

CULTIVATING A COMMUNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT:  
ASSESSING MISSIONAL IDENTITY AMONG NEW MEMBERS  
AT CHURCH OF THE PILGRIMS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

By

Jeffrey K. Krehbiel  
B.A., Hope College, 1982  
M.Div., McCormick Theological Seminary, 1986

A Doctor of Ministry Project Report  
submitted to the faculty of  
Columbia Theological Seminary  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of  
Doctor of Ministry  
2004

## COPYING AGREEMENT

In presenting this Doctor of Ministry Project Report as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry degree from Columbia Theological Seminary, I agree that the library of the school shall make it available for inspection and circulation in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type.

I agree that permission to copy from or to publish this document may be granted by the professors under whose direction it was written when such copying or publication is solely for scholarly purposes and does not involve potential financial gain.

It is understood that any other copying from or publication of this Project Report will not be allowed without written permission of the author.

---

Jeffrey K. Krehbiel

ABSTRACT

CULTIVATING A COMMUNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT:  
ASSESSING MISSIONAL IDENTITY AMONG NEW MEMBERS  
AT CHURCH OF THE PILGRIMS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

by

Jeffrey K. Krehbiel

February 2004

37 pages

This project explores the formation of a “missional” identity among new members. Through a four-week Bible study exploring missional themes and a survey, participants in the study were asked to reflect on how their involvement in the life of the congregation shaped their perceptions. Three factors emerged as key in shaping a new member’s identity: (1) the congregation’s own publicly stated commitments and practices; (2) the strong and visible presence within the congregation of veteran members who visibly embody and model the life of Christian discipleship; and (3) participation in corporate worship, particularly the sacraments.

Writing in the introduction to *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, the first volume produced by the Gospel and Our Culture Network, an ecumenical team of North American church leaders and theologians concerned with recovering the missionary character of the contemporary church, George Hunsberger names the question that is at the heart of their concern:

How can we be a distinctly American church that does not merely mimic the cultural designs of the society but embodies a powerful version of what it is like to be a community shaped by the gospel and its alternative way of seeing and doing things? (xvi)

Following the paradigmatic program of the late British missiologist Leslie Newbigin, Hunsberger defines the church's mission as the call to represent the reign of God as a "sign, instrument, and foretaste" (15). It is to do this not just in its words or deeds, but in its very life. Thus the recovery of the missionary character of the church requires a move from concern with "program" to "embodiment," from the church as a "place where" certain things happen, to the cultivation of a community that understands itself as God's "sent people." Hence, the church's very style of life constitutes a "missionary dialogue" with the culture, as the church forms its common life around a vision of the reign of God (10). Writing in the second volume to emerge from the Network, the Mennonite church leader Lois Barrett describes the church as an alternative culture:

If Christian faith makes any difference in behavior, then the church in conformity with Christ is called to an alternative set of behaviors, an alternative ethic, an alternative kind of relationships, in dialogue with the surrounding cultures. Its difference is itself a witness to the gospel. (Guder:119)

This Project Report is concerned with the formation of such a “missional” community. Within the context of our contemporary North American culture, how does the church come to understand itself as a community of alternative values and practices, in which its common life is itself a witness to the gospel? More specifically, as new members become a part of the community of faith, what are those practices within congregational life that most contribute to their self-understanding as a part of a missional church?

## **Section I: Theoretical Perspectives**

### **Cultivating A Missional Community**

In the sixth chapter of *Missional Church*, Inagrace Dietterich describes the cultivation of missional communities through participation in certain ecclesial practices. The church, she writes, is challenged to form a people with distinctive habits of the heart, embodying the way of Christ as an alternative social reality (152). Regular and intentional participation in these ecclesial practices is the way in which God forms the church as a witness to the gospel. Thus these practices not only form and guide the internal life of the community, but also “model and proclaim a different way of life to a watching world” (182).

Following the definition of social practices articulated by Alasdair MacIntyre, Dietterich includes, specifically, liturgical practices among those that are central to the formation of missional communities. She explores, in particular, baptism, Eucharist,

reconciliation, discernment, and hospitality. Each of these share a common pattern as they are based on and shaped by the witness of Scripture, while witnessing to the inbreaking of God's reign in Jesus Christ. Therefore they "derive from, depend on, and participate in his redemptive ministry" (181). The cultivation of missional communities through these ecclesial practices is itself the very mission of the church. Quoting Norman Kraus:

The life of the church *is* its witness. The witness of the church *is* its life. The question of authentic witness is the question of authentic community. (182)

The cultivation of a people who follow the way of Jesus Christ is a lifelong process of participation in a community that seeks in its common life to embody the gospel. In his chapter "Missional Leadership," Alan Roxburgh writes that it is Jesus himself who provides the model for church leaders to follow, as he invited the disciples into a "dynamic, reciprocal interaction between demonstrating the nature of that reign himself and teaching about its meaning" (Guder:186). Following Paul's account of leadership in the fourth chapter of Ephesians, Roxburgh defines the task of leadership as "to equip the saints for the work of ministry" so that they can "lead a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called" (Eph 4:12). In our individualistic culture, this requires the formation of a covenant community strong enough to define its own identity over against the ascendant culture (Guder:200), a community that understands itself as "sign and foretaste, agent and instrument" of the reign of God. Thus the primary image that Roxburgh suggests for the missional church is "the pilgrim people, moving in and toward the reign of God" (Guder:204).

Of necessity, this means that leadership in the missional church is not confined to the clergy. Rather, what is needed is a covenant community of leaders within the broader community of the church who intentionally model an alternative way of life by taking on certain commitments, practices, and disciplines that make them a distinct, missionary community (Guder:208). Again, this reflects the model of Jesus' own ministry, in which he chose a group of disciples who were called to a higher level of commitment, while at the same time inviting many to come and see what he was doing and participate in his ministry. The role of leaders in the covenant community is to invite people on a journey toward a particular set of values and commitments. Thus within the larger community people are on a continuum, moving toward covenant commitment, toward disciplined witness, from "centered, open-ended exploratory engagement with the gospel toward bounded, covenanted, accountable, missional commitment to the community's witness to God's reign in Christ" (Guder:212). Wherever individuals fall along that continuum, however, the constant goal of the missional community as a whole is to be God's witness in the world.

Therefore, in its outreach to new members, the church is working to re-form "a collection of consumer, needs-centered individuals to live by an alternative narrative" (Guder:200). Resisting the agenda of the dominant culture for the church to be merely a vendor of religious goods and services (Guder:202), the primary agenda of church leaders is not to meet the needs of either the churched or the unchurched. Rather, it is to cultivate a missional community whose life is a witness to the way of Jesus Christ.

### Excursus: On the Sacraments

In reflecting on the place of Christian practices in the formation of missional communities, it is worth taking special note of Miroslav Volf's treatment of the sacraments in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices In Christian Life*. Building upon the important work of Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra (Bass:1997), Volf reflects upon the complex relationship between belief and practice. On the one hand, Christian beliefs are foundational to Christian practice. For example, beliefs about who Christ is and what Christ did provide the norm for the Christian practice of hospitality. In the same way, belief in a merciful God compels one to act in merciful ways. Thus we typically think about the relationship between belief and practice using an "as-so" structure. As God has loved us, *so* we love our fellow human beings. Christian practices, therefore, are by definition normatively shaped by Christian beliefs. Moreover, Christian beliefs by their very nature imply certain behaviors as a response. As Volf puts it:

Espousing a belief puts pressure upon the one who believes to act accordingly. Put more generally, basic Christian beliefs *as beliefs* entail practical commitments. (253)

On the other hand, in actual human experience, practices often come first. People come to believe either because they are already engaged in Christian practices or they find themselves attracted to them. In most cases, Christian practices come first and Christian beliefs come later. Volf offers the winsome example of his parents' hospitality to a gruff member of his father's Pentecostal church while he was growing up as a child in his native Yugoslavia. The way his parents practiced hospitality, Volf writes, profoundly shaped the way he came to understand basic Christian beliefs. He writes:

People make Christian beliefs their own and understand them in particular ways partly because of the practices to which they have been introduced—in which their souls and bodies have been trained—in the course of their lives. Put differently, by being attracted to and habituated in a set of practices, they have embraced the set of beliefs that sustain these practices and that are inscribed in them. (256)

While the norm for all practices is grounded in Christian belief, the relationship between Christian beliefs and the sacraments is more direct. In the sacraments, core Christian beliefs are *normatively inscribed*. In the same way, the sacraments *ritually enact* normative patterns for Christian practices (248). Thus, it is the Lord’s Table, in which the most basic Christian beliefs are ritually enacted, that provides the normative pattern for his parents’ hospitality. But hospitality is not the only practice that the Eucharist undergirds. The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is a summary of the “whole of Christian life” (249). In the same way, Bass and Dykstra conclude, baptism is not so much a distinct practice as it is the liturgical summation of all the Christian practices:

Here all the practices are present in crystalline form—forgiveness and healing, singing and testimony, Sabbath-keeping and community shaping, and all the others. (Volf:31)

Thus, in Christian worship each of the Christian practices is given guidance. “Worship distills the Christian meaning of the practices and holds them up for the whole community to see” (Bass:9).

## **Section II: Exploring My Local Context**

Church of the Pilgrims in Washington, D.C., was founded in 1903 as the Second Presbyterian Church (South) by the Presbyterian Church of the United States. Seventeen years later, it was designated as the “national church” of the PCUS and “re-founded” as

Church of the Pilgrims. Inspired in part by Hebrews 11:13 (“We confess ourselves strangers and pilgrims on earth”), the congregation and its leaders conceived of the church’s mission as providing a home away from home to southern Presbyterian men and women who were flocking to the nation’s capital in the wake of the first World War. With support from the General Assembly, the congregation’s pastor, Walter Reid Bird, traveled throughout the south raising funds for the completion of a new building that would be a fitting symbol of its newfound status. Southern Presbyterians gave nearly \$400,000. Yet as William Thompson writes in his history of the congregation:

The real ‘pay-off’ of Dr. Bird’s many solicitation trips, however, was in the tremendous goodwill and publicity that had been spread abroad throughout the South. With as many as 10,000 individual donors, it was inevitable that many of these people should feel that they had made a direct investment in *this* particular church in the Nation’s Capital, and so when their children and grandchildren moved to the metropolitan area in later years, they were often instructed by their families to “go to that church we helped pay for.” *And they did.* (6)

For the next several decades its status as the national church was a central part of the church’s identity. In the 1950s, as the city’s population boomed, the congregation’s membership peaked at just under 1,000 members. In the late 1950s, each of those dynamics began to change. After forty-five years as pastor, Dr. Bird retired. In 1956, just as the city and nation were on the cusp of tumultuous change, the church called 27-year-old John Randolph Taylor, a blue-blood southern Presbyterian completing doctoral studies in theology at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, as its new pastor. With virtually no previous pastoral experience, Dr. Taylor led the church in dramatic new directions. Called a year and a half after the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision,

Dr. Taylor was a strong advocate for integration in both church and society, a stance that alienated much of the church's southern constituency. A highlight of Dr. Taylor's ministry was his leadership on behalf of the 1963 "March on Washington." Disturbed that the PCUS had not officially sponsored the march, Dr. Taylor organized a southern Presbyterian contingent on his own. When Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, the 34-year-old minister was right there on the platform with him (Thompson:7). Later that same decade, returning from the 1965 "March to Selma," Dr. Taylor joined with other local pastors to found "For the Love of Children" (FLOC), a children's advocacy organization still in existence to this day.

The result was a shift in the congregation's primary identity away from the South and toward their local urban context. The shift away from the South was made complete by reunion when the PCUS merged with the UPC(USA), and Pilgrims was no longer the national church. Under the leadership of Dr. Taylor's successors, the congregation became increasingly involved in the welfare of the city, first through outreach to the local "hippie" population of its Dupont Circle neighborhood, and later by providing sanctuary to refugees and illegal immigrants, feeding and housing the homeless, providing shelter to unwed Hispanic mothers, and most recently, by embracing the growing gay and lesbian population of its surrounding neighborhood. The church's longest-standing mission program, founded in 1973, is "The Pilgrimage," a youth hostel which hosts visiting youth and college groups, engaging them in service-learning projects focused on urban poverty and homelessness.

In recent years, however, the congregation has struggled with its sense of identity and purpose as both former heydays, first as the national church and then as a leader in the Civil Rights movement, have receded into distant memory. When I became pastor in the summer of 2000, the church had struggled through nearly ten years of transition in pastoral leadership. The congregation's membership had receded from its 1950s peak of over 900 to less than 200. The once grand building, though still an imposing and beautiful structure, was beginning to look a little dog-eared through years of deferred maintenance. The "disestablishment" of the mainline church, which impacted every congregation in the nation, hit urban churches such as Pilgrims particularly hard. While in an earlier era, when Dr. Taylor or his successors' prophetic words reverberated not only through the southern Presbyterian church but literally through the halls of Congress, it is no longer clear that anyone cares what the church has to say. Moreover, the congregation's many outreach programs had become increasingly difficult to maintain with a small congregation suffering "compassion fatigue."

Nevertheless, there remain at Pilgrims a small but vibrant congregation passionately committed to the city, to social justice, and to extending the congregation's legacy. Since becoming pastor three years ago, I have endeavored to lift up the "missional church" as a paradigm for understanding the congregation's identity and purpose in relation to world. The missional church paradigm offers, I believe, a helpful way to reconceive the church's mission and ministry in a manner not tied to the church's presumed status in the world, as it was in earlier generations. To paraphrase Tertullian,

the greatness of Christianity lies not in its being accommodated to the world, but in its distinctiveness.

Over the past three years we have received twenty-one new members, most under the age of 40, and many with little or no previous church background. Despite assumptions that few “families” live near the church, the nursery has grown from one child under the age of four to fourteen. These couples have come, however, not because of our children’s programs, but because of the diversity and commitments of the congregation. In 2001 the congregation became a “More Light” church, in recognition of the many gay and lesbian members serving in leadership positions. We have recently become involved in a city-wide church-based community organizing project affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation. Two years ago the church started an after-school arts program for students at a neighboring junior high school. Meanwhile, long-standing outreach programs such as Open Table, a Sunday afternoon meal served to the homeless, and the Pilgrimage, continue with strong support under newer leadership. All of this as the congregation continues to struggle with the financial burden of maintaining such a large building.

The most visible and dramatic changes since my arrival have taken place in worship. With the encouragement of the congregation’s membership and leadership, I have introduced a more participatory style of worship. There is more sharing and interaction within the worship service. The music has been broadened to include a wider diversity of styles, from traditional hymns and classical repertoire, to contemporary songs led on guitar and Taiz<sup>▲</sup> chants. We regularly convene worship planning teams consisting

of members of the congregation together with the me, my associate, and the director of music, to plan special services and seasons. As opposed to the “seeker-sensitive” notions of contemporary worship that focus on action in the front with the congregation as “audience,” we have endeavored to draw deeply on the symbols of the faith, particularly the sacraments, to engage the worshiper as a whole person, mind and body, thoughts and feelings. To borrow an acronym from Leonard Sweet, we try to create a worship experience that is EPIC: **E**xperiential, **P**articipatory, **I**mage-driven, and **C**onnectional.

### **Section III: Research on New Member Formation**

#### Methodology

On four Mondays in June 2003, I convened eleven new members of the congregation for Bible study around “Missional Church” themes. The intent of the Bible study was to introduce a common vocabulary to describe their experience, and begin the process of reflecting on the relationship between their Christian faith, their participation in the life of the congregation, and our contemporary culture. Each week I presented core concepts of the Missional Church paradigm, along with a text that explored missional themes. The Bible study method I employed was based on Walter Wink’s *Transforming Bible Study*. The method is inductive, interactive, and holistic. I often presented the text to the group in a storytelling fashion. Questions were prepared to lead the group into the text, inviting them to explore the dynamics of the story without my providing “answers.”

Finally, each week concluded with exercises designed to invite reflection on their own experience in relation to the text (see appendix A).

The first week we studied Mark 11:27–33 and 12:13–17 (Jesus’ conflict with the religious leaders), focusing on the tension between what belongs to God and what belongs to “Caesar.” The exercise asked where in their own lives they experienced a tension between the demands of the culture and the demands of their faith. The second week we read Matthew 5:13–16 and Luke 13:18–21, (images of salt, light, mustard seed, and yeast), and explored the call to be a minority community that transforms the larger culture. The concluding exercise asked where they experience the community of faith at Church of the Pilgrims as “salt, light, or mustard seed.” The third week we focused on the Beatitudes from Matthew 5 and the Great Commission of Matthew 28:16–20, exploring what it means to be called as community of alternative values and practices. In the exercises, they were invited to reflect on their own experience of being “taught” and “discipled” since becoming a part of our congregation. Finally, the fourth week we explored Ephesians 4:1–16, asking what it means to equip leadership in the Missional Church. Participants were then asked to reflect on the ways in which they have been “equipped” for ministry through their participation in the life of the congregation.

Through out the four-week study, I kept a personal journal, recording my own reflections following each session. At the conclusion of the Bible study, each participant was given a fourteen-question survey, asking them to recount their past and present church involvement, testing their own perceptions of Church of the Pilgrims as a Missional Church, and encouraging them to reflect on how their own involvement in the

life of the congregation shaped their perceptions (see appendix B). Ten of the eleven participants returned the survey. Following a preliminary analysis of the data, I reconvened the group for their feedback on my conclusions. In addition, I shared my data and conclusions with a colleague in a peer review of my study.

### Demographics and Participation

Of the ten participants who returned surveys, six were women and four were men. They ranged in age from 25 to 43 years of age (for an average age of 33), and had been attending from between eighteen and thirty-six months (for an average of two years). Eight of the ten attended church as least somewhat as a child. All reported a significant gap in their church participation following high school. Five of the ten had no regular church participation as an adult prior to attending Church of the Pilgrims.

Each of the ten attends worship at least twice a month, and most attend at least three out of four Sundays. Their participation in church activities outside worship attendance fell into five categories (ranked from high to low in order of frequency): education, fellowship, mission, worship leadership (such as ushering or serving as a liturgist), and congregational service (such as teaching Sunday school or serving on the stewardship committee). The reported activities ranged from a low of two activities in only two of the five categories, to fourteen activities spread across the entire spectrum. Significantly, eight out of ten were regular participants in a year-long series of Bible studies I led for young adults entitled “Theology on Tap,” which combined participatory Bible study with fellowship and support.

### Values and Practices

Three questions asked participants to reflect on their perception of Church of the Pilgrims as a “community of alternative values and practices.” In what way, in their experience, is Church of the Pilgrims such a community? What are the values we hold as a community that set us apart from the culture in which we live? What, in their view, are the distinctive practices of our congregational life? Their answers fell into four broad areas. The most frequently mentioned were the congregation’s commitment to the poor and social justice and the priority of putting one’s faith into practice, the value of giving oneself in service to the community without financial reward. Typical was this comment: “While our culture rewards material success, at Pilgrims we promote an active outreach to those in need.”

The second ranked category was the congregation’s diversity, openness, and hospitality, particularly its status as a “More Light” Presbyterian church. In a culture in which we are so often divided by age, race, and social status, the congregation’s diversity, particularly its explicit welcome to gay and lesbian members, was mentioned by five of ten participants. One comment is typical: “Recognizing and loving individuals for his or her own unique gifts and valuing diversity.” Another put it more strongly: “The degree of tolerance and respect for others at Pilgrims cannot be the conventional norm for all churches. We’ve got our characters and arguments, of course, but the rainbow banner outside our entrance [during Gay Pride Week] means something special—and it means something subversive.”

The third category, ranked equally with the second, is the subversive character of community itself. Many commented that in Washington, D.C. it was rare among their friends and co-workers to find anyone who attended church at all. Yet here we don't just gather as individuals but practice "community." "Pilgrim members listen, have genuine interest in other people and respect for their opinions." "We don't offer merely 'lip service' when we speak with one another." "The fact that the church has consistently gathered people to engage in such collective activity in what is unbelievably precious time is really quite subversive. Nothing in our popular culture would suggest pressure to spend time this way." "Pilgrims truly care about one another." At the same time, many commented that Pilgrims is an "outwardly" focused community. We extend concern for others "whether strangers or friends."

Not surprisingly, the most distinctive practice of the community is participation in worship and the sacraments. Many commented not just on the significance of worship in a secular culture, but on the unique style of worship at Pilgrims, which highly values participation and creativity. In other words, in worship and celebration of the sacraments, we express the outward focus, diversity, openness, and caring that was mentioned above in the other categories. Moreover, participation in the life of the community requires disciplined practice. As one participant concluded:

Pilgrims values consistency. This means taking up an activity that requires consistent time out each week, attending services each week, making an effort to really embrace fellowship each week. Our culture seems to pride itself on an attention span which does not embrace such consistency—it's a fad-driven culture. Pilgrims is not a fad.

Closely related to participation in worship is the study and reflection upon the life of Jesus both in worship and in more formal educational settings. At Pilgrims, we are encouraged to “ask questions instead of accepting things at face value.” Through study we are “striving to better oneself as an individual, Christian, and a citizen.” Yet unlike most study individuals engage in, Bible study is not related to career advancement. “Here you have adults getting together to further their education in a topic that is usually totally unrelated to careers, advancements, or anything else.”

### Tension and Conflict

In our Bible study, we spoke of how at times the values of the gospel and the values of the culture are compatible, and at other times they are in tension, even conflict. I introduced the concept of *axis mundi* as a way of thinking about the core values around which the church and culture are organized. Participants were asked to reflect upon their own identity as a Christian in North American society; where do they find the values of their faith in tension or conflict with the values of contemporary North American society? Where do they feel the most tension, if at all?

Seven of ten participants named the tension between the materialism and consumerism of the culture and devotion to community and service to the poor in the church. Several were quite explicit: Our culture is organized around greed, consumption, entertainment, and immediate gratification. One saw his faith in tension with capitalism itself. Another concluded “My Christian identity tends to keep the North American *axis mundi* of \$\$\$\$ in check.” Our culture values how much we earn; the church values what

we contribute to the world. The tension was felt in terms of how we spend our money, time, and career. One particularly thoughtful comment, “We live in a culture that tells us what is most important is ‘success’ (financial? career?) but as Christians we have to realize that is not the most important thing; our relationship with God is. In this way, I am not part of this world, I am not caught up in the same race as everyone else. It doesn’t matter as much.”

Others mentioned the tension between the secularism of our culture and the church’s devotion to God. We may not be persecuted for being Christians, but we are not popular either. Moreover, the tone and nature of the community sets us apart: In a culture that is “loud and fast,” the church invites reflection and contemplation upon what really matters in life: relationship, family, how we treat others, caring for those who are less fortunate. One participant also listed the church’s concern about healthy expressions of our sexuality and the practice of nonviolence as areas of tension with our culture.

When asked how their understanding of what it means to be a Christian has grown or changed since becoming a member of Pilgrims, all participants spoke of a shift from a life centered in the self to a life focused on others, the world, and God. Many spoke about the witness of the congregation in solidarity and advocacy, about the gap between their own values and practices, and the call to express their Christian values in the world. Several spoke of shifting from a narrow conception of the Christian life confined to prayer and personal faith, to a fuller understanding of the Christian life as encompassing all of daily life: family and friends, as well as public life, social issues, politics, and economics. Two of the ten described this shift as from a secular to a God-centered life.

One participant described this as an on-going tension in her life, “I do have to be mindful of what the ‘worldly’ part of me wants and what the Christian part of me wants.”

### Impact and Transformation

The final two questions asked what activities, events, or experiences had most shaped participants’ sense of Christian identity. Bible study and participation in worship scored the highest, particularly participation in “Theology on Tap.” (One participant listed this Bible study itself as having the most impact on her thinking!) Participation in church mission activities, serving in leadership, and relationships with other members scored somewhat lower. One participant spoke of the significance of the New Member class when he joined the church.

When asked to describe a particular moment, activity, event, or experience that was particularly transforming in shaping their Christian identity, seven of ten mentioned a moment in corporate worship. Each of the moments mentioned had in common that they were intensely communal and involved the entire congregation in a corporate act of some significance in the life of faith: the baptism of a child, in which the congregation gathered around the font; the commissioning of a member leaving for a stint as a volunteer in mission in China, in which the congregation came forward to lay on hands in prayer; reception of new members, in which they were welcomed through passing the peace of Christ. One participant listed not a moment in worship, but it was intensely communal nevertheless, gathering with a dozen or so members to clean out the home of

an elderly member. Only two mentioned more “personal” experiences: the study of a particular parable in “Theology on Tap,” and pre-marital counseling with the pastor.

### Correspondence Between Analysis and Activity

There are many potential factors that influenced how participants responded to the survey questions. Some may have been naturally predisposed because of their background to provide deeper analysis. Others may have simply spent more time answering the survey. Nevertheless, there was a correspondence between activity level and depth of analysis. In addition to ranking each survey according to activity level (see “Demographics and Participation”), each survey was rated for the depth of analysis in answering questions 8–10 (the questions dealing with perceptions of tension between church and culture), from a low score of 3 to a high score of 8. While there were exceptions in each category, those scoring 3, 4, and 5 had an average activity level of 7.3/3.5, while those scoring 6, 7, and 8 had an activity level of 10/4.5. Thus, those who were more active in the life of the church across a wider spectrum of church activities tended to provide a fuller picture of the church as a “community of alternative values and practices.”

### Reflections From My Personal Journal

While only one participant named the Bible study that was a part of this study as a major influence on her thinking, clearly the study had an impact on all the participants. In my journal following the first week, I noted that participants initially had a hard time

naming the tension in their own lives between the values of the gospel and the values of our culture. When they did, they tended to think of the tension in personal and individual ways: finding balance in life, being less confrontational, less controlling, etc. In the second week, however, there was something of a breakthrough when I introduced the concept of *axis mundi*, and asked the group to name the “axis” around which our culture was organized and the axis around which the church was organized. Immediately the group drew a sharp, almost polarizing distinction. The culture is organized around materialism, mass communication, profit, individualism, homogeneity. Almost all the cultural traits they named were negative. The church, in contrast, was organized around the values of community, spirituality, mission, justice, and contemplation. While earlier that same evening, they had trouble naming how our church was like salt and light in the world, in talking about our core values, they had no trouble identifying, even over drawing, our distinctiveness.

In the third week, when we explored the Great Commission and the call to “teach and make disciples,” I asked them what had most shaped them as disciples. Named most often was the presence within the congregation of committed individuals who model the Christian life. One of our long-time members who is particularly involved in mission and pastoral care, was named by several participants as someone who embodied, for them, the Christian life of discipleship. In an engaging and noncoercive way, she invites others to give of themselves, primarily by her own example. Moreover, several commented, her example permeated the atmosphere of the congregation: Pilgrims is an “other-focused” community, and you begin to understand that as soon as you enter the door. This, more

than anything else, was named as the greatest influence on shaping participants' understanding of Christian discipleship.

#### **Section IV: Interpretation**

The experience of new members at Church of the Pilgrims entering the life of the congregation embodies the missional transformation that Alan Roxburgh speaks of from “a collection of consumer, needs-centered individuals” to a pilgrim, covenant people “who live by an alternative narrative” (Guder:200). While their participation in the life of the congregation fell along a wide spectrum of involvement, from more “open-ended exploratory engagement” to more “covenanted, accountable, missional commitment,” even those least involved perceived themselves to be a part of a “community of alternative values and practices,” and were able to describe and define that distinctiveness in some detail (Guder:212).

In reflecting on the Bible study discussions and the survey responses, there seem to be three key factors that shaped new members' identity in relation to the congregation. The first is the congregations' own publicly stated commitments and practices. In its worship and educational programs, preaching and teaching, literature and website, programs and mission, Church of the Pilgrims repeatedly names its values and commitments. Clearly, it is not enough merely to claim the congregation's missional status, it must also embody it in significant ways. At Pilgrims, we embody a missional way of life in our emphasis on service, hospitality, diversity, and community. Each of the participants spoke of the impact of the witness of the congregation as an “other-centered”

community that invited them in to an alternative way of life. The rainbow banner above the entryway during gay pride month, the presence in Sunday morning worship of Pilgrimage groups visiting the city, the “outsider art” displayed in the church’s gallery space, the regular announcements of opportunities for service in the congregation’s ministry to the homeless, the heart-felt sharing of prayers for healing and strength among the members—in these and other ways the congregation regularly proclaims its core values. Even those participants who were less active in the life of the congregation perceived the strength of the invitation in this witness.

A second factor was the strong and visible presence within the congregation of those more veteran members of the congregation who visibly embody and model the life of Christian discipleship. Two members in particular were lifted up in the Bible study and surveys. One is a young retiree who is active in many aspects of the congregation’s life, particularly its programs of outreach to the poor, and pastoral care to elderly members. She frequently invites others to join her in this ministry, but as several participants noted, it is the example of her own life that is the greatest invitation. The second is a man who took early retirement in order to serve as a Volunteer in Mission in China with the Presbyterian Church (USA). His doing so was instructive in several ways. In announcing his decision to become a VIM, he not only spoke of his personal faith and gratitude to God for the blessings of his own life, but specifically about his experience within the life of this congregation, and the way in which that led him to make this choice. Moreover, his work in China through the larger church was claimed and celebrated as an extension of our own congregation’s mission and ministry. These were both examples of what Alan

Roxburgh calls the “covenant community” of leaders who intentionally model an alternative way of life by taking on certain commitments, practices, and disciplines, in the process inviting others on a journey toward a particular set of values and commitments.

### Worship and Liminal Experience

The third and perhaps most important factor that contributed to the formation of identity among new members was the experience of corporate worship. It is significant that most participants named their most transforming experience as having taken place in the celebration of a sacrament or sacramental-like ritual. The experiences named in the surveys were not simply “worship” in the broad sense, but were particular liturgical moments in which the congregation was self-consciously naming the values around which the community was organized. They were experiential, embodied, teaching moments in which the congregation acted out liturgically what it believed: laying on hands in the commissioning of a member departing as a volunteer in mission; gathering as a community around the font to baptize a child, in which parents and congregation make covenant with one another and God, “renouncing” the power of evil that separates us from God and neighbor and “affirming” our faith in the power of God’s love that is stronger even than death. Using Inagrace Dietrich’s words, it is these moments that “model and thus proclaim a different way of life to a watching world.”

A recent book on worship by Disciples pastor Timothy L. Carson helps to illuminate why these particular experiences may have had such power. Drawing upon the pioneering work by anthropologists Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep, Carson writes

of worship as “liminal” time (59). In studying rites of passage in traditional cultures, (for example, from adolescence to adulthood), Turner and Gennep describe the moment of transition, the “in between” time, as the *liminal* domain. It is a time of tension and ambiguity, in which there is a break from the old life but the new life has yet to begin. “For many, this time of liminal passage represents a symbolic form of death and rebirth. The old passes away, the new is born—a new self, a new status, a new form of existence. As such, the liminal domain is one fraught with possibility for transformation” (60). Moreover, it is common for those who pass through such a liminal time together to develop a special bond that Turner calls *communitas*.

Liminal reality takes place within sacred time and sacred space that is set over against the ongoing structure of life. The journey through liminal time, Carson writes, is not unlike the three-fold ecumenical-historic pattern of worship, which involves an entrance into sacred space (Gathering as the People of God), a time of transformation and transition (Word and Sacrament), and the eventual sending back into the world (Departing to Serve in God’s Name) (62). Yet in our overly-rational, word-and-head-oriented Protestant-Calvinist tradition, we have often suppressed the possibility of sacred space and the transforming possibility of liminal time. Worship to be transforming must become enacted and multisensory, engaging sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Carson offers this rule of thumb, “When it can be dramatized, symbolized, and enacted instead of your simply giving a verbal explanation—do it” (74).

Carson describes a ceremony that a scouting program hosted for young people who were passing from childhood to adolescence. The ritual drew upon the quasi-

religious, quasi-Native American themes that are the stock and trade of the scouting program. Ceremonial incense was lit, the lights were dimmed, and ceremonial drums pounded as each young person was summoned forward by one of the “elders,” and marked with symbols connoting various virtues of courage and compassion. Here was an assembly of relative strangers, yet the rite of passage had meaning for both the young people involved and their attending relatives. Carson writes:

If a culturally borrowed rite can have an impact on a group of people with very contingent commitments—limited mostly to a short window of time in which their children are eligible for the program—what might happen if those who are baptized into the body of Christ and are united in the Spirit took the drama, ceremony, rites, and rituals of our tradition with equal seriousness? (75)

The rituals describes by the survey participants in my study were, I believe, precisely such liminal moments within sacred time and space. By way of example, it is appropriate to describe the ritual of baptism at Church of the Pilgrims in some detail. In contrast to the baptisms of my childhood, in which parents were often ushered into the sanctuary at the end of worship to have their children baptized by the pastor in a rather perfunctory manner, baptisms at Church of the Pilgrims are highly intentional in every aspect. Parents engage with the pastor in a period of study and preparation prior to the baptism, in which they are invited to help write the covenant questions they will be asked during the baptismal liturgy. The baptism itself is announced to the congregation in advance, signaling its significance within the life of the community of faith.

On the day of the baptism, the entire service is structured around the baptism that is to take place: prayers, music, hymns, Scripture, and sermon all serve to prepare the congregation for the baptismal event. Following the sermon, the parents and family of the

child are invited to gather around the font, followed by the entire congregation, beginning with the children. Warrant for the baptism is read from Scripture. Parents are asked covenant questions, which they have helped to shape. The congregation pledges on behalf of the church universal to welcome the child into the community and teach the child the stories of our faith. Following a liturgy modified from *The Book of Common Worship*, parents and congregation are asked to “renounce evil and its power in the world to separate us from God and neighbor,” and to “turn to Jesus Christ and be his faithful disciple” (366). Then, prior to the Prayer of Thanksgiving Over the Water, whose ancient words trace the history of God’s saving acts, members of the congregation are invited to come forward, pour a splash of water into the font, and lift up a hope, dream, or prayer for the child that is to be baptized. Following the baptism, the pastor hands the child to a member of the congregation, symbolizing its new status as a member of the body of Christ. As a soloist sings an appropriate baptismal song, the child is welcomed into the community of faith.

In Miroslav Volf’s words, in the sacrament of baptism the beliefs and practices of the community are “normatively inscribed” and “ritually enacted” (248). In the creation of sacred time and space, a liminal moment is evoked in which worship participants experience the tension between the “old life” of the world and its values, and the “new life in Christ” to which they have been called. Gathered with those who share the same ambiguous stance, called to live “in the world but not of the world,” *communitas* is the natural by-product. Thus, in enacted ritual, the values and commitments of the congregation are reinforced, and a new identity is formed. As Craig Dykstra concludes,

Worship is the core of congregational life and provides the paradigm for its peculiar form of life...Worship, in this context, is not simply participation in ritual...Worship is rather a style of life that may pervade the whole of a congregation's existence. (91)

### Significance

I undertook this study as a way to help focus my thinking, and that of other church leaders, on the process of new member formation. In many Presbyterian churches, the process of membership is almost perfunctory, undergirded by assumptions that are no longer valid: that most of those who come through the doors of our church are Presbyterians transferring from another Presbyterian congregation; that they already know the stories of our faith; that they have been habituated in the practices of the Christian life; that they understand the distinct values of the Christian community in relation to our North American culture. In the recent years of my ministry, few of those assumptions have been true (if indeed they ever were).

If the goal is to cultivate a community that witnesses to the gospel in its common life, (rather than simply recruiting new members to our Presbyterian "club"), an hour-long class on Presbyterian history and polity is inadequate to the task. At same time, the more didactic approach to new member formation that is the bread-and-butter of Presbyterian churches, in which the most important learning is presumed to take place in a classroom setting, does not have adequate power to form and transform.

What this study has underscored, at least in the context of my own setting, is that the common life of the community of faith is not only its primary witness to the world, it is also the primary factor in the formation of new members. While more formal

catechetical processes may be helpful in shaping new members' identify as a part of a community of alternative values and practices, the most important factor is the quality and character of the congregation's common life. When the congregation shows in its common life that it lives by an "alternative narrative," it is self-evident to those who find themselves a part of it, even without extensive new member "orientation." While it is not clear that the new members participating in this study have fully come to understand themselves as part of a "people sent," they clearly understand that they have become part of a community that lives out its life in the world in distinctive ways formed by gospel values. The common life of the congregation has, first and foremost, been a transforming witness in each one's life.

## APPENDIX A

### **Bible Study Week One**

**Key Concept:** Church is community of alternative values & practices called to represent the Kingdom of God to the world.

Tell the story (Mark 11:27–33 and 12:13–17)  
Pass out text.

#### **Questions on the Text:**

Why might the religious leaders be concerned with Jesus' authority?

What's at stake?

What does it mean to have "authority"?

Why might Jesus answer by referring to John the Baptist?

What would likely have been their relationship with John?

So what is Jesus' strategy in responding to their question?

Why doesn't he answer their question?

In the second text, the Pharisees and Herodians take a different tact.

What is their strategy? How does it differ from the earlier group?

Why might they ask about taxes? What is at stake in their question?

In what way is this a trap?

How might a religious Jew answer the question, "What belongs to God?"

So what does it mean to say, "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's"?

Did Jesus answer their question? Why or why not?

#### **Exercises on the Text:**

1. Who or what are the "emperors" in your own life that compete for your allegiance?  
What is it that they demand of you?  
What are the ways in which they command your allegiance?
2. Repeat to yourself several times:  
"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,  
and to God the things that are God's."  
Pause in silence each time before repeating again.
3. What in your life belongs to God?  
What in your life belongs to the emperor?  
How have you answered this question in the way that you live?
4. Where have you most felt the tension between "what belongs to God" and "what belongs to the emperor"?
5. How would your life change if you "gave to God what belongs to God"?

## Bible Study Week Two

**Key Concept:** The role of the church in a world as a transforming, minority community.

Tell the story. (Matthew 5:13–16 and Luke 13:18–21)  
Pass out text.

### List on a Flip Chart:

What are the qualities of salt?  
What are the qualities of light?

### Questions on the Text:

How much salt do you put in a dish?  
Imagine light in the ancient world: not beacon, but flicker.  
Why minority images? What was Jesus' expectation?  
Jesus said salt of the *earth* and light of the *world*.  
What role then did he envision for his followers?

Look at the two parables of the kingdom in Matt. & Luke.

At first, minority images like salt and light.

John Dominick Crossan adds insight: Mustard plant was not cultivated, it was a weed, something that grew rapidly and was hard to get rid of.

Yeast was considered unclean. Greek carries connotation of "hid" (RSV).

What does this add to the earlier images of salt and light?

So what more does this tell us about the role Jesus envisioned for his followers in the world?

### Exercises on the Text:

1. In what way, in your experience, is Church of the Pilgrims like "salt and light" in the world? In what way are we "salt-like"?
2. How, specifically, do we let our light shine before others?
3. In what way, in your experience, are we like "mustard and yeast," an unwanted but persistent presence? For whom are we an unwanted presence? In what way are we persistent?
4. How do you imagine our understanding of mission would change if we took more seriously our role as "salt, light, mustard, and yeast"?

## Bible Study Week Three

**Key Concept:** Cultivating a community of alternative values

Pass out text. Begin with Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12)

Read one verse each.

### Questions on the Text:

How would you characterize those whom Jesus calls “blessed?”

What do the “poor, mourning, meek, hungry, merciful, pure in heart, and persecuted” have in common?

Sociologists call this an Honor/Shame society.

It could be translated “Honored are those...”

What does this add to our conversation last week about being salt, light, mustard seed and yeast?

How do you read the warning about being reviled and persecuted?

Read Matthew 28: (“The Great Commission”)

Lots of baggage. The opposite of salt & light?

Encourage: Read it through the lens of last week and the beatitudes.

Central passage for Matthew: A summing up.

Therefore, must take into account what precedes it.

Setting: Easter day. Disciples instructed to go back to Galilee setting of their ministry.

Intrigued, they worshiped him, but some doubted.

What is the relationship, in your experience, between worship and doubt?

They doubt, but when Jesus tells them to go to Galilee to meet him,  
what do they do?

What does this tell us about the disciples?

What does “authority” mean? Given by whom? What does this mean?

Given all that we have said so far about being a follower of Jesus,  
what does it mean to “make disciples”?

What is it that we are to teach?

So what is it, in this passage from Matthew, that Jesus is calling us to do?

How do you understand it?

### Exercises on the Text:

1. Since coming to Church of the Pilgrims, what have been the most important things you have learned about Jesus, and what it means to be his disciple? When/where/how did this teaching take place?
2. What is your understanding of what it means to be a “disciple of Jesus”?
3. Reflecting on your own experience since coming to Church of the Pilgrims, in what way have you been “discipled” by the congregation? That is, what have been those experiences, events, activities, persons, etc., that most shaped your understanding and practice of what it means to be a follower of Jesus? How did they shape and form you?

## Bible Study Week Four

Recap themes from previous three weeks.

**Tonight:** Shift to how we cultivate such a community.  
If this is who we are called to be, how do shape such a community?

### **Fourth Chapter of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians.**

Note: Probably not to the Ephesians, probably not by Paul.  
Likely written by one of his disciples. A general letter to the church.  
Not clear the occasion. Seems to be concerned with division.  
Our passage focuses on gifts. (Easier to say “Paul”)

Read the text. (Take our time.)

### **Questions on the Text:**

Right at the beginning, the author— either Paul himself or one of his disciples— makes reference to Paul’s imprisonment.

We know that Paul was arrested several times, and eventually martyred by the Roman government.

What does this reference to Paul’s imprisonment tells us right off the bat about the Christian vocation?

In the first verse, there are two important phrases:

“Lead a life” is simply “walk” in the Greek— “walk” as a way of life.

“The calling to which you have been called” means “vocation.”

Before we talk about what Paul means here, what does “vocation” mean?

So, what is Paul saying when he says the Ephesians have a “vocation”?

So, to “lead a life worthy of your vocation” means what?

The author then goes on to define what this means in vs. 2–3.

How would you characterize what Paul is saying here?

What does it mean to “bear with one another in love”? Why “bear”?

The next two verses, 4–5, use the word “one” seven times.

What is Paul emphasizing?

Then “but” each of us was given grace. One body, different gifts.

Unity & diversity are affirmed.

In 11–13, the gifts and their purpose are spelled out.

List: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers to:

equip for ministry, build up the body, unity of the faith, knowledge of the Son of God, maturity, full stature of Christ

It’s not clear whether “apostles, prophets” etc. are a sub-group of the church or if everyone in the church has one of these roles. The implication is that everyone is given a gift.

Note vs. 16: “as each part is working properly.”

Clearly, it is not just one person. How would you characterize these roles? What do they have in common?

Note the purposes:

What is the purpose of sharing these gifts? What is expected?

So who, then, is responsible, for equipping the “saints”?

Shift in focus in v. 14: what is the concern? Why “grow up”?

What does it mean for the body to grow by building itself up in love?

**Exercises on the Text:**

1. Reflecting on the entire passage of Ephesians 4:1-16, and our discussion of it, how would you characterize what the author has in mind here?
2. What would such a church be like? How would members relate to one another? How would they understand themselves? Can you describe it in less stained-glass language?
3. In what way is this vision of what the church *should* be like similar to your experience of what Pilgrims is *actually* like? How would we have to change as a community in order to live in to the vision of Ephesians 4?
4. Thinking about your own experience since becoming a part of this community of faith, how have you been “equipped,” “built up,” helped to “grow in knowledge,” “matured”? What has helped you in this journey?
5. The author writes that Christ “gave gifts to his people,” and that each part of the body, working properly, promotes the body’s growth in “building itself up in love.” Do you see yourself as having been given such a gift? How would you name it? How have you shared it? What would change if you truly understood yourself to be called by God (given a “vocation”) to share this gift for the well being of the church?

## APPENDIX B

**Survey Questions for New Members**

1. Your Name:
2. Your Age:
3. Approximate date you began attending Church of the Pilgrims:
4. Date you joined the congregation:
5. Briefly describe your previous church involvement, indicating how actively involved you were at various stages of your life.
6. How often do you attend worship now?  
\_\_\_ Nearly every week \_\_\_ 3 out of 4 Sundays a month \_\_\_ twice a month  
\_\_\_ once a month or less
7. Think about all the many different ways you have been involved in the life of the congregation outside Sunday worship since you became a member. These might include regularly occurring activities, such as volunteering at Open Table, teaching Sunday school, attending Adult Education, or one-time or period activities, such as attending the church retreat, “Theology on Tap,” or preparing for the baptism of a child. Please list as many of these activities as you can remember, indicating how often or how many times you participated in each one. Place an \* next to activities in which you have been particularly active.
8. In our Bible study, we talked about the church as a “community of alternative values and practices.” In your experience, in what way is Church of the Pilgrims such a community?
9. What are the values that we hold at Church of the Pilgrims that, in your view, set us apart from the culture in which we live?
10. What are the practices (that is, the things we do together as we “practice our faith”) in our church life at Pilgrims that in your view are distinctive (“alternative”) in relation to the culture around us?

11. In our Bible study, we spoke of how at times the values of the gospel and the values of the culture are compatible, and at other times they are in tension, even conflict. The church organizes its life around one set of values, while the culture is organized around a different set (*axis mundi*, for those of you who were present the second week). Thinking about how you have come to understand your own Christian identity, what does it mean to you to be a Christian in relation to our contemporary North American society? Are there areas where you find the values of your Christian faith in tension or conflict with the values of contemporary North American society as you understand them? Where are they most in tension, (if at all)?
12. Reflecting on your answer to question number 11, in what way, if any, has your understanding grown, changed or shifted since becoming a part of the congregation at Church of the Pilgrims? In other words, how has being a part of this particular community of faith changed how you understand what it means to be a Christian?
13. Looking back on your answer to question number 7, as you think about the ways in which you have been involved in the life of the congregation, including Sunday morning worship, what have been those activities, events, or experiences that have most shaped your sense of Christian identity (questions number 11 and 12)? How or in what way? Can you identify what has had the greatest impact on the development of your Christian identity since becoming a member of Church of the Pilgrims?
14. If there has been a particular moment, activity, event, or experience that you have experienced as particularly transforming in shaping your Christian faith and identity since you became a part of this congregation, can you tell a story about that experience? What was the experience? What was transforming about it? Why?

END NOTE

All scriptural citations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible,  
copyright 1989.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bass, Dorothy C., ed.  
1997 *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People.*  
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Carson, Timothy L.  
2003 *Transforming Worship.* St. Louis: Chalice Press.
- Dykstra, Craig  
1999 *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices.*  
Louisville, KY: Geneva Press.
- Guder, Darrell L.  
1998 (ed.) *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church.*  
*In North America,* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Hunseberger, George R., and Craig Van Gelder, eds.,  
1996 *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission*  
*in North America.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.  
The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit  
1995 *Book of Common Worship.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox  
Press
- Thompson, William E.  
2003 *The Church of the Pilgrims, Washington, D.C.:*  
*The First One Hundred Years: 1903-2003.*  
Unpublished.
- Volf, Miroslav and Dorothy C. Bass, eds.,  
2002 *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life.*  
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Wink, Walter  
1989 *Transforming Bible Study: A Leader's Guide.*  
Nashville: Abingdon.