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God Our Neighbor: Discerning Our Calling By Discovering God's Life in Our Neighborhood

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GOD OUR NEIGHBOR: DISCERNING OUR CALLING BY DISCOVERING GOD'S LIFE IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

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BY

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For the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

Director of Graduate Program

April 14, 2023
Date

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For Stephanie,

Isaiah,

Parkside Church of Christ,

the Spirit of God,

and the neighborhood that hosts us all.

ABSTRACT

This doctor of ministry project presents the results of research completed with congregants and neighbors of Parkside Church of Christ in Dearborn Heights, MI. The research question driving this project is: How might a congregation's missional identity be reshaped by attentiveness to God's activity among their neighbors? The missional activity of the Holy Spirit makes God's future accessible in the present both within and beyond the church; thus, the Spirit is discernible in the particularity of a neighborhood. For this reason, the local neighborhood functions as an arena of the Spirit's activity, a source of theological discovery, and a space for spiritual formation. By paying closer attention to God's activity in their neighborhood, congregations can discover their future in God's life.

After a literature review outlining the "neighborhood pneumatology" that undergirds the core convictions outlined above, this project reports on a series of interviews conducted with Parkside's members and neighbors. Participants responded to four questions, each of which solicited stories about God's presence and activity in the neighborhood in which the church is located. Three central themes are identified from these interviews, each of which affirms the work of the Holy Spirit in and with Parkside's neighborhood. The final section of the project highlights the implications of these findings for Parkside's future in the neighborhood, as well as for any other congregation seeking to share in God's life in the particularity of their place.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Hey, don't you think it's time that we had a party?
Wouldn't you agree we all need a good time?
We could have the neighbors in for a drink,
And lay a little food on too.[1]

Parkside Church of Christ (Dearborn Heights, MI) is a changing congregation struggling to imagine its future in an evolving neighborhood. This was true long before I joined the church as a minister ten years ago, and it remains true today. For many in the church, it is hard to picture what—or *if*—Parkside will be ten years from now. As is often mentioned in frank conversations among church members, we are an older, smaller church—older and much smaller than we once were. When I first joined Parkside, long-time members would regularly remind me that our congregation was once comprised of over four hundred members. "We had two services back then," the familiar reminiscence went. "Even the balconies were full!" Today, about fifty people gather for worship on Sundays, a number that has steadily dwindled for at least the past three decades.

That said, today it is rare for a member of Parkside to reminisce about the old days of packed pews and swelling membership. For a long time, our church's vision seemed fixated on restoring the past, recovering old practices in hopes that we would some day be what we once were. Today, that nostalgic longing has largely been replaced by an openness to what lies ahead. The once ubiquitous question, "How do we get back to where we were?" has generally given way to a new question: "Where is God leading us next?"

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[1] Petula Clark, "The World Song," on *The Pye Anthology* (Sanctuary Records, 1971).

Nowhere is this shift in imagination more evident than in the congregation's shared perspective on the neighborhood surrounding the church building. For years, Parkside members often blamed the decline in church attendance on the changes occurring in the neighborhood—especially the steady increase in Arab Muslim families moving to the area. "How," many wondered, "can a Christian church survive in a majority Muslim neighborhood?"[2] For this reason, the neighborhood was seen by many congregants as an obstacle to church growth, as a problem in need of a solution.

In the mid-2000s, this concern led to a season of congregational discussion and discernment centered on the future of Parkside in the neighborhood. Two options emerged: either the church would remain in its current location, or it would relocate to the more homogeneous suburbs to the west. After much prayer and consideration, the congregation chose the former option; they recommitted themselves to the place God had planted them 50 years prior. In the years since then, this decision has been reaffirmed a number of times. Whenever the option to move, merge, or disband arose, the church discerned a call to stay. Furthermore, each new decision to remain in its place deepened the congregation's commitment to its neighbors and neighborhood. The neighborhood was no longer a problem to solve, but a calling to follow. Rather than a barrier to thriving, the neighborhood became integral to the church's future. Whatever Parkside might be and do in the future, it would be it and do it in and with this neighborhood.

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[2] As is highlighted below, this perception of our neighborhood as "majority Muslim" reflects a significant overestimation of the number of Arab families living in our area, as well as the inaccurate assumption that all our Arab neighbors are Muslim.

Nevertheless, that future remained—and *remains*—difficult to imagine, let alone describe. As I will highlight in my overview of Parkside's history with its neighborhood below, the church has recently enjoyed a variety of meaningful experiences with our neighbors. However—while these experiences may hold the answer to the question, "Where is God leading us next?"—that future has yet to be discerned and articulated. It is this need for discernment that gave birth to this project.

Parkside's Neighborhood

Before describing my project, though, I must first briefly introduce Parkside's neighborhood and then narrate Parkside's history with its neighbors. For the past 65 years, Parkside Church of Christ has gathered for worship in the same place, a church building constructed by members on Outer Drive in Dearborn Heights, Michigan. Because the building is located half a mile south of the border of Detroit and a half mile north of the border of Dearborn, Parkside leaders often describe the church's location—and thus its neighborhood—as "the intersection of Detroit, Dearborn, and Dearborn Heights."[3] For the purposes of this project, "Parkside's neighborhood" will be more specifically defined as including everything and everyone within about two miles of the church building.[4] Roughly half of this neighborhood is made up of the northeast corner of Dearborn Heights; the other half is comprised of portions of west Dearborn and west Detroit.

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[3] Parkside Church of Christ. "About Us," (https://www.parksidecoc.org/about-us, 2020), accessed March 24, 2023.

[4] In the interviews described below, this neighborhood was even more specifically defined as "the community bordered geographically by Joy Road in the north, Evergreen Road in the east, Cherry Hill Street in the south, and Beech Daly Road in the west."

The majority of the neighborhood is residential, a bedroom community primarily filled with homes rather than businesses. The businesses, shops, offices, and restaurants that line the major thoroughfares primarily serve local residents; aside from attending one of the two local commuter colleges, there are few reasons to commute *to* this particular neighborhood. There are also at least fifteen churches in the neighborhood, and two mosques, including the Islamic Center of America, the largest mosque in the United States.[5] The houses of worship most proximate to Parkside are the Islamic House of Wisdom (a quarter mile north) and Saint Anselm Catholic Church (a quarter mile south). The neighborhood is also home to three large wooded parks, including Rouge Park—a 1000-acre city park in Detroit—and the forests adjacent to Henry Ford's Dearborn estate.

Although the population size of the neighborhood has remained roughly the same for the past fifty years, the racial/ethnic make up of the neighborhood has changed significantly. The two most notable demographic shifts in recent decades are the result of 1) Arab immigrant and Arab-American families moving to west Dearborn and Dearborn Heights[6] and 2) white flight and the influx of African-American families moving to west Detroit following the Detroit Rebellion of 1967.[7] These changes have helped to produce a much more diverse and pluralistic

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[5] Michele Norris, "Largest U.S. Mosque Opens in Michigan," (https://www.npr.org/2005/05/12/4650047/largest-u-s-mosque-opens-in-michigan, May 12, 2005), accessed March 24, 2023.

[6] Dearborn and Dearborn Heights comprise the core of the "oldest, largest, and most diverse Muslim American and Arab American communit(y) in the U.S." More than 40% of Dearborn's population is Arab-American, a percentage that has grown consistently since 1965. (Frances Kai-Hwa Wang, "Decades after 'the Arab problem,' Muslim and Arab Americans are leading political change in Metro Detroit," https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/decades-after-the-arab-problem-muslim-and-arab-americans-are-leading-political-change-in-metro-detroit, September 20, 2021).

[7] In the two years following the uprising, 150,000 white residents moved out of Detroit; in the subsequent decade, Detroit became a majority Black city. Today, Detroit remains both the most segregated city in America and the city with the highest proportion of Black residents. (The Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, "City Snapshot: Detroit," https://belonging.berkeley.edu/city-snapshot-detroit, 2023).

neighborhood than the virtually all-white, all-Christian neighborhood in which Parkside was first planted. Our neighborhood is now home to thousands of white, Black, and Arab families; Christian, Muslim, and non-religious residents live, work, and play alongside one another.

This diversity does not necessarily indicate integration or equity, however. In many ways our neighborhood is marked as much by segregation and injustice as by diversity. For hundreds of years, our neighborhood has been shaped by racial injustice. From their inception, Dearborn and Detroit were "born of the forced captivity of indigenous and African people and the taking of land occupied by Native people."[8] Local housing codes—including 1920's property abstracts that explicitly prohibited non-white families from buying homes in Dearborn[9]—created a geography of segregation that persists today. These practices of segregation were bolstered and enforced by Orville Hubbard (mayor of Dearborn, 1942-1978), the nation's "most outspoken segregationist north of the Mason-Dixon,"[10] earning Dearborn the nickname "the Birmingham of the North."[11] Likewise, the current city borders of Dearborn Heights were designed in 1960 for the intentional "separation of persons on account of race, and (to create) an all-white proposed city of Dearborn Heights."[12] This history of segregation has resulted not only in distinct racial differences in the

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[8] Tiya Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 6.

[9] Property abstracts made available by the Dearborn Historical Museum archives.

[10] Deadline Detroit, "After Charlottesville, Some Push To Remove Orville Hubbard Statue In Dearborn," (https://www.deadlinedetroit.com/articles/18140/after_charlottesville_some_push_for_removal_of_orville_hubbard_statue_in_dearborn, August 17, 2017), accessed March 24, 2023.

[11] Joe Darden, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple, 1987): 135.`

[12] Justia, "Taylor v. Township of Dearborn," (https://law.justia.com/cases/michigan/supreme-court/1963/370-mich-47-2.html, April 5, 1963), accessed March 24, 2023.

communities northeast and southwest of Parkside, but has also created a disparity of opportunities and resources from one zip code to another, and even violence against our black neighbors.[13] Also notable is our neighborhood's history of Islamophobia; in a variety of times and ways, the increasing presence of Arab Muslim neighbors has sparked fear and hatred from local white Christians.[14] In the community surrounding Parkside, diversity has not always—or even often—led to racial, ethnic, or economic equality, let alone neighborly love of stranger.

In short, Parkside's neighborhood has changed, is changing, and is in need of change. It is *in* this neighborhood that Parkside is discovering its identity, *to* this neighborhood that Parkside is called, and *with* this neighborhood that Parkside is discerning God's future.

Parkside's History with its Neighbors

It has frequently been said—both by leaders and by other members—that Parkside had no real interaction with its neighborhood prior to the past ten years. While this is likely an exaggeration, my best efforts to comb through church documents, bulletins, and congregants' memories for examples of neighborhood engagement prior to 2013 have largely come up empty. Aside from a couple of community fundraisers, rented spaces, and church activities to which

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[13] In 2013, Renisha McBride—an African-American woman in need of assistance following a car accident—was murdered by a white Dearborn Heights resident when McBride knocked on his front door. In 2015 and 2016, Kevin Matthews and Janet Wilson—both of whom were also African-American and unarmed—were killed by white Dearborn police officers. All three deaths occurred in Parkside's neighborhood.

[14] A few examples: In 1942, a Yemeni resident of Detroit was denied citizenship explicitly because—according to courtroom documents—he was "not white of skin" nor "Christian," but belonged to "the Mohammedan world," just one example of the U.S. citizenship policy (1790-1952) of barring non-white, non-Christian immigrants from citizenship. (See Khaled Beydoun, *American Islamophobia* (Oakland, CA: University of California, 2018). In 1985, Michael Guido was elected mayor of Dearborn after accusing his opponent of contributing to the growing concentration of Arab Muslims in Dearborn, and by distributing a plainly xenophobic pamphlet entitled "Let's Talk About… The Arab Problem." In 2012, professed Christians led an anti-Muslim demonstration in downtown Dearborn, parading through the Arab-American Festival with a pig's head mounted on a stick. (Jeremy Weber, "How Not To Evangelize Muslims: Stick A Pig's Head On A Pole," *Christianity Today* (June 19, 2012). As outlined in Beydoun's *American Islamophobia*, these same sentiments have shaped many people's attitudes toward Dearborn Muslims following 9/11 and throughout the campaign and presidency of Donald Trump.

neighbors were invited, there are surprisingly few instances of intentional neighborhood interaction in Parkside's first fifty years.

This is not to say, however, that Parkside was isolated from the neighborhood in its earliest years. It is probably more accurate to say that, early on, Parkside members engaged the neighborhood *as neighbors.* In 1960—two years after Parkside's building was constructed—33% of the congregation lived in the neighborhood, and 86% lived in Detroit, Dearborn, or Dearborn Heights.[15] For a significant portion of the congregation, "interacting with Parkside's neighborhood" was part of everyday life, just as Parkside was part of their life in their neighborhood. Over the years, however, the proportion of Parkside's membership living in the neighborhood dwindled dramatically. By 1982, only 24% of the congregation lived in the neighborhood, and the percentage of the congregation living in Detroit had been cut in half.[16] In 2006, only 13% of the congregation lived in the neighborhood, and only 42% of the congregation lived in Detroit, Dearborn, or Dearborn Heights.[17] Today, the percentage of congregants living in the neighborhood is up slightly (19%), but the percentage of congregants living in Detroit, Dearborn, and Dearborn Heights is at an all-time low (just 30%).

There are a variety of potential reasons for why our congregation has gradually shifted further from the church building and its surrounding neighborhood. It seems likely that the white flight that transformed portions of our neighborhood also impacted where our congregants have

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[15] Dearborn Valley Church of Christ Membership Directory, August 1960. (Please note that Parkside was called Dearborn Valley until 1973. Also, Dearborn Heights was not incorporated until 1960; thus, the homes of members located in what is now Dearborn Heights are listed as Dearborn residences in this directory.

[16] Parkside Church of Christ Directory of Members, 1982.

[17] Parkside Church of Christ Photo Directory, November 2006.

chosen to live, and from where we more often draw new members.[18] Additionally, decades of local church mergers, church splits, and church hopping have resulted in a variety of "transplants" joining our church despite living in other communities. Perhaps most significantly, this reality likely reflects the wider trend of placelessness in suburban American life. As sociologists Kevin Dougherty and Mark Mulder note,

> Due to lifestyle patterns that rest more on social networks linked by automobile routes than physical proximity, 'place' mattered less and less. The suburban shift into a 'place-less' milieu, indeed, seemed to signal the end of the 'neighborhood church.' Individuals and families demonstrated a willingness to drive past multiple churches to the congregation that best fit their identity and preferences.[19]

Similarly, Sinha, Hillier, Cnaan, and McGrew highlight the fact that congregations are now "less neighborhood institutions than collections of people who are similar in some way… (sharing a) common ethnicity, regional or national origin, political orientation, life stage, lifestyle, or class background."[20] The geographical dispersion evident in Parkside's membership seems to belong to a broader tendency among American Christians, a tendency rooted in a variety of intersecting causes.

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[18] Although this reality does not implicate our congregation in any *intentional* decision to move away from neighbors of color, it likely reflects the more subtle means by which we collectively participate in the geography of racism. I doubt any Parkside members who left Detroit explicitly identified racial demographics as their reason for moving; schools, safety, property value, and employment opportunities were more likely top-of-mind for migrating families. Likewise, I would be very surprised to learn that Parkside ever purposefully decided to attract white families rather than congregants of color; the decidedly white culture of our church is something we have inherited and maintained, not something we chose. That said, our congregation's culture and geography have been undeniably shaped by the momentum of white flight and the inertia of racial segregation, resulting in realities that undercut our sincere longing to become a more inclusive community.

[19] Kevin D. Dougherty and Mark T. Mulder, "Worshipping Local? Congregation Proximity, Attendance, and Neighborhood Commitment," *Review of Religious Research*, 62 (2020): 30. The authors later point to recent surveys comparing congregational data from 2001 and 2017 that demonstrate a 20% decrease in American congregants who drive less than six minutes to church, and a 40% increase in congregants who drive more than 15 minutes to church (p. 34).

[20] Jill Witmer Sinha, Amy Hillier, Ram A. Cnaan, and Charlene C. McGrew. "Proximity Matters: Exploring Relationships Among Neighborhoods, Congregations, and the Residential Patterns of Members," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 46.2 (2007): 247.

This shift, however, seems to have significantly impacted Parkside's relationship to its neighborhood. When the congregation no longer lives in the neighborhood—or shares a common neighborhood at all—Parkside's involvement in the neighborhood can no longer be taken for granted. What once happened organically in the shared spaces of everyday life now requires intentionality, organization, and travel. Because Parkside had no such practices of neighborliness, its neighborhood went largely ignored by the congregation. Mark Mulder, citing a 2003 study, depicts a similar reality among a group of churches elsewhere:

> Since members tended to live in scattered patterns throughout the city, they did not really "see" the "outside" neighborhood right around the church. Some churches even tended to "disregard neighborhoods as sources of membership and objects of mission." Most of the churches in this district functioned as internal communities that just happened to be located within the geographic bounds of particular neighborhoods. They did not develop neighborhood relationships. They did not act as the "node" of a neighborhood. Consequently, they did not foster neighborhood cohesion. They were not social spaces where neighborhood relationships could be enhanced. They did not provide a hub for social services that would bond the church to the neighborhood. The author of this study argued that these churches primarily invested in activities that "served the survival and growth strategies of the congregations themselves" rather than benefitting the local community. As a result, these churches seemed irrelevant to their own neighborhoods. Even worse, for six days a week, they acted as dead spots within the neighborhood.[21]

For decades, this description fit Parkside well: "(an) internal communit(y) that just happened to be located within the geographic bounds of (its) particular neighborhood."

The past decade, however, has seen a dramatic shift in Parkside's posture towards its neighborhood.[22] Driven in part by their aforementioned decision to stay, as well as by explicit

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[21] Mark Mulder, *Congregations, Neighborhoods, Places* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College, 2017), 46.

[22] It is important to note that, since my arrival at Parkside in 2013, I have played a significant role in the shift described here. As the congregation's minister, I introduced much of the language and many of the practices outlined below. However, I believe that the most helpful—and accurate—way of telling our story centers on *God's* activity and our *congregation's* response to it, rather than on the initiative of an individual minister. For this reason, I have chosen to narrate our recent history without explicitly naming my or any other individual's specific contribution.

refocusing on the part of church leadership, the congregation has made a concerted effort to re-engage the life of the neighborhood. Identifying "hospitality" as a core value of the congregation in 2015, Parkside began to intentionally invite neighbors to church activities, create new social events for neighborhood families, and cultivate new partnerships with neighborhood organizations.

Activities that were once insular were opened up to make space for neighbors. Our Easter breakfast now included local families who had no intention (or obligation) to stick around for worship. The annual church bonfire was now attended by families who lived down the street. In a sort of interfaith exchange program, a group from Parkside visited a local mosque for Friday prayers and then hosted families from the mosque for worship on Christmas morning.

More notably, Parkside began to plan and host social events specifically designed to "extend God's hospitality" to our neighbors. Our neighborhood Block Party in 2015—an afternoon of food, games, and hanging out in the church parking lot—welcomed dozens of local families, sparked new excitement for Parkside members, and immediately became an annual tradition. It also gave way to other neighborhood events. We hosted a carnival for local children. We organized a Halloween Trunk-or-Treat in our parking lot. We launched an ESL conversation group for local immigrants learning English.

Perhaps most significantly, Parkside also began to develop partnerships with local organizations and other neighbors. Our first experiments with partnership centered on sharing unused space in our building with neighborhood groups, businesses, schools, and nonprofits; no longer would our building "act as a dead spot in the neighborhood" for six days a week. Later, we began leaving our property to join in with initiatives happening elsewhere in our

neighborhood. We joined a campus ministry group to help out at one of the local colleges. We participated in a park clean-up at Rouge Park. We even joined the local farmer's market; each week throughout the summer, we set up a tent, sold handmade goods to benefit local nonprofits, and handed out free water to thirsty shoppers.

Initially, the congregation's prevailing reaction to these emerging practices of neighborhood interaction was a mix of hesitancy and excitement. "We've never done anything like this!"—spoken with varying levels of enthusiasm and skepticism—was the common refrain. In time, however, "we've never done anything like this" was increasingly replaced by "this is what we do" and "this is who we are." "We are a neighborhood church plant," one Parkside leader recently remarked. "I could imagine us continuing to exist without our building, but I'm not sure who we'd be without this neighborhood."

For as meaningful and formative as these neighborhood experiences have been, however, they have yet to provide substantive answers to Parkside's questions about its future. We are now convinced that our future lies with the particular place in which God has planted us, but we continue to struggle to identify and define that future. We continue to ask, "What's next? And what do we need to do, change, and become in order to join in that future?" Our most recent experience navigating the COVID-19 pandemic—during which our congregation met almost exclusively on Zoom for over a year, virtually isolating our church from our neighborhood—has further obfuscated our vision of our future, dampened our enthusiasm, and drained much of our energy. We have emerged from that season longing for renewal, for a future worth stepping into. This project is designed in response to this longing.

Terms

Before moving further with this project, it is important to define a few key terms:

Neighborhood: Throughout this project, I will be using the word neighborhood to describe the geographical area helpfully defined by Scott Hagley as "the small-scale environment within which we can live, work, play, and shop. It is bigger than the family home or even the block, but smaller than the city or the county. It is a place that can host a broad range of interactions and provide the basic elements of human community. Subjectively, neighborhood describes an identifiable group, naming a personal identity that can be connected to place."[23]

Neighbors: Those who reside or otherwise spend a significant amount of time in the neighborhood as defined above.

Parkside's Neighborhood: The community at the intersection of Dearborn, Dearborn Heights, and Detroit, bordered geographically by Joy Road in the north, Evergreen Road in the east, Cherry Hill Street in the south, and Beech Daly Road in the west.

Pneumatology: The study of or reflection on the identity and activity of the Holy Spirit.

Neighborhood Pneumatology: The study of or reflection on the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in a particular neighborhood or, more broadly, in the particularity of neighborhoods.

Spiritual: Pertaining to or deriving from the Holy Spirit.

Missional: Pertaining to participation in the holistic mission of the triune God in the world.

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[23] Scott Hagley, *Eat What is Set Before You: A Missiology of the Congregation in Context* (Skyforest, CA: Urban Loft, 2019), 181.

Project Description

My thesis is that attentiveness to God's activity in a church's surrounding neighborhood shapes that congregation's future participation in God's life. My research question, then, is: How might a congregation's missional identity be reshaped by attentiveness to God's activity among their neighbors? Chapter Two provides a theological and missional foundation for the project. Chapter Three describes my methodology and research. The method utilized in this study is thematic analysis. Specifically, I have interviewed members of Parkside and non-congregant residents of the church's neighborhood, soliciting stories and reflections about God's presence in the neighborhood. In Chapter Four, I provide a thematic analysis of the themes that emerged from the interviewees' responses. In Chapter Five, I explore the missional implications of these themes and propose next steps for the congregation's future participation in God's life in their neighborhood.

Contribution to Ministry

The primary aim of this project is to serve Parkside by providing a meaningful examination of our experience of God in our neighborhood that will help inform our future participation in God's life. However, I believe this project is also valuable for a variety of other ministry contexts, particularly smaller congregations in diverse and changing neighborhoods. Parkside is by no means the only smaller congregation struggling to discern its future in its particular place. As Carl Dudley observes, small churches often struggle to believe "that vitality and renewal are possible. When churches think that their present course is the only one possible, they don't try to make changes. And when they don't try, nothing new happens. That reinforces

their belief that nothing can be done to change it. It's a vicious circle."[24] Theologian Cameron Harder concurs, noting that smaller congregations often "hunker down and turn inward, eyes focused on their own survival. And in the process, they turn away from the community that needs them. They don't see those who would support them if they were only willing to look outward and ask."[25] The goal of this project is to turn the attention of both Parkside and other similar congregations outward toward our neighbors and God's future waiting to be discovered among them.

Additionally, I believe that Parkside's changing and pluralistic neighborhood is paradigmatic of many Western ministry contexts. As highlighted by theologian Patrick Keifert, North American Christianity is decades into a "third disestablishment" in which Christianity is no longer the dominant or default religious perspective in the neighborhood, and in which Christians find themselves living among a diverse network of neighbors of varying faiths and perspectives.[26] Although this "disestablishment has meant challenge, change, stress, and struggle" for many local churches, it also represents "God's invitation to join in (a) new adventure in the life of God and world, gospel, church and culture."[27] My hope is that this project serve as an invitation into this missional adventure, both in the discoveries it makes about God's life in our neighborhood, and in the methods it exemplifies for discovering—and participating in!—God's life in other neighborhoods.

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[24] Carl Dudley, quoted in Cameron Harder, *Discovering the Other: Asset-Based Approaches for Building Community Together* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2013), 76.

[25] Harder, *Discovering the Other,* 77.

[26] Patrick Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era* (Eagle, ID: Allelon, 2006), 33.

[27] Ibid., 33, 36.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There's a meaning oh so clear;
Listen.
Notes as old as life is dear;
Listen.[28]

A Neighborhood Pneumatology

Congregations can discover their future in God's life by paying closer attention to God's activity in their neighborhood. This relatively simple claim undergirds the entirety of this project. However, beneath this apparent simplicity is a robust theology of both neighborhoods and the Holy Spirit. Drawing from the insights of theologians and other scholars, I will below outline a *neighborhood pneumatology*—that is, a theology of God's Spirit in the neighborhood and of the neighborhood in God's Spirit. Specifically, I will demonstrate the ways in which the missional activity of the Holy Spirit makes God's future accessible in the present both within and beyond the church, and the ways in which the local neighborhood is the arena of the Spirit's activity, a source of theological discovery, and a space for spiritual formation. I will approach this theological development in two stages, focusing first on the life of the Holy Spirit and second on the life of the neighborhood.

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[28] Clark, "The World Song."

The Spirit

The Spirit as God's Future in our Present

In their handbook on congregational change, *How Change Comes to Your Church,* Patrick Keifert and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson argue that missional transformation emerges from practices that seek "to discern God's preferred and promised future for each local church... [A]ny Christian discerner who does not begin with that end in mind cannot put first things first in the here and now."[29] Cameron Harder seems to agree, writing that God's change

> comes from out front, from the future… as a gift sent to us from up ahead… [T]ime is a river in which we are standing, facing *upstream.* The past is behind us, flowing away. The future is flowing toward us full of unpredictable possibilities… God stands upstream ahead of us, calling us, encouraging us to link hands as we wade through the rapids… [facing] the future knowing that it is both a creation of our choosing and the work of a loving God.[30]

Every congregational process of vision discernment and identity formation, then, is a pursuit of God's future in a particular time and place. Each question about a congregation's future—such as the question that launched this project—is an invitation to discover and join in God's "preferred and promised future." As such, every church seeking to discern its future is engaged in a *pneumatological* pursuit, because the "the Spirit belongs to the future"[31] and "is given to make God's future real in the present."[32]

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[29] Patrick Keifert and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *How Change Comes to Your Church: A Guidebook for Church Innovations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 38.

[30] Harder, *Discovering the Other,* 78-80.

[31] Ted Peters, *God--the World's Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 480.

[32] Tom Wright, "The Holy Spirit in the Church," (https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/the-holy-spirit-in-the-church-fulcrum-conference-address, April 29, 2005), accessed March 24, 2023.

This claim—that the Holy Spirit is God's future in our present—is widely represented in contemporary pneumatologies, but is perhaps no more robustly articulated than in Ted Peters' systematic theology text, *God: The World's Future.* In his landmark work, Peters lays out a "proleptic" account of creation and new creation, writing,

> God creates continually and will not finish this creative work until the creation is consummated in the eschaton. God is the world's future. The destiny of all things in God's future determines what they are today… My hypothesis, then, is the following principle of proleptic creation: God creates from the future, not the past… God is continuing to bestow upon us a future, even at this very moment. It is the continuing divine work of future-giving that is the source of life and being… Hence, I suggest we think of God's creative activity as a pull from the future rather than a push from the past.[33]

In other words, our past and present are defined by God's future; all of creation is being drawn into the eschatological life of God. Just as every step in the preparation and baking of a pie is defined by the finished product, all of God's creation is defined by its culmination.[34] "God's final future takes the form of the new creation," Peters summarizes, "symbolized in the New Testament as the Kingdom of God."[35]

The Holy Spirit is vital to this proleptic task as "the eschatological power by which the present age will be transformed into the kingdom of God;"[36] God's future becomes present and accessible through the ongoing creative work of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit," Peters writes, "has a special relationship to the future because the work of the Spirit is tied so closely to creation and

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[33] Peters, *God--the World's Future*, 252-278.

[34] Ibid., 280.

[35] Ibid., 91.

[36] Ibid., 480.

new creation."[37] Furthermore, as the Spirit breathed into humanity at our genesis and poured out on all flesh at Pentecost, the Spirit draws us into God's in-breaking future right now: "The Spirit makes the future present, thus, binding us to the new creation yet to come."[38] "Thus," Peters concludes, "the Spirit belongs to the future, to the transformed future."[39]

Of course, Peters is not the first or last theologian to identify the Spirit as the presence of God's future. In the same year Peters' work was first published, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann—whose pneumatological contributions will receive more attention further below—wrote, "If the present experience of the Spirit is understood as the presence here and now of the coming new creation of all things, then—conversely—the new creation of all things is conceived as the completion of that which is already experienced here and now."[40] British missiologist Lesslie Newbigin likewise observed that "The Spirit brings the reality of the new world to come into the midst of the old world that is... [The Spirit is] the recognizable presence of a future that has been promised but is not yet in sight."[41] More recently, Finnish theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen described the Holy Spirit as "the power of the eschatological renewal and consummation, the new creation."[42] As the "pledge" or "down payment" of God's promised

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[37] Ibid., 479.

[38] Ibid., 476.

[39] Ibid., 480.

[40] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 74.

[41] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 63.

[42] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 59.

inheritance,[43] the Holy Spirit draws God's future into our present, and draws us into God's future.

This proleptic vision of pneumatology thus shapes not only our description of who the Spirit *is*, but also what the Spirit *does.* Again, Peters is most helpful in describing this proleptic activity of the Spirit, writing,

> [The Spirit] makes both the Christ of yesterday and the kingdom of tomorrow present today… [making] the past work of Jesus Christ present to faith, and [making] the future fulfillment of God's kingdom present to hope…In hope, the Spirit illumines our consciousness with visions of God's future, with the freeing confidence that the divine promises will attain fulfillment… As the power of the future, the third person of the Trinity is that force that breaks open the present, releases it from the grip of the past, and draws it toward the fulfillment of the past's noble promises.[44]

This picture of the Spirit as the power of the future breaking open the present—making the kingdom of tomorrow present today—helps to define the role of the Spirit in the mission of God, to which we now turn.

The Spirit on Mission

If God works from the future drawing all things into their culmination in new creation, then the mission of God can be described as the in-breaking of God's future, and the Holy Spirit can be defined as the primary actor in the *missio Dei.* Newbigin draws this connection between the proleptic work of the Spirit and the mission of God, writing that the Spirit's spanning of "the gulf that yet yawns between the consummation for which we long and our actual life here"

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[43] 2 Cor.1:22, 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14.

[44] Peters, *God--the World's Future*, 471-506.

indicates "the fundamental interconnection of the eschatological and missionary elements" of God's life.[45]

Evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock more robustly establishes the link between proleptic pneumatology and missional theology, writing,

> Creation is not finished yet. Spirit has it on the track of new creation… Bringing creation to its goal is the main task of the Spirit… Spirit is the creative ground of all new possibilities. It is God that gives the world a future and the Spirit that brings it to pass… Mission is a Spirit event.[46]

Building on the work of Peters, Moltmann, and several other pneumatologists, Pinnock offers an approachable theology of the Spirit as the one "who bonds the loving fellowship that God is and… reaches out to creatures, catches them up and brings them home to the love of God."[47] As such, the Holy Spirit is best understood both as "a *person*, taking initiative and doing things,"[48] and as "the *power* that brings God's plans into effect, as a gentle but powerful presence, communicating the divine energies in the world and aiming at increasing levels of participating in the fellowship of love."[49] As both divine person and power, the Spirit functions as the primary actor in God's mission; since the *missio Dei* is a "Spirit event," it is rightly defined primarily as

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[45] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 53.

[46] Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 58-70, 142.

[47] Ibid., 21.

[48] Ibid., 28.

[49] Ibid., 28, 60-61, italics mine.

"God's mission, not ours."[50] Missiologist David Bosch further clarifies this description of mission as "an attribute of God," writing, "Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world: the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission... There is church because there is mission, not vice versa."[51]

Because it is the Spirit who initiates and actuates this movement of God to the world, the Spirit can be described as working "everywhere in advance of the church's mission," enabling "the church to participate in God's mission of mending creation and making all things new."[52] By centering mission on the presence and activity of the Spirit, Pinnock places the church "at the disposal of the Spirit," thereby insisting that it is "essential that if the church is to go forward in mission, it be open to the Spirit's leading."[53] The missional work of the Holy Spirit both precedes and defines the activity of the church. Thus, the missional identity of any congregation hinges on attentiveness and responsiveness to—and participation in—the ongoing activity of the Spirit.

In short, mission is first and foremost a practice of pneumatological discernment. British theologian Kirsteen Kim defines mission as "finding out where the Holy Spirit is at work and joining in."[54] This understanding of mission as a Spirit event "makes discerning the presence and activity of the Spirit of Christ the first act of mission, and so mission becomes a form of

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[50] Ibid., 142.

[51] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 390.

[52] Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 192, 142.

[53] Ibid., 142, 220.

[54] Kirsteen Kim, "The Spirit of Mission and the Mission of the Spirit: Affirming and Discerning," Presented at the Thomas H. Olbricht Christian Scholar's Conference, Lipscomb University (2022): 11.

spirituality—discerning life and love, affirming life and joining in with love, wherever they coincide."[55] In his exploration of Acts as a "Spirit ecclesiology" in which "[t]he church lives by and in the power of the Holy Spirit," Mark Love similarly centers the missional identity of the church on the presence and activity of the Spirit.[56] Because the "church will find itself drawn into the mission of God only through the power of the Holy Spirit,"[57] the capacity "to be attentive to the Spirit and obedient to the calling of God" is vital to the church's ability to embrace God's future.[58] Rather than "building oars to propel the boat under our own power," Love calls congregations to hoist their "sails to receive the empowering wind of the Holy Spirit."[59] Kärkkäinen agrees, citing James Dunn as he writes, "[I]f Christian mission is *missio Dei*, then 'mission amounts to participating in the mission of God carried out by the Spirit,' which of course demands that we be able at least tentatively to recognize the Spirit of God." [60]

This ability to recognize the Spirit drives Pinnock's missiology:

> The shape of empowered mission is not arrived at ideologically or even pragmatically. In mission we ask not just "Is this action good and necessary?" We also ask, "Where is God leading? Is this God's undertaking?" There are no rules and regulations for mission, because Spirit leadership is central. Mission is not social work but deeds directed and empowered by the Spirit… The church lives out its witness in concrete historical

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[55] Kim, "The Spirit of Mission," 11.

[56] Mark Love, *It Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us: Acts, Discernment, and the Mission of God* (Unpublished manuscript, 2023), 13.

[57] Ibid., 209.

[58] Ibid., 209.

[59] Ibid., 52.

[60] Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, 173.

> situations, waiting for God to lead. There is a role for thinking about what to do next, but this thinking should be always done in the context of waiting on God.[61]

As we respond to Spirit leadership in contexts of waiting, we are formed and reformed for mission, because—as numerous ecclesiologists have observed—congregational change comes "by the leadership of the Holy Spirit,"[62] by "learning to truly listen and trust the Spirit's movement in our context."[63] However, this waiting and listening is not limited to the confines of the church and the congregation. As Kim points out, "(Mission) is about discovering what God is doing in the world by discerning the life-giving and loving work of the Spirit and seeking to do it with the Lord. It is not only having a spirit of mission to go to the ends of the earth but about participating in the Holy Spirit's holistic work in the world."[64] For this reason, missional participation necessarily draws our attention outward to the activity of the Spirit beyond the church.

The Spirit Beyond the Church

To identify the Holy Spirit as the primary agent of God's mission is to affirm the presence and activity of the Spirit outside the boundaries of the church. "Focusing on the agency of the Holy Spirit," Kim writes, "(points us)… to a wider understanding of the mission of the Spirit, who is not only present and active in the church or mission agency but also in other people, and

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[61] Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 145-146.

[62] Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson, *How Change Comes,* 97.

[63] Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 119.

[64] Kim, "The Spirit of Mission," 11-12.

more broadly in the world."[65] Drawing from John Wesley's concept of prevenience, Kim illustrates the way missiological claims about the Spirit both preceding the church in mission and bringing about conversion necessitates that "the work of the Holy Spirit must be wider than the church or Christian community."[66] Most fundamentally, however, Kim roots her assertions about the extra-ecclesial presence of the Spirit in the Nicene Creed's description of the Spirit as "the Lord and Giver of Life," writing,

> Such a description of the Holy Spirit moves beyond an anthropocentric and ecclesiocentric understanding of the Holy Spirit, who serves us and the church only, toward a proper recognition that, with the Father and Son, the Spirit is engaged in the recreation of everything—the remaking not only of Christians but also the whole of humanity and the cosmos. This vision then enables us to reach out to others outside the church and, whether or not they choose to come in and join us, to appreciate them, their culture, faith, and way of life because we believe that the Holy Spirit is working in their lives as well. We are able to affirm "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable" (Phil 4:8) no matter where we find it, knowing that all goodness is from God in Christ by the Spirit.[67]

Clark Pinnock makes a similar claim about this Nicene phrase, connecting it to the proleptic mission of the Spirit:

> This phrase ("Lord and giver of life") calls on us to think of Spirit as active in the world and history, especially in its development and consummation. The universe in its entirety is the field of its operations... And the Spirit is present everywhere, directing the universe toward its goal, bringing to completion first the creational and then the redemptive purposes of God. Spirit is involved in implementing both creation and new creation.[68]

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[65] Ibid., 4.

[66] Ibid., 3.

[67] Ibid., 5.

[68] Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 50.

In these assertions, Kim and Pinnock both seem to build on the foundation laid in Jürgen Moltmann's *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation.*[69] By presenting the Spirit as "the wellspring of life,"[70] Moltmann roots his pneumatology in "the personal and shared experience of the Spirit… as an awareness of God in with and beneath the experience of life."[71] Because the Holy Spirit pours out the life of God into every corner of creation, filling the earth with divine life,[72] the Spirit opens up the "possibility of perceiving God in all things, and all things in God."[73] For Moltmann, however, this panentheistic[74] pneumatology is rooted not in a vague universality of the Spirit, but in the particularity of Christ crucified:

> [T]he foundation and justification for the panentheistic vision of the world in God (is)… the knowledge of the crucified God… [U]nder the cross the vision comes into being of God in all things—all things in God. If we believe that God is present in the God-forsakenness of the crucified Christ, we see him everywhere.[75]

The Spirit present in all of creation is the Spirit of Christ.

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[69] Pinnock cites Moltmann directly; Kim does not, though her work is undeniably a more recent contribution to the pneumatological conversation engaged by Moltmann.

[70] Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 35.

[71] Ibid., 17.

[72] Ibid., 177.

[73] Ibid., 35.

[74] Throughout this paper, I employ an understanding of panentheism that describes God as present in all things, and describes all things as existing within God. In this, I am most nearly following Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's definition of "classical panentheism," a view that imagines a "close link between the Creator and created reality" without conflating the identities of God and world. Because "God's essential presence [is] everywhere in creation," the "God-world" relationship can be described as "mutually relational and dynamic" without embracing a theology of God-in-creation that is neither exclusively immanentist nor exclusively transcendent. In this, the panentheism embraced in this project differs significantly from pantheism (imagining God *as* everything and everything *as* God) and from more "radical panentheism[s] in which the world is conceived as the body of God." Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015) 78-79.

[75] Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 212-213.

The centrality of Christ in Moltmann's panentheism does not, however, render the church similarly central. While the Christian community is vital to Moltmann's view of the Spirit's mission,

> [The] fellowship between people which is the work of the Spirit reaches beyond the church; it fills the church, but takes us beyond its frontiers… [The church] exists wholly in its receptivity for the Spirit's coming, for the influence of its energies and the radiance of its light. That makes Christianity alive to the operation of the Holy Spirit *extra muros ecclesiae*—outside the church as well—and prepared to accept the life-furthering communities which people outside the church expect and experience. This does not mean that the church is giving itself up. It is simply opening itself for the wider operation of the Spirit in the world.[76]

The presence of the Spirit thus makes "life in the everyday world… just as important as the gathering of the congregation."[77] Because the Spirit is discoverable "in the encounter with others" and in "experience of our neighbor,"[78] Moltmann asserts that "the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit is experienced just as intensively in the homes to which people return when they leave church as it is in the church."[79]

One of Moltmann's students, German theologian Michael Welker, also affirms the presence of the Spirit beyond the church, though by very different means than his mentor. Surveying the diverse testimonies of the Spirit's work found in scripture, Welker lays out a "realistic theology"

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[76] Ibid., 230-231.

[77] Ibid., 235.

[78] Ibid., 220.

[79] Ibid., 235.

of the Spirit that prizes the concrete particularity of varied experiences of the Spirit.[80] According to Welker,

> the Spirit leads into God's presence in the midst of creaturely life. In the midst of creaturely life, the presence of God makes itself accessible to experience. In this way what is fleshly and perishable, what is fixed on the relative earthly world particular to it, what is defined by and dependent on its relative earthly world, is initiated into a more comprehensive reality.[81]

This commitment to the presence of the Spirit in the midst of creaturely life leads Welker to assert that "Real fleshly life is enabled by the Spirit and in the Spirit to be the place where God's glory is made present… Through the Spirit and from the Spirit, earthly, frail, and perishable life… becomes the domain where God is made present."[82] By emphasizing the Spirit's particularity over the Spirit's universality, Welker thus deepens our understanding of the Spirit's presence beyond the church, while also calling us again to attentiveness to and dependency on the Spirit. "The Spirit of God helps human beings to perceive God in the midst of creation," he writes, "to experience God under the conditions of earthly life relations."[83]

Pinnock embraces a similarly panentheistic[84] pneumatology, writing,

> The Spirit is present everywhere, both transcending and enfolding all that is, present and at work in the vast range of happenings in the universe. The Spirit meets people not only in religious spheres but every-where-in the natural world, in the give-and-take of

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[80] Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 46.

[81] Ibid., 324-325.

[82] Ibid., 330-331.

[83] Ibid., 334.

[84] Pinnock is intentional about differentiating his understanding of the Spirit's presence from pantheism that imagines everything *as* God: "God is not the world and the world is not God, yet God is in the world and the world is in him. Because he is at the heart of things, it is possible to encounter God in, with and beneath life's experiences." Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 61.

> relationships, in the systems that structure human life. No nook or cranny is untouched by the finger of God.[85]

For this reason, he is particularly critical of Christian theology's tendency to "dimin[ish] the Spirit's activities to much smaller proportions, in effect marginalizing the Spirit to the realm of church and piety."[86] Reaffirming the agency and personhood of the Spirit, he goes on to write, "[T]he Spirit is present not as a vague power sustaining the world but as the Spirit of the triune God... The power of love is at work everywhere in the world, not just in the churches."[87] However, Pinnock also helpfully highlights the unique calling of the church in the Spirit's mission:

> Although the Spirit is omnipresent and not confined to the church, Spirit's presence in the [Christian] community is highly significant… Though present everywhere, Spirit can be more effectively present among those who know the risen Lord, can work there with greater intensity promoting human renewal.[88]

In other words, the activity of the Spirit beyond the church does not render the church irrelevant, but rather draws the church beyond itself to discover and join in the ongoing work of the Spirit in all of creation.

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[85] Ibid., 187.

[86] Ibid., 49.

[87] Ibid., 51-52.

[88] Ibid., 116.

Discovering and Discerning the Spirit

Outlining a comparably "robust trinitarian panentheism" that prioritizes "the living, dynamic, creative presence of the Creator in the world,"[89] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen affirms that the Holy Spirit "is not content only to work in Christian spheres, but is active also in political, religious, intellectual, and secular environments."[90] In this way, the Spirit can be described as a "public person."[91] That said, this naming of the Spirit in/as public adds additional complexity to the task of identifying—and joining—the Spirit's activity, as Kärkkäinen attests:

> The widening of the sphere of the Spirit, however, introduces a further challenge, namely, the need to discern the spirits, as the work of the Spirit in history and the world is often ambiguous. Although ambiguity applies also to the Spirit's work within the church, it is still more intense outside…The discernment of the Spirit in history and world events is always contested, and the results are provisional.[92]

This Spirit may be *in* all things, but not all things are *of* the Spirit;[93] discovering the work of the Spirit requires practices of discernment, especially in the unfamiliar and pluralistic spaces

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[89] Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, 72.

[90] Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, 72. As he develops his own proleptic pneumatology, Ted Peters makes a similar claim, writing: "[T]he Spirit of God is present throughout the cosmic process. The divine Spirit is not the private possession of the historic Christian churches" Peters, *God--the World's Future*, 513.

[91] Here Kärkkäinen draws on a phrase coined by Welker. It is important to note that for Welker, the Spirit as a "public person" is defined by personhood in "diverse webs of relationships" Welker, *God the Spirit,* 213ff. The emphasis here is not on the publicly-available presence of the Spirit—though that is inferred!—but on the sociality that marks the life and activity of the Spirit.

[92]Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, 183-184.

[93] By firmly maintaining "divine transcendence" alongside God's "robust presence and activity" in the world, Kärkkäinen's "classical panentheism" thus sidesteps the oft-criticized pitfalls of many other panentheistic proposals that struggle to differentiate between God and God's good-but-damaged creation Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 78-79. To affirm God's presence in all the world is not to claim that God is all one finds in the world. The Spirit is everywhere, but the Spirit is not the only person/power at work in our spaces.

beyond the church's walls.[94] This reality presents not a cause for despair, however, but an invitation into curiosity and collaboration. "The ambiguity [of discerning the Spirit's work outside the church] also bears a positive aspect," Kärkkäinen notes, "as it brings the church and world together in a dialectic of mutual learning and correction."[95] The necessity for discernment need not shut us down, but rather draws us *out* and *together.* Thanks to the insight of companions within and beyond the church—not to mention the self-revelation of the Spirit—we are never alone in our journey of discovery.

Nor are we without criteria for naming the Spirit's presence. Because the Spirit is "the Spirit of Christ" and Jesus is "the Christ of the Spirit"—because "Christ (is) an aspect of the Spirit's mission" as much as the "Spirit is a function of Christ's"[96]—the life of Christ offers an invaluable lens for discerning the activity of the Spirit. "[I]n a truly trinitarian framework," Kärkkäinen writes, "the discernment of the Spirit happens in an integral Christological environment… Christology is the most important source of criteriology."[97] Pinnock agrees, writing,

> The ways of God are admittedly hard to track, but movements of the Spirit in history can be seen because they are movements of the Spirit of Jesus. Because of him we know what

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[94] Kim concurs, writing, "By positing the Holy Spirit's presence and activity in all creation, I am not advocating a form of pantheism, in which God and the world are identical. The Holy Spirit, sent from the Father and through the Son, not only indwells the creation but also transcends it. The Spirit may potentially be everywhere and in everything but in fact parts of the world are under the power of evil and darkness. That is why the presence of the Spirit is not a given but needs to be carefully discerned" Kim, "The Spirit of Mission," 9.

[95] Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, 184.

[96] Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 80. For a fuller exploration of this "Spirit Christology" see 79ff.

[97] Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, 172-173.

> we are looking for, at least in a general way. Jesus, the light of the world, is the criterion for discerning Spirit.[98]

Although the limitations of the biblical testimony about Jesus also open Christology to subjectivity and ambiguity, certain markers of Jesus' life can be named with relative confidence. As Pinnock notes,

> [W]herever we see traces of Jesus in the world and people opening up to his ideals, we know we are in the presence of Spirit. Wherever, for example, we find self-sacrificing love, care about community, longings for justice, wherever people love one another, care for the sick, make peace not war, wherever there is beauty and concord, generosity and forgiveness, the cup of cold water, we know the Spirit of Jesus is present.[99]

For Kim, the "Spirit of Jesus" is discerned by two primary criteria: Life and Love. "The identification of the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ," she writes, "cements [the] connection between mission, life, and the practice of love."[100] In affirming "life" as a marker of the Spirit, Kim is in accord with the primary emphasis of Moltmann's *Spirit of Life,* in which the author posits that signs of the Spirit "are present wherever faith in God drives out these fears of life, and whenever the hope of resurrection overcomes the fear of death."[101] So, Kim asserts, "the work of the Spirit can be affirmed wherever life and the elements for life are found. By extension, the Holy Spirit is present and active where there is vitality, creativity, growth, and flourishing."[102] At the same time, Kim insists that "it is not enough to affirm life":

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[98] Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 211.

[99] Ibid., 209-210.

[100] Kim, "The Spirit of Mission," 11.

[101] Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 188.

[102] Kim, "The Spirit of Mission," 9.

> What is new in the New Testament is not the Spirit's connection to life—that is generic to the term spirit—but the Spirit's connection to Jesus. From a Christian point of view then, the Spirit who integrates the cosmos and gives us life is the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit of Jesus is discerned not only by life but also by other criteria.[103]

Chief among these other criteria is love, the bedrock of Jesus' life and mission. "The Spirit that exhibits both life and love is not merely a life force," Kim writes, "…but encourages relationships, sharing, kindness, mercy, self-giving, and so on."[104] Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff makes a similar claim: "Whenever in history we encounter driving forces that build up love, that conciliate where differences live together in harmony, there we discern the ineffable presence of the Holy Spirit's action."[105]

Even a Christocentric emphasis on "life and love" can be unhelpfully ambiguous, however. To protect against such a "numinous and opaque" definition of the "Spirit of Christ," Welker provides a detailed list of the Spirit's *concrete* activity in the ministry of Jesus:

> [T]he Spirit of Christ is a power that:
> - brings help in various forms of individually and communally experienced powerlessness, captivity, and entrapment;
> - in total selflessness and without public means of power thus gathers people to the universal, emergent public of the reign of God;
> - acts as the Spirit of deliverance from human distress and sin, and the Spirit of the restoration of both solidarity and the capacity for communal action;
> - acts as the Spirit of preservation in the midst of ongoing affliction in the most varied contexts of life;
> - transforms and renews people and orders, and opens people to God's creative action
> - persistently works toward the universal establishment of justice, mercy, and knowledge of God in strict reciprocal interconnections;
> - grants authority to the person who is publicly powerless, suffering, and despised;

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[103] Ibid., "The Spirit of Mission," 10.

[104] Ibid., "The Spirit of Mission," 11.

[105] Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 94.

- extends beyond imperialistic monocultures and the condition of being tied to a particular situation and time, and makes possible the prophetic community of experience and of testimony of women and men, old and young persons, ruling and oppressed persons;
- enlists the services of this finite and perishable community, and changes and renews it in order to make God's power of creation and of new creation manifest and effective through and for this community.[106]

Even a list as robust and specific as this is admittedly incomplete; Welker provides numerous additional lists of the Spirit's activity found throughout the biblical narrative. In doing so, Welker insists on a diversity of pneumatological experiences, each of which stands as a signpost of "God's inexhaustible power and presence, extending beyond specific times and situations, becoming recognizable in a manner that can be both experienced and described."[107] The life and love of Jesus then serve not as a bounded set of criteria for discerning the Spirit, but as the center from which an inexhaustible list of Spirit experiences emerge.

The proleptic vision of the Spirit highlighted at the beginning of this chapter provides yet another framework for naming experiences as the work of the Spirit. Because the Spirit is "the recognizable presence of a future that has been promised,"[108] any foretaste of the eschatological kingdom can be identified as a creation of the Spirit. As N.T. Wright notes, "the Spirit comes to us from [the unexpected world of God's new creation], the world waiting to be born, the world in which, according to the old prophets, peace and justice will flourish, and the wolf and the lamb

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[106] Welker, *God the Spirit,* 220-221.

[107] Ibid., *God the Spirit*, 157.

[108] Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 63.

will lie down side by side."[109] For this reason, every eschatological image also doubles as a criterion for discerning the Spirit. As Peters writes,

> Because we understand the work of the Spirit to anticipate proleptically the consummate future by drawing us into the processes of integration and unification in the present, we must recognize and affirm the presence of the Spirit wherever the fruits of the future kingdom are discerned—peace, justice, reconciliation, healing, integrity—both inside and outside the church.[110]

Wherever we encounter concrete expressions of the life and love of the age to come—the kingdom inaugurated and incarnated in Jesus—we may, at least tentatively, name the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Summary

As this brief pneumatological survey has highlighted, the presence of the Spirit is both vital for and discernible by any church longing to discern its future. As the presence of God's future and the agent of God's mission, the Holy Spirit invites congregations to join in God's ongoing activity beyond the walls of their churches and imaginations. By joining others in attending to the emergence of life, love, and new creation in the concrete experiences of everyday life, we encounter the Holy Spirit and are drawn into God's mission. As I will outline in the following section, this pneumatological foundation thus invites us to rediscover our neighborhoods—in all their particularity—as arenas of the Spirit's activity, theological discovery, and missional formation.

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[109] Wright, "The Holy Spirit."

[110] Peters, *God--the World's Future*, 513.

The Neighborhood

Churches and Neighborhoods

Recent years have seen an influx of Christian reflection on the particularity of place, and specifically about the importance of neighborhood in the life of a church. In the words of Tim Soerens, "The only viable and enduring form of Christian witness is a community living in a particular place."[111] David Leong, author of *Race & Place*, likewise argues that "[P]lace matters and is not a secondary consideration in the Christian life. Discipleship always gets worked out in our geography."[112] While these and numerous similar assertions tend to prefer the language of "place" and "parish," each of these claims apply just as well to neighborhoods. Australian minister Simon Holt makes this connection explicit: "God's call is a call to place… the call of God is to be in a particular place and there to embody the presence and grace of God. It's a call to locality. Quite simply, it's a call to the neighbourhood."[113]

These contemporary theologies of place are often rooted in the biblical narrative. Because the story of scripture is the narrative of "God's interaction with the physical world"—from the soil of Creation, to the fleshliness of the Incarnation, to the particularity of the Spirit-filled congregations in increasingly diverse locations—"it's hard to fathom a Christian theology that

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[111] Tim Soerens, *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020), 15. Soerens' coauthors of *The New Parish* likewise join him in centering their proposal for congregational change on "shar[ing] life together in a particular place." Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, *The New Parish,* 22.

[112] David Leong, *Race and Place: How Urban Geography Shapes the Journey to Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 112. Civil rights icon John Perkins agrees, writing, "If the church is going to offer some real good news in broken communities, it has to be committed to a place!" Charles Marsh and John M. Perkins, *Welcoming Justice: God's Movement Toward Beloved Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 114.

[113] Simon Carey Holt, *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighborhood* (Victoria, Australia: Acorn, 2007), 87.

does not treat the neighbourhood as significant."[114] In this, Holt agrees with Walter Brueggemann, whose seminal work *The Land* asserted that "[l]and is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith."[115] Eugene Peterson concurs:

> In the Christian imagination, where you live gets equal billing with what you believe. Geography and theology are biblical bedfellows… Everything that the creator God does, and therefore everything that we do, since we are his creatures and can hardly do anything in any other way, is in place.[116]

This emerging theological reflection on place is more than a mere "academic exercise," however; it is essential for Christian practice.[117] The particularity of these place-based theologies are especially vital for overcoming the church's tendency for abstraction. "Universal ideas cannot be the good news that the concrete testimony of a particular people at a particular time can well be," writes missional theologian Darrell Guder.[118] Sociologist James Davison Hunter concurs, writing that God "does not speak through empty abstractions or endless circumlocutions. Rather, in every instance, God's word was enacted and enacted in a particular place and time in history."[119]

Parker Palmer makes a similar point, in two stages. He begins by warning against a private, disembodied gospel by calling the church to "incarnate its life in public," writing,

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[114] Holt, *God Next Door*, 93.

[115] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith, 2nd Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 3, emphasis in original.

[116] Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003), 9.

[117] Leong, *Race and Place*, 29.

[118] Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 29.

[119] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 240.

> [T]he church preaches a vision of human unity which means very little if not acted out in the public realm… [T]he public life is not incidental to the church's agenda, not an option for Christians who feel so called, but central to our life in the Spirit.[120]

Palmer then shifts his attention to address the abstraction inherit to any Christian practice that seeks to engage some vague and universal "public:"

> The neighborhood is [an] important setting for the public life… The public as a whole is simply too large, too abstract, for the individual to identify with and respond to. A small world like the neighborhood gives the public a human face, a human scale.[121]

The smallness of the neighborhood's world provides an invaluable context for making concrete what is often otherwise intangible; both mission and love of neighbor are nothing more than "noble idea[s] apart from… the tangible challenges of a particular place in which to live [them]."[122] A missional commitment to share in "God's dreams" and "follow the Spirit" thus requires "a shared geography to move us from an abstract idea to a very real dare."[123] The real, concrete mission of God in history dissipates into propositional triviality without the tangible specificity of place.

Unfortunately, embracing this "sense of place as the exclusive and irreplaceable setting for following Jesus" can be quite difficult for many North Americans.[124] In *The New Parish*,

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[120] Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians & the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 23, 32.

[121] Ibid., 39.

[122] Holt, *God Next Door*, 87.

[123] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look,* 69.

[124] Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 9.

Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen identify a primary challenge to this neighborhood-based[125] faith as the myth of "living above place:"

> 'Living above place' names the tendency to develop structures that keep cause-and-effect relationships far apart in space and time where we cannot have firsthand experience of them… Not only does living above place disconnect you from the effects of your actions, it enables you to concoct visions regarding the welfare of others without ever being in relationship with them.[126]

Living above place thus undercuts Christian love of neighbor; to settle for "a placeless faith is to render theology impotent to address the real struggles of ordinary people in the here and now."[127] Hunter links this placelessness to a recent historic shift toward disembodiment, noting that, while "body and location were [once] inextricably connected to experience," today "neither matters as much as they once did… presence and place simply matter less."[128] This devaluing of presence and place has made a devastating impact on both our churches and our neighborhoods. It has produced "homogenous and consumer-oriented" churches.[129] It has created the injustice-sustaining "illusion that we are passive, neutral consumers of place."[130] It has robbed us of "our

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[125] Although the authors favor the word "parish" over "neighborhood," their definition of parish mirrors this project's use of the word neighborhood: "When the word parish is used in this book it refers to all the relationships (including the land) where the local church lives out its faith together. It is a unique word that recalls a geography large enough to live life together (live, work, play, etc.) and small enough to be known as a character within it." Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 23.

[126] Ibid., *The New Parish*, 23-25.

[127] Holt, *God Next Door*, 93.

[128] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 238-239. Hunter's subsequent observations about the role of communication technologies in cultivating this disembodiment are especially poignant in the post-pandemic world: "[W]hen one can communicate with anyone at anytime from anywhere and to anywhere—whether through a cell phone, the Internet, or some other technology—… [c]onsciousness, experience, identity, physical presence, and the landscape around us, in short, are disembodied."

[129] Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, *The New Parish,* 25.

[130] Leong, *Race and Place*, 67.

humanity in terms of our bodies," our "understanding [of] how connected we are to the land, the earth, and the places that actually make us fully human," and our sense of the "the holistic nature of what it means to be Christian in and for the world."[131] It is no wonder, then, that—in his conclusion to *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*— theologian Willie James Jennings issues a strong warning about "the grotesque nature of a social performance of Christianity that imagines Christian identity floating above land, landscape, animals, place, and space."[132] The myth of placelessness is the soil from which all kinds of evil emerge, a symptom and sustainer of the power of sin and death.

Thankfully, there is today a chorus of voices calling for the recovery of place as central to participation in God's mission. For instance, Guder argues that "[t]he gospel is always to be embodied by the people of God in a particular place. The sent-out community is sent out into the specific context in which it is located."[133] Because mission is attending to and joining in the life of God in the world, churches must thus "learn how to recognize God's faithful presence in the neighborhood," writes pastor and ecclesiologist David Fitch.[134] Absent a "focused place to listen, we cannot have a focused place to discern and act on what the Spirit is doing in that place."[135] Without the particularity of a shared neighborhood, churches lack the concrete context necessary

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[131] Ibid., 62.

[132] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 293.

[133] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion,* 148.

[134] David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 25.

[135] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, 29, 49.

for answering the question, "What might the Spirit be doing, and how can we join in?" "The hopes and ideas and longings of our very particular places," Soerens writes, "are where these questions about what God is up to take on literal shape."[136] Missional participation requires a neighborhood.

Hunter describes this missional participation as "faithful presence within" a particular place.[137] Building on Hunter's proposal, Hagley calls for churches' "perduring presence" in their community, writing,

> I suggest the congregation participates in God's mission by cultivating a particular kind of enduring presence within the neighborhood. Presence—understood as availability to, dwelling among, and solidarity with—is both the means and the ends of congregational mission.[138]

In shifting the focus of mission from "changing the world to dwelling faithfully in it," Hagley highlights the reality that the "congregation does not complete projects on behalf of God, but rather is moved by God with others and in the neighborhood."[139] Because "Christian mission takes place somewhere," the missional call of the congregation is "to attend to a place, and to witness to the gospel in that place."[140]

This neighborhood-centered missional identity is vital both for the wellbeing of the neighborhood and for that of the church. Urbanist and pastor Eric Jacobsen centers his writing on

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[136] Ibid., 64.

[137] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 237.

[138] Hagley, *Eat What is Set*, 164.

[139] Ibid., 25-26.

[140] Ibid., 26.

attentiveness to the former, likening the stewardship of a neighborhood to the stewardship of creation, inviting us to apply the "mandate to preserve and care for [creation]… to our built environment (just as) with our natural environment."[141] In calling churches to "more effectively become good neighbors" by "deeply study[ing] and understand[ing] their own context" in order to better grasp "what their neighborhood is like,"[142] these emerging neighborhood ecclesiologies highlight new avenues for "restoring and remaking places of trauma into communities of peace."[143] In this way, attentive proximity to the lived experiences of our neighbors is essential to joining in God's restorative work. As Michelle Warren notes, "Knowing about pain and injustice from a distance is simply not enough to do anything of substance," but "[p]roximity changes our perspective and broadens our vision:"

> [Proximity] transforms your view of the bigger world and the people moving about in it. Most importantly, it transforms you in all the ways that are necessary to help you take part in God's process of redeeming and rebuilding what is broken… [W]e the church must move together toward a proximate, informed response that moves toward the alleviation of injustice.[144]

For this reason, faithful presence is vital to the health and renewal of our neighborhoods.

That said, neighborhood life is equally vital to the health and renewal of our congregations. As Holt observes, "neighbourhoods are as important to the life and nature of the

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[141] Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 68.

[142] Mulder, *Congregations, Neighborhoods, Places*, 19, 30.

[143] Leong, *Race and Place*, 116.

[144] Michelle Ferrigno Warren, *The Power of Proximity: Moving Beyond Awareness to Action,* Kindle Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVaristy, 2017), loc 80.

faith community as the local church is to the long-term well-being of the neighbourhood."[145] Because a congregation is both called to and formed in its particular place, "the church is most true to its nature and mission when it lives with and for the world on its doorstep."[146] This is why Hagley claims that "the identity of a congregation cannot be discerned apart from the contributions of neighbor;" "if the congregation will bear witness to the gospel among this people in this place," he writes, "it must allow the peculiarities of people and place a constructive voice."[147] Churches have no meaningful identity without commitment and attentiveness to their neighborhoods. However we approach our neighborhoods, "the one thing we must not do is ignore them. We must figure out how to work out our discipleship to Christ in the specific context of our [neighborhoods]."[148]

The Neighborhood as the Arena of the Spirit's Activity

Many of the sources cited above root their call to the neighborhood in a theology of the Incarnation. The most common foundation for a renewed commitment to place seems to be centered on the fact not just that God became flesh, but that God became *particular* flesh in a *particular* place. Holt summarizes this position effectively, writing,

> [T]he Incarnation is about much more than God revealed in human experience, but God revealed and encountered in place—and in the most domestic of places one can imagine.

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[145] Holt, *God Next Door*, 97.

[146] Ibid., 98.

[147] Hagley, *Eat What is Set,* 237.

[148] Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 67.

> It was not just God's initiative to enter into my flesh and my experience, but to enter into the places of my daily life, neighbourhood included.[149]

This incarnational foundation thus gives birth to an incarnational approach to neighborhood engagement, a call to "[a]llow the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ to form your imagination for faithful presence."[150]

I appreciate this approach for its grounding of all place-based ministry in the identity and activity of God; because particularly-in-place is what God is and does in Jesus, we can rightly expect God's ongoing mission to center on particularity-in-place. At the same time, I find the Incarnation to be an insufficient—and even dangerous—foundation for a missional call to neighborhood. When limited to the historical event of Jesus' temporal embodiment, an incarnational approach to mission can become a mere emulation of the methods of Jesus, instead of an ongoing discernment and participation in God's life. At its most unhealthy, this posture can produce a self-understanding that imagines the church *as Jesus* in the neighborhood—rather than *as partners* with God and neighbor—leading to a variety of misguided and even harmful practices. As Leong notes, "incarnational work, however well-intentioned, may be more messianic than [intended]... an approach loaded with ethnocentrism and cultural superiority that can completely undermine the genuine desire and good intentions."[151] What is needed, I believe, is a theology of place that moves beyond exemplary Christology towards a more participatory

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[149] Holt, *God Next Door*, 93. Hunter makes a similar claim ("In all, presence and place mattered decisively. Nowhere is this more evident than in the incarnation." Hunter, *To Change the World*, 240); as does Fitch (Fitch, *Faithful Presence,* 34), and the authors of *The New Parish* ("the incarnation of God demonstrates your missional calling to live into time and place." Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, *The New Parish,* 26).

[150] Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, 46.

[151] Leong, *Race and Place*, 122.

pneumatology. Alongside our theology of incarnation, we need a theology of the Spirit in the neighborhood.

Fortunately, much of what was outlined in the previous half of this chapter applies especially well to the neighborhood. Moltmann's universal affirmation of the Spirit "in, with and beneath the experience of life"[152] combines with Welker's concrete attestation of the Spirit "in the midst of creaturely life…in what is fleshly and perishable… [and] particular"[153] to highlight the presence of the Spirit in *every* and *each* neighborhood. Everything that has been said about the particularity-in-place of the incarnation can also be said of the Holy Spirit. Because the Spirit "assumes the place of the 'fleshly' physical-finite presence of Jesus in the world," the Spirit makes Christ "present in many experiential contexts in an authentic and concentrated manner."[154] The Spirit is God-made-particular, again and anew in every neighborhood.

This Spirit "already at work" in "our everyday places," can thus be described as the "central character" in each of "our particular places."[155] This reality drives Fitch to name his "local McDonald's as the arena of God's Spirit at work," and to claim that

> every neighborhood, coffee shop, community center, Black Lives Matter protest march, YMCA, workplace, racial reconciliation village hall meeting, prison, city hall, homeless shelter, MOPS group, labor union hall, and hospital is a potential arena of God's presence.[156]

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[152] Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 35.

[153] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 324-325.

[154] Ibid., 222-233.

[155] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, 45.

[156] Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 12.

This language of "God's presence" is helpfully clarified by Moltmann's identification of the Holy Spirit with the Hebrew biblical concept of the Shekinah, the "presence" or "glory" of God among God's people. "The Shekinah," Moltmann writes, "is the presence of God himself. But it is not God in his essential omnipresence. It is his special, willed and promised presence in the world. The Shekinah is God himself, present at a particular place and at a particular time."[157] I suggest a similar description of the Holy Spirit in our neighborhoods; the Spirit is God's self present in our particular place and time. The Spirit is not a mere abstract force or generic omnipresence, but the person of God moving and discoverable in the specific people, places, and experiences that comprise the life of the neighborhood.

Holt seems to work from a similar understanding of the Spirit as he repeatedly refers to the neighborhood of as "a place of God's presence"[158] and "a place of the Spirit;"[159] our "neighbourhood(s) and neighbourly relationships play host to the presence of God."[160] In its nearness and concreteness, the neighborhood can even be described as the place "where God's presence is most tangible" and thus "where the church is called to be."[161] Rather than imagining the church as the place the neighborhood encounters the Spirit, we are thus drawn to imagine the church encountering the Spirit in the neighborhood. Neighborhoods are sacred spaces; "If God is present in our neighbourhoods as much as God is present anywhere else," Holt concludes, "then

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[157] Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 48.

[158] Ibid., 84.

[159] Ibid., 102.

[160] Ibid., 84.

[161] Ibid., 99.

the neighbourhood is holy ground."[162] Peterson concurs, describing the "ordinary places where so many of us live" both as "holy sites" and as "gift-places."[163] Because the Holy Spirit is present, our neighborhoods are both holy and gifted.

The Neighborhood as an Abundant, Gifted Community

Any affirmation of our *neighborhood* as an area of the Spirit is also an affirmation of *neighbors* as a Spirit-gifted community of abundance. "[T]here is a ridiculous abundance of people, resources, ideas, and brilliance all around us," Soerens writes in his aptly-named *Everywhere You Look.* "This is almost assuredly true right where you live, right now… There's a dizzying amount of abundance hidden in plain sight."[164] Despite our persistent inability to notice, each of our neighborhoods is abundantly charismatic,[165] overflowing with God's gifts. Just as the Spirit is at work beyond the walls of the church, "Christians do not have the market cornered on being kind, generous, or loving. The fruits of the Spirit are on display in all sorts of people."[166] This in turn drives the church to "hunt not for 'what's wrong, but what is strong' in

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[162] Ibid., 122.

[163] Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 10.

[164] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, 61. In this, Soerens is in agreement with his co-authors of *The New Parish* who join him in writing that, because "the Spirit is at play in the neighborhood," "every person who has meaningful hopes for some aspect of the (neighborhood)… is a potential partner in the reconciliation and renewal." (Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, *The New Parish,* 143).

[165] I use charismatic here and throughout this paper exclusively in reference to the Spirit's provision of gifts or *charismata.*

[166] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, 101.

our neighborhoods,"[167] and to even "learn from [our neighbors]… as they teach us how to follow Jesus by their own examples."[168] In this way, the call of the church in the neighborhood is pneumatological celebration:

> When we see the fruit of the Spirit within our neighbors, when we see their passion for justice, when we see them creating beauty and hospitality, we should be the first to celebrate it… What if the Christians in the neighborhood became known for naming the gifts, strengths, and hopes of others? What if we got creative with how we champion and celebrate others?[169]

This abundance of spiritual fruit likewise leads Holt to claim that "the neighbourhood is a place for celebration, and one to be celebrated for all it provides."[170] It is a space in which the "gifts of God's grace are spread abundantly among the just and unjust in ways that support and enhance the lives of all."[171] "Talents and abilities," "knowledge, wisdom, and inventiveness," "goodness, truth, justice, morality, and beauty," are all, according to Hunter, "gifts of grace that are lavished on people whether Christian or not."[172] The uniqueness of the Christian community, it seems, lies less in our spiritual gifting, and more in our calling to identify, celebrate, and support every good gift of the Spirit, from wherever and whomever they may spring up.

This calling is also vital to Scott Hagley's *Eat What is Set Before You.* Borrowing the language of Luke 10, Hagley describes churches "eat[ing] what is set before them" as "learning

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[167] Ibid., 99.

[168] Ibid., 101-102.

[169] Ibid., 107-108.

[170] Holt, *God Next Door*, 125.

[171] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 232.

[172] Ibid.

to depend upon partners and the gifts of the neighborhood, joining the rhythms and wellbeing of their neighborhood, so that they might discern faithful Christian witness for this time and in this place."[173] This posture of dependency on neighbor opens up practices that allow churches "to discover and join the people of peace in the neighborhood, and to discern the good news of the gospel within this relational ecosystem."[174] In short, a congregation's ability to "participate in the mission of God" hinges on their willingness to "receive and recognize the gifts of God in Christ as they live in their respective neighborhoods."[175]

All of this lends additional theological credence to what proponents of asset-based community development have been observing for decades. Developed by John McKnight and John Kretzmann, asset-based community development is grounded in the idea that "the neighborhood is a treasure chest" of gifts and abundance.[176] For this reason, "[t]he key to neighborhood regeneration, then, is to locate all of the available local assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness."[177] Peter Block joins McKnight in insisting that, in partnering with our neighbors, we become "the architects of the

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[173] Hagley, *Eat What is Set*, 21.

[174] Ibid., 15.

[175] Ibid., 27.

[176] John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco, CA: Barrett-Koehler, 2010), 70.

[177] John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago, IL: ACTA, 1993), 5.

future that we want to live within. Such a future is made possible through the untapped abundance of every community, especially our own."[178]

The "tenets," "properties," and "capacities," of an abundant community outlined by McKnight and Block comport well with an affirmation of the Holy Spirit's presence and gifting in the neighborhood. Asserting that "[w]hat we have is enough," the authors call each neighborhood to "[f]ocus on the gifts of its members," including capacities such as "Kindness, Generosity, Cooperation, [and] Forgiveness"[179]—capacities that correlate to the biblical list of the fruit of the Spirit. Furthermore, the image of the Spirit in and among our neighbors echoes the authors' claims that "[these] properties and capacities are abundant and exist as a potential in everybody,"[180] and that "an abundant community is one that values our capacities and assumes that they already reside within us."[181] Thus, a core idea for asset-based community development is also central to a neighborhood pneumatology: "What we seek exists around us."[182] The neighborhood is indeed a treasure chest of gifts of the Spirit.

Parker Palmer highlights the presence of these gifts in our public interaction with strangers,[183] writing that shared life with unfamiliar neighbors is the means by which the "gifts of

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[178] McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community,* xiv.

[179] Ibid., 66-68.

[180] Ibid., 68.

[181] Ibid., 84.

[182] Ibid., 116.

[183] Everything Palmer writes about public life with strangers applies particularly well to life lived with neighbors.

the Spirit will be brought into our lives."[184] By urging us to "receive the gift the stranger offers [as] the fulfillment of God's promise of new life," Palmer thus paints a sort of proleptic, eschatological picture of the Spirit's presence in and among neighbors:

> Only as we enter and participate in the public life will the stranger be able to deliver this gift, the gift of new life which God has promised. The holy city arises in the very process of strangers coming together and bringing word of life to each other. For this is a city in which strangers mingle unafraid, able to deliver their gifts and bring each other new life. This is a city in which the public life is fulfilled.[185]

In the gifts of our neighbors, the abundance of God's future breaks into our present; the proleptic presence of the Spirit is made flesh in our neighborhoods.

The Neighborhood as a Source of Theological Discovery

As the sacred space of the Spirit's presence and as abundant communities of the Spirit's gifts, neighborhoods are essential contexts for theological discovery—for uncovering who God is and what God is doing. Because "God is revealed and encountered in place," the "call to mission is a call to discern, embody and proclaim the presence of God where we are" and is thus "a call to neighbourhood."[186] In attending to the life of our neighborhood, we learn more about the life of God. This leads Karl Barth to declare, "Whether willlingly and wittingly or not… my neighbour acquires for me a sacramental significance."[187] Pneumatologist Amos Yong echoes Barth's observation, writing that "it is precisely the neighbor… who reveals to us the redemptive

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[184] Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, 57.

[185] Ibid., 60-64.

[186] Holt, *God Next Door*, 94.

[187] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics The Doctrine of the Word of God, Volume 1* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 436.

hospitality of God."[188] Yong specifically applies this idea to life lived alongside neighbors of other faiths, writing,

> Christian mission is not only about bringing Christ to our neighbors of other faiths, but may also serve the important purpose of our meeting Christ in them... our being loved by our neighbors, including those of other faiths, is also the means through which the love of God is given to us.[189]

Through the presence and gifting of the Spirit, God is revealed to the church by its neighbors, even as God is revealed to our neighbors by the church. The church's calling is not only "to bring Christ's presence to" our neighbors, but also to "discern his presence at work among people in our neighborhoods."[190] Theology is happening whenever we attend to and reflect on experiences in the neighborhood.

This theological discovery is essential not only for *knowing* God but also for *joining* God in mission. According to Hagley, the mission of God is discerned and discovered through "faithful, enduring presence" in the neighborhood.[191] Only in its "capacity to practice theological and missional discernment" among neighbors can "the congregation's life in the neighborhood disclos[e] God in some way."[192] In turn, missional life in the neighborhood uncovers "capacities

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[188] Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (New York: Orbis, 2008), 151.

[189] Ibid., 151-152.

[190] Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 39. I find Fitch's comments on "discerning" Christ's presence to be more helpful than his emphasis on "becoming" or "bringing" it; language of discerning/discovering equips Christians to *participate* in God's life both within and beyond the church, rather than merely replicate or recapitulate God's life among our neighbors.

[191] Hagley, *Eat What is Set*, 23.

[192] Ibid., 51

for leadership and theological reflection… [and] the means for making sense of God's voice."[193] In other words, missional participation and theological discovery form a mutually informative loop, deepening our understanding of *and* participation in God's life in the neighborhood.

This reality undergirds Soerens' claim that, "our primary task [is] listening and seeing how God is the active agent before we become active" in our neighborhoods; "listening for where God is working is our primary endeavor."[194] This requires churches to eschew the tendency to "be helpful" in order to "be curious."[195] By "ask[ing] plenty of questions" and "witness[ing] what's actually happening" among our neighbors, we discover "what God is doing in our everyday lives" and are thus freed up to join in it.[196] For this reason, the "magic of paying attention to the Spirit at work in our neighborhoods is the only legitimate way forward" for churches seeking to share in God's life: "[W]e need to become experts in the art of paying attention to the Spirit at work. This critical skill is not just for a renewal of the church or for the healing of the world, but for our own transformation."[197] In this way, the neighborhood emerges not only as a source of theological discovery, but as a space for spiritual formation.

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[193] Ibid., 111.

[194] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, 44-45.

[195] Ibid., 44.

[196] Ibid., 10.

[197] Ibid., 39.

The Neighborhood as a Space for Spiritual Formation.

As valuable as our neighborhoods are for *learning about* God, they are even more valuable as contexts in which we are *changed by* God. Neighbors and neighborhoods play an invaluable role in a church's spiritual formation—that is, the Spirit's ongoing work of forming and transforming a congregation. This is the foundation of Holt's "spirituality of the neighbourhood," a spirituality that "embraces its most immediate context as a place of God's presence and [as] rich with sacred possibilities."[198] As a spirituality that nurtures "connections with the daily places of life," Holt's spirituality of neighborliness "reflect[s] the life-transforming nature of the Christian faith"[199] by introducing "spiritual disciplines for the neighborhood" through which the Spirit cultivates transformation.[200] Because we are formed by and with God in the neighborhood, we are called to "embrace the neighbourhood as a context for spirituality;"[201] Christian "spirituality only has tread when it is one of neighbourliness."[202]

Holt is not alone in his emphasis on the neighborhood as a context for spiritual formation. Soerens, for instance, insists that a congregation's "own transformation is inextricably bound up with the transformation of their neighbors."[203] This, then, makes attentiveness to the Spirit at work in our lives and neighborhoods "the starting and ending place for all Christian formation

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[198] Holt, *God Next Door*, 111.

[199] Ibid., 25.

[200] Ibid., 111.

[201] Ibid., 84.

[202] Ibid., 99.

[203] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, 18.

and the primary path to becoming fully human."[204] As our "place of practice," our neighborhood becomes "the context of our own formation even as we seek to join in its transformation."[205] Any church who shares in the life of their neighborhood "must expect to change and be changed, must expect its own continuing conversion, as it encounters Christ the Lord in the cultures into which it now is sent as his witnesses."[206] Welker explicitly identifies this reciprocal conversion as the work of the Spirit, writing, "[T]he Spirit effects a witness both to the outside and from the outside, operating in a recursive manner in which those who bear witness are themselves recipients of witness borne to them by the concrete repercussions of their own witness."[207]

For this reason, Hunter calls the real life context of "family, neighbors, coworkers, and community" the "crucible within which Christian holiness is forged."[208] Reflecting on the prophet Jeremiah's encouraging exiles to "seek the welfare of the city," Jacobson likewise calls "the temporal city the crucible in which character is formed for [God's] eternal city;" God's aim in this admonition "was the shaping of a people more than the shaping of a city."[209] The authors of *The New Parish* also adopt the image of a crucible, writing, "Your real relationships in your neighborhood are the crucible for mutual flourishing… Your Christlike transformation is linked

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[204] Ibid., 38.

[205] Ibid., 70.

[206] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion*, 96.

[207] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 175.

[208] Hunter, *To Change the World*, 253.

[209] Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 71.

to the people in the place where you are."[210] The authors also claim that Christians "become something altogether new" when they "share life together in a particular place,"[211] and therefore "the neighborhood—in all its diversity—has a voice that contributes to the form of the church. There is a growing sense that the Spirit works through the relationships of the neighborhood to teach us what love and faithfulness look like in that particular context."[212]

Palmer also places great value on the role of neighbor in spiritual formation, calling "the public realm where strangers meet" "a proving ground for faith," and "every encounter with every stranger" a "chance to meet the living Christ."[213] "In all these ways," he continues,

> the stranger of public life becomes the spiritual guide of our private life. Through the stranger our view of self, of world, of God is deepened and expanded. Through the stranger we are given a chance to find ourselves. And through the stranger, God finds us and offers us the gift of wholeness in the midst of our estranged lives, a gift of God and of the public life.[214]

Thus, by neglecting our neighborhoods, "we deny ourselves a unique and compelling form of spiritual growth."[215] The neighbor is not simply one who needs us; we need our neighbor "if we are to know Christ and serve God."[216]

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[210] Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, *The New Parish,* 48.

[211] Ibid., 22.

[212] Ibid., 31.

[213] Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, 67.

[214] Ibid., 70.

[215] Ibid., 56.

[216] Ibid., 65.

Of all the authors cited thus far, none makes this need-for-neighbor as apparent as Scott Hagley. Highlighting the way "congregations are shaped by the neighborhoods we are called into even as we hope to change or transform the neighborhood,"[217] Hagley illustrates the fact that "neighborhood mission reflects back upon a congregation. The arrows in mission do not point in only one direction, but rather come back to shape the church sent out into the neighborhood."[218] This "formational challenge"[219] is grounded in the church's participation in "the life of God as suffering love"—a suffering defined not as pain, but as "being affected by another."[220] The church thus shares in God's life by "suffering" our neighborhoods: "learning to respond to the work and initiative of God in others."[221] This "suffering" of neighbors is the catalyst for our spiritual formation:

> As we go out into God's world and build partnerships and relationships beyond the church, we open ourselves to suffer the presence of others, to be shaped, challenged, and gifted by those beyond the boundaries of the church… such interactions may challenge and even give shape to the self-understanding and identity of the congregation.[222]

In other words, we "receive the gospel when we learn to be with others" and thereby discover the neighbor as "the means for our own salvation."[223] In this way, "the decision to remain in the

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[217] Hagley, *Eat What is Set*, 22.

[218] Ibid., 51.

[219] Ibid., 63.

[220] Ibid., 92.

[221] Ibid., 92.

[222] Ibid., 72.

[223] Ibid., 175-176.

neighborhood gifts [the church] with an opportunity for renewal and discovery… Dwelling with and within our context changes us, whether we are prepared for that change or not."[224] This is what Hagley means when he claims that experience in the neighborhood "presents formational challenge for the congregation;" life with neighbors necessitates the discovery of "a new identity attentive to the changing dynamics of the place they are located."[225] This transformation may at times feel like a crisis as "relationships formed in the neighborhood may challenge cherished notions of the congregation,"[226] but it is also the process by which the Spirit forms and reforms our churches for participation in God's future.

Conclusion

This, then, is how God's future arrives in our present, how God's transformation comes to our churches: through the revelatory and formative presence of the Holy Spirit in and with our neighborhood. As abundantly-gifted arenas of the Spirit's missional activity, the neighborhood is vital to the missional identity of the church. Any congregation seeking to discover its future in God's life is thus drawn into attentiveness and discernment in its particular place, watching for and joining in the work of the Spirit wherever it emerges among our neighbors. This is the neighborhood pneumatology that funds the project outlined below.

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[224] Ibid., 202, 215.

[225] Ibid., 230.

[226] Ibid., 230.

EXEGETICAL INTERLUDE

ACTS 10

There's a story to be told;
Listen.
Sounds so new; in truth, it's old.
Listen.[227]

Before outlining that project, however, I want to pause to highlight a New Testament story that exemplifies the neighborhood pneumatology described above. I believe the Peter-Cornelius narrative in Acts 10 is paradigmatic for any church discerning the Spirit's work among their neighbors.[228] As a story about congregational change, theological discovery, and reciprocal conversion, this narrative seems like a unique match for this project. In Acts 10, Peter and his companions experience precisely what I long for my congregation to experience: they are changed by God as they step out and share life with strangers-become-neighbors. In the pages below, I will walk through the story of Peter's/Cornelius' conversion, paying special attention to the missional-theological themes that inform my imagination for this project.

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[227] Clark, "The World Song."

[228] It must be noted that Luke's primary concern—both in this pericope and throughout Acts—is not to describe the work of the Spirit in *the local neighborhood,* but is instead to narrate the movement of the Spirit and gospel to "*the ends of the earth*." That said, as the Acts narrative moves from Jerusalem to new locations such as Samaria, Joppa, Philippi, Athens, and Rome, Luke seems to pay close attention to the particularity of each new place in which the Spirit appears. In this way, Acts could be read as a series of neighborhood pneumatologies—a collection of stories about the Spirit at work in an ever-expanding list of neighborhoods. For this reason, the Peter-Cornelius story informs not only our own discernment of the Spirit's activity among our neighbors, but also the early church's discerning the Spirit's presence in all of the locations described in the second half of Acts.

Introducing the Story

The extended narrative told in Acts 10:1-11:18 describes the most significant turning point in Christian history following Pentecost. At its core, it is a story of Gentile-inclusion; it explains how an exclusively Jewish Church grew into a universal Christian community comprised of both Jewish and Gentile believers. *What* happens in this story is undeniably important. For the purposes of this project, however, *how* it happens may be even more important. In the face of "substantial pious resistance," God transforms two separate communities, making them one.[229] The end result of this story—the full inclusion of Gentiles—seems secondary to the journey it took to get there. As Luke Timothy Johnson points out, the turn to include Gentiles is—both from a literary and historical perspective—seemingly inevitable, making Luke's commitment "to show the *human process* of coming to recognize and affirm God's intention" even more notable.[230] In the words of William Willimon, this story seeks to answer the question, "How did the church arrive at a turning point where insiders were willing to include outsiders?"[231] It is a tale of communal transformation in which "the church's identity as witness to the work of God" is at stake.[232]

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[229] Richard Pervo, *Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 264.

[230] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 90.

[231] William Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1988), 95.

[232] Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment,* 91.

Beginning Outside: 10:1-8

The fact that so much is on the line for the Christian community adds to the surprise that the story begins not with a Christian, but with a "God-fearing" Gentile soldier named Cornelius (10:2). As Darrell Bock clarifies, Cornelius' status as a God-fearer likely means that he "has been exposed to the God of Israel… without embracing in any detailed way elements of Jewish legal practice."[233] In short, he "is an outsider, but one who is at least on the fringe of the community."[234] He has not converted to Judaism and thus would seem unqualified for membership in the emerging Christian community, but his spirituality and generosity indicate an openness to God and neighbor. Willie Jennings describes Cornelius as "a living contradiction. He is in the old order, but his actions are preparing him for the new order."[235]

These old and new orders seem to collide in 10:3, when an "angel of God" appears to Cornelius, announcing that his "prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God." Thus the first of many subsequent surprises is revealed: "God had acted to break down barriers between Jew and Gentile by treating the prayers and alms of a Gentile as equivalent to the sacrifice of a Jew."[236] In other words, God had accepted Cornelius' behavior—and Cornelius himself—despite his outsider status. God had found in this stranger that which typifies God's people. Cornelius may not yet be a member of God's family, but according to God's angel, he is already acting like one.

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[233] Darrell Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 386.

[234] Willimon, *Acts,* 95.

[235] Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2017), 103.

[236] Phillip Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 183.

Even here, before Cornelius' envoys—and the narrative itself—move on toward Peter, the reader is faced with two significant theological observations. First, God celebrates the godly life of a religious and cultural outsider. Even before his conversion, Cornelius' generous lifestyle and religious fervor are honored by God. He may not yet believe in Jesus, but he exhibits a burgeoning love for God and love for neighbor; despite his current exclusion, his is a life worth celebrating. Second and perhaps more importantly, in this story a fundamental change in the church's identity begins with God's work among strangers outside the church. Before the Christian community could possibly have known it, God's change had already begun. If they hoped to participate in God's change, however, they would need to embark on a journey of discovery among those they had never imagined journeying alongside.

Visions and Revisions: 10:9-16

While Cornelius' people make their way toward Joppa, we find Peter on a rooftop, praying while hungry.[237] As Peter speaks to God and longs for food, God speaks back and offers Peter something to eat. To Peter's dismay, however, the food offered in this divine vision is inedibly unclean. Following in a long line of faithful people refusing to eat impure food, Peter declines.[238] "By rejecting this call to eat," Bock notes, "Peter believes he is being obedient to God."[239] Based on the precedent of comparable situations such as those found in Daniel 1 and

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[237] Notably, Peter and Cornelius are both introduced as praying people; both men pray, and both men receive an unexpected word from God. Interestingly, Peter's vision is preceded by both prayer *and* hunger. "Prayer and hunger, hunger and prayer—these will be the pillars on which God will build the future of the creature," Jennings writes. "These are the pillars on which God will constitute the new order." Jennings, *Acts,* 105.

[238] Pervo, *Acts,* 271.

[239] Bock, *Acts,* 389.

Ezekiel 4, Peter gives what had always been the right answer. This time, however, his answer is deemed to be wrong. Something has changed; God has made the unclean clean (10:15). Changing circumstances have redefined what obedience entails.

Furthermore, as a number of scholars have pointed out, this change implies far more than an end to kosher food regulations. "The vision," Bock writes, "shows the arrival of a new era."[240] Jennings agrees, writing that in this moment, Peter "is being asked to enter in, become through eating a part of something that he did not imagine himself a part of before the eating."[241] "What was at stake," James Dunn summarizes, "was the character of the new movement as a Jewish movement and the process of identity transformation."[242] In short, Peter was being invited to change direction and embrace a new identity; he was being called to repent.[243]

It is worth noting, with Ben Witherington, that "Peter is not being portrayed in any idealized way in this narrative; indeed, he is portrayed as one who is reluctant and resistant to the message of his vision."[244] Peter's initial refusal (10:14) and subsequent "wondering" (10:17) and "thinking" (10:19) indicate just how challenging this invitation was. This change does not come easily; Peter will need time, additional confirmation, new experiences, and opportunities to narrate these experiences before he can recognize God's work, let alone embrace God's change.

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[240] Ibid.

[241] Jennings, *Acts,* 107.

[242] James Dunn, *Acts* (London: Epworth, 1996), 138.

[243] This is not to suggest, however, that Peter's previous adherence to purity codes was an act of unfaithfulness or unrepentance. The message of the vision is not a condemnation of previous behavior, but is rather an indication that God had initiated significant change. In the face of such a change, however, faithful disciples are called to new repentance—to turn as God turns.

[244] Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 351.

Still, one must not overlook the healthy posture that gives way to Peter's conversion. His prayerfulness, hunger, commitment to faithfulness, and willingness to wonder ready him to respond to God's unlikely invitation. The dramatic turning with which his story concludes is cultivated by prayer (10:9), curiosity (10:17), and reflection (10:19). He will remain unable to grasp the work of God, however, until he meets the strangers the Spirit has sent.

The Apostles to the Apostle: 10:17-23

Peter's ability to recognize and accept the change God had initiated depends on what Dunn calls the "double confirmation" of the Spirit's command and Cornelius' vision.[245] The narrator suggests that Peter may not have responded favorably to the visitors from Cornelius had the Holy Spirit not explicitly said, "Go with them, for I have sent them" (10:20). The reversal of expectations is remarkable; the Spirit has *sent* these men to the Spirit-filled apostle! Perhaps for the first time in the New Testament, we find God's Spirit sending outsiders to insiders. Here the trajectory of Acts 1:8 is surprisingly inverted; witnesses from the "ends of the earth" have been sent by God to Judea. This reversal in no way diminishes the sent-ness of Peter, of course; it merely highlights the reality that the Spirit moves in and from all directions. "The Spirit of God is on both sides," Jennings notes, "outside the door with the seekers and inside the door with the perplexed Peter."[246] God's apostles, God's message, and God's change have arrived at Peter's

[245] Dunn, *Acts,* 138.

[246] Jennings, *Acts,* 108.

doorstep. “Peter is now in the strange position of listening where he would have normally been speaking;”[247] Peter’s reception of God’s calling hinges on his reception of these strangers.

After hearing the story of Cornelius’ encounter with the angel, Peter accepts the men’s invitation to travel with them. First, however, he invites the visitors in to be his guests (10:23).[248] While welcoming Gentile guests into his home is not quite as taboo as the converse scenario yet to come, it is nonetheless “a significant step” in both parties’ journey of discovery.[249] “Hospitality,” Richard Pervo reminds us, “implies the acceptance of a social bond.”[250] Thus, he adds, Peter’s “subsequent hospitality is a silent demonstration of his acceptance of the Spirit’s direction.”[251] In their decision to share space—and presumably meals—together, Peter and his guests have begun to share in the life of God and one another. In the words of Jennings, “Both Peter and these sent from Cornelius are guests in the house of (Simon the Tanner), and together they are inside the story of God.”[252]

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[247] Ibid., 109.

[248] Witherington, *Acts,* 351.

[249] Bock, *Acts,* 392. Ben Witherington, among others, sees this invitation as an indication that “Peter is beginning to understand the message of the vision, since truly scrupulous Jews tried to avoid all such contacts with Gentiles.” Witherington, *Acts,* 351.

[250] Pervo, *Acts,* 272.

[251] Ibid., 273.

[252] Jennings, *Acts,* 109.

Converted by the Testimony of the Other: 10:24-33

In 10:24, the narrative relocates to Cornelius' house—the site of revelation and transformation. God has led Peter and his companions into an unfamiliar place to discover the Spirit's work among unfamiliar people. Jennings describes the moment Peter enters Cornelius' home as a transgression; it is not Peter's transgression, however, but God's. God "transgress(es) border and boundary," he writes, "in the best place for such transgression… in the intimate spaces of family and close friends and in a clandestine illicit meeting of those who should not be together."[253] That said, by saying yes to God's call, both Peter and Cornelius are participating in God's transgressive movement. Peter acknowledges this up front, labeling their meeting as ἀθέμιτόν—"taboo… strongly frowned upon,"[254] "not permitted… indecent"[255]—while confessing that God has recently redefined their communal reality; "God" Peter states, "has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean" (10:28). Johnson observes that this is not actually what the voice in Peter's vision had said; *that* revelation seemed to be about food, not people. "Only Peter's subsequent experience, shaped by Cornelius' narrative, has led him to this interpretation of the vision."[256] In other words, Cornelius' experience and story provide the interpretive key for Peter's understanding of God's word to him in Joppa; Peter cannot grasp its meaning without Cornelius.

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[253] Ibid. Notably, Jennings goes on to write, "God works in and from tight spaces, intimate settings of family and close friends, to change wide open spaces of peoples and nations."

[254] Witherington, *Acts,* 353.

[255] Bock, *Acts,* 393.

[256] Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment,* 93.

This comes into even sharper focus in 10:34 when, following Cornelius' firsthand testimony, Peter responds, "I *now* realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism." Peter's realization of this essential theological truth is contingent on his interaction with this stranger. While much emphasis is often placed on Peter's sermon and the baptisms that follow, this initial back-and-forth between Cornelius and Peter seems equally revelatory. There is a notable mutuality in this exchange. Both men have stories to tell, and both men have stories to hear. Both men speak, and both men listen. Listening, Jennings notes,

> is the key currency of the new order… the engine that will operationalize holy joining. Listening for the word of God in others who are not imagined with God, not imagined as involved with God, but whom God has sought out and is bringing near to the divine life and to our lives.[257]

Perhaps Cornelius best sums up the posture of every person in the house when he says, "Now we are here in the presence of God to *listen*" (10:33).

As both men listen to each other, "the separate religious experience of two persons—one inside the church, one outside it—is mediated by narrative to form the basis for a common story."[258] As a result, both men begin to experience a sort of conversion. As Willimon notes, "this is a story about the conversion of a gentile [*and*] the conversion of an apostle. *Both* Cornelius and Peter need changing if God's mission is to go forward."[259] That change is initiated by private religious experiences—and reaches its climax in gospel proclamation and baptisms in the Spirit

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[257] Jennings, *Acts,* 111.

[258] Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment,* 92.

[259] Willimon, *Acts,* 96. Mark Love argues that, in fact, the conversion of Peter is perhaps the more notable of the two conversions, as Peter's "path to participation in God's unfolding story" among Gentiles constitutes a longer journey than that of Cornelius. "Who," Love asks, "needs converting in this story[:] Peter or Cornelius?" Love, *It Seemed Good,* 192.

and water—but finds its generative center in a reciprocal, reflective exchange between two strangers. Both Peter's and Cornelius' "divine promptings… are incomplete in themselves. They require human action or reflection."[260] Both men's conversions are presented "not as the result of a direct command but as the result of reflection" on the testimony of the other.[261]

Good, New, Good News: 10:34-43

In time, the moment comes for reflection to give way to articulation: Peter begins to preach. From a literary perspective, Peter's sermon (10:34-43) "is addressed to the readers" more than to the characters in the story, serving as a bridge between God's work among Jewish Christians and God's work among Gentiles.[262] In this sense, it is *doing* even more than it is *saying.* The content of the sermon may not be new, but the context is; emerging from an encounter with outsiders, new meaning springs from the now-familiar kerygma. Notably, this sermon hinges on the affirmation that Jesus is "Lord of all" (10:36). As Richard Locknecker points out, this title—"Lord of all"—is "a pagan title of deity… rebaptized by the early Christians to become an appropriate Christological title."[263] So, much like this experience itself, Peter's articulation of God's work centers on a mutually-informative phrase that both groups find meaningful; two thought-worlds merge in a single phrase, thereby giving birth to new revelation.

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[260] Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity Luke-Acts, Vol 2* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 128.

[261] Pervo, *Acts,* 274.

[262] Ibid.*,* 278.

[263] Richard Longnecker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 393.

For Peter as for Cornelius, "Lord of all" is reinterpreted by this experience. "[Reference to the] Lordship of Christ had brought home to Peter that the Lordship of God extended over all, Gentile as well as Jew," Dunn writes. "In this phrase, then, is encapsulated the redefinition of God, as well as of his purposes."[264] Simply put, "Since [Jesus] is Lord of all, the gospel can go to all, including people of the nations."[265]

This sermon—and especially its redefinition of "Lord of all"—stands as an important reminder that proclamation remains an essential component of communal transformation. Even amidst the extraordinary and ordinary works of God and neighbor, gospel articulation serves a central function. However, even the gospel here is reoriented by the presence of strangers in an unfamiliar setting. Cornelius and his community receive the gospel in this sermon, but Peter and his companions also reencounter the gospel as both good and news. They rediscover Christ as Lord of *all*.

Spirit, Baptism, and Hospitality: 10:44-48

Before Peter or Cornelius has an opportunity to act on this revelation, God again acts first; the Spirit is poured out on Cornelius and his companions (10:44-45). In this outpouring, the emerging insight into God's inclusive mission suddenly becomes tangible reality. "The Spirit confronts the disciples of Jesus with an irrepressible truth: God overcomes boundary and

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[264] Dunn, *Acts,* 143. Willimon agrees, noting that "Peter is not reading some new idea into the story; rather, he is further penetrating the meaning of the affirmation that Jesus Christ is Lord… A vision of the Lordship of Christ, ruling with the Creator of heaven and of earth, is the basis for Christian efforts at inclusiveness." Willimon, *Acts,* 98.

[265] Bock, *Acts,* 397.

border," Jennings writes. "God touches first."[266] A recurring theme surfaces once more: the work of God's people is secondary—chronologically and qualitatively—to the work of the Spirit.

This does not render the work of the church unimportant, however. Peter and his companions have a vital role yet to play in this moment; they are to baptize these newly Spirit-filled believers. Peter's emphatic proclamation in 10:47 mirrors his emphatic denial ("Surely not!") in 10:14; "Surely," he says, "no one can stand in the way of their being baptized in water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." As Ajith Fernando writes, "This was an argument from experience. Peter's point is: 'They are having an experience just like the one we had, which we know was from God. So this too must be from God.'"[267] Although the church does not initiate this change, they are invited to affirm and join in God's work. The onlooking Jewish Christians "are more than passive witnesses," Johnson observes. "They are the ones who identify the event's meaning."[268] By baptizing the Gentiles, these Jewish believers are saying "yes" to God's change. The waters of baptism, then, are a marker of conversion for everyone involved, "signifying the joining of Jew and Gentile, not simply the acceptance of the gospel message. Yet both," Jennings adds, "are a miracle. Both are grace in the raw."[269]

The baptisms in the Spirit and water are merely the initiation—not completion—of God's change, however. As Dunn notes, "A final sentence indicates the extent of their acceptance: these

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[266] Jennings, *Acts,* 114.

[267] Ajith Fernando, *Acts,* Kindle edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), loc. 6779.

[268] Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment,* 95.

[269] Jennings, *Acts,* 114.

faithful circumcised accept hospitality of guest friendship and table fellowship for some days."[270] Jennings calls this moment of hospitality "the greatest event of this story."[271] This concluding remark at the end of 10:48 is easily overlooked, but Pervo reminds us that "social intercourse has theological significance."[272] Missiologist vanThanh Nguyen clarifies this theological significance, writing, "Equality of gift (the Holy Spirit) means equality of salvation, which implies equality among all believers, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, Jews or Gentiles. This equality necessarily includes table fellowship, for that is the heart of Christian unity and fellowship."[273] Jennings describes the close of this scene, writing that in this moment of hospitality, "a rip in the fabric of space and time has occurred. All those who would worship Jesus may enter a new vision of intimate space and a new time that will open up endless new possibilities of life with others."[274] The unimaginable change of God has occurred, and has been ratified through the Spirit, baptism, and hospitality.

Toward a Missional-Theological Imagination

As is typical of New Testament narratives, Luke's intention with this story seems to be formational rather than didactic. By telling and retelling the story of continual conversion, Luke aims to cultivate a theological-missional imagination. As with Peter listening to Cornelius'

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[270] Dunn, *Acts,* 146.

[271] Jennings, *Acts,* 115.

[272] Pervo, *Acts,* 283.

[273] vanThanh Nguyen, *Peter and Cornelius,* Kindle edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), loc. 4329.

[274] Jennings, *Acts,* 115.

testimony, we listeners are meant to find ourselves in this story as participants in the change it describes and as converts to the God it celebrates. Thus, it seems fitting to conclude this interlude not by identifying key theological propositions, but by attending to the imagination this story generates. How does this narrative shape our expectations as we spend time with our neighbors and God? What theological imagination does this story cultivate in us as we encounter the Spirit at work in our neighborhood?

We can begin with the assumption that God is already at work among strangers in our community, that the Spirit has entered into homes and spaces that we have not yet entered, and that God's change has already begun. We can also expect to discover that many of our neighbors exhibit God-honoring behavior—spiritual fervor, generosity, etc.—despite not yet believing in Jesus. We will even likely discover that there are God-fearers beyond our imagined borders and boundaries.

We will also find ourselves increasingly aware of the incompleteness of our own journey of discovery. Through prayerful, faithful wondering, we will develop a hunger for deeper formation, a yearning for new revelation. We will probably find, however, that God's change is surprising and uncomfortable; we may even discover that changing circumstances have redefined obedience. We will undoubtedly be called to repentance.

We will almost certainly discover that our neighbors hold the interpretive key to our understanding of God's ongoing mission. For this reason, we must adopt a posture of listening, an eagerness to hear the stories of those whose experience differs from our own. This will not require our own silence, however, but will instead open us up to articulate the gospel story in a way that is good and new for everyone involved, including us. We can expect the reciprocity of

this exchange to stem from and lead to a mutual hospitality in which we are both guests and hosts, sharing space with our neighbors in God's story.

Most of all, we can anticipate the surprising in-breaking of God's Spirit, the transformation of our church and our neighborhood, and the formation of a new unexpected community. This is the story we have been invited into—the story of Jesus Christ, Lord of all. And this is the imagination that fuels this project. The project outlined below is designed to uncover the Peter-Cornelius stories happening in our particular neighborhood, so that we may be converted—again and again—by the Spirit's presence in our place. "Now we are here in the presence of God to listen."

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHOD

You could ask the Joneses,
I could ask the Thompsons,
Stuart from the store,
And don't forget the Johnsons;
And what about the man who stands on the corner?
He must have a tale or two to tell.[275]

Core Commitments: Listening to the Neighborhood and Inviting Stories

As a project centered on the identity-shaping power of attending to God's activity in a congregation's neighborhood, the interviews that make up my research emerge from two core commitments: *listening to the neighborhood* and *inviting stories*. According to missional church consultant Alan Roxburgh, "listen(ing) to our local neighborhoods" is essential for learning "how to join with what God is doing in our neighborhoods and communities."[276] David Leong likewise calls "listening locally" a "critical practice in any form of Christian ministry."[277] The authors of *The New Parish* agree, writing,

> Listening to the narrative of your place… awakens you to what the Spirit is already up to and what good news really looks like in the place you live… Listening to the story of your place opens you to the possibility of genuine relational encounter, which is mutually transformative... (creating) the ground for faithful discernment and action.[278]

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[275] Clark, "The World Song."

[276] Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (New York: Morehouse, 2015), 98.

[277] Leong, *Race and Place*, 117-118.

[278] Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, *The New Parish,* 125-127.

Leading with listening equips us to "lean in with curiosity"[279] and to make new discoveries, rather than acting on preexisting assumptions about ourselves and our neighbors. For this reason, Mulder recommends ethnographic practices that allow churches "to look at themselves and their familiar neighborhood with 'fresh eyes,'" encouraging congregations to "study the culture of their neighborhood and their church by participating in community events and interviewing neighbors."[280] The interviews at the center of this project are grounded in this commitment to "listening locally."

More specifically, these interviews were designed to invite stories from and about our neighborhood. Because neighborhood stories are "where an authentic sense of identity comes from," McKnight and Block claim that

> (i)nviting stories is the single biggest community-building thing that we can do, especially when the stories we tell are stories of our capacities, what worked out. Since stories tell us what is important, speaking of our capacities establishes them as the foundation upon which we can build a future.[281]

Not only are stories vital to community building, they are also essential to the task of discerning the Spirit. As Moltmann demonstrates, it is "possible to experience God in, with and beneath each everyday experience of the world."[282] However, it is only possible to discover the Spirit's "transcendence which is imminent" inductively—by beginning with our "experiences of the

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[279] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, 93.

[280] Mulder, *Congregations, Neighborhoods, Places* 62-65.

[281] McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community*, 96.

[282] Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 34.

world" and allowing them to inform our "experience of God."[283] In this, Moltmann prizes "shared experiences (that) put their stamp on the community" over "(e)xclusively individual experiences (that) are not communicable at all."[284] And because an "important way of communicating shared experiences is narrative," Moltmann concludes that the "community experienced can be understood as essentially a narrative community."[285] In other words, the presence of the Spirit is most clearly discerned through the stories of a community's experiences.

Echoes of the pneumatological role of narrative also appear in Luke Timothy Johnson's *Scripture & Discernment.* "The Spirit of God, when truly at work, leaves traces in our story," Johnson writes. "The church does have a way to discern the Spirit's work, but only if the fruits are made available by narrative."[286] For this reason, "(t)he narrative of experience is the prerequisite for the kind of discernment required for the church to reach decision as an articulation of faith. Such narratives are important for all decisions made by the church."[287] Hagley agrees, claiming that "theological storytelling is an exercise in discernment… discernment as attentive storytelling to real-world events marks an important feature of the Christian faith."[288] Mark Love also notes that congregational change comes not "by receiving new information, but rather by learning to tell a new narrative that accounts for our experience in

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[283] Ibid., 35-36.

[284] Ibid., 25.

[285] Ibid.

[286] Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment,* 138.

[287] Ibid., 135.

[288] Hagley, *Eat What is Set*, 117.

different ways."[289] Lamenting the absence of such stories in most churches, Love wonders if "we are missing out on the full meaning of (our) experiences of God" and suggests that "our failure to pay attention to the details around those events leaves us with less to say and less to believe."[290] Unless we make space for the stories of our neighborhood, we will continue to miss out on the transformative presence of the Spirit.

This is why Episcopal priest and church consultant Alice Mann calls congregations to "become narrative leaders within their civic contexts"[291] Focusing her own research on the ways "a congregation (can) use place-based narratives as entry points for redemptive interaction with the soul of the place it inhabits,"[292] Mann argues that new possibilities for mission emerge whenever "congregations explore the intersection between their own core narratives and those of their local community."[293] Thus, Mann invites churches to join John Paul Lederach in asking of their neighborhoods, "What is the distinctive character, personality, or soul of this place?"[294] "As a congregation ponders its own sense of identity and purpose, and its community's soul or character," Mann concludes, "stories should be given center stage."[295] The aim of this project is

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[289] Love, *It Seemed Good*, 203.

[290] Ibid., 201.

[291] Alice Mann, "Place-Based Narratives: An Entry Point for Ministry to the Soul of a Community," in *Finding Our Story: Narrative Leadership and Congregational Change,* ed. Larry A. Goleman (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2010), 81.

[292] Ibid., 73.

[293] Ibid., 60.

[294] Ibid., 71.

[295] Ibid.

to do just that: to attend to the soul of—and Spirit in!—our community by listening attentively to the stories of our neighborhood.

Participants and Recruitment

In order to gather stories from and about our neighborhood, I set out to recruit participants who had spent significant time in Parkside's neighborhood. Specifically, I made it my goal to include interviewees from each of these three groups: 1) Parkside members who live in the neighborhood, 2) Parkside members who do *not* live in the neighborhood, 3) Residents of the neighborhood who are not members of Parkside. In this selection, I followed the advice of Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson, who write,

> (I)f you want the building of Christian community to be your primary outcome as you seek God's preferred future, then you'll want to invite people from within the local church and others who are not part of it to help you with discovery. The wider the community of people from whom you discover, the greater the chance you might form Christian community that is both deep and wide.[296]

With this aim in mind, I selected twenty people—with each of whom I am personally acquainted—and invited them to participate in my project, with the hope of recruiting at least four participants from each of the three categories listed above. Beyond these geographical and membership parameters—and a requirement that each participant be over the age of 18-–there were no additional limitations to my participant pool.

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[296] Keifert and Granberg-Michaelson, *How Change Comes,* 104.

Recruitment and Demographics

Each potential interviewee was formally invited to participate via email. The invitation included a short overview of my project, an explanation for why they had been selected,[297] a geographical definition of Parkside's neighborhood, the interview questions, and consent forms. Of the twenty I invited, eighteen initially agreed to participate; four, however, later decided not to be interviewed. The twelve participants who were interviewed fit my hoped-for categories exactly: four were congregants who lived in the neighborhood, four were congregants who lived outside the neighborhood, and four were non-congregants who lived in the neighborhood. Of the four non-congregant participants, two identified as Christian, one identified as Muslim, and the fourth did not specify a religious affiliation. Congregant participants have attended Parkside for an average of 13 years, ranging from 1-30 years. Participants who live in the neighborhood have done so for an average of 20 years, ranging from 9-44 years. Because participants were not asked to provide any additional demographic information, nothing additional about their ages, ethnicities, or genders can be shared.[298]

Interview Procedure

Interviews were conducted from December 29, 2022 to February 4, 2023. The interviews each lasted an average of 45 minutes, ranging from 30 minutes to 64 minutes in length. Ten of the interviews were conducted in person at Parkside Church of Christ; one interview was

[297] "Because you are a member of Parkside church" and/or "because you live in the neighborhood."

[298] Based on my own observations, however, I can safely estimate that most participants were ethnically white, ranged in age from 35-95, and that there was about the same number of women and men.

conducted on Zoom, and one was conducted over the phone. All twelve interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder.

Interview Approach and Questions

My interview questions were primarily informed by the process of Appreciative Inquiry, specifically as described by Cameron Harder in *Discovering the Other: Asset-Based Approaches for Building Community Together.*[299] Initially developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivasta, Appreciative Inquiry is a process designed "to help organizations grow by focusing on what had been working in the organizations' past, rather than by analyzing what had gone wrong... (These) discoveries (are then used) as a springboard for imaginative planning."[300] In his book, Harder outlines a particularly Christian approach to Appreciative Inquiry that begins with the "most basic assumption… that *God is at work for good in every person and community at all times."*[301] In this way, Appreciative Inquiry helps to "develop a people's skills in *affirmation*: the ability to *see God at work* in their past… and affirm that work and their own value to God as a community."[302] Harder sums up the process, writing,

> The usefulness of appreciative inquiry to the mission of the church depends in part on the particular questions in the inquiry. To be *appreciative*, they must be questions that look

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[299] Although my interview questions were *informed* by Appreciative Inquiry, I did not adopt the extended guidelines of Appreciative Inquiry as my project's *research method*. My research method—Thematic Analysis—is outlined further below.

[300] Harder, *Discovering the Other*, 83.

[301] Ibid., 86, italics in original.

[302] Ibid., 83, italics in original.

> toward the positive. But to be questions arising out of faith, they must look in some way for the positive action of *God* in the world.[303]

By focusing on the positive action of God among them, Appreciative Inquiry "builds community members' ability to imagine themselves in a more positive future."[304] Appreciative Inquiry's emphasis on cultivating an imagination for the future, its assumptions about God's positive presence in the community, and its narrative-based aim of "get(ting) at people's stories" through open-ended questions make it an ideal fit for my particular project. Harder describes it best, writing, "Appreciative inquiry used in a Christian context looks for evidence of the Spirit's movement among us. It tries to teach us how to recognize God at work, to celebrate and get on board with God's community-building mission."[305]

Harder goes on to outline four specific kinds of questions Appreciative Inquiry interviews should include:

1. "*Peak Experience* questions (that) ask, What has been good, and of God, in our past?"[306]
2. "*Core Values* questions (that) ask, What do we value most about our congregation or community?"[307]
3. "*Hopes* questions (that) ask, What do we wish for?"[308]

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[303] Ibid., 84.

[304] Ibid., 90.

[305] Ibid., 97-98.

[306] Ibid., 86.

[307] Ibid., 86. Regarding values, Harder adds (p. 89), "By focusing on best practices and that which people value (the satisfiers), appreciative inquiry moves people toward a positive future, while at the same time (almost as a side effect) moving the away from that which detracts from life."

[308] Ibid., 86. "Questions in this category help people use their responses to the previous questions as a springboard for imagining the future," Harder adds. "Generally, hope is a better long-term motivator than fear… (Hope) draws us toward the things that satisfy us, that make life whole and good in the long term" (pp. 86-89).

4. "*Commitments* questions (that) ask, What would you be willing to offer (time, personality, things you could give or lend, skills, experience, connections, and so forth) to help that wish come true?"[309]

As I designed my interview questions, I adapted Harder's four questions to solicit stories about experiences in, the value of, God's hope for, and Parkside's engagement with the neighborhood. Each of the twelve participants was asked the following questions:

1. **Tell me about a time when you were particularly aware of God's presence in this neighborhood**. (When and where was this? What happened? Who was involved? What was your role? And what about this experience points to God's presence?)
2. **What do you value most about this neighborhood? Tell me about a time you saw that value exemplified in this neighborhood.** (When and where was this? What happened? Who was involved? What was your role? And how does this event demonstrate this particular value?)
3. **Based on your understanding of God, how would you describe God's hope for the future of this neighborhood? Can you tell me about a time when you saw a hint of that future in the present or recent past?** (When and where was this? What happened? Who was involved? What was your role? And what about this experience do you hope to see again in the future?)
4. **How might our church better participate in God's life in this neighborhood? Can you tell me about a time that you've seen a congregation or group do something**

[309] Harder, *Discovering the Other*, 86.

similar? (When and where was this? What happened? Who was involved? What was your role? And how might that sort of experience be replicated in our neighborhood?)[310] With each of these questions, I sought to invite stories. As participants shared their stories, I asked additional clarifying questions such as "What happened next?" and "Could you say more about that?" Otherwise, my input was essentially limited to the questions and sub-questions listed above.

Data Analysis

After the completion of the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed by a transcription service. With these audio and print versions of participants' stories, I then embarked on the process of thematic analysis outlined by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke.[311] Describing thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns/themes within data (which) minimally organizes and describes your data set in rich detail,"[312] Braun and Clarke go on to highlight a six-phased approach to uncovering themes from interview data.[313] Utilizing this six-step method, I began by familiarizing myself with my data,[314] listening to the recordings and reading through the transcripts several times over the course of five weeks. Next, I generated

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[310] Question 4 represents my most significant deviation from Harder's questions. Because some of participants were not members at of our church, I focused on what *Parkside* might commit to in the future, rather than the personal commitments of individual interviewees.

[311] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3.2 (Jan. 2006): 77-101.

[312] Ibid., 82.

[313] These six phases are: 1.) familiarizing yourself with your data, 2.) generating initial codes, 3.) search for themes, 4.) reviewing themes, 5.) defining and naming themes, and 6.) producing the report. Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis," 92-99.

[314] Ibid., 92.

initial codes,[315] identifying recurring words, phrases, and ideas that seemed significant to the collection of narratives presented in the interviews. Once I had coded the entire transcript, I then sorted the most prevalent codes into potential themes.[316] After reviewing and refining my themes,[317] I then defined and named them.[318] In the next chapter, I will, finally, report on these themes,[319] highlighting the three most central themes that appeared in the interviews and—in conversation with pneumatologists and ecclesiologists—naming them as the work of the Spirit in our neighborhood.

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[315] Ibid., 94.

[316] Ibid., 95. Here my selection of themes was informed both by the interviews—individually and collectively—and by the pneumatological framework outlined in chapter two. In this way, my approach to my thematic analysis drew from both the inductive analysis and theoretical analysis described by Braun and Clarke. (p. 89)

[317] Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis," 20.

[318] Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis," 22.

[319] Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis," 23.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH RESULTS

Hey, maybe we should give an open invitation;
We could have a friend from every single nation.
We could ask the friends to bring along a friend;
Anyone who wants to come will be welcome.[320]

Overview of Responses

Over the course of twelve interviews, I had the privilege of hearing dozens of stories about Parkside's neighborhood. I heard stories from October 2022 and from the early 1950s. I heard stories of strangers becoming friends, of creativity and playfulness, and of abundant fun and food. I heard stories of shared tragedy, of solidarity in loss, and of companionship in the midst of anxiety. I heard so many stories about big public parties, and just as many stories about small-scale interactions between neighbors—stories that rarely, if ever, get told. I heard surprising stories about our oldest and youngest neighbors and familiar stories about experiences at our church. I heard a story about a "giant grandma cooking contest," a story about a bike parade, and even a story about a community rallying together to help a runaway turtle find its way home. And in all of these—through explicit references to divine communication and miraculous survival, but also through everyday accounts of neighborly kindness and hospitality—I heard stories about God, about the work of the Spirit in our neighborhood.

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[320] Clark, "The World Song."

In reply to the interview questions listed above, the twelve participants provided a total of fifty-five distinct responses,[321] most of which included at least one narrative example.[322] In many cases, a variety of intersecting anecdotes were shared, each held together by a common idea. Before engaging in an extended analysis of the central themes I observed in these responses, I will first provide a brief overview of the stories participants shared.

The stories of the interviewees were notable both in their variety and in their commonality. A couple of the interview questions elicited a wide range of responses, while the other two often prompted remarkably similar replies. The first question ("Tell me about a time when you were particularly aware of God's presence in this neighborhood") produced fifteen distinct stories, only two of which overlapped with another participant's response. These stories varied from personal experiences (such as moving into a new home or enjoying life with a significant other), to shared experiences with other residents of their block, to bigger public events and festivals. If there is any common thread holding this first collection of stories together, it would be a general sense of people coming together to share in each other's lives; even this broad motif fails to account for a at least a few narratives, however. It seems more accurate to assert that respondents noticed God's presence in a wide array of neighborhood experiences, notable in their variety more than in their similarity.

In contrast, the second question ("What do you value most about this neighborhood?") resulted in remarkably consistent set of responses from the majority of participants. Nine of the

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[321] For a chart briefly delineating all fifty-five responses to these four questions, see Appendix A.

[322] Whenever an interviewee provided two different, clearly differentiated responses or stories in reply to a single question, I analyzed each response independently. Thus, a total of forty-eight questions resulted in fifty-five responses.

twelve interviewees named the experience of diversity as one of the things they value most about the neighborhood. Seven Parkside members—including all four who live elsewhere—identified diversity as a value, as did five of those who live in the neighborhood, including two of the four non-congregants. To illustrate their emphasis on diversity, six respondents told stories about attending community festivals, two shared stories about personal friendships, and one described a community-service program. This theme of diversity appeared in many other responses as well, and will be explored more thoroughly in my thematic analysis.

The third question ("How would you describe God's hope for the future of this neighborhood?") drew out two different—though sometimes intersecting—responses. Of the thirteen answers provided, seven centered on neighbors continuing to grow in their care for one another, while five focused on neighbors coming to faith in God. Among Parkside members, these two responses were evenly distributed; each appeared four times. Among non-congregants, three pointed to neighborly care as God's hope, while only one spoke of religious conversion or faith. For several respondents, however, these two hopes went hand in hand. For instance, one participant began their reply to this question by saying, "I believe God would want us to love the people of our church neighborhood, and that his hope would be that we would all believe in and come to him through Jesus." Notably, though, only one participant shared a *story* about someone in the neighborhood coming to faith in Jesus; the majority of the stories in this third collection focused on neighborly love.

Responses to the fourth and final question ("How might our church better participate in God's life in this neighborhood?") were much less consistent than the prior two questions. There was some commonality, though, with seven respondents recommending public events that bring

people together. Five respondents also specifically noted that Parkside is "already doing it"—that is, the church is already participating in God's life in the neighborhood and ought to "keep on keeping on," to quote one interviewee. Other recurring responses included partnerships with other organizations, evangelistic efforts, and explicit references to hospitality. Although this set of responses lacked the consensus apparent in questions 2 and 3, a somewhat consistent trend may be observed: Parkside can share in God's life by continuing to host community events.

As four separate collections of stories and reflections, these responses are undeniably interesting. Taken together as a robust repository of neighborhood memories, however, these stories reveal even more significant themes and meaning. In the remainder of this chapter, I will outline three of these themes: cultivating a community of care, welcoming diversity, and practicing hospitality.

THEME 1: A COMMUNITY OF CARE

As might be expected, many of the interviewees' responses featured anecdotes and language pertaining to relationships and community. Several of the most commonly-recurring phrases noted in my coding reflect this theme.[323] An emphasis on interaction or conversation appeared in twenty-one reflections—nearly half of all responses. Fourteen responses included the language of "bringing people together," and ten highlight experiences of people "getting to know each other." Friendship and relationship are explicitly identified in twelve responses, while care or love are named in fourteen. From a purely linguistic perspective, relationality and care featured prominently in these interviews.

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[323] For a complete outline of my coded data, see Appendix B

More notably, however, many of the stories that did not use these commonly-occurring phrases still centered on experiences of community, interaction, and people growing in friendship and care. In fact, all but four of the fifty-five responses included stories about people sharing life together, most of which offer examples of people caring for each other in some way. This theme of caring community is so ubiquitous that I almost failed to recognize it, taking for granted the assumption that—as neighborhood stories—these responses would feature practices of neighborliness. Community and care are the air these narratives breathe, an atmosphere so persistent it nearly becomes invisible.[324] This theme only came back into focus for me as I sat with the significance of several individual stories and, in the process, came to rediscover their collective meaning.

For instance, when one participant was asked about her experience of God, she told a series of intersecting stories about the three other families that make up their cul-de-sac. In their mentoring each other's kids, sharing meals with each other, attending each other's weddings, caring for the oldest among them, and even simply bringing in each other's trash bins, these four households represented "the type of neighbors that are looking out for each other." For her, this shared life is a marker of God's presence; as she put it, "I think you can see God's hand in how we all get along with each other and take care of each other….we just all are very entwined in each other's lives."

Other participants described their blocks in nearly the exact same way. "A lot of charity, a lot of kindness, a lot of just plain good-natured human beings—it seems to me—are more

[324] At one point in my process of analysis, I had to pause and remind myself that none of my interview questions used explicitly relational language. Interviewees were so consistent in their sharing of stories of friendship and relational care that I nearly forgot that I had never specifically asked for such stories.

prevalent in where I live, and I enjoy that," one participant commented. "I feel safe; I feel connected to a certain degree. Those are all reasons that I enjoy this neighborhood." After providing a few examples of his neighbors' kindness, he then described this experience of connectedness on his block as a reflection of God's hope for the rest of the neighborhood. As he shared,

> If [neighbors] can embrace a little bit more love than hate—and a little bit more kindness than either being mean or turning a blind eye—I would think that would be something, just on a very basic level, that God would like to see furthered within our community and within this neighborhood… (I) think that God would be very pleased with—particularly in our little network on our block—how we treat each other, how we view each other. And if that could spread to other people and to other blocks, great.

Another respondent shared a remarkably similar perspective on her own immediate neighbors, identifying the thing she values most about the neighborhood as "people being there for each other and helping each other out. I feel the sense of community in the neighborhood [that] I don't feel like you can get anywhere else, honestly." For many of the residents I interviewed, this neighborhood is home to several uniquely caring communities.

Interestingly, most of the non-resident participants also reflected on unique experiences of community. As members of Parkside, however, their primary engagement with this caring community came at neighborhood events hosted by the church. For instance, the majority of participants—including all but one of the non-resident congregants—shared stories about Parkside's Block Party, an annual cookout/festival held in the church parking lot and attended by a number of local families. Reflecting on her experience at the Block Party, one participant named God's presence in "the interaction, the friendliness, the fact that [guests] not only knew that we were here doing something, [but] that they could come and interact with us and meet

us… It's that interaction that is very important, not just for a neighborhood, but for a church." Citing God's hope that the congregation "get to know more of people in the neighborhood," this participant went on to highlight the ways the Block Party "gave us an idea of the lives of the people in our neighborhood around the building," providing insight into the actual experiences of the families who live nearby. Another participant shared a similar reflection on the Block Party, saying,

> The Block Party is definitely an opportunity to really just get to know the neighborhood as individual people... In this world today, it's so easy to not see people. From my perspective at least, the whole message of Christ is seeing people… Being at the Block Party gives us the opportunity to get to know the people and to *see*.

In this way, church-hosted neighborhood events have created an entry point for Parkside members to discover and enter into the relational network that makes up our neighborhood.

Aside from Parkside events, several other neighborhood events were described by participants as community-building experiences. For example, one participant told me stories about her neighborhood's many block parties and other social events, including their first annual bicycle parade. What began as one neighbor's suggestion developed into over a hundred neighbors—parents, grandparents, children, and toddlers—circling their block on bikes. "It was really cute," she said, "[and] a lot of fun." Reflecting on the significance of these sorts of activities, she added, "I just feel anything that the kids would have fun and draws people together, families, community… anything that starts off as like, 'Oh my God, that sounds like a lot of fun!'—I feel like ends up being conversation," conversation that develops into true friendship. Another participant echoed this observation, commenting, "Anything that we do

outdoors or that we put a sign up for, [gets people] talking and interacting. That in itself is what God wants."

Perhaps the most poignant example of the power of "talking and interacting" came from a participant who shared her experience with the ESL (English as a second language) conversation group that meets at Parkside. Describing the group as an opportunity to practice English through discussion, fun, and getting to know each other, this respondent highlighted the sense of community that formed among the group over time:

> We became, I think, part of [each other's] lives. [English students] had different things going on that we'd be praying about—good things and sad things. And we developed a close relationship with them. They came to us wanting to learn the English language better… but out of that came relationships, and caring, and love for each other.

Although many interviewees cited this sort of loving care as a sign of God's presence, this participant was the only one to specifically name it as the work of the Holy Spirit. "When there were things going on that seemed like God was working," she commented, "that seemed like we were making connections that maybe we shouldn't have, I really believe that the Holy Spirit was engaged in all of that, very much. Yes, just the deeper conversations and the connections."

While experiences as seemingly ordinary as neighborly conversation and mutual care may not strike some as particularly divine, several of the pneumatologists highlighted in Chapter Two insist that cultivating a community of care is one of the primary acts of the Holy Spirit. "(T)he Spirit builds community, belonging, and mutuality," Kärkkäinen writes. "That is the way toward a new wholeness, a new community of equals."[325] Anselm Min also notes that the Spirit's "personhood seems to lie precisely in transcending herself to empower others likewise to

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[325] Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, 191.

transcend themselves in communion with others."[326] This idea is also central to Welker's understanding of the Spirit who "generates a force field of love in which people strive so that all things might 'work for good' for their 'neighbors.'"[327] Welker goes on to describe the Spirit as the "power that restores a community," activates "solidarity, loyalty, and the capacity for action in [the] community,"[328] and "places people in the community of conscious solidarity, the community of responsibility and love."[329]

For Pinnock, this loving relationality is essential both to what the Spirit *does* and who the Spirit *is*. As the "bond of love" who holds together "the loving fellowship that God is," the Spirit "reaches out to creatures, catches them up and brings them home to the love of God."[330] In this way, the "shared life [of]… sociality, mutuality, reciprocity and peace" that define God as Trinity is opened up by the Spirit to include and create human communities.[331] Through the Spirit, the God who *is* a community of love *creates* communities of love. This trinitarian framework likewise shapes Moltmann's description of "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit:"

> It issues from the essential inward community of the triune God, in all the richness of its relationships; and it throws this community open for human beings… the link between the Holy Spirit and community brings the experience of the Spirit into the community experienced by human beings and God's other creatures… God the Spirit creates the network of social relationships in which life comes into being, blossoms and becomes

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[326] Min, *Solidarity of Others*, 118.

[327] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 227.

[328] Ibid., 274.

[329] Ibid., 282.

[330] Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 21.

[331] Ibid., 31-38.

> fruitful. In this sense "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" is the activity of the Spirit that confers fellowship or community.[332]

For this reason, Moltmann defines the Holy Spirit as "the Spirit of community,"[333] and as "the power that creates community."[334] "Wherever community of life comes into being," Moltmann asserts, "there is also community with God's life-giving Spirit. The creation of community is evidently the goal of God's life-giving Spirit in the world of nature and human beings."[335] Soerens echoes this claim about God's goal, writing that the "desire of God is that the world be a venue of generous neighborliness."[336] Quoting John McKnight, Soerens further defines this neighborliness as "building a culture of care for each other."[337]

In all this, these theologians agree with the observations made by the women and men I interviewed. Wherever we encounter a community embodying a "culture of care," we can join the respondent mentioned above in affirming that "the Holy Spirit was engaged in all of that, very much." Nowhere is this more evident than in expressions of compassion in the midst of crisis.

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[332] Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 218-219.

[333] Ibid., 229.

[334] Ibid., 227.

[335] Ibid., 219.

[336] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, 2.

[337] Ibid., 75.

Compassion in Crisis

Of all the stories I heard, nearly half (21 of 55) included instances of neighbors responding to crises or challenges; all but two participants shared at least one such story. Many of these stories centered on experiences of health crises, emergency situations, or navigating death and loss. For instance, the ESL volunteer quoted above went on to share the story of how her conversation group cared for one member—a student joining remotely from Dubai—following the death of her son. "That was very difficult to hear," she said, "and it was very difficult over Zoom; you can't give hugs over the internet." Despite the distance, however, the group stayed in close contact, praying with and encouraging the grieving mother—even sending her flowers. "I didn't know what I was doing, sending flowers to Dubai from the United States," the participant shared, "but she did get them somehow. And that stayed with her. She was very, very grateful for that. And we made connections like that."

Another participant told me the story of a tragic fire on her block that took the life of one of her neighbors. This participant shared how moved she was by the response of another neighbor, a young woman who knew the deceased resident but was not "the best of friends" with him:

> When there was a fire and she [saw] it, she called 911, and just her concern when they interviewed her… I just thought that was the sweetest thing to me, her care… I still remember seeing her outside with one of her children. I watched her face… it touched me. I'll say that, because you could tell, even her demeanor in the interview—her demeanor talking about it, the emotion—you could tell that she cared.

Participants shared several other similar stories about life-and-death situations. A neighbor intervened to deescalate a potentially violent altercation. A stranger reached out following the loss of a partner. A handful of families rushed outside to help a neighbor survive a car crash. An

acquaintance became a companion in the wake of a terminal diagnosis. Again and again, members of this community cared for each other in the face of very serious challenges.

Not every story of responding to challenges was nearly as serious, however. For every life-and-death crisis story, there were about two others pertaining to the challenges of everyday life. In these lower stakes situations, neighbors proved to be just as responsive. For instance, one participant told the story of her neighbors coming to her aid during a snowstorm. “I had about eight people outside… attempting to shovel my snow,” she shared. “I was just at the window crying, because this is the sense of community that this neighborhood brings.” “My kids were like, ‘Wow,’” she added, to which she replied, "Yes, this is what it's all about: Community and helping each other out."

Another participant shared stories about chance encounters with neighbors in need of help. He told me about his experience coming to the aid of a family down the street whose water main had broken and was threatening to damage their house. He told me another about repairing a broken window on a neighbor’s car, and about that neighbor’s reciprocating by offering a discount at the store where he works. Admitting that these may seem like small examples, the respondent added that they mean a lot to him, “because again, where I grew up, I was so far away from everybody. There were no random chances to help. You could not stumble upon somebody to help…Those sorts of chance encounters are possible in this neighborhood.”

This same participant was one of two who reflected at length on an occasion when Parkside’s community Trunk-or-Treat event was seemingly going to be rained out. Rather than cancel due to the heavy rain, “everybody figured out how to take everything that was meant for car trunks and truck beds and everything, and we moved it inside.” “It was fun!,” another

participant recalled. “Rather than trunks decorated, pews were decorated. [It was fun] seeing all the kids who I'm sure would've been [disappointed]… still be able to participate in that.” In hindsight, this interviewee described this decision as divinely influenced, suggesting that “God may have whispered to them, ‘Hey, we can still make this happen.’” The other interviewee also noticed God’s presence that day, not in a divine whisper, but in the “drive and perseverance for the sake of community” embodied by parents walking through the rain to make their kids’ day. “When you see people working in the rain, doing these things that are inconvenient to themselves, that is a nature that God has given us,” he concluded.

In addition to weather-related challenges, power outages also featured prominently in multiple responses. One participant told the story of the multi-day blackout that left all the mobile homes across the street from the church without power. “The lights went out through the whole area except for your side, Parkside,” she remembered. She and a friend came to the church to warm up. Soon, several other neighbors joined them, and an impromptu lunch party broke out. “You fixed us lunch…you let us get warm,” she recalled. “[I was moved by] the love in the room, that everybody was together, and the way that you fed us. We were cold, and we were all in the same situation, [but] I knew everything was going to be all right.”

Using remarkably similar language, another participant remembered an even more extensive blackout that occurred in 2003:

> When all of the power went out, people just started gathering in our backyard. We had a patio table with some chairs, and people that we didn't know and really hadn't had much interaction with [came by]. Because of everybody going through the same issue, it turned into—I don't want to say a party, because that was far from it—but it turned into a nice social event where there was nothing else that we could do except interact with each other... Everybody congregated and it brought us together. It made us closer. That's just

> been the case ever since. It just seems to keep growing now from that one particular thing.

Noting the comfort and bond created by a shared challenge, he went on to highlight the way everyone "going through the same thing" created a sense of equality and empathy—a sense that ultimately transformed neighbors who "were essentially strangers" into lifelong friends. "That experience definitely cemented and started sowing the seeds of really getting to know the people that are around us," he added. "We now are intimately close with [some of those neighbors]."

Several participants described neighbors caring for each other in the midst of financial hardship. One respondent remembered his father—the owner of a grocery store in the neighborhood—"giv[ing] people a break on paying their bill" during an economic crisis in the 1950s. "He was very happy to do that for people that needed the money or didn't have the money to buy the groceries," he recalled. Another told me the story of a young woman providing meals for a heartbroken neighbor in need (a story that will be told in more detail further below). Another participant described her experience distributing groceries to local families during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. She was especially struck by the collaboration involved in the distribution; one neighborhood church collected the food and dropped it off at Parkside, who then coordinated volunteers dropping supplies off on neighbors' porches. In recalling all this, the participant concluded:

> My understanding of God is that He wants us all to interact and be a part of each other's lives, because we're not in this just to be by ourselves… I'm here to help all those around me, and they're here to help all those around them. It's a matter of providing help for others, not just getting help from others, that I feel like God wants from us. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been put here together.

As the defining crisis of the past two decades, the COVID-19 pandemic appeared in a handful of other responses, and featured prominently in one participant's story. Describing the experience as a crisis in which the neighborhood—and "everyone in the world—was in the same boat [of]… fear and not knowing what to expect," she then shared how her neighbors found creative ways to care for each other in their isolation. Using a previously neglected group text thread, families on her block began to send each other encouraging messages. "Whether it was your fear, or not seeing your family, or just being lonely every single day—there were tons of messages sent within our neighborhood group chat… that really brought us closer together," she remembered. "During the pandemic, she added,

> I really saw God coming through in that sense… Everyone was responding; everyone was helping. Even if it was like just a comment, people were there for each other. That's when I really saw this is bigger than corona, the virus, or the fear. People really want everyone to feel like, "Hey, you're not alone; we're in this together."

As with many of the other examples mentioned above, this crisis seems to have produced a deeper, lasting connection among this interviewee's neighbors. Nearly three years later, most of her neighbors are still sending each other encouraging messages, hosting each other for parties, and visiting lonely neighbors with a cup of tea. "It's brought a lot of togetherness," she concluded.

Again, I can imagine someone discounting many of these anecdotes as nice-but-unremarkable instances of neighborliness—nothing that particularly points to the work of the Spirit. Once more, however, we discover notably similar language about the work of the Spirit in the theological and missiological texts we explored earlier. Pinnock, for instance, specifically points to the Spirit's presence in all such experiences—"in the love we feel for one another... in

the give-and-take of relationships... [and] *in the compassion we feel in the midst of brokenness*."[338] Because the Spirit is constantly at work "renewing life and creating community in order to benefit people," Pinnock claims that the Spirit "becomes tangible in the deeds of love that function like sacraments in the world."[339] Each act of compassion in grief, solidarity in crisis, commonality in anxiety, and help in times of need is thus a tangible encounter with the Spirit of God.

Mulder borrows language from sociologist Robert Wuthnow to describe these sorts of compassionate companions as "communities of caring."[340] In contrast to social service providers and charity organizations, communities of caring share life together over a long period of time, imagine neighbors as friends and partners rather than clients, and emerge from "thick relationships" rooted in shared values and traditions.[341] These communities often address the same sorts of challenges that social services are designed to mitigate, but they do so through the compassionate solidarity borne of an extended life together in the same place. Mulder and Wuthnow rightly identify churches as communities of caring; however, it seems that the same language applies to any Spirit-created community of care—to any God-breathed collection of compassionate women and men—including our particular neighborhood.

Scott Hagley seems to agree, writing that compassionate acts of solidarity "participa[te] in God's healing work, preparing us to receive God's promised future," thereby drawing us into

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[338] Pinnock, *Flame of Love,* 73-74, emphasis mine.

[339] Ibid., 143.

[340] Mulder, *Congregations, Neighborhoods, Places*, 98.

[341] Ibid.

relationships of "interdependence and trust, connectivity and community."[342] In this, Hagley echoes the theology of Peters, who once again frames neighborly love proleptically and thus pneumatologically. According to Peters, compassion in crisis reflects a sort of "eschatological ethics" in which acts "of loving service today anticipa[te] ahead of time what will be our reality tomorrow, namely, our eschatological oneness with the new life of Christ."[343] Peters thus refers to these expressions of neighborly care as "eschatopraxis—that is, doing the future ahead of time."[344] Because the Spirit is "the eschatological power by which the present age will be transformed into the kingdom of God,"[345] who therefore "makes the future fulfillment of God's kingdom present,"[346] all eschatopraxis is pneumatological; every reflection of eschatological ethics is Spirit-filled. To put it more simply, any act of compassion that thereby reflects God's coming kingdom in the midst of our present crises can be celebrated as the movement of God's Spirit. Empowered by this Spirit, communities that care for neighbors and strangers "as parts of one's own family… proleptically anticipa[te] the divine unity of tomorrow."[347]

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[342] Hagley, *Eat What is Set*, 177-178.

[343] Peters, *God--the World's Future*, 737.

[344] Ibid., 750.

[345] Ibid., 480.

[346] Ibid., 475.

[347] Ibid., 756.

Neighbors as Family

The ultimate expression of the neighborhood as a community of care came in several respondents' observations that their neighbors felt and/or functioned like family. For example, the participant who shared the story about the pandemic group text used exactly that language, commenting that it went from "not really knowing who was who, to now it's like family." She elaborated:

> I'm telling you, during the pandemic, it was like knowing every single person that was sending a message—who they are, who their kids are, what they've done—and every day, more and more conversation happened. I felt like my family was there with us. It was just a sense of relief, and I feel that's where God was like, "You're not seeing your parents, but guess what: (you have) the neighbors that were passing by." We'd knock on the window; we'd wave. It was just a sense of we're not alone, and I feel that's God.

In these and other similar comments, this participant described her pandemic experience as God forming a family out of strangers/neighbors.

The interviewee who hosted the backyard blackout get-together used similar language, telling me, "Our next-door neighbors are like our family now. We've grown up with them for the last 20 years. That [experience during the blackout] was one of the beginning moments of really feeling a part of where we lived and feeling close to the people that were around us." The respondent who lived near the deadly fire described her compassionate neighbor the same way. "Her care… it was like a family thing," she recalled. "When I looked at her, I could see, that's like a family." Another participant held a similar perspective toward two of her neighbors, both of whom are widowed. Although this participant didn't use the word "family," her words illustrate a familial bond:

> The one widow neighbor, she needed a lot of things. We were back and forth helping. The fact that I was widowed at a much younger age obviously made me more in tune to

> helping her and being there for her. *We had that kinship of widowhood.* Then the other one now is—so that basically was a lot of it, and we all would just help each other.

Whether they used the language of kinship or family, many of the respondents—especially those who lived in the neighborhood—described their neighbors as their family.

This is not to say, however, that this family metaphor was reserved only for people who live nearby. One respondent depicted the network of students and parents at her local preschool as family, despite the fact that many live in other cities. Describing new additions arriving at the school, she told me, "They come here and they're like, 'You guys are like family,' and we're like, 'It's exactly what it is!'" As she described it, this family-like community began as local neighbors, but has expanded to include many others from outside the area, and is always open to more, regardless of where they live. "I can see people moving into our neighborhood because of the sense of family and community," she told me. "Forming lifelong relationships of people—really being there for each other in the long run—I feel like [that's] God's way to show people… you will be drawn to community at the very end of the day."

A member of Parkside described her congregation in similarly familial terms. Like the interviewee at the preschool, this participant also imagined her church family expanding to include others: "Having that family connection feel[ing] in the congregation… spre[ad] outside of the congregation [is] exactly what I feel God would want us to do." I appreciate this image of the church as an open family. Based on the witness of other participants, however, it would seem that God might also be welcoming the congregation *into* the family connections the Spirit is already creating in our neighborhood. For congregants who live in other areas, the Spirit at work in and with Parkside's neighborhood seems to be extending an invitation to come join the family.

In this way, the sort of family language often applied to congregations may also be applied to our neighborhoods. If God's Spirit truly is the Spirit of community at work in the world, our neighborhood might be described with the same phrase Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon use to describe the church: "a place where God is forming a family out of strangers."[348] Leong echoes this idea—describing the church as "a place where socially estranged people are becoming family to each other"[349]—before introducing the idea of *fictive kinship*: "an arrangement by which families are formed in spite of bloodlines, and relationships of intimacy can bridge or cross perceived social divides."[350] While fictive kinship is indeed a marker of a Spirit-filled church, the stories shared by interviewees suggest that it is not an experience exclusive to the church. In the midst of deepening friendships and compassionate care, strangers and neighbors are being formed into families all around us. If we can name this family-creation as the work of the Spirit *in the church,* could we also likewise name the presence of the Spirit wherever we encounter fictive kinship in the neighborhood? If so, it seems apparent that God's Spirit is indeed creating families of love among our neighbors, and has been continually drawing our congregation in as witnesses to, participants in, and recipients of this community's care.

Theme 2: Diversity

As mentioned above, three-fourths of respondents named diversity as something they valued most about this neighborhood. However, this theme also appeared in nearly two dozen

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[348] Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony (Expanded 25th Anniversary Edition),* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2014), 83.

[349] Leong, *Race and Place*, 160.

[350] Ibid., 162.

other responses. Of the fifty-five responses provided, thirty-two (58%) either directly mentioned or explicitly illustrated ethnic, religious, cultural, age, or socioeconomic diversity. All but one of the participants observed this diversity at some point in their interview. While ethnic and religious diversity—especially interactions between European- and Arab-American families and interactions between Christians and Muslims—were the most commonly provided examples of diversity, several interviewees also noted economic differences and age differences in the stories they told.

One participant summed up the diversity of the neighborhood as "a mixed neighborhood," commenting,

> Ethnic background, racial background, financial background, economic differences—all that—each are mixed in the neighborhood… People from all parts of the world and people from all economic and ethnic backgrounds tend to reside in this neighborhood, which makes it a interesting place. On one side of the church, there's a mobile home park—a lower economic group. Around [the church] is a mix of mostly middle-size homes, but [also] many, many very big homes scattered about. There's [significant] international and economic diversity here. I think that people can live together and get along, and that's a good start.

Another interviewee, a church member, described the neighborhood in nearly identical terms: "different walks of life and different ages, different backgrounds… all economic backgrounds… giant houses and [mobile homes]… just diversity!". One participant likewise commented that this is what she values most about this place: "Having such different people in different places in life… do[ing] life every day being so close together." Yet another highlighted the presence of Arab families west of the church—"the highest Middle Eastern population outside of the Middle East"—and of Black families north of the church in order to illustrate the "different racial

perspective[s]" that one might not find in a homogeneous neighborhood. "That, I think, is a benefit of being in our neighborhood," he added.

All four of the non-resident interviewees mentioned Parkside's Block Party as one of their primary experiences of this diversity. "It's nice to be able to sit down at the Block Party and get the perspective of somebody who has lived a different life than you," one participant shared. "Being able to sit down at an event where you have such a diverse community helps open your eyes that though we may have different behaviors or beliefs or values or experiences or perspectives, that ultimately at the core of it, we are all seeking the same thing." Another painted a word picture of the party's attendees, saying,

> Older longtime residents show up and like to chat with our members. New, young Middle Eastern families come and play games and eat and have ice cream. Grandparents and parents bring their kids from across the street at the trailer park. It's a very diverse group of people that show up.

Another congregant described the Block Party as "a symbol" of/for the neighborhood. "You get a big sampling of the neighborhood," he commented. "They all come together and eat together, and our children play together… There is a blending of the neighborhood that is not typically done." For these respondents, events like the Block Party represent both a unique joining of diverse neighbors and a unique opportunity for them as non-residents to experience that diversity firsthand.

As other interviewees revealed, this same sort of diverse joining also regularly occurs at events not hosted by Parkside. For example, one participant described a neighborhood festival hosted by a nearby Catholic parish—Saint Anselm—noting that the event draws families of "all nationalities and religions and stuff like that… a lot of people from the neighborhood here." A

different interviewee also told me a story about that same festival, elaborating on the diversity of those present:

> Everybody from the neighborhood—I mean, all walks of life, anybody that was around—was probably at the fair at some point in time… Any and all creeds, religions, ethnicities—there was very diverse attendance. When you would go there, it wasn't just one section of people; there was a nice mix of all kinds of different people, races, religions. You can tell just by looking at people there were differences, but again, for that kind of stuff, it doesn't matter. You're just there to enjoy the fair and have [a] fun time.

Another participant described his experience at a different neighborhood festival, "a huge potluck"—"a giant grandma cooking contest"—featuring "all different food, all different cultures." Families from a variety of nations and cultures—"Filipino… Vietnamese… Chinese… Czech, Polish… Lebanese… Iraqi… Indian"—set up tables and proudly served their best dishes to guests for free. "I've never seen anything like it before," he told me. "It was different… [It was] just everybody together… [saying] 'Here, let's all celebrate each other's cuisines,' and through that, the culture of those communities." This experience thus exemplified both what this participant valued about the neighborhood *and* how he imagined God's hope for the neighborhood: that neighbors would "treat different people as equals as much as those different cultures allow... which a lot of times is easier said than done when it comes to different cultures and different income levels interacting in such a close area." For at least seven interviewees, public events—whether they are intentional cultural celebrations or simply everyday neighborhood festivals—serve an important role in drawing neighbors together in all their diversity.

Of course, those who live in the neighborhood are just as likely to encounter this diversity—albeit on a smaller scale—in their everyday interactions with their neighbors. One resident

specifically named the diversity of his immediate neighborhood as something he enjoys. He noted, however, that what truly makes this diversity valuable is the common community and humanity shared by neighbors in the midst of their differences. As he put it, "I have found that one of the things in our neighborhood—no matter what your creed, ethnicity, or whatever—is that people find a way to have commonality with the fact that we're just all human beings. This neighborhood seems to, in a lot of ways, exemplify that." Another resident described her block as a sign of God's presence in that "God's love of everybody" is embodied in she and her neighbors "accepting everyone for their different religious beliefs and cultures and stations in life." For her, as for so many other interviewees, God's presence becomes tangible in contexts of diverse fellowship.

This diverse fellowship is ascribed to the Holy Spirit by many of the theologians we have already encountered, perhaps none more so than Michael Welker. For Welker, the presence of the Spirit is marked by—as previously mentioned—a "force-field of love," a force field that Welker repeatedly insists is marked by "concrete diversity" and a "sensitiv[ity] to differences"[351] and is thus "not a homogeneous unity, but a differentiated one."[352] As a trinitarian God who *is* a differentiated unity—a community of diversity—God "builds the reign of God out of diverse and varied contexts, out of different traditions, and out of different cultures."[353] Welker highlights this diversity throughout his survey of the Spirit's presence in the biblical account, most notably in his exploration of the Pentecost event:

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[351] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 22.

[352] Ibid.. Moltmann describes "the fellowship of the Spirit" as "unity in diversity." Moltmann, *Spirit of Life,* 194.

[353] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 133.

> Without dissolving the variety and complexity of their backgrounds, without setting aside their forms of expression and understanding as these forms are marked off in relation to other forms, an unbelievable commonality of experience and of understanding occurs. And this difference between the experience of plural inaccessibility to each other and of enduring foreignness, and unfamiliarity, on the one hand, and of utter commonality of the capacity to understand, on the other hand—this is what is truly spectacular and shocking about the Pentecost event.[354]

He goes on to observe the way the outpouring of the Spirit "produces a powerful public in which there is the possibility and the reality of *diverse* experiences… [in the midst of] cultural, historical, and linguistic diversity."[355] In this way, the work of the Holy Spirit can be described as "the gathering, building up, and vitalizing of the entire, diversely differentiated community and of its members."[356] The Spirit of community is thus also the Spirit of diversity, the Spirit who empowers "people from diverse contexts to strengthen each other and to serve each other, promoting what is best for each other."[357]

We have already observed, with Leonardo Boff, that "differences liv[ing] together in harmony" is a clear marker of the "ineffable presence of the Holy Spirit's action."[358] Kärkkäinen concurs, writing, "In the fellowship of the Spirit, the antagonism of individualism and collectivism is resolved for the sake of unity-in-diversity/diversity-in-unity."[359] Similarly, James Brownson claims that "God is most fully known and glorified through a diversity of cultures and

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[354] Ibid., 232-233.

[355] Ibid., 235.

[356] Ibid., 155.

[357] Ibid., 280.

[358] Boff, *Trinity and Society,* 94.

[359] Kärkkäinen, *Spirit and Salvation*, 189.

cultural perspectives," and that "God's presence is irreducibly multicultural."[360] Experiences in diverse communities are therefore both signs of and contexts for discerning the Spirit's presence.

Because the Spirit opens up the unity-in-diversity of the Trinity to creation, and thereby cultivates new communities of diversity, meaningful encounters with diverse others are essential to life in the Spirit. As Leong notes, "When we only or even primarily experience belonging in homogeneity—racial, cultural, religious, or otherwise—then I believe we are tragically missing out and falling short of the deeply transformative divine community."[361] For this reason, Soerens writes, "diversity of thought, experience, and wisdom [is] a gift to be received, rather than a threat."[362] This, then, according to Hagley, is how the Spirit forms Christian identity: "through encounters with difference."[363]

In other words, interviewees' testimonies about the diversity of the neighborhood are not only credible markers of the Spirit's presence; they are also invitations into vital contexts for spiritual formation. The Holy Spirit changes people—neighbors, sure, but also and especially the church—through life shared in diverse community. This seems particularly evident in participants' stories about Christian and Muslim neighbors sharing life together.

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[360] James Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic," *International Review of Mission 83.330* (1994): 485.

[361] Leong, *Race and Place*, 36.

[362] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, 102.

[363] Hagley, *Eat What is Set*, 236.

Christians and Muslims Together

Of the thirty-two interview stories that highlighted the neighborhood's diversity, sixteen—exactly half—included examples of Christians and Muslims interacting. Most of these stories came from congregants who described their growing relationships with Muslim neighbors as formative, surprising, and—remarkably frequently—as "an opportunity." For instance, one church member recalled the moment Parkside first began to provide classroom space for ESL classes, describing her initial interaction with students. "Many who came were Muslim women," she remembered. "I was not used to the hijab and the language difference, but it sparked an excitement in me like, 'This is an opportunity.'" This initial interaction prompted the participant to learn more about Arab culture, the Arabic language, and about Islam; she even attended a seminar in order to learn more. In time, those first steps led her to start the aforementioned ESL conversation group, resulting in increasingly deep friendships with several Arab and Muslim women. Eventually, she found herself hosting some of these friends in her home to discuss Islam and Christianity. "We did that a couple of times in a very respectful way on both sides," she told me. "That was very good; there was some things going on there that were kind of deep."

Another congregant also used the language of "opportunity" to describe his experience with Muslim neighbors, saying, "Being a Christian church in a very Muslim-rich environment is an interesting experience and opportunity, [since] there are some parallels between Islam and Christianity." He went on to depict the relationship between Christians and Muslims as similar to that of Jewish and Gentile members of the early church, nearly quoting Acts 10 in his assertion that "Jesus didn't come just for the Jewish community… Jesus didn't come to differentiate. He came to save."

While some participants perceived this interaction between Muslims and Christians as an "opportunity for us to try to spread Christianity," others seemed to imagine it more as an opportunity for mutual exchange and even change. For example, the participant who described the family-like community at her local preschool went on to share stories of the interfaith friendships that have blossomed among both students and staff. "We have students that come from every type of different background/religion that you can think of, so it's really nice to get the families together," she said, before elaborating:

> A lot of them want to go by doing the right thing whether it's religiously or cultural-wise, or wanting to get to know people from a different faith. We have students here that are best of friends that come from two different religions. I feel like God does that… I feel like God has a lot to do with putting us together—whether it's [in the school building] or out in the parking lot or wherever it may be—to ask those questions, to educate people on both ends… I've gained a lot of information, so I feel like God's presence is definitely there for us to educate each other.

For her, the religious diversity of the school—which she elsewhere described as Muslim and Christian students becoming friends—created a context for interfaith conversations, a context that she understood to be a sign of God's presence.

Another participant also described a Muslim-Christian friendship marked by mutuality, albeit it in a very different context. When her spouse was diagnosed with a terminal illness, his doctor—a Muslim man—showed exceptional care and compassion to them both. The interviewee noticed a particular connection between her own expressions of faith and the faith of the doctor. "Through our whole ordeal, he started to realize how strong of a faith we had," she said. "He was very impressed." She described a sort of realization shared between herself and the doctor, a realization that both parties "believe in the same God. They believe like we do; they just believe differently." After her spouse passed, his doctor continued to check in on her. "It was

more than him just caring about me because I lost my husband," she told me, "It was caring about me as a mutual person of faith."

One longtime resident specifically mentioned a mutual change that he had noticed among Christians and Muslims in the neighborhood. "Ten years ago," he began, "the Muslims and Christians were at each other." After providing a couple examples, he noted that the previous tension seems to be gone now. "They changed," he said. "We changed." He described the kindness of Muslim neighbors on the road, his surprise at being greeted with a sincere "Merry Christmas" by a Muslim employee at a store, and also about Christians no longer telling mean-spirited jokes about their Muslim neighbors. Highlighting his own personal change of heart, he described a transformative experience watching a baseball game at a local park:

> Both teams—the whole teams—in that league were Muslims. I remember when I first noticed a [player score a couple runs]. The opponents congratulated them! Anytime one of them made a good play, that team and then the other team would congratulate the guy. I thought that was so nice. That would never happen in our Christian way of playing ball. [But] it made sense—you're happy even if you lost.

What might have otherwise been a trivial observation at the park stuck with this participant, changing the way he thought.

Another participant described a similarly transformative experience with a Muslim family next door. Over time, the two neighbor families became increasingly intertwined, despite their cultural and religious differences, to the point that they are now close friends. "I would say God was in that because we all got along so well with a lot of our differences," she told me. "A peaceful coexistence [reflects] the peace of Christ." Another long-time resident observed a similarly peaceful coexistence: "I think it's a pretty well integrated thing between Christians and Muslims here. [Muslims] certainly have a presence here in the neighborhood, but it's a nice

[presence].” He also affirmed the presence of God among both Christian and Muslim neighbors, saying, “We are [all] God's people and God watches over us. Certainly, whoever prays, whether it's Muslims or Christians… he'll hear our prayers. I think God watches over us.” This sentiment is illustrated powerfully in the experience of the interviewee whose neighbors spent the pandemic encouraging each other via text message. “Things were quoted in that, whether it was from the Bible, or the Qur’an, or the Torah—whatever it was from—things were quoted in our group chat during this pandemic to help people get through… [There were] messages sent within our neighborhood group chat…from [people of] different religions or faiths, that really brought us together.” In the midst of crisis and anxiety, her neighbors became an interfaith community of mutual encouragement.

Perhaps the most powerful example of this Muslim/Christian mutuality came from a Parkside member who volunteered with the ESL group. When asked to share a story about God’s presence in the neighborhood, this participant told me the story of story of Lena,[364] a Muslim, Lebanese immigrant who proved to be “a key person with the right background [to] advocate for our group.” The interviewee described Lena’s role in inviting new students, “interpreting for them, creating community and openness—and [I] just felt like that was a godsend.” He then elaborated on Lena’s contribution to the group, saying

> She interpreted for others [from English] to Arabic. She played a social role in asking people, bringing them, just helping them through the class, and just [creating] a fun and helping group together… She was able to play the role that was really was needed to make a class functional and [to help] the two cultures to communicate more clearly, and to just bring some laughter and enthusiasm—things that help the overall experience of the group.

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[364] Her name has been changed to promote anonymity.

Notably, he also reiterated Lena's God-sent-ness. "That was a time when I felt like God was coming in… through her," he said. "He sent her to help [this group] materialize and develop."[365] This statement—that God *sent* a Muslim immigrant to a Christian church to play a vital role in the formation of a multicultural community—strikes me as illustrative of one of the most significant realities these interviews collectively observed: that the Spirit of God seems to be at work in the Muslim/Christian relationships being formed in our neighborhood, not unilaterally, but mutually—reciprocally—in and from both sides.

These narratives thus raise an important question, especially for our church: Can we really affirm the presence of God's Spirit among neighbors of other faiths? Is it possible to remain faithful to our Christian convictions while also naming the presence and practices of our Muslim neighbors as markers of the Spirit's activity? Theologians such as Clark Pinnock insist that doing so is not only a possibility, but a necessity for any Christian seeking to discern the Spirit. "If the Spirit gives life to creation and offers grace to every creature," Pinnock writes, "one would expect him to be present and make himself felt (at least occasionally) in the religious dimension of cultural life. Why would the Spirit be working everywhere else but not here?"[366] If we can affirm the concrete presence of the Spirit in every corner of the neighborhood, it is reasonable to suggest that "God's truth may have penetrated any given religion and culture."[367] Even though

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[365] Christine Pohl describes individuals like Lena as "threshold people." "Such persons," she writes, "understand both the world of the stranger and the world of the welcoming community. Often they are persons who were previously welcomed as strangers and then eventually became part of the community, assuming the role of host with newer strangers." Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition,* Kindle edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), loc. 1080. For more on Pohl and thresholds, see the conclusion of my reflection on Theme 3 below.

[366] Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 200-201, parenthetical phrase in original.

[367] Ibid., 202.

"Jesus is not named in other faiths," Pinnock continues, God's "Spirit is present and may be experienced. God can speak to people's hearts through the Spirit."[368] This reality may thus cultivate among Christians an "eager[ness] to find out"[369] where the Spirit is working among people of other faiths:

> We should watch for whatever Spirit may be teaching and doing among them. This posture creates the possibility of a dialogical relationship. We can enter into the faith of others and acknowledge truths and values found there… God is everywhere at work, even in the religious sphere, and may be speaking to people with ears to hear. We do not claim to know how the Spirit works among non-Christians, but only that he is active. This gives us hope and opens us to charitable relationships with those of other faiths.[370]

This is not to say that all faiths are fundamentally the same, or that Christianity can no longer be considered uniquely true. Rather, this affirmation of the Spirit among adherents of other religions expresses a profound commitment to follow the Spirit of Christ wherever the Spirit may be discovered and a deeply Christian conviction that no corner of creation—no God-breathed human being or community—is devoid of the Spirit's presence.

Likewise, this claim does not eliminate or minimize the Christian call to evangelism, but instead informs and transforms it. If evangelism is partnership with the Spirit, then the Spirit's presence among neighbors of diverse faiths draws us in as participants in their pursuit of God. As theologian Miroslav Volf demonstrates, this reshapes witness as mutuality; as we witness to people of other faiths, we do so "in the way [we] believe others should witness to [us]" and are

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[368] Ibid., 204.

[369] Ibid., 202.

[370] Ibid., 205-207.

simultaneously eager "to let others witness to [us]."[371] Viewed through the pneumatological lens outlined above, this mutuality in witness is far more than interfaith politeness; it is a means by which the Spirit continues to transform us through the witness of the religious other.[372] In the words of Amos Yong, the Christian community is "empowered by the Spirit… to meet, interact with, and perhaps even bless religious others. Along the way, the Spirit… will transform us precisely through the interreligious encounter into the image of Jesus."[373]

Furthermore, this mutuality drives interfaith collaboration for the sake of others, empowering us to follow each other's lead as we join the Spirit in the work of new creation. Applying this principle specifically to Muslim-Christian relationships, Volf suggests that—by pursuing a common God together—"Muslims and Christians (are also) pushed to pursue the common good."[374] In this way, "Muslims and Christians can be allies in promoting a vision of human flourishing centered on love of God and love of neighbor."[375] Based on the testimony of

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[371] Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 117.

[372] Interfaith activist and Hindu nun, Pravrajika Vrajaprana, likewise describes the power of interfaith *friendships*—in contrast to interfaith *events*—as uniquely transformative, writing "Interfaith gatherings lack the means to solve these [formational] challenges. They, like wrongly prescribed drugs, often serve to mask the symptoms without curing the illness. For, after our gatherings have ended, our good-byes have been said and the kumbaya moments have dissipated, what has changed? The only way to genuinely effect change in ourselves and change in others is to be what each of our religions tells us that we should be... By being our religion we do much more for interfaith work than all the speeches we've ever made put together. Do it, and make it a lifetime commitment. " Pravrajika Vrajaprana, "Interfaith Incognito: What a Hindu Nun Learned from Evangelical Christians," in *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation,* ed. Peace, Howe, and Mobley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 24.

[373] Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 160.

[374] Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 246.

[375] Ibid., 218.

this project's participants, God's Spirit seems to be creating precisely these sorts of alliances in our particular neighborhood.

God's Spirit Among Children

Compared to interfaith, socioeconomic, and multicultural diversity, intergenerational diversity received far less attention in participants' stories; only about a tenth of responses explicitly highlighted differences in ages. That said, more than a third of their stories featured adults spending time with—and often learning from—children and teens. For instance, when asked to narrate an experience of God's presence, one participant described her experience as a teacher:

> [To] really see the joy of what we're giving these kids is breathtaking. Really my husband jokes all the time, like, "Oh, how can you do this with all these kids?" I'm like, "It's rewarding. It really, really is… [They] learn to share; [they] learn to be friends. And then just seeing the joy—if one is absent one day and then the next day the joy of that one student saying, "Oh my God, I missed my friends!" It's all rewarding… God's presence is definitely there.

Another participant also described discovering God's presence among children while volunteering at a local Catholic school. "I don't know if you'd call it God's presence," he began, "[but] when I see kids in the neighborhood walking to school, that's very meaningful to me." Describing the student body as mostly Christian but partially Muslim, he went on to tell me stories about the students singing together during their weekly school mass. "You ought to hear our kids sing," he told me, "Boy, they really love to sing… [even the students who aren't Christians] have no problem with it… They just love to sing!" After saying this, the interviewee broke into song himself: "'I've got that, love, love, love, down in my heart, down in my heart, down in my heart, I got that'—oh boy, they just blow that one out of the water!".

Most of the respondents' stories about children emerged from their descriptions of neighborhood parties and events. For example, one Parkside member told me how moved he was while watching neighborhood kids at Parkside's most recent Trunk-or-Treat event. "I was impressed by those kids," he said. "[All] of those kids were saying, 'Thank you very much;' I could see they said that sincerely. Those parents, all of them, were doing a good job!" This participant then went on to describe these children as serving God through their gratitude. "They may not be members of the church," he told me, "their devotion may be different, but [you can tell] they want to serve God." Another participant began by claiming that "God always puts children first" before subsequently making a similar observation about her neighborhood: "I feel like our neighborhood thrives on social events for the kids." Another resident of the neighborhood shared a story about her time at Parkside's Block Party, saying

> I just love to see the children so happy and playing. I see God's presence in all of them. They don't know the difference between color. You know what I mean? That right there just [speaks] to itself… Last year, there was two little ones, and they never met, but… they became good friends… They [were] just sitting there picking up some blocks and doing that. Then [one kid] was like, "Here" and handed it to the other kid," and the other kid was like, "Okay, let's build them." It was just cool.

A couple others also described the impact of children at the Block Party, including a non-congregant neighbor who remembered a teenager at the event making "such an impression" on her that she stopped and prayed with her right there at the party.

Of all the interviews' recurring phrases and stories, perhaps the most surprising was the frequent references to bounce houses; seven of the twelve participants included bounce houses in their responses. While a couple of these references were simply descriptive of what one finds at a neighborhood event, most of them went deeper than that. People formed "connections" outside

the bounce house, one participant shared. They "blended" and "interacted" while watching their kids in the bounce house, another mentioned. For another, the bounce house functioned as a symbol illustrating "equality" in the midst of diversity. "All these other people may be from completely different walks of life, but everybody wants to jump in the bouncy house," he told me. "It all falls back under the umbrella of human nature—of trying to reach out to people, anybody, whether they're different or not—just to be like, 'We can do this together.'" A different interviewee shared a remarkably similar—and extended!—reflection about children jumping in a bounce house at Parkside's Block Party:

> I oftentimes am around the bouncy house. The great thing about kids is like, they have that ignorance that's so bliss. They don't know all the stresses and struggles that come with life, man. You get them in the bouncy house and they're having fun. It doesn't matter who had what for breakfast, or who has what shoes, or whose parents do this or that. They're just in there being kids… In the bounce house we have kids of every color or racial background, and they're just intermingling. Just being kids, just having fun… They're just in there—kids being kids, bouncing, and having fun. There is no fear that people may have of somebody who's different. Oftentimes adults have an aversion to somebody who may be different, because they don't know if that person would be safe or a threat or whatnot. Kids in a bouncy house, it's just like, "We're bouncing, we're having fun." There is no societal pressures to feel or act or behave some way.

In this way, the bounce house functions as a symbol of the communities of diversity the Spirit has been forming in our neighborhood, and of the particular role children play in revealing the presence of that Spirit.

David Fitch emphasizes this revelatory role of children in *Faithful Presence,* highlighting "the discipline of being with children"[376] as one of seven key practices for discerning and joining the Spirit's presence. Reflecting on Jesus' promise that "whoever welcomes a child welcomes me," Fitch observes that "when you receive a child into your presence, you also receive the

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[376] Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 131.

presence of Jesus."[377] "As the adult becomes present to the child," he writes, "the space between them becomes the place of [God's] faithful presence."[378] In this way, the presence of children is both "sacramental"—a "special work of God by the Spirit whereby Jesus [becomes] present"—and formative, "not only transform[ing] children's lives but the adults in the space as well."[379] For Fitch, the sacramental nature of being with children lies in their vulnerability; "in their vulnerabilities, my own vulnerabilities are exposed… a space is opened up, and Jesus becomes present and begins to work."[380] For this reason, Fitch urges Christians "to be present [with] children, to know them, to be changed by them" because those "who can lower themselves to be present with a child will experience Jesus and his kingdom"—and, I would argue, his Spirit—"like nowhere else."[381]

Thus, age diversity ("your young" and "your old") joins socio-economic diversity ("your servants") and racial/cultural diversity ("other languages," "every people") as signposts of the Spirit of Pentecost poured out on all flesh. In the presence of our youngest and oldest neighbors, our wealthiest and poorest neighbors, our Muslim and Christian neighbors, and our neighbors of various cultures and ethnicities—in the midst and *because* of the diversity of our neighborhood—we are discovering and being changed by God's Spirit.

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[377] Ibid., 135.

[378] Ibid., 134.

[379] Ibid. 134-135.

[380] Ibid., 135.

[381] Ibid., 136-137.

Theme 3: Hospitality

While not as ubiquitous as the theme of community nor as explicit as the theme of diversity, the theme of hospitality undergirds a number of the stories shared in these interviews. In fact, more than one-third of the responses I collected included notable references to or examples of hospitality/welcome. Many of the stories summarized above center on hospitable practices; the blackout patio party, the inclusion of new students from outside the neighborhood, the rainy day Trunk-or-Treat, the post-pandemic visits for tea, the bike parade—these and several other anecdotes involved neighbors welcoming guests and making space for strangers.

This is the language one participant used to describe the ESL conversation group, for instance. “It was surprising that so many people felt comfortable here… when they were almost all [from an] Islamic background.” he told me. “[But] we were able to make them feel comfortable and welcome.” Another Parkside member used similar language to describe the church’s sharing classroom space with the public school, saying “By opening our doors to the school and students, I believe God was giving us an opportunity to show hospitality.” Another member of the church also used hospitality language in his depiction of the church, telling me,

> One of the reasons that I've stayed a member of the church is because I do feel we participate well in this; the church here participates well in God's life and purpose in the neighborhood as I personally think a church should… To me, extending God's hospitality is the message—just being kind, helping. To me, that was the motto or slogan or what have you when I joined the church and I was like, "Yes, this is for me." To me, that's participating in God's life: doing those things.

This interviewee shared several examples of this hospitality, most of which involved the church sharing space with neighbors: “the food kitchen,” “classes and services that are public,” “the building is open for somebody else to use it.” “Essentially,” he summarized, “it’s a small

business incubator, sort of, for people directly in this community… when I drive by during the week at two o'clock on a Wednesday, this parking lot is full!"

When I asked the non-congregant participants how Parkside might join in God's life in the neighborhood, each of them also emphasized practices of hospitality. "I guess you open your door to anybody that wants to come, don't you?" one neighbor answered. "I would think [participating in God's life is] basically to just welcome people whenever they want to come." "Be welcoming," another interviewee told me, before elaborating:

> It's hard to get people to want to kind of come out of their shell and to even be neighborly sometimes. If the church can play a role in helping people maybe come out of that shell with whatever you can do to draw them in—anything along those lines would be good for the church and for the community.

He also described the church as "the linchpin for bringing people together," and then went on to point to the fair hosted by St. Anselm Catholic Church as an example. "Have an event that can benefit everybody… along the lines of the fair," he concluded. "With the area that you guys have, I think that there is potential for all kinds of different things that could draw people in… making the church… a linchpin for everybody around here to come together."

Another neighbor suggested something very similar, recommending the church welcome neighbors by hosting "anything that you can bring them together…to have fun with." "I just think the more families you bring together, the more stories are shared," she added. "When you have other families involved and stories are told, there's always the presence of God." Likewise, the respondent who attended the "grandma cooking contest" pointed to neighborhood events like that one as an example of hospitality, claiming that these sorts of experiences are relatively common in the area. "There's lots of those little pop-up things that, again, are not necessarily

helping people, but they're just allowing a community to be equal," he told me. Another neighbor specifically named Parkside as a welcoming presence in the neighborhood, calling the church an "outreach pouring out to people and saying, 'Hey, anybody's welcome! Let's have a block party! Let's do a trunk and treat!' It's beautiful."

As has been highlighted already, several other interviewees told stories about Parkside's annual Block Party; as they did, nearly all used hospitality-related images. The Block Party provides neighbors "with a safe space to spend time and just feel loved and comfortable," one respondent shared. He continued, saying that, by opening up this space for strangers, the party presents a rare "opportunity to sit down and have conversations and get to know people as people." One of the non-congregant interviewees described her time at the Block Party in much the same way. "When I take my child there, everybody's friendly," she said. "All the people that go there—even the people that live in the neighborhood—are real friendly, welcoming, just nonjudgmental." Another local resident said something similar, telling me that the Block Party in particular was meaningful to her as a chance "to get out and mingle with people because I'm already in solitude with me and God alone… I need more interaction." She then mentioned that she sometimes attends church seeking that interaction, but that—as someone living with depression and anxiety—it takes a lot of "courage to do that, to attend." For this reason, she said,

> [The Block Party] is more meaningful to me because there's lot of people there. It's meaningful for me to come to church, but it is *really* meaningful [to attend the Block Party] because there's a lot of different people there, and I do find myself able to mingle a little bit more… [I feel] loved, just feel the love of God's presence... at the Block Party with all the parishioners, with you yourself. I do feel the love….it really is a blessing to not just me, [but] I'm sure [to] a lot of folks in the [community]. It's really a blessing to get out, to mingle, to be acknowledged... It's just a beautiful feeling.

The presence of God's Spirit in the creation of hospitable space is a focal point in several recent pneumatological works. Among those we have already explored, Welker describes the "Spirit of love" as creating "free space" for "people who are distant, foreign, even hostile."[382] Moltmann depicts this free space not just as a *creation* of the Spirit, but as the *identity* of the Spirit, calling God's Spirit "the space of freedom in which the living being can unfold."[383] "In the open air of the eternal Spirit," he writes, "the new life unfurls. In the confidence of faith we plumb the depths of the Spirit, in love we explore its breadth, and in hope its open horizons. God's Spirit is our space for living."[384] In this way, the Spirit makes available God's rule—the "wide, free space [God] gives for the freedom of his people."[385] Volf likewise describes the life of the Trinity as hospitable, "other-receiving love."[386] In welcoming "humanity into divine communion" so that we "may rejoice in the eternal embrace of the triune God," God—specifically, as we have already observed, the *Holy Spirit*—thus empowers us "to make space in ourselves for [others] and invite them in."[387]

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[382] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 226.

[383] Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 43.

[384] Ibid., 161.

[385] Ibid., 100.

[386] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 127.

[387] Ibid., 100, 131.

In *Hospitality and the Other*, theologian Amos Yong outlines "a pneumatological theology of hospitality" that describes the Spirit as both "divine guest" and "the divine host who dispenses the economy of God's hospitality."[388] The Spirit, then, "signifies the extension of God's economy of abundant hospitality into the whole world."[389] In this way, the Spirit draws us into God's hospitality as both recipients and participants. As Yong puts it,

> The redemptive economy of the triune God invites our participation as guests and hosts in the divine hospitality revealed in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. As guests and hosts, sometimes simultaneously, we are obligated only to discern the Spirit's presence and activity so that we can perform the appropriate practices representing the hospitable God… Christian mission participates in what I call the eschatological hospitality of God that anticipates the redemption of every nation, tribe, tongue, and people.[390]

For this reason, expressions and experiences of hospitality may rightly be named as experiences of the Spirit; "practices of hospitality—of being hosts as well as guests—become the concrete modalities through which the gifts of the Holy Spirit are poured out on all flesh."[391]

This "welcoming of strangers" is what advocates of asset-based community development describe as a key property of an abundant community;[392] neighborly practices of hospitality, write McKnight and Block, "are what widens our inventory of gifts."[393] Similarly, Christian ethicist Christine Pohl identifies "hospitality to strangers as a fundamental expression of the

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[388] Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 126.

[389] Ibid., 126.

[390] Ibid., 127, 140.

[391] Ibid., 153.

[392] McKnight and Block, *The Abundant Community*, 67.

[393] Ibid., 83.

gospel."[394] Spirit-filled hospitality is thus essential to the vitality of both the church and of the neighborhood. Because "[a]cts of hospitality participate in and reflect God's greater hospitality," Pohl writes, "[they] therefore hold some connection to the divine, to holy ground."[395] Through the Spirit, hospitality makes the neighborhood holy ground. Likewise, hospitality resists the abstraction of neighbor by cultivating "practical and personal expressions of respect and care for actual neighbors."[396] In our neighborhood's concrete, particular spaces of welcome, both guests and hosts are being drawn into the life of the Spirit of hospitality. Each of the hospitable experiences named by these interviewees can then also be named as locations of the Spirit's welcome.

A Shared Table[397]

The interviews' emphasis on hospitality comes into sharpest focus in stories featuring people eating together. Fortunately, there are plenty of such examples—forty percent of participants' responses included instances of people sharing food or drink. For instance, one congregant summarized the Block Party as "a lot of sitting in a tent and just having conversations and eating food." When asked how Parkside might better share in God's life, this same respondent said, "Maybe we just need to have more events with food... Everybody wants a free meal!" Another interviewee also emphasized the food at the Block Party. "We offer hot dogs and

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[394] Pohl, *Making Room*, loc. 95.

[395] Ibid., loc. 179.

[396] Ibid., loc. 853.

[397] Readers are not advised to read this section on an empty stomach.

hamburgers. And," he added, "we make sure the meat is halal so it's accepted by our Arabic neighbors and enjoyed by all." One neighbor verified this claim that the food was enjoyed by all, telling me, "We love the hamburgers, I can tell you—me and a few other folks. Oh, them hamburgers are good!" In virtually every anecdote about the Block Party, food is omnipresent.

For another resident, food is a defining feature of the neighborhood:

> With this neighborhood where I am, the culture is exemplified by the restaurants primarily and just the variation that we have in that. I know we're next to Dearborn and Dearborn Heights, but it's not just all Middle Eastern food, right? There's a wide variety. That's what I value most about the neighborhood.

These comments were then echoed in his recollection of his visit to the multicultural food festival. "Your plate would just be loaded, and it was all free," he told me. "I don't even know how it was paid for." When asked to describe his role at the event, he smiled and said, "My role in that was just a pleased observer. I was a taste-tester. I walked around and just kind of basked in the glory of all of this."

Other respondents also shared reflections on the meaning of food at neighborhood gatherings. One interviewee claimed that potluck-style meals were central to his block's street parties, telling me that everyone's willingness "to donate some type of food…indicates that you'[re] able to talk about things." The story highlighted earlier about neighbors shoveling snow from a participant's driveway also ended with shared food and hospitality. When the participant saw her neighbors shoveling, she said to herself,

> "Oh, I'm going to make my blueberry muffins." Anytime we're at [our neighborhood's] block party, that's when I always bring my blueberry muffins. I'm like, "You know what? We're putting out some blueberry muffins." I have an attached garage. I opened my garage, they came in, we had a conversation, [and] I thanked them…It was really nice. It brought us together for a good twenty minutes of having water, hot cocoa and blueberry muffins.

She also described this garage breakfast in terms reflective of "fictive kinship," telling her neighbors that she was "doing it for her own family" regardless; in this moment of mutual welcome, that family included these neighbors.

Another resident—the one who warmed up at the church during the power outage—described a similar sort of "love in the room" as she and her neighbors enjoyed lunch in the lobby. "People kept coming," she said, "and [a church member] brought some food up from the basement. [He] made— I can't remember. Was it spaghetti or something like that? It was really good because everybody was cold and hungry… That was cool." Food also played a central role in another instance of neighborly care described by a different interviewee, who told me about a neighbor of hers whose partner stole all his money and left him alone with no food. "The guy was a diabetic," she added, to emphasize the seriousness of the situation. "There was a lady that lived in the [mobile home] park here," the story continued, "and she made sure that guy ate every day. Whether it was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, spaghetti—whatever she made, she made sure he ate." For a week, this neighbor provided this man with "breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Describing this neighbor as "his angel," the interviewee concluded that "by her cooking for him, God made a way through her to help him." In a quite literal way, the Spirit's hospitality was made tangible—made edible—in her food.

Finally, one other congregant described shared food as the catalyst of her growing friendship with a Muslim family who lives next door. "We had a great rapport with them," she told me. "And they would make Middle Eastern food for us all the time, because they were always cooking for their extended families; they would always bring us items over that they

made." In return, she shared, her spouse would always bring their neighbors vegetables that he grew in his garden. Reflecting on this "lovely relationship," she added,

> The food was what broke everything [open], because then I would go to return the containers that she'd give me, and then I'd get to meet her because she was in the house and thank her for the food. Then it got where then they would invite me in and whatever. Over time, there was just more and more crossing over into each other's lives and personal spaces. We [even] went to one of their son's weddings!

Later, she called "sharing food" the "love language" of both her family and her neighbors. "It's an intimate thing and a necessity," she said, before elaborating:

> Obviously, we need to eat for nourishment to sustain us, so it's a necessity. And it is quite intimate what you choose to eat, who you choose to sit down with—manners, etiquette. You have that time that you're at the table, so you're going to talk because you're already held in those places.

In this way, food functions for her—as with so many other interviewees, it seems—as a hospitable force, drawing strangers together in its intimate necessity.

In his "theology of eating," Norman Wirzba makes a nearly identical claim. "[E]ating," he writes, "is among the most intimate and pleasing ways possible for us to enter into the memberships of creation and find there the God who daily blesses and feeds life."[398] Rooting his perspective on "why eating matters" in "God's own Trinitarian life of gift and sacrifice, hospitality and communion, care and celebration," Wirzba asserts that "to partake of a meal is to participate in a divine communication."[399] Meals, then, extend an invitation into the life of "God's nurture and love"[400] and into the lives of one another. "At its best, eating is a sharing and

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[398] Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating,* Kindle edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), loc 370.

[399] Ibid., loc. 116.

[400] Ibid. loc. 324.

welcoming movement that makes room for others," he writes. "To eat is to enter intimately into the lives of others."[401] Wirzba also illustrates the way in which shared meals also play a proleptic role—bringing heaven to earth—writing,

> Heaven is here described as the Spirit's transformation of relationships so that they lead to the wholeness of life. Eating in heaven is affirmed as a full participation in the lives of others... Eating matters in this life and the next because it is a realization–imperfect now, but perfect then–of God's eternal communion-building life.[402]

Thus, through the Spirit, "[e]ating joins people to each other… and to God… introduc[ing] us to a graced world of hospitality."[403]

Scott Hagley also notes the literal dimension of "eating what is set before you" as essential to missional life in the Spirit, writing that "we express solidarity by eating with others. We are not only what we eat, but also those with whom we eat shape us."[404] Recommending "the recovery of hospitality"[405] as the means for joining in God's life in a particular place, Hagley then demonstrates the generative power of shared meals, writing, "In eating with others, welcome is not only offered, but new communities are formed."[406] Mark Love likewise highlights the Spirit's community-forming presence at the shared table, writing "The pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh… becomes visible in a community that breaks bread together… A

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[401] Ibid., loc. 122.

[402] Ibid., loc. 246.

[403] Ibid., loc. 313.

[404] Hagley, *Eat What is Set*, 30.

[405] Ibid., 253.

[406] Ibid., 255.

church that discovers its life as it is drawn into the life of the Spirit will likely find itself eating at tables not of its own choosing."[407]

Eating with strangers is also vital to Pohl's imagination of Christian hospitality. Calling a shared meal "the activity most closely tied to the reality of God's Kingdom,"[408] she observes that "[s]hared meals are central to every community of hospitality—central to sustaining the life of the community and to expressing welcome to strangers."[409] Again, the language of intimacy surfaces—this time in contexts of cultural diversity—as Pohl writes, "When strangers and hosts are from different backgrounds, the intimacy of a shared meal can forge relationships which cross significant social boundaries."[410] Based on this observation, as well as the myriad stories shared by interviewees, it seems safe to assert that the Spirit of hospitality, diversity, and community operates uniquely and transformatively at the shared table of strangers-become-neighbors.

Parking Lots and Threshold Places

This exploration of the Spirit's hospitality in our neighborhood would be incomplete without a brief examination of the public spaces in which many of the interviewees' stories were set. More than half—twenty-six—of the experiences participants described occurred primarily/ entirely in public or public-facing spaces. Parking lots provided the setting for at least fifteen of

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[407] Love, *It Seemed Good,* 156.

[408] Pohl, *Making Room*, loc. 381.

[409] Ibid., loc. 833.

[410] Ibid., loc. 827.

these stories, while several others took place on sidewalks, in streets, and in parks. Only ten of the stories took place inside a church, and even most of these stories featured the church sharing space with the public (ESL classes, preschool, etc.) or hosting a public event (the ESL conversation group or the rainy-day Trunk-or-Treat). Even fewer took place in private homes, and only two took place at worship gatherings—neither of which was at Parkside. When asked for stories about God's presence in the neighborhood, respondents often looked to public spaces.

For instance, one respondent described a neighborhood street party he attended at which neighbors blocked off the street and spent the evening singing, drinking, and talking in front of their houses. Another told me about their local block parties, social events that drift in and out of each other's homes, yards, and into the street—including the transformation of one stretch of road into a full basketball court. This participant is the same one who also told me about the bike parade—another event held in the middle of the street. A different interviewee described the time Parkside volunteers passed out water and cheered on runners who participated in the marathon that winds its way through the neighborhood each year. According to another respondent, Parkside members also passed out water at the local farmers market "in one of the big parking lots" nearby. Telling me about volunteers who would hand out bottled waters "and just sit down and chat with some of the people who came by," this interviewee specifically described their purpose as "show[ing] hospitality." In these public spaces no one owns, strangers found themselves sharing life as both guests and hosts.

More often than not, these public spaces were parking lots. The multicultural food festival was held in the parking lot of a local community center. St. Anselm's fair was hosted in the parking lot and front yard of the church. And the two most frequently cited events—Parkside's

Block Party and Trunk-or-Treat—also both took place in the church parking lot. Relatedly, three of the four non-congregant respondents mentioned Parkside's parking lot in their suggestions for how the church might join in God's life. "When you look at the parking lot that you guys have over here," one interviewee told me, "you walk back there and it's even more vast than you think. There's so much potential! Just off the top of my head—Have an event… in the parking lot, [an] event that can benefit everybody." "Close off the parking lot and… [host] a fun activity," another said. The third told me, "I'd like to see you guys do [this]: Have a church outside in the parking lot." Beyond these examples and suggestions, Parkside's parking lot also appeared in non-congregants' stories as a space in which they heard a direct invitation from God, engaged in interfaith conversations, and prayed with strangers. Wherever else we might affirm the presence of the Spirit, it seems right to say that the parking lot is holy ground, a vital arena of the Spirit's hospitality.

Christine Pohl refers to these kinds of public spaces as "threshold places"—open spaces that serve as "bridges between public and private space" and thus allow for "an initial encounter with strangers that could make them slightly more familiar."[411] Because of the risk posed for both hosts and guests when "hospitality is completely hidden from the view of others" in private spaces,[412] Pohl argues that "[f]inding and creating threshold places is important for contemporary expressions of hospitality."[413] As an interviewee above shared, it can be less intimidating to visit a parking lot block party than to attend an indoor church service. For this reason, Pohl urges us to

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[411] Ibid., loc. 674, 1076.

[412] Ibid., loc 1050.

[413] Ibid., loc 1076. Pohl likewise describes certain individuals as "threshold people."

"reduce risk by making hospitality more public. This is not to suggest making hospitality less personal," she continues, "but rather that welcome be initiated in a more public setting."[414]

According to Mark Mulder, these public settings are one of the most significant gifts a church can offer its neighborhood. Citing a study conducted by Canadian community developer Mike Wood Daly, Mulder asserts that "open space"—including "many areas a church might take for granted"—is the number one asset "congregations may be able to contribute to the broader community."[415] Kretzmann and McKnight concur, claiming that the "space and facilities" of religious institutions—including the "parking lot and [other] open unused space[s]"—"can become essential assets in the on-going process of community building" in a neighborhood.[416] Eric Jacobsen likewise finds great meaning in "[p]ublic spaces [that] provide the neutral territory that is necessary for the formation of informal relationships."[417] He sees public spaces as particularly essential for Christian communities because they

> require us to share with one another, they allow us to truly dwell among our neighbors, and they provide a context for a healthy exchange of ideas… Public spaces force us to think about and interact with people we don't necessarily know… Public spaces mitigate class differences—they are neither my turf nor your turf. And so they force us to relate to each other as equals.[418]

In all these ways, public spaces—threshold places—are vital to neighborhood hospitality. If we long to discover the Spirit of God's welcome, we would do well to go look in the parking lot.

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[414] Ibid., loc. 1071.

[415] Mulder, *Congregations, Neighborhoods, Places*, 62.

[416] Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities,* 144.

[417] Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 79.

[418] Ibid., 81.

Conclusion

Each of the fifty-five stories I heard throughout these interviews offers a meaningful glimpse into the life of the Spirit among us and our neighbors. As this thematic analysis has uncovered, however, taken together these stories form an even more meaningful narrative, an incomplete-yet-coherent collective account of the Holy Spirit's activity with and in our neighbors. Based on the testimony of the twelve women and men I interviewed, this is the story of the Spirit in our place:

The Spirit of community has been creating relationships of compassion and solidarity, drawing neighbors together in joy and in crisis, forming families out of strangers. The Spirit of diversity has been poured out onto communities of difference, inviting Muslims and Christians into friendships of mutuality, revealing God's presence in and through our youngest neighbors. The Spirit of hospitality has been welcoming our neighborhood into God's life as guests and hosts, preparing food and drink and space for us at the table of the Lord in all its forms and locations—in garages, backyards, patios, parking lots, and even sometimes churches. In all this and more, the Spirit of life and of love is pulling, calling, forming us through our neighbors—and our neighbors through us—into the life and love of the triune God who is community, diversity, and hospitality.

When I love God
I love the beauty of bodies,
the rhythm of movements,
the shining of eyes,
the embraces, the feelings,
the scents, the sounds
of all this protean creation.

When I love you, my God,
I want to embrace it all,
for I love you with all my senses in the creations of your love.
In all the things that encounter me,
you are waiting for me.

For a long time I looked for you within myself,
and crept into the shell of my soul,
protecting myself with an armor of unapproachability.

But you were outside
- outside myself -
and enticed me out of the narrowness of my heart
into the broad place of love for life.
So I came out of myself
and found my soul in my senses,
and my own self in others.

Jurgen Moltmann[419]

[419] Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 98.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Oh we could make such sweet music together,
If you come with your heart in your hand.[420]

This project began by asking, "How might a congregation's missional identity be reshaped by attentiveness to God's activity among their neighbors?" Thus far, this research question has remained unanswered. I have explored testimonies about God's activity among our neighbors and have uncovered a few central themes, but I have not yet addressed the reshaping of our congregation's missional identity. In this final chapter, I will present some of the missional implications of the research results outlined above, both for our particular congregation and for any other church seeking to join in God's mission in their place.

Implications for Parkside Church of Christ

As previously stated, my research is founded on the conviction that attentiveness to the Spirit's activity in a church's neighborhood shape that congregation's future participation in God's life. How then is Parkside's future being shaped? By attending to experiences of the Spirit's presence in our place, these interviews reveal an in-breaking future in which our church shares in the Spirit's cultivation of community, diversity, and hospitality in and with our neighborhood. Our experiences of this future have already begun to reshape our missional identity, even as they draw us deeper into the Spirit's life in our place. In order to step further into God's future, then, we are being called and formed alongside our neighbors for participation in the Spirit's ongoing creation of a hospitable, diverse community of care.

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[420] Clark, "The World Song."

It is important to note that this emerging identity does not entail replicating, replacing, or even extending the Spirit's work. As detailed in Chapter Two, as a "Spirit event," the *missio Dei* is "God's mission, not ours."[421] It is tempting to respond to the results of this project with an enthusiastic commitment to go create caring communities, to cultivate diversity, and to be hospitable, using our observations of the Spirit's activity as the template for our own ministry. Although such a response is understandable and even admirable, it may also be misguided. We are not being called to *do* the Spirit's work, but rather to *join* the Spirit—and our neighbors!—in faithfully responding to and sharing in that work. To act on this project's findings, then, is to step into God's future as faithful participants and partners, rather than heroic substitutes for the activity of the Spirit.

This by no means renders our current and future activity meaningless, however. As interviewees repeatedly affirmed, Parkside is already participating in God's life in the neighborhood in meaningful ways. Individually, these comments are easy to shrug off, but taken together, they form a powerful and surprising—and, frankly, much needed—affirmation that our small congregation is engaged in something that matters. To quote eight different participants:[422]

> "The church here participates well in God's life and purpose in the neighborhood, as I personally think a church should…. You should keep doing that." "You do the block parties. You do the, 'Hey, come.'" "You open your door to anybody that wants to come." "You guys clearly are and have been [welcoming]. Continue with stuff like that... you guys are on that path, and have been doing stuff like that already." "You've done that this past October when you had the Trunk[-or-Treat]." "[You're] already doing it with the block parties, the interaction with the neighborhood. You're already doing it, so there's your answer." "When you were doing your outreach with waters at the farmer's market, your block parties, your trunk-or-treats… English as a second language—I feel like

[421] Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 142.

[422] Specifically, three non-congregant neighbors, four local congregants, and one congregant who lives outside the neighborhood.

> you're doing all the things you could… I don't have the answer for what more [you] should be doing because I feel like you are doing it." "God's hope for our future, I feel, is just continue." "It's just keep on keeping on."

Notably, none of the affirmations expressed in these interviews mentioned the number of people who attend worship on Sunday mornings; the identity celebrated and encouraged by these comments is decidedly unrelated to congregation size. In this, I am reminded of an anecdote shared by David Fitch, who describes a conversation he had with leaders of his congregation:

> I remember asking the group to count the number of relationships we had with people in the neighborhood… We counted about seventy-five people we were involved with in long-term, real-life relationships in various kinds of situations. I then asked if our church was 50 people (the total who gathered on Sunday) or 125 (the total number of relationships where we were discerning the presence of Christ at work among us). I argued it was the latter.[423]

Tim Soerens makes a similar observation, claiming that if "we change the game to joining in God's dream in our neighborhood, and if all of us listen and discern the Spirit in our everyday lives… [we discover] a hidden, disconnected megachurch in all of our neighborhoods."[424] His colleagues at the Parish Collective agree, writing, "[W]hereas you might think of yourself as belonging to a church plant of twelve people, with a parish imagination, the number of people in your church might be five hundred, or even five thousand."[425] Or, as one of the participants in this project put it, "Just because we may not be seeing our membership swell from these events, it doesn't mean that our membership's not swelling from these events." The point here is not that Parkside might be a bigger congregation than we realize; it is not about congregation size at all.

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[423] Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 41, parenthetical statements in original.

[424] Soerens, *Everywhere You Look*, 61.

[425] Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, *The New Parish,* 141.

Rather, the comments shared in these interviews bear witness to a congregational identity independent of traditional metrics such as congregation size—an emerging identity grounded in neighborhood relationships rather than Sunday morning attendance.

In calling us to "keep on keeping on," these interviews reveal that some of the activities our church might take for granted—most notably our annual Block Party—are more meaningful than we realize, as they provide hospitable spaces in which we discover the diverse community of care God is forming in our neighborhood. They might also drive us to return to practices we have recently put on hold, such as the ESL conversation group or our participation at the farmers market, both of which have been discontinued in the past couple years. They may even inspire us to initiate new activities and host new events, as recommended by at least a few interviewees. Then again, perhaps there is wisdom in another respondent's comment: "Do we have more block parties? Do we have more community dinners? I don't know if that's any better than what we're already [doing]. I don't know if doubling down on those [is best]."

In fact, these interviews make a compelling case that, rather than expending energy hosting new events, Parkside would do well to instead embrace new opportunities to be hosted by our neighbors. As a few congregants noted in their responses, a congregation our size can only do so much. Rather than define our congregation by a scarcity of energy, resources, and volunteers, these interviews draw our attention to God's abundance awaiting us in our neighborhood. Beyond our own congregation's efforts, our neighborhood is home to so many moments of hospitality, experiences of diversity, and practices of community—each of which can be ascribed to the work of the Spirit, many of which are open to our participation. The witness of this project

thus calls Parkside into God's future *by becoming guests of the diverse, hospitable communities God is creating in our neighborhood*.

Christine Pohl, among others, highlights the reciprocity of true hospitality, noting that "the gifts of hospitality do not flow in one direction only; hospitality is a 'two-way street.'"[426] As Amos Yong observed above, the Spirit who is both host and guest likewise invites us into the practice "of being hosts as well as guests."[427] For this reason, Scott Hagley contends that "congregations must learn to live as guests of the neighborhood in which God has placed them."[428] Reflecting on the sending of the disciples in Luke 10, Hagley writes,

> Whatever it is that Jesus sends the disciples to do, embodied presence—sharing space, food, proximity—constitutes the bulk of Jesus' instructions. Proclamation and healing assume shared space around a table; they depend upon the hospitality of the stranger.[429]

In this same way, Hagley argues, our congregations "must also learn to eat what is set before them, learn to become guests in being hosted and welcomed by the neighborhood even as they seek to host and welcome the stranger."[430] "As congregants discern rhythms of welcome that might be shared and learned together," he concludes, "they must also learn to discern and respond to the invitations of others and outsiders."[431] By accepting the invitation of our neighbors, we join them as witnesses to and partners in the new creation activity of the Spirit.

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[426] Pohl, *Making Room*, loc. 820.

[427] Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 153.

[428] Hagley, *Eat What is Set*, 30.

[429] Ibid., 262.

[430] Ibid., 77.

[431] Ibid., 256.

Because this work is happening in a context of difference and disparity—a community currently marked as much by inequity as by diversity—our becoming guests of our neighbors opens us up to new opportunities to participate with them in the Spirit's work of racial and economic justice. This is not to say that mere proximity promotes equity; even in diverse communities, time spent together does not necessarily lead to a more just and inclusive neighborhood. As David Leong writes,

> [L]oving diversity as individuals without accounting for the systemic nature of our neighborhood's structural inequalities is not only unhelpful. Ironically, it is also a form of colorblindness.This colorblindness is a desire for diversity on our own terms, in ways and forms that are palatable to us as individual consumers… Until we're able to move beyond this shallow appreciation for diversity to the deeper questions of how and why systems shape the diverse life experiences of our neighbors, we'll remain on the surface of racial tensions and confused about why our colorblind and/or colorful society remains materially different for racial groups.[432]

Leong goes on to demonstrate the way celebrating our neighborhood's diversity without seeking to understand its inherent inequities can result in a "cheapening [of] the work of reconciliation by glossing over the division. Instead of excavating the foundation to bring it down, we may simply chip a few pieces off the top, and this accomplishes very little."[433] Mark Mulder concurs, warning that the "complexities of poverty and neighborhood renewal will not be solved merely through relationships."[434] Despite the fact that "many congregations find themselves attracted to the idea of relationship-building as a method" of fighting injustice, to "really address issues of

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[432] Leong, *Race and Place*, 45-46.

[433] Ibid., 107.

[434] Mulder, *Congregations, Neighborhoods, Places*, 75.

[injustice], merely developing relationships is inadequate."[435] For Mulder, being a good neighbor requires a church "to broaden their concern with individuals to include addressing the systemic barriers to well-being that those individuals face," both by caring for their neighbors' needs and by becoming "public witnesses to systems of injustice."[436] In other words, joining in the Spirit's "making all things new" in our particular place requires more than friendly interactions with diverse neighbors. Experiences of diversity will not, on their own, address our systems of oppression, segregation, exclusion, and injustice.

That said, something powerful—even transformative—does seem to happen when contexts of diversity are intersected by practices of communal care and mutual hospitality. As Willie Jennings notes, "the space of communion" necessary for the "joining of peoples now separated by violence, poverty, or race" becomes available wherever people "reach down to join the land and reach out to join those around them, their near and distant neighbors."[437] Through the Spirit of reciprocal welcome, shared space and shared life have the potential to transform mere coexistence into the sustained desire needed to overcome the generations of discriminatory policies and practices that have shaped our place. In this, Jennings writes,

> The identities being formed in the space of communion may become a direct challenge to the geographic patterns forced upon peoples by the capitalistic logic of real estate. We who live in the new space of joining may need to transgress [these] boundaries… by living together where we supposedly cannot, and being identified with those whom we should not.[438]

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[435] Ibid., 79.

[436] Ibid., 80, 99.

[437] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 286.

[438] Ibid., 287.

For this reason, Miroslav Volf names hospitality as an antidote to injustice, urging us to "let embrace—love—define what justice is."[439] Pohl likewise describes hospitality in the midst of diversity and inequity as "an act of resistance and defiance, a challenge to the values and expectations of the larger community."[440] This is particularly true of shared meals, she notes, writing, "Because eating is something every person must do, meal-time has a profoundly egalitarian dimension…. 'It's the great leveler.'"[441] In the words of Ed Loring, "Justice is important, but supper is essential."[442] Shared meals and other practices of mutual hospitality can thus become both foretastes of the equitable neighborhood of God's future and catalysts for our partnership with Spirit and neighbor in realizing that future in our present.

Furthermore, communities of care and hospitality provide the context for flourishing and mutual transformation in the midst of religious difference. This claim is essential for our ongoing life together with our Muslim neighbors. It is also central to Amos Yong's *Hospitality and the Other*, in which he presents a pneumatology of hospitality intended to inform "a flexible and relevant theology of interreligious practices."[443] According to Yong, "hospitality opens up a 'free space,' where people of other faiths can enter, where strangers, even enemies, might be transformed into friends;" in so doing, hospitality defines Christian mission as "not only hosting

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[439] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 225.

[440] Pohl, *Making Room*, loc. 701.

[441] Ibid., loc. 838.

[442] Ibid., loc. 845.

[443] Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 128.

people of other faiths but risking being guests of such strangers."[444] Toward this end, the Spirit empowers congregations to "interact with strangers" of other faiths by "listening to and receiving from others" on *their* home turf, "in public and even private spaces where more genuine dialogue, inter-change, and interaction occur."[445] Specifically, Yong suggests sharing "neighborhood meals together" writing,

> Because food plays an important role in hospitality, eating together is already a major accomplishment that symbolizes the establishment of sufficient bonds of trust across interreligious lines. Further, meal occasions are not only acts of friendliness but serve the processes of socialization and negotiation of religious identity. When people of different faiths come together around the meal table, the boundaries between adversaries break down, ritual practices are expanded, and a public space of mutual transformation is potentially established.[446]

Life in the Spirit, then, invites us to the table—the *actual* tables—of our Muslim neighbors as guests-becoming-friends, as neighbors-becoming-family. "Along the way," Yong concludes, "the Spirit of hospitality will transform us precisely through the interreligious encounter into the image of Jesus, even as we hope and pray… that as guests and hosts we can also be instruments of the hospitable God."[447]

In these diverse contexts of hospitality and communal care, new partnerships can emerge. As we and our neighbors are drawn *toward* each other by the Spirit, we are also sent *with* each other as partners in the renewal of our neighborhood. Several interviewees suggested these sorts of partnerships as central to our congregation's future. As one respondent put it, our church can

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[444] Ibid., 132.

[445] Ibid., 134.

[446] Ibid.

[447] Ibid., 160.

participate in God's life by "joining with others who are already doing that." "I feel like if we join with organizations, churches, groups who are already doing that," she added, "that would be the way for Parkside." Another interviewee likewise remarked, "I'd like to see our [congregation] helping to participate in activities that happen in the neighborhood… [to find out what's] going on in our neighborhood, and for us to leave our building to go and participate in those [things]." Another recommended partnering with local businesses; still another suggested partnering with neighborhood services such as a soup kitchen or halfway house. For a handful of respondents, the question of "What might we do?" thus became "Who might we join?"

These partnerships are also central to the neighborhood life outlined by several of the authors mentioned above. Leong, for instance, insists that "communities are changed and transformed slowly and collaboratively—together in real partnership—and not by charismatic individuals or good ideas alone."[448] For this reason, "[c]ollaborative engagement is… an essential posture for those seeking to move from an attractional church [a building/program-centric congregation] to a parish approach."[449] Kretzmann and McKnight agree, writing

> [Churches can share in the "process of building better communities" through] the creation and continuing development of a wide-ranging series of "partnerships" with other associations, institutions, organizations, and individuals that also exist within their community. By uniting the resources of local religious institutions with those that already exist in other aspects of the community, churches… can become actively connected to the most vital issues of their community and can be empowered to build a series of strong relationships… [In this way,] religious leaders can begin to work together with other community leaders to develop a series of new partnerships that will connect the local

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[448] Leong, *Race and Place*, 123.

[449] Ibid., 121, parenthetical statement in original.

> religious institution with the on-going process of building a stronger, more fully integrated community.[450]

Hagley concurs, writing, "Mission participates with God in joining ourselves with those to whom God sends us."[451] Borrowing a phrase from theologian Gary Simpson, Hagley thus describes mission as "public companionship"—partnership with neighbors for the sake of "a robust, trustworthy, and healthy civil society."[452] "The church exercises solidarity with its neighbors by cultivating space for connectivity and community, which means forming, nurturing, and discovering missional partnerships," Hagley contends.[453] In this way, the church is invited "to reimagine its life, its membership, its participation in the neighborhood in new ways. This is a task of building partnerships, of discovering new companions in ministry."[454]

This is a task most meaningfully accomplished in contexts of hospitality and diverse community. As our congregation discovers our life as guests of our neighbors, we will discover unexpected companions and cultivate new partnerships. By collaborating with—and even following the lead of—those we once considered lost and needy strangers, we affirm the Spirit's activity among and within them; we join in God's mission by joining in the work of the diverse communities that have become our hosts.

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[450] Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities*, 143-146.

[451] Hagley, *Eat What is Set*, 69.

[452] Ibid., 170, 179.

[453] Ibid., 179.

[454] Ibid., 69.

This emphasis on developing neighborhood partnerships, cultivating interreligious mutuality, and addressing systemic injustice in no way diminishes the value of what is typically imagined by the word "evangelism"—that is, retelling the gospel story and inviting people to share in it. Several participants in this project rightly identified God's hope for this neighborhood as people coming to know Jesus and sharing in his kingdom; a few even suggested practices for introducing neighbors to the gospel. One interviewee, for instance, claimed that God's "hope would be that we would all believe in and come to him through Jesus." "God would want them all to come to know Jesus and be in a right standing relationship with him," another said. "That's God's hope; that's our job." Another respondent expressed a desire to see our church continue "spreading God's Word and love and care and concern for others around us." I agree; the practices of receiving and extending hospitality among diverse communities outlined above do not supplant gospel proclamation.

Instead, they form the ground from which gospel proclamation and participation emerge—not as abstract propositions or strategies for persuasion, but as concrete testimonies springing up from actual shared experiences. As our lives become increasingly intertwined with that of our neighborhood, we and our neighbors bear witness to the work of the Spirit firsthand, opening up the possibility to observe aloud that "the Kingdom of God has come near." In this way, the good news of Jesus emerges as both good and news—as the narrative that links our present to God's past and future. This is not to say that neighborhood hospitality is merely the *means* by which evangelistic opportunities are created, as if life shared together simply serves as a technique by which we get to the "real work" of evangelism. Life shared together with the Spirit and our neighbors *is* evangelism; evangelism is attentiveness to the Spirit in our place and among our

neighbors. Like Peter in the home of Cornelius, we are being invited into the hospitality of others in order to experience and witness the transformative work of the Spirit. We discover the presence of God's new creation in and among our neighbors, name that presence in language that makes sense of our shared experience together, and welcome others into conversion even as we ourselves are continually being converted. In this way, Yong writes, evangelism is "nothing more or less than our having experienced God's redemptive hospitality and our inviting others to experience the same."[455]

This is the mission into which we are being invited and for which we are being formed. By attending to the holistic work of the Spirit within our neighborhood's diverse and hospitable communities of care, our congregation's identity is reshaped alongside that of our neighborhood. Toward this end, I would like to propose one specific next step in Parkside's ongoing formation in our place.

Accepting the Invitation: A Practice for Ongoing Formation

Later this year, I plan to present the findings of this project to my congregation. Highlighting the project's discovery of God's Spirit at work in diverse communities of hospitality and its implications for our ongoing life with God and our neighbors, I will then propose a new initiative for the coming season. Rather than planning new events or creating new programs, however, this next step will center on our congregation's accepting the invitations of our neighbors. Over the course of several months, we will attend neighborhood events hosted by others; we will embrace our calling to become attentive guests in diverse contexts of communal caring.

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[455] Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 131.

The events we choose to attend will intentionally reflect the diversity of our place. We will attend events in Detroit, Dearborn Heights, and Dearborn. We will attend events hosted by Muslim-led organizations, events hosted by city/commercial/community organizations, and events hosted by churches or Christian organizations. We will attend events held in primarily Arab-American spaces, in primarily African-American spaces, in primarily European-American spaces, and in notably multi-ethnic spaces.

While these events will thus vary significantly, they will each meet three common requirements:

1. **Proximity**—Each event must take place within Parkside's neighborhood as defined above.
2. **Food**—Each event must include a shared meal, snacks, or beverages.
3. **Conversation**—Each event must provide a context in which neighbors can talk together.

In this way, each event we attend will create a space for community, diversity, and hospitality in our particular neighborhood. For example, we might attend some of the events mentioned in the interviews such as the multi-cultural food festival at the community center. We might also attend a banquet at the nearby Islamic center, a fundraiser meal at the school up the road, a justice-oriented rally hosted by a local advocacy group, a picnic and clean-up day at Rouge Park, and a public dinner at St. Anselm Catholic Church. The final selection of events will be made in conversation with Parkside members before formalizing a schedule. We will attend one such event per month, over the course of about a year.

Because our participation in these events is meant to support missional formation through attentiveness, each individual event will be bookended by practices of reflection. Before leaving

for the event together, congregants will meet for prayer and for reflection on scripture — specifically, the Peter-Cornelius narrative in Acts 10. Following the event, attendees will be invited to complete a written reflection about their experience.[456] Specifically, they will be asked to answer the following five questions:

1. What happened?
2. What surprised you?
3. What questions did this raise?
4. What are you learning? Or, how are you changing?
5. What might God be doing here?

Following the last of this series of events, participants' written reflections will be compiled into a single, anonymized collection of narratives and reflections. This collection will be made available to church members who will be encouraged to read and analyze them via a simplified version of thematic analysis. This analysis will culminate in a congregational meeting, at which participating members will engage in practices of articulation. Specifically, they will be asked to consider and narrate two interrelated movements: 1) the activity of God in our neighborhood and 2) the ongoing formation of our congregation. In other words, we will be asked, "What is God up to in these neighborhood experiences? And how are these experiences shaping our church to join in God's life in our neighborhood?" The group's collective response to these two questions will then be summarized and shared with rest of the congregation, thereby informing next steps and new engagement with our neighborhood.

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[456] Because these written reflections will be made publicly available to myself and other Parkside members, they will also include the appropriate consent and acknowledgment statements. Relatedly, submission of this written reflection will always be optional; attendees will never be required to fill them out.

This process may result in observations that mirror those presented in this paper; then again, it could yield very different insights. Regardless of the outcome, however, I am convinced that the project itself will serve a vital, formative function for our congregation. Through faithful presence and attentiveness to both the Spirit and our neighbors, we will find ourselves changed —formed for partnership with God and neighbor.

Implications for Congregations in Other Neighborhoods

As I mentioned in my introductory chapter, this project was primarily intended to serve my particular congregation and neighborhood; still, I believe its findings hold significance for other congregations, especially smaller churches in changing, pluralistic contexts. I am convinced that the neighborhood pneumatology outlined in chapter 2 could be valuable for any congregation's developing imagination about the Spirit's activity in their local community. Furthermore, much of what the interviewees and I discovered in our place is likely also true in many—if not most—neighborhoods; whatever a church's geographic setting may be, joining in God's future in that place almost definitely includes sharing in the Spirit's creation of community, welcoming diversity, and cultivating hospitality. Likewise, congregations in myriad neighborhoods are being invited by the Spirit to become guests of their place—to pursue justice, interfaith mutuality, neighborhood partnerships, and attentive evangelism in response to the work of the Spirit among their neighbors.

For this reason, the "next step" practices I just outlined are likely to be formative for any congregation willing to commit themselves to faithful presence in their place. The events being hosted in another church's neighborhood may differ significantly from the events being hosted in

Parkside's neighborhood, but the same Spirit indwells both spaces. The same postures of presence and attentiveness will thus serve virtually every church in every place.

Most of all, I hope my description of this interview project can serve as a template for Christian communities elsewhere. I highly recommend this project to anyone seeking to discover the Spirit at work in their neighborhood. By welcoming the testimony of congregants and neighbors, we receive the gift of new revelation, a fresh look into the oft-ignored activity of the Spirit beyond our church walls. As we discover this Spirit in the particularity of our context, we are both welcomed and formed for partnership, transformed by and with our neighbors for the sake of God's future made present in our place. In receiving the gift of our neighborhood's stories as a gift of the Spirit, we also reciprocate with a gift in return; in our listening, we share in a hospitable space of mutual transformation. As one of the non-congregant participants in my project reflected, unprompted, at the end of our interview,

> Life is so fast that—even everything that we've been doing within our neighborhood—you really don't stop and think about all the positivity that comes from it, because you're busy doing it…. (Responding to these questions) was like an eye-opener. We do really have a good thing that's happening in our neighborhood. And as much as you do realize it, it's just going at such a fast pace. When you stop and really reflect on it is when you confirm it…We have such a great thing that we need to pause and think about it for a second. I really appreciate it.

In every context, this project has potential to make space for reflection and realization. In the sharing of neighborhood stories, we narrate the story of God and thereby rediscover the gospel alongside our neighbors. For this reason, I urge anyone who is interested in participating in God's life in their place to try this out. Ask the neighbors within and beyond your church to share their stories of God's presence, abundance, hope, and calling. Listen for the voice of God in the words of their stories, and allow yourself, your congregation, and your neighborhood to be

formed anew in the hospitable space of attentiveness. Attend to the story of your neighborhood, and in so doing, attend to

> the gentle whisper of the Spirit and the generative power of diverse belonging (that)… are in fact the faithful beginnings of Christian community. Christian community requires faithful imagination and creative perseverance to realize, but when we sit together in fellowship at the Table of hospitality, where all are truly welcome, we are overwhelmed with the reconciling love of God, which draws near to us and our neighbors.[457]

[457] Leong, *Race and Place*, 200.

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APPENDIX A: OVERVIEW OF RESPONSES

1. **Tell me about a time when you were particularly aware of God's presence in this neighborhood.**
   - Block Party at Parkside
   - Block Party at Parkside
   - Connection with Neighbors in Cul-de-sac
   - Experience Working in a School
   - God Promising Peace and Safety in New Home
   - God Steering Them Toward Site of New School
   - Loving Relationship with Partner
   - Neighborhood Group Text During Pandemic
   - Parkside Sharing Rooms with ESL Classes
   - Safety During Nearby Home Fire
   - Student's Contribution to ESL Conversation Group
   - Students at Catholic School
   - Trunk-or-Treat at Parkside
   - Trunk-or-Treat at Parkside
   - Warming Up at Parkside During Power Outage
2. **What do you value most about this neighborhood?**
   - Clean, Well-Kept, and Close to Nature (ex. Experiences with Animals)
   - Commonality Amid Diversity (ex. Get-Together During Power Outage)
   - Diversity (ex. Block Party at Parkside)
   - Diversity (ex. Block Party at Parkside)
   - Diversity (ex. Food Pantry and Distribution)
   - Ethnic, Racial, and Economic Differences (ex. Block Party at Parkside)
   - Family-Feeling (ex. Grief of Neighbor after Tragedy)
   - Immediate Family Live Nearby (ex. Family Holiday Gatherings)
   - Integration of Muslims and Christians (ex. St. Anselm Fair)

- Muslims Showing Kindness, Getting Along with Christians (various examples)
- Opportunities for Interaction and Solitude (ex. Helping Neighbors with Repairs)
- People Being There for Each Other and Helping (ex. Shoveling Snow)
- Substantially Different Cultures/Religions Coexisting (ex. General Friendliness)
- Variety of Cultures and Food (ex. Multicultural Food Festival)

3. **Based on your understanding of God, how would you describe God's hope for the future of this neighborhood?**
   - For all to come to know Jesus
   - For Christianity to penetrate the lives of Muslims
   - For peaceful coexistence
   - For us all to interact and be part of each other's lives (ex. two different volunteer stories)
   - To bring us all into God's kingdom (ex. Easter baptisms at St. Anselm Church)
   - To form lifelong relationships of people being there for each other
   - To protect everybody from evil (ex. Surviving dangerous threat of violence)
   - To see everyone follow God's way/become righteous
   - That everyone will come to God
   - That people treat each other with love and kindness (ex. Response to car accident)
   - That we get along and uplift each other
   - That we will love the people of our neighborhood (ex. ESL conversation group)
   - That we would continue to treat people as equals and be helpful (ex. Parkside sharing space with neighborhood organizations)
4. **How might our church better participate in God's life in this neighborhood?**
   - Door-to-door witnessing
   - Events that bring people together (ex. St. Anselm Fair)
   - Events that create opportunities for conversation (ex. Block Party, Thanksgiving event)
   - Events that get people together (ex. Bike Parade)
   - Groups for people to learn about Jesus in non-intimidating settings
   - Joining with others who are already doing it (ex. Farmers market)
   - Keep on keeping on, extending God's hospitality

- Showing care, concern, and love to neighbors
- Welcome people (ex. Visitors at St. Anselm Church)
- You are already doing it (ex. Block Party)
- You are doing it (ex. Trunk-or-Treat)
- You do the Block Party
- You have done it (ex. Trunk-or-Treat)

APPENDIX B: CODING

Each recurring phrase/idea that I coded in my analysis of the interview data is listed below, followed by the number of responses in which that phrase/idea appeared (out of 55).

Mentions/Examples of Diversity—32
Public Gatherings—25
Food/Drink—22
Interaction/Conversation—21
Challenge/Crisis—21
Hospitality/Welcome/Space—19
Children/Teens—19
Religious Diversity—19
Ethnic/National Diversity—18
Islam/Muslims—16
Arab/Arabic—15
Setting: A Parking Lot—15
"Bringing (People) Together"—14
Care/Love—14
Setting: Parkside Church of Christ—14
People Coming to Jesus/God—13
Friendship/Relationship—12
"Fun"—12
Setting: Next-Door/Own Block—12
God in Connection/Community—11
"Get(ting) to Know" Others—10
"Opportunity"—10
"Diversity"—9
Music/Singing—9
Parkside Block Party—9
Setting: Mobile Home Community—9
Sitting with Others—8
Parkside Partnering with Others—8
Bounce House—7
Witnessing/Sharing the Gospel—7
Setting: Own Home—7
Strangers/Neighbors as Family—6
Free—6
Events Specifically Drawing *Local* People—6
"Continue"/"Already Doing"—6
Coexisting/Interacting Across Difference—6
Trunk-or-Treat—6
Health Crisis or Other Emergency—6
Experience of God in Neighbors—6
Compassion During Grief/Loss/Death—5
Connection—5
Deepening of Closeness Over Time—5
Age Diversity—5
Economic Diversity—5
Provision During Financial Hardship—4
Contrasting Home Values—4
Cultural Diversity—4
ESL—4
Helping Others (Unspecified/Other)—4
Helping People Know/Know About God—4
Setting: St. Anselm Church/School—4
God in Moments of Protection/Provision—4
Saint Anselm Fair—3
Other Block/Street Party—3
Intentional Interfaith Conversation—3
Baptism—3
Power Outage—3
Helping With Repairs—3

APPENDIX C: INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

GOD OUR NEIGHBOR: DISCERNING OUR CALLING BY DISCOVERING GOD'S LIFE IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD - INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating how a congregation's identity is shaped by attentiveness to God's activity among their neighbors. This study is being conducted by Wayne Beason, a graduate student in the Hazelip School of Theology at Lipscomb University under the supervision of Dr. Mark Love. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to investigate how a congregation's identity is shaped by attentiveness to God's activity among their neighbors. Approximately 12-16 people are expected to participate in this research.

Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to engage in a series of interview questions. These interviews will be recorded using an external audio recording device. This study will take approximately 60-90 minutes.

Risks and Benefits:

The study has a minimal level of risk. A potential risk is general discomfort realized from disclosing personal experience or feelings as related to one's experiences in this congregation and/or neighborhood. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential.
I will keep the research results—including audio recordings—in a lockbox in my home and only I have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by April 2022. I will then keep all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you in a lockbox in my home.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to stop participating at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Lipscomb University in any way.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Wayne Beason, at 586-995-1135 or wbeason@mail.lipscomb.edu. You may ask questions now or later and my faculty advisor, Mark Love, mlove@rochesteru.edu, will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. Justin Briggs, Chair of the Lipscomb University Institutional Review Board at jgbriggs@lipscomb.edu. You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time. I consent to participate in the study and for the interview to be recorded.

_____	_____
Signature of Participant	Date
_____	_____
Signature of Researcher	Date

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Preliminary Questions

1. **Do you consider yourself to be a member of Parkside Church of Christ?** If so, for how long have you attended Parkside?
2. **Do you currently reside in the neighborhood surrounding Parkside Church of Christ?** (For this project, this neighborhood—hereby referred to as "this neighborhood"—is defined as the community bordered geographically by Joy Road in the north, Evergreen Road in the east, Cherry Hill Street in the south, and Beech Daly Road in the west.) If so, for how long have you lived in this neighborhood?

Interview Questions

3. **Tell me about a time when you were particularly aware of God's presence in this neighborhood**. (When and where was this? What happened? Who was involved? What was your role? And what about this experience points to God's presence?)
4. **What do you value most about this neighborhood? Tell me about a time you saw that value exemplified in this neighborhood.** (When and where was this? What happened? Who was involved? What was your role? And how does this event demonstrate this particular value?)
5. **Based on your understanding of God, how would you describe God's hope for the future of this neighborhood? Can you tell me about a time when you saw a hint of that future in the present or recent past?** (When and where was this? What happened? Who was involved? What was your role? And what about this experience do you hope to see again in the future?)
6. **How might our church better participate in God's life in this neighborhood? Can you tell me about a time that you've seen a congregation or group do something similar?** (When and where was this? What happened? Who was involved? What was your role? And how might that sort of experience be replicated in our neighborhood?)