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A Ministry Journey that is Unfolding:
How I Came to See Myself as a Female
Preacher and Leader

A Research Portfolio
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
Tyndale University

by

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Toronto, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This portfolio explores my unfolding ministry journey as a preacher and leader by exploring my background, beginnings, theological traditions, and experiences – all elements that shaped my deepest convictions concerning preaching and leadership. The Doctor of Ministry program, with the lectures, peer discussions, assignments, projects and readings, played a significant role in helping me to reflect and wrestle with my identity as a preacher, how I lead and intend to lead, as well as considering my current situation as a church planter in the Catch the Fire family of churches. The research, which focused on understanding felt needs of the community in order to preach contextually-informed sermons in a new church plant, was primarily ethnographic research, with a strong evaluative component. Participants, who were considered community advisors, rated each sermon preached. The key finding was that developing a better understanding of the felt needs of the community increased the overall effectiveness of my sermons. The unifying themes in this portfolio include my journey of how I came to see myself as a female preacher and leader, as I focused on myself (my call, background and convictions), on the Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and on others (the people that God has called me to impact, as a preacher and leader). Throughout the DMin program, I believe I have acquired tools to become a better preacher, leader, and servant of God. I have developed a preaching theology that is going to be foundational to my preaching vocation and a philosophy of leadership that will guide my leadership aspirations.

DEDICATION

To my most precious treasures:

my husband Dan,

my son Shiloh, and

my daughter Lily.

With God, all things are possible!

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: MY CALL AS A
PREACHER AND LEADER TO THE
PEOPLE OF BROCKVILLE AND
AREA

I am above all a deeply loved daughter of the Most High God; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. My identity is deeply rooted in this understanding. I am also a wife to one man and a mother of two children under the age of 10. My husband and I are in the process of planting a new church in Brockville, Ontario, a place we moved to in March 2020, right at the beginning of the COVID pandemic and ensuing lockdowns. Prior to our move, we had been residing in Toronto, Ontario, the city I had been living in for 18 years. The new congregation is slowly taking shape as we recently soft-launched our church plant. We have temporarily named it Less Words More Actions, a Catch the Fire (CTF) Community. We hope that this congregation will one day become CTF Brockville, once we meet the criteria of having at least 40 members in our congregation.

Enrolling in the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) program at Tyndale Seminary has been both rewarding and challenging. The first challenge happened when the program I enrolled in changed from DMin in Preaching and Communication to DMin in Leadership with a Preaching Concentration. When I first enrolled, fresh from completing my Master of Divinity (MDiv) in Pastoral Ministry, it was because I felt I still needed to sharpen my preaching skills. I still needed to sit at the feet of seasoned preachers. How can someone be better prepared for the

sermons that they preach? I wanted to go even deeper. But when the change happened, I had already started this adventure so turning back was not an option. It turned out to be a blessing because, if I thought that I was not out of the woods yet concerning preaching, I was even way deeper in the woods concerning leadership.

It has now been five years since I have embarked on this journey. I became a new mother right in the middle of my program and my daughter is now three years old. Together with the joy and pain of motherhood, I learned the joy and pain of learning, reflecting, and wrestling with various themes of preaching and leadership. This was topped off with planning and executing my field research in a completely foreign environment, as God called me to a place very different from my initial context. The common thread that unites the various and disparate parts of this DMin journey is my unfolding ministry journey of how I came to see myself as a female preacher and leader. In this introduction, I will briefly highlight the different themes that will be developed all through the body of this portfolio, starting with my personal preaching identity, my philosophy of Christian leadership, and my research project as well as a brief outline of my learnings and what the future may hold.

In chapter 2 of my portfolio, *My Pilgrimage Toward a Preaching Identity*, I start by exploring the theological background that has shaped me. This includes, Orthodox Christianity, Baptist, Non-Denominational Evangelical, and Non-Denominational Charismatic traditions. My preaching identity was also influenced by preaching mentors with their own distinctive point of views, so I discuss three of them: pastoral, seminary classroom and in-writing mentors. I conclude this part

with my own theology of preaching that emerged out of my background, experiences and values that are widely shared but of particular value to me. Preaching involves silent listening, it is Christ-centered, it is participating in God's work, it involves self-knowledge and bearing witness, it holds theology and biography together, it leads to double love of God and others, and it is practical.

The third chapter of my portfolio, *My Emerging Trinitarian Philosophy of Leadership*, is all about the leadership style to which I aspire. It is the leadership model that I want to follow wherever God calls me to lead. It is Father, Son and Holy Spirit-focused, hence the name Trinitarian. This is where I was surprised: this portfolio, after all, is not just about me. It is also about God. Chapter 3 starts with an honest admission that I never consciously considered myself as a leader. I was leading without knowing that I was a leader. Therefore, I think people, especially women, who have never considered themselves as leaders for various reasons can benefit from my reflections on this subject. I first discuss my convictions concerning Christian leadership by taking into account my call, my giftings and experiences, my current position as church planter, and additional Christian leadership models that have inspired me. I conclude by formulating my own philosophy of Christian leadership. It is rooted in the love of God the Father, grounded in the humility and servanthood of Jesus the Son, and led and guided by the Spirit of God.

The fourth part of my portfolio, *My Project to Understand My Community in Order to Preach More Effectively*, is all about my field project. This is where the focus shifts towards others, the people God has called me to “feed” and care for. I

found myself in a pioneer position, starting a new congregation from the ground up in the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville (UCLG), Ontario, of which Brockville is the main city. The heart of this field project was to understand the culture and context of the new community I am called to shepherd so I can genuinely impact people with meaningful sermons that speak into their lives for their blessing and the glory of God.

This project has informed my practice of preaching by helping me understand the felt needs of my community better and developing my preaching skills. Since I was relatively new to this area and community, understanding the values, lifestyle, hopes and fears of the people living in my community who may become future members of the church plant was important. I also wanted to avoid broad generalizations and develop sermons that speak to listeners' lives. Therefore, I invited nine participants, whom I considered as advisors, to listen to a generic sermon of mine (Sermon 1: Brutal Honesty). I preached this first sermon and gave it to these participants for evaluation. I then interviewed these same participants to discover the felt needs of the people that live in our community. I then reflected on what type of preaching would be appropriate. Finally, I designed and preached three contextually-informed sermons (Sermon 2: What is Impossible for Man is Possible for God, Sermon 3: He Must Increase but I Must Decrease, Sermon 4: Woman, Thou Art Called to Lead!) and asked the same participants to evaluate them to see if understanding the felt needs of the community made a difference in the quality of my preaching. The results showed that there was improvement in the ratings and comments received between the generic sermon and subsequent

sermons. It also revealed the importance of receiving feedback for my sermons for the overall growth and development of my preaching skills.

As I edited my portfolio into one cohesive narrative, I discovered that there were a lot of repetitions that needed to be removed, lest I sound like a parrot. But this highlighted the common thread throughout all parts of this portfolio. In all three sections, I kept referring to myself and my journey as I received my call to preach, the experiences that shaped me into the leader that I am and that I aspire to be, and God's guidance to plant a church in my new context. It also became apparent to me that important recurring themes such as soaking, intimacy, inner healing, and the voice of God repeating to me: "feed my sheep" kept coming up in each of the main chapters. So, this journey has been a reflection on my calling as a preacher and as a leader shepherding God's people.

This has been a journey of discovery, reflection, and learning to align myself with what God is doing now without letting go of the past. I am called to make use of all the rich foundations I have been given along with new insights to help build up the church now. I am more determined than ever to succeed in my present task: to plant a distinctive church, not just any church but a CTF church, in my new community of Brockville and area. People need to experience God the way we experience him at CTF, pursuing an intimate and passionate relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even though this is not the focus of this portfolio, I believe it is a guiding principle of who I am as a preacher and leader. As one professor has highlighted to me, I will remain a charismatic at heart: a charismatic preacher and leader.

CHAPTER 2 MY PILGRIMAGE TOWARD A PREACHING IDENTITY

Enrolling in the DMin in Leadership with a Preaching Concentration program has been rewarding. Even though I had come a long way, I felt there was still a lot to be learned when it comes to preaching. Ian Pitt-Watson wrote in *Preaching: A Kind of Folly*, “I don’t understand preaching, but I believe in it deeply” (Pitt-Watson 1978, 5). He further stated:

Because the preacher is involved in what he is saying and cannot be objective to it he can never fully understand what is happening when God speaks to him and through him. But he can be sure that this thing *does* happen, not always but sometimes, sufficiently often to make the preaching of the Word essential, even central, within his total ministry. *Why* it happens remains a mystery. (Pitt-Watson 1978, 21, italic in original)

Indeed, there is an inherent mystery to preaching, from the “birth” of the sermon to how it is heard once it is delivered.

So here I was, trying my best to understand this wonderful task that God has called me into. I would call the timing for it as the best of times as well as the worst of times. Just when I thought I was ready to plant a new church in my basement, God closed all doors in Toronto, Ontario where I had spent the last 18 years of my life living, loving and establishing networks, and directed us as a family to go live in the Ottawa region. This was very unfamiliar ground, amongst very unfamiliar people. I felt I still needed to sharpen my skills as a preacher but this huge move in our lives and saying “Yes” to God felt like walking on water, both miraculous and difficult.

In this chapter, informed by my readings and life experiences, I will first focus on the articulation of my own theology of preaching, starting with my theological tradition and preaching mentors who have formed me followed by an exploration and reflection on my own sense of call, gifting and life experiences that have shaped me into the person and preacher that I am.

THEOLOGY OF PREACHING

I will start from my beginnings, my theological tradition, followed by preacher mentors who have contributed to my spiritual formation. Then I will articulate my emerging theology of preaching.

Theological Tradition

In this section, I will explore the theological background that has shaped me. This includes, Orthodox Christianity, Baptist, Non-Denominational Evangelical, and Non-Denominational Charismatic traditions.

Orthodox Christianity

I was born in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia into an Orthodox Christian family. Ethiopia has a unique Judeo-Christian heritage. Before Christianity, Judaism was deeply engrained in Ethiopian society through the legendary union of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. According to the *Kebra Nagast: Glory of Kings*, Menelik I, who was the founder of the Solomonic dynasty and ruled in the 10th century B.C., resulted from this union (Beckwith, Fisher and Hancock 1990, 17). All rulers of Ethiopia, until the last Emperor Haile Selassie in the 20th century, have claimed to be descendants of Menelik I and, consequently, descendants of the tribe of Judah.

Christianity became the state religion of Ethiopia in 350 A.D., second only to Armenia and longer than Christianity had been a state religion even in the Roman Empire, when Christianity became the official religion in 380 AD (Robertson 2017). The Ethiopian Axumite Kingdom that ruled approximately from 100-940 AD was converted to Christianity by a Syrian boy called Frumentius. He was travelling to India with his Christian instructor, Meropius, when their ship was seized off the African coast and its passengers were killed, sparing only Frumentius and another boy. The two were taken to Ethiopian King Ella Amida's court. In the course of time Frumentius, who was held in great honour and affection by the King, founded the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church when King Ella Amida's heir, King Ezana, ascended to the throne (320-360 A.D.) (Beckwith, Fisher and Hancock 1990, 18).

As a result, Ethiopians have been devoted to God for many centuries and this is reflected in many of the customs and traditions of the country. God is, in fact, woven into the deep fabric of everyday life, even in the way they greet one another. However, the combination of the threat of Islam and the ignorance of Christian nations coming to the aid of Ethiopian believers, has led to the isolation of the Ethiopian church from the rest of the Christian world (Robertson 2017). Graham Hancock, quoting Edward Gibbon, wrote: "Encompassed by the enemies of their religion, the Ethiopians slept for near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten" (Beckwith, Fisher and Hancock 1990, 13). He goes on to say that "a fortress mentality took root during these centuries of retreat [and that,] in keeping out the hated 'enemies of their religion,' ... Ethiopians

also cut themselves off from the evolving mainstream of Christian thought” (Beckwith, Fisher and Hancock 1990, 13).

As a fellow Ethiopian, from my early days, I had a desire to know God and obey him. I remember receiving a Bible as a gift from my father in my pre-teens and, starting to read it but abandoning it several times, after reaching Leviticus. I thought the Bible had to be read from cover to cover like any other book and stopped reading it once it became too complicated to understand; what seemed to me like zillion rules and regulations that did not make sense to me.

Encouraged by a family friend who regularly participated in the yearly fasts, I also remember that in my family, I was the first to complete a 40-day vegan fast that coincides with Lent, called “Hudadi” or “Abiye Tsome,” as well as becoming a pioneer in celebrating the never-ending saints’ days (W. and Joachim 1970; Feast Days of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, n.d.). Almost every day in a month was a certain saint’s or angel’s day that I religiously observed by displaying a picture of the saint or angel, lighting a candle, praying to that saint or angel and dedicating some food and snacks that would become holy, that we would all later enjoy. Even though my family was not a church-going one, I strongly encouraged my older brother to join the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and rebuked him when he started being influenced by Protestant beliefs, called “Pente,” short for Pentecostal. He remains a deacon in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church to this day.

So, from early on, I had a certain zeal for God like many of my fellow Ethiopian Orthodox believers, but one that was misplaced. I loved God and desired to follow him, but this was based on my own personal efforts through obeying rules

and observing the church's rites rather than from a place of trust, relationship and rest in God. In this, I can echo the apostle Paul's words:

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. (Romans 10:1-4 NRSV)

Baptist

While I was in university, a friend asked me where I thought I would go if I died. I answered that I would neither go to heaven nor to hell but would probably end up roaming the earth in between heaven and hell. This conversation opened the way for me to be connected to this friend's church, Beza Baptist Church, while on school break in 1999 (Beza means redemption in Amharic, Ethiopia's official language). I was assigned a wonderful teacher who walked me through the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and showed me the plan of God. I was amazed to see how the entire Bible was unified and suddenly made sense. It was no longer what I thought to be "the boring book" I had tried to read and abandoned so many times before.

Not long afterwards, in 1999, I received Jesus as my Lord and Savior and was baptized. My understanding of salvation based on the finished work of Christ on the cross, and not on my own efforts, freed me of years of trying to earn my way to heaven. I could not believe why I was not told this earlier and wanted to proclaim this Good News from the rooftops. Of course, I was met with harsh resistance the moment I tried to share what I thought was this liberating news to some of my good Orthodox friends.

Unfortunately, school break—during which time I received Christ as Savior and Lord in my hometown of Addis Abeba—was coming to an end without giving me the opportunity to grow in discipleship and church attendance. I had to leave for university located hundreds of kilometres away from my hometown. My Christian friend was in his last year of university before the summer of my conversion, so I went straight back to my worldly ways of living. But the assurance that I was saved by grace through faith never left me for the following six years of wandering.

I graduated university in July 2001 and moved to Canada in October 2002. By 2005, I was starting to feel this huge spiritual void in my life. All these years from the time I received Christ in 1999, I had remained a baby Christian, but God was patiently, slowly and gently drawing me back to himself. I would go through television channels and end up watching Christian programs such as Benny Hinn’s “This Is Your Day!” and end up crying incessantly for mysterious reasons. I eventually ended up watching Pastor Charles Price on his televised program “Living Truth” and finally decided to attend his church.

Non-Denominational Evangelical

Six years after being saved, in 2005, I started attending Peoples Church, a non-denominational evangelical congregation in Toronto, Ontario. I found then senior Pastor Charles Price to be an excellent Bible teacher and was intrigued at how he could extract thoughtful messages and lessons from the different passages that he was covering. I developed a deep love for the Word of God and an appreciation for preaching. My journey to spiritual maturity was about to deepen.

I also started volunteering at church by enrolling in an evangelistic program called Evangelism Explosion (EE). EE was first developed by the Reverend Dr. D. James Kennedy, who was senior pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, with the aim of training laypeople to be effective witnesses of Christ (Kennedy 1996, ix-xii). Rev. Dr. Kennedy had the vision of mobilizing “a mighty army of at least 10 million full-time lay evangelists in the very near future” (Kennedy 1996, ix-xii and 215). At Peoples Church, EE training was provided in a semester format at five levels, each level being 12 to 13 weeks long. I started as an EE trainee and by the time I graduated at level V three years later, I was a full-fledged trainer, well-versed in presentation evangelism. I was extremely enthusiastic at the prospect of being able to share my faith with family and friends, without being confrontational or confused or stuck in my explanations. I started seeing many people come to Christ, including several of my co-workers, my younger brother, as well as the man who would become my future husband.

A certain dissatisfaction remained, though, as I continued in some sinful behaviors that I could not shake off, no matter how many times I read the Bible. I slowly started to lose interest in the sermons that I had come to love so much. Something was missing. I started crying out “There must be more than this!”

After learning about seminary education while attending Peoples Church, I applied to Tyndale Seminary in 2007 and was accepted.

Non-Denominational Charismatic

While I was yearning for more of God's touch in my life, in 2008 I attended MissionFest Toronto (MFT), an event that brings together people from all Christian denominations to share what they are doing for the Lord, especially as they live out the Great Commission. I was there representing the EE team of Peoples Church. As I was visiting other booths, I met Pastor Ramesh from Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF), now CTF Toronto, who was also a Tyndale Seminary graduate. We connected immediately and he said that he wanted to introduce me to "a very anointed fellow Ethiopian woman" who was a long-time member of TACF. I accepted the invitation and Beza, namesake of the Ethiopian church where I received Christ, ended up being my first cell leader at TACF, friend and later co-pastor when we led a first-generation Ethiopian-Eritrean congregation in downtown Toronto. At MFT, Pastor Ramesh also took me over to his wife Elsie who prophesied over me. I had no idea what that meant but realized I was getting acquainted to the more that I had been praying for. This encounter would precipitate my move from Peoples Church to TACF.

It took a lot of hesitations and multiple visits to TACF to make sure that I was not getting involved in a cult before I felt free to make it my home church in 2009. It happened that my first orientation class at Tyndale Seminary, during my application period in 2007, was with Professor James A. Beverley. That day, he was teaching on various cults and one of the videos he showed was of a meeting at TACF. In the clip, we watched as people claimed receiving gold fillings in their teeth supernaturally and praising God for the amazing miracles. At the end of the

class, Professor Beverley kindly offered us his book on the subject entitled *Holy Laughter & The Toronto Blessing: An Investigative Report* as a gift. Of course, I had never heard of that church and did not even read the book until my encounter at the MissionFest.

I could have easily been disinterested but once I read the book, it was balanced enough in its presentation of the revival, that happened in 1994 at what was initially the Airport Vineyard church near Toronto's Pearson International Airport. This church later came to be known as TACF. Dr. Beverley had a balanced view of the positive aspects of the church and the criticisms regarding what could have been handled better during the revival. He wrote: "If the Toronto Blessing is too wild, are not dead and boring services an equal, if not greater, sin? If Vineyard leaders put too much emphasis on spiritual 'experiences,' what about other church leaders who deny them completely? If the Holy Spirit is overemphasized, what shall we say against churches that ignore the Spirit?" (Beverley 1995, 150). This encouraged me to check the church out for myself and reach my own conclusions before I decided to join.

The first day I walked into TACF, I felt the tangible presence of God. A mysterious heat enveloped and embraced me, as if God was giving me a heartfelt hug. I remember having goosebumps all over my body and being teary-eyed, for no reason. That day, I worshipped God like I had never worshipped him before. It was completely different from my experience at Peoples Church and I would never be the same again. The internal transformation journey was starting to deepen. In the following years, I would have several supernatural encounters with God that meant

everything to me and brought long lasting freedom and many healings to various areas of my life where there were bondages. These encounters are very personal, specific and meaningful. I look forward to sharing them as God leads and opportunities present.

The main thing that I started learning about at TACF was my identity in God; that I was loved and accepted by him apart from my accomplishments and shortcomings; that he delights in me and desires a close intimate relationship with me. I learned to hear his voice, to meditate or soak, as we call it at CTF, by spending countless hours in his presence being still and knowing that he is God, receiving visions and dreaming dreams. David G. Benner writes this of Jesus, “Resisting the temptations to a false self based on power, prestige or possessions, Jesus chose his true identity as the deeply loved Son of God. His identity was not an issue. This is why he was also not distracted by the critics who tried to dismiss him as being merely Joseph’s son (Luke 4:23)” (Benner 2015, 91). I started living out of my true identity in Christ.

I also learned about journaling and started to extensively journal my experiences with God, and it was transformational. I was able to grasp things about myself (good, bad and ugly), God and others that would not have been apparent without this practice. I was able to converse with God more easily as I wrote down deep questions and found answers flowing at the tip of my pen. As I kept journaling, I was surprised by how much more easily I could hear God speaking to me as his beloved daughter. I also found out that it is an excellent tool to remember, re-live those experiences and be awed by the work of God in my life as

I go back to re-read what I have written down. Helen Cepero writes that “journaling is really about authenticity” (Cepero 2008, 28). She goes on to explain that “Like the treasure hidden in a field, or the pearl of great price, this is the discovery born not out of what we know or have but out of our awareness of who we are and whose we are. As John Calvin insisted, ‘There is no deep knowledge of God without a deep knowledge of self and no deep knowing of self without a deep knowing of God’” (Cepero 2008, 28). For me, journaling has facilitated a deep knowledge of self and deep knowledge of God, which are two things that go hand in hand and are not mutually exclusive. This will become one of my principles of preaching.

This is also the time I learned about prophecy, realized I had the gift and started prophesying into people’s lives. Many people were amazed at how accurate the messages given were. In my own life, I would know things before they happened and not be impacted as much when they did happen. It is like the Lord saying: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” (Genesis 18:17¹). I grew in my knowledge of God as my loving Father, as my friend, and as my intimate lover. Daily I would wake up earlier and earlier in the morning to spend time with God and journal profusely about my encounters, talk to God, pray, intercede, and just marvel at his revelations and the intensity of his love. This is indeed a very special place to be. I no longer only knew about God but knew him and it completely transformed me.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the NIV

CTF is also the place where I grew in my leadership abilities. I first attended various cell groups and eventually became a cell leader myself as my gifts started to become apparent: mainly teaching, prophesying, and spiritual care.

Theological Tradition Summary

As one of my professors at Tyndale Seminary remarked, I am “an ecumenical movement” in myself. There are many advantages to this. For instance, my Orthodox background has ingrained in me the importance of worship that is loud, vibrant and engages all the senses. Much of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s praise and worship includes dance accompanied with drums, even if there is a minimal use of musical instruments. This reminds me of David and the Israelites dancing and rejoicing before the Lord: “David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals” (2 Samuel 6:5, NRSV). To this regard, William A. Dyrness writes:

The trust and confidence the Hebrew had in God led to a deep sense of joy that seems to pervade the references to worship in the OT. This joy led them naturally to outbursts of praise to God. The root idea of praise (Heb., *hillēl* or *yādāh*) is connected with making a noise or bodily gesture, or with playing and singing ... Praise was often so exciting that worship could only be described as boisterous. There was dancing (Ps. 150:4), all kinds of instruments (Ps. 108:2), constant singing (Ps. 33:3) and even tumultuous shouting (Ps. 27:6). There was nothing dreary about OT worship! In fact one has the impression that in praising, men and women realize their highest end. Von Rad says insightfully: “Praising and not praising stand over against one another like life and death: praise becomes the most elementary token of being alive that exists” (von Rad I, 370). The “dead” worship of some contemporary churches strays far from God’s desire. (Dyrness 1977, 164-165)

It seems to me it is harder to try and keep calm and collected during praise and worship than to be loud and boisterous. How can one keep calm before the many benefits of the Lord?

In addition, the burning of sweet-smelling frankincense and myrrh incense during the prayers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which are symbolic of both the gifts brought before baby Jesus as well as the faithful's prayer rising before God (Matthew 2:11, Psalm 141:2, Revelation 8:4); the explosion of rich colourful garments of the priests and deacons; the exquisite architecture of church buildings; the various traditional paintings depicting God, angels and saints adorning walls and ceilings; and embroidered umbrellas shielding the *tabots* that emerge from the holy of holies (the *tabot* is an engraved slab of stone or wood representing the Tables of the Law in the Ark of the covenant in the Old Testament times); all of these richly add to the experience of the faithful communing with God and with others.

My connection to the Baptist Church, however brief, has emphasized the importance of yearning for souls that are still separated from God. The presentation of the Gospel was thorough and in such a way that it led me to ask, like the Ethiopian eunuch, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" (Acts 8:36).

My time at Peoples Church grounded me in the Word of God and helped me to develop a love for the Word and preaching. It is the place where I started to read my Bible with dedication and passion, and to attentively listen to sermons that were feeding my soul and spirit, always delighted by the lessons and applications I

was gleaned either from the sermons or hours of study. With its emphasis on missions, it is also the place that has not only encouraged me to obey the Great Commission but also equipped me to reach out to those still in darkness, starting right where I was (Toronto) before I can ever dream of going out to the ends of the world (that appears to be Brockville, Ontario for now).

Finally, I admit that I did not join CTF for its strength in preaching but because there was an element missing in my spiritual walk that none of my other church backgrounds were able to provide. I joined because it connected me to the work of the Holy Spirit in my life and addressed issues and woundedness that were seriously hindering my walk with God.

CTF has also taught me the importance of sharing testimonies during worship services. In *Rediscovering Worship: Past, Present, and Future* edited by Wendy J. Porter, Mark J. Boda highlights the importance of testimony in worship. Boda wrote:

Testimony, which was at one time a key component within church services but is now largely sidelined, was a key horizontal element within the worship experience of Israel, whether that entailed testifying to one's pain or thanking God for his deliverance. The fact that most of the psalms with such horizontal testimony also contain a vertical dimension suggests the assumption in Israel that God listens in on such worship and receives praise through such testimony. But of course, such testimony is designed to be a catalyst for further prayer and worship by the rest of the community." (Boda 2015, 65)

Sharing testimony is a huge component in the worship of CTF as well as many charismatic churches in Africa (for instance, The Synagogue Church of All Nations located in Lagos, Nigeria and its television program, Emmanuel TV).

Yet, all of this good resulted in some unresolved issues that created some difficult tension in me. I believe that I am a charismatic at heart since I have benefitted and grown so much spiritually under CTF. However, I am extremely disturbed by my church's tradition of "weak preaching" (Beverley 1995, 153) and "anti-intellectual spirit" (Beverley 1995, 155) or, distrust of theology and doctrine, which directly translates to sloppy sermons.

I believe that CTF can benefit from a good dose of theology and biblical exegesis being incorporated in its preaching practice, especially as the church states that the Bible is foundational to its preaching. Sharing of experience and making sermons applicable to listeners' lives is highly encouraged, which are very important. In addition to this, I believe balancing the preacher's and others' personal stories with God's story would make the sermons richer and more relevant. If we neglect theology, which is in essence speaking about God as M. Kapic stresses (Kapic 2012, 15-16), it might give the wrong impression that the central character is no longer God but the lives of people. By balancing topical sermons with exegetical sermons—even following lectionary texts from time to time—large portions of Scripture that might otherwise be ignored could be expounded on, giving the congregation a more balanced diet of the Bible. Therefore, I truly believe that a good dose of theology and exegetical sermons will only strengthen CTF, not diminish its strength.

Finally, since I am a product of this rich theological background, I will strive to discard what is not beneficial and hold on to the positive aspects of each of

my church traditions, as I pursue the planting of our own church in the area where God has placed my family and me.

Preaching Mentors who Have Formed Me

I will now discuss preaching mentors who have influenced my preaching identity. These are my pastoral mentor, Pastor Charles Price; my seminary classroom mentor: Reverend Doctor Kevin Livingston; and my mentor in-writing: Doctor Gordon D. Fee. Each one has formed me with their own distinctive point of view and emphasis as presented below.

Pastoral: Pastor Charles Price

Pastor Charles Price was the senior pastor of Peoples Church when I attended from 2005 to 2008. I was so inspired by his sermons that I would go home and write poems based on what I had heard. He once asked the congregation where we thought the richest place was found on earth. He went on to tell us that it was the graveyard. That day, I was so motivated that I went home and composed the following poem based on 2 Timothy 4:6-7 “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

THE GRAVEYARD

The richest place on earth
It has no glamour, no warmth
To find it is not hard
It's next door, it's the graveyard.

So many talents, it has swallowed
So many dreams, it has chowed
What could have been doctors, lawyers, scientists and ministers
Preachers, evangelists, shepherds and teachers.

As for me I have made this solemn vow
I will not be lazy, I will not allow
The graveyard to win so selfishly
I know what the Lord has planned for me.

I will be poured out like a drink offering
Mine will be a life victorious, amazing
Not a single dream with me will die
There will be no regrets left when I finally say goodbye.

How precious are my God's thoughts about me
How vast is the sum of them really
The grains of the sand they outnumber
I will make my Lord proud; to the graveyard...I will not surrender!

In his farewell speech to Peoples Church, this is what Pastor Charles had to say about his church and the task of preaching:

Our task has been simply to see that Jesus Christ is central in this church and that in coming to him, people find life, joy and fruitfulness... There is a high love for the Word of God and a high love for God himself. Sermons long or short are not the point. I've asked two questions of every sermon I've preached here: how does this lead people [to be] dependent on God? Not a to-do list: "go away and do it" but how does this lead people needing God himself to make this work on Monday, Tuesday, back at home, at the various crisis that are part of life? And the second question has been: would a 12-year-old understand this? ... Simplicity is not superficiality. Superficiality can be very complex actually. We want to be simple so that each of us can grasp these simple truths, child-like truths that are so profound and so deep in how they work their way in our lives. (The Peoples Church 2016)

Pastor Charles emphasized on the importance of preaching that exhibits simplicity and focuses on God. As a result, I have always strived and continue to make my sermons abide by this principle of simplicity and focus on God.

Seminary Classroom: Reverend Doctor Kevin Livingston

Rev. Dr. Kevin Livingston is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in Canada and was an associate professor of pastoral ministry at Tyndale Seminary. He taught me all the pastoral ministry courses that I took when

completing my MDiv. Years of schooling under his mentorship have given me the tools that I need to excel as a pastor and preacher. It is in the classroom that I first learned the importance of exegetical preaching and preached my first exegetical sermon. In addition, he introduced me to a plethora of excellent preachers and Christian thinkers who have influenced me as to what true Biblical preaching means. In this section, I mention some of those who have impacted me most.

John Stott wrote: “All true Christian preaching should be expository” (Stott and Scharf 2015, 25). That means preaching entails “expounding the truth of a biblical passage, opening up a text (verse, paragraph, chapter or whole book) in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately and relevantly” (Livingston 2017a, Slide 35). This is radically different from the way I have heard preaching and preached myself for the past several years, especially at CTF.

Darrell W. Johnson explains that “Expository preaching is not about getting a message out of the text; it is about inviting people into the text so that the text can do what only the text can do” (Johnson 2009, 58). By contrast, a lot of the preaching I have been used to consists of picking and choosing passages of Scripture that support certain topics that the preacher wants to emphasize or points he or she wants to make. Thomas G. Long argues that:

Preaching is genuinely biblical whenever the preacher allows a text from the Bible to serve as the leading force in shaping the content and purpose of the sermon. More dynamically, biblical preaching involves telling the truth about – bearing witness to – what happens when a biblical text intersects some aspect of our life and exerts a claim upon us. Biblical preaching does not mean merely talking about the Bible, using the Bible to bolster doctrinal arguments, or applying biblical “principles” to everyday life. Biblical preaching happens when a preacher prayerfully goes to listen to the Bible on behalf of the people and then speaks on Christ's behalf what the preacher hears there. (Long 2016, 58-59)

This emphasizes Long's view of the preacher as bearing witness. Other preaching images that a preacher can relate to depending on their temperament, personality, skills or life experiences could be herald, pastor, and storyteller or poet (Long 2016, 20-50).

Eugene H. Peterson indicates that preaching is primarily a self-less, thoughtful, quiet and careful exposition of Scripture, not "a mixture of cheerleading and entertainment with a lot of scripture verses thrown in at random" (Peterson 2011, 86). I had often wondered why I was "falling out of love" with God; why the "awe of God" was strangely beginning to dim in my life. It became apparent when I read the following:

All worship is an intelligent and loving response to the revelation of God. Our worship is poor because our knowledge of God is poor; our knowledge of God is poor because our preaching is poor. But when the word of God is expounded in all its fullness, and the congregation begins to glimpse the glory of the living God, they bow down in solemn awe. It is preaching which accomplishes this. That is why preaching is unique and irreplaceable. (Stott and Scharf 2015, 9)

Stott and Scharf further point out that "A low level of Christian living is due, more than anything else, to a low level of Christian preaching. If the church is to flourish again, there is a need for faithful, powerful, biblical preaching. God still urges his people to listen and his preachers to proclaim his word" (Stott and Scharf 2015, 22). Certainly, quality preaching is important, but it is also not the only reason that worship is poor. In my own case, what is currently missing in my life could be quality preaching since CTF is doing a good job on emphasizing on the role of the Holy Spirit. So, emphasis on the Holy Spirit and emphasis on quality preaching go hand in hand.

Dr. Livingston's passion for pastoral ministry and preaching is contagious, and I think I have caught some of that passion along the way. Inspired by one of his comments in the classroom, I originally wanted to name the new church plant in Brockville "God's Kitchen." In addition, he has been extremely encouraging to my ministry and myself as a female pastor of African background. I know this from his positive and constructive feedback, whether in assignments, group discussions or one-on-one meetings, and the way he treats me and draws the best out of me.

In his preaching classrooms, he used nine important guidelines provided by a female preacher, the Reverend Doctor Mary S. Hulst, to indicate the marks of a good sermon. Dr. Hulst has outlined ten simple guidelines, or a checklist, to help one improve his or her practice of preaching (Hulst 2016, 15-190). I now deeply understand that each of my sermons need to be:

Biblical: a sermon clearly derived from Scripture with the objective of pointing people to God and his word, not just proving a point

God-centred: a sermon that focuses as much on God's story – his character and actions – as our own and teaches about the triune God

Grace-full: a sermon that focuses on the Good News of Christ, grace and how we get to live differently; not so much focused on law, moralism and what to do

Compelling and clear: a sermon that is unified around a central theme and easy to follow

Imaginative: a sermon that uses creativity and good techniques to make it memorable

Contextual: a sermon that speaks into the deep life-needs of people and our culture with pastoral sensitivity and wisdom

Relevant: a sermon that is practical and applicable to people's lives

Embodied: the preacher's delivery of the sermon is audible and clear with good eye contact, appropriate facial expressions and gestures and, good variety of voice tones and speeds

Self-less: the preacher knows his or her audience well and embodies a love for God and other people rather than self-promotion in his or her sermon

Open to feedback: the preacher is open to receiving regular feedback and makes it happen so that his or her preaching becomes better (Livingston quoting Hulst 2017c, Slides 31-49)

I am now not only constantly measuring my sermons against these criteria but also applying these to the sermons I choose to listen to, not only to feed my own soul, but also to be trained in the skills of preaching.

In Writing: Doctor Gordon D. Fee

I was recently introduced by one of my DMin professors to Dr. Gordon D. Fee as a potential mentor-in-writing, a New Testament scholar who comes out of the Pentecostal-Charismatic background and an excellent exegete of Scripture.

In his book *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, he presents arguments regarding which translations of the Bible to use for a better understanding of what the original Hebrew or Greek author meant (Fee and Stuart 2014, 36-56). He concludes: “If you were regularly to read [the NIV 2011], and then consult at least one from three other categories (NRSV/NASB; GNB/NAB; REB/NJB), you would be giving yourself the best possible start to an intelligent reading and study of the Bible” (Fee and Stuart 2014, 56). During my most recent sermon preparation exercises, I have been using his advice and reading the chosen biblical passages in the above translation combinations, which has helped me to better grasp the text in view.

In his book *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, a thick analysis of more than 900 pages, Dr. Fee writes that “For some a book on the spirit as ‘theology’ is the kiss of death; and in many ways I am in that camp.

But we lack a better word; and in the final analysis, the health of the contemporary church necessitates that its *theology* of the Spirit and its *experience* of the Spirit correspond closely” (Fee 1994, 2, italics in original). I fully agree and look forward to finding out more about this topic, especially because CTF has been criticized so much about its understanding of the Spirit and the ensuing manifestations.

Emerging Theology of Preaching

Out of my background, experiences and values that are generally shared yet of specific importance to me, the following theology of preaching principles that are guiding my own preaching have emerged: Preaching involves silent listening, it is Christ-centered, it is participating in God’s work, it involves self-knowledge and bearing witness, it holds theology and biography together, it leads to double love of God and others, and it is practical.

Preaching Involves Silent Listening

When I reflect on who I am as a preacher or teacher, I am reminded of Jacob’s ladder. I have a beautiful wood carving depicting Jacob lying down, a ladder going up attached to it and angels going up and down on the ladder that reminds me of the story told in Genesis 28:10-17. When I look at this artwork, it invokes in me the importance of waiting upon the Lord, seeking the face of God. It is an awesome place to be. In my church we call it soaking. And I call myself a serial soaker.

Soaking in God’s presence is best described in the following quotation by CTF: it is “[t]he other half of the conversation. Jesus says, ‘Ask and you will receive.’ We’re very good at the asking part...but how about the ‘receiving?’ If we

are the ones who are doing all the talking, it's really a one-way conversation. Soaking is the listening part of our conversation with Him. It's setting aside time to lie down and receive from Him" (Catch the Fire Ministries n.d.(a)). To use a frequent CTF analogy, like a dry sponge before it is soaked in water, we come before God so that by the time we leave, we are wet, soft and dripping his goodness and even if life squeezes us, what comes out is water that refreshes others instead of a dry sponge that scratches the squeezer. So, I have and continue to practice soaking in God's presence where I sometimes ask and wait for God's answer, and at other times, I just wait for God's presence to come, in anticipation of what he wants to show or reveal to me.

Isaiah describes the concept of soaking: "Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary" (Isaiah 40:31 NASB). It is my understanding that this points to the importance of taking a step back and taking an eagle's point of view; looking at the big picture and trying to see what God is doing so that we can get to the details: the running and the walking. Another passage that describes soaking is Psalm 46:10a: "Be still, and know that I am God."

When we preach, we are on sacred ground. So, silence is very important before the act of preaching. Our speech comes out of silence. In his book *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, Parker J. Palmer tells us that after silence comes pages and pages of speech and we hope that our speech is faithful to what we have heard in the silence, in the depth of our soul and spirit (Palmer 2000,

8). So, it is important to be silent and listen to what God has to say during the preparation for preaching, before we preach.

Preaching, to me, also has an element of the supernatural. We see visions and dream dreams. The Lord reveals himself to us; speaks with us, gives us a revelation of what is on his heart. We cry out: “Show me things that eyes have not seen, ears have not heard!” (Paraphrase mine, 1 Corinthians 2:9). We are waiting for that Word of God, from God, that will turn the parched land of our lives, of people’s lives, into fertile ground where his Word can take root, start growing and bear fruit. In my own personal experience, this is the place where God reveals things that I would not otherwise have known, about specific people or situations that will drive me to start interceding, as well as ministering to specific people, as and if the opportunity presents itself (especially during what we call the Ministry Time of preaching, that I will explain below). In this sense, I would say that I am above all a people’s Pastor. William H. Willimon beautifully highlights the importance of caring for people, caring for precious souls. He writes “The pastor is that person among persons who cares for the congregation... We are earthen vessels but to us has been entrusted a treasure – the treasure of the gospel, the treasure of those convened by the gospel” (Willimon 2016, 92). After preaching, ministry time gives an opportunity to personally care for those in need of a touch, a timely word, an encouragement, a healing, etc. In all my church backgrounds, CTF was the place this was encouraged and practiced on a consistent basis.

During my sermon preparation time, I always strive to spend quality and silent time with God, listening to what he wants to say and impart. From the

moment I choose a passage, to the time I develop the sermon and as I continue to wrestle with it, I make sure to set apart scheduled time (at least half an hour to more) where I come before God, anticipating, and quietly listening to his input. Sometimes, words or sentences may be highlighted, other times I may see visions or dream dreams, or creative ideas could emerge. Sometimes, nothing happens during silent listening, but later on, as I go about my day or tasks, an idea, sentence or series of events may emerge making the sermon and/or its delivery more efficient.

Preaching is Christ-Centered

John takes the picture of Jacob's ladder and applies it to Christ. In John 1:51, Jesus says: "In all truth I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending over the Son of man" (NJB). Timothy Keller emphasizes the importance of preaching Christ from all Scripture, by explaining how to preach him "from every genre or section of the Bible, through every theme, in every major figure, from every major image, from every deliverance story line and through instinct" (Keller 2015, 70-90).

There are two particular forms of Christ-centered preaching that are helpful for me. The *Redemptive-Historic* view of preaching (Chapell 2018, 1) supports the posture that the proper interpretation of any text requires regard for its context, including its literary and historical setting and its place in God's redemptive plan. In arguing for this view of preaching from all Scripture, Bryan Chapell stresses that when a passage is preached redemptively, it avoids being merely moralistic: "straighten up, fly right, and do better" (Chapell 2018, 3).

Instead, it becomes Christ-centered, manifests God's grace and enables people to embrace the hope that comes through Christ (Chapell 2018, 7-8). This view strongly advocates Jesus' name to be mentioned in every sermon, thereby fixing believers' gazes on Jesus (Chapell 2018, 9). In summary we read: "This is the bottom line of Christ-centered preaching: When a sermon is done, do people look to themselves or to a redeeming God for their security? Only when they know to look to God alone has a sermon been truly beneficial and biblical" (Chapell 2018, 29).

Paul Scott Wilson, on the other hand, uses *law and gospel or trouble and grace* (Wilson 2018, 117) as his hermeneutic for preaching. He gives an illustration of the intertwined nature of these by stating: "When a drug addict is told to quit drugs, the instruction is good, yet if that is all that is given, it is not enough to save. The addict may be pointed in the right direction but is still hopelessly stuck. Law accompanied by gospel, however, is empowerment through the Spirit to make the required behavioral change. Both law and gospel are needed...both command and empowerment" (Wilson 2018, 121). The gospel and the empowerment are often what are missing from the sermons that I am used to, especially at CTF, because the work of God in Christ is not emphasised enough, and leaves people burdened or feeling guilty instead of placing their hope on Christ. Many sermons preached by Pastor Charles Price had a good balance of law and gospel.

In my own preaching, I always ask the question: did I point people to Christ and his amazing grace or did I increase people's burdens by telling them what they ought to do? I often believe people know what they ought to do but lack

the empowerment to do it, so if I have to err, I prefer to err on the side of Christ and who we are and what we get to do because of him in our lives.

Preaching is Participating in God's Work

Preaching entails, above all, recognizing that God is doing the work and I have been invited to participate in it: "Preaching like all other actions of the church, is joining in on what God is already doing, and we dare to preach because we believe that Jesus Christ is already speaking to the church and to the world" (Stott and Scharf 2015, 18). It starts with my own deep convictions about God, Scripture, the Church and the pastorate. Rev. Dr. Livingston elaborates what these convictions could look like: belief that "God is light, has acted, and has spoken, that Scripture is God's Word, still speaks today and brings about transformation; that the Church is dependent on the Word and can only fulfill its destiny as it listens to God's voice in Scripture), the pastorate (that the first duty of a pastor is to faithfully preach the Word), and preaching (that it must be expository) (Livingston 2019a, Slides 42-52).

Eugene H. Peterson points out, in *The Pastor: A Memoir*, that pastors are not people who "get things done" or "make things happen" (Peterson 2011, 5). Instead, a pastor is one "placed in the community to pay attention and call attention to 'what is going on right now' between men and women, with one another and with God" (Peterson 2011, 5). This point is related to one of my philosophies of Christian leadership, pointing to a leader's humility. A humble leader is one who does not believe he/she has all the answers but is desperately dependent on God and involved in what God is doing. It is not about what they are doing or want to

accomplish but what God is doing, and he invites them to participate. Peterson further writes: “I was pastor to people who were in the lion’s den, to men and women facing wild beasts in the Colosseum” (Peterson 2011, 20). What people go through is often very complicated and divine intervention may be the only way out. It is about God at work, not us at work. So, it is important that the pastor does not make things happen but follows God’s leading. Peterson highlights “the importance of ‘unlearning curves’ in a minister’s vocation... Inappropriate, anxiety-driven, fear-driven work would only interfere with and distract from what God was already doing” (Peterson 2011, 44 and 45). Therefore, I believe preachers need to pay more attention to God’s work and guiding others into this awareness. They work from a stance of rest, “Staying in touch with people in despair, knowing them by name, and waiting for resurrection” (Peterson 2011, 45).

Even when it comes to sermons, Ian Pitt-Watson writes that “Sermons are more 'born' than 'constructed.' And this is true of most works of human creativity. More often than not, as one does the hard work of preparation, the sermon simply happens, emerging in front of us as we live in the biblical text” (Livingston quoting Ian Pitt-Watson 2019d, Slide 19). This is not to mean that a sermon just happens, but as we give it our best in terms of preparation, there is a supernatural element of the Holy Spirit breathing on it and making it come alive. It suddenly makes sense to us and we anticipate that others will be touched by the message in front of us. It is indeed, above all, God’s work and I feel it is a great privilege and honor to be invited to participate in God’s work.

Preaching Involves Self-Knowledge and Bearing Witness

Eugene H. Peterson states that most pastoral work consists of pointing away from oneself to something other than self: “the pastoral ego ‘has the reek of disease about it, the relentless smell of the self’” (Peterson 2011, 292). Therefore, humility in pastors is essential: knowing that we do not know everything and letting others know we do not (Peterson 2011, 63-64). The knowledge of self may leave a preacher vulnerable as they discover their weaknesses and where they have missed the mark. But ultimately, with humility, it leads to healing and to a journey toward God and toward others.

Parker J. Palmer encourages a journey toward selfhood that is a journey toward God. He argues that the self is not set apart or special or superior but a mix of good and evil, darkness and light; a place of humanity (Palmer 2000, 69-70). He further maintains that not knowing one’s “true self” causes one to lead a false life and others much pain (in work and relationships) (Palmer 2000, 71). The good news is that God, through his Spirit, provides an inner journey leading to true self and healing (Palmer 2000, 81-82). This will ultimately lead to community and caring for one another (Palmer 2000, 81-82). As a pastor, I ought to be aware of this and willing to engage in self-knowledge. I believe that a pastor’s vulnerability can lead to community and mutual caring as people can relate and learn from the pastor’s story.

Likewise, we need to recognize that preachers are people in community. I need to frame myself as a communal person, who works among and with - not over or distant from or aloof from the community that I am called to serve. From that

posture, I go to listen to the Bible and hear for myself and for the people. In that sense, biblical preaching is “not a disembodied word but spoken to particular people in the concrete circumstances of their lives” (Livingston 2019b, Slide 75).

Thomas G. Long explains that:

The preacher goes to the biblical text as a priest, carrying the questions, needs and concerns of congregation and world, not as an agenda to be met but as an offering to be made. And then the preacher listens to the text. The word heard there may be one of comfort, but it may also be one that judges. It may answer our questions, but it may call our questions into question. It may be a word that brings us joyfully home, or it may call us deeper into the wilderness. Whatever that word may be, the preacher must tell the truth about it. The priest must now become the witness. (Long 2016, 73-74)

Whatever the preacher has heard, he/she must now share with the people, thus becoming a faithful witness.

Preaching Holds Theology and Biography Together

Preaching should consist of both theology and biography, our history and God’s story. Frederick Buechner writes about how ministers, of all people, fail to be real and vulnerable and share about their lives, instead “sticking to homiletical pronouncements” (Wilson quoting Buechner 2019, 13). He asserts that “If [ministers] draw on their own experience at all, it is usually for some little anecdote to illustrate a point or help make the pill go down but rarely if ever for an authentic, first-hand, flesh-and-blood account of what it is like to love Christ, say, or to feel spiritually bankrupt, or to get fed up with the whole religious enterprise” (Wilson quoting Buechner 2019, 13). As a result, he maintains that “The faith [these ministers] proclaim appears to be no longer rooted in or nourished by or challenged by their own lives but instead free-floating, secondhand, passionless” (Wilson

quoting Buechner 2019, 14). At CTF, vulnerability and sharing one's personal story is encouraged and I have no problem sharing both my failures and accomplishments in my sermons. My problem could be overdoing it: too much of my story and not enough of God's story.

Other ministers might be tempted to heavily rely on sharing other people's stories or even borrowing other people's entire sermons because they believe their own stories "seem too private to share or too trivial or too ambiguous or not religious enough" (Wilson quoting Buechner 2019, 14). This could result in sermon plagiarism that has far reaching consequences. Sharing other peoples' stories is not wrong but if we constantly borrow other people's sermons and/or stories, it is not really our own life that is rooted or nourished or challenged by what we are talking about. Instead, what we are talking about comes from a website or a piece of information that we have borrowed. Also, we don't fool congregations for very long: our people know whether our experience is firsthand or secondhand, borrowed, or inauthentic. Long stresses "Only preachers who deliver their own sermons stand with one foot in the life of the people and one foot in the biblical text. No Internet-dependent preacher stands in this same place. No borrowed sermon, however fine, can answer the question that cries out from every congregation, 'Is there a word today, a word for us, from the Lord?'" (Long 2016, 260). Deploring plagiarism, Pitt-Watson adds "Preaching requires a total identification of the man who speaks with what he says. Reading other men's [and women's] sermons simply turns bad preachers into bad actors" (Pitt-Watson 1978, 19). A preacher can communicate with all sorts of people that are quite different

from themselves without having to resort to plagiarism. Biography is not necessary the preacher's situation but a human situation that the preacher has internalized and has become real to him/her.

Therefore, preaching needs to be loyal to both theology and biography. A good sermon addresses both the human situation (our complexities) and the human condition (our sinfulness and condemnation under God) at the same time. The two need to address one another even if it might seem hard for a preacher to address both in a sermon. There ought to be a dialogue between the two. Paul Scott Wilson argues for the importance of caring for people's needs as well as their redemption: "food, health, shelter, and so on" (Wilson 2018, 39). He writes: "I have heard sermons that focus on both God and grace but that seem to have no connection to the needs people bring with them to church. The problem is not that the message is irrelevant; it is that the preacher did not take time to be clear about relevance" (Wilson 2018, 41). The gospel must address both our condition and our situation and my sermons strive to address both.

Preaching Leads to Double Love of God and Others

Preaching should lead to a double love of God and others. J. Todd Billings emphasizes that Scripture interpretation should lead us to a "double-love" of God and others: love of God and love of neighbor (Billings 2010, 90). Any sermon that points to God as "one that makes all of our dreams of success come true" (Billings 2010, 90) or "how to respond to challenges at work, or to challenges in our relationships at home" (Billings 2010, 87) has missed the mark or has become a "Deistic Hermeneutic": God has done his part, now we are the main actors

(Billings 2010, 86-90). Sadly, I reflect back and realize that I have unfortunately prepared many sermons that sound Deistic, where a lot of instructions to do or to be a certain way are emphasized without enough emphasis on how or more importantly, who empowers: not by might, nor by power, but by God's Spirit (Zechariah 4:6). There is room for improvement.

Billings promotes a more sound "Trinitarian Hermeneutic" (Billings 2010, 86), where God is the main actor and we are drawn to worship and delight in his beauty (Billings 2010, 79), in a spirit of gratitude, thanksgiving and service (Billings 2010, 28), where the focus is Christ and the Spirit is transforming each one of us into Christ's image; thereby, "entering into the triune God's activity of redeeming fallen creation (biography) through the instrument of Scripture (theology)" (Billings 2010, 36-37) (parenthesis mine). To achieve this, Billings highlights the importance of creeds, hymns, behind-the-text issues, historical and linguistic analysis, the Holy Spirit's address, tradition, and critical inquiry in reading and interpreting Scripture (Billings 2010, 67). He further wrote, "the Spirit is addressing God's people through Scripture, calling us to stop attempting to control Scripture, and to receptively respond to God's call through Scripture to enter into the Spirit's work of making all things new in Jesus Christ" (Billings 2010, 67). This is my new challenge in my sermon preparations; that the process of interpretation and preaching will ultimately lead me to a love of God and love of neighbor (Billings 2010, 90).

Peterson emphasizes that what counts is not a sense of achievement and competency, but the importance of worship (love of God) and family (love of

others). Family keeps the preacher grounded, faithful, personally relational in the daily practice of sacrificial love that entails forgiveness, grace, blessing and patience (Peterson 2011, 316). I could not agree more. Not only the preacher's biological family, but the family of believers at large, the congregation that the preacher is leading included.

Henri J.M. Nouwen also speaks of the importance of a minister who is intimate with God, who "truly knows the heart of God... a heart of flesh," (Nouwen 1989, 38) that brings "healing, reconciliation, new life, and hope;" (Nouwen 1989, 41) not just a moral, well-trained and creative leader (Nouwen 1989, 43). I believe these are all excellent points and should be reflected in our preaching, in mirroring our love for God and for others. As preachers, we ought to love God first but also being a pastor and a preacher: a minister of word, sacrament and pastoral care; even more than being exegetes, theologians or civic officials.

Moreover, Fleming Rutledge emphasizes that "biblical preaching uses the language of relationship. It is engendered from the Word of the God who is love" (Rutledge 2011, 21). She recounts, "I once heard about a wise older preacher correcting a young pastor who said, 'I love to preach!' The older man said, 'It is far more important to love the people among whom you preach.'" She further states, "...the effectiveness of a sermon will depend not so much upon the exegetical, linguistic, and verbal skills of the preacher as upon his or her knowledge and love of God and his Word" (Rutledge 2011, 21) and, I would add, his people.

As we remain intimate with God, he empowers us to love him and love our neighbors. As our focus remains Christ, we get transformed into his likeness by

the power of the Holy Spirit and get to participate in God's activity of redeeming humanity to himself. Our preaching ought to highlight and facilitate this dynamic.

Preaching is Practical

This is what I appreciate about preaching at CTF. At the end of each sermon, there are a few minutes of practical ministry. People are invited to respond to the message that they have just heard, usually in a prayer format; at least to one part of it, so that they can encounter God and practice what they have heard right there and then. It is called ministry time or prayer ministry time. Of course, if further ministry is required, trained ministers can assist.

Ministry time is an important concept and exercise that I came to understand at CTF and went on to apply in the context of my own church plant. After every speech, whether preaching or teaching to a larger or smaller group of people, the speaker takes a few minutes to encourage people to exercise an aspect of what was taught. This arises from the vision of the church "that we may walk in God's love and then give it away to Toronto and the world" (Arnott 2011, n.p.a) and from the understanding that "people come hungry for a life-changing experience in the presence of God" (Catch the Fire Ministries n.d.(a)). This can take many forms depending on the topic preached and the number of people in the audience. People can be encouraged to get into smaller groups to share and pray with one another. For example, if the topic was about leadership, the prayer ministry time could be: "In groups of four, take two minutes each to share about a tough time you've already had in ministry. Pray for each other for uncommon favour to be able to stand under every trial and temptation" (Long 2011, 13). If the

topic was about generational sins and curses, the prayer ministry time could be: “In your groups of four, pick one person who knows of an issue that needs to be resolved. Take them through the process of breaking any and all curses related to this area” (Long 2011, 44).

Touching upon this concept of practicality, Keller asks, “How can we go about making truth real to hearts as we preach?” (Keller 2015, 164). He answers: “preaching affectionately, imaginatively, wondrously, memorably, Christocentrically and practically” (Keller 2015, 166-187). He talks about making the sermon “gripping and real to the heart. Change happens not just by giving the mind new arguments but also by feeding the imagination new beauties” (Keller 2015, 160). So, “What do I want to have happen as a result of people hearing my sermons?” I want people to respond. I want people to do, to be moved into action right after the sermon. I want people to practice their faith. They are no longer listeners; they are now doers. It is time for them to encounter God with their own personal needs. To experience the grace of God, as taught in the sermon. To be empowered by God. It is implementation time. And hopefully they keep on practicing what they have learned.

In addition, Robert Stephen Reid identifies four distinct voices in preaching—Teaching, Encouraging, Sage and Testifying—and I believe I lean more toward the encouraging voice (Reid 2006, 24-25). I so appreciate Ian Pitt-Watson’s words, as quoted by Reid: “Instead of telling people what to do, authentic biblical preaching helps people to do it. Authentic biblical preaching is about action enabled by insight, imperatives empowered by indicatives, ethics rooted in

theology, ‘what we ought to do’ made possible by what God has done” (Reid quoting Ian Pitt-Watson 2006, 99). In explaining what this voice specifically means, Reid says, “A preacher whose intention is to *facilitate an encounter* with the holy adopts an Encouraging Voice advocating solutions directed toward listeners’ felt needs” (Reid 2006, 23-24). Even though it is difficult to know what people need to do and how they need to do it, I believe a combination of the following could help: meditation and spending time with God for revelation, the theme of the sermon, the ideas arising in the various sections of the sermon, knowing our congregation and its felt needs, and the experience of the preacher.

In summary, I understand that these seven elements of preaching may seem not to be clearly connected in some kind of practical system for preaching, hence “emerging.” More work may be needed to sharpen my theology of preaching. For now, I believe these are important guidelines to my preaching practice. I want my preaching to exhibit some or all of these elements each time that I craft a sermon. They are also closely related to my philosophy of leadership, as will become apparent in chapter 3.

Conclusion

It’s been a while now since I first wrote the conclusion to this chapter of my portfolio. When I first wrote it, I was sitting in a rental apartment in Brockville, Ontario where my family and I were residing while we finalized the purchase of our property. I couldn’t even go out and make connections in my new community because we were in the middle of a full-blown epidemic, COVID-19, that was a worldwide and very contagious respiratory disease. It was also the time where, to

my surprise, I saw an interest from the leadership of CTF for my husband and I to open a CTF Brockville church. We were given some orientation and guidelines as to how to start connecting with people in the region by making use of social media, as well as how to use contacts within the church to help us register our new church. I was delighted at this new development, anticipating what the Lord had for me, my family and the whole wide world as we dealt with uncertain times. God indeed works in mysterious ways.

On the other hand, my desire to integrate the two families, charismatics and non-charismatics, is as strong as ever. Holt writes: “The Reformation period drastically changed the practice of Christian spirituality. The split between Catholics and Protestants meant that each side lost something of what the other could offer. Consider what Luther could offer to Catholics and what Ignatius could offer to Protestants...” (Holt 2005, 112). When this is applied to my own situation, Charismatics have a lot to learn from other Christians, especially about the importance of strong, exegetical and biblical preaching. Other Christians, in turn, have a lot to learn from charismatics by leaning more on the Spirit and less on their established traditions and intellectualism. There is always a balanced way to do the work of God, by not preferring Word over Spirit or vice-versa.

I can truly echo Pitt-Watson: “I don’t understand preaching, but I believe in it deeply” (Pitt-Watson 1978, 5). Even though it is hard to pick and choose what to include in my emerging theology of preaching, I believe the seven elements that I have highlighted are foundational to a proper understanding of preaching. To summarise, preaching involves silence, is Christ-centered, means participating in

God's Work, involves self-knowledge and bearing witness, holds theology and biography together, leads to double love of God and others and is practical.

My denominational DNA is vibrant and colourful: Orthodox, Baptist, Evangelical and Charismatic. In addition, I have been formed by amazing men and women of God: Pastor Charles Price, Rev. Dr. Kevin Livingston, Dr. Gordon Fee and my countless seminary professors who have poured into my training as a pastor and preacher.

Above all, I am a child of God, loved, pursued, saved, redeemed, and called into his service. I have been blessed by God with all spiritual blessings, acquired many gifts and accumulated life experiences along the way. What I have done to deserve all of this, I do not know. But I am eternally grateful to him who has chosen me to "feed his sheep." Glory be to his name.

CHAPTER 3

MY EMERGING TRINITARIAN PHILOSOPHY OF LEADERSHIP

I have never considered myself a leader; at least not consciously.

Interestingly, when I participated in a questionnaire that would allow me to identify my spiritual gifts on the path of becoming a better servant to the body of Christ and bringing forth results that are pleasing to God, I concluded—after answering all 250 questions, analyzing the results and deeper reflection—that I did not possess leadership gifts (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 96 and 213-225).

The leadership courses and the subsequent reasonings and reflections that I participated in during my DMin program have been such a blessing because they made me re-think and re-evaluate my understanding of leadership. I was leading without knowing that I was a leader. Whether this is good or bad, I honestly do not know. On one hand, this seems humble as I never set out to be a leader but to serve where I felt God was directing me. On the other hand, what we do not realize and do not reflect upon can become our downfall. I will never forget the wisdom one of my professors at Tyndale Seminary imparted during my MDiv program: “If you forget everything you have been taught in this institution, just remember this one thing: the importance of reasoning” (Ko 2017).

I have never considered myself a leader in part because of my background history and my gender. My father was a great military leader and I was always the General’s daughter. I also come from a society that does not necessarily view

women as leaders. I was intellectually gifted and mostly one of the best students in my classes, even as compared to my male counterparts, and a hard worker, earning my living; but anything that has to do with leadership seemed out of reach or rather, out of mind. In other words, I never aspired to be a great leader, but the best possible person God wanted me to be.

This chapter will first explore and reflect on my personal conviction on the nature and practice of Christian leadership based on my sense of call, life experience, giftings and current situation that have shaped me in the person and leader that I am as well as Christian leadership models that have inspired me; followed by an articulation of my own philosophy of Christian leadership.

CONVICTIONS CONCERNING CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

I will begin from my call as preacher and pastor, followed by my giftings and experiences of leadership. Then, I will explore my current position of church planting and Christian leadership models that have inspired me. Finally, I will articulate my emerging philosophy of Christian leadership.

My Call as Preacher and Pastor

When God called me to preach in 2007 while sitting in the upper pews of Peoples Church, I experienced what Jeremiah heard when God called him: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). Disillusioned, I had just dropped out of a post-degree Bachelor of Social Work program at York University in the fall semester of 2006. Even though I was initially delighted to be accepted into a program that was geared to address oppression and subordination - as

experienced and mediated through gender, age, race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and ability - I remember being shocked day by day, realizing that Western society seemed to have been built on the philosophies of misguided Greek philosophers. To my great disappointment and annoyance, some of the required readings and class discussions openly mocked Christianity and probably all forms of religion where people believe in forms of reality that cannot be measured scientifically. As time went on, I grew increasingly uncomfortable as I found myself restricted from openly voicing my points of view without creating hostility between myself, my classmates, and professors. As someone who is averse to conflict, it seemed to me that the only way out would be to drop out, so after a brief soul-searching, I followed through with my decision, right after my mid-term exams (whether that was the right resolution to make or not, God knows).

Not long after, I learned about something called seminary education, when a guest speaker at Peoples Church came and explained that some of us were called to higher education to exalt the Name of Jesus. He got all my attention. Prior to that, I was completely unaware about the existence of such an institution as well as the fact that clergy developed their skills through formal education. Later on, as I studied the subject of giftedness in the writings of Drs. J Robert Clinton and Richard W. Clinton, I would learn about the three distinct categories of natural abilities, acquired skills and spiritual gifts that form the giftedness set of an individual and the significant role each of these play in the development and maturity of a leader (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 1-3). All three are essential elements in leadership and leadership development. I therefore learned that God

leads people he has called to acquire skills that will help them accomplish his purposes; in my case, preaching and pastoral ministry.

So, my search about seminary education led me to finding out about Tyndale Seminary and eventually applying to enrol, still unsure that a female could be a pastor. Since I had no example of female pastors to look up to in my environment, I made sure to voice my concerns in my application and requested to do a double major in Pastoral Ministry and Missions. I thought that if I could not be a pastor, I could at least focus on taking the Good News of Christ wherever God would choose to send me. I was called to preach, and I was going to preach no matter what. That was now in my DNA since receiving the call that fateful morning. Thankfully, when I received a reply from Tyndale, I was accepted to do an MDiv in Pastoral Ministry with the recommendation of doing a minor in Missions. The fact that an accredited and long-standing institution of higher education had listened to my doubts and yet had accepted me to do an MDiv in Pastoral Ministry settled the questions I had about the acceptability of a woman training as a pastor and preacher right then and there.

In addition, when I finally graduated 11 years later, I had several examples of women leading churches, even though this topic remains controversial, vigorously debated and even sometimes, outrightly denounced and denied in some church traditions such as the Orthodox and Catholic churches (Keller and Ruether 2000, 302-303). Even though I have resolved the matter of women serving in ordained pastoral leadership, I believe it is still necessary to explore the question of female leadership in the Bible and throughout church

history because of the continued pushback I experience from time to time as a preacher and leader, making this a topic I am passionate about. Therefore, I will explore this topic below.

William Webb has succinctly presented four positions regarding women's place in the church that are prevalent today: hard/strong patriarchy (hierarchy)—a woman's position should never be greater than man; a woman should not teach where any man is present and a woman should never be ordained; soft patriarchy (hierarchy)—a woman can be a pastor but never hold the senior pastor position; evangelical egalitarianism—a woman can become a senior pastor based on her character, gifts and theological education; and secular egalitarianism—a position that “generally does not have much of a place for religion” so a woman's position in the church in this case would be not applicable (Webb 2001, 26-28).

One Biblical passage that is key to the debate regarding female leadership in the church is the following: “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35). Joseph Fitzmyer for instance analyzes 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 as a unit (Fitzmyer 2008, 528) whereas Craig L. Blomberg has chosen to comment on 1 Corinthians 14:26-40 as an exegetical unit subdivided in three parts: verses 26-33a, a description of orderly spontaneity; verses 33b-38, the silence of women during the evaluation of prophecy; and verses 39-40, a concluding summary (Blomberg 1994, 277). Whether this passage of interest is considered in context or as a smaller unit, both

commentaries discuss in length the many difficulties for commentators and Bible scholars to arrive at a consensus as to the true interpretation of the controversial verses 34-35, and both scholars propose a middle ground. Fitzmyer concludes: “Lest too much be made of these controversial Pauline verses, it is well to repeat the comment of Calvin...: ‘The discerning reader should come to the decision, that the things which Paul is dealing with here, are indifferent, neither good nor bad; and that they are forbidden because they work against seemliness and edification’” (Fitzmyer 2008, 531). In similar vein, Blomberg summarizes:

We desperately need to allow one another the freedom to agree to disagree, to set up alternate models, to encourage local fellowships to determine for themselves, according to their best understanding of Scripture, what men and women should and should not do in home and in church. Egalitarians and hierarchicalists alike need to stop accusing each other of being unbiblical and instead acknowledge more humbly that the biblical data simply aren't clear enough to permit dogmatism on either side. (Blomberg 1994, 292)

If we have the heart of Christ, it is indeed possible to be gracious with one another and agree to disagree.

When we explore female leadership in the Bible, we notice that some women, such as Junia, Priscilla, Huldah and Deborah were occasionally permitted to lead in the Bible (Webb 2001, 46). Amongst these, Junia is even directly identified as an apostle: “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (Romans 16:7). Even though there is a debate regarding the gender of Junia, linguistic evidence suggests this was probably a female (Moo 2009; Webb 2001, 99; Witherington 1988b, 114-115; Eisen 2000, 47-49).

Furthermore, there were women who took on roles of leadership in early church history. Ute E. Eisen looks at the history of female leaders in the early church from a different perspective — by studying inscriptions or epigraphic and papyrological evidence, such as ancient monuments erected in their honour (Eisen 2000, vii and 1). Her premise, also echoed by Witherington, is that women’s leadership roles in the church has been tainted by an overly patriarchal interpretation of the past and an account of history that is male-dominated, effectively relegating women to an inferior status that is dependent on men and inactive in history as well as negatively affecting their role in the modern age where the debate regarding women’s rightful place in church leadership still rages (Eisen 2000, vii and 1; Witherington 1988a, 199-201).

Eisen’s work is an attempt to reconstruct the often “trivialized or ignored” (Eisen 2000, 1) history of women officeholders in the early church and to circumvent sparse and often discriminatory literary articulation of women’s participation in the history of the early church as leaders and officeholders. After thorough and careful analysis of these non-literary evidence, Eisen concludes:

It is clear that women were active in the expansion and shaping of the Church in the first centuries: they were apostles, prophets, teachers, presbyters, enrolled widows, deacons, bishops and stewards. They preached the Gospel, they spoke prophetically and in tongues, they went on mission, they prayed, they presided over the Lord’s Supper, they broke the bread and gave the cup, they baptized, they taught, they created theology, they were active in care for the poor and the sick, and they were administrators and managers of burial places. In short, to the question whether there were women officeholders in the Church’s first centuries our study returns a resounding answer: yes! (Eisen 2000, 224).

Even though the church had regressed into full-blown patriarchy reminiscent of Old Testament models in its leadership structure by the fourth century AD (Witherington 1988a, 209-210), women have slowly, but surely, responded, attempting to recover their authentic voices. This process, at least in the United States, is described in the book *In our own voices: Four Centuries of American Women's Religious Writing*. Many Christian denominations, such as Quakers, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Pentecostals, now formally ordain women to Christian ministry (Keller and Ruether 2000, 295-302). Amongst these are The Reverend Antoinette Brown, thought to be “the first woman formally ordained to the Christian ministry in an established denomination [Congregational] in America [in 1853]” (2000, 295 and 311) and Bishop Mary E. Jackson, fourth bishop to chair over Mount Sinai Holy Churches at the age of eighty-eight in 1969 (Keller and Ruether, 2000, 308).

One contemporary preacher from which I find great inspiration is Fleming Rutledge, one of the first women to be ordained to the priesthood of the Episcopal Church and who served for twenty-one years in parish ministry, fourteen of them on the clergy staff at Grace Church in New York City. She is a preacher and teacher known throughout the US, Canada, and the British Isles and has also authored ten books (Rutledge 2024). I especially find her sermons compiled in *And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament*, God-centred and grace-full. They focus primarily on God's story, character and actions as well as accurately paint the human situations and conditions, and God's provisions for these. In addition, they

are easy to follow, coherent, deeply biblical and theological and convincing. In an age of deistic and feel-good messages, these are difficult marks to find in a sermon.

Other mentors of mine, especially involved in church planting initiatives, are Maria Woodworth-Etter, “the grandmother of the Pentecostal Movement” (Liardon 2003, 47) and Aimee Semple McPherson, “the spiritual pioneer who paved the way for the rest of [Pentecostals, Divine Healings and Charismatics]” (Liardon 2003, 229). Woodworth-Etter built The Tabernacle in west Indianapolis, Indiana, United States; a church located next door to her home and that was dedicated on May 19, 1918, where she ministered until her death six years later. Even though she was persecuted for both her gender and ministry style, these were not enough to stop her from ministering and “preaching thousands of sermons from coast to coast” in America, as a travelling evangelist, revivalist and faith healer (Liardon 2003, 68 and 47-74).

Aimee Semple McPherson, a farm girl originally from Canada, ended up “hearing the voice of the Lord telling her, ‘Preach the Word! Will you go? Will you go?’” (Liardon 2003, 242) and would become a travelling evangelist, faith healer and presiding minister when she finally built the five-thousand seat Angelus Temple, later renamed The Church of the Foursquare Gospel, in Los Angeles, California; a Church that would be dedicated in 1923 and staffed with twenty-four elders (Liardon 2003, 254 and 229-266). Semple McPherson’s impact is tremendous: in addition to opening the first Christian radio station ever operated with the first licence ever issued to a woman (Liardon 2003, 256), we read that:

In her lifetime, Aimee composed 175 songs and hymns, several operas, and thirteen drama-oratorios. She also preached thousands of sermons and graduated over 8,000 ministers from L.I.F.E. Bible College. It is estimated that during the Depression, some one and a half million people received aid from her ministry. And today, the Foursquare denomination is continuing to expound the truths of God's Word as they were revealed to Sister McPherson, in her revealed Foursquare Gospel's original Declaration of Faith. The four squares are: "Jesus is Savior, Jesus is healer, Jesus is baptizer in the Holy Spirit, and Jesus is coming King." (Liardon 2003, 265)

These women opened Churches and preached in a time when women were not allowed to be ministers and despite their own objections about the nature of their call. Even though progress has been made, including the ordination of women in many denominations, the mindset that only men can teach, and pastor still lives on in the 21st century and hinders many women from exercising their God-given gifts and abilities. I am thankful I was able to move past my own objections and just like Woodworth-Etter, have been in the process of completely renovating an abandoned church building next to where my family and I live, with the aim of pastoring in it full-time.

These historical mentors have contributed to my determination to pursue my own call as a preacher and church planter, despite the questioning and discouragement that sometimes arise as people question whether females can preach and lead. Despite my own objections some days, I keep reminding myself to pick up my cross and follow Christ (Matthew 16:24).

My Giftings and experiences of Leadership

According to Drs. J. Robert Clinton and Richard W. Clinton, giftings consist of spiritual gifts —“God-given unique capacity imparted to each believer for the purpose of releasing a Holy Spirit empowered ministry via that believer,” natural abilities—“capacities, skills, talents or aptitudes which are innate in a person and allow him/her to accomplish things,” and acquired skills—“capacities, skills, talents or aptitudes which have been learned by a person in order to allow him/her to accomplish something” (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 40). Below, I will list my spiritual gifts, natural abilities and acquired skills that play an integral role to my call as a preacher and pastor.

Spiritual

I used the experience questionnaire designed by Drs. J. Robert Clinton and Richard W. Clinton to identify my spiritual gifts. Drs. Clinton and Clinton state “God has given us gifts so that we can serve the body of Christ and bring forth results that are pleasing to Him. It is primarily through the use of our gifts that there are results and recognition of those gifts. If you think that you have some gift, ministry experience and the results of that ministry will either confirm it or deny it” (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 213). Based on my answers to the 250 questions posed, analyzing the findings and my own reflections, I believe that my spiritual gifts are the following:

- Power Gifts: Discerning of Spirits, Faith, Word of Knowledge, Healing, Miracles, Tongues, Interpretation of Tongues, Dreams and Visions, Dream Interpretation

- Word Gifts: Prophecy, Exhortation, Teaching, Apostleship, Evangelism, Pastoring
- Love Gifts: Giving, Mercy

At first hand, this may seem like a lot of gifts for one single person.

However, Clinton and Clinton assert that although “all Christians have at least one spiritual gift... leaders usually are multi-gifted” (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 46). In addition, belonging to the CTF family of churches where believers’ giftings are encouraged and allowed to be practiced on a regular basis, I believe I have been given enough opportunity and space to exercise these spiritual gifts, with confirmation by those who benefitted from them, all to the glory of God, the blessings of people and my own encouragement as a leader.

Natural

In November of 2018, I participated in two personality assessment instruments, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Fundamental Interpersonal Orientation-Behaviour (FIRO-B), to assess my personality preferences and overall leadership orientation. Isabel Myers and Katharine Briggs developed the MBTI assessment as an application of Carl Jung’s theory of personality types (Stevens 2019b). The FIRO-B was first developed by Will Schutz and helps measure, among other things, how one typically behaves with other people and expects others to act towards them (Stevens 2019a). Even though there are limitations to these instruments as they do not measure everything, and a person’s personality and behavior may change overtime, the results helped me understand my natural tendencies.

My individualized type showed that my personality type is Extraverted, Sensing, Feeling and Perceiving (ESFP) with strong traits of Imaginative and Original. Here is a summary of my natural giftings:

ESFPs are typically outgoing, friendly, adaptable realists. They quickly assess situations and search for solutions that work well for people. They are not necessarily blocked by rules but rather adapt them to the current situation. Noticing details and facts, ESFPs rely on experiences rather than theories to guide them. They are curious and open-minded and often tolerant of different ways of doing things.

They prefer to talk things over and try things themselves rather than simply listen to others' advice. Searching for relevant information in their own experiences and in those of people close to them, ESFPs quickly apply what they learn and then move on to the next situation. They try to make life fun and often enjoy material possessions as well as physical activity. Their attitude is that life is to be lived now, not analyzed; thus they are not ones to sit still.

ESFPs are likely to be most satisfied in a work environment that is friendly, realistic, flexible, and action oriented. People can count on them to focus on the current situation in a caring and fun way and take things as they come, while searching for and then implementing a pragmatic solution. (Stevens 2019b, 3)

This description rings true to me. Whether I am in the role of leadership or a team player, this is an accurate description of how I lead and function. My FIRO-B results indicated that I “most readily express Inclusion (participation, recognition, belonging)” (Stevens 2019a, 9). It is true as I show first my interest in others and what they need to resolve in order to perform effectively. I often want to hear details from each person about what he or she does and what his or her needs are. I am often an encourager and most of my preaching tend to reflect this.

Acquired Skills

In looking back on my life, I can see ways in which God has provided opportunities for me to learn. Through EE, I learned how to share the gospel and lead a person to Jesus Christ. This was the tool I needed to confidently share my faith and intelligently answer tough questions or handle objections that people may have to the faith. It also equipped me to learn about other faiths (such as Buddhism, Hinduism, New Age Movement, etc.) and compare them with Biblical Christianity in order to help me better share the gospel with compassion and understanding (Rough 2003, ii).

The four core values of CTF, easily remembered through the FIRE acrostic, are:

Father's Love: understanding that our heavenly Father loves us and desires a relationship with us; being immersed in the love, grace and presence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; adopting a "spirit of sonship" as opposed to looking ourselves as orphans

Intimacy through Hearing God's Voice: pursuing intimacy with God through worship, prayer, resting or soaking in His presence and loving His word)

Restoration of the Heart: experiencing freedom through the healing of life's hurts, and

Empowering by the Spirit: being empowered to carry the good news of the kingdom to the world in the power of the Spirit and with fire. (Long 2015)

Through the training I received at CTF over the years, I developed various skills, such as soaking and journaling (which is experiencing the Father's love and exercising intimacy), leading small groups and ministering to others (which is restoration of the heart and empowering) by giving words of prophecy, laying on of hand and praying different kinds of prayers (healing, comfort, agreement,

blessings, deliverance, etc.). I also learned the etiquette of ministry, such as dress codes, smell, gender sensitivity, etc., “intended to help... provide a safe, caring environment for those seeking prayer” (Catch the Fire Ministries n.d.(b), 13).

Another acquired skill is spiritual care. CTF partners with a ministry called Restoring the Foundations (RTF) and has adopted its model of spiritual care called Issue-Focused Ministry, which seeks to provide deep, lasting freedom and healing in the life of the person one is ministering to. This is based on focusing on one issue in a person’s life at a time and paying attention to “the Four Problem/Ministry Areas” that are “Sins of the Fathers and Resulting Curses... Ungodly Beliefs... Soul/Spirit Hurts [and] Demonic Oppression” (Kylstra 2009, 7-8). This model of RTF has some aspects of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and specific prayer ministry, which is really an integration of psychology and theology. I received the training in this form of spiritual care and have been using it since, in one-on-one or group format, with a lot of success.

Another skill acquired is deliverance. Dr. Bob Tacky, Bishop of Impact Lives Church located in Etobicoke, Ontario was invited to CTF in order to lead the congregation in prayers of deliverance in 2011. I received two miracles through his ministry: the first time he prayed for me I got married within five months (after a series of failed relationships); two years later, after many failed attempts of getting pregnant (both through prayers and medical help), he again prayed for my husband and me and nine months later we gave birth to our beautiful, healthy and bubbly son. This led me to enroll in his “School of Deliverance,” which consisted of four Saturdays of teaching in spiritual warfare and deliverance. Through this, I learned

to minister deliverance to others in one-on-one and small group sessions, with very encouraging results.

I understand that spiritual warfare and deliverance could be a divisive topic. I have found the following statement very balanced in its view of the various competing models of spiritual warfare:

The ... discussion on the nature of spiritual warfare has focused on some of the many diverse perspectives within the church today. For purposes of clarity, different models and methods have been defined heuristically and set over against each other. But ... it is important to note that a number of proponents of spiritual warfare approach these options with a both/and rather than an either/or perspective. For example, in his book *Spiritual Warfare for Every Christian*, Dean Sherman writes: Some think spiritual warfare is only deliverance. Others emphasize pulling down strongholds in the heavenlies. Still others say spiritual warfare is doing the works of Jesus – preaching, teaching, and living the truth. Yet another group says all this is impractical. They claim we should focus on feeding the hungry, resisting racism, and speaking out against social injustice. I believe we have to do it all. Pulling down strongholds is only important if people are led to Christ as a result. However, some are deaf to the preaching of the Gospel until we deal with hindering powers. And some can't break through into victory until bondage is broken in their lives. We must do it all as appropriate, and as God leads. (Beilby and Eddy, eds. 2012, 43)

And of course, through years of study at Tyndale Seminary, both at the master and doctorate levels, I have acquired many skills, such as exegetical and topical preaching, other types of preaching, teaching, and exhortation skills. As hinted at by one of my professors, I believe I need more birthdays as a pastor, especially when it comes to preaching, to fine tune everything that I have learned. I never went to seminary to be able to get a job at the end of it but because I took my call seriously enough to want to get better at what I was called to do (Long 2016, 5). Thomas Long reminds us of an important truth:

Ministers are not “made” in seminaries. Seminaries and other programs of theological education *train* ministers; ministers are made in and through the *church*. Women and men may for a season engage in formal theological education to gain deeper knowledge of the Christian story, but they were first taught that story and they are sustained in that story by Christian people in the church. They come to schools to wrestle with the great theological ideas, but it is the church’s theological heritage they will encounter. They come to places of theological training to acquire the skills of guiding, teaching, counseling, and speaking, but they come because the church, in some way, has already discerned in them gifts for leadership. (Long 2016, 5)

My Leadership Experiences

Clinton and Clinton point out that leaders can evolve into great leaders through opportunity, training and experience (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 16). They emphasize that “Awareness of leadership giftedness will help one recognize what is happening in their experience and help them focus on deliberately seeking opportunity and training” (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 16). My first leadership experience in a church setting occurred at Peoples Church as an EE trainer. Before this opportunity, I was an EE trainee, taking the required training over a period of three years during which I received step-by-step practical, On-the-Job Training (OJT) visits, as well as classroom teachings, discussions and study assignments to improve my skills as a witness and, later as a trainer (Evangelism Explosion Training Materials 1997, 5). My teaching gift was recognized by others during our EE OJT, which encouraged me to further develop it through a formal seminary training.

I soon became a full-fledged EE trainer, well-versed in presentation evangelism, and was responsible in taking two to three people, each week when EE was on, across Toronto (malls, apartment buildings and homes) demonstrating as

well as training them how to do effective evangelism. Throughout the years, as I learned how to share the gospel and lead a person to Jesus Christ, I would see many people come to Christ. Therefore, I would say evangelism is very important to my leadership focus and vision.

My second opportunity to lead came when I joined CTF, where I discovered, exercised and grew in my leadership gifts of pastoring, teaching, prophesying, exhorting, spiritual care and many of my power gifts. I first attended various cell groups and eventually became a cell or small group leader myself as my gifts started to become recognized by people in the church. I also sought to grow and am still growing in those gifts. Therefore, I must say CTF is the place I truly grew spiritually in a holistic way, in the form succinctly described by Bradley P. Holt:

Jesus provides an *example* of spiritual practice by integrating his inner and outer life. He was, as a human being, on intimate terms with God. He rose early in the morning to commune with God. He referred to God as his “Abba,” his dad or father. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he wrestled with God, first telling the truth about his feelings and then submitting to the Father’s will. His outward life demonstrated compassion for all, especially the marginalized – women, the poor, the sick. Ultimately, his life showed compassion unto death, even for those who berated him. Jesus showed fierce opposition to those who distorted the ways of God. He used his intellect to confound his enemies. He attended temple and discussed theology with the learned. He healed all sorts of people, showing the importance of the bodies of people, not just their souls. He is the only founder of a major religion who took this time to heal people’s bodies as well as their minds and spirits. A spiritual practice that looks to the example of Jesus will integrate prayer with action, will seek intimacy with God while taking a healing approach to people, and will confront the powers of evil while comforting the oppressed. (Holt 2005, 34)

As a cell group leader, I helped many grow spiritually in the church. This opportunity has helped me to have experiences in inner healing (which is the inner work or our inner journey), spiritual care, deliverance, and physical healing. In addition, knowing our true self ultimately leads to community and caring for others (which is our outer journey). Therefore, to accomplish the outer journey proficiently, inner healing is of extreme importance and every leader is trained in it at CTF. This also results in a better relationship or intimacy with God, which is our upper journey. Paying attention to all three journeys (upper, inner and outer) is very important for me as a leader. My association with CTF also led me to a deeper work of the Holy Spirit in my life that addressed issues and woundedness that were seriously hindering my spiritual growth and walk with God. Therefore, Spirit-led and Spirit-filled leadership are an important component of my philosophy of Christian leadership.

My third leadership experience started when I started co-leading a women's group of first-generation Ethiopian and Eritrean descents that grew out of a small group at CTF. That group would eventually turn into a new diaspora church plant, called Father's Love For The Nations, from which I resigned as co-pastor in 2019. The format of small groups at CTF was established after the model of Jesus and his twelve disciples. A leader would have twelve members and the goal was to immediately reproduce another leader that would co-lead the group for a while—thus, getting hands-on training—and would then be released to start his or her own group of “twelve disciples.” So, the goal of small groups was always to produce leaders who would reproduce other leaders, leading to multiplication. As a result,

the “multiplying leader” model is very important to my philosophy of Christian leadership.

Multiplication happens as we take time, energy and effort to equip others, which is what we did at Father’s Love For the Nations. John C. Maxwell states that equipping is more difficult than shepherding and involves the giving of certain gifts that involve extending CARE (Communication, Affirmation, Recognition, and Example); working on people’s strengths and weaknesses; giving of the leader’s time, energy and focus; giving people ownership of the ministry; becoming a resource person (atmosphere, training, support, tools); making expectations clear; eliminating unnecessary burdens and; catching and rewarding people for doing something good (Maxwell 2003, 36).

When Father’s Love For The Nations was first started, our emphasis was to be able to minister and teach in our own language (Amharic) and reproduce leaders, as first-generation immigrants from Ethiopia and Eritrea who attended CTF often did not have a good command of English and valuable lessons and discipleship opportunities were being lost in translation. We strongly believed that there were many values of CTF that were not present in other churches, especially diaspora churches, and felt there was a need for this ministry to benefit our people. It was received with great excitement, enthusiasm and a grateful heart and it naturally grew over a few years. Under both our leadership, it soon became apparent that this was more than a cell group and we decided to plant a new diaspora church in downtown Toronto, with the approval and support of CTF’s leadership. I was doing bi-vocational ministry while serving at this church, and

over the years, I would grow in my gifts and skills, especially in pastoring, preaching, and power gifts. This also helped grow my confidence in ministering to others.

A big change has since happened in my life, which I will elaborate a little further in the next section, as I have moved on from these previous places of service. I am now in the process of building a new church in the Brockville, Ontario area. In one of my DMin class exercises, we participated in an inventory called CliftonStrengths Assessment to discover our leadership and change strengths. I discovered that my leadership and change signature strengths, that enabled me to lead in a changing environment, were Relator (encourage deepening relationships), Strategic (find the best course of action through complications), Includer (believe that no one should be ignored), Competition (compete to win) and Positivity (find a way to bring joy, energy and enthusiasm into tasks) (Craig 2020b, 2-4). My Strengths-based leadership domains were mainly relationship building (Relator, Includer, Positivity) then, influencing (Competition) and, strategic thinking (Strategic).

Therefore, I have used my relationship building strength to lead by getting to know people in the Brockville and surrounding areas and understanding what is important to them; even as I crafted sermons that addressed their needs and situations. Since I am a Relator and Includer, I have encouraged leadership to emerge from the people that God has brought in my path to motivate them to be involved and continue to participate in the church planting process. Recognizing

that I do not have a strength in executing, I have involved people in that domain and encouraged leadership to emerge to fill the gap.

Even though planting a church from scratch may sound overwhelming, my Competition strength has ensured that I am in it to win. This signature leadership strength was especially powerful to discover because it meant that although I am “gracious to [my] fellow competitors and even stoic in defeat, [I] do not compete for the fun of competing. [I] compete to win” (Craig 2020b, 3). This means I have continued to persevere through rough paths and have not given up easily. I have not been easily discouraged even when things did not go as planned or there was resistance or discouraging situations. The prize in my case is the establishment of a new church plant, as envisioned by God, so I will continue to see that vision come to pass. In addition, my strength of Strategic thinking has helped as initially, I have led by sharing my ideas for this new plant with as many people in the community as possible so that they could also catch the vision of what God has in store for us and get a chance to be involved. I have also used my leadership strengths as a Relator, Includer and Positive person to build trust, show compassion, provide stability and create hope (Craig 2020a, Slide 12), thereby influencing people from the community to follow.

Moreover, the MBTI and the FIRO-B measurement instruments that I participated in and mentioned in the previous section before leaving for Brockville showed me that I am best positioned for this task of planting a church in a completely foreign environment as an intuitive leader, positioning myself to be most effective, most culturally appropriate and, most responsive in the face of

change (Craig 2020c). This has proved true as I was able to navigate many changes (Covid, motherhood, new environment) with grace. I have accomplished this as I adopted the following postures as explained by Brian Craig:

A posture of learning: (from answers to questions), of vulnerability (from head to heart), of availability (from spoken words to living words), of stillness (from preparation to meditation, *especially with my practice of soaking*), of surrender (from control to chaos), ... of trust (from defensiveness to creativity), of joy (from work to play) and of dependence (from resolution to tension, and back again) (Craig 2020c, highlight my own).

Even though I have not always exhibited all of these traits and recognize that I especially lack “a posture of cultivation (from programmer to environmentalist)” (Craig 2020c), I have planned and strived to live these out more often than less often, in tandem with my leadership strengths and personality type. I have also recognized these in the leaders that I am forming and helped facilitate their growth towards fulfilling God’s purposes in their lives. Indeed, Clinton and Clinton highlighted that once a leader understands the process of giftedness development, others can be helped in the development of their own giftedness (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 9). This is how I have led in my new church plant.

My Current Position of Church Planting

As mentioned above, in the face of a changing Canadian landscape that is becoming increasingly multicultural, my family and I have moved from Toronto to Brockville, Ontario in March 2020 with the vision of starting a new congregation instead of joining an already established one. The area of the church plant is mainly of European origin with a visible minority population of less than 5% (Statistics Canada 2017). This move came as a result of a two-fold decision: leaving Father’s

Love For The Nations, the ethnic Ethiopian/Eritrean congregation that I co-led for five years in downtown Toronto, as well as not being able to find a meaningful position within my home church, CTF Toronto.

There were several things that my co-leader and I did great during our time of partnership. Lots of lives were transformed: relationships restored, people affirmed in their identities and extremely encouraged to pursue their God-given purposes, abilities, and gifts; especially, in a culture that usually controls women and does not give them a voice. However, I ultimately quit my co-leadership at Father's Love for the Nations because of vision misalignment (I was more focused on outreach and evangelism to grow the church; my friend on developing leaders in the church), different leadership styles as well as cultural issues of relationships, authority, and conflict-resolution.

At the beginning of this chapter, I had briefly alluded that I have an aversion to conflict. As a result, during my time at Father's Love For The Nations, I was agreeing artificially with most decisions (Lencioni 2012, 42), trying to be nice and pretending to be satisfied with resolutions than with real agreements. Jared E. Alcántara writes that,

Jesus did not come into the world primarily to make us nice. One does not need God to be nice. The gospel is neither a master class in etiquette nor a vision for works-based righteousness. Lewis observes, "A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world and might even be more difficult to save." (Alcántara 2019, 24-25)

Over time, I have found out that this behavior leads to a festering of resentment and destruction of trust, which led me to decide that it would be better

to save our friendship and resign altogether. Looking back, there were also many instances of lost opportunities for my friend and I to enter “the fundamental state of leadership,” a stage where we are purpose-centered, internally driven, other-focused and externally open (Quinn 2004, 22). For instance, choosing to change strategies when opportunities presented themselves instead of doing things the “the same old way,” because it is either more comfortable or as a way of not losing control, could have yielded better results. Quinn writes that, “we strive to stay in our zone of comfort and control. Given the choice between deep change or slow death, we tend to choose slow death” (Quinn 2004, 6). There were times I felt we were leading our diaspora congregation into slow death as the numbers did not grow for a long period of time.

Finally, I have experienced firsthand the toll that leading and administering a congregation can take on leaders. I have also learned that my primary vocations of preaching and pastoring can be neglected when I tried to do everything in our diaspora congregation. So, my plan for this new church plant was to allow lay leadership to blossom and thrive and not attempt to control everything.

A key Biblical passage to consider in this regard is Acts 6:1-7. John R. Stott accurately describes what the devil was trying to do in this context, a counterattack that started as soon as the Holy Spirit came upon the church, first through persecution followed by the corruption of Ananias and Sapphira, finally culminating in a subtle ploy of distracting the apostles from their main responsibilities of prayer and preaching (Stott 1990, 105). Howard Marshall positions this as “the Twelve...being distracted from their primary duty” (Marshall

2008, 133). So, “the solution to the problem was the appointment of a new group of leaders to serve tables” (Marshall 2008, 134-135), men who possessed Holy Spirit inspired wisdom resulting in increased proclamation and addition of new converts to the church.

When appointing leaders, I believe that the effectiveness of the selection lies in the fact that new leaders were appointed based on gifts of the Holy Spirit, not based on where one thinks he/she can do good: “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3a). Therefore, as a leader, it is important not only to know, study and develop my own giftedness, but also help others to do the same. Clinton and Clinton have listed seven reasons why leaders need to know about giftedness; mainly to give perspective to followers, to recognize and develop leadership potential, for placement of leaders in roles, for accountability, to facilitate a proactive stance toward development, to move toward focused lives and for balanced profile (to identify and fill gift vacuums in groups) (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 8-9). All of this will influence God’s people towards God’s purposes.

Another example of this in the Bible is Jethro’s advice to Moses on the need to delegate authority. In Exodus 18:13-27, an over-worked and weary Moses humbly accepts the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, and chooses capable leaders who will help him govern effectively. This is how Augustine is quoted as describing what Moses did: “Did not God talk with Moses, and yet he, with great wisdom and entire absence of jealous pride, accepted the plan of his father-in-law, a man of an alien race, for ruling and administering the affairs of the great nation

entrusted to him?” (White 2016, 132). Likewise, I believe I could use secular leadership principles and resources in our church plant, like Moses listened to his father-in-law and succeeded. Moses did not choose any men but “capable men... who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain” and men who have a teachable spirit within. Durham points out that Moses “is instructed to select *with great care* men who can assist him” (italics mine) and whose “responsibility is the reapplication (and no doubt also the collection) of interpretations of God’s requirements and instructions given already” (Durham 2015, 252 and 253). In other words, the work was entirely God’s and constantly requires his guidance and direction; all the more reasons why men (and women) who are gifted, appointed and trained accordingly are required.

A second reason we moved to Brockville was because I did not secure a ministry position at CTF Toronto. Right after graduating with my Master of Divinity degree, I had sought employment with my home church, believing that Charismatics could learn from other denominations, especially about the importance of strong, exegetical and biblical preaching, and other denominations could, in turn, learn from Charismatics to lean more on the Spirit and less on their established traditions and intellectualism. I strongly believed that there is a balanced way of doing God’s work and I could contribute towards bringing the two arms of Christianity (Charismatics and non-Charismatics) together, based on my experiences and years of study.

Alas, the congregation that I loved and that had contributed to my spiritual growth for many years closed its doors to me. Following these disappointments, I

sought God's guidance on these issues as well as received counselling from Tyndale's Counselling Services, to receive guidance and direction about my next steps and career choices. What resulted was a strong sense of being led towards starting a brand-new charismatic congregation in Brockville, Ontario that will incorporate both preaching that is sound and the works of the Holy Spirit. In line with this, my research project for the DMin program focused on understanding the values, lifestyles, hopes and fears of the people in Brockville and surrounding areas that will inform my practice of preaching; that is, investigating in a deep way the context, character, temperament, personality of the people there then; reflecting on what kind of preaching would be appropriate and designing a few sermons based on the findings.

Doors have since opened with CTF starting in June of 2022, not in the shape of an employment (preacher or pastor) within an established church like I had hoped for, but in the form of a church plant that is affiliated with CTF and could one day become CTF Brockville. With this happy development, I still feel like I am building the bridge as I walk on it (Quinn 2004, 8-9). I have no way of knowing how to get there, except to trust in him who has called me to do it, being confident that he will complete the good work he has started in me. I am indeed "walking naked into the land of uncertainty" (Quinn 2004, 9).

In many of my walks around the neighborhood where we are planting our church, I have encountered people who have asked me what type of church it will be. When I answered that I am "charismatic," more than a few were not sure what that meant. Therefore, I envision that opening a charismatic church entails a

cultural change for most, changing the way church services and ministries are conducted. So, there is a need to communicate clearly the “why” of this church plant. The best way to identify our church might be to say: “we’re people who follow Jesus and take him seriously by what he says, like praying and healing for the sick.” My decision to open a church instead of joining my home church, where I have tremendously benefited and grown spiritually over the years, arises for the most part from the desire to resolve some of the tension that I have alluded to above, mainly its weak tradition of preaching and, the absence of a church in our new community that emphasizes the work and power of the Holy Spirit (expressed through healing, deliverance, the prophetic, etc.). So, there is a need for a place where the two families of Christianity, Charismatics and non-Charismatics, can be integrated; a place where sound, biblical and exegetical sermons are preached while the work of the Holy Spirit is not underemphasized or altogether ignored.

A good role model of leadership that inspires me in the Bible is Nehemiah, a servant leader who dreamt what might be, invited those around him to share his vision and travel with him toward implementation (Gane 2014, 273-283). Nehemiah’s story is all the more interesting to me because the church that I ended up buying in Brockville, Ontario is in ruins and needs complete renovation! J. Oswald Sanders writes that Nehemiah’s strategies worked because of the quality of his character: he was a man of prayer, showed courage in the face of danger, was genuinely concerned for the welfare of others, identified with others in their sorrows and sins, carefully planned his strategies, was cautious, kept his goals a secret, made clear decisions, did not play favorites, was uncommonly emphatic,

was a realist, accepted responsibility and was a vigorous administrator (Sanders 2006, 212-214). His methods consisted of raising morale, building up faith, encouraging others, kindling hope by directing people's vision to God, solving real problems through decisive actions, and delegating responsibility (Sanders 2006, 214-217). As a result, the wall was completed (Nehemiah 6:15). Sanders concludes that "the test of spiritual leadership is the achievement of its objectives" (Sanders 2006, 217). Nehemiah was therefore a great leader who exhibited not only godly character but effective strategies. I plan to lead like him.

Additional Christian Leadership Models that Inspired me

As I prepare to formulate my own emerging philosophy of Christian leadership, I find myself inspired by the following Christian leadership models: transformative and, servant and subversive. I believe these two models can lead to a holistic ministry practice that I am envisioning for our new church plant as discussed below.

Reading John S. Burns' *The Leadership River*, I was attracted to "the transforming leadership school," first developed by James MacGregor Burns (Simmons, Shoup, and Burns 2014, 110). Expanding on this further and making differentiations with similar models, Carolyn M. Shields wrote that, "Burns (1978)...identified categories of leadership based either on transactions or on a goal of transformation," the latter concept leading to both transformational and transformative leadership (Shields 2010, 562). Shields summarizes that "transactional leadership involves a reciprocal transaction; transformational leadership focuses on improving organizational qualities, dimensions, and

effectiveness; and transformative ... leadership begins by challenging inappropriate uses of power and privilege that create or perpetuate inequity and injustice” (Shields 2010, 564).

It is important to note that transformative leadership is distinct from transformational or transactional leadership: “Transformative leadership is a social justice-oriented approach undergirded by notions of democracy (e.g., opportunity, equity, fairness, freedom). Leaders using this framework seek to identify, challenge, and redress issues of marginalization, power, privilege, and subjugation in society (Keddie, 2006; Weiner, 2003)” (Nevarez, Penrose and Padrón 2013, 163). We further read that leaders with this orientation are committed to social justice, challenge the “status quo,” advocate against marginalization, are concerned with diverse inequities and, are dedicated to advancing equity (Nevarez, Penrose and Padrón 2013, 153). These are the strengths that attract me to this leadership model. It is a leadership style that challenges the status quo and empowers others. I want to empower females to lead in churches and in the various ministries that God has called them in, as a transformative preacher and leader. There is a transformative power of the gospel that needs to be investigated further, leading to both the individual transformation and the social transformation implications.

Furthermore, transformative leadership “begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and addresses both individual and public good”. It is relevant “for leadership for equity, deep democracy, and social justice” (Shields 2010, 558-559). This compels transformative leaders to address issues of control, power and inequity towards a more just society. It accomplishes

this by beginning with critical reflection and analysis and moving to action, “action to redress wrongs and to ensure that all members of the organization are provided with as level a playing field as possible – not only with respect to access but also with regard to academic, social, and civic outcomes” (Shields 2010, 571-572). So, as a transformative leader, I will make issues of poverty, inequality and those in the borderlands (including sexism in ministry and how females are seen as leaders in the church) central to my advocacy, leadership practice and vision by empowering others towards positive change using an inspired vision.

Critics of this model maintain that it is “too idealistic and too demanding” and could place too much responsibility and pressure on the shoulders of leaders to solve societal ills (Shields 2010, 572). Indeed, when I think of transformative leadership, I am reminded of Martin Luther King and all that he endured, even to giving up his life. Another criticism holds that transformative leadership remains mostly conceptual with few applications in real-life settings (Shields 2010, 572). Other limitations include the view that traditional ideologies, practices and values must be deconstructed (not everything traditional is bad), viewing culture as a benefit and not a disadvantage (culture may need critical evaluation by those it most impacts) and, the leader’s strong will when it comes to overcoming injustice (implying other areas of leadership could be neglected) (Nevarez, Penrose and Padrón 2013, 153). As a transformative leader, I can overcome these challenges by being aware of them and by focusing on the transformative power of the gospel.

In the book *The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation* by Jared Alcántara, the author discusses the need for preachers to

“expand our theological imagination” (Alcántara 2019, 145-146) and compares false visions (success, pleasure, fulfillment, desire, image, happiness) versus a God-shaped vision. He writes:

A God-shaped vision sees, honors, and dignifies those whom society ignores, such as the undocumented, the widow, the orphan, the mentally ill, and the disabled. It names and exposes sin, whether in us or in others, for what it is—the “culpable disturbance of shalom”—and seeks to advance God’s vision for shalom in the world through Christ followers who act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Mic. 6:8). It confronts the idols that we worship individually and corporately by demanding that we choose the God who made us over the gods we have made for ourselves. It longs for human beings, especially the least, the lonely, and the lost, to experience restored and reconciled relationships with God and with others. It takes our most cherished markers of identity and does not ask us to erase them—thanks be to God—but does ask us to reorient and reframe them in such a way that Christ can occupy the central place. It prays what the Lord Jesus asked the disciples to pray: “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). (Alcántara 2019, 146)

This is exactly what Gordon W. King captured as servant and subversive leadership in his book *Seed Falling on Good Soil*, a leadership style I am most comfortable with and that I aspire to adopt. Throughout the book, he recounted many stories, both from the Bible and in modern day life, of people who dared question the status quo and tirelessly worked in various ways for the inclusion, salvation, healing and deliverance of those in the “borderlands.” He wrote: “God’s presence gives dignity to human life in the borderlands, builds communities of justice and compassion, and challenges the cultural practices of exclusion and privilege. The kingdom is God’s work of healing in a wounded world” (King 2016, 19). When my husband and I first started to visit Brockville, it seemed prosperous and healthy from the outside: big, well-manicured properties; well-dressed, fit and friendly people; and big trucks and boats parked in almost every driveway.

However, as we started shopping for a property to purchase and started looking into the downtown core, we discovered a lot of addiction, joblessness and poverty – which further reinforced why we were being called to this area.

So, applying King’s principles and God’s call of 1 John 3:18, “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth,” I envisioned our new church plant, temporarily named Less Words More Actions, to be an extension of God’s compassion and care for the poor and broken in the community of Brockville and its surrounding areas and aimed for a holistic ministry practice. A holistic church is one that “practices both evangelism and social ministry; balances nurture and outreach; knows and loves its community; clearly communicates its theology and specific vision for holistic mission; integrates the holistic vision into the internal life of the church; builds its ministry on a base of spiritual maturity and healthy, loving relationships; and calls and equips its members to action” (Sider, Olson and Unruh 2002, 17); in short, a church that shows the tangible love of God through social ministry; especially to those who are downtrodden and marginalized in its borderlands.

Another area that is becoming apparent to me is that females in leadership are also marginalized and, on the borderline, which is why I am so passionate about the topic of female preachers and in leadership. I believe my own experience of being marginalized gives me compassion for females in leadership and in various forms of ministry, even if our experiences might not be the same. So, when I speak about ministering to those in the margins and on the borderlands, I do not only

mean the drug addicts, the single mothers and the ones feeling judged in the churches – I am also referring to females called to preach and lead.

In *Churches That Make a Difference*, Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh give illustrations of what a transformative leader and a holistic ministry could look like in real life. They write about New Creation Lutheran Church's transformational vision that looks beyond its neighborhood to address social issues that affect the entire city such as community policing, affordable housing and welfare reform, by partnering with other churches and forming an ecumenical coalition called Philadelphia Interfaith Action (Sider, Olson and Unruh 2002, 32). They also write about founding pastor Bishop Dickie Robins of Life in Christ Cathedral of Faith located in Chester, Pennsylvania - a city ripe with social ills - who cannot contain his passion and enthusiasm regarding his social activism that translates into him participating in governmental and non-profit committees that develop local policies and implement social programs such as, a government-funded "work-first" program that assists people in leaving welfare, the Chester Education Foundation, the Delaware County Drug and Alcohol Commission, and an environmental actions committee. Bishop Robins truly believes that through his activism he can contribute to the fixing of the broken "wagon" (Sider, Olson and Unruh 2002, 100 and 101).

Other examples in my own denomination are Rolland and Heidi Baker, of Iris Ministries, "who touch people's lives in Mozambique with daily doses of God's love... They simply gave out bread to the hungry in the garbage dump and brought orphaned street children into their home. Each day, they reached out to the poor in

spirit and God moved. Every day, they shared the gospel and led souls to Christ, and, every month, more workers relocated to Mozambique to join them” (King 2005, 55), empowering, motivating and transforming people.

If we are “compelled by love” (Baker 2008, 7) and believe that “light belongs in the darkness” (King 2005, 42) various ministries of community engagement, compassion and social justice can be implemented in a local church setting under various forms: reducing sex and violence in the media, reforming unfair economic pattern empowering the poor, protecting the unborn, restoring the environment, organizing a counselling team for abused people, training youth in conflict resolution, safety and self-respect, holding Bible Study at an AIDS hospice, teaching computer skills, lobbying for Third World debt relief, providing holiday gift baskets to needy families, raising money to support local homeless shelters, establishing an Overcomers club: Christ-centered 12-step support group for recovering addicts, starting a Kids Café: nutritious meal and fun activities for youth, providing Daycare, sending kids to Summer Camp, and establishing a Discipleship class (Sider, Olson and Unruh 2002, 133, 135, 137, 138, 147, 150 and 162). Simply put, the opportunities are endless, and we are without excuse.

In summary to this section, preaching will be my first vocation: sound, exegetical, contextually informed sermons. But there is also a need to focus on action. That is the reason we have called our church plant Less Words More Actions as it’s about planting a holistic church, doing the work of ministry, caring for the flock, healing and visiting the sick, delivering the oppressed, giving spiritual care for those who are heartbroken, showing the tangible love of God through

evangelism and social ministry in its various forms, especially for those on the margins and in the borderlands, including females called for leadership in the church context. I therefore aspire to be a transformative leader.

PHILOSOPHY OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

I will now outline my own philosophy of Christian leadership, grounded in my readings, class exercises, assignments, lectures, study, and reflections. It is especially important to note that my philosophy of Christian leadership is intimately connected to my theology of preaching outlined in the previous chapter of my portfolio. For instance, I believe that preaching involves knowing self and knowing God, as well as loving God and loving others. In the same way, I believe Christian leadership is rooted in a leader who knows himself/herself and loves God and others.

I have developed what I am calling a “Trinitarian model” of Christian leadership, a leadership model that is rooted in the love of God the Father, in the humility and servanthood of Jesus the Son, and in the leadership and guidance of God the Holy Spirit. I found it appropriate to use the word Trinitarian because it involves all three persons of the Godhead: God the Father (love), Jesus the Son (humility and servanthood) and God the Holy Spirit (Spirit-led and guidance). I state this while firmly affirming that God is one and all God’s characteristics apply to all members of the Trinity. I am certain my conclusions can be applied more generally but these comments focus more on pastoral leadership and myself as a leader. I have sought to apply this Trinitarian leadership model to my church plant.

Christian Leadership is Rooted in the Love of God the Father

Here I am going to discuss about the importance of a Christian leader who knows himself/herself and loves God, others and himself/herself. There could be negative ramifications of leadership if issues of woundedness are not resolved. A leader who knows himself/herself cares for the people entrusted in his/her service.

Parker J. Palmer encourages a journey toward selfhood that is a journey toward God. He argues that the self is not set apart or special or superior but a mix of good and evil, darkness and light; a place of humanity (Palmer 2000, 69-70). He further maintains that not knowing one's true self causes a person to lead a false life and others much pain (in work and relationships) (Palmer 2000, 71). The good news is that God provides inner journey that leads to a sense of true self and healing (Palmer 2000, 81-82). This will ultimately lead to community and caring for one another (Palmer 2000, 81-82). As a Christian leader, it is important for me to know myself and love God and others.

Writing about self-knowledge, Calvin states that:

True and substantial wisdom principally consists of two parts, the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves... Almost all the things we know – the good things, the true things – center on two kinds of knowledge: What we know about God, and what we know about ourselves... But, while these two branches of knowledge are so intimately connected, which of them precedes and produces the other, is not easy to discover... and so, by our imperfections, we are excited to a consideration of the perfections of God. Nor can we really aspire toward him, till we have begun to be displeased with ourselves. For who would not gladly rest satisfied with himself? Where is the man not actually absorbed in self-complacency, while he remains unacquainted with his true situation, or content with his own endowments, and ignorant or forgetful of his own misery? The knowledge of ourselves, therefore, is not only an incitement to seek after God, but likewise a considerable assistance towards finding him. (Wilson 2019, Class Handout, 13)

There is an intimate link between self-knowledge and service (Palmer 2000, 31). A healthy view of self leads to better leadership. A leader's true colors will seep through, so it is essential that a leader first becomes transformed by the gospel before they share it with those that they are leading. Above all, a Christian leader needs to be a witness (Peterson 2011, 90). They can talk and witness all day long, but if they do not live the gospel, starting at home, they will not be successful. Therefore, a leader's character definitely makes what they preach and teach believable or not. The way they relate to their loved ones at home as well as in public is the greatest testimony of their inner beliefs and will affect their ability to lead.

A Leader Who Knows Himself/Herself

There is a cliché that is often used at CTF: "Hurt people hurt people." This applies to leaders as well. There are many leaders who end up wounding others in their community because of their own hurts. It is therefore crucial that Christian leaders invest time in knowing themselves and healing any hidden issues of woundedness. Ray S. Anderson has written extensively on this. He makes note of spiritual and pastoral abuse that can be invisible, unlike physical abuse, yet leaves scars on people's psyche and soul (Anderson 1997, 192). Such abuse stems "from the misuse of power for the purpose of controlling and exploiting another's vulnerability" (Anderson 1997, 193). Leaders who are prone to this conceal their weaknesses. Instead, they project them upon those they are supposed to care for (Anderson 1997, 193 and 194). This results in accusations, judgments, exploitation, manipulation and coercion (Anderson 1997, 194 and 196). As a result, leaders who

are “uncomfortable with their own humanity” can abuse, seeking to resolve their issues through ways that become abusive. These leaders fear being unmasked and uncovered as only human (Anderson 1997, 195). Anderson further writes that “Spiritual abusers are leaders who use the priestly office of ministry to create and manipulate guilt rather than to mediate and relieve it. Such abuse disempowers people as spiritual beings and creates spiritual wounds no ordinary therapy can remove” (Anderson 1997, 196). Instead of aligning themselves with God to bring value, “Spiritual abusers are leaders who use the prophetic office of ministry to align themselves with God against the people of God. Such abuse abandons people and condemns them to the hell of spiritual apostasy” (Anderson 1997, 196).

One of the values that I appreciate and are emphasized at CTF is a healthy view of one’s identity, especially the leader’s identity. A leader has to be grounded in their identity as the beloved child of the Most High God, not one that needs to impress God with their accomplishments. Henri J.M. Nouwen states that “very few people know that they are loved without any conditions or limits” (Nouwen 1989, 38). Therefore, as a leader, I need to experience for myself hearing God’s voice calling me his beloved and that he is well-pleased with me, just the way he has created me. I should not feel I am important to God only when I most resemble others or do great exploits (Matthew 3:17). Anderson also stresses that “those who are set apart for leadership must have demonstrated a healthy core of self-identity and a capacity to exercise authority and use of power without exploiting the weaknesses and needs of others (Anderson 1997, 194). The practice of inner

healing helps achieve a degree of wholeness in a leader, leading to positive image of self and love of God and others.

A Leader Who Loves God

In addition, Nouwen emphasizes the need for a leader who loves—one who knows the heart of God; “a heart that forgives, cares, reaches out and wants to heal,” (Nouwen 1989, 37) and a heart that loves without limits or conditions (Nouwen 1989, 38). A leader’s understanding of God profoundly shapes their leadership. Developing a personal and intimate relationship with God is therefore of utmost importance. I often ask myself these questions to help me do self-reflection: Am I in awe of God? Do I adore him and cherish spending time in the closet or is it just an act; to be seen and admired? Do I truly trust and value God above anyone and everything? Does he seem distant and uninvolved or is he always with me; through the wilderness as well as the wetlands? Do I really love Jesus or is this all a show for number and results? The Psalmist rightly said: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23-24, ESV).

A Leader Who Loves Others

Christian leaders need to see themselves as communal people, who work among and with the people that they are called to serve; not by lording it over them or being distant from or aloof. A leader needs to choose to stay irrelevant (Nouwen 1989, 30 and 35) and loving rather than relevant and successful. This could be achieved by belonging to a group of friends for accountability, authenticity,

criticism and loving support (Palmer 2000, 18; Nouwen 1989, 64). Nehemiah is a good example of a leader who did not “lord it over people” (Nehemiah 5:15).

A Christian leader’s goal should not be one of striving, competing, being driven, and laboring to succeed in the worldly way of doing things or accomplishing tasks. A leader should be on the ground with their people—God’s people—loving, caring, guiding, and leading them into God’s presence, experiencing life with them, with great patience. To that end, I believe that as a pastor-shepherd, I need to spend time understanding my congregation just as I spend time understanding myself and God, so that I do not abuse them (as thoroughly emphasized by Anderson) as well as to better serve them. The last thing I want is to misuse my power, lord it over others, control or exploit the very precious ones that God has called me to feed. In the same vein, Zach Eswine also stressed that pastors ought to know their sheep, love, cherish and appreciate them; not be puffed up with God knowledge (Eswine 2015, 113).

A Leader Who Loves Himself/Herself

Finally, an area that is often neglected is genuine love of oneself. This is often overlooked due to false modesty. Bradley P. Holt wrote that “Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Implied in such love is self-care, nurture of the self, and healing” (Holt 2005, 150). As we have established above, knowledge of self and love of self coincide. We cannot love others without loving ourselves. When we begin to see the way God sees us, then we begin to love ourselves. Again, the practice of inner healing plays a major role in this area as it roots us in the realization that in Christ, we are loved, safe and valued.

In summary, as a shepherd, I give priority to know myself, love God, love others and love myself to better care for the sheep entrusted to my care. Practices such as soaking and inner healing help me in searching my heart and knowing if there are any hindrances there. I can then love God, love myself and others better.

Christian Leadership is Grounded in the Humility and Servanthood of Jesus the Son

Here I am going to discuss about the importance of a Christian leader who is humble in his/her leadership approach and has a servant's heart. A humble leader is one who relies on God for answers, not on himself/herself to lead others. A servant leader is one who puts the interests of others before him/her and does not lord it over them.

Our ultimate leadership model is Jesus. He is much more than that: he's a savior to be worshipped, a redeemer to be adored, but he is also a model for Christians of what it means to be a leader. Unlike us, Jesus is human, but not merely. Jesus is local, but not only (Eswine 2015, 35-36). In 1 John 3:8, Jesus states clearly why he came: "The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." Jesus came to take our sins upon himself and take our place of condemnation on the cross. He died so that instead of deserving to die, we may live (eternally) and live abundantly. Eswine writes that Christian life and ministry should be an apprenticeship with Jesus toward the recovery of humanity and leading others to do the same. Even though we cannot perfectly model

ourselves on Jesus because Jesus is God, we can aspire to lead like him with his help.

Two major ways (by no means exhaustive) that Jesus led are through humility and servanthood.

A Leader Who is Humble

Jesus models humility by completely relying on his Father to do what he needs to accomplish: “Jesus gave them this answer: ‘Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does’” (John 5:19). Eswine writes that we should not desire to do something great for God at the expense of humility, love and submission to God’s presence (Eswine 2015, 42). Eric Geiger writes:

Humble leaders realize the only thing we are entitled to is death and destruction because of our sin. Yet God in his mercy has given us himself, taken away our sin, and offered us everlasting life. In the same way, everything we steward, every opportunity we have, every season we are able to lead and serve others is only because of his grace. To remind us of this truth, the apostle Paul rhetorically asked, “For who makes you so superior? What do you have that you didn’t receive?” (1 Cor.4:7). Humble leaders remind themselves of this truth over and over again. (Greiger 2018)

This is humility at its best. There is not an ounce of selfishness and self-centeredness but self-forgetfulness. Not thinking less of oneself but thinking of oneself less.

Humble leaders obey God and follow him wherever he may lead. Jesus did exactly this and he was led to the cross before God exalted him (Philippians 2:5-11). Eswine commented that “Jesus’s way is not the celebrity way.” His way is spending much time in seclusion with his Father, focusing on the sick, troubled and

obscured; not the rich, well-known and connected. He invited his followers to do the same (Eswine 2015, 62-65). He also “made a habit of giving his time to unknown, broken people in in out-of-the-way places, overlooked by the world, but delighted in by him” (Eswine 2015, 68-69). Nouwen was led to follow in Jesus’s humble ways as he was led to live amongst and serve mentally handicapped people. Nouwen heard God tell him to separate from the best and the brightest who want to rule the world (at Harvard, where Nouwen once taught) and go and live among marginalized men and women who have few or no words; the poor in spirit who will heal him of spiritual burnout (Nouwen 1989, 22). This is quite remarkable.

A Leader Who is a Servant

The second point of Christ-centered leadership is to be a servant. A servant leader is one who puts the interest of others first, who “uses leadership to serve followers” (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 27). Jesus pointed this out himself: “They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all’” (Mark 9:33-35). Anderson again paints a great picture of a servant leader: “An effective servant leader must possess three things: a creative vision that inspires, a delegated power that enables, and a spiritual gift for ministry” (Anderson 1997, 197). A servant leader values people but does not coerce them; instead preparing them to receive the blessing and benefits of the Lord (Anderson 1997, 199). It is

also important that a servant leader is loving, a good steward, faithful and accountable to God (Anderson 1997, 200). Servant leaders use power both to discipline and give direction: “The servant leader, more than anyone else, will be an advocate for those who stumble and fall through their own failure or who are wounded by others through the process” (Anderson 1997, 200 and 202).

Furthermore, “The character of Christ,” such as “humility, non-exploiteness, servanthood, and obedience to the mission and will of God” are all important in a servant leader (Anderson 1997, 203). Indeed, under the care of a servant leader, the “little ones” who belong to Christ are not despised and abused, for “in heaven their angels continually view the face of My father” (Mathew 18:10, CSB).

In summary, as a shepherd, I need to remind myself constantly that the sheep in my care are not my own after all; they belong to God. They have not been entrusted to me to serve me or for me to feel important but for me to sacrificially serve them. As Anderson elaborated, I need to develop a healthy core of self-identity and view of God so that I am a leader who uses her power effectively; enables and empowers others; not coerce, manipulate or exploit others. A servant leader would not coerce, manipulate or exploit others; not lord it over others. In order to achieve this as a servant leader, it is crucial that I ask important questions: Who are the people sitting in the pews? How do I see them (as a project to be worked on and changed, value-less (Anderson 1997, 193) or as the beloved of God? What are they going through? What do they believe in? What do we disagree upon? Have they experienced God for themselves? What are their aims, goals and expectations? What do they like? Dislike? How do they view authority? How

different are they from me? What spiritual teachings do they need? Where are they stuck? How are they being impacted by the world around them? etc. Of course, the most important underlying question is: How can I best become a “servant leader” (Anderson 1997, 197, 199, 200, 202 and 203) to them who can model Jesus to them?

Christian Leadership is Led and Guided by the Spirit of God

Here I am going to discuss about the importance of a Christian leader who is intimate with God and hears and obeys his voice. Practices of soaking and hearing God’s voice can position a leader to be led and guided by the Spirit of God.

Nouwen speaks of the importance of a leader who is intimate with God, “truly knows the heart of God...a heart of flesh,” (Nouwen 1989, 38) that brings “healing, reconciliation, new life, and hope;” (Nouwen 1989, 41) not just a moral, well-trained and creative leader (Nouwen 1989, 43). Intimacy entails a very close walk with and knowing God. One way for Christian leadership to gain intimacy involves silence and resting in God: “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10a), “The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exodus 14:14), “For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him” (Psalm 62:5, ESV).

It is very important for a Christian leader to seek the face of God and wait upon him. As a shepherd, I frequently practice soaking to be that leader who is led and guided by God. Intimacy is also highlighted in Isaiah: “Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary” (Isaiah 40:31,

NASB). It is therefore important for a Christian leader to work from a stance of rest, stepping back and seeing the world from an eagle's point of view, looking at the big picture and trying to see what God is doing so that the details of running and walking become apparent.

Furthermore, when the needs and challenges of ministry are heavy, the more a leader will need to spend quality, one-on-one, secluded time with God to avoid burnout. Eswine is a good reminder that Jesus did exactly this as he focused not on the rich, well-known and connected but on the neediest of them all (Eswine 2015, 60, 62-65). Peterson echoes this as well. A pastor is one placed in the community, who pays attention and makes an effort to rescue people from darkness, danger and whatever holds them captives (Peterson 2011 5, 20) and works from a position of rest; not anxiety and fear (Peterson 2011 45). This is accomplished as a Christian leader stays intimate with the Lord.

In addition, in order to be Spirit-led, a Christian leader needs to learn to hear God's voice and obey him by participating in what God is already doing: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27, ESV). After describing disillusioned pastors who quit and disappointed congregations that dismiss them, Peterson writes:

I wonder if at the root of the defection is a cultural assumption that all leaders are people who "get things done," and "make things happen." That is certainly true of the primary leadership models that seep into our awareness from the culture — politicians, businessmen, advertisers, publicists, celebrities, and athletes. But while being a pastor certainly has some of these components, the pervasive element in our two-thousand-year pastoral tradition is not someone who "gets things done" but rather the person placed in the community to pay attention and call attention to "what is going on right now" between men and women, with one another and

with God — this kingdom of God that is primarily local, relentlessly personal, and prayerful “without ceasing.” (Peterson 2011, 5)

I believe this statement is true not only of shepherds but of all Christian leaders in the position that God has placed them. A Christian leader is not primarily someone who gets things done but one who participates in God’s work. It is about God at work, not the leader at work because “inappropriate, anxiety-driven, fear-driven work would only interfere with and distract from what God (is) already doing” (Peterson 2011, 45). Instead, Christian leaders ought to pay more attention to God’s work and guide others into this awareness and process.

In his article titled “The Spirit-Led Leader,” Robert Logan explains that no matter how smart a leader is or how well-intentioned, they can never take the place of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the people that they are leading (Logan 2018). As Logan summarizes it: “The best I can do is to help people listen to what God is doing in their life and then to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to see God’s agenda become a reality... The best leaders in ministry today don’t lead from a place of self, but by listening to the voice and direction of God” (Logan 2018).

This is so true of Temitope Balogun (T.B.) Joshua, former General Overseer of The Synagogue Church of All Nations located in Lagos, Nigeria. Coming from very humble beginnings but with a deep-rooted passion to seek the face of God and please him in all things, T.B. Joshua performed astonishing signs, wonders and miracles reminiscent of the early Church acts of the apostles. Videos testifying of how this humble servant of God was powerfully used to bring God’s kingdom on earth can still be watched today (Emmanuel TV, 2024). TB Joshua relied so much on God for the majority of what happened in his congregation that

typically, when asked a question of direction, he would not answer what he thought but would say: “Wait for me; we will pray and hear what God is saying.” This is the mark of a true humble Christian leader.

In summary, as a shepherd, I need to constantly position myself to be in a stance of soaking and rest so that I can be increase my intimacy with God. Out of that intimacy, I can be strong, get refreshed, hear God’s voice and be led where the Spirit leads.

Conclusion

My journey into the world of leadership started with questioning my call to be a preacher and pastor. Since then, I have been on a whirlwind of an adventure. Looking back, I never set out to be a leader but was highly motivated into bringing as many people as possible into the bright light that had shone on me in 1999. Enrolling in EE to acquire skills of evangelism in order to better serve my God and other people eventually introduced me to the world of leadership.

As we can see from the description of my experiences, I have had different focuses of leadership at various times of my life. At Peoples Church, the emphasis was on evangelism and training others; at CTF, the focus was on Spirit-led leadership (emphasis on the Holy Spirit), and multiplying leadership with the goal of developing and empowering others or reproducing leaders, especially based on their giftings. Other aspects of my leadership journey have been discovering and growing in spiritual gifts, acquired skills and natural abilities; leading based on

leadership strengths, personality types and gifts (full of wisdom, full of the Holy Spirit); leading with a servant's heart by paying attention to humility and dependence on God; leading not knowing the exact details but "building the bridge as we walk on it;" pondering about transformative and subversive leaderships, and planning to be involved in ministries of community engagement, compassion and social justice in the Brockville and surrounding areas once we launch our new Church.

Even though I started with not considering myself as a leader because of my cultural background and continued resistance to female leadership in church settings (Clinton and Clinton 1998, 16), my giftings (spiritual, natural and acquired) and experiences of leadership, my current involvement leading a church plant as well as my continuous wrestling with this topic in classrooms as well as in writing, presenting and defending my research project, have convinced me that I am a preacher and leader, a shepherd leader. Hearing God's voice calling me a shepherd has also helped in settling this issue for me.

My own Trinitarian Model of Christian Leadership asserts that Christian leadership is rooted in the Father's love where inner healing helps a leader achieve a degree of wholeness, resulting in knowledge of self and leading by loving God, self and others, which in turn translates into nurturing, caring, encouraging and motivating. It is grounded in the humility and servanthood modelled by Jesus which entails leading by being humble and with a servant's heart. And it is led and guided by the Holy Spirit where the leader focuses on leading by being intimate with God and hearing and obeying God's voice).

Overall, my leadership philosophy focuses more on the need to develop the character of a Christian leader and instill godly values rather than skills. Both character and skills are important in a leader. In fact, each aspect of character has an element of skill embedded in it. We have to learn to be quiet and still (soaking, meditation), to hear God's voice (reading the Bible, journaling), to serve (we look for opportunities to be of service), to be humble (exercising forgiveness), to know self (inner healing), to love God and others (spiritual practices such as prayer, worship, spending quality time with people, speaking their love languages) and to be led by the Spirit.

Qualified Christian leadership entails people who are properly screened, trained, developed into capable leaders and is expressed by character (spiritually mature servant leadership), skills (prepared, competent, organized, and accountable leadership) and values (empowering and equipping leadership) (Cousins 2021, 48). Alcántara speaks of developing and honing our skills or "woodshedding" (which involves consistently practicing in order to be better at it) (Alcántara 2019, 1-3). We do not become an excellent or effective leader overnight. We need to keep leading - in good and bad times, when the accolades come, when no one is watching, when it is difficult to lead, when the road is smooth and flowing and, when it is rough and bumpy. The goal is to be faithful with what we have been given so that one sweet day, we can hear the Lord say: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:21).

CHAPTER 4

MY PROJECT TO UNDERSTAND MY COMMUNITY IN ORDER TO PREACH MORE EFFECTIVELY

In the following chapter, I will discuss the opportunity that existed in my ministry setting that I focused on, the response that addressed the problem I identified, issues of accountability and permission to conduct my research, how I gained access to participants, the research I conducted and what I learned.

Opportunity

In 2020, my family and I moved to the area of Brockville, Ontario with the vision of planting a new church. Besides the logistics that are involved with church planting (gathering a congregation, registration, permits, affiliation, funding, ministry team, etc.), I was acutely aware that I needed to plan the worship service and, specifically, as the main preacher, the weekly teaching and preaching of sermons. The problem arose as I was not familiar with the culture and context of the area. I did not understand the hearts and minds of the people living in the community. With the arrival of the Covid pandemic and ensuing lockdowns, it was even more difficult to get to know people and be involved in congregational life with other established churches. Therefore, I did not know where people were in their spiritual journeys, which made the planning and preaching of sermons that speak to people's lives even more complicated.

Response

This research project attempted to fill the gap by exegeting the culture of the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville (UCLG) in order to understand my community as a tool to help me preach effective sermons that speak into people's lives in a contextually informed way. This area has many towns and villages such as Maitland (where the church is physically located), Brockville, Elizabethtown-Kitley and Prescott where my principal target groups reside, all within a half-hour drive of the church plant.

Nine participants were selected from the UCLG based on their willingness to help and participate in this project. They were asked to evaluate one generic sermon preached prior to my analysis of the culture and context and three contextually informed sermons that were designed and preached after a careful investigation of the area through one-on-one interviews of participants. This helped measure the impact of contextually informed sermons and will ultimately help me develop sermons that speak to the needs and concerns of my community.

Supervision, Permission, and Access

I am above all accountable to God who has called me to this task of planting a new church in Maitland, Ontario. My husband and I have since been aligned with the CTF family of churches and are considered a pre-launch CTF church (further explanation provided under Chapter 3: My Current Position of Church Planting). This means I am accountable to a CTF Church Planters leader with whom I am meeting on a regular basis. In addition, my husband and I took a required CTF church planting course overseen by the same leader. We also

participate in regular meetings with CTF churches and affiliated groups. While we are waiting to meet the criteria required to open a CTF Brockville church, we have temporarily called our church plant Less Words More Actions, a CTF Community.

Context

I started attending CTF Toronto in 2008 and soon started growing in my leadership abilities. I must admit that I never joined this church for its strength in preaching, which is what I am primarily called to do. The best I can describe my church's sermons are "deistic" sounding, a hermeneutic where God has done his part and we are now the main actors (Billings 2010, 86-90). At best, these sermons sound like self-help sermons. However, there was an element missing in my spiritual walk that none of my other church backgrounds (Orthodox, Baptist and non-denominational Evangelical) were able to fill.

This gap was filled when I joined CTF Toronto. This congregation helped connect me to the work of the Holy Spirit in my own life, leading to spiritual wholeness and growth at a deeper level than ever before. The missing emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit that I experienced in my previous non-charismatic churches but later on discovered and experienced at this church is best captured in the following quote by Dr. James A. Beverley: "If the Toronto Blessing is too wild, are not dead and boring services an equal, if not greater sin? If Vineyard leaders put too much emphasis on spiritual "experiences," what about other church leaders who deny them completely? If the Holy Spirit is overemphasized, what shall we say against churches that ignore the Spirit?" (Beverley 1995, 150).

When I no longer had the option of joining CTF in meaningful employment, my husband and I felt a strong sense of being led to plant a brand-new charismatic congregation in Brockville, Ontario that incorporates both sound preaching and the works of the Holy Spirit. Soon after, CTF's leadership heard about our intent to plant a new church and started us on a journey of being aligned with them to plant a CTF Brockville church. This fell perfectly in line with my research project for the DMin program as it focused on understanding the values, lifestyles, hopes and fears of the people in Brockville and surrounding areas that informed my practice of preaching. That is, I investigated in a deep way the context, character, temperament, and personality of the people in the UCLG—their felt needs. Then, based on my findings, I designed and preached three sermons with the goal of contextual awareness. As I am the main preaching and teaching pastor for the foreseeable future, this research project has helped me preach contextually informed sermons that speak to peoples' lives instead of generic and generalized sermons that could have missed my listeners' contexts.

To accommodate this new vision, my husband and I bought a house with a church building on it, initially under the impression the building only needed some minor repairs and a new roof. We learned that the building used to house Maitland Community Reformed Church, a congregation that was dissolved in 2010 (as per Jack Van de Hoef, pastor of Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Brockville). According to Goldie A. Connell (Connell 1985, 182), Maitland Community Reformed Church “was built in 1955 by Dutch immigrant families who originally started their congregation in Brockville...and services were [originally] conducted

in Dutch.” The couple who bought the property with a plan to start their own ministry run into shortage of funds and made the decision to sell it to us.

We soon discovered that the church building was quickly deteriorating as it was left in a state of prolonged disrepair requiring the building to undergo total renovation. Since then, a brand-new steel roof has been constructed, the building has been waterproofed, and mold and debris have been thoroughly cleaned up. However, due to funding issues, we have now decided to put off renovation work indefinitely. Instead, my husband and I are currently concentrating on starting a congregation that meets in our home, online and in a temporary location and will eventually relocate to the building once the work is finished.

The new area that we joined is mainly of European origin (more than 87% from the British Isles) with a visible minority population of less than 5% (Statistics Canada 2021). Our church plant is technically located at the intersection of a small village called Maitland and the city of Brockville that is the seat of the UCLG. This county of approximately 104,070 people is itself a collection of smaller villages, townships, and municipalities (Statistics Canada 2021). For ease of data collection, all participants selected for this research project resided within 30-minute drive of our church, as we deemed people further away are unlikely to join the church.

Models and Other Course Material

In this section, I will be identifying how prior projects and course work have equipped me to conduct this research project.

In her book *A Little Handbook for Preachers: Ten Practical Ways to a Better Sermon by Sunday*, Mary S. Hulst outlines ten simple guidelines or checklist to help preachers improve their practice of preaching. According to Hulst, a sermon needs to be biblical, God-centred, grace-full, compelling and clear, imaginative, contextual, relevant, self-less, and open to feedback (Hulst 2016, 189-190). I applied all these elements in crafting and delivering my own sermons, with more emphasis on the guidelines of ‘contextual’ and ‘relevant’ since the aim of this research project was to develop contextual and relevant sermons that speak into the lives of listeners and can be applied in their day to day lives. The very definition of contextual, “speaks into the deep life-needs of people and our culture with pastoral sensitivity and wisdom” (Livingston quoting Hulst 2017c, Slide 42) and relevant, “practical and applicable to people’s lives” (Livingston quoting Hulst 2017c, Slide 44) fit into my goal of addressing people’s deep-life needs and motivating them to apply the lessons learned. Amongst the guidelines listed, I believe contextual and relevant are those that cater most to listeners. Hulst writes “To preach in our contexts is to sing the song of our people; it is to put their names in the Story” (Hulst 2016, 115). She also elaborates that relevant preaching is concerned about how our listeners should live differently because of our sermon (Hulst 2016, 117).

This realization led me to ponder the relationship between preaching and biography. Preaching should not be a dispassionate recounting of God’s story only but God’s story, my story and our story together (our biographies). Frederick Buechner vehemently warns that if ministers ignore their experiences – including the good, the bad and the ugly – and stick to just “homiletical

pronouncements...the faith they proclaim appears to be no longer rooted in or nourished by or challenged by their own lives but instead free-floating, secondhand, passionless” (Wilson quoting Buechner, 2019, 13-14). Preaching will benefit by being loyal to both theology and biography, there ought to be a dialogue between the two. In a related vein, in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today*, Paul Scott Wilson (Wilson 2018, 41) argues that God and grace ought to be preached but needs that people bring to church must be addressed as well. Pitt-Watson quotes Karl Barth as stating: “As a minister I wanted to speak to the people in the infinite contradiction of their life, but to speak the no less infinite message of the Bible, which was as much of a riddle as life” (Pitt-Watson 1978, 6). Victor Shepherd pointed out that a good sermon addresses both the human situation (our complexities) and the human condition (our sinfulness and condemnation under God) at the same time (Shepherd 2020a). He writes that “the future of preaching depends on our Christology, our grasp of the human condition and our grasp of the human situation” (Shepherd 2020a).

It is therefore crucial to know and understand my audience as I plant a church, without which my sermons cannot be contextual and relevant. Preaching must be contextual by addressing the questions, needs and concerns of the people who live around me. Without knowing the culture of the community, this is impossible to accomplish. Exegeting the culture, not just the biblical text, is important to crafting sound sermons that speak the Gospel into the future congregation’s contexts. This entails living with a missionary mindset, like the apostle Paul, by meaningfully walking around and living in my neighborhood and

target area, taking the time to observe in order to find the best way to take the whole gospel into the real context in which people are living (Woodward 2013). This research project has helped me to better understand the culture of the area and people in which I am planting a church so that my sermons can speak into their life's needs and situations.

In addition, even though many preachers stress the importance of preaching exegetically, Shepherd underlined the importance of using a variety of approaches (exegetical/expository, devotional, ethical, doctrinal, apologetic and social). He states that “we must always keep in mind that [Exegetical/Expository preaching] is not the only approach (despite notable preachers who say it is); Jesus didn't customarily preach exegetically, while his opponents did, especially the scribes” (Shepherd 2020b). Heeding to Shepherd's advice to use the following division of preaching approach, I could make a third of my preaching expository, a third topical and a third based on what people request, of course, always within balance and with the leading of the Holy Spirit. Here again still, I need to know what people request before I can incorporate this into my sermon schedule.

Project Methodology, and Methods

In this section, I describe steps followed to complete my project. It includes a description of the participants as well as the location where the project took place. The scope of the project, as well as the methodology and methods, are also described in detail, making it easier to comprehend how I approached my data and the steps I took to gather and analyze it. In addition, I outline the phases and timetable of my project as well as how I dealt with ethical issues for this project.

Field

The new church plant is physically located in the UCLG, and specifically in the village of Maitland, which is my principal target community. However, Maitland is a very small village and the opportunity to meet people or gather recorded data was very limited. So, I recruited nine people who reside within 30 minutes-drive of the church building and who have lived in the UCLG for at least five years. I first used convenience sampling (Nikolopoulou 2023) to recruit acquaintances and enrolled seven participants. The remaining two came as references from one participant that I recruited, for a total of nine participants. Six of them were females and three were males, ranging in age from 36 to 74 and having lived in the UCLG from most of their life (person in their 70s) to six and a half years. Seven of the participants described themselves as Christians and two of them as Metaphysical ministers. This is a belief system, according to one participant, that attempts to study and apply humanity's highest potential of the psycho-spiritual realm in describing and integrating spiritual experience within psychological theory.

This project focused on understanding the felt needs of people living in the UCLG towards the preaching of contextually informed sermons that can speak into peoples' lives. Based on Mary Hulst's explanation of people's deep life needs (Hulst 2016, 101), I define felt needs as what participants perceive as being deep life needs (fears, worries, concerns, challenges, etc.) of the community that can be addressed when a sermon is contextually informed. Participants initially listened to and rated a generic sermon. Then, I interviewed them to understand the felt needs

of the community through them. Once I compiled, analyzed, and interpreted the interviews, I prepared and recorded three sermons that attempted to be contextually informed over the following three weeks and posted them online for easy access so that participants could watch and evaluate them. Finally, the ratings of the generic sermon were compared with the ratings of the contextually informed sermons to see if there has been any improvement in those ratings. In addition, the feedback received helped me enhance my preaching skills. The project started in March 2022 with the posting of the generic sermon and the last evaluation for sermon 4 was received in June 2022. The data demonstrates that understanding felt needs of the community improved the contextual and relevance ratings of the sermons preached and helped me develop my preaching skills as I incorporated feedback received.

Methodology

My research was primarily ethnographic research, with a strong evaluative component as participants rated each sermon preached. Jared E. Alcántara (Alcántara 2019, 94) writes that “An ethnographer studies the community in which she or he lives, reflects on that community, and functions as both an insider and an outsider, a participant and a critic at one and the same time.” As someone who had recently moved to the area, this made ethnographic research well suited to my research project, as I focused on understanding the community surrounding the church plant through the experiences of people who participated in this project. The end aim was to get in the habit of preaching sermons that are contextual, relevant and speak to congregants’ contexts.

Bonnie L. Yegidis and Robert W. Weinbach (Yegidis and Weinbach 2006, 177) further explain that “ethnographic research is primarily descriptive research ... [that] seeks to understand the beliefs, attitudes, values, social roles, social structures, and norms of behavior in social environments that are different from that of the researcher.” I could not get to know everything there is to know about the culture of the area of interest, as that would have been too wide, too time consuming and outside of the scope of this study. At the same time, I did not focus on getting to participants’ personal lives either as they were not part of my congregation. What I was interested to know specifically through this study was felt needs of the community where the church is being planted, through the experiences of people that I interviewed. This, in turn, informed the subsequent creation of three contextually informed sermons crafted for this project. This was accomplished by selecting a specific set of questions to ask participants, whom I regarded as my community advisors, to provide me with information such as the kind of residents in the area, the community's needs, and their spiritual and life experiences; information that I could not have otherwise obtained through other means.

This project was designed to assess if addressing some of the felt needs of people living in the surrounding community made sermons more effective in terms of being contextual and relevant. It attempted to answer the question: does an improved understanding of my community’s felt needs improve the relatability and applicability of my sermons? Even though quantitative data was collected in the form of sermon evaluations, this is mainly a qualitative data analysis.

Furthermore, Alcántara makes an important point that “We do not learn more about a community because we want to write a master’s thesis; we learn about it because we love our community and want to reach it” (Alcántara 2019, 96). I have kept this principle in mind during data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Methods

I used convenience sampling to select the people who participated in this project by personally asking people I know by phone, email and in person if they would consider participating in my preaching project. I also recruited additional individuals by encouraging references and recommendations of additional people that could help in the research. Those who showed interest received an information letter and consent form that introduced the project's goals and objectives, explained the methodology, discussed about the ethics of the project, and asked people who might be interested in participating to sign a consent form. Nine people signed the consent form, including two family members, and were included as participants.

There were three phases of participation for community participants. In the first phase of participation, community participants were asked to listen to a generic sermon and evaluate it using a modified “Sermon Evaluation Form” that I provided them (See Appendix E). This feedback form was designed to discover to what extent the sermon was contextual and to what extent the sermon was relevant, on a scale of 1 to 10 (Livingston 2017c). According to Mary Hulst, a sermon is contextual (Hulst 2016, 101) when it speaks to listeners’ deep life needs (hopes,

fears, worries, concerns, challenges, etc.) and is relevant (Hulst 2016, 117) when it is applicable to listeners' lives.

In the second phase of participation, community participants were interviewed. Using descriptive questions (Spradley 2016, 86), I conducted an in-depth one-on-one interview with each participant, in person or by phone, that was audio recorded and lasted less than two hours. These consisted of “grand tour” questions, asking the participant to give general descriptions “of how things usually are” (Spradley 2016, 87); “mini-tour” questions, which are follow-up questions to grand tour descriptions (Spradley 2016, 88); “example” questions, leading to “the most interesting stories of actual happenings”(Spradley 2016, 88); “experience” questions, asking about specific experiences (Spradley 2016, 88-89); and “native-language” questions, asking the participant to use their own terms/words/expressions (Spradley 2016, 89-90). (See Appendix D: Research Instruments).

Grand tour questions that point to cultural issues were formulated based on Gary Nelson's research (Nelson 2008, 157) because my goal for the interviews was to learn about the kind of people who live in the community and the felt needs of the community based on participants' perceptions of the nature of the community. This helped me to tailor my sermons to the felt needs of my listeners. The question I asked followed by an explanation of why I asked it:

- 1) Please describe the people that live in this community. (To find out if they are farmers, blue collar workers, etc. This would inform me as to the most appropriate kinds of illustrations to use, i.e., literature, farming, sports, etc.)

- 2) What are the needs in the community? (To find out felt needs in the community and understand the social challenges facing the community)
- 3) What do people do in their spare time? (Helps to get to know the community and for sermon illustrations and applications)
- 4) Where do people hang out together? (This question helps answer if people stick together, are spread out or actively involved in the community)
- 5) What type of activities take place in the community? (For sermon illustrations and also to understand the community's deepest values)
- 6) What are the social cleavages in the community? (To discover strengths and weaknesses in the community)
- 7) What are some of the significant changes in the community in the last 5-10 years? (To find out to what extent the community is open to change and how they perceive change)
- 8) Have you had spiritual experiences in your life? If yes, what are your most notable spiritual experiences? (To discover common spiritual themes and questions worth exploring)

In addition to these questions, following Spradley's instructions, I asked follow-up, example, native-language, and experience questions, as needed, and based on the responses that I received. (For examples of these questions, please see Appendix D).

Once I compiled a list of felt needs as described by the participants (See Table 2, p.139), I crafted my sermons in a way that they would address the themes identified. Further explanation of how Sermons Two, Three and Four were

designed will be described later in 6.2: “Finding and Interpretations of Sermon Evaluations.”

In the third phase of participation, community participants were asked to listen to three contextually informed sermons, made available one after the other, at least one week apart, and evaluate each one of them, again using modified Sermon Evaluation Forms that were provided (See Appendix E). All of the sermons were video-taped and posted online for easy access. My hope was to see a difference in value and in comments between the “before” and “after” sermons. I wanted to find an answer to the question: Does having a better understanding of a community's felt needs make a sermon more contextually relevant to the needs of the listeners? I also wanted to improve my skills as a preacher by incorporating feedback received from my listeners from one sermon into future sermons.

When it came to data collection and analysis, I began by compiling participants' answers for each of the eight grand tour questions listed above. I developed eight separate documents, one per question. On each document, I compiled all nine answers received from participants, highlighting words, short sentences, concepts, and ideas that repeated and seemed important (for instance, if more time was taken by a participant to explain a topic). I used “In Vivo” (Saldaña 2016, 105) and “Descriptive” (Saldana 2016, 102) coding, giving similar ideas similar codes, as first cycle coding. Once contextual and cultural data has been collected, Alcántara stressed that “interpretive questions” (Alcántara 2019, 96) for data analysis could be answers to questions such as ‘How is my community changing?’ ‘What is the wound in need of redress here?’ ‘What gifts of the

community do I need to celebrate?’ and ‘What idols do I need to expose? Based on this, I then categorized the codes into the following groupings: 1) topics mentioned by more than one participant, 2) topics that needed to be celebrated, 3) topics that seem to be problems, and 4) topics that needed to be challenged as these were the trends I saw in the answers collected.

Once I had meaningful groupings, I then condensed them into major themes or categories using “Focused” coding as second cycle coding (Saldaña 2016, 239). I identified related themes and categories and merged them together. Keeping in mind that the purpose of this preaching research is to understand felt needs of the community so that they can be addressed in my contextual sermons, I further separated or highlighted felt need-based categories or themes for each question. Finally, I went through every question with its compiled felt need-based categories and ended up with the final themes these data identified as needing to be addressed in my contextual sermons. The process of compiling and categorizing the data is found in Appendix F: How the Data was Categorized.

The problem I started this project with was not knowing where people were at in their spiritual journeys or their lives in general, which made the planning and preaching of sermons that speak to people’s contexts even more complicated. The goal of the overall project was to find out felt needs of people in the community of the church plant and determine if my preaching is addressing those felt needs. The evaluation form allowed participants not only to rate whether the sermon preached was contextual or relevant on a scale of 1 to 10 but also to give an explanation for their ratings, without word limits. In other words, they were free to

comment as much or as little as they wanted, and most participants gave ample feedback. I highlighted feedback that I thought could be addressed in a subsequent sermon.

Phases and Timetable

The phases and timetable for this project are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Phases and Timetable

Phase	Action	Time Frame	Who	How
Preaching Field Project Proposal	Develop different sections of project proposal	April 25, 2021 – October 31, 2021	Meron Ahferom and Mark Chapman	Written submissions by email
	Project proposal approved	November 2, 2021	Mark	Written report by email
Ethics Review	Develop REB application for review	November 5, 2021 – December 23, 2021	Meron Ahferom and Mark Chapman	Written report by email
	Certificate of ethics review clearance	February 4, 2022	REB	Written report by email
Recruiting Participants in Project	Information Letter and Consent Form submitted	February 7, 2022	Meron Ahferom	Forms sent by email, in person, by phone
	Received signed Consent Form	February 7, 2022-March 29, 2022	Nine Participants	Forms received in person, by phone, by email

Phase	Action	Time Frame	Who	How
Preaching Field Project Implementation	Start of field project announcement	March 6, 2022	Meron	Written submissions by email
	Generic sermon link and Evaluation Form Submitted	March 6, 2022	Meron and Nine Participants	Written submissions by email
	Feedback for Generic Sermon received	March 7, 2022 – March 22, 2022	Six Participants	Written submissions by email and in person
	One-on-one interviews of participants	March 12, 2022 – March 29, 2022	Nine Participants	Audio recorded in person, by phone
	Analysis of interview data	March 12, 2022 – April 15, 2022	Meron	Written report
	Sermon 2 link and evaluation form submitted	April 21, 2022	Meron	Written submission by email
	Feedback for Sermon 2 received	April 26, 2022 – May 15, 2022	Six Participants	Written submission by email and in person
	Sermon 3 link and evaluation form submitted	May 5, 2022	Meron	Written submission by email
	Feedback for Sermon 3 received	May 9, 2022 – May 22, 2022	Six Participants	Written submission by email and in person

Phase	Action	Time Frame	Who	How
Preaching Field Project Implementation	Sermon 4 link and evaluation form submitted	May 18, 2022	Meron	Written submission by email
Preaching Field Project Implementation	Feedback for Sermon 4 received	May 27, 2022-June 2, 2022	Six Participants	Written submission by email and in person
Preaching Field Project Final Analysis	Analysis of Feedback Form, Research Project Findings, Interpretation, and Outcomes	October 17, 2022 – December 15, 2022	Meron	Written report
Preaching Field Project Completion	Writing of Final Report	December 19 – January 20, 2023	Meron	Written submission by email

Ethics in Ministry Based Research

Since I was not in a position of authority over the participants, there was no undue influence over them in their decision to take part in this research or not. The decision was purely theirs with no negative consequences.

I did not anticipate any fear of repercussion over giving their honest feedback on the recorded sermons as I do not hold any measure of power over the participants. Therefore, I did not see the need to make feedback anonymous. However, I was aware that participants could withhold their honest feedback for fear of affecting our relationship. So, I made sure to inform participants in my initial information letter and later verbally, during our one-on-one conversations,

that if a conflict of interest arises, I would give priority to our relationship. My first sermon was appropriately titled “Brutal Honesty” to encourage honest feedback from participants to be “brutally honest” with me. In addition, participants were given freedom to stop participating at any moment of the research if they changed their mind or felt uneasy. All nine participants who initially signed the consent form stayed in the research project until its completion, even though three participants did not return their sermon feedback forms.

I also explained to participants in my information letter and later verbally, when we had our one-one-one conversations, that the benefit to participate in this project is helping me, the minister-researcher, become a better preacher and rendering service for the development of contextual and relevant sermons in the life of the new church that we are planning to open. I explained to them that their participation in this project demonstrated that I needed and valued their input. I also informed them that the benefit to them as participants is being valued and heard by me, a minister, as I highlight and incorporate what I have heard and learned in my sermons and preach messages that people in the community can relate to and identify with.

Finally, I assured participants that confidentiality is of utmost importance and would be maintained throughout the project. Since some participants know one other, I used numbers to identify participants in this chapter. All data collected was stored in a locked box that was kept in my office, and on a password-protected computer. I was the only one who processed the data and wrote the final report. Tyndale’s Research Ethics Board approved this project on February 4, 2022.

Findings, Interpretation, and Outcomes

My desired outcome for this project was two-fold. First, I wanted to discover felt needs within the local community surrounding our future church plant, so that I could shape my sermons to address those felt needs. Secondly, I wanted to find out to what extent an improved understanding of felt needs within the local community improves the effectiveness of a sermon in terms of being contextual and relevant.

There were two stages of analysis in this field project. The first stage analyzed participants' context to discover felt needs and produce contextually informed sermons. The second stage analyzed feedback on sermons preached to determine if understanding felt needs brought any difference in ratings as compared to the generic sermon. The first stage involved conducting individual interviews, asking questions to help identify cultural issues. Using these insights, I prepared and preached three sermons that showed contextual awareness of those issues. I then analyzed sermon feedback. In total, nine people participated in the interviews. The second stage involved receiving feedback for the sermons preached. In total, six people participated in providing feedback for the sermons preached. Three of the nine people did not submit their feedback for sermons preached and did not give explanations.

Findings and Interpretations of Data from Interviews

Participants came from varied backgrounds and life stages. Six of the participants were females and three were males. They ranged in age from 36 to 74, with two under the age of 45. They lived in the UCLG from most of their life

(person in their 70s) to six and a half years. As for religious orientation, seven of the participants self-identified as Christians, with two attending online congregations on a regular basis that cater to their interests. Two were adherents to a New Age philosophy.

Participants disclosed their background and occupation as follows: four are currently employed, one as a youth pastor in a local congregation; another as a landscaping business owner; another one as a Christian counsellor; and another as a government employee. Five are now retired but had the following backgrounds: a teacher, a professor, a nurse, a social worker, and an engineer.

The following are the findings and interpretations of the data received to design and preach three contextually informed sermons for this project. I did not analyze evaluation forms for the generic sermon as they would be used to compare with subsequent sermons. I will now explore responses received from each of the eight grand tour questions (for more details on these questions, please refer to Appendix F: How the Data was Categorized).

Question 1. Please describe the people that live in this community.

All nine participants provided responses to question one. When asked to describe the people that live in their communities, participants responded in terms of people's ethnic or racial backgrounds, occupations, issues in their communities, political or religious convictions, social classifications, and other classifications they deemed important. The data was initially coded into twenty-six groupings that was eventually narrowed down to nine categories as some categories could be

grouped together under the same heading (See Appendix F). For example, diverse ethnic backgrounds, mainly Caucasian and low visible minorities all indicate people's ethnic backgrounds, so I grouped them together. Finally, out of the resulting nine categories, since the thrust of the project was to find out felt issues or needs that could be addressed in a sermon, and based on the number of participants that discussed the issues and the number of times they came up, I narrowed my focus down to four themes for the purpose of this project that I will discuss below. The four themes identified were: 1) Salvation/Maturity, 2) Financial Needs, 3) Parenting Issues, and 4) Women Issues.

First, I realized that salvation and/or maturity needs of individuals were identified more than any other theme (by seven participants, twenty times). I group salvation and maturity together because some need to be saved and some are saved but need to mature in their spiritual walk. One participant responded, "most of these are really not church-ed... not really following good standards, good values and things like that..." which she described as "a big need." Another participant identified "spiritual crisis" as a deeper need to all other issues, such as financial, emotional, or work-related troubles. A third participant observed "a lot of partying in the area," "quite rowdy," "they seem to live everyday for the moment, they're not thinking about the future," and "a lot of people do not attend church." I understood that church attendance could have been affected by Covid-related church closures, but Covid was not identified as a major issue in all questions, leading me to conclude this trend is more a salvation/maturity theme.

The second main theme that was identified by participants was financial needs (by six participants, twenty-seven times). Even though question one was more about what kind of people live in the research community, low paying jobs were mentioned seven times, poverty four times, homelessness three times, unemployment four times, income issues four times and addictions five times. Some of the comments that were heard were “high unemployment,” “high level of people on social assistance,” “a large homeless population that has increased,” “a lot of those jobs went overseas,” “a lot of minimum wage jobs,” and “quite a few people in the area are not well off.” These and similar comments were grouped under the theme of financial needs.

Addictions was also added under financial needs because it was pointed out that a lot of the addicted people that did not receive proper help and care are the homeless population as well as people who tend to find entertainment in “smoking and drinking and that kind of thing” because that is all they can afford (as opposed to sport activities such as boating or four wheeling for instance). In addition, there were remarks that a lot of people with addiction and drug problems find it hard to get off or don’t find adequate resources to get off, again referring to a deeper root of financial issues. Addictions could also point to spiritual issues, but the comments made about addictions from the participants’ perspectives pointed to an inability to get off addictions because of lack of resources as well as getting into addiction in the first place because of an inability to find other means of entertainment.

The third main theme that participants identified was parenting issues (by four participants, eight times). Some of the comments that led to this category were

“lots of young mothers with unplanned pregnancies,” “lots of ... fathers that are not available,” “young mothers often have a lot of problems raising their children” and “children with a lot of behavioral issues.” These and similar comments were grouped under parenting issues. One participant mentioned that the community is family-orientated, with kids involved in lots of sport activities, which can be a positive parenting trait. This comment was added under positive community.

A final theme that came up was women (by three participants, six times). Surprisingly, there were some positive comments related to women such as, “The Business sector is mainly women” and “The professionals are very minimal, but many of the ones who are, are mostly women.” I found this emphasis on women and their potential in terms of their contribution to society interesting. The negative connotations of women were related to abuse and victimization, such as the existence of women shelter escaping domestic violence, incest, and young women with unplanned pregnancies often resulting in difficulties in raising their children.

Question 2. What are the needs in the community?

There were nine responses to question two in this project. All nine participants provided a response. By following similar reasonings for grouping data in question one, the data for question two was initially coded into 12 groupings. Upon further analysis and compilation, the data was narrowed down to five categories based on similarities of groupings. By focusing on felt issues or needs for the purpose of my research, I narrowed down the categories to four themes. The themes identified were: 1) Salvation/Maturity, 2) Inadequate Youth Focus, 3) Financial Needs, and 4) Women’s issues.

The main theme that came up for question two was salvation and/or maturity issues mentioned thirty-six times by seven participants. Some of the comments that led me to choose this identification hinted at salvation/maturity needs, such as “a worldwide need: to know the Lord,” “not really committed, Sunday church goes only,” and “Don’t put God/Jesus first.” There were also comments about fear. One participant stated “people are afraid to come out again” as Covid-related restrictions were being relaxed during the time of interview; another one also referred to fear related to Covid and a third one hinted a few times about “fear of being overwhelmed” generally by various demands in people’s lives. Fear-related issues could be addressed by the Bible, so I classified it as a spirituality/maturity issue. Identity issues were also mentioned, especially as it relates to the homeless and to teenagers. Some of the comments were “their lives [the homeless] are valued” and questions that youth struggle with, such as “Who am I as a teenager?” I grouped these comments under spiritual issues with themes such as fear, identity, mental health that could be addressed through God’s Word; still understanding that in a generic sense, everything could be a spiritual issue. While mental health could be a medical issue, the participants mentioned it as something that could be addressed through spiritual counselling.

Comments like “church doesn’t have much to offer [teens],” “youth do leave the church as soon as they are able to” and “[there are] established religions. But only for the elderly” led me to categorize responses under a sub-theme of inadequate youth focus, which I understood to be a spiritual issue pertaining to the health of churches as opposed to the spiritual health of individuals. This issue was

specifically related to the failure of churches to attract and/or retain younger generations. Even though there might be some overlap with the previous theme of salvation/spiritual maturity, I chose to separate it as a category because of the number of times it was mentioned (by two participants, four times) and because the focus is the spiritual health of congregations, due to their lack of focus on youth, not of individuals.

The second main theme related to felt needs in the community was financial needs (by five participants, twenty-three times). This category comprised various money-related issues that were mentioned by participants such as income issues, poverty, unemployment, low paying jobs, homelessness, abuse leading to loss of homes or income and addictions (using the same reasoning as above). One participant mentioned “people with lower incomes ... struggle trying to find affordable rent,” another one stated “money is on the minds of people” and someone else pointed out a major need of “Homelessness. Food banks are always stretched.”

The theme of women makes up the fourth category of felt needs or issues (by 3 participants, 7 times). Some of the positive comments relating to this category were “a group of women called Warm Hands and Feet,” volunteering to meet needs in the community and the existence of professional women in the community. Some of the more negative comments pointed to women who are victims of spousal abuse and the existence of women’s shelters in the community to provide for victims’ needs.

Question 3. What do people do in their spare time?

There were nine responses to question three in this project. All nine participants provided a response. When asked what people do in their spare time in the community, participants mainly responded in terms of different activities that people are involved in during festivals, which are very popular, such as water-based, seasonal and tourism, and various more interest-based activities such as sports, golfing and shopping. By following similar reasonings for grouping data in question one, the data for question three was initially coded into thirteen groupings that was eventually narrowed down to three categories based on similarities of groupings. From there, I focused on one felt need-based theme of salvation/maturity issues for the purpose of this research. In retrospect, I understand I could have retained all thirteen categories for my sermon writing as a sermon does not only address a felt need but also uses illustrations and stories that speak to people's interests.

By far, choices such as drinking, smoking, and partying instead of putting family and church first comprised most of the responses for this question, which I believe are salvation and/or maturity-related issues (by four participants, ten times). One participant stated: "Party crowd. High schoolers 15, 16, 17 all the way up to 50 years old. County. Town. Little village folks." describing the range of people given in to this lifestyle. He added that this party crowd "Ignore church... No time to go to church... Saturday, party day and Sunday, recovery day." Another one mentioned "Lots of drinking, drugging" and yet another one, "Drinking and partying" instead of focusing on God, church and family. Even though some of

these comments could have been categorized as addiction, the emphasis during the interviews was on the deeper need of salvation and or maturity such as not knowing God and/or not following God's instructions.

Question 4. Where do people hang out together?

There were nine responses to question four in this project. All nine participants provided a response. When asked where people hang out together, participants responded in terms of different work-based associations, volunteering in the community, involvement in festivals such as shopping, online gaming communities, especially amongst the youth, and various interest-based groups such as gathering in homes and sports. The data was initially coded into 11 groupings that was eventually narrowed down to six categories based on similarities of groupings. Out of these, one felt need-based theme emerged for the purpose of my research, the theme of salvation/maturity. Again, my assumption was that anything that is not a felt need-based theme is not important to contextual sermons in this research project; but I could have retained the categories that I have disregarded for illustration ideas or to make my sermons imaginative.

For a question related to types of associations in the community, it was interesting to hear comments that point to deeper spiritual issues of salvation and maturity (by three participants, four times) such as one participant mentioning "I don't feel like I belong anywhere [in the churches]. It's not a community." Another one said, "I'm tired of going to Brockville because of people complaining a lot." Another one also referred to people gathering in "bars, pubs, dance clubs" instead

of attending church or focusing on family. These and similar comments were grouped under salvation/maturity issues.

Question 5. What type of activities take place in the community?

There were nine responses to question five in this project. All nine participants provided a response. When asked about activities that take place in the community, participants pointed to activities that take place during festivals such as shopping and tourism, recreational activities such as skateboarding and splashpads, various sport-related activities such as soccer and hockey, volunteering-based activities, various addictions, and even mentioned salvation/maturity issues which was surprising for a question related to activities. The data was initially coded into nine groupings that was eventually narrowed down to five categories based on similarities of groupings. Then I focused on one felt need-based theme of salvation/maturity for the purpose of my research. I later realized I could have kept all categories for sermon illustrations or to highlight positive aspects of the community.

Salvation/maturity issues were raised up by three participants seven times with comments such as “Mockery of Christianity,” “Younger generation: Racing car. Partying. Stupid things,” and “Cannabis, immorality.” When it comes to the theme of addictions (by two participants, five times), participants mentioned “Drugs, bars, pornography” and “Cannabis stores. Out of whack. Anxiety? Pass time? Different perspectives on this.” Since I believe the deep cause of addictions is salvation (bondage) and/or maturity issues, I opted to put them under one overarching category of salvation/maturity issues (for a total of five participants,

twelve times). It is important to mention that sometimes, someone would be better served with medical or psychological care in addition or besides a focus on spiritual development.

Question 6. What are the social cleavages in the community?

There were nine responses to question six in this project. All nine participants provided a response. The data was initially coded into nine groupings that was eventually narrowed down to five categories based on similarities of groupings. Out of these emerged two felt need-based final themes of salvation/maturity issues (by three participants, three times) and parenting issues (by three participants, four times).

I chose to group answers relating to partying and drinking under salvation/maturity issues for the same reasoning as under question three above. One participant answered that she avoids getting together with people “Because the kind of music they would go and listen to or going out drinking or even the home parties they would have” would be against her Christian walk. Another one echoed the feeling by mentioning “Bars downtown, partying in people’s homes” is one social cleavage in the community. A third one pointed out to excessive partying that takes place at “the mud bogs.” Mud bogging is an off-road motorsport in which large-wheeled vehicles race through a mud pit or a track (yourdictionary.com 2024). He said that people attending often say: “I’ll drink a few beers and loosen up...” but end up getting drunk and becoming rowdy. This altogether echoes similar answers I have received about the drinking, drugging, and partying problem

in the research community. So, I have applied the same reasoning as above and classified it under spiritual issues.

The second felt need-based theme that emerged was parenting issues. One participant stated, “Parents on social assistance. Children not doing anything,” explaining that the poor can no longer access amenities that are no longer free such as skating and swimming. This could be seen as a social structural issue, but the thrust of the answer was on parental inability to plan well before deciding to have children (young mothers with unplanned pregnancies who end up on social assistance or fathers abandoning their families). The participant further explained that because it now costs to be involved in those activities, children and youth are being affected by the growing disparity between rich and poor. The partying lifestyle and the focus on achieving and “keeping up with the Joneses” rather than focusing on the family mentioned by another participant also affects children and was grouped under parenting issues. Another comment recorded under question seven that could be added in this category was “Not living for family anymore.”

Question 7. What are some of the significant changes in the community in the last 5-10 years?

There were nine responses to question seven in this project. All nine participants provided a response. The data was initially coded into seven groupings that were eventually narrowed down to four categories based on similarities of groupings. For the purpose of this research, I chose to focus on the following four felt need-based final themes.

First, the main theme of financial issues was emphasized when it comes to significant changes in the community (by all nine participants, twenty-eight times). Many responded by pointing out to the closure of many big industries removing well-paying unionized jobs and the addition of minimum-wage jobs, which has affected income and finances. Some of the comments were “businesses moving out of Brockville and causing a lot of unemployment,” “We’ve lost 22% of businesses just because of Covid,” “malls have shut down” and “lack of jobs.” Slow change and health issues were also lumped in this category because they ultimately impact people’s finances when it comes to availability of adequate jobs and people’s ability to afford proper care.

A lot of issues that have spiritual undertones were grouped under the second theme of salvation/maturity issues (by seven participants, eleven times). One participant observed, “You’re supposed to be tolerant of everything that people do – that’s where the world is heading now,” even though the community is deemed conservative or “loyalist,” meaning in the words of one participant, “stuck in patterns of thinking – new ways might frighten them a bit.” Another one stated, “Partying has gone up a lot...Living for the moment and fitting in. Most of it ties to partying and fitting in,” which again to me indicates, like in question one above, the deeper need of salvation/maturity needs.

There was a sub-theme of inadequate focus on youth by local churches that came up by two participants, two times as was the case in question two above. One participant observed “older church crowd are not terribly willing to accept younger influences. They can be a little stubborn that way,” again showing

resistance to change in the churches. Another similar comment was “old churches just dying, figuratively and literally. The people are dying and there is no significant young people coming into the older mainline churches.”

The fourth theme that came up focused on women (two participants, two times). One interesting comment that pointed out to women being discriminated against was “It’s an old boy’s club: ‘that girl will never make it.’” There was also a positive mention of women’s contribution to society. Another participant emphasized that there are a lot of women or mother-daughter run shops in the area, selling handmade products or anything they can sell, which shows a positive contribution of women to the community’s economic fabric.

Question 8. Have you had spiritual experiences in your life? If yes, what are your most notable spiritual experiences?

Unlike the above questions, this question focused on the individual rather than the community. However, it was posed to discover common spiritual themes and questions worth exploring, as well as the different ways participants might have encountered God or not. In addition, I wanted to find out what type of spiritual language to adopt for my sermons as the immediate listeners of my messages would be my participants, as well as to identify which spiritual topics are important to my immediate listeners. In addition, I wanted to understand the community of interest through participants’ most personal spiritual beliefs. Most of the participants took more time with this question than any other question posed.

There were nine responses to question eight in this project. All nine participants provided a response. The data was initially coded into nine groupings that was eventually narrowed down to four categories based on similarities of groupings. The final focus was on four felt need-based final categories for the purpose of my research: 1) Salvation/Maturity, 2) Women, 3) Financial Needs, and 4) Parenting Issues. Interestingly, for a question focusing on spirituality, other issues that already came up for the above questions were highlighted by the participants, even though the question has become personal.

Answers related to salvation/maturity, God encounters/divine intervention, the power of God, gifts of the Spirit and believers' authority/prayer were compiled into the main theme of salvation/maturity issues (mentioned by all participants for a total of 61 times). Some answers were clearly experiences, mostly positive and personal to participants, but I was able to discern some spiritual needs, such as the need for salvation/maturity for instance. One participant stated, "actually became born-again. So that was a very great spiritual experience for me" and added, concerning what is observed in the community, "You can't just let them think that what you're doing is not a sin because we're all sinners and we all sin. But does it make it right if we all sin, if you know what I mean. Why should anybody join the church if it's just like the world, if it's not going to act any differently?" Another participant observed, "I go and get the best of all religions in the world. I incorporate all the world religions' most valuable teachings and fundamentals for our planet's survival... It's more like a universality of awakening." In the same vein, another participant stressed the importance of "Embracing all religion, being

involved in community activities such as singing in Lyn.” Lyn is a nearby village in our community. I compiled these and similar comments under spiritual issues that could be addressed when preparing my contextual sermons.

The theme of women came up here too, mentioned by three participants, three times especially as it relates to spousal abuse. Another interesting comment was, “Catholic religion, Christianity. We’ve been under patriarchal rule for so long...that is one of the reasons I turned away from Catholicism...I felt inside there was something wrong...Something missing...having to do with women...” These and similar comments were grouped under women’s issues.

Participants also shared stories of supernatural provisions in times of great needs, that point to financial issues, that were miraculously met by God. I compiled similar comments under the third theme of financial issues, mentioned by three participants, three times.

The final theme for this category was parenting-related issues that were raised by two participants, three times. One participant commented on child/teenager abuse prevalent in the area. Another comment was also made about the existence of a yearly Victims and Survivors of Crime event concerning various abuses, child/teenage abuse being one of them. One of the participants organized the first event in 2018 in collaboration with Victim Services.

Sermons Designed Based on Felt-Need Categories

The following were felt need-based final categories that I derived from questions one to eight (see above): salvation/maturity needs, financial needs, women's issues, parenting issues and inadequate youth focus (See Appendix F: Final Compilation).

Based on the felt-need categories I developed from the participant interviews, I designed and preached three contextually informed sermons that attempted to address one or more of these categories. These were: Sermon 2: What is Impossible for Man is Possible for God, Sermon 3: He Must Increase but I Must Decrease, and Sermon 4: Woman, Thou Art Called to Lead! (see Appendix G: Contextually Informed Sermons). In addition, Sermon 2 was preached during the Easter season. Sermon 3 was preached after I had a dream where I was reminded of a time when I was sensing an invitation to meditate on John 3:30: "He must become greater; I must become less." I woke up to a phrase that played over and over in my head, "I must decrease but he must increase." So, I felt the dream was a confirmation that the right time to preach a sermon touching upon John's statement had come. Finally, sermon 4 was birthed out of some concerns I heard in my interviews about the role of women in the church, especially questions of patriarchy and its negative impact on women leadership in the church as well as in general. I felt this was an occasion to address those questions and concerns. Table 2 is a summary of sermons preached, the occasions for the sermons, and the themes addressed in each sermon that emerged from responses to the interview questions.

Table 2. Contextual Sermons Preached and Felt Needs that they Addressed

Sermon 2: What is Impossible for Man is Possible for God Occasion: Easter	Sermon 3: He Must Increase but I Must Decrease Occasion: Dream/Revelation	Sermon 4: Woman, Thou Art Called to Lead! Occasion: Addressing concerns in interviews
Themes: Salvation/Maturity Needs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maturity (Fervent Prayer, Sin Issues, Passionate Walk) • Power Of God (Nothing Too Hard, Miracles) • God Intervention • God Encounters • Salvation • Holy Spirit • Fear Financial and Other Needs Festival	Themes: Salvation/Maturity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maturity • God Intervention • God Encounters • Salvation • Holy Spirit • Identity Parenting Issues Women Issues Financial and Other Needs	Themes: Salvation/Maturity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maturity (Compromise) • Power Of God • God Intervention • Salvation • Holy Spirit Parenting Issues Women Issues (in church, in Bible, in history, patriarchal, old-school mentality) Hope For Needs Inadequate Youth Programs

These sermons were not just the result of the data collected. I was also following the church calendar, which resulted in sermon 2 written for the occasion of Easter. Some issues that remained with me through either my interviews (such as issues related to women and patriarchy), or the written feedback I received also made their way into my sermons. For instance, the feedback I received from participant #4 on sermon 2: “I have heard at least one television preacher teaching that we are gods” was addressed in sermon 3.

I understand that my categorization might not seem to reflect the data I collected. I also understand that I could have been overly biased as I categorized what I was hearing into sections that best fit where I was going with my subsequent sermons, making it seem I was trying to make the data fit decisions I had already made rather than making decisions that arise out of the data. But I made sense of the data the best I could based on the short period of time between collecting and preaching the sermons. In addition, the best way I found to categorize the data was to follow similar trends that were raised by participants and start grouping them accordingly. Thirdly, the reason why I followed certain trends in the data and not others were because I was influenced by my own biography and experiences, especially when it came to how women are viewed in leadership. Explain those influences further.

I preached all four sermons, with an average of a week or two in between, and posted them online for easy access. I requested that each participant return their feedback within a week or two – some responses were received within a day or two, others took significant amounts of time beyond two weeks. In summary, I received a total of 24 feedback sheets by six participants for the four sermons preached, including the Generic Sermon: Brutal Honesty. Unfortunately, three of the nine participants failed to give their feedback on all the sermons.

Findings and Interpretations of Sermon Evaluations

The following are the findings and interpretations of the data received as feedback for each sermon preached in this project. Table 3 displays sermons preached and corresponding ratings by participants. Participants rated how

“contextual” sermons were, on a scale of 1-10, based on how well “the sermon speaks into my life need(s).” They also rated how “relevant” sermons were, on a scale of 1-10, based on how well “the sermon could be applied to my life.” (Appendix E).

Table 3. Compilation of Sermon Ratings by Participants

Participant #	Sermon 1 (Generic)		Sermon 2 (Contextually Informed)		Sermon 3 (Contextually Informed)		Sermon 4 (Contextually Informed)	
	Contextual	Relevant	Contextual	Relevant	Contextual	Relevant	Contextual	Relevant
One	N/A*	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Two	N/A	N/A	8	8	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Three	N. R.**	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.
Four	8	5	8	9	6	9	10	9
Five	8	9	9	10	9	10	7	8
Six	5	7	7	8	7	9	9	5
Seven	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.
Eight	7	8	9	8	7	8	7	8
Nine	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.	N. R.

*N/A: Not Applicable. A self-chosen rating by participant with further explanations.

**N. R. No response received from participant.

A reason that was given for the N/A ratings by Participant One is the feeling of not being “qualified nor experienced enough in this field of study to render an accurate and justified evaluation.” However, I did receive detailed qualitative feedback of what was preached in the sermons in a summary format (highlighting the different themes I touched upon) making me believe the messages were heard but not evaluated.

Participant Two, who also gave the N/A ratings for Sermons One, Three and Four, explained the Bible and its teachings were not relevant to the

participant's life and life needs because of major differences in religious beliefs. Participant Two gave detailed explanations of differing worldviews and opinions that were not applicable to the purposes of this study because they did not focus on the content of the sermons. Moreover, Participant Two's opinions that focused on differences of worldviews were not raised by another participant. Therefore, I did not include Participant Two's comments in my analysis of feedback received for sermons because they were not shared by another participant. However, those worldviews and opinions will be extremely valuable in addressing issues related to faith and differing worldviews in future sermons. Likewise, the ratings given for sermon 2 by this same participant will not be included because of N/A ratings for the generic sermon. However, I have included some of the feedback Participant Two gave by addressing some of the comments directly or indirectly in crafting some of my sermons since, once I heard them, they remained in me. For instance, I addressed Participant Two's belief that we are all God in Sermon 3, which ended up being very challenging to them. They responded: "Dear Meron, the very title of your third sermon, *He Must Increase, but I Must Decrease*, sent shivers up and down my spine and I totally disagree with it!"

For the four remaining participants who assigned a rating for sermons preached, table 4 displays contextual and relevant ratings by participants for each sermon preached. In total, there were 4 participants who assigned ratings on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest. Table 4 displays contextual and relevant ratings of sermons by participants.

Table 4. Compilation of Contextual and Relevant Ratings by Participants

Participant #	Sermon 1 (Generic)		Sermon 2 (Contextually Informed)		Sermon 3 (Contextually Informed)		Sermon 4 (Contextually Informed)	
	Contextual	Relevant	Contextual	Relevant	Contextual	Relevant	Contextual	Relevant
Four	8	5	8	9	6	9	10	9
Five	8	9	9	10	9	10	7	8
Six	5	7	7	8	7	9	9	5
Eight	7	8	9	8	7	8	7	8

In the following section, I will analyze the participants’ ratings of sermons based on the two evaluative criteria, “Contextual” and “Relevant.” Figure 1 displays contextual ratings of each sermon by participants. Figure 2 displays relevant ratings of each sermon by participants.

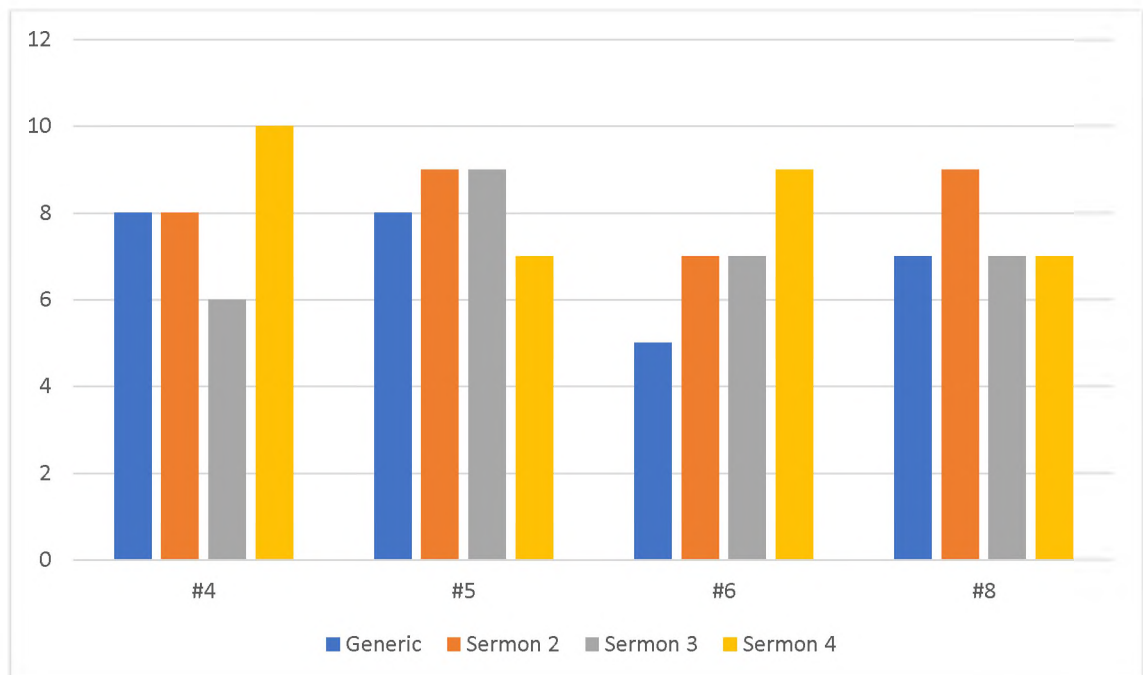


Figure 1. Perceived Contextual Ratings of Sermons by Participants

The definition of “contextual” in the rating scale was “*The sermon speaks into my life need(s).*” I believe the participants discerned that the contextually informed sermons spoke more deeply to their life needs than the generic sermon. When compared to the generic non-contextual sermon, I can deduce that sermons contextually improved for three participants: Participant Five (8 for generic, 8.3 for contextual), Participant Six (5 for generic, 7.6 for contextual) and Participant 8 (7 for generic, 7.6 for contextual), whereas they remained the same for one participant, Participant Four (8 for generic, 8 for contextual) (See Table 4 for a compilation of all ratings). However, these data do not show enough difference to make a significant conclusion about impact. So, I have relied on participants’ written feedback to come to my conclusion of slight improvement. Table 5 is a compilation of qualitative data for improved contextual rating from sermon 1 to subsequent sermons.

Table 5. Compilation of Qualitative Data for Improved Contextual Rating

Sermon	Comments from Participants
Sermon 1	<p>#4 This is a ... sermon which can be continued in parts to demonstrate the different types of prayers we can offer to the Lord</p> <p>#5 The first poem you read was ok with me</p> <p>#6 It doesn't hit the main reason I can struggle with giving this to God</p> <p>#8 I often felt a disconnect through the message being “read”... I struggled to sense a strong connection to the message elements</p>
Sermon 2	<p>#5 We definitely need this message</p> <p>#6 Very encouraging... I like the sermon, your passion and most of the content. I could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit on it.</p> <p>#8 Appreciate how this message spoke to needs many people have of feeling that their prayers do not reach God or He does respond, which may lead them to lack of belief in God</p>

Sermon	Comments from Participants
Sermon 3	#5 I found this sermon the best I have heard so far...I think a lot of people can relate to shame as it applies to their lives #6 I liked the message and context it is relevant for today. #8 Interesting, actually, that this sermon and the Bible passages may not speak to a person’s “felt needs” noted in the preamble above, but more importantly to how we need to surrender our “life needs” to the agenda of the Father
Sermon 4	#4 I would grade this sermon 10 for contextual. The storyline was well explained to encapsulate the condition of our society in this age. #5 You had some great illustrations and Bible teaching #6 Very relevant for today #8 The various typical positions of churches toward women leadership were also very helpful and useful for your recipients to hear

Participants were overall more critical of sermon 1 as compared to the remaining sermons. They gave further explanations for improved ratings by using words and phrases such as “definitely need...,” “the best...,” “very relevant...,” showing me that they strongly agree regarding slight improvement in contextual ratings of subsequent sermons preached. It is interesting to notice that even though Participant Four’s average rating remained the same, I received a perfect 10 score for sermon 4’s contextual rating, so I included it in the table above.

I understand that even though there is a disconnect between the interview questions and the sermon evaluations, the questions being about the community but the evaluations about the impact on the individual, the participants have understood the heart of the research and have incorporated the community into their feedback, such as described above: “I think a lot of people can relate...”, “Appreciate how this message spoke to need many people have of...”. It showed me that in their

evaluations, they did not only include the impact the sermon had on them but potentially on the community at large.

Contextual sermons remained the same for Participant Four because of a rating of 6 for sermon 3, which was lower than their rating of the generic sermon. The participant felt a connection was missing between the introductory part of the sermon that is seeking to address life needs of an individual or a community and the theme verse of “He must increase but I must decrease.”

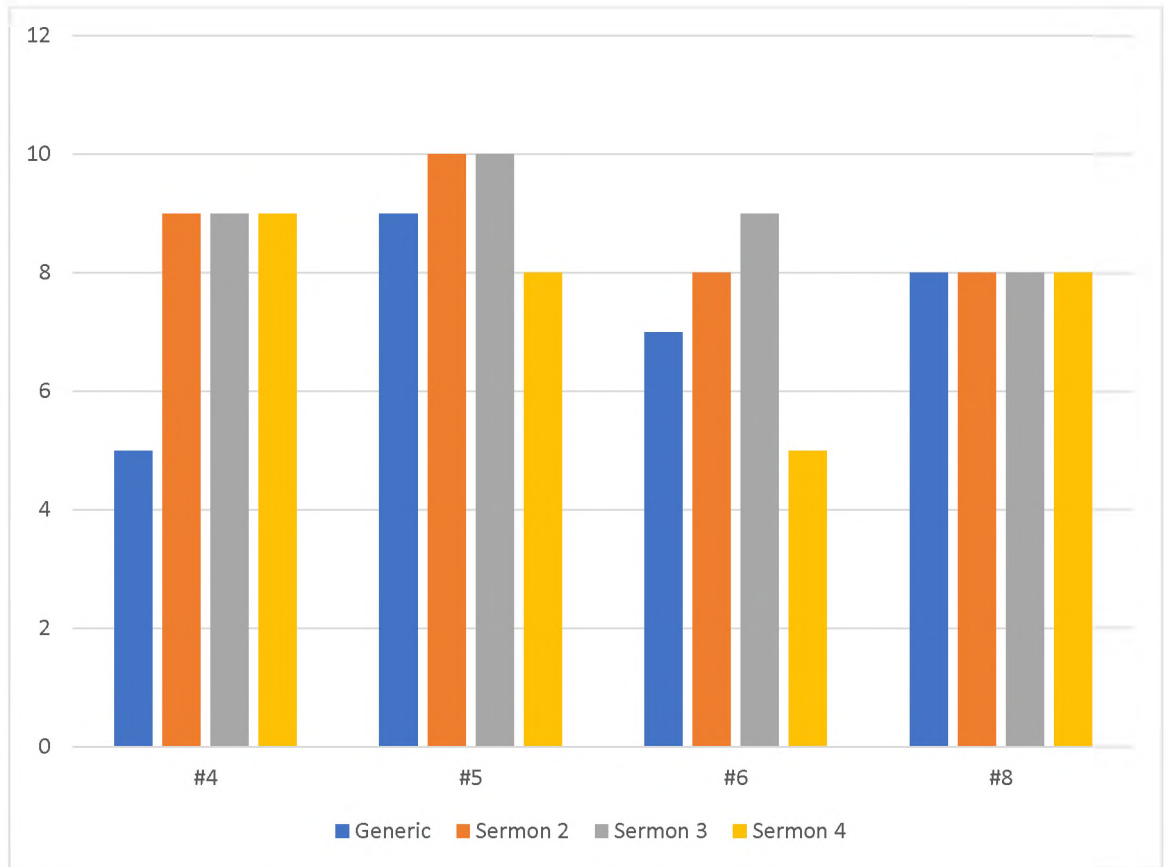


Figure 2: Perceived Relevant Ratings of Sermons by Participants

The definition of “relevant” in the rating scale was “*The sermon could be applied to my life.*” It appears that participants discerned that the contextually informed sermons spoke with more relevance than the generic sermon. These

results show that sermons on average were more relevant for three participants: Participant Four (5 for generic, 9 for relevant sermons), Participant Five (9 for generic, 9.3 for relevant sermons) and Participant Six (7 for generic, 7.3 for relevant sermons) and remained the same for Participant Eight (8 for generic, 8 for relevant sermons) (See Table 4 for a compilation of all ratings). Again, these data do not show enough difference to make a significant conclusion about sermon impact. So, I have relied on participants' written feedback to come to my conclusion of improvement. Table 6 is a compilation of qualitative data for improved relevant rating from sermon 1 to subsequent sermons.

Table 6. Compilation of qualitative data for improved relevant rating

Sermon	Comments from Participants
Sermon 1	#4 I can at times apply the sermon to my life, but not always. #6 Encourages me to turn to God but not “why” “what are my options?”
Sermon 2	#4 I felt that you made the sermon applicable to congregations and individuals alike by giving examples of some of the needs people may pray about that is relevant to the community we live in. #5 You gave me hope in a discouraging world. Also practically how I can pray more fervently. Thank you. #6 I loved the reference to your homeland and being open to other cultures timing to celebrate Passover. #8 Although for me personally I do not currently see mountains, there are times where I have been on my knees praying for particular situations that were really bothering me. Maybe I need to open my eyes to see some situations as mountains, have a stronger heart for them, not be like Peter and be asleep, just leaving them to God and whatever His will be done...
Sermon 3	#4 The sermon was clearly an exhortation not to think of oneself more highly than one ought to. #5 Personally this is an area I have struggled with #6 Great reminder... I love your passion. Great job.

	#8 The message can certainly be applied to my life, to realize the call for Him to increase (in me) and my self-orientation to decrease
Sermon 4	<p>#4 For relevance I would grade it 9. This subject is a controversial one for many churches or denominations. Regardless of whether one agrees with your reasoning or not, your presentation of the issue was impassioned and you provided scriptures to make your point strong.</p> <p>#5 I was raised in a patriarchal home... I believe I am doing what God has called me to do but I have compromised a lot in my life.</p> <p>#6 Not an area I struggle with but I can see the need for women to take leadership place. Great encouragement for men to let them. Well done.</p> <p>#8 This message acknowledges and is a good reminder of what I have sought to live into, in life and in ministry. Might I still have some unseen bias toward women leadership in churches? Possibly – God help in that.</p>

Participants were overall more critical of sermon 1 as compared to the remaining sermons. Participants gave further explanations for improved ratings by using words and phrases such as “Well done,” “This message is a good reminder,” “Great job,” “Thank you,” showing me that they strongly agree about slight improvement of relevance in sermons preached. Here again, I notice that even for Participant Eight who gave a similar rating across all sermons for relevance, his written feedback showed that the subsequent sermons challenged him further to apply the messages to his life; making them strongly relevant as captured in the table above.

Outcomes

My desired outcome for this research project was to establish that my sermons will be more contextual and relevant if, through ethnographic interviewing of participants, I gain more understanding of the felt needs of the community and

the people for whom I am starting a church. This would be demonstrated if there was even a slight improvement in the ratings of my contextually informed sermons compared to the initial generic sermon. Table 7 displays the total rating of sermons by participants and Chart 3 displays the average total effectiveness of sermons by participants. I understand that relevant and contextual ratings are different questions, however, I have applied the same calculation across all sermons preached for the purpose of comparison.

Table 7: Total rating of sermons by participants

Participant #	Sermon 1 (Generic)	Sermon 2 (Contextually Informed)	Sermon 3 (Contextually Informed)	Sermon 4 (Contextually Informed)
4	(8+5) 13	(8+9) 17	(6+9) 15	(10+9) 19
5	(8+9) 17	(9+10) 19	(10+9) 19	(7+8) 15
6	(5+7) 12	(7+8) 15	(7+9) 16	(9+5) 14
8	(7+8) 15	(9+8) 17	(7+8) 15	(7+8) 15

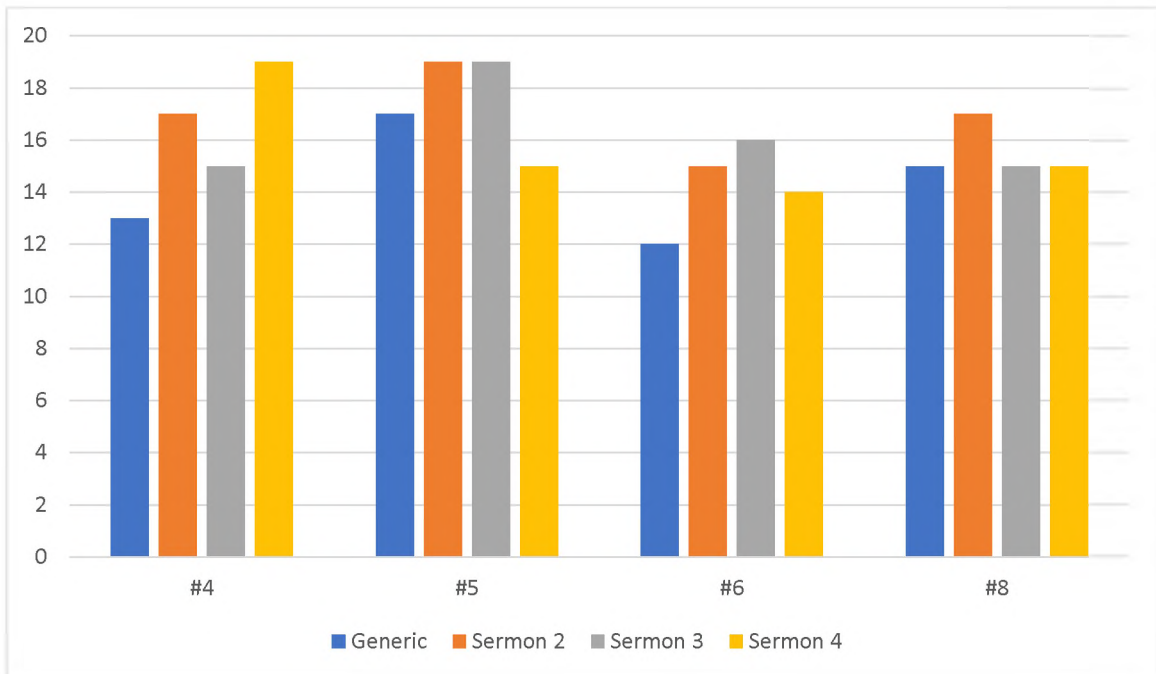


Figure 3: Average total perceived effectiveness of sermons by participants

As can be seen, when compared to the total value of the generic sermon, average total of all contextually informed sermons was higher for all four participants. For Participants Four and Six, the total of all contextual sermons was higher than the generic sermon. For Participant Five, sermons 2 and 3 were higher whereas sermon 4 was lower. However, the average total of sermons 2, 3 and 4 were still higher than the generic sermon. For Participant Eight, sermons 3 and 4 were equal to the generic sermon whereas sermon 2 was higher, making the average total of all sermons still higher than the generic sermon. Based on this improvement of ratings for my contextually informed sermons, I conclude that developing a better understanding of the felt needs of the community may have increased the overall effectiveness of my sermons. I understand that because of the small number of participants in my research, I cannot make this a universal conclusion. In fact, addressing felt needs of listeners in a sermon by making sure it

is contextual and relevant are just two aspects of the sermon. As pointed out by Hulst, there are other aspects of the sermon that count to make it better or deem it effective.

Conclusion and Implications

Even though I have arrived at what seems to be a positive outcome for my research, the dilemma continues. This is best captured in the following exchange between Participant Eight and me:

Me: Very good points you make! Yes, the challenge a preacher has is to challenge life's felt needs as well – especially when things do not work according to plan. It's all about God's purposes at the end of the day, as you said, and all the glory is His; so, we don't always affirm people's needs – yet, a preacher needs to address those needs (“contextual” is a bit tricky).

Participant Eight: Thank you Pastor Meron, very nice to receive some feedback on my review! Hopefully you don't mind my continuing this conversation, that it will be useful to you. Yes, for a preacher/pastor, providing context is tricky and in fact crucial. It is in acknowledging someone's struggle and pain, even trauma, mourning with those who mourn, that we offer ourselves to others in the heart of Christ, that they have the opportunity to witness Christ in us and through us. Then together we “go to the foot of the cross”, where Christ suffered for us, to redeem us. We may not see until much later HOW God redeems the years the locust ate. It may not even be until we reach heaven, and that may be very discouraging, unless we surrender our struggles to live in His comfort and grace. Biblically we think of Job, in this timeframe we may think of Joni Eareckson-Tada, and there are so many others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer also comes to mind, a faithful and effective witness to the end. It really helps to consider those who have gone before us and are currently going through struggles, to contextualize our own struggles and suffering. (Email correspondence between Participant Eight and myself, May 29, 2022)

This illustrates that addressing people's needs is important and, in turn, helps make one's sermon effective. Yet, even though it is crucial to address

people's needs in a sermon, even more is the goal of inviting people to pursue God's coming kingdom and his will being done on earth, as it is in heaven.

I believe my preaching skills have been honed further because of the feedback that I have received from all participants without exception, even the ones whose feedback were not considered because they were beyond the scope of this project as explained above. Time and time again, I have received solid feedback on what I did very well as well as what could have been done better or could be improved in the future. Oftentimes, those are points that I could not have realized myself but well received and noted for future sermons, such as topics or ideas that could further be developed or messages that could be better presented in a series format as opposed to trying to address it all in one sermon. In addition, I would say that my confidence to address people and what concerns them in my target community of within 30 minutes-drive from our church building has increased, while the fear of preaching messages that fly over people's heads and have no relevance decreased.

This project married two things that I really believe in as a preacher: preaching contextually and getting better at preaching. Preaching contextually necessitated that I get to know and understand the felt needs of the community to which God has sent me; how else could I have influenced them? Getting better at preaching required that I put myself through the grueling exercise of soliciting feedback from my listeners. Overall, in this project, I wanted to demonstrate the importance of a preacher knowing his/her context in order to preach an intelligent

and meaningful sermon that can speak into listeners' lives and help them apply what they have learned.

It took a long time for this project to come together because I did not have a congregation for whom I could craft and deliver sermons on a regular basis. In fact, I am in the process of planting a new congregation that is slowly taking shape as my husband and I recently soft-launched the future CTF Brockville. For now, we are known as Less Words More Actions, a Community of CTF. As we plant our new congregation, we are guided by the inspiring words of the Canadian missiologist Glen Smith:

We can therefore state that the comprehensiveness of the mission of the Church in the city requires the proclamation of the gospel, the planting and nurture of congregations, and the application of the principles of Christ's lordship to all areas of community life. It means concern for all that is city, even for the cosmos above and beneath the city, from the quality of the air people breathe to the purity of the water in the river and canals. (Smith n.d., 20)

We are in the process of planting and nurturing a congregation like this in the community of Maitland, a town located in the UCLG. But what is our context? What does community life look like in our context? What are the cultural values of the people amongst whom we live and serve? Those were some of the questions that I wrestled with as I was planning my project proposal. It was determined that the best way to gain a greater understanding of the local culture of my community was to focus on understanding felt needs in the community through conducting ethnographic interviews. Indeed, when a preacher prepares a sermon, there needs to be an intersection between the exegesis of the text and the exegesis of life

(Livingston 2017b). The preacher needs to find out what life-needs the text being preached is addressing.

So, I devised eight descriptive questions (Spradley 2016, 86) to help me understand those needs. I formulated those questions myself with guidance from Gary Nelson's Borderland Churches, where he develops questions to be asked in order to understand your local community (Nelson 2008, 157). Even though I am satisfied with the results of my interviews, and especially how easy it was to group their responses into categories and themes that were similar trends in participants' answers, I was still not confident if those were the right questions to ask. However, I was able to ask further questions—follow-up, example, experience and native-language questions as described by Spradley (2016, 88-90)—based on where the conversation was going, so that I was able to discover major themes concerning my community that could be addressed in my sermons.

Sermons should address listeners' needs but that is not the sole criterion of an effective sermon. Mary Hulst made it very clear when she argued that there are ten guidelines to make sermons better (2016, 189-190). So, in addition to striving to make my sermons contextual, relevant and open to feedback, I also made conscious efforts to make them biblical, God-centered, grace-full, compelling and clear, imaginative, embodied and self-less. In addition, I also followed the Church calendar (Sermon 2 focuses on Easter), God's leading (Sermon 3 is based on personal revelation) and themes shared by participants that were also valued by me (Sermon 4 focuses on female leadership in the church). So, the themes addressed in my sermons were not only discovered through ethnographic interviews and

interpretation of the data, but also through the guidance of the Church calendar, God's personal direction, and discovering subjects of common interest shared by participants and myself. In addition, I wanted to balance my sermons by using Scripture passages from both the Old and New Testaments.

Preachers need to have a desire to grow. This is where feedback for my sermons became important, especially feedback in terms of how much the sermons preached were contextual and/or relevant. To this end I used a modified Sermon Evaluation Form designed to measure the contextual and relevant ratings of a sermon on a scale of 1 to 10 (see Appendix E). Unfortunately, I could only consider the feedback of four participants out of a total of nine for this part of the research. I understood that feedback would be subjective depending on participants' preferences, from style of preaching to what they perceived to be an appropriate scale for their ratings. A hard rater could be completely satisfied but still give a 6 whereas an easy rater might have more criticisms yet still rate the sermon an 8. Sometimes, participants gave a lower rating because, even though the sermon addresses a need they could clearly see in their community, that need is not necessarily something they were personally struggling with. A sermon cannot obviously cover every need that exists amongst listeners and even though clearly applicable, may not apply to the listener's life because it is not an area they are struggling with. So, giving a rating is tricky and very subjective. Maybe having more people and more demographics could improve results of future sermon evaluations.

A year from now, if I were to do the same survey to learn more about my community, I'm going to work hard to ask the same questions to a younger demographic, to include voices from the 18-35. I wonder how different my results would have been if I had voices from the 18-35 age range. Therefore, it would be interesting to incorporate this age group when I think about next steps or further research topics.

In addition, I could have also spent more time and strategy to analyze the written feedback forms to see if there were elements identified by participants as to what makes a good sermon and if there was evidence of that in participants' comments besides focusing on contextual and relevant marks. For instance, some participants took time to comment on my presentation, how I looked, how I dressed and how that impacted the way they received the message that was delivered. So, there was a lot of qualitative data that could have been analyzed besides focusing on context and relevance, even for participants who gave N/A ratings.

While all this is true, I still hoped to see some difference in ratings and feedback from the generic sermon to the contextual ones. I was pleasantly surprised to see an improvement in both contextual and relevant ratings, however slight and ambiguous that was, both numerically and in participants' comments as captured in tables 5 and 6. There was also a certain level of enthusiasm in the explanations for the ratings as participants took extended time to voice their opinions concerning the sermons preached. Their feedback will help me preach better sermons in the future. The final verdict was that understanding life needs of my participants did contribute to the effectiveness of sermons preached.

There were also other implications from this project worth mentioning. Two participants prayed a prayer of Christian commitment following the interviews. Interestingly, some of the brutally honest feedback pushing against Christianity the way I represented it in my sermons came from at least one of those participants, making me question if they really understood what it meant to make a Christian commitment. This could be a good topic for another research project. I have submitted this to God, praying and hoping that the seeds planted will take root in due time, well aware that not every seed planted will bear fruit. At the same time, I have promised this participant that our conversations and, possibly debates, will continue post research project.

One positive development is that two participants are now having regular fellowship with us in our home as we have since started regular Sunday morning worship meetings. One participant has been attending quite regularly in-person and another one usually joins us online because of a conflict of scheduling. So, relationships have been strengthened and meaningful community is happening, which is very encouraging.

Another learning in this project is that care must be taken when people decide to receive feedback for their sermons. Without the proper preparation and explanation of what this all means and entails, it could lead to potential hurts and breakdown of relationships. One participant asked me to return the favor by rating that participant's own preaching, which I agreed to do. It seemed to me that after I rated that participant's sermon, there was some distancing that happened that made me wonder if I created some offense with disappointing ratings or comments that

could have been perceived as harsh. If so, this should be a learning curve. I have had enough training, exposure and experience of giving and receiving feedback for sermons throughout doing my Master of Divinity and the Doctor of Ministry degrees; so, it does not affect me as much. I actually see receiving feedback as an excellent tool, sometime quite humbling, to improve one's preaching skills.

On the other hand, it negatively affected me when I did not receive feedback for my sermons, especially after following up and being told something to the effect of "There's only one left to rate and I'll send them in" or "I promise my feedback will be in by the end of the week," only to never get them. That was quite disappointing. The first delay in my final analysis happened as I kept waiting for these promises than never materialized. Since I made the promise that friendship would take precedence when a conflict such as this arose, I had to dust myself off and move on. However, I had to make conscious efforts to make sure that our relationships remained intact. Promising this was easier than doing it though.

Finally, since we have now soft launched our church plant and I am the main weekly preacher, I have been using data from this project to choose topics and themes that I have identified as needs in the area from my conversations with participants. Some of these themes focus on fellowship and connections (Sermon: *Devoted to Fellowship*, based on Acts 2:41-44), the importance of prayer and taking our walk with God seriously (Sermon: *Could You Not Pray?* based on Mark 14:32-38) and the need for hope (Sermon: *Hope Has a Face*, based on Luke 2:25-32). I envisage results from this research will continue to enable me to plan an ongoing sermon schedule more accurately based on identified needs, fears,

concerns and hopes of the community that I have been called to serve. I also will use valuable feedback received from the two participants of different faith that were not included for the purpose of this research to plan future sermons for people of different faith. All of this will allow me to be a more faithful servant to the God who has called me and constantly asks me: “Meron, do you love me? Then, feed my sheep.”

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: WHAT HAVE I LEARNED AND WHAT IS NEXT?

I believe in doing things with excellence. Maybe it is my competition signature strength. In everything that I do, I do it to win. When I completed my MDiv studies, I felt I needed to further develop my preaching skills, so I enrolled in the DMin program. During the past five years, I have read and reflected on dozens of books and study articles; participated in countless of hours of in-class and online classes; taken part in reflections and discussions where my peers and professors helped sharpen me and vice-versa; submitted several assignments and major projects and conducted original research that became the building blocks of this portfolio. These and more have helped me to advance from where I started five years ago. I can testify that I have not become an authority on preaching yet, but I have advanced, and with bonus, as I learned a thing or two about leadership.

In the second chapter, *Theology of Preaching*, I recounted that when my call to preach initially came, I seriously doubted that a female could be a pastor. Looking back and reflecting on my call has settled the issue, here again with a bonus. Not only am I called to preach, but I am also called to lead, pastor, teach, counsel, prophesy, evangelize and all the other things that a shepherd does (Willimon 2016, 7-8). I recently had a personal encounter where I received a response from God about my calling yet again. Feeling confused about whether I am called as a pastor, an apostle or a prophet, I had asked God to settle the issue for me. In my soaking time with him, I clearly heard: Shepherd.

I also highlight the people who have mentored me, the experiences that have shaped me and other elements, such as giftings and theological traditions in the second segment. All of these resulted in the formulation of my philosophy of preaching. When I state that preaching involves silence, is Christ-centered, is participating in God's work, involves self-knowledge and bearing witness, holds biography and theology together, leads to double love of God and others, and is practical—it is not just some theoretical formulation. I live this week in, week out; even as I preach mainly to an online community at the present. Still, I need to live more, as one professor pointed out to me, to master these convictions. More determined than ever to grow our congregation and plant the future CTF Brockville, I cannot wait for the time I will have a physical audience to preach to.

An area completely foreign to me has come to the surface: leadership. It was way down in the woods. It is starting to see the light of day. In the third chapter, *Trinitarian Leadership*, the area where I struggle most in the expression of my calling, I focus more on a Trinitarian view of leadership, putting the emphasis on Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is an inspiration, more than anything else. Trinitarian Leadership is a leadership model that is rooted in the love of God the Father, in the humility and servanthood of Jesus the Son, and in the leadership and guidance of God the Holy Spirit. I should emphasize that God is One and all members of the Trinity have all these attributes. This forces me to gaze upon God first before I start looking at myself and eventually focusing on the people that God has called me to lead, a topic that will be developed more in the next section. I ought to love like God the Father loves, I ought to be humble and serve like Jesus

serves, and I ought to lead and guide like the Holy Spirit leads and guides. In him, through him and by him for the benefit of his people.

I also realize that in order to be a leader, one needs to have followers. The process that I find myself in, planting a new church, makes this a little bit complicated. Granted, I have online followers and a few people visiting our home church from time to time, but the congregation has not grown yet. We are struggling to grow in number. The isolation that came with COVID did not help and a lack of funding to finish the church building renovations—where we would have openly advertised and invited people—added to the problem. Perhaps, once I finish this phase of my journey, that is, my DMin program, I can give my undivided attention to the task of planting the church and everything that is involved in it, including leading as a Trinitarian leader. This does not mean I do not consider myself as a leader right now, as this whole process has helped me change my perspective.

The section about others, *Understanding felt needs of the community in order to preach contextually effective sermons in a new church plant in Maitland, Ontario*, confirmed to me a wisdom I gained from my classroom teachings:

“Preachers come from God's people (not apart from them or above them) but when we stand to speak, what we do is not the people's making or even our making. It is the work of God. The sermon ‘comes from God, in whose name they speak and act’” (Tom Long, as cited by Livingston 2019c, Slide 65). Just like I am not above my audience, I should not preach above their head. Therefore, I needed to understand my community, my potential audience.

After selecting participants from my community, whom I considered as my advisors, I conducted interviews, crafted sermons, asked participants to evaluate them (generic versus contextually informed), and concluded that there was a slight improvement in the ratings and comments received between the generic and subsequent sermons. I explored the importance of a preacher knowing his/her context in order to preach an intelligent and meaningful sermon that can speak into listeners' lives and help them apply what they have learned. I not only need to feed God's sheep, but feed them nutritious food, in my context, contextually relevant sermons.

So, what's next? Where do I go from here? It was pointed out to me that it is rather ironic that we have named our church plant, even temporarily, Less Words More Actions. This portfolio has proved that I have done just the opposite: more words, less actions. Preaching will always be my first call. I will keep applying everything I have learned through my extensive studies, both at the Master and Doctorate levels, to be a better, biblical, exegetical preacher. I will pursue preaching as a craft that must consistently be practiced in order to be better at it, whether online, in a church building or wherever God opens a door to preach.

At the same time, action is important. Planting a holistic church, doing the work of ministry, caring for the flock, healing and visiting the sick, delivering the oppressed, counseling and so on and so forth. In addition, showing the tangible love of God through evangelism and social ministry in its various forms, especially to those in the margins and the borderlands. I believe a balanced approach is

essential. But if I must choose, it will be less words and more actions, knowing also that in every action, there will always be a word, one that is inspired by God.

This journey has also highlighted to me what is really important—pursuing God with all I have with a focus on intimacy and empowerment of the Spirit, which are two of the foundational values of CTF. Yes, biblical and exegetical sermons are important, but I will remain a charismatic at heart. This applied to preaching looks like this: Going one step further with my sermons, spending so much time with God, God's grace and gifts increasing in my life to the point that the supernatural breaks out during Ministry Time, after the sermon is delivered. This is another level of revelation where God addresses people by name and gets to the root cause of their problems, issues and concerns. Maybe I can also either start a blog or write a book about all my encounters with the Lord. Action becomes easier once it originates with a revelation from God.

Finally, I want also to focus on bringing the shalom of God amongst brothers of different Christian denominations. My rich theological background compels me to do this. Each of the churches that I have been blessed to be a part of has left a big mark on me (Orthodox – zeal, Baptist – salvation, Evangelical – preaching, Charismatic – intimacy). I have held on to what is good and let go of what is not. I also believe there is strength when we are united in diversity. I don't know how to do this yet, but I know God will make a way in due season. For now, I cannot wait to complete my Doctor of Ministry degree, visit my father in Ethiopia, take a well-deserved vacation with my beloved family and catch up on lots of

historical and biographical movies and Christian programs that feature supernatural encounters with God. Glory be to God.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Procedure

I have taken the following steps to assist me in collecting data:

- I will recruit 6-12 people who reside in the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville (UCLG), Ontario.
- They will be recruited from the following groups:
 - o People who reside in the immediate surrounding of the church building (in Maitland)
 - o People who reside within 30 minutes-drive of the church building in nearby towns such as Brockville, Prescott and Merickville.
- I will first use convenience sampling to recruit acquaintances such as neighbors, family, friends, and people I frequently encounter in the area since I do not have an established congregation.
- Then, I will use snowball sampling to recruit additional individuals based on references from the people that I have recruited, if there are recommendations of people they think could help and be part of the research.
- The recruitment criteria are that people have lived in the area for at least the past 5 years and live within 30 minutes' drive of the church building.

When it comes to recruiting family members, I plan to ask my father-in-law and his wife because they have already volunteered when they heard about my project and have indicated their willingness to ask two additional people who they believe would help for this project. I have no authority over any one of them, and they have no authority over me.

Other people I plan to ask are the couple who have sold my family and I our house and church building, two or three next door neighbors, our grass cutter, people involved in our church building renovation, my massage therapist, two pastors from the area, two people from churches I have recently attended, a lady I got to know since moving to our house and had fellowship with a couple of times and a lady and her husband I frequently met at a nearby beach.

I know these people are suitable for my project based on their availability and prior conversations I have had with them (most of them have lived in the area most of their lives and have detailed knowledge of its culture, are Christians or from Christian backgrounds, have had spiritual experiences, know my purpose for moving to the area and have shown an interest in what I am doing, are willing to participate, etc.).

Everyone within the UCLG interested in helping me understand the culture of the area and listening to my sermons and giving me feedback can participate in this project. Christians and non-Christians can be involved. I am trying to have a

balanced mixture of males and females as well as all age groups (except minors for lack of extra level of oversight), economic classes and educational levels.

I will be asking people orally, either through the phone or face to face. Interested people will be provided an Information Letter and Consent Form that they can sign and return within one-week. If interested people exceed 12, I will prayerfully choose who will participate, based on having a balanced pool of participants.

APPENDIX B

Information Letter

I, Pastor Meron Ahferom, am a Doctor of Ministry student at Tyndale Seminary. I am in the process of starting a new church in Maitland, Ontario. I moved to this area with my family in 2020 with a vision to start a new congregation instead of joining an already established one.

As part of my evaluation, I have to conduct a research project that will at the same time contribute to the new church plant. The topic of my research is: Understanding felt needs of the community towards the preaching of contextually effective sermons for a new church plant in Maitland, Ontario. Since I am new to this area and community, I believe that understanding the values, lifestyle, hopes and fears of the people who might become future members of the church plant is important to stay away from broad generalizations and craft messages and sermons that speak to people's hearts. Therefore, the principal aim of this research project is to find out whether understanding the community's context and culture can contribute to the effectiveness of the message being preached.

By participating in this research, you will help me, the minister-researcher, become a better preacher and render service for the development of contextual and relevant sermons in the life of the new church to be opened. A potential benefit for you is being valued and heard by me, a minister, as I highlight and incorporate what I have heard and learned in my sermons and preach messages that you can relate to and identify with.

A potential risk in participating in this research could involve being less apt to share true feedback, especially a negative one, in an attempt to not affect our relationship. Please be assured that I will always prioritize my relational role should a conflict of interest arise. Moreover, deciding to participate in this research will in no way oblige you to become a member of the new church or agree with my views and beliefs. Participation is purely voluntary with the freedom to withdraw consent at any moment of the research if you change your mind or feel uneasy. You are not waiving any legal rights should you choose to participate in this research.

There are three phases for your participation. First, I will ask you to listen to a generic sermon and evaluate it using an evaluation form that I will provide. Second, I will hold an in-depth interview with you that will be audio recorded and will not last more than two hours. Third, I will record three sermons, one each week, that I will ask you to listen to and evaluate. The research will be conducted starting February 2022 until the end of March 2022. I will hold a more in-depth information session with you individually at an agreed upon convenient date and time for you should you consider participating in this research.

One of the important values of this project is to maintain the confidentiality of each participant. All data and information collected will be held in a locked box kept in

my office and password-protected computer. You are invited to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable throughout the research project. I will be the only one who will process the data and write a final report that will also be included in my final project for my Doctor of Ministry graduation requirements. The final report will also be made available to all participants in the study who would be interested in receiving it in early 2022. Please note, I will do all that I can to ensure that confidentiality is maintained, unless otherwise requested.

If you have any questions, please direct them to me, Pastor Meron Ahferom at (647)862-2207 or at meronahferom@yahoo.ca. If you have any questions about the ethical nature of this study, please contact the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at Tyndale University at reb@tyndale.ca.

Thank you for considering participating in this research project as we work together to strengthen the spiritual growth and development of our community and the effectiveness of our preaching ministry.

Countless blessings,

Pastor Meron Ahferom

APPENDIX C
Consent Form

Study Title: Understanding felt needs of the community towards the preaching of contextually effective sermons for a new church plant in Maitland, Ontario.

Researcher: Meron Ahferom

By signing below, I consent to my participation in this research designed to show the importance for a preacher to know his/her context to be able to preach an intelligent and meaningful sermon that can speak into congregants' lives and situations. I have read the letter of information and understand the risks and benefits of participation. I also understand that:

- my identity and data will be kept confidential unless I wish to disclose them
- I am free to withdraw from the research at any time before, during or after, without reason or consequence
- I have been told the purpose of the research and am free to ask questions at any time
- I have been told the interview sessions will be audio recorded
- I may take any complaints or concerns I may have to the researcher, Meron Ahferom (647-862-2207 or meronahferom@yahoo.ca) or contact the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at Tyndale University at reb@tyndale.ca

I have read the above statement and freely consent to participate in this research.

Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D

Research Instruments

According to Spradley (2016, 86), descriptive questions consist of “grand tour” questions, asking the participant to give general descriptions “of how things usually are” (Spradley 2016, 87); “mini-tour” questions, which are follow-up questions to grand tour descriptions (Spradley 2016, 88); “example” questions, leading to “the most interesting stories of actual happenings”(Spradley 2016, 88); “experience” questions, asking about specific experiences (Spradley 2016, 88-89); and “native-language” questions, asking the participant to use their own terms/words/expressions (Spradley 2016, 89-90).

Since my objective is to know what kind of people live in the community and find out the felt needs of the community so that I can shape my sermons to the felt needs of my listeners, I will ask the following grand tour questions that point to cultural issues, formulated based on Gary Nelson’s *Appendix E: Questions to Be Asked in the Community in Which You Live and/or in Which Your Church Is Situated* (Nelson 2008, 157):

- 1) Please describe the people that live in this community. (To find out if they are farmers, blue collar workers, etc. This would inform me as to the most appropriate kinds of illustrations to use, i.e. literature, farming, sports, etc.)
- 2) What are the needs in the community? (To find out felt needs in the community and understand the social challenges facing the community)
- 3) What do people do in their spare time? (Helps to get to know the community and for sermon illustrations and applications)
- 4) Where do people hang out together? (This question helps answer if people stick together, are spread out or actively involved in the community)
- 5) What type of activities take place in the community? (For sermon illustrations and also to understand the community’s deepest values)
- 6) What are the social cleavages in the community? (To discover strengths and weaknesses in the community)
- 7) What are some of the significant changes in the community in the last 5-10 years? (To find out to what extent the community is open to change and how they perceive change)
- 8) Have you had spiritual experiences in your life? If yes, what are your most notable spiritual experiences? (To discover common spiritual themes and questions worth exploring)

Based on the answers and willingness to answer these, I can get into Mini-Tour, Example, Experience and Native-Language questions as described by Spradley. The aim is to be relatively open-ended to get participant perceptions of the nature of the community. I will make sure that each interview does not last more than two hours (Sensing 2011, 111). I will audio record the interview sessions.

APPENDIX E
Sermon Evaluation Form

This evaluation form will be used at the beginning and end of the study.

According to Mary Hulst, a sermon is contextual (2016, 101) when it speaks to listeners' deep life needs (hopes, fears, worries, concerns, challenges, etc.) and is relevant (2016, 117) when it is applicable to listeners' lives. In this sermon evaluation, I will attempt to find if an improved understanding of the felt needs of a community improves the applicability of a sermon to listeners' own felt needs.

Contextual: The sermon speaks into my life need(s)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please Explain:

Relevant: The sermon could be applied to my life

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please Explain:

APPENDIX F

How the Data Was Categorized

For each question posed, I created a “Compilation of Data” word document where I compiled highlighted words, short sentences, concepts, and ideas that were repetitive (**mentioned at least two times by two or more participants**) and seemed important, using In Vivo and Descriptive coding. What I deemed important was based on repetition, what seemed to be a problem, what needed to be challenged and what could be celebrated.

I understand my choice of what to focus on and how the data was classified seems arbitrary. Some issues, although not mentioned too many times, resonated with me because of my own experiences and preferences. I also made the decision to include anything worth classifying if it was mentioned at least two times by two or participants. As a result, it appears that a smaller volume of data got a fair bit of attention in my findings.

The following groupings resulted based on how many times themes arose for each question.

Question 1: *Please describe the people that live in this community.*

When the data for question one was coded the first time, it was broken into twenty-six groupings. The groupings were:

1. Diverse Ethnic Backgrounds	2. Mainly Caucasian	3. Low Visible Minorities	4. Business
5. Blue Collar	6. Tourism	7. Farmers	8. White Collar
9. Salvation/ Maturity	10. Addictions	11. Low Paying Jobs	12. Poverty
13. Parenting Issues	14. Unemployment	15. Homelessness	16. Income Issues
17. Conservative	18. Loyalist	19. Religion	20. Clicks
21. Young Families	22. Retirees	23. Established	24. Women
25. Positive Community	26. Services Through Churches		

As this data was studied and reanalyzed, it was condensed to nine categories:

- 1. People’s Backgrounds**
Data was taken from 1-3 to form this new category
- 2. Occupations**
Data was taken from 4-8 to form this new category
- 3. Political and Religious Convictions**
Data was taken from 17-19 to form this new category
- 4. Social Classifications**
Data was taken from 20-23
- 5. Positive Community/Service**
Data was taken from 25, 26 to form this new category
- 6. Salvation/Maturity**
Data was taken from 9 to form this new category
- 7. Financial Needs**
Data was taken from 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16 to form this new category
- 8. Parenting Issues**
Data was taken from 13 to form this new category
- 9. Women Issues**
Data was taken from 24 to form this new category

Keeping in mind that the purpose of this research is to understand felt needs of the community that I can address in my contextually informed sermons, out of the nine categories above, I chose to focus on the following four categories for the purpose of this exercise:

- 1. Salvation/Maturity (by seven advisees, twenty times)**
- 2. Financial Needs (by six participants, twenty-seven times)**
- 3. Parenting Issues (by four participants, eight times)**
- 4. Women Issues (by three participants, six times)**

Question 2: What are the needs in the community?

When the data for question two was coded the first time, it was broken into twelve groupings. The groupings were:

1. Salvation/ Maturity	2. Income Issues/Poverty/ Unemployment/ Low Paying Jobs	3. Homelessness	4. Women Issues
5. Mental Health	6. Service Through Churches	7. Positive Community	8. Connections
9. Abuse	10. Fear	11. Identity	12. Addictions

As this data was studied and reanalyzed, it was condensed to four categories:

- 1. Salvation/Maturity**
Data was taken from 1, 5, 8, 10, 11 to form this new category
- 1.2 Inadequate Youth Focus**
Data was taken from 1 to form this new category
- 2. Financial Needs**
Data was taken from 2, 3, 9, 12 to form this new category
- 3. Women Issues**
Data was taken from 4, 9 to form this new category
- 4. Positive Community/Service**
Data taken from 6-7 to form this new category

Out of the five categories above, I chose to focus on the following four categories for the purpose of this exercise:

- 1. Salvation/Maturity (by seven participants, thirty-six times)**
- 2. Inadequate Youth Focus (by two participants, four times)**
- 3. Financial Needs (by five participants, twenty-three times)**
- 4. Women Issues (by three participants, seven times)**

Question 3: *What do people do in their spare time?*

When the data for question three was coded the first time, it was broken into thirteen groupings. The groupings were:

1. Salvation/Maturity	2. Water Activities	3. Seasonal Activities	4. Hanging Out
5. Tourism	6. Musicals	7. Sports	8. Youth Activities
9. Exercising	10. Walking	11. Golfing	12. Festivals
13. Shopping			

As this data was studied and reanalyzed, it was condensed to three categories:

- 1. Salvation/Maturity**
Data was taken from 1 to form this new category
- 2. Festivals**
Data was taken from 2, 3, 5, 6, 12 to form this new category
- 3. Various Activities**
Data was taken from 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13 to form this new category

Out of the three categories above, I chose to focus on the following category for the purpose of this exercise:

1. Salvation/Maturity (by four participants, ten times)

Question 4: *Where do people hang out together?*

When the data for question four was coded the first time, it was broken into eleven groupings. The groupings were:

1. Salvation/ Maturity	2. Work	3. Volunteers	4. Musicals, Movies, Art
5. Shopping	6. Video Games	7. Homes	8. Festivals
9. Sports	10. Outdoors	11. Senior Groups	

As this data was studied and reanalyzed, it was condensed to six categories:

1. Salvation/Maturity

Data was taken from 1 to form this new category

2. Work-Based Communities

Data was taken from 2 to form this new category

3. Positive Community/Service

Data was taken from 3 to form this new category

4. Festivals

Data was taken from 4, 5, 8 to form this new category

5. Online Communities

Data was taken from 6 to form this new category

6. Interest-Based Groups

Data was taken from 7, 9, 10, 11 to form this new category

Out of the six categories above, I chose to focus on the following category for the purpose of this exercise:

1. Salvation/Maturity (by three participants, four times)

Question 5: *What type of activities take place in the community?*

When the data for question five was coded the first time, it was broken into nine groupings. The groupings were:

1. Salvation/ Maturity	2. Recreational Activities	3. Festivals	4. Addictions
5. Sports	6. Water Activities	7. Shopping	8. Services Through Churches
9. Tourism			

As this data was studied and reanalyzed, it was condensed to five categories:

1. Salvation/Maturity

Data was taken from 1 and 4 to form this new category

2. Festivals

Data was taken from 3, 6, 7, 9 to form this new category

3. Recreational Activities

Data was taken from 2 to form this new category

4. Sports

Data was taken from 5 to form this new category

5. Positive Community/Service

Data was taken from 8 to form this new category

Out of the five categories above, I chose to focus on the following category for the purpose of this exercise:

1. Salvation/Maturity (by five participants, twelve times)

Question 6: *What are the social cleavages in the community?*

When the data for question six was coded the first time, it was broken into nine groupings. The groupings were:

1. Interest-Based Connections	2. Socio-Economic Connections	3. Salvation/ Maturity	4. No Clicks
5. Aged-Based Connections	6. Ethnic-Based Connections	7. Financial Needs	8. Parenting Issues
9. Generosity			

As this data was studied and reanalyzed, it was condensed to five categories:

- 1. Salvation/Maturity**
Data was taken from 3 to form this new category
- 2. Diversity of Connections**
Data was taken from 1, 2, 5, 6 to form this new category
- 3. No Significant Clicks**
Data was taken from 4 to form this new category
- 4. Parenting Issues**
Data was taken from 8 to form this new category
- 5. Positive Service**
Data was taken from 9 to form this new category

Out of the five categories above, I chose to focus on the following two categories for the purpose of this exercise:

- 1. Salvation/Maturity (by three advisees, three times)**
- 2. Parenting Issues (by three advisees, four times)**

Question 7: *What are some of the significant changes in the community in the last 5-10 years?*

When the data for question seven was coded the first time, it was broken into seven groupings. The groupings were:

1. Financial Needs	2. Salvation/ Maturity	3. Covid-Related Issues	4. Strengthening Tourism
5. Women Issues	6. Slow Change	7. Health Issues	

As this data was studied and reanalyzed, it was condensed to four categories:

- 1. Financial Issues**
Data was taken from 1, 3, 6, 7 to form this new category
- 2. Salvation/Maturity**
Data was taken from 2 to form this new category
 - 2.1 Inadequate Youth Focus**
Data was taken from 2 to form this new category
- 3. Women Issues**
Data was taken from 5 to form this new category
- 4. Festivals**
Data was taken from 4 to form this new category

Out of the four categories above, I chose to focus on the following four categories for the purpose of this exercise:

1. **Financial Issues (by nine participants, twenty-eight times)**
2. **Salvation/Maturity (by seven participants, eleven times)**
3. **Inadequate Youth Focus (by two participants, two times)**
4. **Women issues (by two participants, two times)**

Question 8: *Have you had spiritual experiences in your life? If yes, what are your most notable spiritual experiences?*

When the data for question eight was coded the first time, it was broken into nine groupings. The groupings were:

1. Salvation/ Maturity	2. God Encounters/ Intervention	3. Power of God	4. Gifts of the Spirit
5. Believer's authority/ Prayer	6. Abuse	7. Women Issues	8. Financial Issues
9. Parenting Issues			

As this data was studied and reanalyzed, it was condensed to four categories:

1. **Salvation/Maturity**
Data was taken from 1-5 to form this new category
2. **Women Issues**
Data was taken from 6, 7 to form this new category
3. **Financial Needs**
Data was taken from 8 to form this new category
4. **Parenting Issues**
Data was taken from 6, 9 to form this new category

I chose to focus on all the above categories for the purpose of this exercise, resulting in the following four categories:

1. **Salvation/Maturity (by nine participants, sixty-one times)**
2. **Women Issues (by three participants, three times)**
3. **Financial Needs (by three participants, three times)**
4. **Parenting Issues (by two participants, three times)**

Final Compilation

Finally, as I compiled all the categories that I chose to focus on for the purpose of this exercise from questions 1-8, the result were the following felt-need-based categories (**identified at least two times**):

1. Salvation/Maturity Issues

Theme in questions 1-8

2. Financial Needs

Theme in questions 1, 2, 7, 8

3. Women Issues

Theme in questions 1, 2, 7, 8

4. Parenting Issues

Theme in questions 6, 7, 8

5. Inadequate Youth Focus

Theme in questions 2, 7

APPENDIX G

Contextually-Informed Sermons

Sermon 1: Brutal Honesty (Based on Psalm 41)

While I was preparing to write a sermon on Psalm 41, I stumbled upon this prayer penned by someone:

Lord, suddenly my body feels different, as if it doesn't belong to me anymore. I'm used to being in control, but now the illness has taken over. Help me to accept this time of illness and to learn something from it. Help me to learn from my dependence upon others. Help me to accept what they do for me with gratitude but not to make my weakness an excuse for demanding so much that I drain their resources. Help me to accept the fact that I am not as brave as I thought I was. Above all, surround me with your peace and assurance that I may grow closer to you than I have ever been before.

At face value, this sounds like a beautiful prayer, doesn't it? A lot of Christians pray like this! The person seems very humble, accepting of his circumstances which in this case looks like he's sick – he has an illness. He's compliant, he's polite, he doesn't want to bother God too much or impose on others. He doesn't want to be a burden. He looks at his sickness as almost a blessing sent to teach him one thing or two.

I was once watching a critically acclaimed movie on Netflix, called *Darkest Hour*. Maybe some of you have seen it. The lead actor, Gary Oldman, won an Academy Award for Best Actor in it (I know, now you want to watch it!). It's a riveting story of how British Prime Minister Winston Churchill convinced Parliament and the nation to go to war with the ruthlessly advancing Nazi army rather than surrender to meaningless peace talks with a mad and unreasonable dictator.

Looks like we're living in a similar time with this whole situation developing between Russia and Ukraine. When mad and overly ambitious, egoistic people full of themselves with visions of empire and grandeur dictate...

Anyways, there was a scene in the movie in which the unpopular and newly appointed Prime Minister (and that is Winston Churchill) meets with the British King as part of doing business and they start engaging in small talks. At one point in the conversation, Churchill was describing his parents, and this is what he said of his father, meaning Churchill's father: "My father was like God... busy elsewhere;" to which the King chuckled, of course.

Precious people, we have the same impression when we listen to that introductory prayer that I read at the beginning. "God is busy somewhere, elsewhere; let me not bother him with my petty troubles." And in the meantime, though, the person who's praying seems like he's dying – "*the illness has taken over,*" he says, "*But let me not bother you with it.*"

Now, in contrast, listen to how the writer of Psalm 41 addresses his issues when he comes before God. If you have your Bibles, please turn with me to Psalm 41. I will be reading from the New International Version, the NIV.

(Read Ps 41)

Right from the bat, we notice - as someone accurately pointed out – that “This prayer is different than the usual, traditional, polite and deferential Christian prayer that patiently waits for God’s good mercy.”

Indeed, Psalm 41 is considered a psalm of lament and - as its name indicates - is a lament and has nothing that suggests “patient waiting” or giving into circumstances that are distressing to the one that penned it. The psalmist is making a passionate plea to God, full of expressions of indignation and almost demanding and accusatory, crying out to His God for an answer, for a breakthrough. He shall be vindicated, and his enemies will pay for their treason.

So, in this sermon, I have attempted to provide answers to three burning questions that we, as listeners of this passage on this side of the Cross, may have.

The first question is: Who do we turn to when things get tough? Who do we turn to when we’re faced with all sorts of afflictions?

The second one is: Why are we afraid to pour out our hearts to God? Why then are we afraid to be honest with our miseries?

And the last question is: What happens if God does not respond according to our requests? What happens if we don’t get the answers that we’re looking for?

First: Who do we turn to when things get tough?

The psalmist unashamedly turned to God: He says: “Have mercy on me, Lord!” You heal me! You raise me up! You are pleased with me therefore You will not let my enemy to triumph over me! You uphold me!” There’s no question he’s looking up to God.

This psalm is believed to have been written by David, King of Israel. Indeed, in the latter part of his reign, he had experienced a lengthy illness while family and associates were plotting to take over or to get to one side or the other. So, this psalm could have well been his crying out to God for an answer, for a breakthrough, for God to interfere in his affairs – to get him out of the muddy waters he found himself into. Not only is he sick but there’s also a dangerous political plot that is brewing.

But you may wonder, if this was indeed David’s cry to God, wouldn’t it have been easier to call on his loyal army for help instead? King David was a man of war after all, a ferocious man at that of great strength who once cut off the head of a giant (of Goliath who was a powerful foe to the nation of Israel). David is the man of whom women sang about in their dances, saying: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands”, driving at the time King Saul into a jealous fury because of

the comparison of bravery and strength. (You can read the fascinating story in the book of 1 Samuel).

So, David could have gone to war to wipe out his enemies or at least given the order to get rid of those who taunted him. But clearly, here he chooses to turn to God to get him out of his afflictions.

Beloved of God, who do you turn to when things get tough in your life? Who do you have on speed dial? Is there someone you tend to look up to or do you tend to look into your own resources when you are troubled?

A few days ago, we all arose to the shocking news of unprovoked aggression and invasion of Ukraine, a sovereign country, by its more powerful neighbor, Russia – of course under some shady pretexts (if you’re following the news). Some people unfortunately lost their lives, both soldiers and civilians. It was really hard and sad to hear people’s lives cut short for some nonsense. It gives rise to feelings of anger, indignation, loss and despair.

Some 2000 years ago, a young man’s life was also suddenly cut short. He had only begun his public ministry. One of the differences between people whose lives were suddenly cut off in this developing conflict and this young man is that he actually willingly gave his life away. It was not an accident. It was planned all along. Writing about him, this is how Isaiah the prophet described him:

*Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.* Isaiah 53:4-5.

The name of this young man was Jesus. This Jesus is the same to whom many cried out to, like the Psalmist, saying: “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*” (Luke 18:38). We find many stories of healings and deliverances in the Gospels (i.e., the first four books of the New Testament recounting the life and ministry of Jesus in 1st century Palestine). And Jesus didn’t disappoint but showed great compassion and mercy for all those who were afflicted and came to him looking for solutions. He healed them. He delivered them. He cared for them. (Matthew 15:30).

Now, imagine for a moment what these people who have missed out on if they had perceived that their sicknesses were to teach them something or to draw them closer to God or whatever.

Precious saints, I want to stress that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8). He healed then, He is still healing today; He delivered then, He is still delivering today; He cared for people then and gave solutions; He still cares today and gives solutions. Even more so today as the Bible tells us that He was raised to life from the dead and is seating at the right hand of His Father and is

continually interceding for us (Rom 8:34). Whatever issues you may have, precious people, you can confidently go to Him and lay them down before Him, knowing help is on its way.

This brings us then to the second pressing question: Why are we then afraid to pour out our hearts to God?

Obviously, we've all been taught that the reason the Israelites, the people of Israel, were delayed for 40 years on a journey that should have only taken them about 2 weeks when they got out of slavery from Egypt and travelled to their promised land flowing with milk and honey was because they complained and groaned and murmured and were not grateful etc. So, I do understand your hesitation not to fall under God's judgment.

But there is a huge difference between murmuring against God and murmuring to God. Huge difference.

In today's reading, we cannot ignore the fact that the Psalmist spends a good deal of space lamenting about his enemies: the middle six verses of what we just read, vv 4-9, talk about how malicious, slandering, full of gossip...his tormentors are. He takes the time to report to God their very words that cut him deep into his heart and soul.

Just pour out everything you're feeling. The anger, the hurt, the desire to hurt back...pour it out, pour it out, pour it out...do not hide it! Remember, He loved you while you were still his enemy (Rom 5:8-9) and He sees you as you go through turmoil. There is nothing you are going to shock him with as you pour out your heart to him.

When was the last time you reserved a special time with God to tell him how you are exactly feeling? Maybe you felt led by God to do something special but now you're stuck because funds are depleted or missing. Maybe you thought the person you are with was your soul mate but now you cannot even communicate civilly without wanting to commit murder. Maybe a friend you used to enjoy talking with for hours about anything and nothing has been avoiding you and can't stand the sight of you. Or maybe, you finally had time to spread the good news and win souls and you were making preparation to win your city for Christ, but suddenly you have been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer where the illness has spread to other parts of your body... Whatever your affliction may look like, have you thought about sitting at the foot of Jesus and like the psalmist, tell him exactly how you are being tormented by all of this?

The point is, we need to learn to go to God, to turn to God whenever we are faced with afflictions. Go to him first with your complaints, with your afflictions, with your miseries, with life's upsets. He will lead you to judge wisely and charitably, if you must judge – instead of resorting to gossip with someone else. Maybe he'll lead you into confession or repentance or will show you an angle that you have not seen. Or maybe, He won't say a thing. But the fact that you have gone first to him

shows that your trust is in Him. And the Bible tells us that those who put their trust in the Lord will never be put to shame.

Baring our soul to God, Confession, repentance and returning to God, bring us to the heart of the third and final question.

Finally, what happens if we DO turn to God and DO pour out our hearts to Him but He does not heal/deliver us? Or He does not answer us according to our requests?

I guess this is the ultimate fear, isn't it?

In Psalm 41 that we just read, the psalmist confidently ends with the sense that God has heard his prayers and answered him favorably. He's already breaking out in praise as if he's heard an oracle assuring him victory. He goes: "*Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.*" (v.13). He is confident his enemy will not triumph over him. Believing without seeing: isn't that the very definition of faith?

But maybe, you and I have prayed on one or two occasions and even more, and God did not heal; or He promised through a priestly/prophetic voice, but nothing really happened ... It's taking time for our promises to come to pass. Or the opposite of what we prayed for happened...

I have a Facebook friend and that friend was once a contender for marriage. We had met on a Christian dating site and had gone out on a date a couple of times. Long story short, it didn't work out and I was sad and hurt at the time but eventually, I found my most amazing husband, the delight of my eyes and we got married and that person eventually also found his partner and went on to have kids.

Well, from time to time, I see him post on Facebook those most heartbreaking anti-God rants and sometimes, I am tempted to unfriend him. But on second thought, he reminds me of the goodness of God. Imagine if God had not said a categorical NO to that relationship! I absolutely adore God and live and breathe God; that person hates and mocks God at every opportunity. So, every time I see him, I am most thankful. I'm sure he's also thankful – I don't know, maybe to science or the big bang theory every time he sees me. Oh well...

But unfortunately, some people take God's No or his "delay" in answering to mean: why even bother asking?

See, this is the attitude that puts us in danger of eroding our intimacy with God, that "Genuine Covenant Interaction" (as one theologian puts it - Brueggemann) that is ours in Christ. Remember Joseph, he wrestled with God. He held on to Him and said: "I will not let you go until you have blessed me."

Do you have a "genuine covenant interaction" with Jesus, Beloved? I believe the major point that the Psalmist is making in Psalm 40 is found in v12 - "you set me in your presence forever." Being set/being put in God's Presence forever is to be valued more than physical healing. When you think about it, physical healing is good, but it is temporal; being set in God's presence forever is FOREVER, it's eternal.

The Psalmist is teaching us that there is intimacy and fellowship in being honest before God, in telling Him what's on our hearts, what's bothering us, what's hindering our relationships, what's withholding us, what's setting us back, what's frustrating us! It's not as if we can hide it anyways. He knows us more than we know ourselves – He's closer to us than our own breath!

So, we wrestle with God. We wrestle, in reporting to Him the sins and wrongdoings of others - not gossiping about them or trying to right the wrongs done by avenging ourselves. In wrestling, we also realize our own sinfulness and repent or confess, relying on His abundant grace and love, made possible through Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

And of course, this act of baring our souls to God and coming in repentance and forgiveness before God is enabled by the Precious Holy Spirit we have been sealed with. So, we see that the goal of lament is an intimate fellowship with God that leads to God's exultation (Harrichand), to praising God, to lifting up God's holy name in thanksgiving, praise and worship – because He always wins!

Are you hungry and thirsty for more intimate relationship with God? Are you ready for another level of intimacy with the Lord, from whom you cannot hide anyways? Here's how you can pray:

Today, Lord, has been awful!
It started badly.
Imps of depression sat on the bedposts
Waiting for me to wake,
ready to pounce on me,
to harry me
and fill me with their gloom.

My head ached, my nerves were edgy
and I felt irritable.
And then it rained...
not a decent sort of rain, soon over and done with,
but a penetrating, miserable, drooling kind of rain,
that wet-blanketed soul as well as body.

There are days like that, Master.
Days when life is heavy, boring, meaningless;
days when no ray pierces the inward gloom,
just plain bad days.

What is your recipe for such hours, Lord?
I am reminded of some words which were often on your lips:
'Take heart!'
They must have comforted your followers many times.

You used them when they were startled,

when they had lost their nerve,
when they needed encouragement.

I need encouragement, Master,
so I quieten my mind and wait to hear you say:
'Take heart!'

Thank you, Lord.

By Flora Larsson

So, Beloved, in summary:

Who do we turn to when things get tough? We go straight to God in the name of Jesus. We ask for God's Spirit to strengthen us, to touch us, to comfort us, to help us, to guide us, to heal us, to enlighten us.

Why are we afraid to pour out our hearts to God? There is no need to hide your true feelings from Him. He already knows the turmoil in your heart. No need to be afraid, no need to pretend that all is well, no need to let our anger fester and create a wedge between God and us. Instead, we make it a habit - to go to God with our issues, our miseries, our complaints, and our troubles. We become very honest with what we are feeling, how we are feeling. We Confess. We Repent. We Return to Him so that He can heal us and what is ours.

And the last question is: What happens if God does not respond according to our requests? Sometimes, no is a good response. Do not despise a different answer from God than what you expected. He knows best. He's Your Daddy. He's Your friend. He's the One who created You. He's the One who rescued You from an everlasting condemnation.

But keep wrestling with Him precious ones, keep asking the hard questions, keep appearing before Him knowing that the ultimate goal of baring our souls before God is developing a more intimate and deep relationship with the Lover of our souls. Maybe the funds will never be released, but there will be a greater assignment for you. Maybe your friend will never turn from their evil ways, but you will be at peace and rewarded with an even better friend that is closer than a brother. Maybe, you will not be healed of your stage 4 cancer, but you will be able to confidently say: Even if He slays me, I will hope in Him. Even if he does not rescue me, yet I will always worship Him.

Be abundantly blessed! Peace be to you!

Sermon 2: What Is Impossible for Man Is Possible for God (Based on Acts 12:1-7 and Luke 18:27)

I will be reading from the Common English Bible. [Read Acts 12:1-7; Luke 18:27]

My dad was once in prison. I was barely a teenager and the government he was part of had just been overthrown after a long-drawn civil war; and as a general in the army, he found himself in prison. So, yes, just like in this story, there were soldiers guarding him, together with a bunch of other high-ranking officials. It was a bittersweet time. Bitter because my father, whom I loved dearly and admired, was stripped of all honor and thrown in prison; sweet because every weekend, my mom and 3 brothers, would visit and have a picnic with him that lasted a few hours – along with a bunch of other families all around us. They at least allowed us to do that. So, there was somewhat of a festive mood, despite the situation that those men and their families found themselves in.

But one person – the apostle Peter in the story that we just read - being guarded by “four squads of soldiers, sixteen in all, bound at all times with two chains, between two soldiers while others are guarding the entrance of the prison”: What is he, a bird? Is he going to fly away and disappear? I mean, this is another level of paranoia from the authorities! Peter is not even a powerful general – even my father was not guarded like that! After all, Peter, to use some of the terms of the Bible to describe him, is “an unlearned, uneducated, inexperienced and ignorant fisherman” whose main leader had just been executed not too long ago. Maybe by that time, it had been about 10 years since Jesus’s death.

Except that if you read a couple of chapters backward, in Acts 5, you will find a similar scenario. Before we go there, let me talk a little bit about King Herod. The person identified as King Herod in this story is Agrippa I (different from Agrippa II) or simply Agrippa. This Herod was ruler over territories in Judea and he was also the grandson of Herod the Great. Remember? That evil ruler who had ordered all the male babies 2 years old and under to be murdered in the area of Bethlehem, in an attempt to kill the future King of the Jews; that is baby Jesus. That story is usually recounted during Christmas time, and you can find these events in the book of Matthew 2.

Anyways, Agrippa was friends with a couple of emperors of Rome and as a result, he rose to power and ruled over an ever-expanding territory. Like his grandfather, Herod the Great, he worked hard at improving relations with the Jews which was not always easy, which is probably one of the reasons why, after having James executed (James is the brother of the apostle John and one of the 12 disciples of Jesus), he also wanted to execute Peter. Because he saw that the execution of the apostle James was viewed well by the Jews. Of course, his popularity increased when he did that and he wanted to taste more of that. There are people who will do anything for their 5 minutes of fame.

So, this Agrippa I, who would do anything to increase his fame, power and kingdom knew, and probably was well informed, that the Jewish religious leaders or the elites, were at odds with this new rising group of people who had started being identified as Christians in the region. They previously had tried to stop the spread of the teaching in Jesus's name and had imprisoned the apostles. But at night, an angel of the Lord had appeared and freed them and instructed them to go right back to their public preaching. You can find that fascinating story in Acts 5.

The only problem is that the general population probably didn't know that it was an angel that had freed the apostles, but some type of conspiracy or human ingenuity. So, this time, King Herod, who obviously had done his homework, is making sure that his big fish, Peter, who is assumed to be the leader of the Apostles, would not play the same trick this time and humiliate him. Peter is a big bird! So, King Herod had Peter guarded at maximum security.

He does not yet know that What is impossible for man is possible for God!

Repeat after me, Beloved: What is impossible for man is possible for God!

Now, it seems that Peter didn't get the memo either. Even after experiencing the wonder of miraculous escape in Acts 5, it looks like he had given up this time because instead of praying, we find him sleeping! I mean, I wouldn't blame him. His beloved friend and co-laborer, James, had just been killed not long ago and it seems he was also resigned to that same fate. At first glance, it might seem that he was just trusting that God will take care of his fate, whether he lives or he dies. If he lives, it's good, but if he dies, it's even better because he will meet his beloved master.

BUT the church was EARNESTLY praying for Peter! There are different types of prayers, and one of them is called earnest prayer. Say after me: Earnest Prayer. Earnest prayer, which is literally translated "stretched out" from the Greek word used here, is continuous, fervent, prevailing, hands-stretched-out-to-God-in-fervent-supplication-type of prayer. The same type of prayer was offered by the disciples and the people gathered with them right before the coming of the Holy Spirit, in Acts 1. It's a type of prayer that moves the hands of God. Yes, God is Sovereign and can decide how best to respond to our supplications, but it's a prayer that is wholehearted, urgent, pleading, vigilant that calls for an intervention from God.

One English preacher, Samuel Chadwick (A Wesleyan Methodist minister at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century), said: "*Intensity is a law of prayer... There are blessings of the kingdom that are only yielded to the violence of the vehement soul.*" He goes on to give many examples of earnest prayers from the Bible: "Abraham pleading for Sodom, Jacob wrestling in the stillness of the night, Moses standing in the breach, Hannah intoxicated with sorrow, David heartbroken with remorse and grief." Those are passionate prayers that lead to amazing

encounters with God – they are devoid of laziness, coldness, unbelief, distrust, doubt, cynicism, passivity, and boredom. [Look into this preacher and his work actually. It looks like he had tapped into something special that we can all benefit from. Passion is contagious. And people who encourage others to pray passionately are worth looking into.]

In history, there are people who prayed like that. The Scottish reformer John Knox prayed: “Give me Scotland or I die!” A book that I read a while ago, the pastor of a church prayed: “Lord, fill me or kill me!” (I think I finished reading that book in one day!). He was earnestly praying for the more of God! And of course, daily, there are people who pray like that; maybe you’re one of them! We pray for loved ones to be free from addictions, for unbelieving family members or friends to be given hearts of flesh, for financial situations to turn around, for various needs (such as housing and job needs) to be met, for churches to work in unity, for revival to come to our cities and nations – for laziness, coldness and indifference to leave our people, our neighborhoods – for partying, drug uses and different abuses (child abuse, spousal abuse) – to be broken off of people and be replaced by a hunger and thirst for God’s righteousness and for people to return to God and find rest in God. God says: “Return to me and I will return to you.” (Zechariah 1:3).

Saints, when we pray like that, what is impossible with man becomes possible with God!

Repeat after me: What is impossible with man is possible with God!

Even though death is so near, the church in the first century is saying: What is impossible with man is possible with God. Death is so imminent, everyone has given up but what is impossible with man is possible with God.

What is it in your life that seems hopeless, saints? What is that mountain that seems immovable? What are the things that are so complicated, you don’t even know where to start? Today, start by declaring over it: Mountain, what is impossible with me is possible with God! We can start praying earnestly about things going on in our lives, ministries, businesses, families, in our cities and neighborhoods – that we don’t like, that we despise, that we don’t want to be part of because of our jealousy for the things of God. Today, let this be a reminder to earnestly pray about these things while we are declaring: what is impossible with man is possible with God! Do you truly believe that Saints?

Now, please go on a little journey of imagination with me here. The angel, commissioned by God to deliver Peter, arrives in his prison cell – and to his great annoyance, finds Peter asleep!

The church is praying earnestly but Peter, the apostle Peter – their leader! - is fast asleep! In his frustration, the angel strikes Peter to wake him up – that is not a gentle nudge, people of God – he doesn’t gently wake him up. He strikes him!

There's a certain irritation there: "Peter, wake up!" "You're a man of many visions. You've been commissioned to feed the sheep of God, to care for them, to love them, guide them, to teach them —and you're sleeping?!? You've already given up???...Wake up! It's time to go fulfill your destiny!"

There are many people of God who appear to be "fast asleep" – leaders, lay leaders, Christians from all walks of life, with various callings of God on their life.

Wake up, child of God! Arise and shine, for your time has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you! Say to that mountain facing you, "be lifted up and thrown out!" If you have faith like the grain of a mustard seed, like the Bible says, you will say to that mountain: move from here to there; and it will move! Do you truly believe that? What is threatening your life right now? What is that one thing that is keeping you awake at night, that is gripping at your heart or that has stolen your peace? What are the bondages that have made you captive? What is that one thing that has stolen the passion from your heart, that has extinguished the fire that was once there? God is able to set you free. God is able to make your path level and your way smooth (Isaiah 26:7).

What is impossible for man is possible for God. Amen?

We just celebrated Resurrection Sunday or Easter Sunday a couple of days ago and it is going to be celebrated in a couple of days in other parts of the world, especially the Easter Orthodox tradition that follows the Julian calendar. In my country of origin, Ethiopia, it is called Fasika and it's a huge celebration, probably bigger than any other celebration.

In today's passage, we read about Passover and the Feast of Unleavened bread. Jesus died at Passover time. The feast of Unleavened Bread followed directly upon the Passover. The two festivals were regarded as one. If you remember, similar problems about timing arose when Jewish leaders were contemplating Jesus's arrest and execution. They didn't want to stir things up during the festival, because they feared an uproar among the people.

The Passover night is a night of messianic deliverance for the Jews. It's the time when God miraculously delivered them from their captors and tormentors, the Egyptians. And that same understanding has carried over into Christianity. What we celebrate as Easter Sunday or Resurrection Sunday or Fasika is the event of Christ's resurrection from the dead, delivering us from eternal separation from God: O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? Christ has conquered it all. And in Christ, the Bible tells us that we are more than conquerors! The Lord has the same power to rescue now as He did when He delivered Israel from Egypt!

Precious Saints, I'm going to repeat it again: what is impossible for man is possible for God! I don't know whether He is going to send His angels to rescue you and

your loved us from the impossible situations you find yourselves in. There are amazing testimonies everywhere of bombs missing homes or not going off, mobs turning away from carrying dreadful attacks after seeing some sort of protection that was not there in reality – especially in missionary work. So, angelic rescues do happen even in our days. God does not change – He is the same yesterday, today and forever.

I wish I had this fantastic angelic rescue story to tell you concerning my dad, but I don't. Again, God is Sovereign. To use that cliché term: we cannot put Him in a box. God did not send an angel to save my dad from prison but 3 years later, my dad was returned to us. Ironically, a hardened and unbelieving heart had become a heart of flesh in prison. My dad had found Christ in that Ethiopian prison, of all places. A communist general, soldier by career all his life- from his teens till his late-50s – Christ finally found him in prison; and he became a born-again Christian. Praise God. In my eyes, that's better than angelic protection.

So, how God rescues is different. How He answers fervent, continuous, earnest prayers offered with an intensity of Spirit is different. How he works miracles is different. Our job is to believe; believe in the impossible; expect the miraculous; expect the more of this Great and mighty God! And believing, earnestly pray! God is able to save us and rescue us from impossible situations – He has done it over and over again. But even if He doesn't, we are still going to believe because death is not the end of the story – as we saw on Resurrection Sunday. It is just the beginning! So, take heart, Beloved! Take heart!

What is impossible for man is possible for God.

Let us pray: Eternal and Sovereign God, clothed with beauty and majesty...

Blessing: I bless you to believe in the God of the Bible who can do the impossible! Nothing is too hard for Him. There is nothing boring and stale about Him! His mercies are new every morning. I bless you to have faith like the grain of a mustard seed. Believe in the impossible, believe in the miraculous and have fire in your belly! Holy Spirit fire on you!!!

Sermon 3: He Must Increase but I Must Decrease (Based on John 3:25-30)

[Reading from the English Standard Version (ESV)]

The focus of my message today is the last verse, v30: He must increase, but I must decrease. I included the previous verses so that we have some context, but I want to really focus on v30: He must increase, but I must decrease. Repeat after me God's Beloved: "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Once upon a time, there was a couple well advanced in age, without a child. They both loved God very much they and walked according to His Word, in obedience to His Word. There was only one problem with this couple: they were without child. They were barren. This is the story of Zechariah, a priest, and his wife, Elizabeth – right before the dawn of the first century in Judah, in the land of Israel.

Now I know a little bit about the feeling of being childless, or the fear of being unable to conceive or hold a child to term in the womb – something that is made even more difficult when everyone around you seems to be having kids effortlessly. For my husband and I, it took us two years of non-stop hard hard hard work before getting our first child, our son, and after him, it would take us 6 more years of relentless attempts (including 3 failed in-vitro fertilizations) before God finally blessed us with our second child. So now, we have a boy and a girl and every time we look at them and especially when feel overwhelmed as parents of young kids, we remember that they are miracle babies and give thanks to God. So grateful for them! All the glory goes to God! But this process has taught me one thing or two about the turmoil that goes on in someone's soul when things are not working according to plan.

Around the time of first century, in ancient Israel or Judea, being childless brought a lot of shame and reproach, especially for women who were not able to conceive – like I'm sure it still does in a lot of cultures around the world. In Ethiopia, where I am from originally, people who are childless suffer a lot. There's a lot of stigma associated with it. And sadly, a lot of marriages become sour or end because of issues of barrenness.

So, coming back to the story that I started telling at the beginning; BEHOLD, one sweet day, none other than the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah the priest and announced that God had granted an answer to their prayers. Even though Elizabeth his wife was well advanced in age by that time, she will conceive, and they will have a son and this son is to be named John. And there's more to this great news: John will grow to be a great man, a great prophet; with a very special assignment: He will be the one who will prepare the way of the Lord; He will be a forerunner to the long long-awaited Messiah; the one who will deliver Israel and the whole world!

And when, true to the word of the angel, John was finally conceived, his mother Elizabeth rejoiced and proclaimed that the Lord had taken away her reproach from her. He had taken away her reproach, her disgrace, her humiliation, and her shame. And she rejoiced in that.

Today precious people of God, I proclaim that the Lord will take away your reproach concerning something that has been bugging you for a long. The enemy has been reproaching you, others have been taunting you with it; maybe you have been the talk of the town because of it... but today, because of the Lovingkindness of God, that reproach/that shame/that disgrace/that thing that you are stuck in will be rolled away from you! In Jesus' Name!

For some of you, it might be a child – you're looking for the fruit of the womb. For others, you might not be looking to get pregnant per say, but you might be looking to finally meet your partner/your companion, to get married; you might be looking to get a new position or a promotion or a new partnership for your business, or for a way to grow your business. You might be looking for a breakthrough in your ministry. You might be looking for a new place, a safe place to live in, an affordable place to live in where your children and you can thrive. Whatever it is precious Saints, today, I prophesy that your enemies will be humiliated, and you will rejoice in the Lord your God, because the Lord has favorably looked upon you! Amen? If you said: Amen, it is yours indeed!

God's promises are Yes and Amen! What He did for Zechariah and Elizabeth, He can still do for you and me! So let every reproach, every disgrace, every shame, every humiliation, everything that you are stuck in be rolled away from your lives. In Jesus' Name! Let your path be leveled and your way be made smooth, in Jesus' Name. Amen and Amen!

We're doing ministry in the middle of the sermon today. Hallelujah!

So fast forward years later in the story that I started with, and this long-awaited and long-yearned for baby, whose birth was foretold by an angel (I mean, How many births do you know of that were foretold by an angelic apparition) — this baby who grew up to be a great prophet, who was filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb, of whom it was written: "*no one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptist*" – we find him in today's Bible reading saying something very interesting. Something worth pausing and reflecting upon. John said: "He must increase but I must decrease."

I found an interesting translation in the New International Reader's Version, in the NIRV. It reads: He must become more important. I must become less important. And Precious Saints, that is the heart of the issue.

John, of course, is talking about Jesus. His disciples had remarked that now that Jesus had started baptizing like their master, everyone was going to Jesus. We sense

a certain sense of competition, of rivalry, maybe even of jealousy. And John has to set the record straight, again. He had already done that in John chapter 1. Some religious leaders had sent a delegation to ask him who he was. And he had said: “No, I’m not the Christ. No, I’m not Elijah. And no, I’m not the Prophet – you know, the long-awaited Prophet, The Messiah, the Savior of Israel. There is however one among you that you don’t recognize, whose sandal straps I am not even worthy to untie! He is the One you should be following.” And he had encouraged his disciples to go follow Jesus. You can go back and read it.

John has understood that **his role is secondary** to that of Jesus. There is no conflict there, there is no fight for affection. There is no jealousy. There is no pretense of being someone that he is not. He is secure in who he is and what he is called to do. He is “a voice in the wilderness,” pointing people to Jesus. What he lives for is to bear witness to Jesus, to point people to Jesus, to prepare people for Jesus. And he is perfectly okay with that. Unlike the Jewish religious leaders of the day who found themselves extremely jealous and even murderous in the face of Jesus’ rising popularity, John is the epitome of someone with impeccable character and someone who has understood his role in the economy of salvation. Far from feeling jealous, John rejoices that everyone is going to Jesus, for they did not get it, but that was the whole purpose of his ministry.

Precious Saints, God is the Only One who can save people. That is why He is God. No human being can save people. Jesus is able to save people because He is God. He is not just a prophet or a good moral teacher or a great miracle worker or a guide to self-actualization or an exceptional man. John is here giving a true testimony to who Jesus is, saying: “Jesus is the Son of God. He is greater than me because He existed before me (this couldn’t have been true because he was born before Jesus). Yet, he says “Jesus existed before me. He is the One who takes away the sin of the world. He is the One who gives you the Holy Spirit, who baptizes you with the Holy Spirit. He comes from above, from heaven. I don’t! I’m a mere human. I’m from the earth. But Jesus is above all things.” In other words, he is saying: I know my place. I know my calling. I know who I am. And I am perfectly secure in that. I do not need to live in some sort of a delusion that I can save the world or that I am equal with God.

Now interestingly, while I was preparing this message, I fell upon this timely news article (and I am not going to name the source because I have found some people have issues with what my news sources are). So that news article read like this:

Janelle Monáe, the Grammy-nominated performer, actor and author, has confirmed that they identify as nonbinary in interviews tied to their new book. “I’m nonbinary,” Monáe said in an appearance this week on “Red Table Talk,” the Facebook series co-hosted by Jada Pinkett Smith. “So I don’t see myself as a woman, solely. I feel all of my energy ... I feel like God is so much bigger than the ‘he’ or the ‘she,’ and if I am God, I am everything.”

I mean we can touch upon many aspects of this article but what I want to concentrate on for now is the part where Monáe, a mere mortal, who has a beginning and will have an ending one day, who cannot turn one hair of her head white or black (except by using hair coloring, of course), believes she is God, excuse me, **they** believe they are God! And there are many people who have fallen into this delusion!

Let me ask you, dear Monáe, if you are God, where were you when God laid the foundations of the earth? Read the entire chapter of Job 38. Where do you find yourself there in the process of creation, when God created the earth and decided on its size, its blueprints, and its measurements? Surely you know if you're God! God asks very pointed questions there and anyone who thinks they are God surely must have the right answers! Can you command the planets in the universe? Are you in charge of the different lights of the universe or the different seasons of the world? Are the heavens your handiwork?

Let us not fall into delusion, precious Saints. We are finite. God is infinite. We are from below. He is from above. He is the Creator. We are created beings. We have a beginning, and we will have an end. God has no beginning and has no end. He knows all things. He is all powerful. He can be everywhere at all times. We can't. We just can't. No matter how evolved we think we are; or how much we have achieved, we can't be God. We're not all powerful. We're not all knowing. We can't be everywhere at the same time. We can only create from what is already created; and we can't create something out of nothing. And for all our sophistications and advancements, there is still so much more that we don't know and can't solve or resolve. Just go to the doctor's office: there are so many things that are unknown. Take for example our attempt to have a baby. My husband and I soon found out that we were part of the "unknown cases." They couldn't figure out why we couldn't be pregnant as there was nothing physically or medically wrong with us.

So, we can learn a thing or two from John the Baptist, that great man whose birth was foretold by an angel, who knew to point to Christ, not to himself: "He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." There was no confusion as to who he was and what his assignment was. And He rejoices as Jesus is gaining attention, as Jesus gains popularity. His mission is now accomplished, and he can say: He must increase but I must decrease. **He must become more important. I must become less important.**

And this is the challenge for me and you, precious Saints: no matter what our assignment in life is, are we true witnesses to God or do we want the attention on us? Are we driven by the praise of others, by competition, by striving, by rivalry, by strife, or do we do things to be seen by others? Do we want people to look at us and say: "Wow, look what she has created!" "Look what she has built!" "Look how many people he has touched!" "Look at the church he has constructed!" "Look at

the business that he has built!” “Look at how many followers she has!” Are we concerned about the glory of our name or His name, the One to whom all glory is due? Like John the Baptist, can we genuinely say: **My joy is now complete: He must increase and I must decrease. It’s a Must. It’s a divine necessity.**

And the other point I want to make is: Are we jealous and envious when other people succeed? Are we driven by competition and rivalry amongst ourselves? Can we genuinely rejoice in the achievements of others or are we endlessly looking for faults in others – but we are always without fault, or we can easily excuse our own shortcomings? I believe that is a sign of true godliness and Christian maturity when we can rejoice in other people’s achievements and what God is doing in their lives – when we are not driven by competition and jealousy.

That is one of the definitions of love by the way. I am doing a series on the Fruit of the Spirit and last week we touched upon the fruit of Love. Quoting my previous pastor, I shared that the best definition of love is when “with humility of mind we regard one another as more important, more significant, better than ourselves.” Philippians 2:3-4. Of course, the world teaches us otherwise. It’s always about how I am better, more important, more significant than others. It’s about my rights, my freedom, my needs – at the expense of others. But that is not the way of love.

The way of Love is what St Augustine, one of the earliest church fathers and theologians, has stated, that in my opinion has best captured the contrast between John the Baptist and Jesus:

*I listen; He is the One who speaks.
I am enlightened; He is the light.
I am the ear; He is the Word.*

Saints, let us meditate day and night in our hearts and be able to genuinely say: He must increase but I must decrease. Say it with me one more time before we wrap up for that is the prayer we will finish with today: Jesus must increase, but I must decrease. Amen? Amen!

Now, lift up your hands for the final blessing:

Let every reproach be rolled away from you. Let your path be made level and your way be made smooth. As you decrease – in your will, your ways, your stubbornness, your vices – may the Light of Christ in you increase and may you be a blessing to the entire world. Lord, take more of us and give us more of You. In Jesus’ Name. Amen!

Sermon 4: Woman, Thou Art Called to Lead! (Based on Judges 4:4-5)

Today we are going to talk about female leadership. Our Scripture reading is Judges 4:4-5. Just two verses. So, if you have your Bibles, please turn with me to Judges 4:4-5. I will be reading from the NIV version.

Now I think this calls for a little background discussion about the book of Judges. Right after coming out of slavery in Egypt, God's people, the Jewish people or the people of Israel, were led through the Sinai desert by Moses for a period of about 40 years. At the end of that period, Moses, their leader died right as they were about to enter the land that God had promised them – “the land flowing with milk and honey” as it is commonly known; the land that would be the forever home of the 12 tribes of Israel, as promised by God.

The only problem was that the land was already inhabited by other nations, but God had promised to get rid of those people and give it to His own people, the Israelites. Now, why did He choose to do that will be the topic for another sermon because otherwise, we'll be here until tomorrow. But very briefly, the people of Israel were to show to the whole world what it meant to live separate, without compromise, as the people of God – God as their head and them, following and obeying His voice.

So, after Moses, Joshua replaced him to lead the people into the promised land and while he and other leaders who had seen the faithfulness of God throughout the desert trek or in the immediate period of conquest following that were alive, everything went as planned. People were obedient to God and in turn, God was with His people and was routing their enemies and defeating them before the people of Israel. They were inheriting huge amounts of lands, houses, vineyards and cities, even fortified cities—because they had the upper hand in warfare. No other nation, no matter how mighty, was able to resist their advance or defeat them. God was the Captain of the warfare and He was the One fighting for His people.

But the moment Joshua and the generation who had seen the great and mighty things that God had done on behalf of His people passed on; a generation that did not know about God and His covenant or promise with His people, soon arose. Now, why did that happen? The Bible does not tell us. Was the new generation sick and tired of hearing old stories? Did they become lazy and took things for granted? Were the stories irrelevant to them? Did their parents forget to faithfully recount their experiences with God, the great exploits of God and teach their children about God? We don't know for sure. We don't know for sure; we can only speculate. What we do know is that the next generation after Joshua and the leaders with him had stopped following the God who took them out of slavery into the promised land and had started following other gods, leading to political and spiritual bondages. Sounds familiar? We see this a lot in our current society.

For people who are not familiar with this story, let's talk a little bit about what God's covenant or agreement with His people was. The terms of the agreement were very simple: God had said: "follow Me, worship only Me, be obedient to Me, and I will protect and bless you. Do your part, I will do mine. You will be heads, not tails. You will inherit what you have not labored for. Life will be peaceful and easy for you. You will never be sold as slaves. You will not be oppressed and terrorized. No one will be able to win over you. You will never be sick. You will not be miserable. You will not be depressed. I will be Your God and You will be My people. There will be a difference between you and others. Nobody will be able to rule over you or defeat you in any shape or form." (Great things, right?)

"On the other hand," He had said, "stop following Me and start worshipping other gods (either your previous gods before you knew Me, the gods of your ancestors or the gods of the people in whose land you are living) and I will lift off My hand of protection from you. There will be no more signs, wonders and miracles; no more great and marvelous things coming from Me. Basically, you will be left on your own; to fend for yourselves. I will not answer when you cry out, when you get sick etc. – you are on your own. Don't expect My help. It will be survival of the fittest, just to let you know... Then You will know who the True God is."

The fuller list of blessings and curses based on obedience to God or disobedience to God is found in Deuteronomy 28. If you want to stay within the book of Judges though, you can find the terms of the covenant, of the agreement with God touched upon in Judges 2:1-5. To which, the people had said by the way, "we agree; let it be so!"

So, what happened then? Well, soon after the passing of Joshua the leader and the elders who were ruling with him, there followed a cycle of rebellion and suffering followed by deliverance. The people of Israel would compromise by doing everything that God said not to do (just like a child), including abandoning the worship of the One True God and trying to be universal and accepting by incorporating spiritual practices of their neighbors that included worshipping other gods. They would intermarry and follow all the evil practices of the people in whose land they were living in, thus breaking their agreements with God or the terms of the agreement with God. And true to His words, for He had warned them several times of the consequences, God would lift off His hands of protection and blessings. That would lead to the nations all around them, especially the mighty Canaanites, who were endlessly looking for an opportunity to get rid of the Israelites, to subdue, terrorize and oppress them.

So harsh was the oppression and terror – sometimes spanning many years and even decades – that the Israelites would cry out to God, asking for mercy and help – and He would relent and raise up a judge, a savior, a leader, a warrior to lead them into freedom – to break the yoke of bondage from their necks. Unfortunately, though, soon after, especially once the judge that liberated them died, they would again

forget about the faithfulness and goodness of God, would rebel and the cycle would repeat itself. Rebellion, suffering, crying out to God, deliverance. Rebellion, suffering, crying out to God, deliverance. This, in a nutshell, is the book of Judges. Fascinating book that actually ends in a downward spiral: when the book of Judges closes in Judges 21:25 we read: *“In those days there was no king in Israel; each person did what they thought to be right.”* In other words, total anarchy. What is right for me is right for me; what is right for you, is right for you. Sounds familiar, again? Looks like our modern culture is going towards that trend; so help us God!]

Now in this unsettling environment enters a woman judge and prophet. *Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.* Some translations read: *“was judging” Israel at that time*” (Judges 4:4). This remarkable woman is a female judge, a prophet, a military leader, and to top it off, she is also a poet/a singer! She is a well-known and beloved female leader in the Bible, in a very patriarchal society at that (whether on the side of the Israelites or on the side of the Canaanites or all of the other “ites” living in the land: because there were also other nations in the land called Perizzites, Hittites, Amorites, Amalekites, etc. But the Canaanites were the strongest and the ones who would oppress Israel the most). So, “in a day when men ruled families and nations and women were typically considered minors in court, Deborah became one of Israel’s most charismatic judges.”

In Judges 4 and 5 where Deborah appears, she would lead the Israelites to victory over their powerful enemies, the Canaanites—an oppression that had lasted for 20 years. And under this woman’s strong and wise leadership, who again rose to power in a male-dominated society, Israel would go on to have peace for 40 years – so for a whole generation! In other words, the people got double for their trouble. Oppressed for 20 years, free and thriving for 40 years! Praise be to God – He promises to give us double for our trouble (Beloved, say “double for my trouble!”) I encourage you to go ahead and read the entire account in Judges 4 and the ensuing victory song in Judges 5, “a song that is preserved in the Bible as one of the oldest surviving Hebrew poems.”

In today’s brief reading, Deborah is the wife of Lappidoth, we are told, and we don’t hear anymore about him. Obviously, he is someone who has released his wife to do all that God had called her to do. There aren’t many men like him, especially in ministry. For centuries, many women genuinely called by God to lead have been rendered to silence and inaction. Women called by God not as replacements for men when men do not honor their calls, as many sadly seem to believe but called by God to lead whether there are other men in leadership or not – because sometimes the mentality is as if we are second hand choices (O, there’s no man willing to lead? O wait! I’m gonna chose a woman!”) I don’t think that’s how it goes. I believe many opportunities to impact the world for good and for the

kingdom of God have been lost this way because of wrong understandings and mentalities. Otherwise, we wouldn't find the likes of Deborah in the Bible.

When my call to become a pastor/a preacher suddenly came one beautiful Sunday morning in 2007, while I was sitting in the upper pews of a church in Toronto, I was immediately flooded with many doubts. I was full of doubts! Can a female be a pastor? Can a female apply to do pastoral studies in a major evangelical institution? Can she lead and shepherd a church once she is equipped with the skills needed? See, I did not have many role models to look up to in my environment at that time.

But honestly, praise be to God for places like Tyndale Seminary! The fact that an accredited and long-standing higher education institution listened to my doubts and yet accepted me to do a program in Pastoral Ministry settled the questions and doubts I had about the acceptability of a woman training as a pastor and preacher right then and there. Because I did have doubts; I did have lots of doubts. And my anxieties were confirmed when I walked into my first pastoral orientation class, and I was the only female amongst 6 or 7 other men... that made me so nervous!

Obviously, things have changed a lot since then. Nowadays, there are lots of female pastors that are ordained by various Christian denominations and there are many women given opportunities to serve and to lead. And when they are not given opportunities, they actually go on to start their own churches or ministries, or they make their own ways according to the nature of their calls.

In the Bible, some women other than Deborah, such as Junia, Priscilla and Huldah have also led. You can look these women up in your own time. Amongst these, Junia is even directly identified as an apostle: Romans 16:7 reads "*Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was*" This is the apostle Paul writing. Even though there is a debate regarding the gender of Junia, linguistic evidence suggests it is probably a female.

And when we look at church history, there were women who took on roles of leadership in early Church history, despite the fact that their stories have not been correctly recorded or preserved. Their stories are now being told by studying inscriptions or epigraphic and papyrological evidence, such as ancient monuments erected in their honour. If you're interested in this, I would encourage you to get Ute E. Eisen's book: *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*. Very eye opening and very affirming piece of work.

But I would admit that it is still not easy for a female to be a leader. Such is the culture and the mentality we still live in when it comes to female leadership, especially in the church (because my interest is in the church). In the 21st century, after all the debates for and against female leadership, after all the passionate discourses over the controversial Pauline epistles such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (1

Corinthians 14:34-35 is where Paul wrote *“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”*

Another controversial passage is 1 Timothy 2:8-15); after all the different positions held by various proponents have been examined —mainly: hard/strong patriarchy (that says a woman’s position should never be greater than man; a woman should not teach where any man is present and a woman should never be ordained); soft patriarchy (a woman can be a pastor but never hold the senior pastor position); evangelical egalitarianism (a woman can become a senior pastor based on her character, gifts and theological education); and secular egalitarianism (religion has no place)—after all of this, the topic of female leadership still remains controversial, vigorously debated and even sometimes, outrightly denounced and denied in some church traditions such as the Orthodox and Catholic churches.

My friends, there is still work to be done.

What causes me grief in all this is that sometimes, this one item, becomes the major stumbling block to someone submitting themselves to God or receiving Christ as their Savior and Lord. I find this very sad. When someone rejects God because they think God is patriarchal (I will touch up on this a little bit later).

What does this all mean to us, Beloved? Men, Fathers, Brothers - I am talking to you: if the women in your lives have been called by God to lead – let them lead!

Be like Malala’s father. You know, Malala Yousafzai, the little girl shot by the Taliban in Pakistan because she dared stand up to this evil organization, especially concerning girls’ rights to education. Living in a very oppressive regime, Malala’s father dared to be different by championing and encouraging his daughter to be all that God had called her to be. He empowered his little girl to do great exploits and she became the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize at just seventeen years of age!

Be a Lappidoth! Do not retain the Deborah’s in your lives! God has called them, God has gifted them, God has anointed them for the assignments that He has placed in their hands! Allow them to lead, allow them to get better at what they are doing by acquiring skills or developing their natural talents. Do not be a stumbling block to God’s purposes. Do not put the women in your lives down because of a misguided understanding of Scriptures – because I think at the core, that is what it is! It is bad exegesis of Scripture.

A lot of men who want to Lord it over women usually use the line in Genesis 3:16. The story of the fall. After Eve was deceived by the serpent and she ate of the forbidden fruit and gave some to her husband, God pronounced a curse on her: *16 To the woman he (God) said, “I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for*

your husband, and he will rule over you.” And he will rule over you. So some men think it is their prerogative to rule over women. Let me remind you that that is a curse, it came as a result of disobedience. It was not God’s plan A for societies to turn patriarchal, for men to rule over women. That is not what He wanted. But men used this to their advantages and sadly, continue to do so even in the 21st century.

But today awesome people of God, I have good news! Jesus came to reverse the curse. He became a curse for us. That’s the meaning of the Cross. Galatians 3:13 ¹³ *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”* In case you are not aware, the curse of men ruling over women has been removed. This is further affirmed by Jesus’ actions of speaking to a woman to the surprise and shock of His disciples (I’m referring to the Samaritan woman at the well, the first evangelist to convince her entire village that Jesus is the Messiah they’ve been waiting for all this time, a story you can go ahead and read in John 4).

This (meaning, the curse of men ruling over women being removed) is further affirmed by Jesus first appearing to a woman after His resurrection. He appeared to Mary Magdalene, who then went and told the other disciples of Jesus that He was alive in Mark 16. We can also witness the Holy Spirit, the much-awaited Gift and empowerment to carry on the mission of God, being given to both men and women, sons and daughters in Acts 2. And finally, to rest my case, we find Paul himself, the one at the center of the controversial verses concerning women in leadership asserting in Galatians 3:28: *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

So, my brothers, fathers, sons, men in all walks of life – let the women, let the girls, let the ladies in your lives fulfill their destinies. Release them to be and do all that God has called them to be and do. In Jesus’ name! Amen!

And fellow women, girls, ladies: be all that God has called you to be, especially in Your Father’s House, in God’s Kingdom. If called to be a leader, be a leader! If called to be an apostle, be an apostle. A prophet, a teacher, a presbyter, a deacon, a bishop; preach the Gospel in season and out of season, convince, rebuke, encourage; prophesy – be the mouth of God – speak in tongues, go on missions, pray, preside over the Lord’s Supper: break the bread, give the cup; baptize, teach, create theology, be active in the care for the poor and the sick, be administrators, managers, be officeholders in your churches. Do not let anyone discourage you, especially because of your gender. You are second to none! Say: I am second to none! Say it again: I am second to none! Christ died to set us free, not to put us in bondages. Use the gifts, talents and abilities that God has so generously gifted you with. Be strong and courageous! Be a ray of light and hope – today, decide that you will lead in the area that God had called you to lead! Amen? Amen!

Lift up your hands to receive the final blessing: Receive double for your trouble – let your enemies be defeated before you and let your head be always lifted up in victory in everything that you do; attempt great things; for the Lord your God is the One who fights your battles on your behalf! Today, receive double for your trouble!

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