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THE ART OF INVITATION

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Abstract

The church of today is operating in a complex society and is challenged to organize ministry, programs, and structure while being responsive to individuals. The average church goer is facing complex and challenging life issues, looking to the church for refuge, acceptance, security, and belonging. There is a natural tension at the intersection of organizing ministry for the sake of the whole and providing unconditional acceptance for each individual within the context of the larger church. A case study of twelve individuals with diverse experiences and challenges was examined. Results indicate the interactional style of the church favors formal processes engaging the most capable, organized, and efficient members who expect others to self initiate their involvement in the life of faith and in the programs and initiatives offered. Some (those connected or engaged) are perceived as favorites or “insiders,” while the “outsiders” often feel overlooked, forgotten, stigmatized, insignificant, and/or like a misfit because the personal connection is missing or minimized. Individual perception of the church as a whole impacts the engagement of the individual, and this in turn, impacts the health and cooperative spirit of the whole. Lastly, the Art of Invitation is introduced to provide one approach to help churches and faith communities build and restore healthy cooperative relationships.

Key Words: relationships, transparency, understanding, transformation, individual acceptance, invitational

Introduction

Through social work practice, clinical observations, and informal and formal ministry interactions, this author observed apparent relational disconnection expressed and observed in and around the Body of Christ (i.e. church groups and Christian ministries). This apparent disconnection seems to occur commonly through judgments and conclusions drawn by some about others. Though much has been written about important aspects of the Christian life, building and restoring relationships is a key focus to ensuring a safe and trusting environment within the church. In trying to work together to navigate the challenges of the 21st century's complicated social and cultural changes, how can the church empower individuals to be more empathetic to these challenges and overcome barriers to healthy relationships and cooperation?

Literature Review

Religion is a part of the American relational fabric. Campbell and Putnam (2010) assert that for many, American's religion is a civic responsibility that unites rather than divides. Religious and non-religious Americans have very different views. Religious people typically change over time "finding religion, dropping out of religion, or switching from one religion to another" (Campbell and Putnam, 2010, p. 639). While broad analysis can track trends, the religious landscape is a web of interlocking personal connections (Campbell and Putnam, 2010). At the same time, congregational ministries are diverse in terms of partners, purposes, and relationships (Thomas, 2009).

One way to examine relationships within the church is to examine church attendance trends. Measuring aggregate religiosity using multiple studies and polls, Grant (2008) notes there was a rise in religiosity in the 1950's, followed by a decline beginning in the 1960's, and there has been a slow decline since. The article, "Report Examines the State of Mainline Protestant

Churches,” (2009) notes a decline in membership, giving, and volunteer engagement in the mainline churches (i.e. Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, United Church of Christ). Weems, Jr. (2010) suggests church attendance has remained steady; however, those attending weekly have declined in number, attending only twice a month or less. Schwadel (2010) finds no evidence of decline in religious service attendance, with the exception of those Americans who are Catholic, female, or living in the South. Interestingly, congregations die less often in comparison to other organizations, and Anderson, Martinez, Hoegeman, Adler and Chaves (2008) suggest this may be because some members hang on even in a weakened state.

The climate of the church matters in terms of anticipating support from one another (i.e. will someone be there for me) (Ellison, Shepherd, Krause, and Chaves, 2009). Creating an atmosphere of warmth and support seems to be more difficult for larger congregations and is unaffected by the number or effectiveness of small groups. Those churches which set aside time around the worship services for socializing seem to be able to foster higher levels of anticipated support from one another (Ellison et al., 2009). In regards to the developmental disability populations within the church, Conner (2010) suggests that friendship is an important “Christian model of spiritual connectedness that finds its origins in the initiative of God and addresses the fundamental human experience of loneliness and fear of negation” (p. 332).

Social exchange theory, which could be relevant to understanding church interactions, holds that successful relationships encourage a positive outlook, problem solving, and management of stress and anxieties (Bertera, 2005). Though complicated, Ellison, Zhang, Krause, and Marcum (2009) conclude from their extensive review of literature that supportive interactive social relationships "yield significant benefits for individual's health and well-being" (p. 412). Even when one is ambivalent about a particular friendship, the relationship can have

positive qualities (Bushman and Holt-Lunstad, 2009). According to Rook (1984), when negative interpersonal interactions and feedback are experienced, one's well-being can also be harmed. Yet, social interaction and support, even negative interactions, have benefits to human health Cohen (2004).

From a Biblical perspective, the basis of human relationships is found in our relationship with God as creator. As Genesis 1:26 says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Additionally, people are made to be in relationship with others (Genesis 2:18). Although the verse, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him," is often quoted in regards to marriage or courtship, the basic need for human relationship is for singles as well. Paul explains:

...I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman ...is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. (1 Corinthians 7:26, 32-35)

Not only is human life meant to be lived in the context of relationships, the life of faith is meant to be experienced in relationships as well. Romans 12:5 states, "...so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." God's plan for reaching people is through people. In Matthew 28: 18 – 20, the Great Commission, Jesus instructs the disciples to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded

you.” Matthew 22: 36 – 40 highlights that the second greatest commandment centers on treating others with love, as we love ourselves. In John 18:35, Jesus says, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” These verses emphasize the importance of relationships in the ministry of sharing and living one’s faith.

Church relationships are a composite of the individuals and families within its touch. Consistent with Attachment Theory, individuals need a secure base. Riggs (2010) summarizes that the foundational work of John Bowlby, author of Attachment Theory, and Mary Ainsworth, recognizes the importance of a secure base. The bonds that are formed in the early years of life are significant as to how individuals form relationships not only in childhood, but also in adulthood. These theories speak to the human need to for security, belonging, and acceptance (Riggs, 2010). One finds trust building is complicated and involves interpreting a situation between two people (Behnia, 2008). Trust building involves an optimistic outlook of the one who trusts, the believability of the one who is trusted, and the benefits and penalties of the relationship. Relationships are essential for life, and building trust is essential for relationships (Behnia, 2008).

Generational changes add to the complexity of securing healthy relationships within the family and within the church. As children grow up with new and different cultural norms, new and different values take root (Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012). One significant cultural shift is found regarding the basic unit of marriage.

The social role and mutual relationship of marriage, divorce, and singlehood in the contemporary world is qualitatively different from anything to be found in the past.

Although marriage as a legal, social and religious institution with a set of rules, formal and informal dates back some 5000 years, the notion that one forms a relationship based

upon love is a contemporary notion, and this notion has had far reaching implications.

(Coontz, 2004, p. 974)

The 2009 American Community Survey (ACS) Report widens the view on changes affecting relationships in the modern era. The ACS shows people are marrying later in life (i.e. six years older than in 1970). Public opinion over divorce, cohabitation, premarital sex and gay parenting has changed over time. Seventy-seven percent of all respondents to the Pew survey have been married; a third of these individuals report having been divorced at least once in their lifetime. Four in ten of the divorcees surveyed remarried. Divorce rates peaked from 1960-1980, and currently public opinion seems to favor divorce over an unhappy marriage. The Pew survey finds 36% of all adults have lived with a partner without being married at some point in their lives, and this figure rises to more than four in ten among adults ages 18 to 49. Significant to generational changes, among adults ages 65 and older, the figure drops to 9% (Taylor et al., 2007).

The audience in the church today is composed of individuals who are drawn from society with a myriad of experiences. Americans are concerned about economic, developmental, and moral implications of changes within families (Taylor, 2007). The Pew Report finds people are concerned about fatherless families, as well as, out-of-wedlock births, which make up 37% of all births in the U.S. in 2005. Ellwood and Jencks (2004) find half of all fatherless families are created by divorce, separation, death, or imprisonment, and nearly half of all out-of-wedlock births are cohabiting fathers and mothers. Children from single parent families commonly experience very high levels of poverty, along with emotional, behavioral and academic problems (Ellwood and Jencks, 2004). Major studies suggest “that parental divorce can negatively impact the well-being, spirituality, and interpersonal relationships of children, among other things”

(Knabb, Brokaw, Reimer, and Welsh, 2009, p. 45). The effects of divorce carry into adult life, where experiences are processed and given meaning (Knabb et al., 2009).

Further complexities to the relationships of today include the increased numbers of the older segments of the population. As one ages, the likelihood of needing skilled nursing care increases as well. In 2010, 13 % of the population was 65 and over as compared to 4.1 % in 1900; a growth spurt of 15.1 % in the past decade (Werner, 2011).

Another social and cultural change affecting American relationships is the shift in immigrant populations from Europe in the last century to Latin Americans and Asians in the current century (Akresh, 2011). Akresh finds religious participation to be high in these groups, and that most immigrants identify as Catholics or Protestants, although Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus are immigrating as well.

Still another social and cultural change of the modern era is the consuming presence of digital technology. In a recent survey of American families, the Barna group (2011) finds, “there is no question that technology has increased conflict within families. Parents complain that technology wastes time, creates diversions from homework, allows students to maintain a private, exclusive relational life, and distracts from family conversations” (“Top Trends of 2011: The Digital Family”, 2011, par. 1). With the computer age, the opportunity for compulsive Internet pornography use and sexual addiction is a growing problem. While specialized ministries have been developed to call attention to the use of pornography and its effects on individuals and families, much of the problem is hidden from discussion in Christian circles. White and Kimball assert:

These couples need recognition from the Church that they are not hurting in isolation; that they are not the only ones dealing with pornography problems. They need a freedom

from the perceived consequence of being shunned by the Church; an openness that will allow them to confess their sin and receive support, encouragement, and healing. (White and Kimball, 2009, p. 357)

Another significant and difficult challenge facing increased numbers of people is the economic conditions of today. Almost 16% of Americans had income below the poverty level in 2011 (Bishaw, 2012). Ruby Payne states:

Scarcity and competition for basic resources affects people at a deeply personal level. Scarcity and the resulting unstable economic environment demand that we attend to solving immediate problems; they force us into the tyranny of the moment. Consequently, poverty requires survival skills, strategies, and the use of hidden rules that are different from those used by people who live in more stable economic environments. (2007, p. 2)

American household incomes continue to decline (Noss, 2011), the income gap from 1981 to the present has widened (Weinberg, 2011), and living conditions have changed significantly in the U. S. Shifts in demand from manufacturing or skilled labor, to demands for technology, a higher educated, and a trained work force has impacted this imbalance (Weinberg, 1996). Merritt (2007) suggests that economic struggle is too often associated with moral failure in current cultural and religious thought. Discipline is equated with wealth accumulation; therefore, lack of discipline can be equated with poverty and subsequent moral failure. Merritt goes on to suggest that the poor, to whom the church gives charity and assistance, is often not present in the worshipping community alongside other believers (2007).

Apart from one's income, another significant social challenge is substance abuse. Close to 9 % of the population is involved in illicit drug use in America. Yet, only 1 % of the country receives treatment for drug and alcohol dependency ("DrugFacts: Nationwide Trends," 2012).

Along with substance use, domestic violence affects the relational health of American families as 35.6% of women and 28.5% of men in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Experiencing violence at an early age leads to negative health consequences across the lifespan. Eighty-one percent of women and 35% of men experiencing rape, stalking or physical violence by an intimate partner report significant impact such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Black et al. 2010).

Significant to the need for support, about 25% of U.S. adults have a mental illness; nearly 50% of U.S. adults will develop at least one mental illness during their lifetime. The most common mental illnesses in adults are anxiety and mood disorders. Additionally, mental illness is associated with chronic medical diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity (Centers for Disease control and Prevention, 2011).

If it is true that there are many social and cultural challenges in the 21st century pose challenges for relationships and cooperation in the church, understanding emerging generational characteristics in light of these changes is needed. The Barna Group discovered that those in their late teens to late 20's, who were "outsiders" to the church perceived Christians as being negative, judgmental, political, hypocritical, sheltered, antihomosexual, and too focused on getting converts (Kinnaman, 2007). Emerging generations, whether Christian or "Unchristian," share similar sentiments, and are disengaging in record numbers from the church as "43% disengage between the teen years and the early adult years" (Kinnaman, 2011, p. 22). Fifty-nine percent of Christian young adults have stopped attending church on regular bases. This seems similar for Catholics as well as Protestants (Kinnaman, 2011). Ham, Beemer, and Hillard (2009) describe the current generation's exiting church engagement as an epidemic. This study of young

adults who were at one time actively involved in a conservative, Bible-centered church, finds that these young people typically disengaged at different times in the formative years: grade school, junior high, high school and college. He notes two different groups. The first group involves those with significant doubts about the relevancy of the Bible. The second group is comprised of those who attend services on Easter and Christmas and are likely to be reengaged when raising children. The latter group expresses high joining with Biblical truth, but finds the church irrelevant to their lives. Ham further asserts that this generation heavily values relationships.

Also focusing on emerging generations, the research of Stetzer, Stanley and Hayes (2009) suggests that the church must move from a behave/believe/belong ministry, to a belong/believe/become model. “Creating an environment that is conducive to the development of community is difficult and has challenges involving a balance between being ‘programmatic and organic, between being institutional and relational, and between being rigid and flexible’” (p. 79). The church is faced with operating in a postmodern era. The current prevalent thinking opposes notions of modernism such as logic and reason as the primary method to explain existential questions about God and life. Furthermore, these authors suggest the following four challenges to fostering Biblically based community: using technology without replacing relational interaction by it, establishing ongoing transparent relationships where vulnerabilities are shared, offering security where family and relational dysfunction may be missing, and offering a safe place to be (Stetzer et al., 2009).

In sum, the social and cultural landscape in America is complex and has undergone many changes. In light of the social and cultural complexities facing individuals, families, and the

church today, a case study to understand the nature and occurrence of any relational obstacles seems beneficial.

Methodology

A qualitative method is appropriate for this study because it can explain the relationships between variables (i.e. the barriers to healthy and cooperative relationships within the church, the social and cultural diversity of the interviewees in the study) in the context in which they operate (Gummesson, 2006), and it allows for interpreting respondent experiences (Williams & Gunter, 2006). The intent is to use interviews to gather data for this study. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) is used to provide insight into the challenges and barriers interviewees identify to healthy and cooperative relationships in the church. Case study research has a long history of use by many disciplines (Creswell, 2007). A case study process is used involving the four steps as recommended by Yin (2002): design, execution of the case study, analysis of the case study data, and reporting. The results are analyzed with the intent of identifying patterns of behavior and responses from the church, as perceived by those who interact with others in a Christian church context. Interviews provide an opportunity to obtain detailed examination of the substance being researched (Yin, 2002) and are a preferred method in exploratory case studies (Silverman, 2005). The interviews are semi-structured and made possible by the use of open-ended questions. “Open-ended questions are also flexible enough to allow the discussion to lead into areas which may not have been considered prior to the interview but which may be potentially relevant to the study” (Goulding, 2002, p. 59).

This study sets out to understand what relational obstacles are present in American Christian church given the social and cultural changes the church is experiencing in the modern era. The question is asked: In trying to work together to navigate the challenges of the 21st

century's complicated social and cultural changes, how can the church empower individuals to be more empathetic to these challenges and overcome barriers to healthy relationships and cooperation? Twelve individuals were selected to participate in the case study and were known to the author through previous communication and ministry association (i.e. fellow congregational members, persons known while working as a church based social worker, persons known from community conversations). Collectively, these individuals represented Christians who have experienced or are currently experiencing some of the social and cultural challenges cited in the literature review (i.e. changes in communication due to technology, economic hardship, changing family structure, mental and physical illness, substance use, generational shifts). Each interview was completed face to face in an hour to an hour and a half time frame. Each person was made aware that the purpose of the study was to understand obstacles to relationships within the church. As such, each was asked to share truthfully as to their thoughts and feelings so that by participating, perhaps each would be contributing to a greater understanding through which good could come. Each respondent voluntarily consented to the interview process and was granted confidentiality in terms of location of interview and identification in the results. Eight open ended questions were used in a semi-structured interview format to illicit feelings, thoughts, and experiences as related to challenges and barriers to healthy and cooperative relationships in the church. The questions began with topics centering on the positive relational experiences in the church so as not to lead the interviewees toward negativity. Clarifying questions were given about obstacles or negative experiences only after the interviewee shared such information. After the interview process, the information gathered was summarized and then color coded into three categories: negative feelings experienced at church or in Christian ministry, thoughts or perceptions about personal and church-wide challenges and

obstacles to relationships at church, and lastly, a brief description of the context for any negative or barrier producing church relationships. Analysis of these summaries moved from identifying six themes (see Appendix A) to three themes to one theme (See Appendix B).

Careful consideration is made to ensure that the findings are valid and reliable. Creswell (2007) summarizes the work of Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) suggesting that the qualitative research should meet four primary criteria: “credibility (Are the results an accurate interpretation of the participants’ meaning?); authenticity (Are different voices heard?); criticality (Is there a critical appraisal of all aspects of the research?), and integrity (Are the investigators self-critical?)” (p. 206). In addressing the credibility of the study, interviews were summarized and reviewed by over half of the respondents who confirmed as to the accuracy of the retelling of each story. Additionally, the interviewees consistently voiced an appreciation of the time given to “tell their story,” implying a willingness to contribute to the knowledge base sought. Although prior association to the study participants may be seen as a bias, a positive relationship is an important factor in one’s willingness to share personal history (Behnia, 2008). To control for authenticity, a diverse sample was chosen. The sample included both males and females, those whose ages ranged from early 20’s to the 90’s, some financially stable and some financially challenged, a married couple with young children in the home, a married couple with an empty nest, two gay life partners, a single parent with small children, a 30 something and 20 something single with no children, a widow with physical challenges, two individuals born in an eastern country who now work in the U. S., and a retired long standing church lay leader who oversees a ministry. Additionally, although interviewees were all located in a small Midwestern town, their collective perspectives encapsulated experiences from churches located around the country and even internationally. To ensure criticality, all aspects of the research were reviewed

by the following three individuals: a retired Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) who holds a Master of Arts Degree in Gerontology and Adult Education, with extensive experience in the fields of gerontology and child and family services; a practicing LCSW working in a mental health setting as a therapist with individuals, and families; and an ordained pastor working as a chaplain in a metropolitan county jail. Each reviewer confirmed that all findings are supported by the data. As to the question of integrity, at specific milestones of the research process, oversight and direction was secured from a scholarly practitioner who himself teaches doctoral students at an institute of higher learning.

Findings

Participant Feelings, Thoughts, and Reactions of Relational Tension

Schneider and Morrison (2010, p. 3) call practical theology “the formal and informal mechanisms a faith community uses to enact its theological teachings through its religious culture and structures.” On a practical level, the individuals interviewed in this study identified many diverse social and cultural realities and challenges significant to their personal feelings and thoughts about the church. Negative feelings expressed from the sample regarding their personal and congregational level interactions included: disconnection, isolation, distance, loneliness, and feeling unwanted, uninvited, unwelcomed, rejected, insignificant, sad, invisible, frustrated, and hurt. In regard to a safe environment at church, participants expressed experiencing the following in varying degrees: cautious, scared, afraid, terrified, uncertain, puzzled, inadequate, stigmatized, judged, embarrassed, humiliated, misunderstood, uncomfortable, unaccepted, and vulnerable. The church climate was described at times as fake, surface, and unsafe to share of one's self. Among the consequences of participant' negative feelings and thoughts were: limiting one's

church attendance, limiting one's participation and engagement with others in the church, questioning the authenticity of the church, and searching for a way or place to connect with other Christians. One interviewee shared:

The relationships around me at church feel like it is really fake. People don't let down their guard... they come with their families, but once you get to know people, you find out they have their set of problems. Church is where someone should be able to let their guard down, the fear of being way more screwed up than anyone keeps us from being who we really are. When we can't be who we are then we can't really make a good connection, and it turns into a snowball of putting on a good face.

In the midst of these feelings, the study reveals that one's faith can be sustained or grown even if the church in which that same person interacts is less than ideal in their eyes. Individuals in this study described themselves as followers of Christ. Each shared varying degrees of relational disconnection or conflict with the churches in their spiritual journeys. In this study, relational disconnection is defined as a state in which a barrier exists in the relationship, creating an insider/outside tension (See Table 1). Four typologies surfaced.

Relational Connection and Disconnection: Insiders and Outsiders

Table 1-How Participants Experienced Relational Connection and Disconnection

Insider and feel like an insider (Comfortable)	Outsider and feel like an insider (Gracious environment)
Insider and feel like an outsider (Barriers exist)	Outsider and feel like an outsider (Barriers exist)

Individuals in the study were very aware of the structural/organizational components of the church, and thus, were insiders as to church culture, traditions, and systems. Individuals viewed the leadership and the actively engaged of the church as the key insiders. Participants voiced subgroups with which they had positive experiences; however, this did not always translate into feeling like an insider. Being an insider had more to do with the perception that one fit relationally in the church as a whole. Participants in the study understood the overall need of the organization of the church to override any individual needs. This was deemed normal, and at the same time, very impersonal, distancing, and unresponsive to the context of life lived outside of the church climate.

Particularly significant were interviews in which individuals had experienced trauma or significant social and cultural challenges. In these instances, there was a voiced need to be a contributing, respected part of the congregation. At the same time, there was the need for sensitivity with regards to the losses experienced. Specialized supports offered by the church were appreciated; yet, the need to avoid stigma or take personal responsibility was involved. Being labeled or singled-out as needing care, even if it was beneficial, contributed to the phenomenon of being an outsider. There was little recognition of how to overcome the relational disconnections experienced. In fact, some had tried many approaches to find a good fit. The process to restore a person after a time of difficulty or absence was up to the individual to pursue. Therefore, the overall conclusion of the study finds that the interactional style of the church favors formal processes engaging the most capable, organized, and efficient members who expect others to self initiate their involvement in the life of faith and in the programs and initiatives offered. Some (those connected or engaged) are perceived as favorites or “insiders,” while the “outsiders” often feel overlooked, forgotten, stigmatized, insignificant, and/or like a

misfit because the personal connection is missing or minimized. Interestingly, this notion of self-initiation and self reliance is consistent with the pervasive value of individualism found in the United States, and may be a deterrent to evangelism (Rosson and Fields, 2008). People of like theological beliefs can more easily form friendships within the church; however, when differences are identified, exclusivity can occur (Scheitle and Adamczyk, 2009).

Relational Interactions: Expectations and Experiences

What seems absent in these individual accounts is a church culture in which people seek to understand one another without judging. Each interviewee made statements where he or she was judging others, and yet, often the interviewee felt judged by others. Participants understood and for the most part, appreciated the tasks and functions of the church; yet they reserved sharing of themselves on a meaningful level to settings that were deemed safe. All respondents hesitated to share openly and honestly without fear of something (e.g. rejection, judgment, being misunderstood, labeled, trusting another with “real stuff”). In observing others at church, one participant says, “People get there, go in, and then head out the door; they go to the same seats and stay with the same people.” Another said:

I feel like I am working really hard to connect with people. It feels like a joke that didn't go over. I don't know if the other person doesn't know how to make small talk or if the small talk feels superficial.

What is not being concluded here is that the church's formal offerings (worship services, Bible studies, fellowship groups, children's programs, schools, service ministries, support groups, etc.) are ineffective. In fact, it is through these varieties of offerings that the respondents learned and grew in their faith. Prior experiences were described when individuals acted upon their beliefs with others of the same faith, and these actions were a significant part of the respondents' faith

journeys. The actions of caring and receiving care from one another in the context of relationships were deemed as having powerful connections by all respondents.

Organizational and Relational Challenge

In the author's view, it may not be possible for the church to function without systems or organization, nor is it possible to meet the relational needs of every individual. Yet, building and restoring cooperative relationships in the church and truly caring for those around us (and to carry out the commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves) by building and restoring relationships in the church needs to be intentional. This study demonstrates that relational connection does not always come naturally. Parolini and Parolini (2012) suggest that churches can embrace innovation and challenges by creating a clan, a family-like culture, which "stresses freedom, uniqueness, dynamism, innovation, new ideas and resources, new challenges, and risk taking to meet the needs of the surrounding community not yet part of the church" (p. 206). The latter approach challenges hierarchy, (i.e. precise communication, routine, formal structure and consistency, efficiency, and stability in operations) (Parolini and Parolini, 2012).

This author suggests that being aware and empowering individuals with simple relational concepts and tools, as well as common barriers to relationships, is needed in the modern era to address the social and cultural challenges that have a pervasive effect upon the culture of the church. Individual perception of the church as a whole impacts the engagement of the individual, and this in turn, impacts the health and cooperative spirit of the whole. One of the keys to unlock significant transformation in the church is to multiply authentic, caring, interpersonal connections one on one and in groups. As Kinnaman (2010) suggests, "Every person goes on a unique journey related to his or her faith and spirituality, and every story matters" (p.25).

Looking for Invitation and Collaboration

The Art of Invitation (AOI) was created by this author to address the need of the church to overcome relational obstacles and challenges and to build and restore healthy relationships one on one, in groups of two or more, and specifically within the church. AOI was first piloted in response to an invitation from a Lutheran seminary to help seminarians with relationship building in a post-modern era. In the case study, participants described an insider/outsider dynamic that they experienced personally and that was perceived as part of the corporate environment. Interviewees typically did not seem to know how to navigate through the dilemma of wanting to participate in the church, while experiencing relational disconnects. Complications came first where there was a lack of seeking to understand others (i.e. perceived insiders, those who offended those of a difference of opinion, those with offensive behaviors to the traditional morals and structure of the church). A second missing ingredient was open and honest sharing. Individuals in the study kept thoughts private and typically only shared when in the context of an invitation or safe, known environment. While there is a great deal of sharing that takes place from the formal ministries and programs of the church (i.e. worship services, Bible classes, Sunday schools), it is often one sided for the purpose of instruction and even correction. Additionally, while this teaching/gathering environment was a recognized and comfortable tradition for interviewees, an instructional style of communication limits the relational connection on a personal level. A third relational complication came in the giving and receiving care within the church. Clearly, interviewees found significant meaning in the giving of care both within the church and in the mission of the church to reach and serve those outside of the church. The path to becoming involved in a serving capacity with others in the church was not easily found for participants. Individuals relegated to church leadership and those actively engaged (i.e. insiders) for an invitation or direction as to how to engage. It appears that informal

acts of giving care to others took place outside of the formal programs of the church; however, participants voiced that significant relational connectedness happens when people in the church work together in formal planned activities as well. A final relational complication was tied to the receiving of care. Interviewees did not want to be singled out as “needy,” and yet each voiced some degree of need. The path to relational connection and restoration within the church for the searching, struggling, or broken is unclear. Individuals seem to appreciate sensitivity to need, but do not want to be someone’s project or to be labeled or stigmatized. From this study, it appears the church operates primarily in presentational and confrontational styles of communication (See Table 2), yet, invitational style seems most appropriate to the culture in which the church now operates.

Table 2-Three Communication Styles

<p>Invitational: -invites relationship -feels like equals choosing to share information or experience</p>	<p>Presentational: -presents information to another for a purpose -feels like teacher/learner choosing to share information or experience</p>	<p>Confrontational: -confronts a wrong, faulty, or different view -feels like opposition, correction, or maybe pressure</p>
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The Art of Invitation

The Art of invitational communication encompasses listening to simply understand another, without fixing, judging, or having an agenda. Secondly, invitational communication happens when one shares openly and honestly, even when faced with judgment or challenge. Sharing openly and honestly invites others to see one’s feelings, thoughts, experiences, and humbling and risky behaviors. It is often this humility and vulnerability that endears to another to connect. Lastly, invitational communication finds giving and receiving is done mutually, as in loving ones neighbor as oneself. When people open themselves up to receiving care, as well as

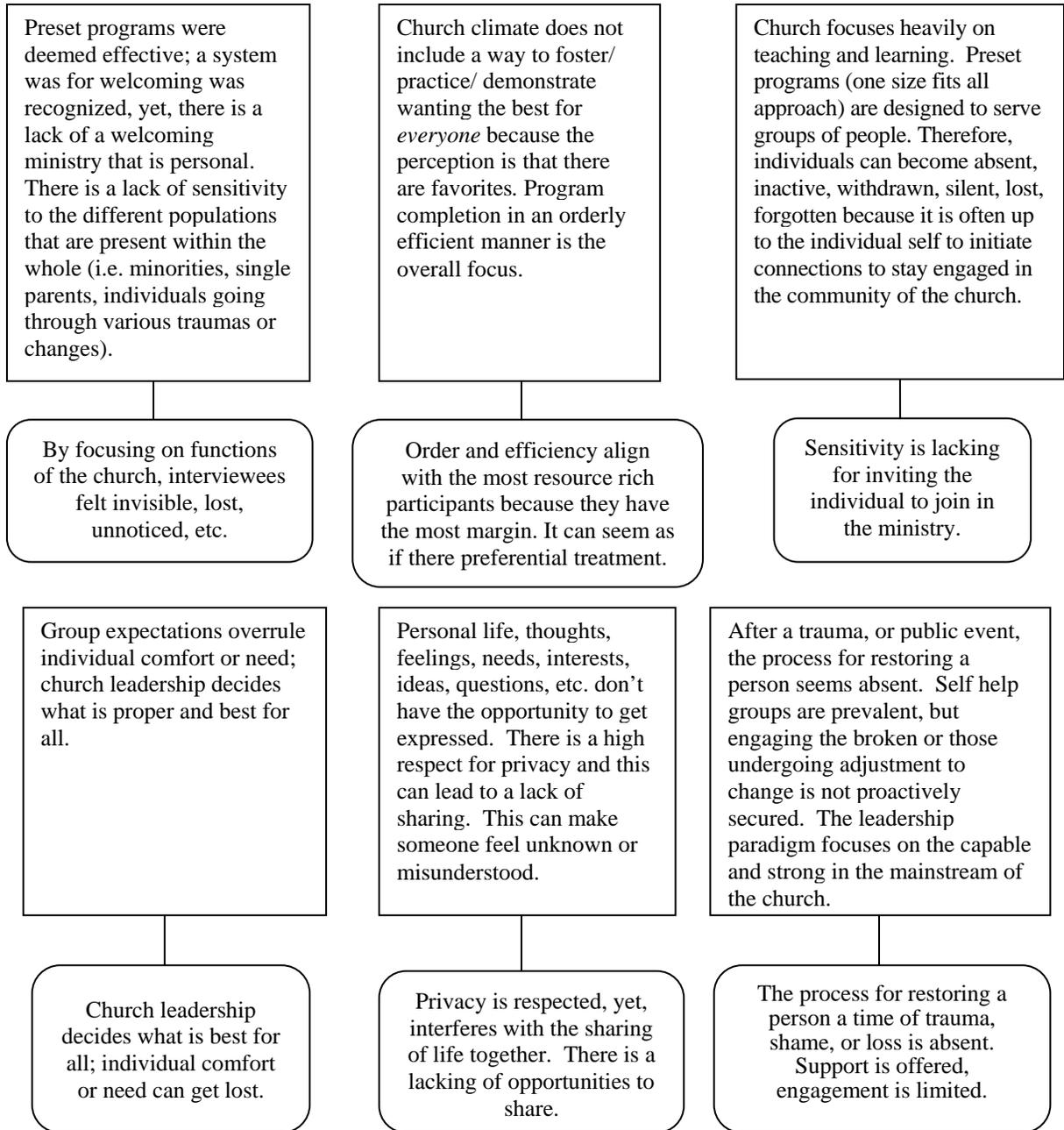
giving care, a sense of humility and trust is communicated. Receiving care from the broken, vulnerable, or disconnected invites relationship because it values the gifts of the giver. Receiving care may also be a significant path for restoration within the church. Receiving care from someone can be as simple as receiving a smile, thank you, or noticing when a person decides to share something personal in the context of reaching out in relationship. Finally, participants in AOI learn to recognize presentational and confrontational communication so as to be more self-aware of the approach needed in any given interchange.

Another core component of AOI is becoming self-aware of four barriers so as to have greater self-control in being invitational: conflicting values, unmet relational needs, unproductive reactions to emotions, and faulty thinking about beliefs. The last core component of AOI is using a Second Thought Process, a term used to help the individual stop, pause, and recalibrate oneself to God's Word and His agenda. As interviewees noted, a person's first thoughts are usually not to focus upon what is in the best interest of another. Therefore, a Second Thought gives one the opportunity to remember that God is for everyone (John 3:16).

Participants from the pilots communicate that AOI helps individuals in the church navigate challenges and overcome barriers to healthy relationships and cooperation. While the Art of Invitation is unlikely to address all of the relational needs of the church, it seems to be useful in helping individuals and faith communities who are looking for more effective ways to carry out the Great Command and the Great Commission of Jesus in an era of new and significant challenges.

Appendix A

Data Analysis-Six Themes



Appendix B

Data Analysis- Three Themes

The interactional style of the church seems to favor a leadership model which highlights the most capable and strong in the mainstream of the church. This provides for a very organized efficient church with a focus on the collective whole. Individuals feel insignificant/overlooked at times.

Congregational programs and initiatives try to specialize and be sensitive, but because the initiatives are not personally responsive to the circumstances of each individual, insiders and outsiders form which seems to be perceived as favorites.

Special populations felt stigmatized and awkward because there was a lack of understanding or empathy/engagement with them. People are responsible for self-initiating engagement and need. The process of restoring an individual is absent.

Data Analysis-One Theme

The interactional style of the church favors formal processes engaging the most capable, organized, and efficient members who expect others to self initiate their involvement in the life of faith and in the programs and initiatives offered.

Some (those connected or engaged) are perceived as favorites, “insiders, while others the “outsiders” often feel overlooked, forgotten, stigmatized, misfit, and/or insignificant because the personal connection is missing or minimized.

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