevant.

Growth

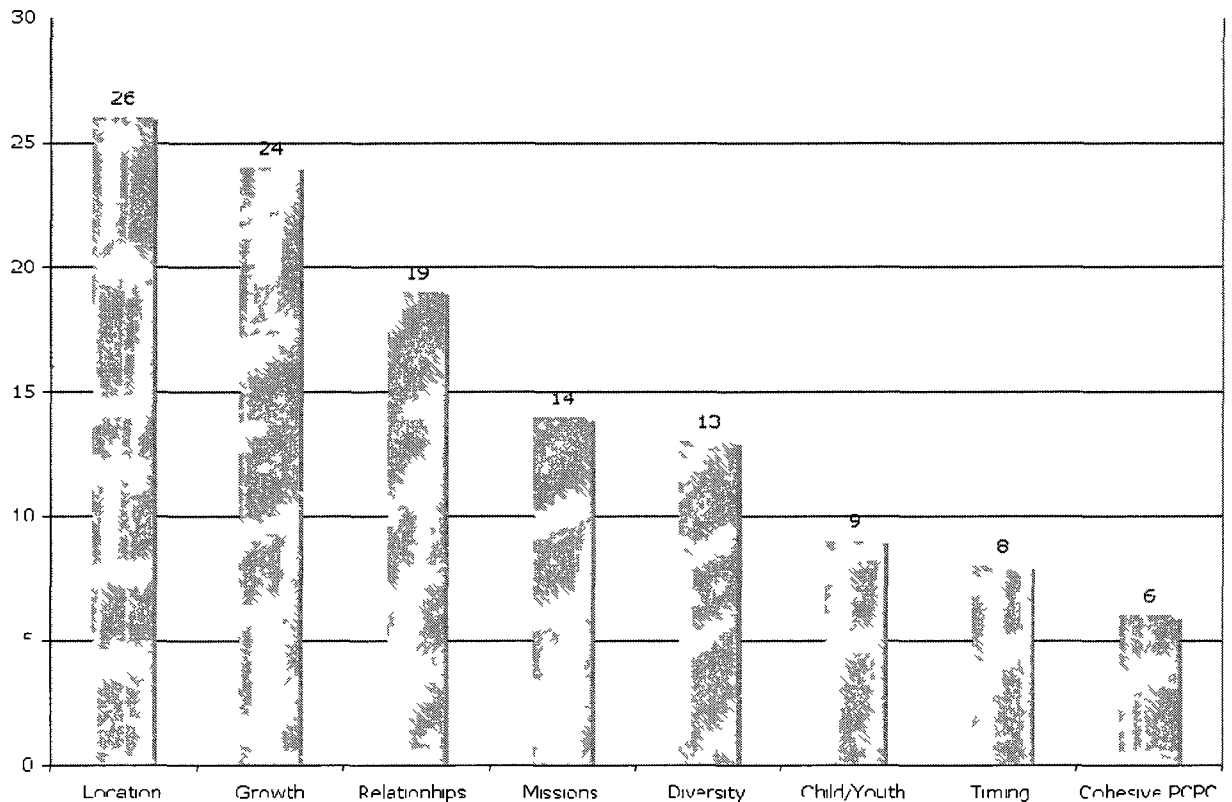
- The church would have lost people that now attend because it is a vibrant service.
- The Connection is the growth element - the church would suffer without it.
- Enjoyed seeing people who left the church return because of the Connection service.
- Young men reconnect their lives through attendance at the service.
- Believes Connection was designed to attract more young people.

Fellowship

- Likes fellowship pre-service.
- Likes the fellowship spin offs from the connection like Sunday night men's gatherings.
- Got a lot out of financial Bible study, donating blood, and mission trip to Gautier.

Missions

- Most important things we do: 1) Sylvia Campbell & medical work; 2) everyone donating to good organizations; 3) all we do for poorer nations and homeless people; 4) church service.



Dreaming: What Has Happened

Location

- Sees bigger places for gathering.
- Meeting in more permanent location designed specifically for more intimate worship - seating in the round, comfortable, eat/drink, easier to hear and see and promote more interaction on a personal level.
- The Connection has outgrown the gym and moved.
- Could see an adaption of present facilities and even growth on present land.
- Could see a parking garage of compatible design with uppermost and lowest levels designed to meet outdoor recreation needs - must be compatible within neighborhood.
- A permanent location ... similar size, on site.
- Would not be happy if the connection left.
- Expects the Connection to have own space, maybe on campus. Recognizes that Gym is not a long term solution.
- Connection would have own building, own fellowship, both groups will benefit.
- Larger space is needed.
- Expanded facilities could help us do more.

- In five years would be in another place and gym environment not a problem. We go to another place in the church or build something new (i.e., a parking garage with a room on top).
- We will have rotational services - in different places (parks, etc.).
- Comfortable being where we are with expanded services.
- Need physical space to grow & need more parking.
- If church moved the contemporary service, that would be ok but it would cause turmoil. Example- my family may want to go to the moved service but I want to go to Sunday school but they are in different places so we would end up arguing. I would want to be where the youth group was. If my parents didn't want to do that, I would be upset .
- Needs to stay at Palma Ceia & figure something out, like utilizing Plant.
- Likes the intimacy of the gym.
- Outgrown the gym, meeting somewhere else, one big Sunday service.
- Service held outside sometimes.
- Sunlight is a part of the future. Envisions open space with little or no physical barriers. Envisions pine straw as a part of the material used.
- The Connection will be meeting the PCPC Sanctuary, due to room constraints and building constraint on our current physical plant. He truly hopes the church does not divide the Connection to another campus, for the damage it could do the whole church and his perception that many members like him enjoy having the option of worshipping in multiple ways or venues in one place.
- The only thing I want to change about the service is the space - to be more worship and less activity. Would see the gym become solely the home of Connection, even it meant losing Upward Basketball.
- A space that feels more focused with art on the walls, clouds on the ceiling, and seats and a stage that didn't have to be torn down each Sunday. A home for Connection, not as a stepchild of the gym.
- expects seating movement - people moving around the area will be a part of the growth of the Connection.
- I see a screen and projector in the Sanctuary as well, to share spaces to bring attendees into both spaces.

Growth

- Positive experience for people who might not come to PCPC.
- Concerned about growth and fire marshal rules. Thinks if the Connection moves, it should be on campus. Possibly put up a new building in the parking lot.
- Expects that the connection group would be out of space but wondered aloud where they would go.
- Growth is a good thing even though change is scary. Growth is inevitable and the grace of God.
- Expansion of church services....good and efficient use of the facilities.
- Hopes that more outreach programs will occur.
- More people responding, getting the message, touching their hearts.

- Like an ameba growing. Some churches don't have space, like in Ybor - they may connect with us. They all have alternative group worship. Connection could become the glove to pull in groups/affiliates. "U2Charist" at Hyde Park Methodist appeals to Connection people.
- C service may be future of PCPC - made up of young people, young professionals, and youth group.
- Don't want to be a mega church. Thinks that the church loses its purpose when there are too many people.
- Get more members - it's a great church. Great foundations & great programs.
- Feels like it's successful already & so doesn't know what they would be striving for.
- Just one big C service rather than 2.
- Expand music nights. Nice way to invite other people who might not come on a regular Sunday because they attend a church.
- Two hour service.
- Saturday evening service.
- Doesn't feel the service will grow to the point that it will need to divide into another church.
- Two services would be full.
- Will outgrow facility within 5 years and will be meeting someplace else.
- More people will attend the service.
- Restricted by parking situation.
- Likes current church size and feels if it grows much more it will become too impersonal.
- Thinks Connection will look the same as it does now, but will continue to grow.
- Service would still be packed but would not want to lose the intimacy.

Relationships – With God and Each Other

- More outreach .
- Parishioners feel part of something deeper.
- Positive experience for those who might not come to PCPC.
- More fellowship and social activities that bring people together to glorify God.
- People connecting, deeper relationships.
- People are meeting outside of church .
- A person is available to talk to, offer counsel after service, maybe a Stevens minister.
- People would know you and miss you.
- People would feel a part of the group and be more involved .
- More intergenerational.
- Very connected, vibrant, young people feel the love.
- The people of the church would be growing in Christ. It would start with families, the neighbors, then strangers... would show love and kindness and it would feel so good, so Jesus...

- Happy with the growth of Connection, what I want to see is a deeper sense of worship and connection within PCPC services.
- People would be really learning worship.
- Would feel more organic - everyone participating. People would feel responsible for their walk. People would have a part - not just listening. Hold hands more. Maybe even dance. Remembers Roger's night concert and kids and parts danced. Everyone has different spiritual gifts. Church would be very alive. It would roll!
- Developed the capacity to be more evangelical.
- Success will come when the Connection service has found a way to assure that each person leaves the service connecting to their walk in Christianity and further their awareness to the importance of that we are all a "work in progress". More formal use of passages from the Bible would help with this aspect.
- He needs to feel the service, not from an entertainment value, though from a spiritual one. Feels the elements are in play at the Connection, just may need to be "harmonized" with more messaging so the service ties together more cohesively.
- A more purposeful congregation that is effective, joyful and empowered.

Missions

- Would like to see focus group or action committee that would identify passive attendees of all services and determine their special interests and encouraging their spiritual growth.
- More mission opportunities in Tampa.
- More participation by Connection members in social work in the community.
- There would be more direct connections within the city, participation in community.
- More events are steered towards the community.
- Taking the message of the connection to the streets in a more profound way would be great, putting the words taught in the Connection into motion in the community.
- More individually motivated programs for evangelism. Like FED and Created, church is able to do more outreach work in the community and world.
- Reach people not being reached.
- Thinks we should start a few churches. Or ministers could groom people like Paul groomed Timothy for ministry.
- The church could double its income or stewardship to give away to homeless - especially Veteran's ministry.
- Would like to see more mission trips.
- Would like to see us more mission oriented. If people went to North Blvd. to see the conditions & the evil & the hate, they would want to help. We could start education classes and teach them computer skills or basic kitchen skills. Transportation is a big problem. We could send out emails to provide transportation.
- Reaching more people, welcome visitors better.
- More opportunity to hear about and join missions - locally and internationally.

Diversity

- Growing into cultural, community and spiritual diversity to a more nuanced alternative to the Traditional population.
- Would like to see action groups encourage gay membership and eventually ordination.
- Feels that gay membership and gay ordination would be welcomed by her and are long overdue.
- Would not encourage ordination of gays but would not resist the church's movement toward that.
- More congregational diversity - racially, age, economic.
- Greater tolerance and diversity.
- More intergenerational.
- Attendees are even more diverse, not just demographically but also in life experiences.
- One night there is a Spanish or Korean service...lots of variety geared to needs in the community.
- We would be pulling in the fringe population of the Tampa area.... people not comfortable in the traditional service .
- We would have reached a new segment of the population not just the middle class
- A larger and more diverse and more committed Connection community, helping other than just on Sundays.
- More African Americans.

Children/Youth

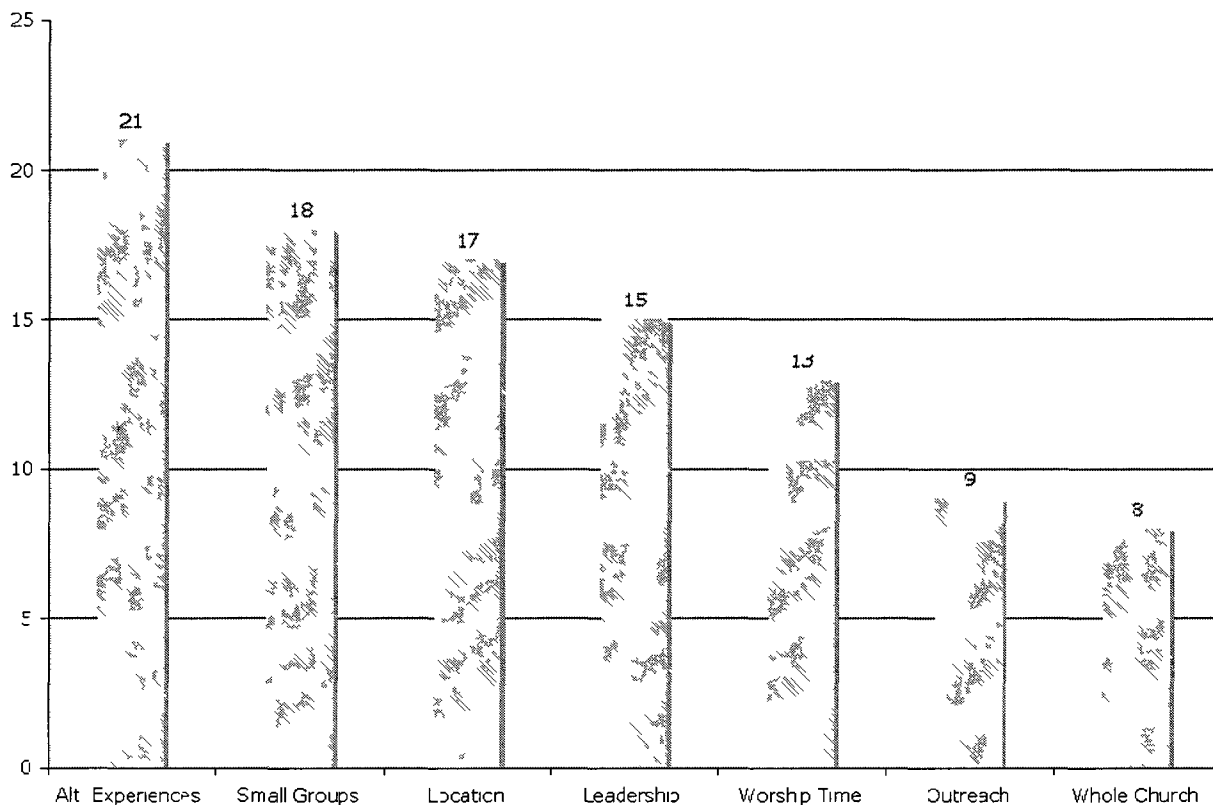
- Children are a part of the service.
- Middle and high school bands have opportunity to perform .
- Kids now prefer the connection.
- Would like to see Youth given opportunities to be more involved and youth playing in band.
- Announce youth activities more in church.

Timing

- More services.
- Service is good, but she likes sanctuary AND wants to go to Sunday school.
- Add another service.
- Traditional and the connection groups would be more distinct would afford more groups to have Sunday school.
- Service would be longer.
- Times are not conducive to membership but the C caters to a different demographic that doesn't want to wake up at 8:30.
- Doesn't see the point of an 8:30 service, b/c so few people attend. Should be later. This would also help attendance at SS

Cohesive Church

- The real dream is to have more integration of the Connection and Traditional services
- Connection recognized as independent and distinct - not an "add on" service.
- Connection is completely accepted, the notion of 2 separate churches would go away.
- Labyrinth on the new Connection area floor as a way of connecting the Connection service with the traditional service and one to each other.
- More shared preaching.



Dreaming: How it Happened

Alternative Experiences / Formats

- We could offer new venues and forums and new aspects to services.
- Fellowship in fellowship hall .
- Structure for people to connect beyond music.
- Members telling personal stories in the service.
- 10 minute "reflection" by a congregant in addition to the sermon in each service.
- Middle and high school bands are a part of the service once per month.
- More votive items with the service, add more religious artifacts to add to the holiness of the area. more symbols and banners.
- Even greater use of audio-visual technologies to share the message .
- Suggested she sees more testimonials in the services.
- Blending of old and new traditions by working together.
- Band would give concerts of Christian music in the evening once per month.
- More sophisticated technical equipment - sound and visual and more people involved with the equipment (now only 3 or 4).
- Have invited a broader base of people to worship (i.e., spiritual poetry night - end with a poem).

- Guest singers, people like Belinda, would be part of our service. We invited 12 people that Sunday and others would be doing the same.
- Feels like youth don't have much role. Need to feel like active members of the community.
- Video screen will be lower to avoid stiff neck.
- More congregational involvement, more open format.
- We launched a night time Connection service.
- Continued creativity and varying of worship formats.
- Occasional guest preachers and more switching between PCPC preachers.

Small Groups / Education

- In-depth bible study (CBS, etc).
- More Bible studies and small groups for people to form closer relationships.
- More elder representation from Connection.
- More small groups and outreach groups.
- Encourage small groups.
- Change time of second service to "not during Sunday school".
- Pull traditional and connection together more.
- Tapes of music available so people can listen in the car.
- Small groups working together with more connections in a deeper involvement.
- Many small groups and greater opportunities for Sunday school.
- To fulfill the capital campaign to build a new building... realizing the purpose and need of pledging to support the church...could be accomplished by small group sessions.
- One way to get there is to prepare support groups what help people find a place.... helping to plug people in and find their purpose.
- Keep trying additional worship study alternatives that might not fit people otherwise.
- The C will benefit from a core group - the NET - that would assume a larger role. Meet more often - on Sunday evenings, etc. Draw more people in. Should be 30 - 40.
- More small groups that meet in people's homes. (e.g., disciplining a child, investing, etc.)
- Enhanced / Growth of the Christian Education program by adjusting times and perhaps "cyber" classes with occ. Face-to-face meetings.
- We launched a Christian education program for the 9:45 Connection attendees.
- More mention and support for small groups - more support for focused small groups.

- Couples Bible study.

Location

- Connection is out of Gym. Would be ok with letting the Connection open up another church.
- Suggests 3 services in Sanctuary.
- Structure of the service (time, setup, etc) is fine but need better facilities.
- Connection is out of the gym - "love is letting go of fear" can't be afraid of a vacuum.
- More church-like, more like a sanctuary. Maybe a communion table with "this do in remembrance of Me" on the front.
- Set up the pulpit and stage so it doesn't need to be torn down every week. More permanent and sanctuary-like.
- Larger space needed... specifically mentioned the Plant high School Gym.
- Would like to see the properties to the north, owned by the church, used for expansion. A new chapel built to house the connection.
- Need to move to the sanctuary to fit more people, add screens and sound systems in main sanctuary.
- Space issue cannot be solved in 2 years.
- Have guides or something so that new people don't get lost.
- Wants to expand influence to all of Tampa.
- Ministry has been very successful and will continue to grow, but at some point the Connection needs its own facility, as part of PCPC.
- Thinks the Church has a vision of building a first class worship center and parking garage with the worship center being on the first floor.
- I want to redesign the multi-purpose room to be a contemporary worship space. It will be fine if the other numbers of activities are limited that can happen there. Could try to build a gym at the north end of the parking lot.
- Fix Connection space and make it more a worship space.

Leadership

- An action committee came up with steps and an action plan.
- Connection is self-sustaining.
- Congregation finding new ways to reach into the community to people who maybe never have come to church.
- A general maturing of faith, spiritual maturing.
- It seems the church as a whole, including C attendees, could be more alert to people coming into the church.

- Dedicated worship space.
- Leadership and constant assessment and response.
- Visitor greeter people seeking out new attendees.
- Greeter in the beginning and end of service.
- "Go to" person is in place to talk to re: a concern.
- Hire additional ministers to help with connection service.
- Sections of congregation are challenged to get to know each other.
- The church needs leadership with youth group (like First Presbyterian).
- Need two leaders in each service; more people involved & more staff, Need resources & higher level of commitment in time and dollars.
- Crossover is powerful - Geoff & John.

Worship Time

- Timing - alleviate conflict with Sunday school - modified or additional times, create a new format with short service and intensive small group study could encourage more study and more fellowship.
- Suggests an 11:00 Connection service so families can go to Sunday school and so the Connection and Traditional Church people can be more integrated.
- More fellowship time before and after services.
- More testimonies, verbal prayer requests and people bringing their Bibles and using them.
- Connection service at 11:00.
- Maybe have a Wednesday night service, even more casual (jeans and shorts) with a meal and classes afterward.
- Service would be longer.
- Need more services in the evenings and afternoons.
- 9:45 service times kill Sunday school opportunities.
- The 8:30 service grows or times change. Maybe have services at 9:45 and 11:00.
- Can't go to Connection if helping out with Sunday school because of living far from church. Would appreciate time change of Connection.
- Missed and wants an adult Sunday school, a time that doesn't interfere with Connection.
- Adjust times of the service to add an evening Connection and change the Sunday times so there is time for one service to leave before another to minimize parking problems.

Outreach

- Expand the ministry to the un-churched - bring more people to the light.
- Lectures or sponsoring something that would bring people to the church like national authors Ron Hall and Denver Moore who wrote "same kind of different as me" or musicians or a Christian parody band like the "apologetics"
- We accomplish these goals by waking up everyday and telling someone how good God has been to us.
- Sees people getting out of their chairs and into the community to show all the love of Jesus to those who do not know him.
- Put a sign outside that says "come and join us." His friends would need to know that they didn't have to dress up - you could put that on the sign.
- Everyone would want to help & be involved. We would be a light.
- More promoting & advertising about various ministries in church.

Whole Church

- Find a way for members to be able to attend both kinds of services in the same day. This will start to reduce feeling of The Other. Cross pollination of music may also be possible. Unwritten dress codes will be less important in future.
- Actively promote closer ties between Contemporary and Traditional population, perhaps by encouraging changing of seating at Dinners.
- Make sure there is an adequate budget for church service functions.
- We give a lot. What is the giving level (%) of Connection attendees?
- Find out how we get together to make it church. Idea: Find out where there is mutual interest.
- More Sunday school classes that appeal to different age groups. Mike Peacock's class could be promoted better to young people.

Other / Comments

- There was a time when I was burnt out on the church, but I love the life of Jesus, I feel passionately about breaking down the walls the church has put up to divide communities. A reminder that God loves everybody. I want to be more inclusive.
- We became intrigued with Mike Peacock's class so we attend Sunday school instead of Connection. Given our age and how we think and feel, we are not as comfortable in C, although we aren't comfortable in Traditional svc either. I am a contrarian. But Jesus is my guide. I am not interested in emotional worship - Christians need to be engaged in the social Gospel. my hopes are for the whole church.
- I think the way of accomplishing this is just by doing it.
- Keep asking people to get involved.
- Connection service by itself is not enough involvement for a person in the church.
- Always have greeters at the door, make the service more welcoming for newcomers.
- Solve parking problem somehow.
- Have a coordinator for welcomers at the door.
- Sharing of music between the Connection and Traditional services. Sampling of contemporary music in Traditional service and some liturgy in the Connection service. States that music is the door that opens the spirit, mind and heart - which when applied will expand the Connection.
- We must challenge our comfort zones in order to increase relationships.
- Cross pollination between the traditional service and Connection have been advanced so that more members take advantage of this unique part of PCPC life.
- 9:45 service does not allow those attending to go to Sunday school.

APPENDIX D

DRAMATIC SCENES

Scenes from “The Thread” by Geoff Kohler

All Rights Reserved

Performance Rights held by Emory Colvin (www.dramaticencounter.com)**Ruby –** *(an attractive young woman wearing stylish clothes)*

This is it. This is the place. I’m just sitting in Starbucks having just spent my last \$1.75.

[looking down and a little ashamed] It’s hard to think of that moment again. That \$1.75 was 3 quarters, 5 dimes, 8 nickels, and 10 pennies.

[She thinks and then speaks inwardly weighing the amounts] 3 quarters, 5 dimes, 8 nickels and 10 pennies. It was all I had. Could find.

That was... all I was wor... had was \$1.75.

Hard to believe. But it was all there. All in Starbucks.

I sit down with my cup of decaf... Verona. Funny, I can remember that. I can remember everything. I sat in one of the soft chairs but I couldn’t lean back. Every thing hurt. I was so thin. I was thinking how I had to get something to eat. It was three days at that point.

I was cold... it was the air conditioning, and I was so glad I was wearing a sweater. Anyhow... I tried sitting still just holding the coffee and trying to make it last, trying to make believe that it was going to fill me up. I must have put six sugars in the thing. I could feel them hit. Isn’t it weird when you can actually feel the food start getting absorbed by your body? Ever feel that? It’s like hearing the gas hit the tank when you start filling up your car. I mean, there was nothing in me.

That day in Starbucks, I could almost hear the coffee hit the bottom of my stomach. I could feel the sugar hit, that’s for sure.

For a second I thought about going home. I’m sitting there and tears well up in my eyes as I thought about my dad... my dad and what he became as I got older and what he was like and how my mom wouldn’t listen to me and how finally I just got away. I got away. I wasn’t going back.

I was sitting in Starbucks crying into my coffee and this girl gets up and comes over.. She’s in black and has this big, black bag over her shoulder and she rips off this big sheet of paper from this huge pad she’s got. She walks over to me says, “I was watching. I’m sorry. I hope you don’t mind.” And then she kind of stammered something. Not sure, but she held out the paper and says, “here... sell it to someone. It’ll help.”

And it was this picture of me. It was like with three different colors, like pencil and then red ink and then blue ink, but it was me, coffee cup, thin as a rail but... I remember the eyes. It was like she could see everything, inside me. I looked at it so long. I couldn’t

believe... I mean... before I walked in that store I was thinking about selling myself... to anybody... just some way to get food. And when I looked up she was already gone.

I stood up and walked out to find her. And there across the street was the gallery, "Rick's New Art". It was like I was pushed across the street through the door. After standing like a dope in the middle of the place, this guy walks up to me... there was no one else there and I hold out the drawing.

You should have seen his face. He saw exactly what I did and he couldn't take his eyes off it either. And then he said, "You, you did this? It's a self-portrait or how did..." And I told him. He couldn't believe that I had no idea who had drawn this, but I told him she said to sell it. Then he said, "Huh... she signed it... something." And he said he'd buy it. He went in the back and came out with a check for \$250. I started to cry. I couldn't believe it. It was like there was a God or something. And he had me sit down and I just sobbed out the whole story for him. Just told him everything.

He made a couple of phone calls. Got his wife down there. They had an apartment upstairs and they just took me in. They helped me get this work, modeling. And the rest is... like they say... the rest.

We never found this girl. I figured she was like some college student but I didn't really get a good look. I mean who knows. She saved my life and I have no idea. Rick and Gloria, that's his wife, they brought me to church with them. They're basically helping me grow up. But I'm still wondering who saved me.

Rachel (a young, artsy woman, late teens)

So this is what it's like. I just go around and talk with people. It's not some big deal. I just live my life. It's okay. My life's okay. [responding] What's it like? It's like I'm holding on to something that's getting me through. Sometimes I'm like really in on it and I get it and other times I'm like wandering in the dark, but I always have this... ah, whatever... that I'm holding onto.

It's like... I remember this one day, I saw this guy from school and all of a sudden I didn't mind talking to him. It was okay to just talk. So, I said hi and I just asked him if he believed in God. [responding] No for real, [laughing] I did.

At that point I sort of started conversations that way. It was just so weird finding people who knew what I was talking about. But, like that kid that day, he was just kind of confused. Didn't really know anything. I realized he was Hillary's boyfriend. But I was just talking those days about what was biggest to whoever I met. I just told him. You know, this thing I'm holding onto. We're not alone. There's a bunch of other stuff, but that was almost everything for me right then. We're not alone.

That's what I told him. [laughing again] He probably thought I lost it. I was so weird. But it was okay. I talked with Ms. Grant, you know the guidance counselor, about it and she was... well, she wasn't so..., I mean after I calmed her down. She was freaking out apologizing and telling me that she crossed some lines or something. And I finally just told her we were cool and I just wanted to know how to find out more about Jesus. It was weird. It was like she didn't even realize she said Jesus that day when she got mad. But anyhow... she was like real surprised I even had a Bible. It wasn't any big deal. I picked it up at the book store. I told her they have a whole section. I get books there and then sit in the Starbucks section and read.

And that's it. At least that's usually it. I remember one day I was sketching people in the Starbucks area. People just waiting for the bus outside the window, or people reading the paper. There was this girl. She was sitting there sipping her coffee. She looked like a model, you know. She's probably in there like every day. She probably meets like everybody she knows there. But I couldn't take my eyes off her. And I kept feeling like I had to draw her. It wasn't like when I was just sketching everybody else. It was like I just knew I had to draw her. And I just went nuts, working as fast as I could, but she wasn't moving. I kept waiting for her to take a sip of coffee and it was like she was sipping once every 5 minutes or so. She was so still.

And all of a sudden she was crying. Tears were just full in her eyes, but not spilling out. And I just drew it all. [thinks] So weird. And then... I was thinking. Something's really wrong. She looks perfect, but something is really wrong.

Who knows? But I'm just hanging on, you know. But I sure thought that she needed to talk to someone. And I'm sitting there looking at this picture I drew and I thought, okay, now I have this picture. So I just got up and gave it to her and apologized.

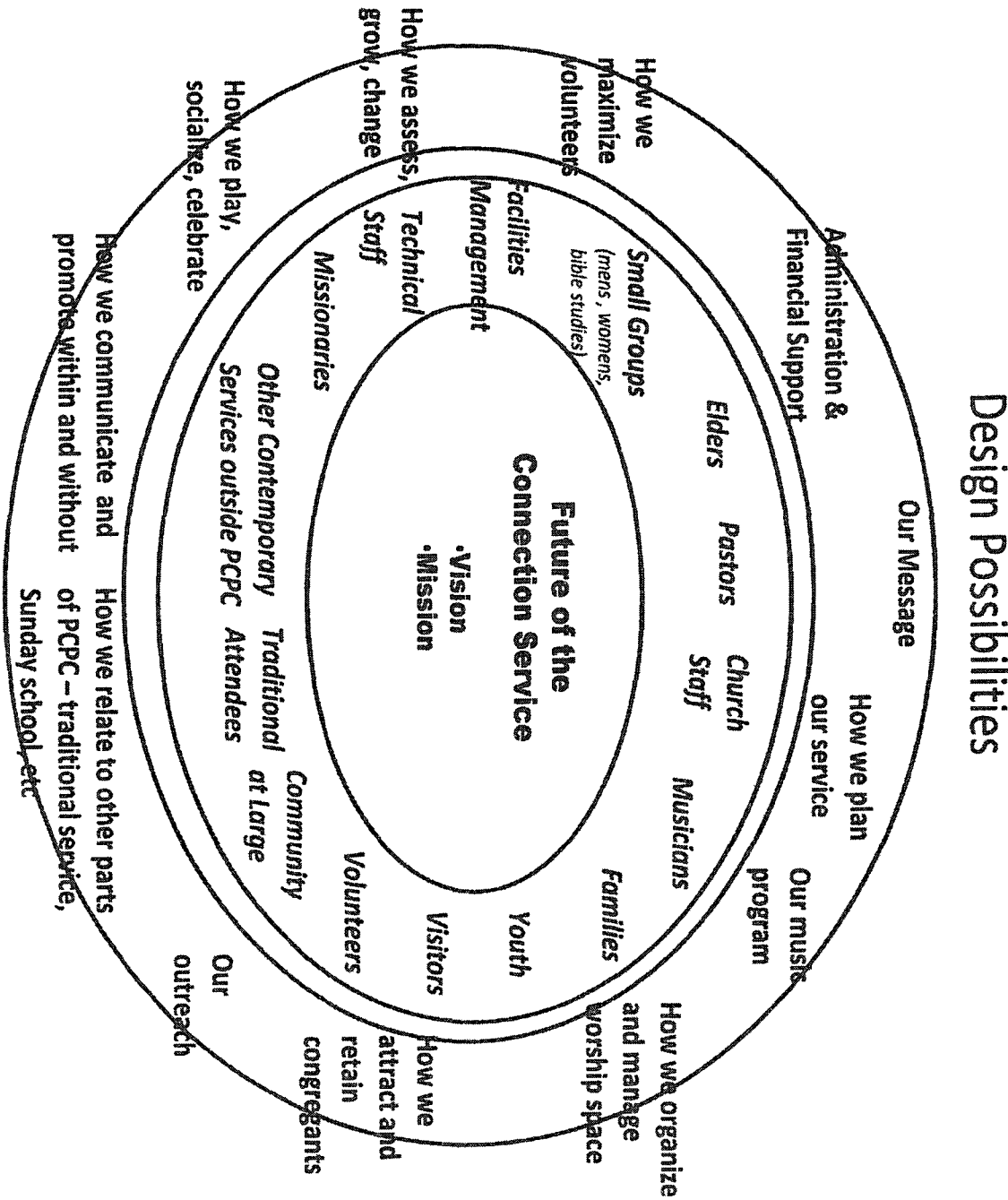
[responding] Huh? I don't know. I felt kind of weird watching her, you know. But I said, "Tell it to somebody. It'll make you feel better." I didn't think I was the one she needed, but I figured if she just got it out to someone, you know? So, I gave her the picture. People seem to like to have pictures of themselves. I hope it made her feel a little better.

[responding] Yeah... she's probably telling people. This whacked girl came up to me and handed me some goofy looking picture of myself and said something random. So strange.

But I don't know. I don't really care. I mean like it doesn't bother me. You know. I'm just trying to pay attention. I'm just trying to follow when I think he's talking to me. I'm just hanging on. [thinks for a moment] Seems to be working.

APPENDIX E

DESIGN MAP



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barth, Karl. *Prayer*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985.
- Cannon, Delores. *Jesus and the Essenes*. Huntsville: Ozark Mountain Publishing, Inc., 2000.
- Cooperrider, David L., and Diana Whitney. *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005.
- Denning, Stephen. *The Secret Language of Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. *The Complete Sherlock Holmes, A Scandal in Bohemia*. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1930.
- Groeschel, Benedict J., O. F. M., Cap. *Listening at Prayer*. Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984.
- Hunter III, George G. *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972.
- Millard, Alan. *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.
- Moschella, Mary Clark. *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008.
- Pattison, Stephen, and James Woodward, . *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2000.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2003.
- Savage, Carl, and William Presnell. *Narrative Research in Ministry*. Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008.
- Senge, Peter, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence*. New York: Random House, 2005.
- Swinton, John, and Harriet Mowat. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. London: SCM Press, 2007.

Tickle, Phyllis. *The Great Emergence*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009.

Whitney, Diana, and Amanda Trosten-Bloom. *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2003.

Willard, Dallas. *Hearing God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999.

Website

—. *The Bible and Interpretation*. 2000.

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Millard_Jesus.htm (accessed January 28, 2011).

Sound Recording

Springsteen, Bruce. *Born in the USA*. Comp. Bruce Sprintsteen. 1984.

VITA

PERSONAL DATA

Full Name: Geoffrey Stuart Kohler

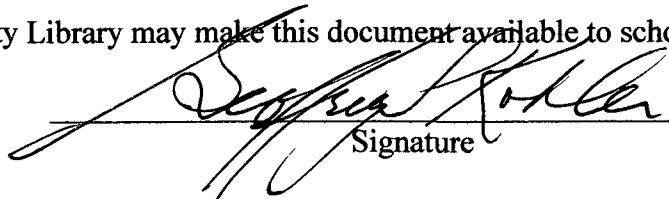
Place and Date of Birth: Amityville, New York; August 19, 1954

Parents Names: George and Darlene Kohler

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

	<u>School (Name and Address)</u>	<u>Degree</u>	<u>Date</u>
Secondary:	Babylon Jr./Sr. High School 50 Railroad Avenue Babylon, NY 11702	High School Diploma	1972
Collegiate:	Barrington College Barrington, RI 02806	Bachelor of Arts	1976
Graduate:	Fuller Theological Seminary 135 N. Oakland Ave. Pasadena, CA 91182	Master of Arts in Theology	1978
	Princeton Theological Seminary 64 Mercer St. Princeton, NJ 08542	Master of Divinity	1987
	Drew University 36 Madison Ave. Madison, NJ 07940	Doctor of Ministry	2011

I understand that the Drew University Library may make this document available to scholars and other Libraries.


Signature

Geoffrey S. Kohler

Name, typed

April 28, 2011

Date