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DEVELOPING A SMALL GROUP MINISTRY
TO STRENGTHEN FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
MAGNOLIA, MISSISSIPPI

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DEVELOPING A SMALL GROUP MINISTRY
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To Kaley,
who without her support, seminary
would have only been a dream.
To my beautiful daughter Addyson,
I pray you also grow up
in a Godly and hospitable home.

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PREFACE

Though this work bears my name, I could not have completed this task without the help and support of many others. First and foremost, I need to say thank you to my beautiful wife, Kaley Gunter, who shared my heart for discipleship and had the trust to allow people into our life and home (even on days when we could not hide our mess). Second, to our daughter Addyson who was at the beginning of this project, only known as “Baby G.” Her birth and adoption put us through a wild ride, but it was a beautiful delay and we would not change your story for anything. Also, to Tanner and Sami, Martha and Emmett, Tyler and Kamry, Beryl, Stephanie, Nick, Brooke and Mark, and Josh and Jessica for being devoted members of our LIFE group. You all were our favorite part of our time in Magnolia, Mississippi. Many others have also provided support along the way. My parents and in-laws always gave encouragement, even when this project required much time away from family. I also wanted to thank my church family, that allowed me time off to travel to Louisville, Kentucky, to be able to complete this degree. Thank you Dr. Scott, Dr. Woody, and Dr. Evan for your time and feedback while they served as the expert panel. I wish to express my gratitude to my doctoral supervisor, Matthew Haste, for I never would have been able to complete this project without his help and for he went over and beyond his duties in his role at the seminary and as my doctoral supervisor. Finally, I wanted to thank God. Without his amazing grace, I could do nothing. It was only by the grace that I had the strength and capacity to complete this project. Therefore, to him be all the glory.

Joe Gunter

Hattiesburg, Mississippi

May 2020

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Are small groups mandated in Scripture? In short, the answer to this question is simply no. Would First Baptist Church of Magnolia (FBCM) ever require small group attendance to be a member in good standing at the church? Also, the answer is no. However, though not explicitly commanded in Scripture, small groups could be used as a way to be obedient to the “one another” commands throughout Scripture.

The phrase “one another” is derived from the Greek word ἀλλήλων which means “one another, each other, mutually, reciprocally.”¹ It occurs 100 times in the New Testament. Approximately 59 of those occurrences are specific commands teaching how to relate to one another. Obedience to these commands is imperative. It forms the basis for all real Christian community and has a direct impact on the church’s witness to the world (John 13:35). However, the danger in the American church is that it is easy to become disconnected from the church body. This danger of becoming disconnected is especially real with the culture emphasizing the individual. Christian Smith supports this danger in his research that shows that 60 percent of the emerging adults interviewed expressed a highly individualistic approach to morality: “They said that morality is a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision. Moral rights and wrongs are essentially matters of individual opinion in their view.”²

This separation was also complicated since it was possible to compartmentalize

¹ James Strong, *The New Strong’s Complete Dictionary of Bible Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 240.

² Christian Smith, *Lost in Translation: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21.

one's life and keep God to a Sunday-only relationship. Compartmentalizing is not the kind of love and devotion that God, the sovereign King, commands from his followers. God desires a wholehearted kind of love. This culture of delegating and compartmentalizing became a popular philosophy in the American church during the last half of the twentieth century. Since teachers were hired to teach children how to do math, and coaches were hired to teach students to play sports, it was assumed by many in the church that youth pastors and children ministers were hired to teach children about God.

These trends of focusing on the individual, delegation to others, and compartmentalizing faith became detrimental to the spiritual health of First Baptist Church of Magnolia, Mississippi. This focus could be best seen in the Sunday school classes that were segregated by not only age group, but gender. The small groups were built more around common interests than a common proclamation and devotion to the Lord. This project set forth the strategic plan and goal to develop a small group ministry to strengthen the church through learning, intercessory prayer, fellowship, evangelism, and equipping.

Context

First Baptist Church of Magnolia (FBCM) is a Southern Baptist church located in Pike County in the southwest part of Mississippi. FBCM aims to be a family of believers in Jesus Christ that love God and love others. FBCM's vision statement is that it "aspires to welcome all to join us in becoming what Christ would have us be."

FBCM was in the decline. Over the past ten years, the decline was occurring at an alarming rate. FBCM averaged 150 in 2011, and by 2015, had dipped to below 100 for Sunday morning worship service. That drop in attendance was a significant decline in only four years. Because of the decline this traditional Southern Baptist church had the same concerns about the health of the church. The intention of this project was to establish a discipleship ministry to help improve the health of the church and to help give its members a faith that was worth passing on to the next generation. The members of FBCM were taught about a God that is worth their love, obedience, or remembrance.

To slow the decline of the church, early attempts were made by the leadership of the church to improve the discipleship ministry. The discipleship ministry made an intentional effort to equip the church with resources to take home and apply from the Sunday morning messages. Each Monday, a recap video and discussion questions were posted for families to use as a resource at home to apply the message to their lives. Additional resources were added to the church website to help families who desired to start family worship at home. However, even with the availability of resources, a gap remained in church health and discipleship. This gap in discipleship led to the desire among the staff to develop small groups that resulted in the strengthening of the church. An alternative to the Sunday school classes that were broken down by age and gender, these new small groups sought to invite people from all walks of life. These new groups sought to be multi-generational and multi-ethnic.

This development of small groups bridged the gap between the corporate gathering of the saints on Sunday morning and the applying of God's Word in members' homes. The development of small groups did not intend to replace the need for discipling at church and home. Encouraging, challenging, and strengthening families in their relationship with Christ was how FBCM sought for families to live out their faith.

A lot of hope and excitement was placed into these new small groups, but it was also practical to keep in mind that there is no easy fix in a discipleship ministry.

Richard Dunn and Jana Sundene pointed out,

There are no programmatic shortcuts to effective discipling. There is no "easy button". Discipling is about relationships. Relationships are inefficient. Discipling is about life change. Life change is messy. Discipling is centered in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ allows no pretense. Discipling is unpredictable. Unpredictability requires risk. Discipling is unique to each person, each generation, each cultural context. Uniqueness eliminates the possibility of universally applied "paint by the numbers" discipling relationships.³

³ Richard R. Dunn and Jana L. Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults: Life-Giving Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InverVarsity, 2012), 58-59.

The small groups at FBCM were called “LIFE Groups,” which is an acronym for the four focuses of their small groups. The letter “L” stands for learning, “I” for intercession, “F” for fellowship, and “E” for equipping and evangelism. FBCM knew its responsibility to tell the next generation about their great God, and had resources available to start family discipleship in the home; however, a gap remained between the church and home.

Rationale

Prior to this project, Thom Rainer’s Church Health Inventory was completed by the staff and deacons to help the church evaluate its health to help see why a decline was happening.⁴ The Church Health Inventory is designed to provide a guide to discover the level of readiness of a church to move to a higher level of health. The staff and deacons were asked to provide their best answer with total candor and honesty. The leadership of FBCM took the inventory to see if they thought similarly.

The result of the Church Health Inventory revealed that FBCM was an unhealthy church but was not in the lowest category. Out of 250 possible points, the leadership scored, on average, a 176. The highest score was 215, and the lowest score was 134. According to Thom Rainer, “A church at this level needs significant work to move into the healthy category. So many deficiencies existed that multiple remedies were needed.”⁵ The Church Health Inventory revealed that the church needed improvement in different areas, but the leadership of the church decided a strong discipleship ministry through a new small group ministry would have the greatest impact.

As a result of the inventory, this project was developed to help strengthen the church. During the same time period of the discovery of the poor health, the church was

⁴ Thom Rainer, “Church Health Inventory,” accessed February 7, 2020, <https://thomrainer.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/church-health-inventory-final.pdf>.

⁵ Rainer, “Church Health Inventory,” 8.

already taking measures to improve the health of the church. One of the focus passages for the church during my arrival in September 2016 was Deuteronomy 6. The Shema was the anchor passage of the Jewish faith and heritage. The Shema instructed its readers to live out lives devoted to the one true God. The whole of the passage was rooted in the opening verse: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4).⁶ James Hamilton points out, “It would be difficult to overstate the significance of the monotheistic declaration of Deuteronomy 6:4. Israel was summoned to hear and heed. Yahweh is their God. Yahweh is one.”⁷ Deuteronomy 6:4-9 gives at least two implications from these verses that could be applied to the small group ministry at FBCM.

First, Moses taught adults the Word of God, and the adults were then expected to pass it on to their children. Second, an adult would be an effective teacher only if these words were “on your heart.” If these words were on their hearts, then adults would be able to teach their children in every situation of life, whether they were sitting, walking, or lying down. This point was utterly crucial. What parents taught their child was what the child learned to treasure and love. If they loved God with all their hearts, then they sought to instill that love to their children in every situation that arose. The most important thing the church could have done for children was to trumpet a vision of God and nurture adults in the wisdom of the Scriptures.

When considering the Shema, it is important to keep into context, as Graeme Goldsworthy explains, that “if God required of Israel that she should be holy, even as God was holy, and love the Lord with all her heart, soul, and might, He also knew that a people as yet not fully saved could never achieve that standard. In such a context, the idea of loving God took on a new significance that was governed by God’s grace.”⁸

⁶ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

⁷ James Hamilton, “That the Coming Generation Might Praise the Lord,” *The Journal of Family Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2010): 13.

⁸ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 155.

Jesus also proclaimed this truth to his disciples. He said the greatest commandment was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind (Mark 12:28-30). The focus of this passage is on hearts, not homes. The Christian's entire life should model that devotion and love and wholehearted affection. While this project did not call for these small groups members to hang scrolls on the doorposts of their homes, they were encouraged to have their hearts and lives reflect that they treasure Christ above all else. This project sought to address this issue by developing a small group ministry to strengthen FBCM.

This project sought to disciple FBCM members through small groups to pass on this devotion and love of the one true God. This project sought to bridge the gap between church and home by overcoming the challenge of learning. FBCM members needed to learn both facts and information about God and Scripture but also needed to learn how to put that knowledge into practice. Much of their discipleship had focused on information transformation—they learned facts and information from a Lifeway curriculum. These small groups sought to teach these same truths but also to help FBCM members apply these truths to their life. FBCM members should not only know the truths of Scripture, but also apply these truths to their lives to become better spouses, parents, employees, employers, and grandparents; in short, to be able to walk out their Christian faith in every aspect of their life.

One of the challenges was infrequent attendance. Thom Rainer points out from recent Lifeway Research that “twenty years ago, the committed church family attended three times a week. Today, a church member was considered active in the church if he or she attends three times a month.”⁹ While the research shows the committed church family attended three times a month, some attend as little as once every three weeks. The challenge of learning revealed how the inconsistent nature of only

⁹ Thom S. Rainer, “Five Reasons Church Members Attend Church Less Frequently,” May 22, 2017, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/05/five-reasons-church-members-attend-less-frequently/>.

attending twenty-five times a year could have detrimental results on someone trying to piece together the big picture understanding the metanarrative of Scripture.¹⁰ This understanding would be hard to understand if the average church member only caught an isolated Scripture every other week. Not only does infrequent attendance create a challenge to understanding the metanarrative of Scripture, but it also provides a challenge to learning how to put the Christian life into practice when the average church member is submerged in a secular world for the vast majority of their life. Only getting random pieces of what it means to be a Christian, one out of every three weeks, makes learning difficult. Sporadic attendance inhibits learning and discipleship. This loss of discipleship opportunities not only occurs in the church but also at home. When combined with the lack of learning and the lack of time due to families' busy schedules, this dangerous formula make spiritual formation difficult and often not a priority.

When commenting on Christian Smith's research, Kenda Creasy Dean points out the importance of being intentional about what the church communicates:

The problem does not seem to be that churches were teaching young people badly, but that we were doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity was not a big deal, that God requires little. . . . What if the blasé religiosity of most American teenagers was not the result of poor communication but the result of excellent communication of a watered-down gospel so devoid of God's self-giving love in Jesus Christ, so immune to the sending love of the Holy Spirit that it might not be Christianity at all?¹¹

Based on Lifeway Research, people in small groups are more likely to display attributes of a growing disciple than those not in a group. Those in a small group display characteristics such as praying more passionate prayers, giving more generously, serving more sacrificially, and more frequently sharing the gospel than those not in a group.¹²

¹⁰ Larry Fowler, *The Question Nobody Asks about Our Children* (Streamwood, IL: Awana, 2014), 11.

¹¹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Are Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University, 2010), 11-12.

¹² Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, *Transformational Groups: Creating a New Scorecard for Groups* (Nashville: B & H, 2014), 41-46.

In summary, the rationale for this project was based on the research from Christian Smith and the results of the Church Health Inventory. These two items revealed that FBCM had a church health problem. Part of the problem could be contributed to the considerable gap between what the typical American Christian believed and what was true historical Christianity, and the problem was complicated when considering the trend of less and less opportunities the church was getting to correct false beliefs. Smith points out powerfully that this was not a small problem:

But we can say here that we have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States was actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that was seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but had rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten step cousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. . . . The language, and therefore experience, of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward. It was not so much that U.S. Christianity was being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity was either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity was actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.¹³

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to improve discipleship at First Baptist Church Magnolia, Mississippi, by developing a small group ministry called LIFE groups.

Goals

To accomplish its stated purpose, this project focused on executing three related goals. The following four goals advanced the purpose of this ministry project. These goals progress to reflect the steps to be taken to develop a small group ministry to strengthen FBCM.

1. The first goal was to design a strategic plan for developing small groups.

¹³ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 171.

2. The second goal was to develop and implement a four-week sermon series to make the members and attendees aware of the need for the development of the small group ministry to strengthen FBCM.
3. The third goal was to develop and start the small group ministry to strengthen FBCM.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this project included a rubric that evaluated the sermon series and a strategic plan for multiplying the small groups. Three goals determined the success of the project. The first goal was to design a strategic plan for multiplying the small groups. If FBCM was to grow stronger and healthier to change the community around it, it would take more than just one small group. The ability to multiply the impact would determine the long-term success of this project. This goal was considered successful when the church and community demographics were analyzed, and a strategic plan was prepared and ready to be put into action following the four-week sermon series.

The second goal was to develop and implement a four-week sermon series to make the members and attenders of FBCM aware of the need for the development of a small group ministry to strengthen FBCM. An expert panel used a rubric to evaluate if the sermon series was faithful to the Bible, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability.¹⁴ This goal was considered successfully met when a minimum of 90 percent of all the rubric evaluation indicators met or exceeded the sufficient level and when the sermons were preached. The sermon series focused on the vision for the small groups, laid out the importance of learning, intercessory prayer, fellowship, evangelism, and equipping in a multi-generational setting.

The third goal was to develop and start a small group ministry to strengthen FBCM. The first group began in my home on a Thursday night from 6:30 p.m. to 8:00

¹⁴ See appendix 1. All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use.

p.m. This goal was considered successfully met when a small group was established, began meeting regularly, and multiplied new small groups. Attendance patterns were also observed to see how the small groups would impact the Sunday morning corporate gathering. An assumption was that as members grew in spiritual maturity, they would more regularly attend and share their faith more often. Both of these presumed results should take noticeable effects on the average attendance of the Sunday morning worship gathering.¹⁵

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms were used in the ministry project:

LIFE-group. This term describes the small groups at FBCM. LIFE is an acronym for the four focuses of the small groups: “L” stands for learning, “I” for intercessory prayer, “F” for fellowship, and “E” for equipping and evangelism.

Discipleship. George Barna defines *discipleship* as “becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus Christ. It was about the intentional training of people who voluntarily submit to the lordship of Christ and who want to become imitators of Him in every thought, word, and deed. . . . Discipleship, in other words, was about being and reproducing spiritually mature zealots for Christ.”¹⁶ A disciple is an apprentice who participates with his master and patterns his life after his master. The training process of the disciple is not just intellectual, but also relational. Discipling is the subset of discipleship, which helps someone else follow Christ. Mark Dever points out, “Christianity was not for loners or individualists. It was for people traveling together down the narrow path that leads to life. You must follow and you must lead. You must be loved and you

¹⁵ All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

¹⁶ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples: New Strategies for Producing Genuine Followers of Christ* (Ventura, CA: Issachar Resources, 2000), 17-18.

must love. And we love others best by helping them to follow Jesus down the pathway of life.”¹⁷

Two limitations and two delimitations were applied to this project. The first limitation was the constancy of attendance; it would be impossible to train those that do not attend. If the average attendee only caught one or two of the sermons in this series, then they may not grasp the full importance of small groups. To mitigate this limitation, each week, the sermon, sermon recap video, and sermon outline were made available on the church’s website, firstbaptistmagnolia.org. The sermon was not only preached during Sunday worship, but also made available to all families through email, Facebook, other social networks, and electronic resources. There was no way to require every church member watch the training sermons, but ample effort was made to make it as accessible as possible.

The second limitation was outside influences. Common outside influences that may have affected attendance negatively or positively were vacations and weather. However, in preparation of the project, these threats were identified by looking at the calendar and making sure to avoid any apparent concerns, examples include, a holiday weekend, hunting season, or scheduled school breaks.

The first delimitation was to limit the sermon series to only four weeks. This delimitation was made in an attempt to have the maximum impact on the largest gathering of the church. The sermon series was given during a traditionally well-attended time of year. The timeframe of four weeks was short enough to maximize attendance, but long enough to display the importance of the small group ministry.

The second delimitation was to the small group ministry. The Church Health Inventory revealed that the church needed improvement in different areas, but the

¹⁷ Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 13.

leadership of the church decided a strong discipleship ministry through a new small group ministry would have the greatest impact.

Conclusion

In addition to strengthening the church, these small groups provided additional opportunities for pastors to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:12). This project equipped FBCM's members to strengthen their families through gathering in a small group. Families would no longer be separated, and younger families would have an opportunity to see their parents put their faith into practice. Additionally, since these small groups occurred in members' homes, members could observe each other living out the Christian life outside of the walls of the church. To the extent that this project was successful, God was glorified as his people faithfully gathered to practice Bible intake, intercession, fellowship, discipleship, and evangelism. Additionally, people placed their faith in Jesus, and God's kingdom was expanded.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR SMALL GROUPS AS AN AVENUE TO STRENGTHEN THE DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

In this chapter, the biblical support for the acronym LIFE, that displays the four focuses of the small group ministry, is given. The letter “L” stands for learning, “I” for intercession, “F” for fellowship, and “E” for equipping and evangelism. Four passages studied in this chapter set the scriptural foundation for small group ministry: Acts 2:42-47, Matthew 6:5-15, Hebrews 10:19-25, and 2 Timothy 1:1-18.

Learning (Acts 2:42-47)

After the ascension of Jesus, the earliest Christian leaders, along with just over 100 followers of Christ, were praying and waiting when God suddenly moved in power (Acts 1–2). This group included eleven of the twelve men commissioned by Jesus as apostles. Jesus had spent forty days with them, delivered proofs that the resurrection was the fulfillment of the messianic promise, and spoke about the kingdom of God. The earliest Christians devoted themselves to “the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Longenecker points out that the “use here of both the definite article and the plural in ‘the prayers’ (ταῖς προσευχαῖς) suggest formal prayers, probably both Jewish and Christian.”¹ These prayers would mostly have been traditional Jewish prayers and prayers from the book of Psalms. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was an answer to prayer. The outcome on the first day of the Christian church was that the number of believers grew from around 120 to over 3,000.

¹ Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, in vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 86.

Acts 2 is a critical passage when considering small groups. Albert Mohler explains this importance as “paradigmatic for understanding the apostolic church and for understanding what churches should prioritize in their day. Churches must always remember to evaluate their priorities in light of these words.”² The early church displayed a commitment to living life in the biblical community, and this commitment resulted in the gospel of Jesus being attractive to those around them.

They gathered together day by day in two locations. First, they had a public gathering in the Temple, and second, they were in homes, having meals together. Their expression of faith included a large public gathering, but also smaller gatherings of the church in homes. Tony Merida emphasizes the importance of both locations:

One gathering was large, and one was small. The believers had to have a large space to meet in since three thousand people can't fit into someone's home. The temple area provided them a place for a large, formal, corporate gathering while their homes were wonderful places for more informal, intimate gatherings. . . . The early church . . . devoted themselves to meeting in both.³

Traditionally, FBCM had small groups that only met on Sunday mornings. These groups were based on Lifeway curriculum, and were separated by age and gender. The explicit goal in these small groups was to pass along information. One of the desires of the small group was to go from learning facts from a curriculum to putting theology into practice.

Small groups were essential in strengthening FBCM. However, these small groups also had the added benefit of strengthening families. According to Jana Magruder's research, the single most significant influence over spiritual health is regular Bible reading while growing up. Parents of young adults indicated that regular Bible reading as children yielded the most significant influence over their spiritual health.⁴ A

² R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *Acts 1-12 for You* (Epsom, UK: Good Book, 2018), 39.

³ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville: B & H, 2017), 40.

⁴ Jana Magruder, *Nothing Less Study: Engaging Kids in a Lifetime of Faith* (Nashville: LifeWay Christian Resources, 2017), 52.

child who reads his Bible regularly while growing up had 12.5 percent stronger spiritual health as a young adult.⁵ Similarly, among adults, the spiritual activity with the most impact was Bible reading.⁶ The challenge of discipleship is that in the average family only 29 percent of kids regularly read the Bible when they were growing up.⁷

J. I. Packer points out, “The claim of the Word of God upon us was absolute: the Word was to be received, trusted and obeyed because it was the Word of God the King.”⁸ The LIFE groups at FBCM sought to show the authority of Scripture in the everyday lives of God’s people, and reflect the devotion of the early church. The church grew in the first century because it devoted itself to the apostles’ teaching.

In Acts 2, the early church devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, prayer, fellowship, and the breaking of bread. The early church was committed to these four practices. The expression “devoted themselves” has behind it the idea of persisting in something and doing it in an ongoing way.⁹ Richard Longenecker explains,

The verb translated “devoted” (προσκαρτεω) was a common one that connotes a steadfast and single-minded fidelity to a certain course of action. Luke uses it elsewhere in Acts to characterize the devotion of the 120 in the upper room to prayer (Acts 1:14) and the apostles’ resolve in the matter of Hellenistic widows to center their attention on prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4).¹⁰

First, they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. The apostles’ teaching was the authoritative teaching given by the apostles and passed initially on by

⁵ Magruder, *Nothing Less Study*, 53.

⁶ Brad Waggoner, *The Shape of Faith to Come: Spiritual Formation and the Future of Discipleship* (Nashville: B & H, 2008), 275.

⁷ Magruder, *Nothing Less Study*, 37.

⁸ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 113.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 149.

¹⁰ Longenecker, *Acts*, 85.

Jesus to the early church.¹¹ Mohler points out that “no church can be healthy unless it gathers together to be devoted to the exposition of the Word of God.”¹²

Second, they devoted themselves to prayer. Thomas Schreiner writes, “Prayer signified the community’s dependence upon God for maintaining their life together in truth and love.”¹³ Longenecker also points out that the “use here of both the definite article and the plural in ‘the prayers’ (ταῖς προσευχαῖς) suggest formal prayers, probably both Jewish and Christian.”¹⁴ In this project at FBCM, the focus would be on intercessory prayer; however, learning from Scripture how to pray would also strengthen prayers.

They also devoted themselves to fellowship. Longenecker writes that the use of the definite article with the Greek, τῆ κοινωνία, “implies that there was something distinctive in the gatherings of the early believers.”¹⁵ Polhill points out that “the word itself implies a close relationship, fellowship, intimacy, and a close connection.”¹⁶

Schreiner writes,

One of the signs of such fellowship was that “all the believers were together” (2:44). Love between Christians manifested itself in that they spent time together. They met together daily in the temple and shared food together (2:46). Remarkably, they sacrificed for one another, even selling “possessions and property” (2:45) to assist those who were in need (2:44-45; 4:32-37). Such sharing was not mandatory or enforced but was entirely voluntary, testifying to the generosity that animated the early church.¹⁷

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 73.

¹² Mohler, *Acts 1-12 for You*, 40.

¹³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 16.

¹⁴ Longenecker, *Acts*, 86.

¹⁵ Longenecker, *Acts*, 85.

¹⁶ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 120.

¹⁷ Schreiner, *Handbook on Acts and Paul’s Letters*, 15-16.

Tony Merida points out that there was a correlation between fellowship with believers and the fellowship of Jesus Christ:

Out of our common fellowship with the Father through Jesus, we enjoy fellowship with our spiritual brothers and sisters. If people are out of fellowship with Christ, then they will be out of fellowship with the church. And if people are out of fellowship with Jesus's people, that is an indicator they may be out of fellowship with Jesus. That is how strong the Christ-church union is.¹⁸

In true fellowship, a depth of relationship and community is visible and intentional. Mohler explains the importance of this kind of fellowship:

This kind of fellowship is very important to the life of the church as well. This fellowship is not a superficial gathering around ham sandwiches and meringue pies. Fellowship in the church is based upon the common love that believers have for one another and their Lord. It was this love that motivated the early church to sell their possessions to meet the needs of those around them (v.44-45). . . . Fellowship can only be distinctly Christian if it gathers around the word of God.¹⁹

Fourth, the early church broke bread. While this may be nothing more than a reference to a shared meal, most likely this breaking of bread is a reference to participation in the Lord's Supper. F. F. Bruce states, "The breaking of bread probably denotes more than the regular taking of food together; the regular observance of what came to be called the Lord's Supper seems to be in view."²⁰ This meal most likely included a communal meal, but also involved an act of worship and remembrance of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. As mentioned previously, disciples were also dedicated to prayer and praying together. God moved in such a way that it brought about fear from those who were looking in at the lives of Christians. Darrell Bock, in his commentary on Acts, points out, "The fellowship that was practiced in the homes of the believers had missionary consequences: these meetings were so attractive that unbelievers started to attend."²¹

¹⁸ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, 36.

¹⁹ Mohler, *Acts 1-12 for You*, 40.

²⁰ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 73.

²¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Jesus and the Twelve, Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 414.

In Acts 2:45, believers gathered together; they sold their belongings and gave the proceeds to anyone in need. Even if it meant that they had to sell everything they owned, they helped that person because they were a brother or sister in Christ. They did not just say, “I love you” with empty words. They did not just say, “I will be praying for you,” and then forget to pray. These people were in each other’s lives and they helped each other out. If one found himself in trouble, then they all went to that person’s aide. This kind of love became attractive to the world that watched them. Biblical love baffled the on looking world that sought to meet individual needs first. Bock writes, “This sharing of material things in common was not a required communalism but a voluntary, caring response to need.”²²

The early church focused not only on the teaching of God’s Word, breaking of bread, prayers, but also fellowship. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting in the temple complex, broke bread from house to house, and ate food with a joyful and humble attitude, praising God, and every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved (Acts 2:46). The early church was going around meeting and rejoicing daily, and they gained favor with the community around them. The word “favor” is the Greek word *χάρις*, generally translated *grace*. It means that which delights²³ or causes joy, pleasure, gratification, favor, or acceptance.²⁴

In this summary of the early church, the author of Acts gives several significant descriptions of a healthy body of Christ. Christian community gave people a place to dedicate themselves to the Scriptures, to connect to others, and to live out the faith. Bock writes, “A vibrant community extends itself in two directions; toward God and neighbor.”²⁵

²² Bock, *Acts*, 152.

²³ Gerhard Kittle, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995), s.v. “*χάρις*.”

²⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2000), s.v. “*χάρις*.”

²⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 154.

This unity of spirit and purpose was the type of community that this project strived to achieve in the small group ministry at FBCM. The hope was that, at the end of this project, a more robust community at a smaller level would lead to a healthier community in the corporate gathering of the saints.

Intercession (Matt 6:5-15)

Intercession is an essential element to develop mature Christians. Mature believers seek to advance the gospel, not themselves. The Lord's Prayer is not a magical incantation, but it serves as a helpful handrail to guide the broader context of one's prayers. According to Magruder's study, a child who regularly spent time in prayer while growing up had 7.5 percent stronger spiritual health as a young adult.²⁶ Learning and intercession have a direct relationship with each other because a weak understanding of God leads to weak prayers. J. I. Packer notes, "Men who know their God were before anything else men who pray, and the first point where their zeal and energy for God's glory come to expression was in their prayers. . . . If there was little energy for such prayer, and little consequent practice of it, this was a sure sign that as yet we scarcely know our God."²⁷

In this section, the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 is examined. Grudem defines prayer as "personal communication from us to God, that not only helps us know about God but also helps us truly know God. Through prayer, Christians can communicate their requests to God, confess their sins to God, and give adoration, praise, and thanksgiving to God."²⁸

Jesus goes into warnings about how not to pray. One example is not to pray like a hypocrite. The temptation to please people must be a constant warning. When it

²⁶ Magruder, *Nothing Less Study*, 76.

²⁷ Packer, *Knowing God*, 28-29.

²⁸ Wayne A. Grudem, *Christian Beliefs: Twenty Basics Every Christian Should Know* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 48.

came to public prayer in the first-century, the temptation was to want others to think that they were holy and righteous. When the hypocrites went in public, they were tempted to pray prayers that were lengthy and lofty to get attention, rather than prayers to glorify God. Hypocrites prayed on street corners to be seen by people. However, their reward stopped there—the only benefit of their prayer would be the attention of others. The hypocrites’ prayer lacked the power to transform and change. Origen remarked, “The hypocrites wearing the mask of goodness, were actors in their theatre, the synagogues and the corners of the streets.”²⁹

Jesus was saying a prayer life for display was worthless. If someone prayed more in public than in private, then their prayer life lacked power. The church did not want this pharisaical powerless prayer. They wanted the gospel to change lives, change the community, change families, change the state, nation, and the nations. That was why they prayed.

At FBCM, small groups needed to recognize that there was no “I” in the Lord’s Prayer. The word “our” at first glance seems like an insignificant pronoun. However, Jesus made a tremendously important theological point by beginning his prayer with the word “our.” Broadus points out, “The use of the plural, throughout the prayer, instead of changing to the singular, as was done in v. 2, 6, 17, evidently presents this as a specimen of social rather than secret prayer; and so, involves prayer for each other, and not for ourselves alone.”³⁰

Jesus reminded Christians that when they enter into a relationship with God, they enter into a relationship with his people. When Christ saves, he saves into his body,

²⁹ John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Valley Forge, PA: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 140.

³⁰ Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 131.

the church. This emphasis on their place in the corporate identity of the church is reiterated throughout the prayer.³¹

Mohler explains, “One of the most significant problems in prayer is that they too often begin with the concerns of individuals and their petitions without regard for their brothers and sisters. Many Christians falter in prayer because they begin with the wrong word: ‘I’ instead of ‘our.’”³² The point is not to neglect the individual, but to never solely focus on themselves. In this project, the focus of intercessory prayer helped FBCM members keep their eyes and prayers on the kingdom of God and their local church body rather than being solely about the individual. Mohler comments

The first petition is the most important one; the other petitions are the requirements to fulfill the first one. ‘Hallowed be your name’ was not a doxology; it was the first petition. ‘Hallowed be your name’ was praying that God’s name be honored as holy. Christians must not miss this: Jesus’ first request is not that his personal needs be met, but that God’s glory and holiness be known and loved as it deserves.³³

Jesus is saying that when they go in prayer, they should go wanting his name to be made Holy. Jesus wanted others to know that God is worthy to be worshipped. Jesus wanted his followers to reflect this to their community. This first petition of “hallowed be your name” saved the follower of Christ from fruitless prayers. This first petition reverently helps the gathering body to see how they were living to glorify God, not themselves. When Jesus petitions God to hallow his name, he is asking that God act in such a way that he visibly demonstrates his holiness and his glory.

To achieve the first petition, Jesus gives the second petition in Matthew 6:10: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” D. A. Carson comments, “To pray ‘your kingdom come’ is therefore simultaneously to ask that God’s

³¹ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down: The Lord’s Prayer as a Manifesto for Revolution* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018), 29-30.

³² Mohler, *The Prayer That Turns*, 31.

³³ Mohler, *The Prayer That Turns*, 43.

saving, royal rule be extended now as people bow in submission to him and already taste the eschatological blessing of salvation and to cry for the consummation of the kingdom.”³⁴ This prayer encourages the church have a heart that is so in tune with the Holy Spirit that they desire what God’s desires.

Graeme Goldsworthy defines the kingdom of God as “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule and blessing.”³⁵ How does the kingdom of God come? Phil Ryken writes, “The kingdom comes mainly through proclamation, through the announcement that Christ, who was crucified, is now King. . . . The only way people ever came into God’s kingdom is by hearing his heralds proclaim a crucified king.”³⁶ Goldsworthy states that the kingdom came “by the Holy Spirit taking the word about Christ into all the world, through the preaching of the disciples.”³⁷

This prayer is a call for the Lord to reshape the hearts of every single person such that God is obeyed and glorified on earth as the angels obey and glorify God in heaven.³⁸ J. I. Packer notes, “Here more clearly than anywhere the purpose of prayer becomes plain: not to make God do my will (which is practicing magic), but bringing my will into line with his (which is what it means to practice authentic religion).”³⁹ William Williams comments on this verse:

To pray for Christ’s kingdom is to pray for the conversion of sinners and the edification and sanctification of disciples. It is to ask the evangelization of the Gentiles and the restoration of the Jews. It is to implore that Antichrist may fall, and the idols perish from under the whole heaven. It is to profess sympathy with all that

³⁴ D. A. Carson, *Matthew 1-12*, in vol. 1 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 170.

³⁵ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (London: Paternoster Press, 2012), 53-54.

³⁶ Philip G. Ryken, *The Prayer of Our Lord* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 39.

³⁷ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 213.

³⁸ Mohler, *The Prayer That Turns*, 62.

³⁹ J. I. Packer, *Praying the Lord’s Prayer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 57-58.

relives and elevates and enfranchises man; and to implore the removal of all that corrupts and debases him, and that sells him, soul and body, to the service of the Evil One. . . . Did we but know aright the necessities of our kind, and the truest, deepest wants of our own souls, the hourly burden of intercession, from our acts, and plans, and alms, and prayers, would still be, “Let thy kingdom come.”⁴⁰

In Matthew 6:11, Jesus gives the third petition for daily bread: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Commenting on this verse, Mohler writes, “The Father cares not only for great things, such as advancing his kingdom in the world but also for small things, such as feeding his children.”⁴¹ This third petition is not saying to give an excessive of wealth so believers could live their entire life comfortably. Jesus is saying, give them enough for today, so that they may trust in God for the rest. Carson briefly states, “The prayer is for their needs, not their greeds.”⁴² This petition is a cry for help as the follower of Christ seek to trust in God to meet their needs. Just like how the nation of Israel cried out to God in the wilderness and God gave them manna. Similarly, believers need to go to God every day to rely on him and trust in him. Sin did not create the believers’ dependence; they are dependent because they are creatures.⁴³ Mohler summarizes, “This passage teaches us that God designed physical needs to point to our deeper spiritual needs. Our need for daily physical sustenance is a faint echo of our daily need of spiritual sustenance and satisfaction from God. . . . Each time we pray for daily bread, we should recognize our deeper need for the bread of life, the only one who can truly satisfy.”⁴⁴

If the petition “give us this day our daily bread” emphasizes their most urgent physical needs, then the petition “forgive us our debts” emphasizes their most urgent spiritual need.⁴⁵ Jesus instructs his followers to forgive their debts as they have forgiven

⁴⁰ William Williams, quoted in Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 141.

⁴¹ Mohler, *The Prayer That Turns*, 75.

⁴² Carson, *Matthew 1-12*, 171.

⁴³ Mohler, *The Prayer That Turns*, 73.

⁴⁴ Mohler, *The Prayer That Turns*, 79.

⁴⁵ Mohler, *The Prayer That Turns*, 84.

their debtors. Jesus' use of the word *debts* is meant to evoke in their mind both a severe offense and a corresponding severe punishment.

Forgiving people is not comfortable; the pain of betrayal is real. However, citizens of God's kingdom are to be characterized by mercy, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. Mohler explains, "The kingdom of God is no place for malice and unchecked bitterness. The King himself makes us citizens by forgiving us, and thus the kingdom's citizens forgive one another. . . . In other words, one way they can know if they have experienced God's forgiveness is to see if they have become a forgiving people."⁴⁶

This passage is a reminder not to hold grudges. Jesus knows what is in the heart of man and he points back to what he did on the cross. The cross was painful for him, but he forgave because of his love. Living to glorify God and expand his kingdom requires hard sacrifices. Jesus reminds Christians that they are the benefactors of his grace. Christians are to show his grace and love to others because of what he has done.

Next, Jesus reminds his disciples to pray against temptation. D. A. Carson points out, "The word *πειρασμόν* (temptation) and its cognate noun rarely if ever before the New Testament mean 'temptation' in the sense of 'enticement to sin' but rather 'testing.' However, testing could have various purposes and different results; and as a result, the word could slide over into the entirely negative sense of 'temptation.'"⁴⁷ James 1:13-14 assures, "God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone." This passage can be best understood as Jesus teaching believers to seek help from God when battling against the temptation of the Devil.

Carson also writes, "Matthew's first mention of temptation (4:1-11) was unambiguously connected with the Devil. Therefore, the Lord's model prayer ends with a petition that, while implicitly recognizing their helplessness before the Devil, whom

⁴⁶ Mohler, *The Prayer That Turns*, 90-91.

⁴⁷ Carson, *Matthew 1-12*, 173.

Jesus alone could vanquish (4:1-11), delights to trust the heavenly Father for deliverance from the Devil's strength and wiles."⁴⁸ C. S. Lewis explains that humanity is prone to two extremes when it thinks about the role demonic forces play in temptation: "There were two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One was to disbelieve in their existence. The other was to believe and to feel an excessive unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."⁴⁹

This project encouraged the small group ministry at FBCM to develop mature Christians that prayed prayers like in Matthew 6, that the Lord's kingdom come. Mature believers seek to advance the gospel, not themselves. The Lord's Prayer is not a magical incantation, but it serves as a helpful handrail to guide the broader context of one's prayers.

Fellowship (Heb 10:19-25)

Acts 2 shows not only a church that prays, but also a church that meets together regularly. Discipleship is never strictly about a person's relationship with Christ, it also involves relationships to the community of disciples. Tony Merida points out, "The church lived out this shared life 'every day.' They were involved in one another's lives. While the church had to love those outside the family in order to fulfill its mission, a healthy church meets together as a family regularly."⁵⁰

According to Magruder's study, the third most significant influence on the spiritual health of a young adult was serving; a child who regularly served in church while growing up had 7.5 percent stronger spiritual health as a young adult.⁵¹ In 2007

⁴⁸ Carson, *Matthew 1-12*, 174.

⁴⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: HarperCollins, 1942), ix.

⁵⁰ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, 39.

⁵¹ Magruder, *Nothing Less Study*, 76.

research that compared young adults who stayed in the church with those who dropped out, 16 percent more of those who stayed in church had regular responsibilities at the church.⁵² This research is essential to keep in mind while reading Hebrews 10, that fellowship is not just attending but being actively engaged. It is also important to remember that fellowship, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests, is “grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brothers and sisters.”⁵³

Hebrews 10:19-25 speaks clearly about the importance of the regular corporate gathering of the saints. This passage is broken into two sections. The first section points to the confidence that a believer has in Christ. This is the same confidence that drives the church today to gather together. In the second section, verses 22-25, the church is encouraged to hold onto the confession that they hold in Christ.

The gathering of the church is God’s plan; this plan is more significant than the random conversion of individuals. Christianity is personal but not individualistic. Christianity is corporate. The command to “consider one another” is associated here with church involvement. Fellowship cannot occur unless the church has gathered together. David Mathis describes the power of fellowship as a means to grace: “As partners under God’s Word and in prayer, a brother who knows me as me, and not generic humanity, speaks the truth in love (Eph 4:15) into my life, and gives me a word ‘such as is good for building up, as is the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear’ (Eph 4:29). This is an inestimable grace.”⁵⁴

In Hebrews 10:19, the word “therefore” recaps the previous section in chapter 10 and makes a summary statement of the Old Testament. These sacrifices in the Old

⁵² Lifeway Research, *Church Dropouts: How Many Leave Church between ages 18-22 and Why?* (Nashville: Lifeway Research, Spring 2007), 37.

⁵³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 20.

⁵⁴ David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 147.

Testament are being done in order to be right with God; those sacrifices are insufficient. They are signposts that point to something greater. Those signposts point to the perfect sacrifice, Jesus. The author of Hebrews wrote to the Jews who went through trials and suffered for the cause of Christ. Because of these trials and suffering, they were tempted to go back into the slavery of their old sacrificial system.

In verse 22, the verb προσερχόμεθα means to come before God, instead of rebelling against him. In this section of Scripture, there are two bases for encouragement to draw near to God. First is the boldness to enter into the holy places. This confidence came from the blood of Jesus, which provides access to the heavenly sanctuary. Jesus, through his blood, has made a new and living way. Christ opened a path to believers that was unknown and inaccessible to people before his work.⁵⁵

The second base for encouragement is having a high priest over the house of God, and this high priest is Jesus, the one and only great high priest. The Jews went through a high priest, but now Jesus is the “great high priest” (Heb 4:14). Christians go before God without fear that God is going to crush them. God allows the Christian to go before him despite being broken (Heb 4:16). This fellowship with God only happens through the flesh of Jesus Christ. He is the great high priest. He has paid the penalty and remembers the sins of a believer no more (Heb 9:12).

These encouragements point to the importance of putting theology into practice. Hebrews 10:22 points out that if believers did not put theology into practice, then their theology is not worth much. Guthrie writes,

The word heart καρδίας in the Scriptures often refers to the inner life of persons. Perhaps this connected with Hebrews 8:10, where the writer indicates that in the new covenant, God put his laws in the hearts of his followers. The word true ἀληθινῆς means a real, genuine, sincere, loyal. Draw near in full assurance of faith. The phrase “full assurance” is also found in Hebrews 6:11. Believers do not have to come in with doubt.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary, vol. 39 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 342.

⁵⁶ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 343.

The main point of this section comes in verses 23-25 when the author of Hebrews instructs the audience of this letter: “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

However, verses 19-22 set up the reason the church could have such a firm confidence in Christ. The early church could have confidence in gathering because they enter through the blood, through the priest, with a pure heart and full assurance, and with clean hearts.⁵⁷ Verse 23 encourages holding fast the profession of faith. Hold fast κατέχωμεν was written in the present tense and therefore it carries the force to keep on holding fast. The same verb occurs in Hebrews 3:6 and 14. The adverb without wavering ἀκλινη means that which does not bend or that which was straight. The believer is to hold fast with the assurance for Jesus was the faithful one that was promised; this truth does not bend. This passage also points to the future because that promised ὁ ἐπαγγειλάμενος refers to God, who has made better promises under the new covenant (Heb 8:6).⁵⁸

Verses 24 and 25 are the third “let us” statement. Let us consider one another to provoke to love and good works. The main verb is κατανοῶμεν, which means to notice, consider, pay attention, and look closely at. Paul Ellingworth explains, “There may be a suggestion of watching out for possible failures or weaknesses in the community.”⁵⁹ Guthrie writes, “The phrase to provoke εἰς παροξυσμὸν, meaning to sharpen, to stimulate, to incite, is used here in a positive sense of stimulating or motivating.”⁶⁰ Mohler comments on the importance of these verses:

⁵⁷ R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville: B & H, 2017), 154.

⁵⁸ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 343.

⁵⁹ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 526.

⁶⁰ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 344.

We cannot have confidence and full assurance of faith apart from the church. We cannot endure in isolation. Each Christian desperately needs the body of believers for encouragement. To obtain assurance, we need continual reminding from other saints. Christ calls his followers to bring out the best in each other. Believers must actively and verbally stir up one another to love and good works. An unhealthy church fails to do this. Unfortunately, some churches bring out the worst in their attendees rather than the best.⁶¹

Verse 25 encourages not forsaking the assembling of the body of believers together. The writer instructs the hearers that they are not to forsake assembling together. The word forsaking ἐγκαταλείποντες is the same word used in Jesus' cry from the cross (Matt 27:46). This connection is vital because, although some are forsaking the gathering together for worship, God would not forsake them. They are forsaking God, and the reasons they might have given were the threat of persecution, connections with the synagogue, and apathy.⁶²

Despite their excuses, they are to exhort (παρακαλοῦντες) one another. The usage of this word indicates urgent insistence, especially that of eschatological urgency.⁶³ Ellingsworth states, “ἐπισθωαγωγὴν is a rare word that occurs in the Greek Bible only in eschatological contexts (2 Thess 2:1). The end of the present verse shows the same eschatological urgency.”⁶⁴ The day approaching refers to the coming of Christ, which draws nearer all the time (Rom 13:12). The corporate gathering of the saints needs to be a priority.⁶⁵ The author is suggesting that even if their life was threatened, gathering together is worth it, which echoes Philippians 1:21: “To live is Christ to die is gain.” What they could get from being with one another was worth risking their lives. Mohler describes why the gathering for worship is so important:

⁶¹ Mohler, *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews*, 158.

⁶² Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 345.

⁶³ Ellingsworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 529.

⁶⁴ Ellingsworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 528.

⁶⁵ A. T. Robertson, *The Epistle to Hebrews*, Word Pictures in the New Testament, vol. 5 (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1932), 412.

Christians must not neglect gathering together for corporate worship and for times of prayer and encouragement. Verses 24 and 25 are strong words of judgment against those who are in the habit of neglecting other believers. Those who neglect assembling together cut themselves off from the very means whereby Christ feeds, assures, and protects his people. To say, “I can do this alone,” is to defy the very command of Christ. Some may claim that they can hear better preaching on the Internet or that they are too busy to attend church, but these excuses reveal the reality of a disobedient heart. Instead of searching for an excuse, Christians should be doing everything within their power to meet together. Not only because they need to be fed by the preaching of God’s Word but also because it is part of the faith to stir up fellow believers to love and good works.⁶⁶

The reason many in the early church were tempted to neglect the corporate gathering was because of persecution. This is why the author dedicates verses 19-22 to setting up the confidence they could have to meet together. The temptation was to go back to a more comfortable life. For the Jews that were converted, no one was trying to kill them when they tried to keep their Jewish practices. The temptation was great to go back to a more comfortable life. In the context of FBCM, no one is trying to kill its members for their Christian profession, but it is easier to go back to a cultural Christianity that costs nothing, or to go back to a secular life that the world around them celebrates. Specifically, the draw to go back to cultural Christianity is the greater pull. Dean Inserra defines cultural Christianity:

Cultural Christianity admires Jesus, but doesn’t really think He is needed, except to “take the wheel” in a moment of crisis. The Jesus of Cultural Christianity is a type of historical imaginary friend with some magic powers for good luck and sentimentality. “Amazing Grace” is a song known from memory, but why that grace is amazing cannot be explained. The God of Cultural Christianity is the “big man upstairs,” and whether or not He was holy and people have sinned against Him is irrelevant. Words such as “hope,” “faith,” and “believe” hang on the walls of living rooms as decorations, but the actual words of God only come around when Psalm 23 is read at a loved one’s funeral.⁶⁷

In conclusion, Hebrews 10:19-25 informs FBCM of the confidence needed to approach God through Jesus Christ’s priestly work. Because of this confidence, FBCM could encourage one another to grow in assurance as they anticipate Christ’s return.

⁶⁶ Mohler, *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews*, 158.

⁶⁷ Dean Inserra, *The Unserved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel* (Chicago: Moody, 2019), 14.

Hebrews 10:19-25 gives the priorities to incorporate into a small group. The two main priorities are holding fast to the confession of hope without wavering, and to stir up one another to love and good works. Small groups give more of an opportunity to develop these priorities compared to the corporate gathering of the saints on Sunday mornings.

Smaller communities allow for increased opportunities to live on mission, as well as the ability to bear one another's burdens. Small groups are a way to move from simply being hearers of God's Word to being doers of God's Word. There was hope that the small group ministry would improve the fellowship and the overall health of the church. Hebrews 10 displays the need to strengthen FBCM through small groups to help them understand the importance of the corporate and small group gathering of the saints. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains,

The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. . . . The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. . . . The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.⁶⁸

However, Richard Dunn and Jana Sundene warn about putting too much hope and confidence in a program:

No mechanical five-step strategies for life change, clever methodologies to mimic or ultra-cool programs to apply. Just inefficient, messy, unpretentious, unpredictable, risky relationships with no "paint by the numbers" answers on how to proceed. Just you, the young adults you are investing in and Jesus. Nothing more—but so much more than enough.⁶⁹

Equipping and Evangelism (2 Tim 1:1-18)

Acts 2 points out that not only is the early church a devoted, praying, gathering church, but also a multiplying church. In this project, FBCM sought to use this small group ministry as a way to let the gospel light shine before people so that they might see

⁶⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 19, 23.

⁶⁹ Richard R. Dunn and Jana L. Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults: Life-Giving Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InverVarsity, 2012), 59.

the members' good deeds and give glory to God (Matt 5:16).

Magruder's study found that the fifth greatest positive influence of a young adult was that as a child they participated in mission trips. These mission trips would have provided opportunities for these students to be equipped and to practice evangelism not only locally, but sometimes cross-culturally. This act of being equipped and participating in evangelism resulted in 6.25 percent stronger spiritual health as a young adult.⁷⁰ In this section, 2 Timothy 1:1-18 is examined to help the small group increase participation of its members and increase their evangelistic efforts.

In this passage, John Stott observes, "Paul's preoccupation in writing to Timothy is with the gospel, the deposit of truth which has been revealed and committed to him by God."⁷¹ Tony Merida points out the importance of passing on the gospel message: "The gospel is practical. It has to do with all of life, from their families to their finances, from their schooling to their purity. Their relationships in the church, their ministries of Word and deed, their affections, and their fears—the gospel has practical implications for all of these things."⁷²

In 2 Timothy 1:14, Paul gives the main point of this chapter: "By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you." Paul writes this letter to Timothy, his spiritual son, to encourage him to keep the faith. Second Timothy is an emotional letter, which John Calvin remarks is "written not merely in ink but in Paul's lifeblood."⁷³ Christianity looked bleak, and many were worried about the future of the church. The church is God's bride, and he does not abandon it.

⁷⁰ Magruder, *Nothing Less Study*, 76.

⁷¹ John Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1984), 20.

⁷² Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 135.

⁷³ John Calvin, *1st and 2nd Timothy, Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 289.

Another encouragement that Paul gives his young disciple Timothy is that he had a personal mentor. Every Christian needs a Pauline figure in their lives; every Christian needs a more mature Christian in their life. Christians need others pouring into them so that they could look up to and gain insight. The Christian life is hard; there is a need for a community of believers from all walks of life to help carry burdens. Jesus sent out his disciples two by two for this reason (Mark 6:7). Merida points out the need for life-on-life discipleship: “What exactly did you do in a mentoring relationship? Verses 3-4 show us two essentials behind the act of mentoring: love and prayer. A true mentor must start here. From this starting point, I see some lessons for us who desire to mentor others. Paul helps Timothy in three areas: calling, character, and competency.”⁷⁴

Paul gives young Timothy the third encouragement. Paul encourages him to take heart and courage from the faith his grandmother and mother that was passed on to him. By God’s grace, Timothy was born into a religious family that knew Scriptures. Timothy reaped the benefits of being raised in a Godly family. Part of what made Timothy a great leader was that he had two tremendous mentors early in his life, his mother and grandmother.

Paul’s words are a testimony to the power of leadership in the family: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother, Eunice, and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well” (2 Tim 1:5). Tony Merida points out, “One cannot overstate the importance of living out the Christian life before watching children. I want to say to my kids, ‘Follow my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, and endurance.’”⁷⁵

How the early church passed on the faith is not detailed. Nevertheless, judging by patterns laid out elsewhere in Scripture, the least they did was display personal

⁷⁴ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, 140.

⁷⁵ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, 141.

examples and provide concrete instruction. They passed on both the teaching of Scripture and the pattern of their own “sincere faith.” Not only the pattern of their walk with God but the integrity that characterized their lives as a result. D. A. Carson explains, “Hidden in this passage lies hope for men or women in mixed marriages. According to Acts 16:1, Timothy’s mother Eunice, was both a Jew and a Christian believer; his father was a Greek, apparently a pagan. The Christian influence prevailed.”⁷⁶

Paul gives Timothy a fourth encouragement: “Fan into flame the gift of God.”

William Mounce seeks to explain what it means to fan into flame the gift of God:

(αναζωπυρειν) is a compound verb from (ανα), “again,” “up,” and “ζωπυρειν”, “to kindle” a fire. It is possible that the preposition (ανα) should be given its full force of “again,” hence “rekindle”. . . . Chrysostom observes, “As fire requires fuel, so grace requires our alacrity, that it may be ever fervent” (“Homily 1”; NPNF 13:477). Just because people are encouraged by someone does not mean that they are failing. It can mean that they are being encouraged to continue despite the pressure.⁷⁷

John Piper observes that αναζωπυρειν might be better translated as “keep feeding the white-hot flame”: “The reason for this is that Paul’s point is not that Timothy has grown cool and needs one good hotfix. That is not the point. . . . So Timothy, keep feeding the white-hot flame. . . . Feed it. Feed it. Flames go out without continuous fuel.”⁷⁸

From the gift of God the author transitions to the importance of the work of the Spirit. What is this “Spirit”? Gordon Fee argues that the spirit is the Holy Spirit, rather than a more general human spirit or attitude. Fee paraphrases verse 7: “For when God gives us his Spirit, it is not timidity that we receive, but power, love, and self-discipline.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God’s Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 328.

⁷⁷ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, World Biblical Commentary, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 476.

⁷⁸ John Piper, *Entrusted with the Gospel: Pastoral Expositions of 2 Timothy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 13.

⁷⁹ Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* New International Biblical Commentary, vol. 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), 226-27.

Not only was Timothy to take encouragement from his mother and grandmother, and the work of the Holy Spirit in his life, but also the confirmation that Paul himself laid on him. Paul laid his hands on Timothy. By the laying on of hands when ordaining deacons or pastors, the church proclaims to have seen this person's life and confirms that the person is qualified for the role. The church, though, has to agree. Inward and outward calls are required to affirm someone's call into ministry. Paul is saying to Timothy, "You have been affirmed; this is what you were created to do. Do not go away because it is hard." Do not hide because it is hard. Paul is calling Timothy to work out his calling to keep ablaze the gift of God.

Merida summarizes 2 Timothy 1: "God calls us according to his will and shapes us by his grace."⁸⁰ In this project, the small group ministry sought to produce a sense of excitement because they are filled with future "Pauls" and "Timothys," the future leaders of the church. The "Timothys" of small groups make perfect receptacles for the Spirit's power when they turn to him. This passage communicates the desire for this project to equip the saints for the work of ministry by raising up future "Pauls" and "Timothys." Through equipping, an earnest prayer was that the evangelistic efforts would multiply as well.

Conclusion

The four passages studied in chapter, Acts 2:42-47, Matthew 6:5-15, Hebrews 10:19-25, and 2 Timothy 1:1-18, set the scriptural foundation for the small group ministry. Through the model of the early church, the small group ministry sought to have the same impact on lives at FBCM and the families in the surrounding area of Magnolia, Mississippi, as the early church did on its community. This chapter laid out the biblical foundation and the next chapter presents the strategic plan to put the small group ministry into practice.

⁸⁰ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, 133.

CHAPTER 3

A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE SMALL GROUP

God has entrusted pastors, as shepherds of local flocks, to care for his people. Ephesians 4:12 exhorts pastors to equip the saints for ministry. A strategic plan for multiplying small groups provides opportunities for raising leaders from among church members to do the work of ministry. A healthy church not only has paid ministers but is comprised of an entire congregation trained to do good works. An equipped congregation that is motivated to transform the surrounding community does not happen by default. Pastors have the responsibility to lead in prayer, analysis, planning, implementation, and evaluating of a plan to make disciples of all nations. Leaders must have more than good intentions; they must have a plan of action. Andy Stanley notes, “Direction is everything. Direction determines destination.”¹

This chapter contains a strategic plan for launching Small groups at FBCM. This strategic plan had four phases: (1) prayer and preparation, (2) analyzing the church and community, (3) recognizing obstacles, and (4) vision and strategy. FBCM desired communities that strategically live on mission placed throughout its county for the sake of the kingdom’s work.

Phase 1: Prayer and Preparation

Intercession was one of the focuses of the small group ministry. Scripture prescribes in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to always be in prayer. John Piper calls prayer “wartime

¹ Andy Stanley, *The Principle of the Path: How to Get from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 33.

walkie-talkies.”² Believers must use prayer to communicate with God during the battles of life. The church must understand the importance of prayer in everything it does.

For the church to be more focused on prayer, a plan must be enacted to teach and preach of its critical role in life. The church also provides accessible avenues for the congregation to take action on the Scripture that was taught. As Charles Lawless put it, “Growing churches teach prayer and model prayer.”³ The overarching conclusion of Lawless’ research is that if prayer is to become a priority in a local church, then it must start with “a pastor and prayer leader who believe that prayer matters.”⁴

To maximize the effectiveness of prayer in the church, not only was a new prayer initiative incorporated in the small group but also an effort was made to strengthen prayer in other areas of church life. Deacons gathered each Sunday morning in the secretary’s office to pray for the worship service. The first launched small group spent the first part of its Thursday night meeting in intercessory prayer. The pastoral staff gathered at 8:00 a.m. to spend time in prayer for the service and the congregation.

The church had several times of prayer that occurred throughout the regular worship service. The Sunday morning worship service began in prayer, had a prayer for the offering, before the sermon, to conclude the sermon, and then the service was closed with a prayer. Prayer was not used as a mechanism to help with transitions with the service, but to demonstrate to the congregation the importance of prayer and to have different leaders provide models of prayer.

The Wednesday night service was a dedicated prayer gathering. The first five minutes involved singing a song or two, the next fifteen minutes were spent taking prayer

² John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 49.

³ Charles E. Lawless, Jr., *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 9.

⁴ Lawless, *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry*, 14.

requests, the next twenty minutes were spent in a devotional that typically dealt with the topic of prayer, and the remaining twenty minutes were spent huddled in smaller groups during a time of guided prayer. Prayer requests were also distributed to those in attendance and mailed to the membership once a month.

FBCM faithfully upholds the importance of prayer in the corporate gathering times, yet there were symptoms of an underlying problem. Through the staff's experiences, it became evident that the members of the church had anemic prayer lives. Most of the time in the Wednesday night prayer meeting was spent praying for saints with illnesses, at best, and, at worst, bordered gossip.

I sought to remedy this by spending the last twenty minutes in a time of guided prayer in small groups. I gave a topic for each group to intercede for during their time. The topic was usually in an area where they would love to have seen God's kingdom work expanded and usually flowed from local, to national, to praying globally.

Prior to this project, God was not the first thought when the members were in need. Intercessory prayer was used as a last line of defense for the average church member. Prayers of thanks were usually heard around Thanksgiving or a meal, but God was seldom thanked regularly for answered prayer or his general blessing. Prayers of lament were entirely nonexistent, even for those that were grieving.

FBCM needed to move beyond leading in the corporate gathering, to more structured prayer. It must promote and cultivate a healthy prayer life among all members. The church did an excellent job of leading the congregation in prayer during services, yet the instruction often did not go beyond that point. Sadly, the time of most instruction in prayer was during the least attended service, Wednesday night prayer. Small groups prayerfully began to cultivate a prayer life in the members while they were away from the physical location of the church.

The church began a prayer campaign to focus the church around the centrality of prayer and the importance of small groups in the believer's life. FBCM had a history

of using “cottage prayer meetings” to prepare for revival meetings. These cottage prayer meetings were a gathering in a home for an intentional time of prayer. To multiply the small group, an attempt was made to take what was familiar in the cottage prayer meetings and use it as an avenue to provide a comfortable atmosphere where people could ask questions about prayer and the new small group ministry.

This time was more than a time to gain information about prayer and the small group, but also a challenge to pray more. Prayer often determined the health of the church. These cottage prayer meetings also provided an opportunity to identify locations and potential leaders for when the time was right to multiply the small group.

A pamphlet was also produced and distributed to the entire congregation, made available at the front office, posted to the website, and social media accounts. The April edition of the monthly newsletter included an article that promoted the small group ministry. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posts were made, and Facebook live videos were done that promoted sermon series that would launch the small group. Emails were also sent out in an email marketing campaign program called Mailchimp.

The unity of FBCM was dependent on the unity of its leaders. The staff had a healthy prayer life and often spent time during meetings to pray for the church. The staff was also in the first small group that was launched after the four-week sermon series on the importance of small groups. At the end of the special sermon series conducted during September of 2016, the deacon body gathered to discuss in detail the upcoming project and the need for small groups. This sermon series was different than the one preached to launch the small group ministry. This particular sermon series was to cast vision for the future of the church, and small groups were an aspect of that vision. Several other meetings also occurred with influential leaders outside of the deacon body to try to gain support for the project before the launch.

Phase 2: Analyzing the Church and Community

Phase 2 analyzed FBCM and the community around it. Phase 2 analyzed the

life cycle of the church using attendance records from 2010 to 2018. The leaders of the church also participated in a “Church Health Inventory” to help determine the health of the church. Phase 2 also analyzed the demographics from the 2010 census and a demographic study done within one mile of the church, performed by the North American Mission Board.

Life Cycle of the Church

FBCM was in the declining stage of the church life cycle. Over the past ten years, the decline was occurring at an alarming rate. The year 2017 proved to be a challenging time for the pastors and staff to maintain church attendance, as gains from church visitors and new members were negated by death or declining health of current members. Though the decline had slowed, the pastors feel that the decline rate was still dangerous.

FBCM averaged 150 in 2011, and by 2015 had dipped to below 100 for Sunday morning worship service. That drop in attendance was a significant decline in only four years. Attendance spikes in the year typically were predictable; traditionally one in January, two in spring during the time of Easter and Mother’s Day, and one at Christmas. The drops in attendance were fairly predictable as well. There were predictable drops in February, June and July, and October and November.

These trends were to be expected; most churches across the nation face these trends. The drops in October and November were probably unique to this area of Mississippi because of hunting season. In 2016, the drop in attendance had stabilized. The addition of new staff brought in numerous new guests. Having guests at church is a crucial element in building a healthy church, but the church must be faithful in transforming guests into members who were equipped and sold on the mission of the church.

Church Health Inventory

Thom Rainer's Church Health Inventory was taken by the staff and deacons to help the church evaluate its health to help see why a decline was happening.⁵ The Church Health Inventory is designed to provide a guide to discover the level of readiness of a church to move to a higher level of health. The staff and deacons were asked to provide their best answer with total candor and honesty. The leadership of FBCM completed the inventory to see if they thought similarly.

Performance Analysis

The result of the Church Health Inventory revealed that FBCM was an unhealthy church but was not in the lowest category. Out of 250 possible points, the leadership scored an average of 176. The highest score was 215, and the lowest score was 134. According to Thom Rainer, "A church at this level needs significant work to move into the healthy category. So many deficiencies existed that multiple remedies were needed."⁶ The top ten strengths as well as the top ten weaknesses are highlighted next.

Strengths. The highest-scoring question on the inventory was the belief that "the pastor of this church was certain of God's call to ministry." While this was an obvious complement to the pastor, it was not a good sign for the health of the church that this question scored the highest. All of the top ten scoring questions out of a total of fifty questions involved the staff. Results showed that the strength of the church was the approval of the staff. However, the longest-tenured staff member had only been there a little over a year. It was also worth pointing out that the inventory was anonymous and was passed out at a deacons meeting and was returned to the secretary's office. The following is a list of the highest-scoring statements.

⁵ Thom Rainer, "Church Health Inventory," accessed February 7, 2020, <https://thomrainer.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/church-health-inventory-final.pdf>.

⁶ Rainer, "Church Health Inventory," 8.

1. "The pastor of this church was certain of God's call to ministry."
2. "The pastor of this church was humble, gracious, and modest."
3. "The pastor of the church was a strong and biblical pulpit communicator/ preacher who had a high view of Scripture."
4. "The staff of the church was passionate about ministry, the church, and serving God."
5. "The pastor obviously loves the church, as evidenced in the pastor's words, attitude, and actions."
6. "The pastor does not attempt to lead as a dictator."
7. "The pastor was willing to lead the church in needed changes even if the attempted changes result in significant opposition."
8. "The pastor was committed to stay at the church for the long term."
9. "If a new staff member was needed, the church was willing to wait a long time for the right person to hire or call."
10. "The staff was persistent in leading the church."

Weaknesses. The Church Health Inventory also revealed ten weaknesses on which the church scored particularly low. If the church health was going to improve, then these ten areas needed to be improved as soon as possible. In this section, after a low statement is listed there is a brief discussion on how small groups might be used to strengthen these areas of church health. These statements are listed as they appeared in the inventory. Although the statements appeared in the positive, the leadership of the church, on average, replied that they "strongly disagree" with these statements.⁷

1. "This church makes a concerted effort to minister to needs in the community."

When discussing the weaknesses of the church, the inventory could have stopped here. Why was the church not growing? Why was the church not healthy? Those questions were answered when the results came in, and this was the lowest scoring church health statement. This result showed the importance of small groups in this church. How else would the church know the needs of the community unless they were in the

⁷ Rainer, "Church Health Inventory," 1.

community? The evangelism emphasis of the small group plays an essential role in the return to health for FBCM. Small groups were started to help FBCM become a church that brought the gospel to their neighbors. The ability to live on mission was a virtue that was taught and valued by the church. Living on mission was to be done by starting multiple small groups across Pike County.

2. “The attendance of the church was on a positive trend.”

It was discussed previously that the church was in steep decline since 2011, but it was good to see that the leadership recognized that there was a problem.

3. “Members in the church were willing to start new groups and classes to reach people.”

This result was essential to find out before attempting to multiply the small group. The leadership had seen from experience that the church resisted starting new groups and classes to reach people, and this obstacle had to be overcome if the small groups were to be successful at FBCM. Small groups offer a simple approach to discipleship. Because many families have busy schedules, the church works to integrate discipleship times. Small groups offer flexible small group times that complement the busy schedules of the modern family.

4. “This church is willing to eliminate ministries and activities if they cannot be done with excellence.”

This result served as a warning for two reasons. First, it was a warning that the time-consumption of other ministries might choke out the small group and that FBCM would not easily give up the other ministries for a ministry done with excellence. Second, it was a warning to make sure that the small group was done with excellence. The most significant danger was not that small groups fail and fizzle out, but that they fail and keep going, adding to an already busy church calendar while making no real impact.

5. “The church is willing to confront the difficult issues and seek remedies.”

This result again revealed the importance of small groups to FBCM. The emphasis on the fellowship that the small group brought hopefully helped FBCM move from superficial relationships into relationships that were strong enough to handle the

hard work of accountability and confronting difficult issues.

6. “The church is keenly aware of its weaknesses, challenges, and needs.”

One of the main reasons the staff believed that this Church Health Inventory was necessary was its ability to reveal some blind spots to the church. Previously, the church leadership had assumed that the main problem was not the health of the church but the fact that the community itself had changed.

7. “This church is willing to build quickly if the ministries and growth demand it.”

This result was not necessarily a negative to the congregation considering the size of the facilities. This result might unintentionally reveal strength in the location and size of the current facility and the fact that the church is debt-free.

8. “Most of the people in the church know the church’s doctrinal positions.”

This result was yet another weakness that the small group sought to improve. One of the emphases of the small group was learning, and what better setting to learn the doctrinal positions of the church than in small settings where one could ask clarifying questions.

9. “The church leadership communicates well on issues, particularly on personnel issues.”

This result was a bit of a strange outlier; the leadership scored themselves low for the communication during the hiring of the staff that they scored so highly. Was this an attempt at being humble and not wanting to score themselves high or knowing on the backend that there was always room for improvement? This result was not as concerning to the health of the church as the others.

10. “This church expects much of its members.”

One of the goals of the small groups was to move the congregation from mere attendees to invest in a local body of believers that were learning, interceding for each other, fellowshiping, equipping each other for the work of ministry, and evangelizing their neighbors. The primary avenue of communicating the vision came through preaching. The communication of the church’s vision was expanded to ensure that people understood

and remembered the direction of the church. This result was done not only by the four-week sermon series to launch the small group, but also to continually reference it in future sermons.

Many members and guests turned to the church's website for information; this site was designed to provide information on the vision of the church. Small groups also provided an opportunity to share the vision as well as allowed people to ask the group leader specifics about the direction of the church. Unity came from a shared vision. The vision must be continually explained and taught.

Simplicity was a core value the staff had placed at the center of the church. To streamline the approach of ministry, the church strived to keep all practices simple. This approach to ministry was not as easy as it sounded. The staff continually brought every new idea through the lens of simplicity and Scripture to ensure the idea was worth the focus of the church. This focus kept the church from adopting many dead programs, but a simple model must be continuously upheld.⁸

However, simplicity does not mean shallow. The staff desired for the small group ministry to be simple, but to drive members deeper into God's Word. FBCM started to address the lack of discipleship among the congregation upon my arrival in 2016, and prior to this project. Prior to the project the current investment in discipleship was to be rewarded in the future, but often the change appeared to be needed immediately. Prior to the project, it was a concern that the small group ministry would have challenges to overcome such as sacred cows or stale traditions.

Small groups were built around the idea that the pastors were not to be the only leaders of the church. Small groups developed leaders who acted as shepherds on the frontline. The small group leader was the first person that members call when in need. These leaders were to be steadily maturing as they ministered to their group and taught

⁸ Thom Rainer, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 201.

lessons.

All members were urged to be in a discipleship program. Small groups were the primary avenues for the discipleship process, though some sought traditional Sunday school as a means of growing in Christ. However, it was the staffs' opinion that the Sunday school program at FBCM was in need of restructuring. The new staff did not feel that they had the influence to overhaul the Sunday school program and instead hoped that small groups provided a better option for discipleship.

The staff were not the only ones that felt like the church needed a better discipleship ministry. The Church Health Inventory showed that even the leadership was aware of the urgent needs of the church. After a period of sharp decline, morale was low and there were skeptics of a young staff reversing the current attendance trends. The church did not have any debt and had over 100k in the bank as an emergency fund. However, the church was not currently meeting the budget for the current year, which caused some concern. In this section, the community in which FBCM is located is analyzed.

Demographics of Magnolia, Mississippi (Census 2010)

To reach the community in which FBCM was located, it was important to know the community around them. One of the primary reasons to conduct an in-depth demographic research was to find gaps between the local congregation and the community it was called to reach. As of the census of 2010, 2,420 people, 749 households, and 515 families were residing in the city. The racial makeup of the city was 44.42 percent white, 53.84 percent African American, 0.43 percent Native American, 0.34 percent Asian, 0.29 percent from other races, and 0.68 percent from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any race was 1.16 percent of the population.⁹

There were 749 households out of which 31.2 percent had children under the

⁹ NAMB, "Demographic and Income Report for 39652," email to author.

age of 18 living with them, 38.1 percent were married couples living together, 24.7 percent had a female householder with no husband present, and 31.2 percent were non-families. Of all households, 28.6 percent were made up of individuals and 15.1 percent had someone living alone who was 65 years of age or older. The average household size was 2.54 and the average family size was 3.08.¹⁰

In the city of Magnolia, the population was spread out with 24.4 percent under the age of 18, 12.3 percent from 18 to 24, 25.7 percent from 25 to 44, 22.2 percent from 45 to 64, and 15.4 percent who were 65 years of age or older. The median income for a household in the city was \$21,190, and the median income for a family was \$25,069. Males had a median income of \$21,991 versus \$18,839 for females. The per capita income for the city was \$12,426. The population of Magnolia had grown by 16.9 percent since 2000. About 18.0 percent of families and 22.5 percent of the population were below the poverty line, including 30.1 percent of those under age 18 and 23.2 percent of those aged 65 or over.¹¹ The following section discusses what the church attempted to do with this demographic information.

Gap Analysis

Aubrey Malphurs writes, “The more the church was different from its community, the more difficult it was to reach that community.”¹² One of the primary reasons to conduct an in-depth demographic research was to find gaps between the local congregation and the community it was called to reach. Though numerous gaps emerge from the demographic study, three seemed to jump off the page.

The first gap that emerged was the racial/ethnic gap. FBCM is an all-white

¹⁰ NAMB, “Demographic and Income Report for 39652.”

¹¹ NAMB, “Demographic and Income Report for 39652.”

¹² Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A New Model for Church and Ministry Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 183.

church in the middle of a predominately African-American community. One of the main problems with FBCM reaching its community was that FBCM did not look like its community. Also, being located in the deep South, racial tensions still exist. A one-mile study from the address of the church revealed that the racial gap was even more significant. Within one mile of the church, the demographics were 33.8 percent white and 64.6 percent black.¹³

The second gap that emerged was the generational gap. Eight-five percent of Magnolia was below the age of 65; however, it was estimated that the opposite was true inside of FBCM. The one-mile study revealed similar statistics—only 14.2 percent of people within one mile of the church were 65 years old or older. The one-mile study also revealed the potential for reaching young families. The largest demographic living within one mile of the church was children within the ages of 0-4 at nearly 8 percent of the total population.¹⁴

This statistic supports the need for small groups but also presents the challenge of forming small groups with a limited amount of different generations in the church. If the small groups were going to be multi-generational, then it would require the limited number of those in the younger generation to buy-in from the start.

The third gap that emerged was the growth gap. The community around the church had seen a 16 percent increase in population since 2000, but the Sunday morning worship service at FBCM was in a steep decline. FBCM was once a thriving church, which gave some of the church members false assurance that “all we have to do was return to what we were doing then.” This project brought change, some intentional and some unintentional, and the leadership needed to guide the church during this transition.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus tasks his church to be witnesses “both in Jerusalem, and in

¹³ NAMB, “Demographic and Income Report for 39652.”

¹⁴ NAMB, “Demographic and Income Report for 39652.”

all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” Malphurs argues, “Local churches have a geographical community and have been tasked . . . to reach out to and minister to that community.”¹⁵ It follows that the more intimately a church understands its geographical sphere of influence, the more effectively it can minister to that community. The church was God’s strategic plan for evangelism with one overarching mission: to go to all peoples to make disciples, teaching them to obey everything Christ had commanded (Matt 28:18-20). As can be seen in the gap analysis, FBCM came up short in making disciples of all peoples.

Prior to the project, the church had a few different events that drew people from the community. These events were often outreach or fellowship oriented. These events were the annual Fall Fest, Vacation Bible School, Community Good Friday service. The church also participated in community parades and the National Night Out events. The events were to focus on first bringing people to Christ, then connecting them to the church. Some may be interested in attending church, but the goal was first and foremost to share the gospel.

Phase 3: Recognizing Obstacles

Much of the biblical support, mission, and vision of the small groups was covered in chapter 2 of this project. This section seeks to cover additional support and information. When people look at the church, they should say, look at FBCM, they are joyful, humble, praising God, and have favor with all the people. When people hear about FBCM, they should have good thoughts and see how the church loves each other. It would be fantastic if the church could say that every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved? One could notice the importance of small groups to Jesus as well. Jesus did not hang out with 5,000 people; he spent most of his life with twelve. Even in Jesus’ last hours, he was found in the garden with his disciples praying.

¹⁵ Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, 173.

Why do small groups work? Smaller groups of people provide a more significant opportunity. As people gather in smaller groups, they have more opportunities to practice their faith than when gathered in a larger corporate setting. Often, the first time someone prays aloud or completes a mission project is inside a small group setting.

The second reason small groups work is because smaller communities are just that, communities. In a small group people can get involved and live life. If something happens and they needed help, they have a group to go to, people who know their name and know their needs. Small groups are the best way to change the local church. Churches who have healthy small groups are not only growing numerically but also increase in spiritual depth.

Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer lay out five myths in their book *Transformational Church* that are insightful for small group ministry.¹⁶ These myths provide awareness into what FBCM should expect as obstacles at the beginning of the new small group ministry that this project introduced. First, there was some fear that small groups were permanent. This myth caused stress because people start thinking, “I better pick the right one because this is the one I am going to die in.” On the contrary, people think, “Okay, this one is not meeting my needs; I better hop to the next one.” However, if small groups are organic, then they should be growing and changing because leaders are being raised to launch another one.

The second common myth about small groups is that they can only meet in the church or at the home of a church member. Through the small group ministry meeting in homes, the church stops being a church that said come to the physical location and instead went into the community. Small groups are mobile; they could meet in a classroom, local coffee shop, or workplace on a lunch break.

The third myth was that the teacher must be a superstar. Often church members

¹⁶ Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 179-83.

fear taking leadership positions because they think that they do not know enough. However, the Bible teaches in Matthew 22:37 that a Christian is someone who loves the Lord with all their heart, mind, and soul. Some have the gift of teaching, but that is not necessary to lead; a person just needs to be faithful. Gifted teachers do not know everything about God's Word, but they start out being faithful. Therefore, one should not go looking for the best small group teachers, but look for those who were faithful.

The fourth myth is that small groups must be complicated. Some churches have sophisticated systems and processes to equip leaders of small groups. Some churches require a leader to go through a twelve-week or more training before leading a group. Sometimes the tendency is to make training more complicated. This project sought to keep small group leader development simple so that people could catch the vision for themselves and see where the Lord is leading.

The final myth is the belief that only the pastor could do ministry. This myth is where many churches go wrong. They look at the needs around them and say, "I wish my pastor could go to them; I wish my pastor were here; he would know what to say." God had placed people in their life that only they could reach for the gospel. It would be easy for them to dismiss a pastor as a religious zealot, but harder for them to dismiss a person they know personally. Either their life is truly different or it is not.

If people personally know each other, then those on the outside could see that the Christians live their lives differently, which gives them more influence to speak into a lost person's life. The Christian did not have to be ordained or have a special calling, but if they became a church with 100 people going out and doing ministry during the week, it was almost guaranteed that God would bless that quicker than relying on paid staff.

Acts 2 displays the early church going from despair at the death of Jesus to a movement that spread across the globe. The church spread over an ocean to North America and is still alive 2,000 years later because of what happened forty days after the resurrection of Jesus. Peter went from fisherman to disciple, to traitor, to someone who

was scared for his life, to denying Jesus, to Apostle, to someone who went and preached in front of Jews with such authority that 3,000 people came and became saved. Let the local body of believers be known for being joyful, humble, praising God, and having favor in men.

Phase 4: Vision and Strategy

Raising leaders is a crucial part of multiplying the impact of small groups.

James Nyquist and Jack Kuhatschek point out the challenges, but more importantly, the privilege of leading a small group:

Leading a Bible discussion can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience. But it can also be scary, especially if you've never done it before. If this is your feeling, you're in good company. When God asked Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, he replied, "O Lord, please send someone else to do it!" (Exod 4: 13)

The list goes on. The apostles were "unschooled, ordinary men (Acts 4: 13). Timothy was young, frail and frightened. Paul's "thorn in the flesh" made him feel weak. But God's response to all of his servants--including you--is essentially the same: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor 12:9).

Relax. God helped these people in spite of their weaknesses and he can help you in spite of your feelings of inadequacy.¹⁷

Foundational Questions

These questions and answers served as an attempt to anticipate any frequently asked questions that might occur about the small group ministry. The first question to be answered is: Why should someone join a small group? FBCM gathers together to learn how to love God and love one another. Small groups are not only the primary entry point into the community within FBCM, but they also represent the church on a personal level. Joining a small group is the best way to be a part of FBCM. The staff dreamed that one day there would be groups that met all across Pike County every night of the week. The world can provide activities, but the world cannot provide the opportunity to be cared for by a multi-generational community that the small group ministry hoped to provide.

¹⁷ James F. Nyquist and Jack Kuhatschek, *Leading Bible Discussions* (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity, 1985), 5.

The second question is: What should someone expect in a small group? Small groups consist of 10-15 people who meet once a week for around two hours to learn about God, pray, and live. group participants do not have to be a member of FBCM to be a part of a community group. All are welcome.

The final question to be answered is: How would someone join a group? The staff desired for groups to meet all over the county. FBCM gives a few group recommendations, and a visitor can attend several groups before making a decision. If a person has additional questions about small groups or is interested in leading or hosting a group in their neighborhood, then they could email or call the church office.

Foundational Principles

Small groups pursue to develop in neighborhoods in the community rather than doing one-time events at church building. Instead of doing big events and hoping they move to the small group ministry, FBCM did the small group ministry to get them to the larger Sunday morning corporate gathering. Small groups were a way for FBCM to stop saying “come to the church building,” and for FBCM to go to the community. FBCM realized that the kingdom of God does not grow best with an event mentality. With an event mentality, FBCM would burn out, or their budget would run out. Small groups help FBCM multiply the impact, not fill dates on a calendar.

A final foundational principle is that small groups should avoid breaking up by age groups. The goal of small groups is not just to “have fun” together but also to be on mission to the world, drawing people to the small group community. These small groups seek diversity; they do not want to be just a gathering of people that look the same, act the same, and have the same interest. Small groups should seek to be a gathering of believers that is so diverse to be a witness to the community around it that the love of Christ is a powerful bond that overcomes differences.

Small groups fill the need for community, loneliness, and loss of family that is prevalent in society. Small groups could be attractive to those who are spiritually

inquisitive but suspicious of a traditional church. These smaller groups give settings that provide an opportunity for individual questions and discussions. This greater participation leads to building stronger relationships.

Small groups provide opportunities for the display of Christian hospitality. Hospitality is an invitation to an authentic and multi-generational community. Finally, small groups pursue to maximize the importance of a healthy small group ministry by giving the church better opportunities for fellowship. As mentioned, fellowship is not just socializing but provides an opportunity for accountability, prayer, confession, and repentance.

Small groups are the primary way FBCM engages the community in evangelism. FBCM also has outreach services and events aimed at inviting people to church with the intent to share the gospel. The church has seen some success with these special events. FBCM allows Acts 1:8 to drive its mission strategy. This strategy includes strategies for reaching their Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. A small group is usually the perfect size for a mission trip and a great way to connect the church to a missionary. These small groups form advocacy teams for missionaries. Advocacy Teams are a tangible expression of a church's commitment to supporting missionaries serving in cross-cultural environments. Small groups can serve as a primary link between the church as a whole and the missionary.

Using Acts 1:8 as a guide for its missions emphasis, FBCM's Jerusalem was anywhere they live and travel on a typical day. For FBCM members, their Jerusalem was Pike County. The church is focused on bringing the gospel to other communities by starting new small groups throughout the surrounding area. The congregation is challenged to think and live on mission. Small groups seek to further the gospel outside of its reach.

The small group ministry of this project sought to have a prayer emphasis that was beneficial in developing a heart for missions among the small groups. To the disciples,

the “ends of the earth” was unknown at that time. Members of FBCM can travel the world and communicate with anyone, anywhere, through a wireless device. They know that there were millions of people still have little to no access to the gospel in their language; yet, God’s call to make disciples of all nations is a call that they must obey.

FBCM wanted to see its small groups have the same testimony as J. D. Greear, when he describes the small groups at his church:

We pretty regularly have small groups move together to North American cities as part of our church planting efforts there. I even know of a church plant in Central Asia that met together as a small group in the United States for three years. God called the whole group to go live overseas together! By that point they already had a lot of their relationship kinks worked out. That’s a big deal, because the number one reason people come back from the field is that they can’t get along with each other. A small group has already had several years’ practice learning to get along and had to work through some of these interrelational issues. Forming small groups for the purpose of church planting and sending them out together might be the thing we are most excited about in our mission future.¹⁸

A more detailed description of the goals and action plan is described in the following chapter of this project. In its purest form, the small groups have three goals: discipleship, evangelism, and multiplication. Discipleship is the process of participation in the life of the triune God through Jesus Christ, resulting in growth in knowledge of God’s Word and in obedience to God’s way through the power of God’s Spirit. The action plan for discipleship was to walk the church through an orientation period where a four-week sermon series was preached, and other resources on the importance of small groups were made available. The second part of the discipleship process was to launch the small group and to walk its members through practices that help each member grow in learning, intercession for each other, fellowship, and evangelism.

Small groups could be attractive for those who were spiritually inquisitive but suspicious of the traditional church. Aristides comments on the reasons for the spread of Christianity. He writes the following to Emperor Hadrian in AD 125:

¹⁸ J. D. Greear, *Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Churches That Send* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 214.

If one or other of them have bondmen and bondwomen or children, through love towards them they persuade them to become Christians, and when they have done so, they call them brethren without distinction. They do not worship strange gods, and they go their way in all modesty and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity, and if it is possible to redeem him they set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.¹⁹

Another ancient document describing the compelling nature of Christianity comes from the mid-300s. Emperor Julian angrily tried to stop the spread of Christianity. He said that a reason for its growth was due to Christians' "charity to the poor": "The impious Galileans not only feed their own poor but ours as well . . . welcoming them to their agape; they attract them, as children were attracted, with cakes."²⁰ The staff desired that the people of Magnolia, Mississippi, would say the same about the small groups ministry at FBCM.

The final goal of the small group ministry was multiplication. Multiplication seeks to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ and plant more small groups, which results in more opportunities for people to see and experience the gospel, create compassion for those who do not know Jesus or do not have community, and grow as disciples. When a group raises a leader and sends the leader to start another group, it is called *multiplication*.

The term *multiplication* was used in this project because raising an apprentice

¹⁹ Aristides, *The Apology of Aristides on Behalf of the Christians: From a Syriac Ms. Preserved on Mount Sinai*, trans. J. Rendel Harris and J. Armitage Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), 49.

²⁰ Tony Merida, *Ordinary: How to Turn the World Upside Down* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), 37.

and starting new groups had a multiplication effect on the growth of the local church. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul invested in Timothy. Paul told Timothy not only to entrust the teachings of the Bible to faithful men but to entrust it to faithful men who would teach others.

Participation in a small group is both a blessing and a struggle. One week, participants experience deep conversation, passionate prayer, tearful accountability, and life-giving laughter. But the next week, the group is only half-present, both physically and spiritually. The conversation lulls with silence, the prayers seem superficial, and everyone seems relieved when it is finally over. Small groups can be a struggle.

Just like the rest of the Christian life, being a member of a small group is ordinary and extraordinary, routine, and life-changing. This ordinary routine of a small group results in a catalyst for spiritual growth. To put it another way, participation in a regular ordinary small body of believers is possibly the most critical step Christians could take for maturity in Christ. Michael Horton supports the importance of gathering together when he writes, “We’ve forgotten that God showers his extraordinary gifts through ordinary means of grace, loves us through ordinary fellow image bearers, and sends us out into the world to love and serve others in ordinary callings.”²¹

A small group ministry is not the solution to every problem the church faces. However, in the context of FBCM that scored so unhealthy in the Church Health Inventory, the small group ministry offers an opportunity to strengthen the major weaknesses revealed.

Making Room

It could be argued that the most effective discipleship takes place in a small group. Often, a larger gathering will produce more ministry opportunities, but discipleship,

²¹ Michael S. Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 14.

accountability, and fellowship diminish as the group gets larger. Jesus invested in twelve men that began a movement that was sustained and thriving for over 2,000 years. Most leaders validate their spiritual success by the number of people who attend their group. Groups need to understand the importance of multiplying from the beginning. Multiplication is essential when talking about the why, when, and who of being sent out to start new groups. Multiplication brings new life to a group by giving members opportunities to develop new relationships. Multiplication builds the kingdom of God.

Developing an Apprentice

To multiply a small group it was essential for the leader of the group to begin developing apprentices when the group starts. Developing an apprentice allows groups to multiply as groups grows numerically. The small group leader should begin by identifying a qualified apprentice. The apprentice should be someone that matches the characteristics of a leader, which could be found in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 3:8-12). The small group should find a qualified apprentice, not just a warm body to fill a leadership position. Multiplication should occur once an apprentice is mentored, and the group has grown to the point of needing to multiply. As the leader of the small group begins the process of multiplying the group, a couple of practices should be considered. The first is to let the group know who the apprentice is and that he or she is starting a new group. Second, is to start developing the apprentice by delegating leadership tasks. The apprentice should be able to do everything related to the group. The leader should start slow and then increase the frequency in which the apprentice leads the group. Third, as the apprentice is developed, time should be set aside to give feedback about the assigned tasks. The leader should not just point out weaknesses of the apprentice but affirm successes as well. The goal of the small group leader is to help apprentices become successful leaders. Fourth, the apprentice should intentionally connect with members of the group, as the apprentices will take some of the group with them to start the next group.

The next step is to establish what would be unique about this small group. What opportunities would this new apprentice bring? Is the apprentice called to a particular location? Does the apprentice feel called to a group of people? After the vision of the group is established, next is finding the ones that best fit with this new vision that will leave with the new apprentice to start the new small group. Do they live in the same community or neighborhood? Do they have similar work skills or hobbies that they could use to advance the gospel? Do they feel called to the same location as the apprentice?

The next step for multiplying a small group is determining the host location. The apprentice does not have to be the host. The host might be outside of a member's home. The small group could agree to meet in a local coffee shop, office space, community ballpark, and community center, to name a few examples. Next is to make a timeline so that everyone is on the same page and the time to multiply is chosen.

Multiplication of the group could take from six months to two years, depending on the development of the group and the apprentice, and when the leader is ready to send them out and celebrate the multiplication. Multiplying a group is bittersweet. It may mean not seeing a close friend every week, traveling to a new host home, or even taking a step into group leadership. These are real challenges of launching a new small group. However, few experiences in the Christian life are as exciting as seeing small groups grow and multiply to reach more people for Christ.

Conclusion

Raising leaders is a crucial part of multiplying the impact of small groups. This chapter laid out the strategic plan for launching and multiplying the small group ministry at FBCM. In the next chapter, the details of the project are discussed.

CHAPTER 4

DETAILS OF THE PROJECT

This chapter reports the implementation of the ministry project used at FBCM. The project began on April 23, 2017. A sermon series was preached at the official launch of the small group ministry. The passages in the sermon series were covered in chapter 2 of this project. A lot of planning and preparation went into the launching of the sermon series. A Church Health Inventory was distributed to the leadership of the church prior to this project. A strategic plan was also prepared before the four-week sermon series, it was distributed to the leadership of the church, and was made readily available to help the members of the church understand where the small group ministry was going. These efforts were taken to give the project a good start, because a good start often leads to an excellent finish. Furthermore, this sermon series was an introduction to concepts discussed in more detail during the launch of the small group ministry.

Strategic Plan

A strategic plan was formed for the small groups. In this strategic plan, the life cycle of the church was examined with current and past attendance trends. The Church Health Inventory was distributed to the leadership of the church and examined to help evaluate the current health of the church and to reveal strengths and weaknesses. The demographics of Magnolia, Mississippi, were examined to see the gaps between the church and the community it served.

After this information was collected, the strategic plan looked at discovering biblical purposes and developing a mission statement description for the small groups. From there, the discipleship process for the small groups was laid out, incorporating both

evangelism and missions into the discipleship plan. Finally, goals and an action plan were laid out for the small groups.

Orientation

At the end of the first sermon series, preached during September of 2016, the deacon body met to discuss in detail the upcoming project and the need for small groups. Several other meetings also occurred with other influential leaders outside of the deacon body to try to gain as much support for the project as possible before the launch. A pamphlet was produced and distributed to the entire congregation, made available at the front office, posted to the website, and social media accounts.

An article was included in the April edition of the monthly newsletter. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posts were made, and Facebook live videos were done to promote the upcoming sermon series that would launch the small group. Emails were also sent out in an email marketing campaign program called Mailchimp.

The first six weeks of the project were spent researching and preparing for the sermons that went along with the small group series. Each sermon series had discussion questions that were posted on the website and social media accounts to help with discussion during the launching of the small group ministry. These discussion questions were also used during the first four weeks of the launching of the first small group that met after the sermon series was completed. After the preparation of each lesson, the lessons were sent to an expert panel for recommendations and evaluation.

The expert panel was a multi-generational gathering of pastors who each have a doctorate and at least five years of experience pastoring a church. The multi-generational pastors gave feedback on the small group ministry and also offered a variety of insight. Although a doctoral degree was a minimum requirement, I also wanted a variety of seminaries and universities represented. I attempted to make sure there was a regional diversity as well; however, those that responded were not as regionally diversified as hoped.

Training Sermons

This second sermon series implemented the content from chapter 2 of this project. The Scripture passages covered in those four sermons were Acts 2:41-47; Matthew 6:5-15; Hebrews 10:19-25; 2 Timothy 1:1-18. This sermon series set the trajectory of where the church would be going for the upcoming months. This sermon series was a concentrated effort to set the foundation for the project. Through the four weeks of training, FBCM explored the acronym L.I.F.E. The “L” stood for learning, the “I” for intercession, “F” for fellowship, and “E” for equipping and evangelism. The training explained that all five elements are necessary to have a biblical small group. For maximum impact, the sermons were made available on the website and social media platforms. The notes were also made available on the website and in the front office.

Sermon 1: Learning

On April 23, 2017, I preached the first sermon in this series to the congregation of FBCM. The sermon used two texts. The Great Commission in Matthew 28 was the first. In Matthew 28, it was pointed out that to fulfill the Great Commission, a Christian must first learn something about Jesus to go and tell of the good news of Jesus Christ. Then in Acts 2:42-47, during the sermon and in chapter 2 of this project it was argued that the early church was devoted to the apostles teaching and gathering house to house. The early church had a hunger for God’s Word and to meet with each other in smaller groups.

During the sermon, an appeal for small groups was made as well. The initial sermon presented the question before the congregation, “If our most seasoned saint that gave their entire adult life to this church were to pass away, would our youth mourn?” “Do they even know her name?” These questions were diagnostic questions to determine if their church had become too age segmented.

The congregation was also warned from the book *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* by Thom S. Rainer. One of the signs of a dead church is that “the Great

Commission becomes the Great Omission.”¹ The churches studied in this book over-relied on programs. These churches thought that they were barely missing the mark; that they needed to find the right combination, right program, or the silver-bullet pastor. After the sermon, I reminded the congregation that at the end of the sermon series, a new “L.I.F.E.” group would be launched. Furthermore, during the next deacons meeting and other committee meetings, the church discussed on how the new small group ministry was different from the present Sunday school classes.

Sermon 2: Intercession

On April 30, 2017, I preached the second sermon using the Lord’s Prayer from Matthew 6:5-15. This sermon included examples of intercessory prayer. During this time, the contrast was made between the Wednesday night prayer meeting and what would occur in a small group. In the Wednesday night prayer meeting, the church had a long list of everyone that was loosely connected to the church. They spent time praying for others. However, in the small group, the question would be asked, “What burdens are you carrying this week? Similarly, “How can we pray for you this week?”

In the Wednesday night prayer meetings, prayer requests were placed on a long list of other prayer requests that had been collected from previous weeks, and those requesting prayer had to trust that others were praying for their prayer requests. However, in the setting of the new small group, they would have someone specifically assigned to pray for them that week. Not only would everyone have someone explicitly praying for them that week, but they would also intercede for someone else in their group. Prayer requests would be posted in a private Facebook group, so in case they forgot what or whom they were praying for, they could go back and check.

¹ Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B & H, 2014), 42.

Sermon 3: Fellowship

On May 7, 2017, I preached the third sermon in the L.I.F.E. series from Hebrews 10:19-25. The initial questions addressed in this message were, “What is fellowship? and Why do we need to fellowship in a small group setting?” In this sermon, I charged the church to redeem the biblical and theological use of the word *fellowship*. The sermon was a reminder that fellowship is talking about the things of God. Fellowship is asking, What are you learning? What is God teaching them? Fellowship has a focus of accountability built into it as well. Fellowship is asking, How is your marriage, how is your parenting going, how is your quiet time, and who is your disciple?

I also reminded the congregation that the size of the group does not determine the success of the group. A quote from Robert Coleman about small groups reaffirms this statement:

It does not matter how small the group is at the beginning, provided that they implant their vision in men and women who would in turn pass the Word along to others, and that they also reproduce. The early church gave eloquent witness to the dynamic in the hearts of people who take God at His Word and believe that with Him nothing was impossible.²

According to Coleman, anywhere the early church went or lived, faithful church members went to them and testified about the Lord. He writes, “The believers in the early church proclaimed the gospel more than just in the place where they worshipped God. They shared God’s love on the corners, in their family dwellings, in the trial courts, and the jails.”³ During the sermon it was prayed that this new small group ministry would move from within the walls of the church so that the community around them could see that something was different in the way the church loved and interacted with one another.

This difference was another reason why the church was challenged to fellowship in a multi-generational setting. However, it is a beautiful picture when the church young

² Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1987), 40.

³ Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship*, 40.

and old fellowships together. Fellowship is not a program, event, or building; it is a way of life.

During the sermon, I pointed out the value of having a small group. As the small group ministry sits around reading and discussing the text of the previous Sunday's sermon, each person has the opportunity to bring insight and different applications based on experience and background. The role of the small group leader is to help steer the group away from, "this text means this to me." The small group leader frequently reminds the group that the text has one meaning, but there are different ways to apply the meaning to one's life. A gathering of people in different seasons of life provides opportunities to get more out of Scripture than if the church member were alone.

Sermon 4: Equipping and Evangelism

On May 14, the fourth and final sermon in the L.I.F.E. series was preached using 2 Timothy 1:1-18 as the text. During the sermon I asked, "Where did evangelism occur?" It was a fear of the staff that most of the congregation would reply, "During the invitation part of the Sunday morning worship service." However, I also asked, "Are the homes of believers the contexts for evangelism?" I asked a similar question for discipleship, with the assumption that most would reply Sunday school. However, I also pointed out that discipleship begins in the homes of believers.

The ultimate goal of the small group was laid out to the congregation: to make mature disciples that go out and make disciples. The small group ministry is not another program at the church but is the equipping of the members of the church to go out and do the work of ministry in their homes, their workplaces, and even the ends of the earth. Hosting in a home is an attempt to help the participants overcome an attitude of obligation toward evangelism. The small group ministry is not meant to be another program or event at the church building. In this sermon, I asked the question, "What did disciples do?"

Disciples are to be imitators of Jesus as their perfect model. The book of Acts records that those who responded to the call of the gospel immediately joined with others of the same faith (Acts 2). Disciples of the Lord must see themselves as people in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. The next logical step is for them to help others know and grow in their faith. Disciples join with other disciples in sharing the good news.

In addition to the text, during the sermon, I shared information from the book *Transformational Church*. Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer believe that “churches that were transformational have people in small community. It was an assumption they believe to be true. It was a qualification for a church to be transformational.”⁴

The five elements of a transformational small group environment were shared. These elements are mission-oriented, word-driven mentality; multiplication mindset; stranger welcoming; and kingdom focused.⁵ These elements were discussed and contrasted with the five obstacles faced by transformational small groups. These obstacles were are transference of information was valued much more than life transformation (transformation included biblical learning, but did not end with it); teaching was valued more than learning; becoming a reflection of past practices; segmentation of the mission of God; and lack of intimacy.⁶

I also shared statistics from *Transformational Church*:

77 percent of members in growing churches say small groups are very important at our church. 69 percent say our church regularly starts new small groups. 64 percent that new members are immediately taught about the importance of living in community with other Christians. 72 percent say, when people are plugged into a small group at our church, they are ministered to and well cared for.⁷

⁴ Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 28.

⁵ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 192-95.

⁶ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 190-91.

⁷ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 176.

Conclusion

After the sermon series, the first small group began in the parsonage of the church, where my family lived. The initial group launched and I had high hopes, not just because of past experiences in small groups, but because it was an opportunity to grow closer to the church and to sit down with many in a living room setting. In chapter 5, the results of the project research data are displayed in a discussion of the project goals, strengths, and weaknesses.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE MINISTRY PROJECT

This chapter concludes the presentation of this project with an evaluation. The purpose of this project was to improve the discipleship process through a small group ministry called L.I.F.E. groups to strengthen First Baptist Church Magnolia, Mississippi. The purpose of these small groups was not to grow the church or to serve the church, but to train the members to be the church. The project officially began on April 23, 2017, with the preaching of the sermon series that promoted small groups. The first small group launched May 18, 2017. Throughout this project, I learned lessons that improved the application in preaching and living in small group community.

Evaluation of the Project Goals

Three goals served as the criteria for measuring the overall effectiveness of this project. The first goal was to design a strategic plan for multiplying small groups. This goal was accomplished by the strategic plan in chapter 3 of this project. This goal included the Church Health Inventory that was completed by the staff and deacons to help the church evaluate its health in order to help see why a decline was happening.¹

The Church Health Inventory provided a guide to discover the level of readiness of a church to move to a higher level of health. The staff and deacons provided their best answer with candor and honesty. The leadership of FBCM took the inventory to see if they were thinking similarly.

¹ Thom Rainer, “Church Health Inventory,” accessed February 7, 2020, <https://thomrainer.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/church-health-inventory-final.pdf>.

FBCM fell within the lower categories, which revealed that it was an unhealthy church but was not in the lowest category. Out of 250 possible points, the leadership scored a 176 on average. The highest score was 215, and the lowest score was 134. According to Rainer, “A church at this level needs significant work to move into the healthy category. So many deficiencies existed that multiple remedies were needed.”² In chapter 3 of this project, the top ten strengths as well as the top ten weaknesses are highlighted.

The strategic plan also observed attendance trends from the church records from 2010. Results can be observed in table 1. In table 1, the data is incomplete from the church records for the years 2010 and 2011, the average recorded for those years were taken from the Annual Church Profile (ACP). Attendance patterns were also observed to see how the small groups would impact the Sunday morning corporate gathering. An assumption was that as members were growing in spiritual maturity, they would become more regular attenders and shared their faith more often. Both of these presumed results took noticeable effects on the average attendance of the Sunday morning corporate worship gathering, the steep decline the church was previously experiencing was leveled out (see table 1).

The second goal was to develop and implement a four-week sermon series to make the members and attenders of FBCM aware of the need for the development of small groups to strengthen families. It later became apparent that the greater need was not to just strengthen families, but to strengthen the overall discipleship efforts of the church through this small group ministry. This small group ministry began the path of becoming a healthier church. This goal was accomplished by preparing and preaching four sermons from the texts described in chapter 2.

For goal 2, an expert panel was also involved in helping with the sermon series. An expert panel used a rubric to evaluate if the sermon series was faithful to the

² Rainer, “Church Health Inventory,” 8.

Bible, teaching methodology, scope, and applicability. See appendix 1 for the evaluation tool. See appendix 2 for expert panel feedback, where it was demonstrated that the goal of 90 percent sufficiency was reached.

Table 1. Monthly averages of FBCM for the years 2010-2018

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Jan.			133	119	101	90	98	106	103
Feb.			117	119	108	75	83	106	98
March			122	137	106	88	97	95	102
April			151	119	130	115	92	107	105
May			123	137	121	108	98	97	107
June			116	124	112	91	91	84	83
July		143	130	133	117	101	109	80	89
Aug.		143	134	132	110	99	118	109	114
Sep.		129	123	114	100	101	106	102	93
Oct.		145	118	112	100	97	101	86	90
Nov.		141	123	118	100	94	100	111	79
Dec.		157	131	114	111	106	104	90	89
Avg.	143	150	126	123	110	97	100	98	96

The sermon series sought to implement the lessons learned in chapter 2 of this project. In chapter 4 of this project, additional details were given on the implementation of this sermon series. The Scripture passages covered in those four sermons were Acts 2:41-47; Matthew 6:5-15; Hebrews 10:19-25; 2 Timothy 1:1-18. The sermon series set the trajectory of where the church would be going for the upcoming months. The sermon series was a concentrated effort to set the foundation for the project. This goal was accomplished by preaching the four prepared sermon series over four consecutive Sunday

morning worship services.

The third goal was to develop and start small groups to strengthen the discipleship ministry at FBCM. This goal was not accomplished and failed to produce a discipleship ministry that reproduced small groups. The goal was attempted by launching a small group in the parsonage of the church. The small group was successfully multi-generational, the youngest being a one-year-old and the oldest eighty-eight years old, but as the first group multiplied into other groups, perseverance became a problem. When new groups started they would often start strong; however, as soon as attendance would decline, leaders grew discouraged

The project identified potential leaders for the small groups but did not adequately prepare leaders for the long-term journey of a small group leader. None of the small groups launched from the original lasted for an extended amount of time. Better training for the leaders could have better prepared the leaders for success.

During April and May, the average attendance of the Sunday morning worship service was over 100. However, after spending four weeks preaching on the importance of small groups it was disappointing having only 7 people show up to the first small group. However, numbers did not stay low; the small group ministry saw a peak of 32 that attended during October of 2017. The original small group that was started in my home grew to a faithful 14-15 in attendance. Four other small groups were launched and saw a brief time of success that helped to contribute to the high of 32 for an average monthly attendance for October 2017.

It was interesting to observe the average attendance of both the Sunday morning worship service and the Thursday night small group in how the two groups related to each other. The initial assumption was that after a time of intentional discipleship and emphasis in evangelism that the small group would make a difference upon the average attendance of the Sunday morning worship service. In addition, I assumed that as members grew in spiritual maturity, they would become more regular attenders and share

their faith more often. Both of these presumed results should have made noticeable effects on the average attendance of the Sunday morning corporate worship gathering. However, the opposite was true in many cases. During the holidays, attendance for Sunday morning worship service would go up and the small group attendance would go down.

Even though this goal was unsuccessful, one positive observed from the attendance averages from 2010 was that the steady drop in attendance that occurred from 2010-2015 drastically slowed down. From 2016-2018, the average attendance of the Sunday morning worship service was leveled out. As a result of this project, God was glorified, my skills as a pastor were improved, some in the church were brought closer together, and potential future small group leaders were identified.

Strengths of the Project

An evaluation of this project produced both confirmation and criticism. The leveling out of the steep decline in church attendance was an encouragement to see and confirmed that the small groups were partially successful in bringing about a healthier church. Two of the three goals of the project were fulfilled. The following section examines the strengths of this project.

This ministry project produced benefits that improved the application of Scripture at FBCM. The small group took take the Sunday sermon and sought to apply it deeper on Thursday evening. This time of application in a group setting also helped me become a better preacher by discussing the text that was preached the previous week.

Finally, intentional time of prayer in the small group helped group members connect. Previously ,the only prayer time for the church was during the Wednesday night prayer meeting. Instead of hoping that the whole group would pray for a request, one person in the group would commit to praying for each request. All of the prayer requests were then placed in a private Facebook group that served as a reminder for whom they were to be praying. Intentional prayer combined with the living room setting resulted in a

closer community. Prayerfully, the strengthening of the prayer life, developing leaders, and overall better discipleship practices resulted in a long-term benefit to the health of the church because of this project.

Weaknesses of the Project

Evaluating the project exposed some missing elements that may have strengthened the overall effectiveness of the project. The overall weakness of the project was timing. Starting the project in May proved to be the wrong decision. The original rationale was that a large portion of the congregation attended during May, so the project would have a more significant impact on a majority of the congregation if started at that time. In reflection, the project should have been delayed and more time should have been spent building relationships, and then the project could have launched in the fall.

However, the same problem with timing of the launch could have occurred during deer season. During the launch in May, the church, despite the efforts to launch the ministry well, did not buy into the vision of a new small group ministry. By July, the average small group attendance was 0, not because of intentionally taking July off, but because no one showed up. This minimal buy-in was disheartening, and the project was almost reconsidered. The attendance patterns of the small groups can be seen in table 2.

Table 2. Monthly averages of L.I.F.E. Groups attendance for the years 2017-2018

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2017					7	6	0	9	13	32	21	9
2018	9	26	25	6	8	29	20	8	18	9	11	10

The next weakness was as the first group multiplied into other groups, perseverance became a problem. When new groups would start, they would often start strong. However, as soon as attendance would decline, leaders grew discouraged.

The next weakness of the project was the project identified potential leaders

for the small groups but did not adequately prepare leaders for the long-term journey of a small group leader. None of the small groups launched from the original lasted for an extended amount of time. Better training for the leaders could have better prepared the leaders for success.

Another weakness of the project was buy-in from the church. Adequate promotion to help spread the word and the sermons expressed the biblical support and practical need for the group. The expert panel also supported this. However, only a long-tenured pastor could have remedied this weakness. I over-estimated the amount of buy-in a pastor that had been there for less than a year would receive.

My fear is that the training and promotion at the beginning and throughout the project came off like a politician lobbying for support, rather a pastor trying to disciple the church. Almost everyone responds to a lobbyist with the same reaction: a healthy dose of skepticism and resistance. Only time could help move from what was probably perceived as a lobbying effort to a training exercise.

Despite the weaknesses of the project, the project was still considered to be a success. The slowing of the steep decline that the church had been in since 2010 could not be overstated. Also, the church lost several saints who were regular attendees during that time. Despite the losses of dedicated saints, attendance remained constant, which showed that there were some additions to the church during this time.

Personal Reflections

When I first began this project, I thought that this small group ministry would have an emphasis on being multi-generational to strengthen families and to strengthen the church in order to reach the community better. However, during the preparation of the project and after discussion with the leadership of the church, as well as receiving the results of the Church Health Inventory” it became apparent that the highest priority for FBCM would be a better discipleship ministry.

This initial focus on multi-generational groups to strengthen families also

explained one of the shortcomings of the project. Most of my reading and study was geared more toward family ministry prior to this project. Further research into discipleship and small group ministries most likely would have revealed that my goal of multiplying small groups within a year's time was too zealous. Looking back, I would have taken it slower in trying to launch new groups, and post-project study would support this observation.

Although the project was not as successful as I had hoped. It did provide opportunities for ministry. FBCM was better able to obey the one-another passages in Scripture. The small group ministry provided opportunities to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). In one instance, the small group ministry had the opportunity to walk with one of its members through a drug addiction.

Through the transparency created in the small group ministry, the group was able to see restoration and reconciliation happen. This challenging situation was a great victory for the small group ministry because this particular person could have hidden this addiction until things got much worse, and without the small group, where would he have been able to turn to find people that love and care so much for him? FBCM averaged 100 people on Sunday morning, which is just big enough to hide. No one person could know all those burdens. Not only that, it is sometimes a challenge to even know the names of someone on the other side of the church.

My involvement in the project and the Doctor of Ministry program has affected me in several ways. First, it helped me grow in hospitality. Allowing people into my home every week was not an easy task. Being hospitable is risky. It is risky relationally; hosts allow people into their lives and grow closer to them, which means those same people are now able to hurt the host more at times. Being hospitable is risky physically and financially—a person has no secrets. The host’s home is open to whoever would like to come in, and the hosts trust that no one is coming in for the wrong reasons.

However, hosts also learn to value people because even if someone did not

come in to intentionally harm, if hosts are reaching young families, they bring in young ones that unintentionally cause harm. Growing in hospitality was a great by-product of this project. This growth was significant because being hospitable is one of the qualifications for an overseer in the church (Titus 1:8). Therefore, growing in hospitality displayed my calling to the church in a practical way and helped me grow as a pastor.

Second, this project helped me grow as a shepherd. Being in a small group brought about different burdens being carried by different generations. In our small group we had a young man that struggled with addiction and we had three marriages in which I was blessed to officiate two. We were also able to walk alongside a young couple that moved to Atlanta and helped them navigate the family issues that came along with the move. The small group allowed us to learn how to walk along with people in various difficult life stages, from the older generation that dealt with cancer, a parent that dealt with kids moving into college, to college students that tried to figure out how to plan for their future

Third, this small group ministered to us. My wife and I went through the hardest season of our lives during this project. We became parents for the first time, and four months later had to enter into the legal system to be able to keep our beautiful baby girl. Eighteen long months we fought and did not know if we would be able to keep the beautiful gift that God had given us. Our small group had the opportunity to love on that girl every Thursday night and to encourage us. We saw first-hand the benefit of a small group because we were miles away from family in Tennessee, and this group stepped in. Not only were they our brothers and sisters in Christ, but also our adoptive parents/grandparents and prayer warriors.

Fourth, the small group provided me opportunities to interact with those that did not or could not go to church. Some attended because they worked in the medical field and could not attend a Sunday morning worship service. Others were skeptical and found our living room to be a more comfortable place to learn about the Christian faith.

Some of these people joined our church body, while others attended a different local church.

Having those outside the church feel welcome in our home with other believers was extraordinarily encouraging. I do not know a better way to strengthen a leader in the area of apologetics than to field questions from a variety of people from different backgrounds.

Finally, if I could go back and do this project again, I would adjust the second goal. Instead of just implementing a sermon series to train the congregation on the importance of the small group ministry, I would use the sermon series to incorporate a pre-and post-survey to obtain measurable results on the effectiveness of the sermon series.

Conclusion

While most of the goals of this project were met, the effectiveness of this project has yet to be determined. Those who participated were kind and gracious in their attendance of the small group. Ultimately, I hoped that the people who participated in the small groups learned more about how to live out the Christian life, interceded for their brothers and sisters in Christ, grew deeper in fellowship, and were equipped to engage in personal evangelism. This growth ultimately determines whether the project was a success or not. God was glorified when his children gathered together.

APPENDIX 1
CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson One Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson was clearly relevant to strengthening the family through small groups.					
The material was faithful to the Bible's teaching.					
The material was theologically sound.					
The thesis of the lesson was clearly stated.					
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.					
The lesson contains points of practical application.					
The lesson was sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.					
Overall, the lesson was clearly presented.					

APPENDIX 2

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC
RESPONSES FROM EXPERT PANEL

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson One Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.				Yes	Older gain energy from young Young gain wisdom from Older
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.				Yes	
The material is theologically sound.				Yes	
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				Yes	Importance of Small GroupsL Learning, Intercession, Fellowship, Equipping, Evangelism
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.				Yes	Purpose of SG Myths of SG—organic, changing, place of mtg.
The lesson contains points of practical application.				Yes	House to House—community, to know, involvement, Knows your name, life change
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				Yes	
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				Yes	

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson Two Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.				Yes	Intercession is critical.
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.				Yes	
The material is theologically sound.				Yes	
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				Yes	How to have a powerful prayer life. Private prayer transforms lives.
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.				Yes	
The lesson contains points of practical application.				Yes	Petition—holy and honorable name. Kingdom come—will
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				Yes	
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				Yes	

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson Three Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.				Yes	
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.				Yes	
The material is theologically sound.				Yes	
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				Yes	
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.				Yes	
The lesson contains points of practical application.				Yes	
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				Yes	
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				Yes	

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson Four Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.				Yes	
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.				Yes	
The material is theologically sound.				Yes	
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				Yes	
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.				Yes	
The lesson contains points of practical application.				Yes	
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				Yes	
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				Yes	

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson One Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.			X		Clear lesson on small groups but perhaps a better scripture reference.
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.			X		Curriculum is more of a topical message on small groups than an exegesis of the passage
The material is theologically sound.			X		No heresy in curriculum just eisegesis
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.			X		Introducing life through small groups
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.			X		
The lesson contains points of practical application.			X		Start small groups
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.			X		Could add the historical context of breaking from Judaism
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.			X		Overall yes.

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson Two Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.			X		Correct emphasis of prayer in small groups
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.				X	Faithful except small group emphasis forced in Matthew.
The material is theologically sound.				X	Correct: Jesus did not give us a mechanism.
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.			X		I know what it was, but could have been a bit clearer.
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.			X		
The lesson contains points of practical application.			X		For exemplary clearly state how intercessory prayer is modeled for small groups.
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				X	Sufficient, perhaps lengthy could do two lessons on intercessions.
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.			X		Work on Intro, clearly stated points, and application.

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson Three Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.			X		Not exemplary only because the idea of multigenerational is only mentioned in the intro.
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.				X	Very good exegesis. Though the elements of fellowship are stated the actual word is not.
The material is theologically sound.				X	Great reminder of the importance of fellowship.
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				X	Stated clearly, but only once. May consider repeating thesis.
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.			X		Not exemplary because of transitions. Consider working on clear transitions
The lesson contains points of practical application.			X		Consider points of application after each point.
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				X	Consider spending equal time on each point, if possible.
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.			X		Could more easily follow with clearer transitions

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson Four Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.			X		Small groups and importance mentioned. Multi-generational mentioned only once.
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.			X		
The material is theologically sound.				X	Not sure that Paul was writing to Timothy about small groups, but application clearly exists.
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.			X		Not all points are clearly related to equipping and evangelism.
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.			X		For exemplary try to find creative ways to highlight transitions between points
The lesson contains points of practical application.			X		Only one point clearly stated.
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				X	
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.			X		Might consider cutting some points and tying points more clearly to thesis.

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson One Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.				x	
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.				x	
The material is theologically sound.				x	
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				x	
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.				x	
The lesson contains points of practical application.				x	
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				x	
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				x	very good

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson Two Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.				x	
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.				x	
The material is theologically sound.				x	
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				x	
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.				x	
The lesson contains points of practical application.				x	
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				x	
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				x	very good

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson Three Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.				x	
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.				x	
The material is theologically sound.				x	
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				x	
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.			x		
The lesson contains points of practical application.			x		
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.			x		Needed more focus on "koinonia"- would have like to hear more content.
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.			x		good lesson

CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Lesson Four Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly relevant to strengthening the family through multi-generational small groups.				x	
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching.				x	
The material is theologically sound.				x	
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.				x	
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.				x	
The lesson contains points of practical application.				x	
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.				x	
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.				x	very good

APPENDIX 3

APRIL 2017 MONTHLY NEWSLETTER ARTICLE MANUSCRIPT AND APRIL 3, 2017 WEBSITE POSTING MANUSCRIPT

Easter was an important time of year and it was a time of reflection on the greatest sacrifice in history. This day was when the God of this universe came down to this sinful broken world and did not give us what we deserve, but instead laid down his life for us. The Easter Holiday was also an important time for the life of the local church.

Easter was one of the most attended days of the year. This was for two reasons: **1.)** It was when most of the church membership shows up on the same day. **2.)** Those that do not regularly go to church were more open to an invitation than normal.

Not only was Easter a great opportunity to invite the neighbor, friend, family member, and co-worker you have been praying for, but we need to ask the question what can we do to help their guests go from guests to disciples of Jesus Christ.

Thom Rainer (President of Lifeway) says, “***Small group attendance was the bridge between worship attendance and ministry involvement.***”

Eric Geiger (Vice-President of Lifeway) says, “***Those who were in some type of group (Sunday School, small group, etc.) were much more likely to display markers of spiritual growth than those not in a group.***”

We see the importance of small groups in Scripture. All throughout the study in **Matthew** we have seen Jesus intentionally challenging and training his 12 disciples. In **Genesis** we learn that we were made in the image of God, who was himself the perfect community: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So you, as an image bearer, were made to image unified community around the greatest commonality: Jesus Christ. In **Acts 2** we see the early church was growing because they were meeting from home to home

meeting each other's needs. In **Galatians 6:2**, we were to "bear one another burdens". As we grow as a church this would be increasingly difficult so we need to seek a way to grow smaller while we were growing larger.

We also see the importance of small groups in the history of our own church. It was not too long ago; you all were meeting to intercede with prayer for Kaley and I.

As an effort to capitalize in the momentum of Easter we will be launching new small groups.

The first small group will be coming **April 19th**. This will be a Grief Group lead by James Brumfield that will meet once a month on Wednesday night. The goal was not counseling, but discipleship. Our church and our community have had several touched by death already this year and this was one of the ways we as a church can be there for those that were hurting.

Our second small group will be coming after Easter as well. We will be going into a sermon series looking at the importance of small groups that will meet outside of the church building during the week. We will start small and seek to multiply groups in the future. A weakness several churches fall into was when they start something new they start out too large and when the newness wears off the new program loses interest. We wanted to avoid that by starting small, and growing as we raise up new leaders.

We would love to see five years from now small groups meeting all over our county every night of the week and then gathering on Sunday to celebrate what the Lord has done in our lives.

These small groups will have four goals.

Learning: Our Sunday School curriculum does a great job of passing on information about God. So we want our small groups to be different, we want the learning in our small groups not just to be information but practical. Please do not hear what was not being said. Certainly, Bible knowledge was not irrelevant; but it was not enough. Small groups were the place to push past Bible knowledge and on to life application, so that

transformation more and more into the image of Christ can be seen in our churches. A transformational small group focuses on everyone giving and receiving hope and help from God's Word so as to spiritually mature in Christ (Heb 10:24-25). In small groups we seek to display what does it look like to a Christian on a Thursday night. What does it look like to be a Christian spouse and parent? What does it look like to be a Christian in the work place? How to rejoice with those that were rejoicing and at the same time weep with those that were weeping. These kinds of concepts cannot be learned in a classroom setting, but were caught as we were living life together. Without discipleship and multiplication at the heart of our groups, they may become clubs rather than one of our church's most effective tools.

Intercession: Prayer was the fuel that drives the local body of the church. We as a church have already seen the power of prayer and need to keep this at the center of everything we do.

Fellowship: Fellowship was not just entertainment or socializing. Fellowship was the gathering of believers to talk about the things of God.

Equipping and Evangelism: The final goal will be to be equipping the saints to do the work of ministry. Opening up new opportunities for people to serve and use their gifts (Eph 4:11-15). Training up leaders and equipping them to do the ministry and Evangelism. We want our small groups to be the new front door of the church. Small groups can be attractive for those who were spiritually inquisitive but suspicious of traditional church. We no longer want to sit back and say come to us, but want our small groups to be a way for us to go to the people. Just as we were actively identifying leaders who can carry on the ministry of the church, our small group leaders need to actively identify and train leaders in their groups to begin groups of their own. Jesus sent you out and you in turn send others out who in turn send out yet others who can use their God-given gifts to expand his Kingdom in our community. Thrown off by these two being together? Don't be, disciples share the gospel. Those who were growing in Christ tell

others about him. Those who were not growing in their faith were much less likely to articulate the gospel.

Upcoming Messages

April 2nd	Morning: Matthew 23
	Evening: Matthew 24:1-34
April 9th	Matthew 24:36-Chapter 25
	Matthew 26-27
April 16th	Matthew 28 (Easter)
	NO PM SERVICE
April 23rd	L.I.F.E. Group Series: Learning
	Hebrews
April 30th	L.I.F.E. Group Series: Intercession
	Hebrews

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ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING A SMALL GROUP MINISTRY TO STRENGTHEN FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH MAGNOLIA, MISSISSIPPI

Joseph Clay Gunter, DMin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Matthew D. Haste

In this project, First Baptist Church Magnolia, Mississippi, looked at bridging the gap between church and home by developing a small group ministry to strengthen FBCM. Chapter 1 presents the history and ministry context of FBCM and the goals of this project.

Chapter 2 provides exegesis of four passages of Scripture (Acts 2:42-47; Matt 6:5-15; Heb 10:19-25; 2 Tim 1:1-18) to show that to strengthen families through small groups we must understand the importance of learning, intercession, fellowship, equipping, and evangelism.

Chapter 3 presents a strategic plan for implementing small groups into the life of First Baptist Church of Magnolia.

Chapter 4 describes the project itself, recounting the content and teaching methodology of the specific sermon series. Chapter 5 evaluates the efficacy of the project based on the completion of the specified goals. They sought to bridge the gap of church and home by developing a small group ministry to strengthen FBCM in this lays their ultimate goal for their families to live lives that glorify God and raise the next generation to do the same.

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