

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

By

Steven Lee Hovater  
B.A., Harding University, 2000  
M.Div., Harding School of Theology, 2008

Supervised by:  
Dr. Rodger Y. Nishioka, first reader  
Dr. Martha L. Moore-Keish, second reader

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## Acknowledgements and Dedication

At the close of this project, gratitude fills my heart for the many people who have supported me along the way. I owe great thanks to the people of the Church who have loved and encouraged me, helping me to find my voice. During the process of writing this project, the people of the Church of Christ at Cedar Lane lavishly poured grace on me, and I am grateful for their support.

When I began this journey, my daughters Micah and Izzy were still young preschoolers, and now they are emerging as strong young women. Lucy and Deacon were yet to be born, but have since filled our home with joy and laughter. They have all endured their Daddy's attention to his homework graciously, and I am grateful for the grace of their patience and love. Finally, my dear Kelly has held my hand through all of this, and enduringly supported my work. I give God great thanks for the gift of her love, which is a great light in my life.

This project is dedicated to those who live on the boundaries.

## *CONTENTS*

Abstract	vii
Article-Length Summary	1
Full-Length Version	38
Chapter 1. Identifying the Topic	38
Chapter 2. Ecclesiological Context	44
Chapter 3. Cedar Lane and Missional Theology	54
Chapter 4. Research Methodology	72
Chapter 5. Data Gathered	83
Chapter 6. Interpretation and Implications	96
Bibliography	111
Appendix 1. Interview Guide	113



## ABSTRACT

### YOUTH OUTREACH AND MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY: LISTENING TO THOSE AT THE CHURCH'S BOUNDARY

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Steven Hovater  
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This project explores the thesis that young outsiders can provide insight into the real nature of the church, by exploring and describing 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 its youth outreach ministry. The research presents insights surfaced through semi-structured interviews. Using a missional theological framework, the project asserts that the practice of listening to those at the Church's boundaries can refine the Church's understanding of its self and the mission of God.

ARTICLE-LENGTH SUMMARY OF  
YOUTH OUTREACH AND MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY:  
LISTENING TO THOSE AT THE CHURCH'S BOUNDARIES

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**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 has not grown up in the church like the teenagers who have traditionally made up the youth group. She does not 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.

## 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 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.

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

## 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 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 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 perceived 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 of 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.

### **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:

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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).

“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.

### 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

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<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.

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 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

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

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

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

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 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

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<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.

<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.

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 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

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<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.

<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.

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 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>

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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.

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

#### *Evolution of Ecclesial Practices*

Missional writers often propose a variety of church practices that embody their particular theology. The Gospel and Our Culture Network identifies twelve such hallmarks, while Frost and Hirsch add three different ones to this list.<sup>18</sup> Evaluating such a (growing) 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

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

<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.

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 attractional model of church. This allowed missional writers to clarify 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>

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

<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.

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>

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

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<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.

<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.

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 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, as it is wrestling

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<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.

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

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, 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.

### **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

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<sup>31</sup> Heuertz 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.

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.

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.

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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.

## 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.

## Research Findings

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:

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>

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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.

<sup>37</sup> P7.

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 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.

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<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.

### *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 that 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.

### **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 have 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.

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

### *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 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 was not what the church was 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

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

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.

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.

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

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

## 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.

### *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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FULL-LENGTH VERSION OF  
YOUTH OUTREACH AND MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY:  
LISTENING TO THOSE AT THE CHURCH'S BOUNDARIES

By  
Steven Hovater

CHAPTER ONE: IDENTIFYING THE TOPIC

Not too long ago, Danielle, a long-time church member at Cedar Lane, told a story about something she overheard in the middle school office where she works. Amanda, a sixth grader who had been drawn into the church's youth outreach program on Wednesday nights, came in and was talking with another kid while they waited for somebody in the office. Somehow they started talking about faith, and then Danielle overheard Amanda say, "You should come to my church—Cedar Lane."

It is a normal enough statement—the kind of thing you might expect a twelve-year old who enjoys something to say to a friend without it needing to be loaded with lots of layers of meaning. But I have thought about that story many times, and the same question keeps coming to mind: What exactly does Amanda mean when she calls Cedar Lane her church? I wonder what the idea of "church" means to her. What does it mean for her to say it is "her" church?

For many people, a middle school office might be a strange place to find a theologian, and it might be even more surprising to find one in the guise of a twelve-year old girl whose relationship with the church has mostly consisted in participation in an outreach ministry. Yet, just beneath the surface of the story, an astonishing reality reveals

itself: 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 has not grown up in the church as many of the teenagers who have traditionally made up the youth group. She does not have the same deep roots as her peers do in the social community of the church, nor the advantages of visible family support as she participates in congregational life. Indeed, because of the disconnection of her family from the church, her own participation is more limited than that of other teens who were “raised” in the church by churchgoing parents. And yet, she has a way of thinking about the church’s mission and identity, about what it means to belong to a church, and about her own relationship to a particular church. She has an ecclesiology.

It seems not only possible, but likely, that because of her youth and liminal status, Amanda’s ecclesiology diverges from that held by other longstanding members of the church. After all, she has had less opportunity to formally examine theological and textual traditions, and her youth prevents her from having had the opportunity to develop a nuanced, experienced ecclesiology. The default assumptions of people who have been more deeply rooted in the church might be that the ecclesiological perspectives of Amanda, and others like her, are therefore less valuable or unimportant.

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 simply would not occur to longstanding members. She might perceive differences between the church’s intended mission and what is really happening, thus having a better understanding of the distance between the church’s ideal ecclesiology and its actualization. Perhaps she can be

emboldened to name realities that others within the church cannot, calling out situations in which the emperor is less modestly clothed than the rest of the crowd is saying. For instance, her experience as an outsider might help the church grapple with the realities of how well we love our neighbors. She might well be able to better perceive our willingness or unwillingness to extend hospitality than those who have long felt at home among us. She might be able to perceive priorities or deficiencies in our teaching by naming pieces that, while assumed, go easily unspoken.

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

This research project attempts to examine these possibilities, asking whether the church's understanding of its own nature and practices, particularly regarding outreach, can be fruitfully informed by a better understanding of the conception of church developing within youth who have become a part of our community through that outreach. The church has many resources to understand its own nature, and in dialogue with the Scriptures and church tradition, we have come to understand that our own experiences 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 and their families, can uniquely contribute to our understanding of the church. I believe this to be true because their experiences provide insight into patterns of real behavior that we simply would not have access to without their presence and perspective. They have a sort of liminal experience of the church, engaging with the church at the boundary of our self-identity.<sup>1</sup> They are part of us, but have also remained somewhat distant and other. Not only is this true because they are not church members, but it is particularly true because of their youth—as children and adolescents, they would have limited formal roles in the congregation even when their families were fully engaged. Because of their unique perspective, they will be able to see facets of the church to which we have become blind. We can ask them, in effect, “This is who we think we are—is this indeed how you have experienced us?”

### **What Is At Stake**

That a story like the one at the beginning of this chapter even exists represents an ecclesiological shift for the Church of Christ at Cedar Lane, which seems to be newly aware of interactions with neighbors at its boundaries. The church is set in Tullahoma,

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<sup>1</sup> The New Oxford American Dictionary offers two definitions for liminal, both of which describe the experience of these adolescents. The first definition of the adjective is “relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process”, which in this context refers to the process of becoming full active members of the church, a process made more awkward by the absence of their families within the church. The second definition is that liminal describes someone or something “occupying a position at, or on both sides, of a boundary.” This definition describes their experience well, as they often live at the edge of the church, and sometimes appear as fully-fledged members of the church, and sometimes are perceived, even by themselves, as outsiders. “Liminal”, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd ed, Digital version. Edited by Erin McKean. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Tennessee, which is something of a sociological anomaly. In the wake of the Second World War, the face of the town was altered by the creation of a vast air force base devoted to engineering facilities. As a result, this rural community is marked by the presence of a distinct professional class of highly educated engineers. Besides the often parodied (even amongst themselves) nature of engineers as orderly, process-loving people, this feature of the community has also meant that our community deals with the divide between this professional class and the rural poor who struggle amidst the low demand for blue-collar work.

Cedar Lane originally grew by reaching out to the professional class in the community, as engineers at the base welcomed coworkers into the life of the church. However, in the last decade Cedar Lane has been at work to re-understand itself and its mission. Although the membership of the church over time had been often characterized as a middle-class church containing many engineers, many factors converged to lead the church to claim a desire to reach out to the rest of its community and to engage in relationships particularly with its poorer neighbors. Over the past five years, Cedar Lane has focused significant energy on a particular form of outreach to children and youth in our community. What began organically with a teacher bringing some of her students to worship has become a major ministry focal point—some seventy students between kindergarten and eighth grade whose parents are not part of our congregation are now brought on a weekly basis for our mid-week gathering. In contrast to much of the rest of the church, many of these youths come from families in poverty, and this infusion has challenged the church on many fronts, both practically and theologically. For instance, how are we to understand ourselves as connected beyond common class structures? How

do we understand our faith-formative partnerships with families who stand outside our boundaries and whose economic experiences differ from those that have been common among us?

As the church grapples with these challenges, the opportunity exists for it to be theologically shaped by the experience, although the possibility also exists that it will retreat into modes of being that offer a greater sense of predictability and comfort. The outcome may be determined in part by how the church comes to understand and value these youth as people with whom they enter into mutual ministry, where each receives and each contributes according to the spirit. This project seeks to highlight the possible insights of these young people so that they may play their part in the continued conversion of the church.

Of course, the highest stakes for the project may not be perceived from the perspective of those already established in the church. Rather, the most important aspects of developing a sense of the value of these contributions may derive from how the church's capacity for such understandings makes it possible for these young people who have stood at our boundaries to fully enter into the life of God's people. At the heart of this project stands not only the question of the utility of the theological perspectives offered, but also the significance of what it means for us as a people to be open to the contributions of others—and to the work of the Holy Spirit which we may experience in our relationships with them.

## CHAPTER TWO: ECCLESIOLOGICAL CONTEXT

In the first section, I briefly mentioned the nature of Cedar Lane and its relationship to the community of Tullahoma. In this chapter, I will provide a fuller description of the research context by describing the church's nature and the story of its current trajectory. I will begin with an account of the church's origin and core identity, and then describe the missional turn that has led to the current situation. This context will help us understand both the nature of the research question and the stakes involved for the future.

The primary research context is the church of Christ at Cedar Lane.<sup>1</sup> The congregation's official membership is currently 482, and the annual average of attendance at its primary weekly worship service is 390; about 90% of those people are Caucasian.<sup>2</sup> Cedar Lane's Wednesday night attendance, which is greatly relevant to this project, is about half of that number and considerably more diverse, largely because of outreach to children and adolescents. Like many churches of its size within the mainstream tradition of the Churches of Christ, it has a low-church style of worship that features a cappella singing and weekly communion. Similarly, the church has followed that tradition's practices of believer baptism and congregational polity. Casual observers would note the cultural affinity with modern American Evangelicalism, and would probably perceive its membership as generally middle-class, though both those facets

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<sup>1</sup> The peculiar capitalization of the church's 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 Census, "Quickfacts, Tullahoma City, Tennessee", <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/4775320> (accessed September 28, 2016).

contain unseen complexities. However, we can more particularly understand this congregation by seeing it within its local context.

### **Origin and Core Identity**

Tullahoma is a rural community with old roots, but its present nature has been greatly formed by a turn of events in the 1950s. Still reeling from the Second World War, the United States department of defense acutely felt the need to retain a technological advantage against any potential threat. Among the commitments made during this age was the establishment of an engineering facility that would contain the engine test cells and wind tunnels that the Air Force now required. To this end, Arnold Air Force Base was established on the edge of Tullahoma, and in a heartbeat the small rural community was infused with some of the brightest minds in the burgeoning aerospace industry. Thus, Tullahoma experienced the opposite of the brain-drain effects that plague many rural communities, and became the home of engineers who came to design the next generation of American aircraft.

The Church of Christ at Cedar Lane was chartered in 1962, and it grew steadily among the professional class created by the base's development and the engineering industry that grew up around it. This dynamic created one of the church's unique characteristics—that of a rurally situated church largely comprised of highly educated professionals. Furthermore, it is filled with a particular type of professionals—engineers. While stereotyping the entire profession may be uncharitable and unproductive, the church is often conscious of the marks of what we might call *engineer culture*. It counts among its blessings the methodical skill and deliberate intentionality that many of its congregants borrow from their professional lives. Its leaders often demonstrate the sort of

disciplined rationality that creates freedom for new positions—if their merits can be well articulated and demonstrated. However, this general character also produces a set of other effects. For instance, the engineer’s penchant for intentionality also manifests itself as an abundance of caution, and the church’s high standards for orderliness have at times created an awkward climate for welcoming those whose lives are guided by different sensibilities and aesthetics.

Cedar Lane has always valued evangelism, perhaps due to the congregation’s roots in the Churches of Christ, a fellowship that grew out of the American Restoration Movement<sup>3</sup>. The growth of the church’s early years coincided with the later part of an era of growth among the fellowship, and often through direct efforts of its members to engage coworkers, friends, and neighbors in Bible studies intended to lead towards conversion, understood within the church to be associated with baptism and subsequent assimilation into the church.<sup>4</sup> However, the church’s success in these efforts obscured another reality. The people of the church were largely disconnected from another side of Tullahoma—the poor of the community.

### The Other Tullahoma

The narrative above describing Tullahoma’s growth due to the aerospace industry only tells the tale of one side of the city—those who have come to the area, bringing

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<sup>3</sup> Also known as the Stone-Campbell movement, the American Restoration Movement also includes the Disciples of Christ and independent Christian Churches. The Churches of Christ diverged from these other branches in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and are generally more conservative in nature.

<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps important to understand that during this era, such Bible studies often focused on the church’s particular emphasis on baptism as an essential element of Christian initiation, practiced as the immersion of believers (adults).

particular expertise with them. Alongside of this community, though, lives the remnant of an older, rural town. In this other city, there is a poorer dimension to the community that is easily overlooked by the professional class. Here, poverty is not displayed on the streets of downtown or in a large sprawl of housing projects, but is tucked away in hidden pockets—like the secluded trailer park behind one of the middle schools, or the set of apartments accepting housing vouchers found behind the sports complex on the edge of town. In those hidden pockets, the other side of Tullahoma lives—people struggling to overcome personal challenges such as lack of education, skill, or physical capacity in a town with inadequate low-income housing, limited opportunities for long-time blue-collar work, and other local challenges.<sup>5</sup> Though it shares the same streets and schools, this community of the poor within our city goes largely unseen by the professional class, who live on the other side of a social and economic gulf.

All too often, this gulf has 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. Over time the church became connected with missionary efforts in far-flung places like Romania, Papua New Guinea, and St. Vincent; places where missionary work among the poor seemed natural. Yet the developing relationships in those places only highlighted the estrangement between the church and its poor neighbors in Tullahoma. In the opening decade of this century, events unfolded that set the church on a course towards bridging that divide.

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<sup>5</sup> Among these we might include the persistence of racial prejudices in a community with limited ethnic diversity, the limited availabilities of social services, and the transportation challenges of a rural community with no real public transportation system and vast distances between housing, schools, and employment opportunities.

## **A Missional Turn**

No single event or single person served as the catalyst for the new trajectory of Cedar Lane's relationship to its neighbors. Rather, a series of events unfolded in the lives of people across the church that began to point towards a renewed understanding of the church's mission in Tullahoma. Here I will outline four of the events that served as catalysts in that progression.

First, pressed by space demands and an aging facility, the congregation relocated to a larger complex at a substantial cost. That process prompted the church to ask if the current congregational vision justified such a move. This provoked the church to develop a new attitude: "If we're going to spend this much money, our mission should be for more than just ourselves." Although the new facility was not located far away from the original site spatially, it placed the church in a different posture in relation to its community.

Second, the process of sending a new mission team to Peru further developed this new mentality for heightening the church's local outreach. As part of the sending process, the two families on the team spent a year at Cedar Lane, getting to know members, teaching, building a support team, and sharing their vision for the work in Peru. As Cedar Lane members digested that holistic vision, they developed a new understanding of the church's local mission, one that emphasized ministry to the poor and marginalized.

Third, a large number of church members took part in a series of short-term mission trips with Cedar Lane's youth ministry to Utah and New Mexico. Their experiences of ministry among poorer communities, and the process of debriefing the trips, caused them to think about creating similar ministries at home. As several of the

ministry activities of these trips were targeted towards kids, members wondered what it would mean to reach out to children in Cedar Lane's local context.

Fourth, the dismissal of a preaching minister provoked a crisis requiring the articulation of a congregational vision. Communicating to both church members and potential new ministers required church leaders to articulate the church's emerging vision, and the rhetoric of outreach became more and more significant to the church's self-understanding. This excerpt from the minister search prospectus represents that rhetoric:

Our involvement in foreign and domestic missions...are an important part of who we are and who, we believe, God intends us to be. But, we also recognize the need to be mission-minded locally, meeting needs and evangelizing right here in our own community. At this point in our history, we desire to be a more outward-focused, more community-minded family. We want to make an impact in Tullahoma by reaching out to the needy, the disadvantaged, the marginalized, building relationships and generating opportunities to share the Good News.<sup>6</sup>

These factors all contributed to an organic process of vision development within the church. This development of this vision reflects the process Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong advocate when they write, "It is not about the vision of one person; rather it involves the discernment and interpretation of the whole community."<sup>7</sup> What church leaders articulated reflected a process that had many movements across the church. A new vision had emerged, and a new trajectory for the church began to take shape. That trajectory was largely informed by, if not conforming to, what has come to be called "missional theology," which began to show up in church classes, in conversations among

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<sup>6</sup> "Our Next Chapter, Casting a Vision-Mission Point Tullahoma" in *Cedar Lane Minister Prospectus*, (Cedar Lane Leadership Archives, 2009), 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006 132,133). See also Ronald Sider, Philip Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh, *Churches that Make a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 271-290.

the leadership, and in the sorts of books that members turned to as they sought to more fully understand their emerging sense of calling. While we will have much more to say about that missional theological perspective in Chapter 3, it should be said that what was happening at Cedar Lane was a missional turn—we were beginning to think and speak in the language of mission. However, that theological vocabulary was not long left in the realm of the abstract, but quickly found expression in a particular way. It would soon express itself in an outreach ministry to children.

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

In her career as an elementary teacher, Donna Askins has developed relationship with many families in the community across social and economic strata. In the fall of 2009, she decided to begin bringing a few of the children from these families to church with her. Soon, she was picking up five or six kids each Wednesday, and she asked Kathy Burnett, another member, to help by riding with her. They began to see this simple action as a part of their participation in God's mission, a way they could concretely reach out to the community. It was new, exciting, and although there were a few difficulties, it was fairly manageable. Things went along this way for several months. Then, one of the little girls and her family moved across town, and the situation rapidly changed.

Tori is a little girl whose family Donna had known from school. She had been coming to church with Donna for several months, so when her family moved in April 2010 to Tullahoma Village, a housing complex in town, naturally Donna and Kathy adjusted their route to go and pick her up. They did so without event for a couple of weeks, until one Wednesday night they pulled up, and found a group of kids there with

Tori, ready to go to church. Taken by surprise, Kathy and Donna found the children's parents, made sure it was okay, and brought the kids. For the next few weeks, they found a larger number of kids waiting each week. They made a critical decision to do everything within their power to avoid turning away kids who wanted to come, and thus the scale of their emerging ministry quickly increased as word spread rapidly through the community. Kathy began driving her own minivan, and they recruited a few other people to help. As the need for more space quickly increased, a small group of volunteers were taking the two church vans, their own vehicles, and occasionally making multiple trips.

Within a very short period of time the number of kids swelled from under ten to over fifty, ranging from two-year-olds to sixth graders. Volunteers that were involved with the ministry were amazed, and perceived this to be the work of God, and felt as though they were experiencing an exciting, if also exhausting, new phase of their life of discipleship. They finally felt as though they were discovering how God's mission might make a difference in their own community. The ministry became a very visible (and audible) expression of the church's evolving understanding of its mission in Tullahoma. However, that movement also brought to light new challenges and questions. The church's mission had moved beyond rhetoric and into action, and now it was clear that there would be costs involved.

### The Deeper Challenges of Hospitality

The ministry's rapid growth caught church leaders mostly by surprise, and initially caused considerable strain and stress on the church's normal structures. Volunteers were not prepared 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 rethought and reworked. Safety issues needed to be addressed, such as the need for additional booster seats for the van or the collection of contact information and permission forms. Processes and routines, which had been in place for a long time, began to shift to accommodate the new situation. New volunteers came alongside those involved initially, added their own gifts to the ministry and took a share in the responsibility of the ministry. The church worked through the accompanying frustrations to various degrees of success, and tried out new systems and structures to help this grassroots effort become an intentional piece of the church's ongoing ministry.

As the church worked through these programmatic changes, it was clear that deeper questions and challenges were also beginning to emerge. Assumptions about order and structure were challenged. The church began to wrestle with how it prioritized some ways of doing ministry that 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, in many cases becoming even more consistent than long time members! Initially there was language that contrasted the "bus kids" from "our kids," but that language began to shift as volunteers became more insistent that *all* of the children were "our kids."

Through the programmatic hurdles and the deeper assumption level challenges, the church has been pushed to think about its motivations and self-understanding. What does it mean to be one of "us?" What will it mean for us to be a people of hospitality, whose words of welcome are translated into concrete action? Do we have the will and

capacity to struggle alongside those whose class position presents challenges that seem foreign to our own experience? Can we envision ourselves as a fully multiclass congregation, or might we need to think about investing ourselves in a more intentional church planting strategy? Can our ethos of structure and order absorb the issues occasioned by a raucous and energetic group of children? What level of engagement should we expect in this particular ministry from people across the church? What will it mean for some of us to support others who are more directly involved in this work?

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 of pertinent pieces of Scripture, and the subjective weighing of the experiences of members.

One piece of Scripture that has lodged itself in the congregation's discussion has been that of Jesus welcoming little children to himself. However, we might note that even within this pericope there is a direction that is not immediately obvious. Jesus not only teaches his disciples to welcome the children so that the children might be blessed, but he implores the disciples themselves to learn from the children. Perhaps in this pericope we can begin to locate another resource that can bring us clarity in understanding where God may lead us—perhaps the church can take a posture of readiness to *learn* from the very children that it has been satisfied, up to this point, 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 in Chapter 3.

## CHAPTER THREE: CEDAR LANE AND MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

In this chapter, I will use Missional Theology as a lens through which Cedar Lane's situation may be fruitfully perceived and analyzed. Missional theology not only provides a framework by which we can understand Cedar Lane's recent past and current situation, but also sheds light on what directions we might hope to emerge from the process of broadening our ecclesial conversation to include those perceived as outsiders.

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 that has been appropriated for a range of themes, concerns, and approaches to ecclesiology.<sup>1</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>2</sup>

Cedar Lane, due to the chain of events outlined in chapter 2, has found itself increasingly using missional language to identify itself over the past decade. However, as Van Gelder noted about the broader missional conversation, there is room for increased clarity about what "missional" really means in this congregational context. How might the trajectories of the church be described as missional? How does the church resist

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<sup>1</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>2</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.

missional directions? What further directions might missional theology suggest for the congregation? This chapter seeks to address these questions. First, I will describe a distilled version of missional theology, as developed in the still young literature base. Second, I will hold up features of Cedar Lane's identity and practice for comparison with what we might expect in a missional church. Finally, the chapter closes with suggestions for future missional development at Cedar lane.

### **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 that 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 that the church carried out. Van Gelder writes that the church developed foreign mission structures throughout the twentieth century with the goal of carrying the gospel into other parts of the world, holding the mindset that God had given them this evangelistic mission in the great commission.<sup>3</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>4</sup> In response, the missional church has pivoted towards an understanding of mission that proclaims that 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>5</sup> The location of mission within the nature of God’s own being results in the perception that God is always at work bringing about the mission, and *sometimes in ways that the church is unaware of, and which are located outside the church’s activity*. This already brings about the possibility that the church may look to recognize and discern God’s activity outside of itself, a point of great concern to this project, but also points towards the great theological question: What is the mission of God?

There are many paths of answering that great theological question, which rises to the significance of the meaning of creation and the intent of all of God’s interactions with creation. In the missional conversation, the quotation above already offers a possible

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<sup>3</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 17-21.

<sup>4</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 21, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Guder, 4. Also, Van Gelder and Zscheile, 8

trajectory, referencing “God’s purposes to restore and heal creation.”<sup>6</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 restoration, reconciliation, and recreation of all things.<sup>7</sup> Thus by God’s own divine agency, in which the church of Jesus participates by the Spirit, creation will return to God’s intent and exists within God’s reign, or under God’s kingship—and this process has already definitively begun. This line of theology has much to commend it, not the least of which is how it refigures the church’s identity.

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

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<sup>6</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.

<sup>7</sup> A common constellation of attributes that might constitute goodness is found in *Missional Church*, namely peace, justice, and celebration. Guder, 90-91.

kingdom manifests itself in surprising ways.<sup>8</sup> The Church is both a foretaste of God's kingdom and an agent of that community.<sup>9</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>10</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 also 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 a certain analysis of the social situation of the church, particularly in western contexts, and even more particularly in North America. The first paragraph of *Missional Church* closes with a sentence that signals the trajectory of this conversation:

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 its position of dominance as it has experienced the loss not only of numbers but of power and influence within society.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of this claim can be further 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>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Guder, 102-109.

<sup>9</sup> Guder 101.

<sup>10</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.

<sup>11</sup> Guder 1.

<sup>12</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile describe the effort to make this case as the first of six movements within *Missional Church*. 49-50.

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 that the church held a powerful voice in the public sphere, but that 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 sort of religious life.<sup>13</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.

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<sup>13</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.

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>14</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>15</sup> The new situation is that churches, once driven from the public sphere but given sanctuary in the private life of Americans, now finds 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. Even if they grieve the loss of the former arrangement, the missional movement argues that churches must move forward and learn new ways of being if they are to survive or be fruitful in the new situation. 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 about its missiological distortions, its collusion with secular power, its hubris, or its oppression of others. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch vigorously advance a critical perspective of Christendom in *The Shaping of Things to Come*, referring to the Christendom model of ecclesiology as an idol and a virus, which

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<sup>14</sup> Guder, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Roxburgh, 12-14.

can't help but spawn churches that carry in their DNA its critical flaws.<sup>16</sup> Their text is essentially a response to three specific flaws, namely that the church of Christendom is attractional, dualistic and hierarchical.<sup>17</sup> Churches that recognize the unsustainability of the Christendom model, they argue, are thus freed to create communities that embody alternatives to these flaws, namely incarnational mission, messianic spirituality, and apostolic forms of leadership.<sup>18</sup>

### Evolution of Ecclesial Practices

Frost and Hirsh viewed these three practices as an extension of the hallmarks of missional churches identified by the Gospel and Our Culture Network—an extension that would bring the number of hallmarks up to fifteen.<sup>19</sup> Evaluating such a list (which seemingly grows with each additional author) 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. Thus, here I will describe 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 provide a demonstration for how normal elements of Christian doctrine and ethics can take on a missional flavor.

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*, Revised and Updated edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2013), 29, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Frost and Hirsch, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Frost and Hirsch, 48-49.

<sup>19</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.

### *Incarnational Ministry*

An incarnational model of ecclesiology is hinted at, though undeveloped, in *Missional Church*, with the emphasis in that early work on how the church must relate to its given context:

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>20</sup>

This impulse towards incarnation found fuller expression in other works when paired with a foil: the attractional model of church. This allowed missional writers to clarify 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>21</sup>

How disciples who venture from the church's shared space remain connected to the church in terms of its fundamental practices remains to be worked out, although the

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<sup>20</sup> Guder, 11.

<sup>21</sup> David E. Fitch and Geoff Holsclaw, *Prodigal Christianity: 10 Signposts into the Missional Frontier* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 42-43.

answer may be in small groups of disciples working as missionary teams.<sup>22</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 their church buildings) through attractional ministry.

### *Hospitality*

Somewhat in contrast to the incarnational impulse described above, the missional movement recognizes the practice of hospitality as a hallmark of missional churches. Such churches develop the practice of making space for the stranger in their midst, both as individuals and as communities.<sup>23</sup> Beyond the simple practice of individuals who make space in their homes and lives for others, this hospitality makes its way into the most essential symbols of the church, such as the Eucharist.<sup>24</sup> The missional church practices fundamental hospitality at every level of its being.

An emphasis on hospitality is, in and of itself, perhaps not distinctive enough to set the missional movement off from other ecclesiologies. However, two nuances to the missional conversation surrounding hospitality push it into this territory. First, missional disciples greatly value the one to whom hospitality is extended. The church regards the stranger who is welcomed into the midst of the congregation not simply as a guest to be converted, but as someone who offers a blessing of understanding and learning to the church.<sup>25</sup> The stranger is not to be received merely as an outsider or a threat, but as

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<sup>22</sup> Fitch and Holsclaw, 102-104. Also Frost and Hirsch, 101-107.

<sup>23</sup> Guder, 175-180. Also, Barrett 169-170, and Fitch and Holsclaw, 105-107.

<sup>24</sup> Guder, 163-166.

<sup>25</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 132.

someone in whom the church may see Christ.<sup>26</sup> Hospitality is thus not simply a fruit of discipleship, but a means of its furtherance: “Strangers not only subvert our familiar worlds; they can enhance and even transform our way of life and our most intimate relationships.”<sup>27</sup> The church enters into the relationship not simply as teacher, but as learner as well, and through the practice of hospitality allows the stranger to participate in the church’s conversion. Openness to the grace and wisdom 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>28</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 vulnerability that implies.<sup>29</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>30</sup>

Both of these missional nuances to the Christian practice of hospitality share the common thread of reciprocity. The missional church sees its relationship to its neighbor this way in part because of its theological orientation, which both allows for the possibility of God’s activity in the neighbor and also necessitates such dignity and respect as in accord with the trajectory of the justice of God’s kingdom, in which each person has

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<sup>26</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 67-72.

<sup>27</sup> Guder, 178.

<sup>28</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>29</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 132.

<sup>30</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 133.

dignity and value as an image-bearer of God. Reciprocity, in hospitality as well as in other practices, ensures that 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>31</sup>

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

In Chapter 2 of this project, 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. A full account of where the church sits within this transition remains outside the scope of this project, but here I will observe the nature of our missional position and trajectory from the perspective of my own position. From my viewpoint as a minister, this transition, while substantial, remains incomplete.

#### Theological Reframing

My own entry into the life of Cedar Lane came in 2010, as the seeds of what would become this outreach to youth began to take root. As part of that process, I was given a prospectus for the church that included this language:

Our involvement in foreign and domestic missions...are an important part of who we are and who, we believe, God intends us to be. But, we also recognize the need to be mission-minded locally, meeting needs and evangelizing right here in our own community. At this point in our history, we desire to be a more outward-focused, more community-minded family. We want to make an impact in Tullahoma by reaching out to the needy, the disadvantaged, the marginalized, building relationships and generating opportunities to share the Good News.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Van Gelder, 63-64.

<sup>32</sup> “Our Next Chapter, Casting a Vision-Mission Point Tullahoma” in *Cedar Lane Minister Prospectus*, (Cedar Lane Leadership Archives, 2009), 1.

The position itself, traditionally titled “Preaching Minister”, was rebranded as the “Preaching and Outreach Minister”. The language of the leadership at that time, and largely within the church, was full of mission and the desire to engage with the local community. From the missional theological lens, this language viewpoint suggests that on one hand, the church had begun to see itself as a people “sent” in mission. On the other hand, missional theologians might well ask where the initiative of God is in the above description—does not the focus still fall heavily on the church’s activity? In my observation, the church has moved towards acknowledging God’s initiative in mission, but a sectarian ecclesiology that views other faith traditions with suspicion has restricted the missional impulse to see the work of God beyond its efforts. With each passing year that sectarian perspective slowly recedes, and the church increasingly opens itself to seeing God at work beyond its own initiative.

Another angle on this theological reframing comes from my own experience as a preacher. The content of my sermons is often expressly missional, and I typically frame texts in missional terms, speaking of how particular texts play into the mission of God or speak to the nature of the reign of God. For example, we spent a few months tracing an account of the mission of God within the whole story of Scripture. Later, a long series on Luke repeatedly emphasized the theme of reversal in the kingdom of God, and a series on John highlighted Jesus’s identity as the “Sent One” and his sending of the disciples as an invitation to join God’s work in the world. While it is surely naïve to interpret these homiletical choices of mine as representative of the church’s theology, from my perspective these types of readings and sermons resonate well within the church. Although my judgment is admittedly subjective, people seem willing to explore elements

of the missional theological shift. However, this willingness on the theological level stands in contrast with the conversation on the sociological front.

### Sociological Recognition and Resistance

Few at Cedar Lane would deny the changes in society noted in the sociological recognition within the missional church movement—pieces of this claim supported by data are readily accepted by the engineering culture noted in the previous chapter. However, the societal turn away from Christendom exacts profound grief and anxiety from many members, and there is a considerable amount of resistance to the suggestion that the fall of Christendom has positive dimensions.

This resistance rose to the surface when a missionary who initiated much of the missional conversation at Cedar Lane, Greg McKinzie, returned from Peru. During their transition, Greg preached a sermon in early 2015 from a millennial, missional perspective that included an interpretation of religious participation data. The sermon interpreted this societal turn and the turn away from institutional Christianity as an unexpected, but God-driven, movement. Greg addressed the anticipated resistance to this claim:

So, if you're scared by the thought that this version of Christian religion is inevitably becoming obsolete—if the newness of what God is doing causes you anxiety and fear—then I invite you to trust that the God who can make Cyrus of Persia the liberator of God's people can **also** use the most nonreligious generation in American history to convince his people at last that what we've become is **not enough**. That to be trapped in our religious forms is too small a thing. To show up and dress right and talk right and sing right is too light a thing. To come clean and clean cut and proper is not enough. God is calling us to what is next.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> I am grateful to Greg McKinzie for sharing the manuscript for this sermon. The emphasis in this quotation is his own.

As McKinzie anticipated, the sermon elicited a range of responses.<sup>34</sup> Some responses were negative, demonstrating hurt and feelings of betrayal. Other responses were positive, expressing gratitude that the church could speak about these shifts and hope for what it meant about the church. From my vantage point, the episode clarified the profound emotions wrapped into the sociological piece of the missional conversation. It remains a task of the church's leadership to negotiate this conversation, helping the church deal with the anxieties of societal change and develop a vision of engaging the changing culture with a new set of assumptions and practices.

### Attractional Hospitality and Incarnational Relationships

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 an analysis of ecclesial practice we can grasp more specific data points and produce a more interesting analysis.

On the surface, the outreach to youth and outreach described in Chapter 2 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—this is the prime metric of the attractional model of church. Similarly,

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<sup>34</sup> McKinzie has posted an account of this episode on his blog and instances of the varying responses at: <http://scriptureandmission.com/on-homiletics-prophetic-words-the-american-church/>.

in terms of hospitality, the church primarily thought in terms of welcoming the kids into its space, or making space for them at our table.

However, the process itself, and our own limited capacities, forced the church to wrestle with deeper layers of meaning within the process, asking not just how many kids were attending but what exactly was happening to them while they were at Cedar Lane. Furthermore, the church began to realize that participation in Christ's work of making disciples among these children and teens would require more than procuring their attendance, and many people of the church began to devise ways of being present in the neighborhood where many of the kids lived more often. Instead of busing the kids to a fall carnival, 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 for a moment. While these examples remain event-oriented, they represent a step away from attractional assumptions. More significant are the relationships members found themselves forging *outside* of these events, and found their lives intersecting with children and their families more often, and finding places where they became advocates for things important to these families. These experiences approach the reconciling friendships that Heurtz and Pohl locate at the heart of mission and which they describe as shifting the metrics of missional success towards faithfulness.<sup>35</sup> While the missional literature portrays "attractional" and "incarnational" models of ministry in binary terms, these developing friendships demonstrate a shift towards the critical heart of the incarnational approach, which is an

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

approach “in which relational identification with the neighbor leads us into concrete acts of solidarity and accompaniment.”<sup>36</sup> While attractational forms remain, Cedar Lane’s current trajectory is in this direction.

Finally, as they grow and deepen, the relationships are gradually shifting from one-sided service relationships into relationships provoking mutual transformation. We began by seeking to welcome a group of children into our space, but we are only now beginning to see what it means to be welcomed back into their families as well.

### **Directions for the Future**

This trajectory of mutuality offers great promise for the future. While the onset of the ministry revolved around “what we were doing for the children,” it has become increasingly clear that these friendships have been part of the church’s own conversion and growth in the gospel as well.

One of the hallmarks of the missional church is the recognition that “the church itself is an incomplete expression of the reign of God.”<sup>37</sup> This movement within the church has opened the church up to this recognition. For example, it has revealed blind spots to our class prejudices and caused us to confront our reluctance to be uncomfortable or inconvenienced by our neighbors. We have come to see more fully the incompleteness of our expression of the reign of God. However, we have not ventured far enough to explore ways that God’s reign might have expression outside our walls—we have had too few conversations about God’s activity beyond our own.

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<sup>36</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, 114-115.

<sup>37</sup> Barrett, 171-172. Also, Van Gelder 40, 54, and Guder, 86-87.

The missional lens suggests that these developing friendships with those who have been outsiders can teach us more about what God is doing in our community. 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, and in the next chapter, I will describe the research methods by which I will explore them.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter 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 chapter contains a description of ethical issues and safeguards related to the project.

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

I have designed this study as qualitative case study research as described by Sharan Merriam.<sup>1</sup> Merriam's definition of a case study is "an in-depth description of and analysis of a bounded system."<sup>2</sup> In this particular case study, the intent is to explore the assertion that young outsiders can provide insight into the real nature of the church, by exploring and describing 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.

Case study research fits this particular type of exploration well for a number of reasons; here I will describe two. First, my own personal interests as a researcher are bound to this context; this is the congregational setting in which I work as a minister, and while I am interested in the general application of the findings, the kinds of things the

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<sup>1</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 2nd edition. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

church can learn in this specific context are part of my ongoing work. I am interested in doing what Merriam, following Cronbach, calls “interpretation in context” in part because the context itself is important to me.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the closeness to the subject material is not without liabilities—it is possible, even likely, that there are elements of this particular situation that I will ignore or misinterpret because my research is confined to the context in which I normally work, and to which I have less sensitivities due to familiarity. On the other hand, familiarity presents benefits as well, and there are elements of the context that my prior work has prepared me to grasp which might elude other researchers in this context, or myself in other spaces. Merriam’s analysis of the spectrum of participant research underlines this tension and other complications, such as the extent to which my presence *as an observer* changes the nature of both my participation and the context itself, thus potentially affecting the validity of my observations and interpretations.<sup>4</sup> It may not be possible to ultimately quantify the balance of these benefits and liabilities. However, recognizing them is an attempt to “manage the tension between engagement and detachment”, as all researchers working as participant observers must.<sup>5</sup>

Second, a case study approach to designing this project fits the nature of the research problem. Exploring the extent to which young outsiders can offer insights to churches requires attending to the presence of variables that are impossible to separate from the context—a factor of research Merriam describes as particularly well-suited for a case study approach.<sup>6</sup> In this case, variables such as the church’s own self-understanding,

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<sup>3</sup> Merriam, 42.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 124-128.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 43.

the nature of the community, and the provenance of specific insights offered by the collection of persons engaged reflect variables which might radically differ in other contexts. A case study approach allows for the presence of these variables, and their exploration. While it remains important to acknowledge the limitations of generalizations drawn from such a case and applied to other contexts, the case study methodology allows for deeper understanding of the particular context, since it encourages a thick description of this context with its inextricable variables.<sup>7</sup> I will address the tension between possible generalizations and appropriate cautions in Chapter 6, but in this chapter I am simply recognizing the dynamic as a matter of methodological design.

### **Primary Research Tool: Semi-structured Interviews**

Recognizing that case study research can take multiple forms and employ a variety of tools, let me now turn to a fuller description of this project's methodological process. Having begun with a thick description of the research context (Chapter 2), I employed semi-structured interviews for the heart of the research.<sup>8</sup> Comprised of a set of pre-scripted questions, used with flexibility at my discretion throughout the interviews, this type of interview fit well in the context of my prior relationship with most of the interviewees, as well as my own location within the community in which the research was situated. This approach also allowed me to maintain an appropriate level of focus and consistency throughout the interviews. I was both able to keep the interviews directed to the subject matter while exploring different directions that appeared over the course of

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<sup>7</sup> Merriam, 43-44 and 50-54.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

the interviews. This tone of focused exploration was intended to underline another facet that I hoped this methodology would foster: a distinct posture of listening.

The semi-structured interview process, with its direction and fluidity, was intended as the heart of the research process because its very nature reflected a central question of the project: what might it mean for the church to become better at listening to those poised at its boundaries? Throughout the process, I attempted to embody that possibility, aiming to fully attend to what the interviewees were saying. This posture of listening was important in part because of the theoretical framework undergirding the project: missional theology. In Chapter 3, I identified Cedar Lane's missional trajectory as moving towards mutuality. The semi-structured form of interviews allowed the project to reflect that trajectory, making sure that the research participants retained agency to shift the flow of the interviews as they progressed. Although interviewees were initially responding to my invitation to participate in the research and certain power dynamics remain inherent in our relationships because of my position as both a pastor and now, researcher, this format encouraged active responsiveness on my part, and returned some measure of agency to the participants.<sup>9</sup>

This project progressed through three phases: Preparation, Interviews and Analysis. Here I will describe each phase as a movement in a sequence, though it is important to note that in reality the process involved considerable overlap. Each completed and analyzed interview led to refinements for subsequent interviews.

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<sup>9</sup> For a brief discussion of power dynamics in interview situations, see Merriam 108.

## Preparation

As per the recommendations by Sharan Merriam, I began the process of collecting data by constructing an interview guide containing initial questions for the interviews.<sup>10</sup> Keeping with the project's purposes, the questions were designed to elicit thoughts, feelings, and information, and to provoke conversation relevant to how participants view the Church in general terms and Cedar Lane specifically, particularly in terms of our engagement with the community. Several questions were meant to open up conversation about the participant's history with Cedar Lane, and whether that experience was marked by hospitality.

A further element of preparation was developing a list of potential interviewees.<sup>11</sup> There is a fuller description of the pool of participants below, but as a preparatory step of the process, I began collecting information on participants in Cedar Lane's youth ministry that fit the basic parameters of this project's focal group. Once I collected enough names for an initial set of interviews, I began the next stage, although I would add to that list of interviewees as the project progressed.

## Interviews

The interview process began as I approached each potential participant with information about the project's purpose and process. Since this project's participants were minors, I also provided their parents with information about the project and obtained consent from both the interviewees and their parents before progressing to the

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<sup>10</sup> Merriam, 102-105.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 105.

interview proper. Often, this was a two-stage process in which I obtained consent and then scheduled the interview for a later time, although occasionally it was expedient to conduct the interview immediately upon obtaining consent.

Each interview began by setting up audio equipment and asking if the participant had any questions before we began. Then, after a few neutral questions about their name, age, and length of time participating at Cedar Lane, I began working through the heart of the interview with questions from the interview guide providing the basic structure, although I attempted to be attuned to the flow of the conversation for opportunities to probe for further elaboration or alternative paths of inquiry. Each interview lasted about half an hour. All media related to the interview, such as signed forms and recordings, were then stored in appropriately secure locations as per the anonymity requirements detailed below until they were needed for further processing.

### Analysis

I began the process of analyzing the available information by listening to the recordings. Each completed interview's recording was transcribed—some by my own hand, others through an agency. I then began by following a process of coding the transcriptions, initially employing open coding, taking notes from each transcript to gather a list of possible categories in which to collect information.<sup>12</sup> As I collected and analyzed additional transcripts, I moved towards analytical coding, in which I made use of recurring themes and motifs to group bits of respondent data into categories.<sup>13</sup> Each

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<sup>12</sup> Merriam, 179.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

transcript was subjected to at least two coding passes, one open and one analytical, although several of the earlier transcripts were reviewed again later to make use of categories that emerged later in the process. The results of this analysis will be reported in Chapter 5, but I should note at this juncture that information gleaned from analyzing the earliest interviews was factored into subsequent interviews, influencing the lines of inquiry. For example, as I began to hear an emphasis on learning, I began to probe further into the kinds of things learned, and the influence that the things learned had on their lives. I also heard about the distinctions between the level of hospitality shown by adults at the church and that extended or withheld by other teen peers, and so I explored that further in later interviews. The effect of this is that the earliest interviews were broader in subject, while the latter interviews were more focused on categories already identified, though I aimed to be attentive to the possibility of new categories as well.

### **Research Participants**

The research participants included seventeen interviewees who met a set of three parameters that suggested they fit the sort of liminal status described in Chapter 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 came by means other than their own families. Specifically, the entry point was the church's outreach ministry, broadly defined in this instance as the effort led by certain adults at Cedar Lane to bring children and adolescents to the church's Wednesday night programming, as outlined in Chapter 2. Second, I limited my pool of interviewees to those who had been attending for at least a year. Third, although

this outreach ministry includes elementary children as well as youth ministry participants, for purposes of this study interviewees were limited to the latter, which at Cedar Lane includes students in grades 6-12.

This selection of participants contains a diversity of interests and individual personalities, but also shares a number of facets that contribute to marginalization within the congregation, and even in a broader societal sense. To the point of congregational marginalization, the first factor is that they do not have adult members of their families 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 some degree of poverty during their youth. Finally, it is important to note that, as I reflected on the transcripts, nearly all of the participants interviewed are also affected by other, more specific marginalizing factors. A combination of home instability, legal or academic issues, disabilities, racial, and other factors contribute uniquely to the marginalization of each of the students. In some cases, these factors led to challenges in the research process, which I will now describe along with other challenges to the process.

### **Methodological Challenges**

The greatest challenges of this project were related to scheduling interviews with participants. Some of the same factors of instability that lead to marginalization also made it more difficult to gain access to some participants. Furthermore, it was often surprisingly difficult to obtain parental consent. On one hand, this was certainly due to my relative unfamiliarity to the parents, as compared to their children who generally

know me well from their involvement with the church. However, a further conjecture about parental reluctance is that many of these parents have a natural suspicion of such engagement by authority figures, due to their own history of marginalization. Beyond simply being a complication to the research process, this unfamiliarity and reluctance is one of the stark realizations from the research process, an observation I will unpack further in Chapter 6.

An additional methodological challenge with implications for the research occurred when our church underwent a youth ministry staff transition in the midst of the project. The previous youth minister moved, and there was a period of six months before the replacement was in place. While our volunteer leaders generally managed the transition very well, one of the most difficult challenges was maintaining the same degree of connection with many of the students whose connection to the youth ministry was through this outreach. Without staff leadership, the church lost a major connection point to students who did not have a familial anchor in the congregation. This too presented a major challenge in developing the pool of participants, and I will analyze this aspect further in Chapter 5 along with the findings directly related to the content of the interviews. Before moving on to the data collected from those interviews, I will conclude this description of the research process with a brief summary of some of the ethical considerations connected to the design and execution of the project.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In addition to negotiating the ethics of power incumbent on interviewers alluded to above, this project carried ethical considerations due to the minority status of its

participants. Accordingly, the Human Subjects Research Protocol appended below was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Columbia Theological Seminary in December 2015. Besides the process of obtaining parental consent described above, this protocol also outlined steps to maintain confidentiality for participants.

### Confidentiality

As outlined in the Human Subject Research Protocol, I took measures both during and after the interview process to maintain the confidentiality of research participants. First, all documents and files related to individuals were stored securely. Hard copies were stored in a locked safe, and digital versions were stored within a password-encrypted partition of my hard drive. Second, all references to individuals in the final reporting of the project are conveyed through obscured identities—no real names or identifying characteristics will be disclosed in any of the report documents or in any public presentations of the research. Third, my own personal boundary as a researcher has been to refrain from discussing the people I interviewed, or the contents of specific interviews with any persons except the individuals themselves.

### Safety

An additional methodological concern was the maintenance of appropriate safe spaces for the interviews. In keeping with congregational and personal practice, the interviews were never conducted in isolation. Rather, each session occurred within view of at least one other adult. Often this meant that I interviewed participants in their homes

with the parents present, or outside their homes in public, common spaces. Alternatively, I used a space at the church's facility that allowed for visibility. Students were never visited at home without the presence of parents. The inconvenience of such measures was substantial, and even meant a narrower sample of interviews than would have been possible otherwise, but was nonetheless important for the safety of all research participants—any shortcutting this standard would have implied a failure to recognize the value of each participant! Indeed, this would have been not simply an immoral failure, but an ironic one, given this project's purpose to demonstrate the unique insights and value of these adolescents. The complicating facet of such necessary measures adds to the methodological challenges for this research project that were outlined above. Together all these challenges only begin to point towards the difficulties involved with an intentional effort by any church to engage young outsiders in conversations about the nature of the church and the mission of God. Perhaps we can only gather the energy necessary to overcome such challenges as we come to value and appreciate the insights and contributions such individuals can bring to our own understandings. To that purpose, it is time to turn away from this outline of the study's methodological process and turn towards the actual findings of the project, which are contained in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DATA GATHERED

For this study, I interviewed 17 students from Cedar Lane’s youth ministry. The interviews ranged from 25-45 minutes. I began the interview by asking simple questions such as the student’s name, age, and the length of time he or she had participated with the church’s ministry. These warm up questions allowed the students to begin moving past the awkwardness of a recorded interview. As the interview progressed, I generally explored questions about the participant’s relationship with the church, and explored what the student found important about the church. At times these conversations just skimmed the surface of the participant’s faith, but it was not uncommon for the conversations to evoke powerful emotions of how the community demonstrated love. At times the conversations were about generalities of the faith, but they often became deeply personal. In this chapter’s report on the content of those interviews, I refer to each participant numerically—P1, P2, and so on.

I found the experience of the interviews useful on an initial level simply as a vehicle for strengthening my relationship with these students. The intensity of listening required by the interview process provoked me to acutely attend to these students, and these relationships with members on the edge of our community need more attention. I will reflect further on my own experience as an interviewer in the last chapter of the project. In this chapter, I will describe the themes I heard from students in the interviews, because the content of the conversations held several insights that need to be heard by the church. Then I will return to evaluate the importance of these findings for this project’s

research question before closing by exploring ways that further study is needed to extend the conclusions of this project.

### **Themes**

Over the course of the interviews, four themes emerged among the perspectives expressed by the students. In the next chapter, I will address the implications of each of these categories of insight for the church; here, my intention is to describe the perspectives themselves.

#### Learning About God

A perspective that initially surprised me was the identification of “Learning about God” as the primary purpose of the church. Nearly all the 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>1</sup> Initially, I interpreted this as immature religious cliché, and thought that the interviewees were simply parroting back to me what they expected 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:

Their main point of people coming is learning and then teaching you about

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<sup>1</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.

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>2</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, I take it as a natural and predictable result from the engagement patterns of these participants. Most of them 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>3</sup> The children’s ministry for most of this time was structured as a classroom setting, and there is significant time devoted to teaching in the youth ministry’s Wednesday night programming as well, although this also incorporates worship elements. It follows that these involvement points have formed the participants’ perspectives of the mission of the church.

A possible selection bias arises at this point of the project. It is possible, or even likely, that the church’s outreach ministry to youth has been effective in engaging people

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<sup>2</sup> P7.

<sup>3</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.

who are disposed to appreciate this sort of educational emphasis. It may very well be that those inclined to more service-oriented experiences, or who thirst for more time focused in worship, have simply not been retained by the ministry over time. Those who have remained are clearly inclined to favor this type of experience.

### *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 that had been told in teaching moments, and voiced their appreciation for the teaching styles of ministry leaders. Furthermore, several expressed how comfortable they were asking questions to receive clarification. 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 began to probe further by asking interviewees about the specific content of what they had learned over time, and what things had made a difference to their lives. These questions provoked a great variety of responses, as some participants struggled to describe the connection between what they were learning at church and the rest of their lives, while others profoundly 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.

On the other hand, several 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, and developing theologies about God’s relationship to the world, 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 the way they were treated in very positive terms. 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 that 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.

#### *Acceptance and Diversity*

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 because of their economic status or other factors such as disabilities expressed that they feel like the church accepts and loves them for who they are.

#### *Hurts and Isolation*

These positive perspectives on the church's hospitality were significantly more common in the sample of interviews collected in this project, but it is important to add a pair of nuances to this picture. First, a small number of participants voiced that they did, at times, feel hurt by specific experiences. Two had been disciplined, and felt singled out

or unjustly blamed for problems.<sup>4</sup> P1 described an experience of not being picked up like expected a few times, and feeling like the church might not want him to come anymore. 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 serious possibility of a selection bias—individuals who did not encounter such hospitality may very well have simply disengaged from the church and would likely not have been represented in the interviews.

### *Group Unity*

One final consideration in this theme of acceptance and hospitality is that occasionally participants would voice conflict with other teenagers in the group. On some level, this may be attributed to the social lives of adolescents and the occasional turmoil that arises. However, a few of the participants expressed the perspective that the welcome and acceptance voiced by adult leaders and volunteers was not mirrored by teenagers who had grown up in the church. P9 said, “With the teens, it's 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.” This participant further elaborated that sometimes the divisions seemed to be based on the financial status of teens. The interviews did not surface enough of this sentiment to discern how widespread this perspective is, but the possibility exists that among the teenagers, the culture of hospitality might not be as fully as developed as it is among adult volunteers and staff.

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<sup>4</sup> Typically, this discipline involves either being asked to not come for a period of time or being not allowed to join a particular trip.

## The Breadth and Depth of Relationships with Adults

When asked about their relationships at Cedar Lane, participants tended to respond by talking about adults. Although each participant referenced only a few names, I was surprised to find that the total number of different adults referenced in the interviews was 25—a higher number than I anticipated. Different interviewees voiced feeling like particular volunteers, such as the van drivers that picked them up, 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 the person who gives them a ride to church being almost like having another parent—even going so far as to say they know that if anything happened to their parents, they know the people from church would make sure that they were taken care of and safe. I also observed that interviewees who had participated in a broader range of ministry activities also tended to have a broader set of relationships among volunteers.

### *Staff Relationships*

While the total number of volunteers that were mentioned in the interviews is an encouraging piece of data, the interviews also surfaced a high degree of importance that the church's youth ministry staff position plays in these relationships. Often, the youth minister was the first person named in interviews as a significant relationship, and the participants also commonly told stories of Cedar Lane staff reaching out to them outside of class times at the church building. It was clear that these moments of reaching out have had a profound and positive impact on the participants' relationship with the church.

However, the primacy of staff relationships can be problematic, as underlined when the church underwent a transition in the middle of the project. When the youth

minister departed for a position in another state, Cedar Lane underwent a six-month period before a new youth minister began working with the church. Many of the interviewees expressed being heartbroken during this time, and perhaps more distant to the church as well. At the time of writing, the new youth minister is only four months into his tenure, and those relationships have not had time to form to the same extent, though participants voiced optimism in that direction. However, this process underlines the importance of continuing to broaden 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 in this group. Although I was entering into these interviews as a researcher, I often was compelled to take on a pastoral role in the midst of the interview, as participants revealed conflicts or struggles that they were currently facing. It often seemed like these things were sitting just beneath the surface, as though the interviewee was quietly waiting for an open door to talk about the issue. The interviews surfaced conflicts between participants and other teens and sometimes their families, struggles with their own faith or behavior, and heavy grief. On a few occasions, even the process of setting up the interviews led to lengthy conversations between myself and the participants or their families, revealing pastoral needs that required further attention later. On one occasion the interview led to a lengthy discussion about the participant's desire for baptism! Reflecting on all of these needs, I wonder how these pastoral needs would have been surfaced or addressed if it had not been for the impetus provided by this research project.

## A Neighbor to the Community

The struggles experienced by interviewees were reflected in their answers about the state of our community. Participants often saw much good in the community, like people serving each other and trying to follow God. However, they also expressed a dire perspective on the negative things that surround them. Some voiced a concern for violence, and P15 used the example of a young man she knew who had recently been murdered. Along the same line, some noted the presence of sheer hatred and contempt among neighbors, some of which was attributed to racism or prejudice. Other interviewees mentioned the prevalence of drug addictions in the neighborhood, and the struggles of poverty.

In the face of these community issues, the last ecclesiological element of the interviews to surface was the church's role in helping its community. Some participants noted that their own families had been recipients of help from the church, as P7 does:

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 their understanding that part of the church's mission in the world was to help its neighbors in need. In the words of P6, part of the role of Christians in the world is to be “good caring people who you can go to in your time of need.”

## Back to the Question

In Chapter 1, I identified this project's central research question as whether "the church's understanding of its own nature and practices, particularly regarding outreach, can be fruitfully informed by a better understanding of the conception of church developing within youth who have become a part of our community through that outreach." After reviewing the insights revealed over the course of the interviews, my answer to that question is definitively affirmative. Entering into these conversations about the nature of the church has helped me understand that our outreach practice emphasizes teaching more than I realized, and has highlighted the importance of a culture of hospitality within the church. Furthermore, these conversations have revealed the interplay between volunteer and staff ministry in this work, 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."<sup>5</sup> They reveal aspects of the realities of our congregational life and of our interaction with the community, and thus our missional calling, which were obscured before they came into clarity through intentional conversation and listening. This claim carries implications for the church's future, which will be explored in the next Chapter. Before that, though, the assertion must be nuanced by an evaluation of the study's limitations.

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<sup>5</sup> The goal of the project stated in Section 1.

### **Limitations and Further Study**

Although I answer the central question of the project affirmatively, I recognize that a number of factors require nuances of the claim. First, I entered into this process as a participant researcher from a particular pastoral position as the church's minister. It is one thing to say that a pastor's understanding can be informed by such interaction with young outsiders, but another to claim that the process can be translated to the church as a whole. Perhaps it is better to nuance the claim by saying that individuals on the margins possess insight into the nature of the church and its mission for those who are prepared to hear it. Further study, experimentation, and creative ministry is required to develop ways that the broader congregation might be brought into conversation with those who live at its edges. However, I do believe the experience of the current study points towards the fruitfulness of such engagement.

A second limitation of the current study is the particularity of the findings in the context of Cedar Lane and its outreach ministry. While I believe the general thesis that the church can learn and grow by engaging those on its edges, it may well be that the particular things learned differ from the themes outlined in this chapter. We can generalize that the church will likely learn—but precisely what it learns may vary depending on the context of the congregation, the nature of the relationships in question, and the church's own self-awareness. What is reported here are simply the things that Cedar Lane can learn from its neighbors. The same journey of discovery is also open for other congregations, but will likely yield other insights.

However applicable the current study is for other context may remain to be seen, but what is certain is that the conversations yielded insight into Cedar Lane's own nature

and that of our youth outreach. In the next chapter, I will begin to unpack the implications of those findings in order to suggest ways the church can move forward faithfully in light of these insights.

## CHAPTER SIX: INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS

In Chapter 2 I outlined the missional journey of Cedar Lane, and in Chapter 3 I developed missional theology as a theoretical framework for this project. In this final chapter, I will develop the implications of my research findings (Chapter 5) through the lens of that theological framework, offering an interpretation of the data that suggests further developments along the missional trajectory. I will loosely map these implications according to the three-fold structure of the description of missional theology offered in Chapter 3, offering implications for Cedar Lane's missional trajectories in theological and sociological understanding before turning to ecclesial practice.

### **A Theological Reality**

As described in Chapter 3, the core of the missional movement is a theological shift, two elements of which are an emphasis on the agency of God in mission and a broad view of the reign of God. The claim is that we can only attend to the practical matters of faithful mission when 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. Understanding that God is the initiator of mission leads to a way of life open to discovering God's work in the world. An emphasis on the reign of God over all the world pulls disciples into patterns of spirituality that take seriously work and social relationships as venues for expressing faith, rather than as distractions from church life. Perceiving God's desire to reconcile creation and bring about life, goodness, and justice

in the world prevents us from pursuing an escapist spirituality. The way we understand God matters for how we live out our faith in God, and how we understand God's mission shapes the way we participate 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.” This is not something I would usually say, at least not in this language; my own ecclesiological emphases are different. I would more likely say that the church is a community of disciples that embodies the work of Jesus in the world, or that we are a community that follows the way of Jesus by loving God, each other, and our neighbors. This simple language of learning that I heard on the lips of many of the research 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 be that it has too easily been nuanced away, that it has too easily been 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 have 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. As I reflected on that apparent conflict, I began to wonder in a broader sense, “Is Cedar Lane helping people connect what they know about God to their own way of life?” I suspect that exploring that question further would yield a similar spectrum of experiences and perspectives as did this study, but there is much to gain by understanding where our efforts to teach a transformative theology are being most successful, and where they are not, and the factors that create the difference. I suggest that improving our capacity to help people make connections between their theology and their lives should become an important point of emphasis across our education ministries, from children to adults. Like the ancient 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>1</sup> The theology we teach must be transformative, connected to the whole of our lives. What practices and systems can help facilitate transformative teaching and learning? How can we assess the transformative quality of our teaching?

### Education Must Be Multi-Dimensional

One potential direction might be in recognizing that a transformative theological education occurs through multiple types of experiences—classroom experiences alone cannot provide a fully formative theology. When we speak of the task of teaching and

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<sup>1</sup> These phrases are my own translations from Ephesians 4:20-24.

learning Christ, we must expand that vision beyond the Bible class hour. In other words, one reason we may not recognize the importance of education in our ecclesiology is that we have too limited a vision of education. 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 the corporate study of Scripture that is our typical classroom experience. All of the church's tools for forming disciples are part of the way we come to learn Christ, and it may take all of them to develop a truly transformative theology that leads to a full life of faith, including the pursuit of God's mission in the world.

This is not merely semantics, a way of re-categorizing other things we value in order to reclaim something we wish we held important. Rather, understanding these other practices as a part of our ministry of theological education can move us to engage them reflectively, intentionally engaging them as experiences that teach us. It can also provoke us to ask of each facet of our ministries, "What is it that we are teaching here? What are we learning?"

Along this line, we may wish to also become more intentional to make sure that we engage people, including these young people thought to be outsiders, in a fuller set of learning experiences. Although I want to be careful here about too easily suggesting a higher degree of church programming as a solution, we may well 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 develop their capacities and integrate their developing faith into their lives.

### Opportunities for Mutual Learning

Unfortunately, what is said above, if left alone, would still confine the participants in this study to the role of “learners”. This project’s thesis was about their capacity to teach. One of the clear implications of the research is that Cedar Lane should begin to help these adolescents find their voice, and that the church should begin practicing the art of listening to them. One initial way we might approach this is to work towards increasingly mutual learning environments. Last summer, Cedar Lane experimented with such by employing a set of intergenerational groups that approached a curriculum based around case studies. The intention of creating a discussion-based environment of mutual learning was met with mixed results; some groups did well, but others struggled due to a variety of issues, such as a lack of prior relationship, personality dynamics, or inconsistency. However, the greatest issue might simply have been that *this was not what the church was used to*. The acts of speaking and listening, giving and receiving attention, felt awkward and uneasy, particularly among these young students from the margins. However, the church must work towards building those capacities. Experimenting with a broader range of learning experiences, we must hone our capacities for mutual teaching and encouragement. In this way, we may not only return a measure of agency to each other, but recognize that ultimately God is the one who works our transformation, through the agency of each other. And as we more broadly view the category of “each other” to include those who have previously been considered outsiders

or to be on the margins, we will also come to understand more broadly the agency of God whose reign extends far beyond our own boundaries.

### **A Sociological Recognition**

Entering into such mutuality also creates new possibilities for the new situation of the church described in the sociological recognition piece of Chapter 3. There, I described both the general tension within the Church in North America and specifically Cedar Lane's struggle within the new sociological reality wherein the Church no longer occupies the central space of culture. Alan Roxburgh describes the Church's new situation as liminal, as the church has both entered into a new transitional place in the world and has also been relocated nearer the margin of society.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, one interesting implication of this study is the possibility that this group of adolescents might prove uniquely important as conversation partners not in spite of their liminality, but because of it. Within a mutual learning context, these students may be able to bring their experience of life on the margins into the church, giving testimony of what a vibrant faith at the boundary of culture looks like. The faith of those who have spent much of their lives at the margins can help others within the church release some of their anxiety over having been dislodged from the center. By choosing to stand in joyful solidarity with those at the edge, the church can learn to live faithfully and joyfully in its new situation. Roxburgh's analysis of the liminal status of the Church sees this sort of listening to those at the boundaries as an alternative to anxiously seeking to reestablish the church's former place of societal power:

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<sup>2</sup> Roxburgh, 46.

One fears that in North America, rather than hearing this call of the Spirit to embrace and listen to the voice of God in a place of strangeness, the churches are continuing to work hard at rediscovering modes of existence and symbols of power that will move them back to an imaginary center. A return to a remembered Christendom or the old detente with modernity is impossible. Those doors are closed. 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>3</sup>

Thus, we can see that one of the most vital possible contributions from those at the margins of the church is to help the church itself live well at the margins of its culture.

This possibility stretches beyond mere sociological accommodation, striking at an important piece of Christian spirituality—humility. While we might look across the canon for calls to humility, for the purposes of this paper, consider the way that Luke’s gospel treats the dynamics of pride and humility in stories such as the birth announcements, Simon’s call, the table stories, and of course the paradigmatic text of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee.<sup>4</sup> Luke consistently depicts humility as being the significant virtue of vulnerable people coming from the margins, while the powerful exhibit pride and arrogance. Jesus responds with the rhetoric of reversal, and invites the poor and rich, the powerful and vulnerable alike to come participate in God’s community—although the proud are often unable to bring themselves to do so. This can be a provocative insight for the Church, as it may be that our own previous social position of power infected the Church with hubris, a presumption of prestige and privilege that we find difficult to give up. Accordingly, the practice of entering into

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<sup>3</sup> Roxburgh, 46-47.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:46-55, 5:1-11, 14:7-14, and 18:9-14.

mutual learning with people at the margins is both an act demonstrative of willing humility, and the way to cultivate it; it is a practice in which we might uncover rich examples of virtue that can be held up and honored within the church, models for a humble and faithful life together. Furthermore, this call to Lukan humility provokes the church to recognize the real consequences of social and economic differences between parts of the church. Those who live largely empowered lives will do well to recognize the real power and privilege differentials that exist and take them seriously. It will not do to simply say, “We are all marginalized.” Rather, in our context of a community fractured across class lines, the church has the opportunity to build real friendships across class and social lines. Thus, the church has the opportunity to grow in its understanding of injustice and walk towards the reconciled justice of the kingdom of God.

### **Ecclesial Practices**

The final component of the missional movement described in Chapter 3 was a particular set of ecclesial practices. While the range of practices relevant to missional ecclesiology is broad, I focused in that chapter on incarnational (as opposed to attractional) ministry and the giving and receiving of hospitality. This study offers implications for both of these facets.

### **Incarnation**

One possible critique of Cedar Lane’s outreach ministry is its attractional model—drawing teens and children out of their communities into an alternative location

called “Church.” While I think that part of that critique is valid, particularly in the initial phases, moving towards a more mutual understanding of those relationships provides a substantial different perspective. It is no longer true that the church does not have an incarnational ministry of disciples embedded within the neighborhood. There is indeed a powerful incarnational presence, 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 the form of these young disciples—not merely in the longer established church members who have relationships with them. Cedar Lane’s primary presence is no longer the people who come in from outside the neighborhood to do ministry there—it is these students who live there.

Opening ourselves to them by listening to their experiences also opens the door for more appropriate forms of service to the community. On one hand, it might mean moving away from programmatic ministries towards a structure that supports these students as they serve their neighborhood. 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 and encourage them to engage the needs that they see!

Alternatively, listening well to these young disciples also may provide insight into not only the needs of our neighbors, but other ways that God is at work healing the community. Perhaps our role will be to join in something we see—at other times it may be to celebrate or support the work of another group making a difference. 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.

The opening anecdote of this project was not an isolated instance; 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. One of the surprising findings of my research was that while I sought to interview adolescents who had been consistently coming for a year or more, sixteen of the seventeen teenagers who actually participated in the interviews have been consistently participating with the church for at least five years—and the final interviewee has been coming for four. That is 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 come to recognize that reality in its speech and actions—this is the ongoing work of creating a culture of hospitality. 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 steps like creating the opportunities for youth ministry volunteers to continue to build deeper relationships while continuing the work of broadening the pool of adults who are engaged—and providing training for them in the practices and mentalities of 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, like 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. The church has already begun experimenting with a few such adjustments; the spirit of willingness to respond to the needs of these young disciples is a key element to continuing to showing them the sort of hospitality that we value as a congregation.

I can already see the indications of outlines of where this sort of thinking is taking Cedar Lane as a church. Previously, we spoke about these students in broad generalities, but more and more leaders and volunteers think about students more personally—they know the individuals' names, and more aware of their stories, gifts, and challenges.

Our approach to youth ministry is changing—during the interview process for our new youth minister, a key point of discussion among the youth committee was how prospective ministers might further engage students that once were considered outsiders, but who are increasingly simply seen as “our kids.” It became important to try and solicit feedback from those students about candidates, although this was more difficult to do than we supposed. Still, 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 even a few years ago. Furthermore, the church has gradually

been reorienting its programming and budget processes 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 are beginning to 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.

In the midst of this project, my conversations with people about my research have continually returned to what it might mean for our journey as Jesus's disciples. People have asked, "Can you tell if what we're doing is making a difference? Does it matter? Is what we have intended as an act of hospitality being received as such, or are we merely fooling ourselves?" I am glad for these questions. This research process is intended to invite the church out further in exploring them. My findings are not meant as the definitive set of insights to be gleaned from such conversations, but as a demonstration of what is possible as we engage them. I am convinced that such conversations hold great power to further transform the church—this has been my own experience in the journey of this project.

### **Preaching to the Preacher**

The possibility for growth and reflection arising from mutuality is not simply a theoretical possibility emerging from my analysis of the project. It was very much my experience in the project itself. Although the interviews all began on my initiative, I often felt the position change very quickly, as the process of acquiring consent essentially meant I was not just extending an invitation—I was asking for one as well. I was asking for an invitation into their world, permission to probe around in the participants' inner lives of faith. These participants opened up space for me to do that in—an expression of hospitality. They welcomed me into their space, often literally, but certainly emotionally, and generously shared their perceptions, experiences, and insights. I was often struck by the depth of what they were willing to share: feelings of anger over injustice, expressions of loneliness and fear, rich gratitude for God's provision in their lives. We laughed frequently during the interviews, but also often shifted into weighty matters, and shared long, heavy silences, and even tears. The interviews didn't simply reveal cognitive information. They also opened the door for emotional exchanges, and often I experienced these as moments of spiritual solidarity, knowing that we were coming close to expressing something shared between us by the spirit of Christ.

Some of the most profound effects of the interview process have been personal to me, not as a researcher, but as a pastor. The first has been simply a greatly enhanced set of relationships with these adolescents and their families. Beyond the information that I would gather from the transcripts as data for this project, I gained a much richer profile of the pastoral needs of these families—I have a much greater appreciation for their hopes, capacities, fears, and obstacles. Several interviews required pastoral follow-up in an

ongoing way, and I am grateful for the way this project opened up those doors. The simple act of intentional listening opened up deeper pastoral relationships than were possible before the project. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, I occasionally met reluctance on the part of parents and teenagers to enter into the process. These concerns were allayed, but that reluctance still underlined the fact that these relationships need work and attention. Although the process was a step in the right direction, there is still more work to be done.

Second, I was simply encouraged by the testimony of these students as they spoke of their faith in the Lord. They are being drawn into the way of Jesus, and their maturing faith was refreshing in its passion and sense of discovery. These young people, exploring their own place in the mission of God, inspired me! Occasionally, they provoked me to consider my own spirituality, as I heard one participant talk passionately about gratitude, or another speak about a habit of nightly prayer. In other cases, the conversations caused me to think about the way I pursue my calling in ministry, and whether I subtly exhibit prejudices and neglect this part of our community.

Third and finally, I walked away from the interviews with a profound sense of solidarity with these teenagers and their families. Because of these shared conversations, and the shared experiences which they revealed, I came away with a passionate feeling that these are “my people.” Sometimes, when we journey towards mutuality with people at the margins, we find that the distance is shorter than we thought; perhaps Christ has already been at work bringing us near to each other. Or perhaps, as we open ourselves up to each other in mutual hospitality, we also become open to meeting the Spirit of Christ in each other.

This sense of solidarity was surprising to me. Perhaps I anticipated hearing something a little stranger or novel in these interviews; and 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 what is stranger, and certainly more important, is not what was different in the conversations, but the commonality that they revealed. This dynamic between the fresh uniqueness of each individual's perspective and the glimpse of the common work of Christ being done among us all is the most formative piece of education for me personally in this process. The experience of exploring that dynamic, of coming to understand what we share in Jesus and the unique gifts the spirit is bringing through each individual, was valuable to me, and is also valuable to the church.

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## APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What is your sense of your relationship with Cedar Lane?
2. What kinds of experiences do you have with the people at Cedar Lane?
3. What kinds of things do you hear people saying about churches?
4. How do you feel the people of the church think about you, and how do they treat your relationship?
5. What is your idea of the purpose of the church, and how do you think Cedar Lane is doing in pursuing that purpose?
6. Are there other churches that you have a relationship with in the area?
  - a. What is similar about those other relationships and the one you have with Cedar Lane?
  - b. Is there anything about your relationship with Cedar Lane that is different than the relationship you have with other churches?
7. What do you think God sees in our community? In what ways do you see God at work in this community?
8. What kind of a church makes a “good neighbor?”
9. What kinds of things do people at church do to make you feel like you belong, or that they want you there?
10. What kinds of things do people at church do to make you feel like you don’t belong, or they don’t want you there?
11. What do you hope your kids are getting out of their time at Cedar Lane?
12. What would you want the leaders of the church to know about who you are?
13. What would you want the church to realize about life in this community?
14. Who are some of the people that you know from Cedar Lane? What kind of people are they?
15. What kinds of things are important to God?
16. What kinds of things are important to the people of Cedar Lane?