

YOUTH OUTREACH AND MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY  
LISTENING TO THOSE AT THE CHURCH'S BOUNDARIES

By

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## 1: A YOUNG THEOLOGIAN

Not too long ago, Danielle, a church member at Cedar Lane, told a story about something she overheard. Amanda, a participant in the church's youth outreach program, came into the office where Danielle works, talking with another teenager. Danielle overheard Amanda say, "You should come to my church—Cedar Lane."

It is the kind of thing you expect a twelve-year old to say to a friend without loading it with meaning. But I have often thought about that story, and wondered, "What exactly does Amanda mean when she calls Cedar Lane her church?" This is a story about a young girl who, despite being an "outsider", has a way of thinking about the nature of the church. Her family is not a part of the congregation, and she hasn't grown up in the church like the teenagers who have traditionally made up the youth group. She doesn't have deep roots in the social community of the church, nor the advantages of family support in congregational life. And yet, she has a way of thinking about the church's mission, and about her own relationship to a particular church. She has an ecclesiology. The default assumptions of people deeply rooted in the church might be that Amanda's perspectives are therefore less valuable. However, another possibility exists.

Amanda's youth might allow her to notice pieces of the church's practice that other members take for granted. Her liminal relationship to the church might cause her to ask questions which would not occur to longstanding members. She might perceive gaps between the church's intended mission and what happens in reality. For instance, her experience as an outsider might help the church grapple with the realities of how well we love our neighbors. She might perceive our willingness or unwillingness to extend hospitality better than those who have long felt at home among us. She might be able to perceive deficiencies in our teaching by naming pieces that go easily unspoken.

The assumption of the church is that Amanda, and her young friends, need to be taught by the church, and this is true—but it is not the only truth. The church also needs to be taught, and perhaps these young outsiders provide a unique opportunity for the church’s formation. They may not yet have the theological vocabulary to name their perceptions. Yet for those with ears to hear, their observations can possibly become a rich source of learning, a challenging repository of perspectives of the church.

This research project attempts to examine these possibilities, asking whether the conception of church developing within youth who have become a part of our community through outreach can fruitfully inform the church’s own understanding of its nature and practices. We understand that our own experiences, in dialogue with the scriptures and church tradition, have a part in shaping our ecclesiology—for example, our experiences of compassionate responses to confession can help us understand the church as a place where the forgiveness of God is reflected among humanity. In this project, I hope to demonstrate how the experiences of those who some would deem outsiders, specifically a group of young people, can uniquely contribute to our understanding of the church, insight we simply would not have access to without their presence and perspective.

## 2: THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The primary research context for this study is the church of Christ at Cedar Lane in Tullahoma, Tennessee<sup>1</sup>. The average attendance at its weekly worship service is 390; about 90% of those people are Caucasian.<sup>2</sup> Wednesday night attendance is about half of

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<sup>1</sup> The peculiar capitalization of the name is an intentional convention adopted by the congregation.

<sup>2</sup> For comparison, the United States Census Bureau reports that as of 2010, Tullahoma’s population is 88.1% “White alone”, with the next largest group being African American (7.0%). U. S. Bureau of the

that number and considerably more diverse, largely because of youth outreach. Casual observers would note the cultural affinity with American Evangelicalism, and perceive its membership as generally middle-class, though both facets contain unseen complexities.

Tullahoma is a rural community with old roots, and suffers the sort of poverty common in the rural south. However, a local military base dedicated to aerospace engineering has also fostered an unusually large professional class for a town of only eighteen thousand residents. Thus, like many other towns, it is comprised of two halves. Though it shares the same streets and schools, the poorer half within our city goes largely unseen by the professional class, who live on the other side of a social and economic gulf.

This gulf has too often also been ecclesial—at least in the case of Cedar Lane. While attempting to perform acts of service to the poor, for the most part the church remained relationally disconnected from its neighbors in poverty. In the opening decade of this century, events unfolded that set the church on a course towards bridging that divide.

### **A Missional Turn**

No single event or person served as the catalyst for the Cedar Lane's missional shift. Rather, a series of events unfolded, and each played a part. The process of building a new facility challenged the church's sense of local mission. Sending a new mission team to Peru caused the church to digest the team's holistic vision and challenged it to translate that mission into its own context. Several church members took part in a series of short-term mission trips that served children in other places, and wondered what it would mean to reach out to children in Cedar Lane's local context. Finally, a ministry staff transition

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Census, "Quickfacts, Tullahoma City, Tennessee",  
<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/4775320> (accessed September 28, 2016).

provoked a crisis requiring the articulation of a congregational vision. These factors, and others, all contributed to a new trajectory for the church informed by, if not conforming to, “missional theology”. Missional language began to show up in church classes, in conversations among the leadership, and in the sorts of books members read. What was happening at Cedar Lane was a missional turn—we were beginning to think and speak in the language of mission. That theological vocabulary quickly found expression in an outreach ministry to children.

#### The Emergence of an Outreach Ministry to Children and Youth

As an elementary teacher, Donna has developed relationships with many families across social and economic strata. In the fall of 2009, she decided to bring a few of the children from these families to church. Soon, she was picking up several kids each Wednesday, and asked a friend for help. Soon, one child and her family moved to a new location, and she invited her new neighbors to join her. The number of kids swelled from under ten to over fifty. Volunteers were amazed, and perceived this to be the work of God, and a new phase of their discipleship. The ministry became an expression of the church’s evolving understanding of its mission. However, it also brought new challenges.

#### The Deeper Challenges of Hospitality

The ministry’s rapid growth surprised church leaders, and caused strain on the church’s structures. Volunteers were unprepared for the swell in class sizes. New discipline issues arose, and details surrounding things like the church’s customary meals before classes had to be reworked. Safety issues needed to be addressed, such as the need

for booster seats for the van or the collection of permission forms. The church worked through these with various degrees of success, and tried out new systems to help this grassroots effort become a piece of the church's ongoing ministry.

Deeper questions and challenges also began to emerge. Assumptions about order and structure were challenged. The church wrestled with how it prioritized ways of doing ministry which primarily benefited internal constituents over structures that benefited outsiders. The boundaries that marked the church's own self-understanding began to appear more ambiguous than before, as children who were seen as outsiders continued to be present over months and then years. Initially there was language contrasting the "bus kids" from "our kids", but that language began to shift as volunteers became more insistent that *all* the children were "our kids".

Through the programmatic hurdles and the deeper assumption challenges, the church has been pushed to think about its self-understanding. What does it mean to be one of "us"? What will it mean for us to be a people of hospitality? Do we have the will to struggle alongside those whose class position presents challenges foreign to our experience? Can we become a fully multiclass congregation? Can our ethos of structure and order absorb a raucous group of children? Will this be a ministry of the whole church, or just a few of us?

The church has largely approached these questions internally, evaluating its own experience with the tools and resources it was best familiar with; long-held theological values, interpretations scripture, and the subjective weighing of the experiences of members. One piece of scripture prominent in the congregation's discussion is Jesus welcoming little children to himself. However, we might note that Jesus not only teaches

his disciples to welcome the children so that the children might be blessed, but implores the disciples themselves to become like the children. This story suggests the church can take a posture of readiness to *learn* from the children that it has previously been satisfied to *teach*. Perhaps these children can offer us insight about the kingdom of God, their place in it and indeed our own. This suggestion becomes even more likely when we consider a fuller look at the perspective of missional theology, to which we now turn.

### 3: CEDAR LANE AND MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

The landmark work *Missional Church*, a collaboration of six theological colleagues, has, since its publication in 1998, provided the language for several movements within the church, language since appropriated for a range of themes, concerns, and approaches to ecclesiology.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one of the original contributors, Craig Van Gelder, later wrote that the diversity of usages of missional language was a result of the “inherent elasticity” of the concepts underlying a missional theology. He warned: “Those seeking to draw on this language should be aware of how this lack of precision and integration may impact their use of the language as well as their choices and actions.”<sup>4</sup>

Cedar Lane, due to the chain of events outlined in section 2, has increasingly used missional language over the past decade. However, as Van Gelder noted about the broader missional conversation, there is room for increased clarity about what “missional” means in this congregational context. Thus, this section provides a summary of missional theology and a brief analysis of the missional trajectory of Cedar Lane.

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<sup>3</sup> Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Reprint edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011) 3, 5.

### **The Core of Missional Theology**

Missional language has happily found footing in both the Academy and the church, as congregations from a variety of traditions have recognized significant insights in the work. However, spanning popular and academic spectrums has perhaps contributed to the ambiguity of the terms. Due to that, and the inherent elasticity we noted with Van Gelder above, it is important to frame what one means by employing missional language. Here, I will describe it in terms of the convergence of a theological shift, a sociological recognition, and an evolution of ecclesial practices.

#### **A Theological Shift**

At the core of missional theology is a different way of thinking about God, the church and mission. Although there is a constellation of ideas involved in that theological shift, I will confine the conversation here to two critical emphases: the agency of God in mission, and the importance of the reign of God.

The authors of *Missional Church* perceived that the church often spoke of missionary work as an activity the church carried out. Van Gelder writes that the twentieth century church developed foreign mission structures to carry the gospel into the world, believing God had given it this evangelistic mission in the great commission.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis undergirds a “church-centric” view of mission that “views the church as the primary acting subject responsible for doing something on God’s behalf in the world.”<sup>6</sup> In response, the missional church has pivoted towards an understanding of mission that

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<sup>5</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 17-21.

<sup>6</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 21, 24.

proclaims mission is, first and foremost, rooted in the identity and nature of God. Guder describes this “theocentric” understanding of Christian mission: “We have come to see that mission is not primarily an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, God is always at work bringing about the mission, and *sometimes in ways the church is unaware of, and which are located outside the church’s activity*. This brings about the possibility that the church might recognize God’s activity outside of itself, a concern for this project, but also points towards the great theological question: What is the mission of God?

There are many paths of answering that question. In the missional conversation, the quotation above already offers a possible trajectory, referencing “God’s purposes to restore and heal creation.”<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps enough of a departure from theologies that view creation as tangential to God’s intent to warrant our attention, but we may be more particular in the direction of missional theology. Commonly, missional theologians and practitioners employ language of the “reign of God” to describe God’s intent for creation, and to connect it with the gospel of Jesus and a greater narrative arc within scripture. The basic line of that narrative is that God’s intent was for creation to be full of life and goodness (whatever that might entail), but creation is corrupt because of human collaboration with evil. Nevertheless, God pursues that intent, restoring corrupted creation through the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and one day being about the final

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<sup>7</sup> Guder, 4. Also, Van Gelder and Zscheile, 8

<sup>8</sup> See also Roxburgh and Boren’s concise description, “God’s dream for the world is about the redemption of all creation, not just individuals getting into heaven; it is about the restoration of life as God intended it to be; it is about realigning life around God and God’s ways.” 101-102. Also Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 57.

restoration, reconciliation, and recreation of all things.<sup>9</sup> Thus by God’s own agency, in which the Church of Jesus participates by the Spirit, creation will return to God’s intent and exists within God’s reign—and this process has already definitively begun.

In this view, the Church, comprised of disciples of Jesus, is not simply a collection of people who have accepted a promise of salvation and await a rewarding afterlife, pending good behavior. Rather, the Church represents God’s kingdom in the present. The church is sent into the world as the kingdom’s servant and messenger, and as a community it embodies the reign of God—though it is not the only embodiment as the kingdom manifests itself in surprising ways.<sup>10</sup> The Church is both a foretaste of God’s kingdom and an agent of that community.<sup>11</sup> Thus, missional theologians see mission as not simply an activity of the Church, but as a feature of its very nature and being.<sup>12</sup> Mission is not confined to the pursuit of (distant) proselytes, but is wrapped into every moment where the church lives in alignment with the will of God. As disciples practice love and peace with each other and with their neighbors, they are about the work of the mission of God.

### A Sociological Recognition

A second broad feature of the missional movement grows from an analysis of the social situation of the church in western contexts, and more particularly in North America. The first paragraph of *Missional Church* signals this trajectory:

“On the other hand, while modern missions have led to an expansion of world Christianity, Christianity in North America has moved (or been moved) away from

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<sup>9</sup> A common constellation of attributes that might constitute goodness is found in *Missional Church*, namely peace, justice, and celebration. Guder, 90-91.

<sup>10</sup> Guder, 102-109.

<sup>11</sup> Guder 101.

<sup>12</sup> “God’s being and agency require us to attend first to the identity/nature of the church before seeking to address its purpose/mission—what the church *is* prior to what the church *does*.” Van Gelder and Zscheile, 9.

its position of dominance as it has experienced the loss not only of numbers but of power and influence within society.”<sup>13</sup>

The importance of this claim can be seen from the structure of that seminal work; after the introductory chapter, the next two are devoted to making the case of the shifting position of the church due to cultural trends and the evolution of American practices.<sup>14</sup> Although various writers within the missional vein may approach this sociological claim with different emphases, here I will describe two recurrent themes: the loss of Christianity’s privileged status within society, and critique of the church of Christendom.

The first of these emphases, the loss of Christianity’s privileged status, refers to a sense that society was once structured so the church held a powerful voice in the public sphere, but the church has been pushed to the margins as the construction of a secular, pluralistic public sphere has evolved. Taking Leslie Newbigin’s lead, the missional conversation argues (and more lately, assumes) that the modern Western Cultural assumption is that no religion should be permitted to make ultimate truth claims in public. It is now apparent that there is tension and conflict between North American culture(s) and the church at the levels of worldview, values, and praxis. Thus, the church can no longer assume a *de facto* partnership with the culture in which the church helps people become better citizens and the culture forms people as good disciples. In this cultural reality, the church cannot continue to make the same assumptions about the starting places of conversations with its neighbors as were possible under Christendom.

*Missional Church* extends the point by describing how the church, having been blocked from the public sphere, increasingly focused its message on a private, interior

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<sup>13</sup> Guder 1.

<sup>14</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile describe the effort to make this case as the first of six movements within *Missional Church*. 49-50.

sort of religious life.<sup>15</sup> The authors argue that as the church culture either collapsed or was eroded in the second half of the twentieth century, morality based on faith was generally rejected or marginalized in terms of its fit for public debate, and faith commitments could only be leveraged for personal decisions.

“Notions of shared public morals gave way to personal decisions of expediency, pleasure, or private judgment. Expectations of privileged position gave way to irrelevance and marginalization. People no longer assumed that the church had anything relevant to say on matters beyond personal faith. Public policy became increasingly secularized, as public morals became increasingly personalized and privatized.”<sup>16</sup>

A final step in this argument comes from Alan Roxburgh, who argues that pervasive pluralism has now stripped away the church’s privileged monopoly over even interior faith.<sup>17</sup> The new situation is that churches, once driven from the public sphere but given sanctuary in the private life of Americans, now find themselves in a crowded marketplace of ideas with competing spiritual sources and authorities.

Missional authors respond to the church’s loss of the cultural center on a variety of levels. Most basically, they insist on the acknowledgement of this reality and its practical implications, employing their rhetoric to implore churches to adopt changes and adapt. However, a more forceful vein of rhetoric argues that the new situation is in and of itself good, that it provides the opportunity to abandon distorted and corrupted forms of ecclesiology in favor of a model that more aptly represents not only this sociological shift, but also theological reality. This critique of Christendom may vary from critiques

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<sup>15</sup> Guder, 54. Alan Roxburgh deepens this argument by demonstrating how churches not only survived by becoming the caretakers of private faith, but for some period of time thrived as they continued to possess a religious monopoly on this private space. Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality*. (Harrisburg, Pa: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1997), 6-13.

<sup>16</sup> Guder, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Roxburgh, 12-14.

about its missiological distortions, its collusion with secular power, its hubris, or its oppression of others.

### Evolution of Ecclesial Practices

Frost and Hirsh view these three practices as an extension of the twelve hallmarks of missional churches identified by the Gospel and Our Culture Network.<sup>18</sup> Evaluating such a list remains beyond the scope of this study, however it will be helpful to take a selection of these to demonstrate Cedar Lane's relationship to the missional movement. However, it will be helpful to consider two practices of missional churches prominent in the literature: incarnational ministry and hospitality. Not only can these two be held in an interesting tension, but they will provide a particularly helpful set of lenses for examining Cedar Lane's outreach ministry to youth. Furthermore, these two illustrate how normal elements of Christian doctrine and ethics can take on a missional flavor.

#### *Incarnational Ministry*

An incarnational ecclesiology is hinted at, though undeveloped, in *Missional Church*:

“A missional ecclesiology is contextual. Every ecclesiology is developed within a particular cultural context. There is but one way to be the church, and that is incarnationally, within a specific concrete setting. The gospel is always translated into a culture, and God's people are formed in that culture in response to the translated and Spirit-empowered Word. All ecclesiologies function relative to their context. Their truth and faithfulness are related both to the gospel they proclaim and to the witness they foster in every culture.”<sup>19</sup>

This impulse towards incarnation found fuller expression in other works when paired with a foil: the attractational model of church. This allowed missional writers to clarify

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<sup>18</sup> Frost and Hirsch 25-26. Also Lois Y. Barrett et al, *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 159-172.

<sup>19</sup> Guder, 11.

what they meant by “incarnational” by contrasting it with models of ministry that brought outsiders into the church (or more accurately, into the church’s property) to receive ministry. Rather, an incarnational mode of ministry takes believers into the communities they seek to serve and to whom they bear witness. David Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw write:

As opposed to the attractional model of the modern church in America, where a church puts on worship services and expects people to come, the incarnational model challenges us to be a people who inhabit neighborhoods, go where the people are, live among them and listen to them, know their hurts and their hopes. From this incarnational perspective we are called to minister and proclaim the gospel while following the Spirit in specific circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

How disciples who venture from the church’s shared space remain connected to the greater remains to be worked out, although the answer may be in small groups of disciples working as missionary teams.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of how that question is answered, many within the missional movement see disciples embedded within neighborhoods as the starting point for the missional church, in contrast to drawing people out of those communities (and into church buildings) through attractional ministry.

### *Hospitality*

In contrast to the incarnational impulse, the missional movement also recognizes the practice of hospitality as a hallmark of missional churches. Such churches develop the practice of making space for strangers.<sup>22</sup> The missional church practices hospitality at every level, as individuals make space in their homes and lives for others, and collectively as hospitality is expressed in symbols of the church such as the Eucharist.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw, *Prodigal Christianity: 10 Signposts into the Missional Frontier* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 42-43.

<sup>21</sup> Fitch and Holsclaw, 102-104. Also Frost and Hirsch, 101-107.

<sup>22</sup> Guder, 175-180. Also Barrett 169-170, and Fitch and Holsclaw, 105-107.

<sup>23</sup> Guder, 163-166.

An emphasis on hospitality is not unique, but consider two missional nuances to hospitality. First, missional disciples value the one to whom hospitality is extended, not simply as a potential convert, but as someone who offers a blessing of understanding to the church.<sup>24</sup> The stranger is received as someone in whom the church may see Christ.<sup>25</sup> Hospitality is thus not simply a fruit of discipleship, but a means of its furtherance.<sup>26</sup> Openness to the grace present in the other provokes a healthy disorientation in the church, forcing us to “think a little more fully about the image of God on all humanity, about our neediness and incompleteness, and about how God saves and transforms us.”<sup>27</sup>

Second, a missional understanding of hospitality emphasizes receiving hospitality as well as extending it. This means that not only does the church welcome strangers into its midst, but missional disciples also look for opportunities to accept hospitality *from* the stranger, with all the implied vulnerability.<sup>28</sup> This vulnerable act of receiving hospitality “changes the missionary encounter” and creates the circumstance by which “the stranger and the church are mutually transformed in the engagement”.<sup>29</sup>

These missional nuances to the Christian practice of hospitality share the common thread of reciprocity. This is in part because of the missional church’s theological orientation, which both allows for the possibility of God’s activity in the neighbor and necessitates such respect as in accord with the trajectory of the justice of God’s kingdom, in which each person is recognized as an image-bearer of God. Reciprocity, in hospitality

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<sup>24</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 132.

<sup>25</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 67-72.

<sup>26</sup> Guder, 178.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 76.

<sup>28</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 132.

<sup>29</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 133.

and in other practices, ensures theological formation not only flows from the center of the church towards the margins, but from the margins back towards the center as well.<sup>30</sup>

### **Cedar Lane and Missional Theology**

Above, I described Cedar Lane as taking a “missional turn”, by which I meant a shift towards theology, self-understandings and practices in alignment with the missional theology described above. The church’s theology has begun shifting, it is wrestling with the broader sociological realities of the church. Evaluating the progression of the theological and sociological elements of the missional shift at Cedar Lane without statistical data remains a subjective endeavor. However, turning toward ecclesial practices we can grasp specific data points and produce a more interesting analysis.

On the surface, the outreach to youth appears to indicate a thoroughly attractional model—after all, the most obvious layer involves bringing people to the church to participate in traditional programming! Indeed, the ministry’s beginnings took this shape and form, following the assumption that getting children to participate in the church’s life would lead towards transformation and discipleship. The initial metrics of success were simply how many children were coming and participating—the prime metrics of the attractional model of church. Similarly, in terms of hospitality, the church primarily thought of welcoming the kids into its space, or making space for them at our table.

However, the process forced the church to wrestle with deeper layers of meaning, asking not just how many kids were attending but what exactly was happening to them while they were at Cedar Lane. The church began to devise ways of being present in the neighborhood where many of the kids lived. Instead of busing the kids to a fall carnival,

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<sup>30</sup> Van Gelder, 63-64.

the church held the event in the park next to their apartments, and did the same for the opening night of VBS. Prayer walks allowed the church to engage in conversations about what people in the neighborhood were praying about, and occasionally, to receive the hospitable invitation to come inside. These examples remain event-oriented, but represent a step away from attractional assumptions. More significantly, members began forging relationships *outside* of these events, and became advocates for things important to their families, in a similar fashion to the reconciling friendships that Heurtz and Pohl locate at the heart of mission.<sup>31</sup> While missional literature portrays “attractional” and “incarnational” models of ministry in binary terms, these relationships demonstrate a shift towards the heart of incarnational ministry, “in which relational identification with the neighbor leads us into concrete acts of solidarity and accompaniment.”<sup>32</sup>

One hallmark of the missional church is the recognition that “the church itself is an incomplete expression of the reign of God”.<sup>33</sup> This experience at Cedar Lane has opened the church up to this recognition, revealing blind spots to our class prejudices and causing us to confront our reluctance to be inconvenienced by our neighbors. We have come to see more fully the incompleteness of our expression of the reign of God.

Might it be that intentional conversations and concentrated efforts at listening could lead these relationships towards a fuller mutuality? Might they point towards further directions for transformation within the church, as well as fuller participation in God’s mission outside of it? Those questions are at the heart of this project. In the next section, I describe the research methods by which I have explored them.

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<sup>31</sup> Heurtz and Pohl, 33-35.

<sup>32</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 114-115.

<sup>33</sup> Barrett, 171-172. Also, Van Gelder 40, 54, and Guder 86-87.

#### 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section provides an account of the research methodology undertaken in this project. I begin by describing the primary methodology of the research—its overall shape—and how that methodology relates to the purpose of the project. I then describe the tools and processes employed over the course of the project, and address methodological challenges that arose during the process. Finally, this section contains a description of ethical issues and safeguards related to the project.

##### **Research Methodology: Qualitative Case Study**

I designed this study as qualitative case study research as described by Sharan Merriam.<sup>34</sup> In this case study, the intent is to explore the assertion that young outsiders can provide insight into the real nature of the church, by exploring the insights of such persons within the bounded set of those who have had specific experiences with the church of Christ at Cedar Lane—involvement with our youth outreach ministry. The heart of the research was a set of semi-structured interviews, comprised of a set of pre-scripted questions, used with flexibility at my discretion throughout the interviews.<sup>35</sup> This allowed me to keep the interviews directed to the subject matter while exploring different directions. This tone of focused exploration was intended to underline another facet that I hoped this methodology would foster: a distinct posture of listening.

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<sup>34</sup> Merriam's definition of a case study is "an in-depth description of and analysis of a bounded system" Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 2nd edition. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), , 40.

<sup>35</sup> Merriam, 90-91.

After acquiring consent from participants and their parents, I recorded interviews with each participant that were approximately a half-hour long. Each interview was transcribed and subjected to a process of coding to analyze the contents.

### **Research Participants**

The research participants were seventeen interviewees who met three parameters suggesting they fit the sort of liminal status described in Section 1— possessing enough history with Cedar Lane to have a substantial sense of belonging, while still remaining outsiders on some level. First, I was looking for adolescents whose entry point into the church was the church's outreach ministry, as outlined in section 2. Second, participants needed to have attended for at least a year. Third, interviewees were limited to youth ministry participants, which at Cedar Lane includes students in grades 6-12.

This selection of participants shares facets contributing to marginalization within the congregation and in society. First, they do not have adult family members who are also members of the congregation. Second, although it was not an explicit parameter for the selection of participants, each of the participants in this set lives within a family that has experienced a degree of poverty during their youth. Finally, it is important to note that nearly all the participants interviewed are also affected by other marginalizing factors. A combination of home instability, legal or academic issues, disabilities, racial prejudices and other factors contributes to the marginalization of each of the students.

For this study, I interviewed 17 students from Cedar Lane's youth ministry. The interviews ranged from 25-45 minutes. I began by asking questions such as the student's name, age, and the length of time he or she had participated with the church's ministry.

As the interview progressed, I explored questions about the participant's relationship with the church, and what the student found important about the church. In this report on the content of those interviews, I refer to each participant numerically—P1, P2, and so on.

## SECTION 5: FINDINGS

### Themes

Over the course of the interviews, four themes emerged among the perspectives expressed by the students: “Learning About God”, “Hospitality and Home”, “The Breadth and Depth of Relationships with Adults”, and “The Church in its Community”. In this section, I take describe the findings relevant to these themes in turn.

#### Learning About God

A perspective that surprised me was the identification of “Learning about God” as the primary purpose of the church. Nearly all participants shared the perspective expressed starkly by P5: “[God] put the church on the world so people could go and learn more about him.”<sup>36</sup> Initially, I interpreted this as immature religious cliché, and thought they were simply saying what they thought I would want to hear. However, my presumptions were overcome as participants leaned further into this perspective, expressing frustration for disruptions in teaching moments, and their preferences for environments in which learning was taken seriously. Several interviews contained moments where the interviewee expressed that this was one of the things that they valued at Cedar Lane:

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<sup>36</sup> In quotations of the interviews, I retain each participant's original language, except where pronoun replacement or grammatical correction is needed for clarity. Non-inclusive language, particularly regarding the divine, has not been altered.

Their main point of people coming is learning and then teaching you about God... It's not a joke. Some churches, they like to have fun instead of actually learn. They do more fun things than learning and Cedar Lane, they do fun things but they're really serious about God. They want you to listen and learn about God more than just hang out with your friends. They love it when you do that but they'd rather you stay with God and learn about God and they're just really serious about it.<sup>37</sup>

Another way the perspective was underlined by participants was in the way they used “learning” language in the way they expressed their faith to others. For example, P4 relayed this as a part of his exchange with a friend:

Well, I heard from a friend that church is bad because all they do is go there and you just hear the other person talk about whatever, then I said, “No, man, that’s wrong because you should go to church and learn about God because God wants to be in your heart. He loves you no matter what.”

Over the course of the interviews, I found myself becoming more positively disposed toward this perspective of the centrality of learning about God. On one level, it is a predictable result from the engagement patterns of the participants. Most have been primarily involved in the church’s Wednesday evening programming, having attended the children’s ministry for several years before being promoted to the youth ministry in the sixth grade.<sup>38</sup> The children’s ministry has been structured as a classroom setting, and there is significant time devoted to teaching in the youth ministry’s Wednesday night programming as well. It follows that these involvement points have formed the participants’ perspectives of the mission of the church. However, it is important to also note a possible selection bias at this point. It is likely that the church’s outreach ministry to youth has been effective in engaging people disposed to appreciate this sort of

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<sup>37</sup> P7.

<sup>38</sup> Participants were aged between 11-18 years old during the interviews, with an average age of 14.1. The median age was 14. Participants had been connected to Cedar Lane for an average of 5.7 years, with a median of connection time of 6 years.

educational emphasis. It may be that those inclined to more service-oriented experiences, or who thirst for more time focused in worship, have simply not been retained over time.

### Accessible Teaching

Along the same line, interviewees often expressed the importance of accessible teaching, and were inclined to believe Cedar Lane offered them such. Several participants recounted stories from teaching moments, and voiced their appreciation for the teaching styles of ministry leaders. Many of the comments echoed P7's perspective:

I went to [references another church] but they didn't word their things... I couldn't really understand. They were talking in adult language. I guess there's a difference in teen language and adult language. Adult language, they have bigger words that you might not understand and they'll word it in the way that they understand it, but Cedar Lane, they word it in a way that they know that the kids that go there will understand what they're saying. If you don't understand, then nobody's scared to raise their hand and ask more about it, and in a simpler form.

### A Transformative Theology

As this theme emerged, I probed further by asking interviewees about the specific content they had learned, and what had made a difference to their lives. Some participants struggled to describe the connection between what they were learning at church and the rest of their lives, while others described how the things they learned filled their thoughts throughout the week and shaped the way they live.

P11 and P13 both expressed finding a life of prayer, and P14 described remembering a song from church while at school and having a sense of peace. Others described moments of loss and grief where they gained peace from their knowledge of God, while some described how their ethical lives were being shaped by the things they learned. For these teens, their theology was having a transformative role in their lives.

Other participants voiced a sense of separation similar to that voiced by P12:

Well sometimes, whenever you go on a youth trip or something, you have an all-church world, and then when you come back to your town, then you come back to the normal world. Where there's not that much church, and there's a couple days during the week when you go.

P9 described this sense of separation in even more stark terms: “Well, I'm going to have to be honest. Whenever it comes to being outside of church, I don't really think about what God would do, about what God would say.” Such descriptions were painful for me to hear as a pastor. While Cedar Lane’s youth are absorbing information about God, a significant number of them struggle to connect their theology to the rest of their lives.

### Hospitality and Home

Among the encouraging points from the interviews was the expression by many participants that they felt welcome and at home at Cedar Lane. When asked what Cedar Lane was to him, P4 responded, “I mean like, basically home because I usually come here every week. I know everybody and everybody knows me. I love them and they’re family.” P3 echoed this sentiment, “They've always treated me like I was family”.

Participants often spoke about the culture of hospitality at the church, and some, such as P1, spoke about participating in that culture of hospitality: “If we have somebody new, everybody's nice to them and they end up coming back or wanting to come back.” Others expressed it from the perspective of being recipients of hospitality, such as P7:

“Whenever I walk in, just faces that I get whenever I walk in because I'm there and the surprises that I get whenever I'm there. It just makes me feel warm, it makes me feel like home and they just ... I don't know, just how they act around you tells you everything. The way that they act around me at church, it makes me feel like I'm wanted and I'm meant to be there... I feel like I can come to anybody there and just talk to them. Anybody. That is my home. ”

More specifically, several participants expressed appreciation that they felt accepted and welcome at Cedar Lane despite their life situation or minority status. P3 talked about feeling comfortable because of the presence of other minorities: “At least at Cedar Lane you have different races and I know me and my family we feel a little better because it's all different races, not just one race there.” Others who feel marginalized elsewhere expressed that they feel like the church accepts and loves them for who they are.

### Hurts and Isolation

It is important to add a pair of nuances to this positive picture. First, a small number of participants voiced that they did feel hurt by specific experiences. These experiences appear as outliers in the sample, as the overwhelming sentiment was of a welcoming and affirming environment. However, this should be considered along with the probability of a selection bias—other individuals who did not encounter such hospitality may have disengaged from the church and would not have been represented in the interviews.

One final consideration in this theme of hospitality is that a few participants expressed that the acceptance extended by adults was not mirrored by teenagers who grew up in the church. P9 said, “With the teens, it's a little bit groupy. There's this group, then there's this group, and then there's that group. We don't all kind of connect as one.” Perhaps the culture of hospitality is not as developed among teenagers as it is among adults.

### The Breadth and Depth of Relationships with Adults

When asked about relationships at Cedar Lane, participants responded by talking about adults. Although each participant shared only a few names, I was surprised to find

that the total number of adults referenced in the interviews was 25—a higher number than I anticipated. Different interviewees voiced feeling like particular volunteers felt like family members. For example, P12 mentioned that the person that picks them up looks out for them like a grandparent, and P18 talked about a volunteer being almost like having another parent—going so far as to say they know that if anything happened to their parents, the people from church would make sure they were taken care of and safe.

### Staff Relationships

The interviews also surfaced the importance of the church's youth ministry staff position. Often, the youth minister was the first person named in interviews as a significant relationship. However, the primacy of staff relationships can be problematic, as underlined when the church underwent a youth ministry staff transition. Many interviewees expressed heartbreak and feeling distant to the church during this time. This underlines the importance of broadening the number of relationships adolescents, including these at the margins, have with adults at the church.

At the same time, this set of conversations revealed the scale of the need for pastoral care. Although I entered the interviews as a researcher, I often was compelled to take on a pastoral role within the interview, as participants revealed struggles that they were facing. On a few occasions, even the process of setting up the interviews led to lengthy conversations, revealing pastoral needs which required further attention later. On one occasion the interview led to a lengthy discussion about the participant's desire for baptism! I wonder how these pastoral needs would have been surfaced if it had not been for the impetus provided by this research project.

## The Church in its Community

The struggles experienced by interviewees were reflected in their answers about our community. Participants often noted good in the community, but also expressed a dire perspective on their surroundings. Some voiced a concern for violence, and like P15 cited relationships with victims of violence. Some noted discord among neighbors, addictions in the neighborhood, and the struggles of poverty. In the face of these community issues, the last ecclesiological element to surface was the church's role in helping its community. Some participants, like P7 mentioned that the church had helped their own families:

Y'all do community things like with the changing the oils and everything else. That's really helpful to some people that might not have the money to do anything like that or anything. Cedar Lane makes a big impact on the world now... And the fact that y'all have things where y'all can help people like maybe they don't have any bills paid or something like that and they need help. Y'all are there and y'all try to find a way to help support them and everything else and y'all help and everything. I'm coming from this because y'all have a big impact on us. Y'all helped us with our bills... We're just really thankful for that and there you go, you made a big impact on someone in the world so you made an impact on the world.

Other participants sometimes changed that recipient language and spoke about the things “we” do to help our community. About half of the students voiced that part of the church's mission is to help its neighbors in need. In the words of P6, part of the role of Christians is to be “good caring people who you can go to in your time of need.”

### **Back to the Question**

This project's central research question is whether the conception of church developing within youth who have become a part of our community through outreach can fruitfully inform the church's own understanding of its nature and practices. My answer to that question is definitively affirmative. Entering these conversations helped me

understand our outreach practice emphasizes teaching more than I realized, and highlighted the importance of a culture of hospitality within the church. Furthermore, these conversations revealed the interplay between volunteer and staff ministry, and have caused me to consider whether those roles are appropriately balanced. Finally, the research has pointed towards the struggles faced by our neighbors and the church's role in working for the good of the community. The emergence of these themes in the conversations demonstrates that listening to the experiences of those who have been outsiders, specifically a group of young people and their families, can uniquely contribute to our understanding of the church. The conversations revealed aspects of the realities of our congregational life and of our interaction with the community, which were obscured before they came into clarity through intentional conversation and listening.

## SECTION 6: INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this final section, I will develop the implications of my research findings through the lens of the missional theological framework outlined above. These implications are loosely mapped to the three-fold structure of my earlier description of missional theology, offering implications for Cedar Lane's missional trajectories.

### **A Theological Reality**

As described above, the core of the missional movement is a theological shift. We can only attend to the practical matters of faithful mission as we are oriented by a fuller theological understanding. Hence, the missional movement has had at its core an understanding of the connection between theology and praxis; in other words, what we

believe about God matters. How we understand God matters for how we live out our faith in God, and how we understand God's mission shapes our participation in that mission.

This resonates with the most striking element of the interviews: the consistent understanding among participants that the church is a place where people "learn about God". My own ecclesiological emphases are different; I would more likely describe the church as a community of disciples that embodies the work of Jesus in the world, or as a community that follows the way of Jesus by loving God, each other, and our neighbors. This simple language of learning that I heard from participants has caused me to reflect on the church's role in primary theological education; the church is indeed given as a means by which people learn about God. While that conviction requires nuance to mature into a fuller ecclesiology, it may have too easily been nuanced away, been too easily forgotten. Why is that? Why do we prefer to think about the church in terms other than as a community of theological education? That question deserves further exploration and study, but I want to offer two reflections resulting from this project.

### Theology Must Be Transformative

One reason we may be inclined to avoid emphasizing theological education in our ecclesiology is that we may have lost a vision of the role of theology in transforming people into better followers of Jesus. Indeed, one of the more troublesome parts of the interviews was the frequency with which participants struggled to describe the connections between what they learned about God and the rest of their lives. Paradoxically, they spoke consistently about the importance of learning about God, without being able to describe instances where it mattered. Helping people connect their

theology and their lives should become a point of emphasis across our education ministries, from children to adults. Like the recipients of Ephesians, Cedar Lane would be well served by the reminder that when we come to “learn Christ”, we are learning to put away a “former way of being human” and to clothe ourselves with a “new humanity”.<sup>39</sup> The theology we teach must be transformative, connected to the whole of our lives.

### Education Must Be Multi-Dimensional

One direction is recognizing that transformative theological education occurs through multiple types of experiences. Relationship building venues and experiences, worship, service, and training in spiritual practices, both communal and individual, all need to take their place in theological formation alongside our typical classroom experience. Along this line, we may wish to also become more intentional to make sure that we engage people in a fuller set of learning experiences. Although I want to be careful here about too easily suggesting church programming as a solution, we may posit that one reason some of the participants had difficulty connecting their theology with the rest of their lives is the limited amount of engagement points they have in the life of the church. Perhaps a broader range of experiences, crafted so that they can learn the art of theological reflection, can help them integrate their developing faith into their lives.

### Opportunities for Mutual Learning

What is said above alone still confines the participants in the study to the role of “learners”—this project was about their capacity to teach. Cedar Lane should help these adolescents find their voice, and begin listening to them! One way to approach this is creating mutual learning environments. Last summer, Cedar Lane experimented with a

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<sup>39</sup> These phrases are my own translations from Ephesians 4:20-24.

set of intergenerational groups. The intention of creating space for mutual learning was met with mixed results; some groups did well, but others struggled due to issues such as a lack of prior relationship, personality dynamics, or inconsistency. However, the greatest issue might simply have been that *this wasn't what the church is used to*. The church must work towards building such capacities. Experimenting with a range of learning experiences, we must hone our capacities for mutual teaching and encouragement.

### **A Sociological Recognition**

Entering such mutuality also creates new possibilities for the new cultural situation of the church wherein it no longer occupies the central space of culture. Alan Roxburgh describes the Church's new situation as liminal, as the church has entered a new transitional place in the world and has been relocated nearer the margin of society.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, these adolescents might prove important conversation partners not despite their liminality, but because of it. Their testimony of faith at the boundary of culture can help the church release anxiety over being dislodged from the center. Roxburgh sees such listening to those on the margins as an alternative to anxiously seeking a return to power:

The only meaningful way forward lies in understanding and embracing our liminal existence. We must live with its confusion and humiliation, as a hopeful people ready to discover the new thing the Spirit will birth. The continued assumption of cultural symbols of power and success will only produce an inauthentic church with little gospel, much religion, and no mission. Liminality requires listening again to the voices emanating from below or outside the perceived mainstream.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, we can see that one contribution from those at the margins of the church is to help the church live well at the margins of its culture.

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<sup>40</sup> Roxburgh, 46.

<sup>41</sup> Roxburgh, 46-47.

This possibility strikes at an important piece of Christian spirituality—humility. Consider how Luke’s gospel treats pride and humility in stories such as the birth announcements, Simon’s call, the table stories, and the story of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee.<sup>42</sup> Luke depicts humility as the virtue of vulnerable people on the margins, while the powerful exhibit arrogance. Jesus responds with the rhetoric of reversal, and invites the powerful and vulnerable alike to participate in God’s community—although the proud are often unwilling to do so. The Church must ask if a previous social position of power infected it with a similar prideful presumption of privilege. In contrast, the practice of mutual learning with those at the margins both demonstrates humility, and cultivates it. This call to Lukan humility also provokes the church to recognize the real consequences of social and economic differences within the church. Those who live empowered lives must address the power and privilege differentials that exist. It will not do to only say, “We are all marginalized.” Rather, in our context of a community fractured across class lines, the church can build constructive friendships across class lines, and walk towards the reconciled justice of the kingdom of God.

### **Ecclesial Practices**

The final component of the missional movement described above was a particular set of ecclesial practices. This study offers implications for the facets focused on above, incarnational ministry and hospitality.

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<sup>42</sup> Luke 1:46-55, 5:1-11, 14:7-14, and 18:9-14.

### Incarnational Presence

One critique of Cedar Lane’s outreach ministry is its attractional model—drawing teens and children out of their communities “to the church.” Despite the validity of that critique in the initial phases, the situation has shifted. It is no longer true that the church does not have an incarnational ministry of disciples embedded within the neighborhood. There is indeed a set of disciples embedded within the neighborhood. However, that incarnational presence has taken an astonishing form—faithful adolescent disciples of Jesus. The Church is present there in these young disciples—not merely in the longer established church members who have relationships with them. Cedar Lane’s primary presence is no longer people from outside the neighborhood who do ministry there—it is these students who live there.

Opening ourselves to them by listening to their experiences also opens the door for appropriate forms of service. In the interviews, I often heard students demonstrate their intimate awareness of the needs of their neighbors. We should explore what it means to empower them to engage the needs that they see! Alternatively, listening well to these young disciples may provide insight into not only the needs of our neighbors, but other ways that God is at work healing the community. Listening well does not mean only listening for what is wrong and broken with the neighborhood—we should also learn to listen for signs of life and vitality, signs of the work of God’s spirit of reconciliation.

As in the anecdote opening this paper, it is normal for these teenagers to speak of Cedar Lane as “my church”. They speak as though they believe they are fully part of the Cedar Lane family—and they are, just as surely as if their parents belonged to the church. While I sought to interview adolescents who had been consistently coming for a year or

more, it turned out that sixteen of the seventeen teenagers who participated in the interviews have been consistently participating with the church for at least five years, a remarkable span of time for these teenagers! What choice does the church have but to view them as part of its family? If we are “their church”, then they are “our kids.”

### Hospitality

Cedar Lane must recognize that reality in its speech and actions. We should consider the obstacles to their inclusion within the church and adjust the concrete systems of the church’s programming to address the challenges they face in engaging the church’s shared life and practices. These may range from obstacles such as an unclear path towards membership for young disciples, to making sure they and their families receive pastoral support, including the connection to staff members that has been important for them up to this point. It means creating opportunities for youth ministry volunteers to build deeper relationships while providing training for them in mutual ministry.

In the end, the commitment to creating space for these adolescents in the church grows out of a focused commitment, but it is not a singular action. It is the composite of a thousand small expressions. Finding ways that we can keep our roster updated to the best communication paths for each person, making sure that everyone gets notifications of upcoming events and offering consistent transportation assistance might not appear as significant theological concepts, but shifts such as these are concrete expressions of our commitment to making sure that these young disciples are fully included in our community of faith. Willingness to respond to the needs of these young disciples is a key element to continuing to show them the hospitality that we value as a congregation.

This sort of thinking is already shaping Cedar Lane. Previously, we spoke about these students in generalities, but more and more leaders and volunteers think about students more personally—they know the individuals’ stories, gifts, and challenges. Our approach to youth ministry is changing. During the interview process for our new youth minister, we sought to engage students that once were considered outsiders, but are increasingly seen as “our kids”. The implications of this are remarkable—soliciting feedback from people who were not formally church “members” about a ministry hire would have been an unlikely consideration a few years ago. Furthermore, the church has gradually been reorienting its programming away from the assumption of expensive trips paid out of pocket to simpler offerings and a broader sharing of the financial burden of participation.

These shifts are spilling out from our youth ministry into other areas of the church as well. As more adults are aware of the stories of these teenagers, they find themselves more concerned with issues that were previously too easily kept at a distance. Now, the shortage of affordable housing is no longer simply a news item—it is the reason several of our kids’ families have struggled to find stability. The state’s provision of scholarships for the local community college is not irrelevant to our church—it may provide new possibilities for people we love and for whom we have great hopes.

### **Preaching to the Preacher**

The possibility for growth arising from mutuality is not simply a theoretical possibility emerging from my analysis of the project. It was my experience in the project itself, as the process affected my own life as a disciple and minister in several different ways. The first has been simply an enhanced set of relationships with these adolescents and their

families, as the act of intentional listening opened deeper pastoral relationships than were possible before the project. Second, I was encouraged by the testimony of these students regarding their faith. These young people inspired me and often provoked me to consider my own spirituality. Finally, the process fostered within me a profound and surprising sense of solidarity with these teenagers and their families. Perhaps I anticipated hearing something more novel in these interviews; they did, after all, yield insights that were fresh to me and which I believe can be fruitful for the life of the church. But perhaps stranger, and certainly more important, is the commonality that they revealed.

This dynamic between the fresh uniqueness of individual perspectives and the glimpse of the common work of Christ among us all is the most formative piece of education for me personally in this process. Exploring that dynamic, coming to understand what we share in Jesus and the unique gifts the spirit is bringing through individuals, was valuable to me, and is also valuable to the church.

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