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GEN Z AND LONELINESS: CREATING A CHURCH CULTURE
OF HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

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by
KEEGAN J. LENKER

KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

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ABSTRACT

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Gen Z and Loneliness:
Creating a Church Culture of Hope for the Future

Generation Z is growing up and finding loneliness to be an active part
of their reality and existence. The church as a whole can often be a reactionary community toward issues in the surrounding culture. This dissertation explores the problem of loneliness amongst Generation Z and will show the necessity of inclusion for this generation in developing an ecclesiology of mission and family for the kingdom of God. This work forms a theological understanding of combatting loneliness by developing a culture of hope within the local church. This work will show the power of presence and God's hospitality while developing a robust reflection of scripture. This work utilizes stories as examples of possibility for the reader in taking on the challenge of loneliness. It will inform the reader to recognize that a culture of hope is possible through an understanding of change and intentional approaches to Generation Z so the church's future can find strength and a purpose.

Chapter 1

Understanding Generation Z

This work will endeavor to educate the reader on the generation known as Generation Z and progress in showing the problem of loneliness and the contributing factors to that loneliness. The author will work through the importance of seeing the solution to this problem by showing the reader how scripture and works to show how God models the character of hospitality found in being present with us.

The author will work to show how understanding change within the realm of leadership in the local church can provide and foster the very hospitality and culture of presence and be the instruments of change necessary for combatting loneliness. Becoming a place of belonging and understanding the dynamics of family will challenge leaders to model this in their spheres of influence

This author asserts that Gen Z, while seeming disconnected, longs for connection, fellowship and belonging. This comes through the active participation of all generations in a local church community. This work will show that without intentionality, hospitality, practicing presence among this generation, loneliness becomes more than simple a

biproduct but a contributing factor to mental health, well-being and possibly their salvation.

In the Fall of 2019, the author went back to middle school. As someone who has had a fascination with distinct generations and what makes them unique, he went back to mentor at a local middle school to walk alongside and learn from Generation Z students. As he signed in and entered the hallways, a flood of insecurity washed over him, hyperaware that he stood out in his surroundings.

When he found his way to the classroom, he hesitantly walked in. He saw several middle schoolers settling into their assigned seats and wondered whether he should find an uninhabited seat, stand in the back, or wait for instructions from the teacher. He noticed a piece of fabric hanging with thirty little numbered pockets on the wall so students could place their cellphones in it as they entered the class. After the bell rang for class to begin, he noticed in the wall hanging pockets there were no phones left in this location. A glance across the classroom found a handful of students discreetly scrolling through their phones and trying not to be seen. He would admit, amid his insecurities, he was tempted to grab his phone in an attempt to blend in.

Eventually, he was assigned to a table with seven students. A couple of these students had grabbed a sketchbook and were independently drawing. Others had started creating designs on the paper in front of them meant for the class assignment that was about to occur, while a few attempted to include me into their group. Having worked with middle school students for several years in ministry before this, he previously knew how to connect with teenagers. Having been about six years removed from this, he was curious if any of his relational tactics still worked and wondered what new things he would learn

about this generation of students. Over the next several weeks, he got to know these students differently by asking specific questions about their artwork, their families, their interests, and observing their lunchtime interactions.

As the students became more comfortable with him and they began to interact more, it was interesting to watch their personalities come alive and to observe how they navigated this time in their life on good and bad days. When one particular student would be having a bad day, she would tend to navigate directly to her phone as a means to disengage and isolate herself from the rest of the group. It is this type of behavior that he found to be the most irritating and compelling. It was annoying because it was something he was by no means surprised by, but he found this behavior to be one of the biggest obstacles in engagement. She would not respond to him when she had her phone in hand. She was physically there, but she was not mentally present.

This compelling behavior left him wondering whom she was interacting with and if there was an app she was utilizing to connect with her peers. He was working to discover whether her interactions were causing deep levels of isolation for her and wondered how he could foster connection both for her and him. Stories throughout this dissertation will be used to bring realizations of struggle for Generation Z students and hope for what can be as church's work to combat loneliness for Generation Z students.

Chapter one will examine the research surrounding Generation Z (also known as "Gen Z" or "iGen," which will be used interchangeably throughout this work) and help acquaint the reader with characterizations of their shared identity traits and how this generation often sees the world. By exploring this generation, the author will establish Gen Z's identity that makes it unique compared to other generations, as seen through their

understanding of diversity, expertise in technology, and the relational depth with parents and church communities.

Age Range

Each generation throughout our history has left an impact on our world. Within these generations, there are many experiences, ideas, and relationships contributing to the effects created. While every generation influences and contributes to the next, each new generation embraces particular convictions that become unique, key identifiers compared to those preceding those that will follow.

Nailing down the specific years that compose Gen Z can be difficult due to overlap with other generations on either end of those years. Author Jean Twenge, who likes to refer to this generation as iGen, states in her book *iGen*, "It's anyone's guess when iGen will end; I'd put my money on fourteen to seventeen years after 1995. That would mean the last iGen'ers were born somewhere between 2009 and 2015, with 2012 right at the middle of that range. That makes the birth year span of iGen 1995-2012." In a partnered work from Barna Research and Impact 360 Institute on Gen Z, they began the start of Gen Z in 1999 and go through 2015. James Emery White, in his book *Meet Generation Z* goes on to help in his identifying this generation's range of years when he says, "So who falls into Generation Z? There's still some debate on exact dates, but essentially it involves those who were born after Generation Y, so approximately 1995 to around 2010. Generation Z encompasses kids between the current ages of six and twenty-one to twenty-three, depending on which age is associated. For this writing, we will look at the years 1995-2012. It is therefore essential to highlight how the size of this group compares to other generations.

Size

When we look at Generation Z's statistics, we discover that it is the largest generation of any that preceded it. Twenge notes, "Using the birth years 1995 to 2012, iGen includes 74 million Americans, about 24% of the population. That means one in four Americans is a member of iGen—all the more reason to understand them." This population's reality will be a considerable drive in our cultural focus for many years to come. In addition to size alone, Generation Z is also characterized by diversity.

Diverse

Looking through an American lens, Gen Z is the most diverse generation in American history regarding ethnicity, marriage, and sexuality. Twenge says that one in four is Hispanic, and nearly 5% are multiracial. Non-Hispanic whites are a bare majority, at 53%. In her article on Gen Z, Libby Kane affirms this, "…Gen Z is the most racially diverse generation in America. The Census Bureau found that 48% of Gen Z is non-Caucasian." Barna's research notes, "The kindergarteners who started school in 2016 were the first American class in which minority ethnicities made up a majority of students and whites the minority. For the next generation on the brink of American adulthood, different is ordinary." Understanding this reality can help those within a religious context recognize we are most likely experiencing the last generation with a white majority in the United States. This trend carries over into how marriage and sexuality are viewed and expressed by Gen Z as well.

Kane's article notes that Gen Z respondents stood out in two areas when asked about topics they support: marrying someone of a different race and marriage equality. When asked about marrying someone of a race different from their own, 77% of Gen Zers

were in favor—the next-highest generation was millennials, at 66%. Marriage equality came in at 66% and 58% for millennials, respectively. The focus upon same-sex marriage and experiencing the same rights a marriage between men and women shows itself in these statistics. Inclusion is an essential aspect of Generation Z. Tim Elmore's identity considers this trait of inclusion as redemptive. He expounds this further when he states, "This characteristic is an identifying concept for Gen Z. They are more inclusive and accepting of different races, sexual orientation, backgrounds, or gender than any US generation before them. They want everyone to feel respected, no matter who they are." In the world we find ourselves in 2020 and the news of ongoing racial injustice will only increase the depth of inclusion for a generation that holds it already in high regard.

This generation can also be considered the most fluid in their approaches to understanding gender. In George Barna's research, which included focus groups with 13-18-year-olds, "They found that only one-half of today's teens believe one's sex at birth defines one's gender. One-third says gender is 'what a person feels like.' Twelve percent do not know how to answer this question, while smaller percentages say 'a person's desires or sexual attraction' or 'the way society sees a person.'" These statistics more deeply inform the reader that this generation is more than just merely inclusive. More so, Gen Z is also characterized by mindfulness and a strong hesitancy to say anything that could potentially lead to them being perceived as exclusive.

Regardless of individual opinions on this generations' characteristics and attributes, we are looking at a large swath of the American population that will impact our culture. Twenge says it this way, "iGen is at the forefront of the enormous changes underway in the United States today, driven by the Internet, individualism, income

inequality, and other forces of cultural change. Understanding iGen means understanding the future—for all of us." The process of educating ourselves well on this generation is crucial to the future. By understanding the future, adults, leaders, and church communities can maximize our impact together as we collaborate and educate ourselves on how best to come alongside this generation for their benefit and the benefit of the culture they find themselves living.

The United States in 2020 finds itself struggling through a global pandemic, an economic crisis affecting households, racial tensions over the unjust treatment of people of color, both peaceful and violent protests against a history of inconsistencies amongst the treatment of different races. Schools function in virtual classrooms that place pressure upon home life rhythms for working parents and church communities while shuffling to find relevance amid all the turmoil. This reality has placed pressure upon Gen Z students and given them a platform to raise and show their concern. They desire to be a part of a solution and even show that through their leaning toward being a safe generation to bring about change.

Safest Generation

Creating a safe world has been the narrative of Generation Z. It is what they have heard about all of their lives. It is emphasized in their sports and even their classrooms when they practice lockdowns for school shootings. They live in a society of navigating a global pandemic with masks and emphasizing hand sanitizer whenever and wherever possible. In all facets of life, Generation Z is getting the message.

Gen Z cares deeply about the safety of their lives. This safety manifests itself in many ways, including a lessening of dating, having sex, drinking, and car accidents.

Additionally, the usage of marijuana has not increased, which is attributed to their perception that it is safer than drinking. Someone may wonder why there is an appeal for safety now more than ever amongst this generation. It appears they are spending more time at home and with their parents, and their levels of connection are measured through their digital devices. An increased amount of time at home yields less opportunity for this generation to spend time on a date, having sex, in environments where underage drinking is more likely to happen, or even in a car. Twenge elaborates, "Like most generational trends, the interest in safety was not iGen's idea alone. iGen's was the childhood of the car seat, of being picked up at school instead of walking home by yourself, of sanitized plastic playgrounds." The current status of our society has only enhanced these bubbles of safety during the pandemic.

The outcome of the global pandemic on having more families spending time together enhances and highlights Gen Z kids' tendency to find themselves in life areas that perpetuate their safety propensity. The reader must note that while the percentages of participation in risky activities are on the decline for this generation, the dangerous participation has not been eliminated. There will always be an exception to the rules as we think about our children, our kids' friends, and some kids' actions within classroom settings.

It appears the development of our kids has slowed in light of this safety. Twenge notes, "This increasing interest in safety may be at least partially rooted in iGen's slower developmental trajectory: younger children are protected more than older ones, and children are protected more than teens." While some of this desire for safety could be understood as a result of "helicopter parenting," a term meaning an overprotective parent,

White disagrees with this and feels that we see the impact of under-protective parenting.

White wants to give results to the overprotective parent to the Millennial generation. When it comes to parenting for Generation Z, he says, "The insinuation is that it's wrong to be overprotective, but it's not wrong to be under-protective. [sic] If you're going to make a mistake, make a mistake in being loose, in playing fast and free, and is not protecting enough. Because the one big parenting sin is believed to be protected." White's assessment on this parenting strategy alludes to allowing kids to get away with more merely because other kids' friends are doing something or acquiring more than most other kids.

Many proactive parents seek to balance some level of safety while trying to help kids transition into adulthood. While this is a good idea, it appears parental involvement may be a bit different than in days past. Libby Kane notes, "Less than half (48%) of Gen Z respondents agreed with the statement 'My parents followed through with discipline if I broke the rules,' and only 26% said they got parental help with homework." Statistics like this in mind may show us that parents like the idea of control in some areas, and teens may have a bit more free reign in other areas, which might explain why teens are growing up slower today. James Emery White notes the labels linked to over-protective versus under-protective parents. "…one of the marks of Generation Z is that they are being raised, by and large by Generation X—a generation that was warned repeatedly not to become 'helicopter' parents. . . As a result, Generation Z is very self-directed." Barna furthers White's thoughts when he states, "He (White) sees Millennials as having been raised by overprotective (Boomer) parents, but Gen Z by *under*protective (Gen X) parents. Gen X, White believes, would rather err on the side of being too loose than too

strict. But the problem is that, in an age of social media, ubiquitous porn, self-harm, cyberbullying, and sexting, children need greater protection than ever before—not less." This amounts to the complex world of parents creating an environment of safety while exerting control and then giving freedoms that could be causing more harm in the long term for these teens. Parents' protective nature lies with understanding the protection needed by Gen Z kids' parents and guardians.

Tim Elmore says that Gen Z kids are more nurtured. "Gen Z is growing up in a world of ubiquitous information; millions of these kids are savvier about culture and world events than previous generations their age. This is not inherently bad. My concern is this awareness has caused caring adults to become preoccupied with the safety, self-esteem, and success of Generation Z kids." This preoccupation for safety could potentially wield a future of indecisive adults when protection has been the norm. This indecisive possibility could hinder a healthy transition into adulthood when decisions have been made for them their whole lives. They do not know how to accomplish necessary skills like laundry, pumping gas, driving, or walking to a friend's house and back.

Barna's research shows that while safety is emphasized, it is not necessarily fully embodied in the ways some may hope. "Although the tolerant inoffensiveness of "safe spaces" is a norm for Gen Z, the underlying anxiety that so many experiences has led to a collective suspicion that true security is unattainable, or at least outside their control." Libby Kane seems to echo this notion as well when she states, "There's a key way in which Gen Z differs from millennials: optimism. More Gen Zers than anyone else (68%) feels the US is headed in the wrong direction…" These statistics are noted before the

world of 2020. While safety is emphasized, the world as they know it today may just affirm their skepticism about the future of the world in which they will live.

A safer generation is a good thing as well. If safety aligns with an overprotective or helicopter parent, we see results of that reality. If parents are under protective and letting kids get away with more, it may also be a sign of a home situation's actual upbringing. More than likely, other factors are happening to focus on safety for this generation, like birth order, socioeconomic status, and education. Still, the overarching reality is that security is important to Gen Z, but they are cautious in what that means for the future. For parents and guardians, it means they must pay attention to the world Gen Z students are growing up in so they can work to discover a healthy balance between being overprotective and under protective.

Tech Savvy

While Twenge notes the decline in many activities like drinking, drug usage, and promiscuity that could be good news to society, there seems to be something deeper going on with this generation that could be contributing to this decline. It should be no surprise that Gen Z kids are incredibly tech-savvy. Elmore says,

> "They spend the equivalent of a full-time job (nine hours a day) on their devices, not including school assignments. They prefer to learn alone as opposed to being with others, which is a clear indication of their preferences for screens. They use various social media platforms, each for different reasons and sometimes for different audiences. While they have different ways of handling their technology when it comes to their relationships, it fosters within them a sense of skepticism and the risk for cynicism."

To know a student in this generation is to recognize a complex world of information that is often coming at them from levels of technology that are both overwhelming and

intimidating to the generations that precede them.

James White tells us, "Many refer to the Millennials as being 'digital natives,' due to their comfort and innate abilities with digital technology. But according to David Bell, professor of marketing at Wharton (School), Generation Z is the 'internet-in-its-pocket' generation." The Internet can be understood as merely another appendage embedded into this generation's identity.

The connection to technology for Generation Z is a real sense of their identity. The devices they carry in their pockets, and the ways it transfers to multiple devices via gaming systems, computers, and tablets shows not just how savvy they are in using them, but their almost insistence upon continually being on them to connect with those around them. These connections shape the sense of who they are in how they interact with them as it pertains to their identity. Kane says, "They favor streaming content in snack-like bites, like that offered through YouTube, and consume mostly on their phones and computers. They largely eschew TV shows and movies and are unused to live programming with advertising." Within the household of the writer of this work, he sees this lived out with his daughter, whose fascination with Legos has led to her getting lost in 20-minute YouTube segments that build specific items with storytelling. She also finds deep interest in watching commercials on television and insists that everyone is quiet so she can learn about the mini-story being told in thirty-second segments. Leaning deeper into what precisely they are doing on their devices, we can learn a bit more.

Within the world today, there is saturation with hashtags in just about every corner of our culture. Hashtags are placed on clothing, commercials, billboards, stadiums, and even the back of pitcher's mounds offering a constant invitation to connect. This

connection is directly linked to a deepened fascination with social media in our world.
Although each generation has navigated it differently, for Gen Z, it is a primary element
of their digital usage. Barna's research (ages 13-18) shows that gaming, consuming
entertainment such as streaming videos and engaging on social media like Snapchat,
Tumbler, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and others are what they spend their time on with
45% using social media every day. It appears Gen Z also loves to branch out specifically
with people they have never met. They are twice as likely as adults to say, "I enjoy
interacting online with people I have not met in real life" (18% vs. 9% all adults).
Reaching out gives a greater sense of 'natural' connection for a generation that utilizes
connection through digital means. It will remain to be seen how this will continue to
shape their ability to interact with much older generations whose affinity is 'in person'
connection. It may not surprise the reader that teens are less likely than adults to agree
that "social media sometimes interferes with my face-to-face interactions." Even if it *is*
interfering, only 12 percent say they notice it much, compared to about one in five adults
(20%). Their desire for digital connection is just a natural part of their everyday existence
and normalized.

When it comes to social media behavior, we are beginning to see some differences
between how millennials and Gen Zers behave. Kane notes, "nearly 60% of both
generations are concerned that social media is too public and that their posts could come
back to haunt them. For Gen Z, this concern has changed its behavior: members favor
Snapchat in part because of the strict control over who can see their posts." This level of
control gives Gen Z the ability to lean more heavily into their tendency for safety. While
this needs to be explored more fully, it is control or independence, tied with security,

highlighted in these actions and gives Gen Z its distinction compared to others.

Relationship with Parents

When it comes to relationships with parents for this generation, interesting information is unique to this generation compared to others that precede them. Research from Twenge says, "…iGen teens are less likely to go out without their parents. The trend began with Millennials and then accelerated at a rapid clip with iGen'ers. The numbers are stunning: 12th graders in 2015 are going out less often than 8th graders did as recently as 2009. So, 18-year-olds are now going out less often than 14-year-olds did just six years prior." This shift in pace could once again be connected to the idea of safety this generation is growing up in, as well as a tendency for adolescence to stretch late into their 20's or even longer. Twenge equates some of this to how teens today are growing up much slower than before. It appears that both parents and teens today are on the same page when growing up more slowly.

Twenge points out that parents do keep a closer watch over teens, and teens say their parents always know where they are and who they are with when they go out. Due to app tracking of devices that allow parents to know where kids are at all the time, safety and slower development are tied together. One may think this dynamic may lead to more significant conflict on what appears to be a bit more control on the parents' part. It does not appear that way. "iGen teens fight *less* with their parents: the number who had a serious fight with their parents more than three times a year fell from 66% in 2005 to 56% in 2015. So iGen is not only kept on a tighter leash by their parents but also fight with them less, bucking the Boomer and GenX assumption that teens will automatically battle parental restrictions." The writer has experienced this in his household and has found this

to be true with his 14-year-old son. Earlier this year, they had a situation with his cell phone and his commitment to schoolwork. After showing a bit of deception on getting work done, his parents immediately restricted his phone usage until he could get caught back up. When the author's wife approached the situation and informed him of the consequence, there was no argument and merely a handing over his phone without complaint or a fight. His device's loss was large enough to his credit that it took him about three hours to get caught up on all his missed work. While their son's situation shows their desire to use what is important to him when it comes to discipline, they have tried to leverage his desire for a phone and their parenting approach to help maintain some connection levels.

Earlier it was noted that 45% of the Gen Z kids population use social media every day. While this percentage will increase significantly as this generation continues to grow, the author's approach on a personal level with his son shows he and his wife are caught in the net of safety, restrictions, and connection with their son too. They are aware that social media is not going to go away. Their son, who loves sports, has used his phone mostly to check scores and maintain the stats on his friends' fantasy sports competitions. When the pandemic hit and schools were closed, they noticed an increased desire for social media on his part. As they evaluated this, they determined he did not see his friends every day, major sports were canceled, so his initial reasons for having his phone were lost, and a new hunger for social media emerged.

Since he was thirteen, they were concerned about his desire for social media apps that they knew had the potential to expose him to things they did not think he could handle in his middle school development. Having a desire for him to take ownership of

this and needing a writing project for school, they asked him to research and write a paper telling them why he thought it was good for teens to have social media. A few days later, he presented a 7-page essay with research backing why this social media was suitable for teenagers. Feeling a sense of pride in his motivation, his father read through it and asked questions about what he had written. A further discussion revealed he wanted what was noted as the Big Three of social media at the time: TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram. Not being excited to have exposure to what his parents considered too risky at thirteen, they decided to try to meet in the middle. His being a part of a family committed to using their Christian faith to be a part of all areas of their lives actively, they committed to pray and ask God for wisdom in what would be best for them in partnership with their son. As his parents, they have tried to keep him from social media until he was sixteen and committed to giving him $1600 toward a car if he could wait that long. Ultimately, what many of his friends had in the Big Three led him to a new negotiation with them. After a few weeks of prayer, he asked if he could get social media at fourteen and a half. They discussed the risks and rewards of decision-making in life, and they told him that the finances promised to him would decrease by the months he sacrificed until he was sixteen. He agreed that $850 was fair, and they agreed to social media when he is fourteen and a half, but he will only be allowed Instagram with the understanding he will get more access as he gets older. He is also allowed to regain money if he waits longer than fourteen and a half. While they want safety for him, they also want to balance the importance of healthy parenting while emphasizing trust in him.

Generation Z's specific foci can tell us a lot about how this generation chooses to connect and the separated areas found within it. Barna's research shows this generation

puts a premium upon happiness. "Fully half strongly agree that 'happiness is my ultimate goal in life' (51%) compared to 44 percent of all adults. Yet research shows that more time with screen activities is consistently linked to less happiness." Gen Z's desire to be happy and the extent they are putting into social media only increases unhappiness. Twenge's research affirms this as well. "8th graders who spend ten or more hours a week on social media are 56% more likely to be unhappy than those who don't. Admittedly, ten hours a week is a lot—so what about those who spend merely six hours a week or more on social media? They are still 47% more likely to say they are unhappy. There is an impact on the levels of happiness related to this generation and their connectedness levels online.

While it may be too early to decide the depth of neurological impact, it is not known the impact sleep is taking hold for this generation in light of their digital connectedness. "Smartphone use may have decreased teens' sleep time: more teens now sleep less than seven hours most nights. Sleep experts say that teens should get about nine hours of sleep a night, so a teen who is getting less than seven hours a night is significantly sleep deprived." In just three years between 2012 and 2015, 22% more teens failed to get seven hours of sleep. This statistic was derived from when smartphones began to enter into the lives of teens. If teens are getting less sleep today than before, this will have a cognitive effect on their everyday lives as this becomes the norm for their existence. Twenge continues, "Lack of sleep can have serious consequences. Sleep deprivation is linked to myriad issues, including compromised thinking and reasoning, susceptibility to illness, increased weight gain, and high blood pressure." A sleep-deprived teenager increases the risk of a more poor mental state that can lead to problems

that extend much deeper into the individual. The long-term effects of such deprivation can have a destructive presence for this generation that carries into the future.

The Church, Faith, and Morals

The relationship trends between Generation Z and religion seem to show a decline in their commitment to this relationship. Twenge points out, "Because most US teens who identify with a religion are Christian—68% of 10th graders in 2015—most of this discussion centers on Christianity and why teens are leaving it. iGen'ers are more likely than any generation before them to be raised by religiously unaffiliated parents." While there is an increase in connection with the church as a whole with older generations, younger generations tend to do what is modeled. The post-Christian world we live in today will only trend in the same direction without the intervention of God's Spirit upon all Christians' lives for the sake of all people.

When looking closer at morals between those who were raised Christian and are engaged with their faith and Christian but not engaged with their faith, there is a more accurate reflection of what is playing out for Generation Z kids. Barna's research shows committed Christians feel strongly about lying being wrong (77%), marijuana use (63%), abortion is wrong (80%), marriage as lifelong commitment (91%), and homosexual behavior being wrong (77%). Compare that to churched Christians and Unchurched. The percentages change: lying as wrong (Churched 38% versus Unchurched 37%), marijuana use as wrong (Churched 26% versus Unchurched 18%), abortion as wrong (Churched 37% versus Unchurched 26%), and homosexual behavior as wrong (24% versus 13%). This tells us that a teen who lacks faith engagement is shaped distinctly by the messages the surrounding culture offers. These messages find themselves vying for their attention.

Looking closer at Generation Z and you discover both clashes and resonance concerning the church.

The places where Gen Z students and Christianity clash may show a continued partnership with previous trends and prior generations. Barna's research helps us here by summarizing it in four areas: truth, sex, money, and tech. As it pertains to truth, Barna's research notes, "At the most fundamental level, classic Christianity and Gen Z as a whole are deeply divided on how to know what is true. Throughout history, Christians have contended we can know God because God reveals himself in creation, in the Scriptures, and, most fully, in Christ. Buying into scientism and hostility toward religion doesn't so much prove the failure of Christian belief and ways of knowing, as it reveals careless, unexamined assumptions about knowledge and truth." It shows the continual rise of relativism in our world and almost invites a buffet of belief options for teens that put together a faith that looks like themselves. Skepticism around truth perpetuates this and even shows in assumptions surrounding sexual ethics as well.

"The sexual ethic embraced by so many teens and young adults is not, for most of them, a carefully considered rejection of traditional Christian ethics but blind, unthinking acceptance of *consent* as the ultimate ethical standard, which many are convinced renders any and all sexual activities morally neutral." While this may reveal a narrative that says "I am in control," Twenge's research shows sexual activity is on the decline. "The average teen now has sex around spring of 11th grade, while most GenX'ers in the 1990s got started a year earlier, by the spring of 10th grade. So with fewer teens having sex, fewer are getting pregnant, and fewer are giving birth at a young age." This information may be discouraging or encouraging, depending upon how the reader receives it. Still, it reveals

the guide in these situations is the individual as shown in a culture of individualism rather than a Christian-based approach to guiding one's faith and moral decisions. The reason for its importance shapes the impact the church community has in shaping a Gen Z student's life.

It was highlighted earlier the importance of happiness for Generation Z. This is also tied to their desire for financial success. "There is nothing inherently wrong with having enough money to care for family and meet financial obligations. But the New Testament writers are clear that making the pursuit of wealth one's primary life goal is spiritually dangerous and even destructive. Gen Z is certainly not alone in their battle to put wealth in its proper place—this is an arena where American Christianity overall has struggled to maintain its prophetic witness to a culture consumed with consuming." Generation Z looks at the church's model and sees a loss of witness in the practice and pursuit of wealth to the detriment of caring for the very people in practice. They say that matters: the poor and those in society most in need of help. The Christian church model as it relates to wealth and money in our Western culture has shown itself to be selfish in practice, while Generation Z notes inconsistency between who the church says it is and the actual practices.

Generation Z and Christianity will be in an ongoing clash with technology, and both will be in constant need of adaptability. The use of technology is not going away. How devices provide an invitation to faith must continuously be taken note of and not replace the value of being together in person. It is vital to utilize how it is being used within church communities and how it invites students to engage, but it should not be used as a replacement. Nothing can replace the importance of in-person presence to

another.

Many churches in the United States are currently amid a global pandemic, and many of those church communities have been shut down for "in-person" meetings. The need for technology is more of a necessity now than ever. However, the potential outcome of this after people are allowed to return will have adverse effects on the Body of Christ meeting together regularly as technology may replace personal connection. The local church must take note of careful approaches into the future. The church will need to understand the importance of connection with Generation Z and their comfort in interaction through digital means and their longings for in-person connections. Work will need to be done to balance an approach for discipleship through technology while tempering the value of presence for a community within the church community.

While it may seem the clashes are tremendous and challenging to overcome, all is not lost. Gen Z and Christianity can be found in resonance and diversity, empathy, openness, and emptiness. The inclusion of ethnicities and diversity of Gen Z shines on the partnership between Gen Z and Christianity. "The Scriptures are clear that people of all races, ethnicities, and nationalities belong to God's family (see Revelation 7:9), and Gen Z tends to be more comfortable than older generations with practicing diversity-in-unity *now*, as well as in the age to come." This reality needs to be embraced by local church communities in the future as a longing for more multiethnic reflections within a congregation will not just be longed for but expected. Gen Z will be watching how church communities make decisions, and they will create expectations of church leadership to be more reflective of this ethnic reflection.

This generation will also offer the gift of empathy to the Body of Christ. When

their spirit of inclusion is at its best, it provides an approach that may well show patience in the work of God for other generations to see. Barna's research says it this way, "Instead of criticizing teens for majoring on 'gentle and respectful,' older believers might instead consider how they can help Gen Z 'ready to explain it' (1 Peter 3:15-16)—and reflect on what they, the grownups, can learn about empathy from a gentle, respectful generation." There is a mutuality of importance found in the relationships that exist generationally within the Body of Christ. This reality is made possible in the ability to listen well mutually. It will mean less talking "at" and more talking "with." Expressions of this will feel more natural to a Gen Z student. The practice of listening will enable older generations to learn from the younger generation and increase a more profound sense of community amongst those who gather together.

Barna indicates that openness is something that resonates with Christianity as well. The pendulum may swing back toward openness to Christianity because within a post-Christian context, and people may develop a hunger or curiosity toward faith they either once had or have developed.

> "While teens' overall ignorance of the Bible and a basic Christian
> view of the world may appear to be an unmitigated loss for the church, there are some upsides. Many teens do not have spiritual baggage from bad Sunday school teachers or hypocritical Christians—A generation lacking confidence in what is true may be open in profound ways to a personal experience of God, much as those on the religious and cultural margins were often open to encountering Jesus during his earthly ministry."

This idea opens the door of opportunity for Christian faiths to relegate what is happening in the local church community and present a clean slate before people to enhance and

develop ministry in ways that are more formational and discipleship oriented.

The emptiness that comes from the world's narrative may awaken this generation's hearts a desire for a more robust faith. For the Christian faith, where the death and resurrection and Jesus are central, the resurrection does not seem to impact it when death has not taken place. In the awakening that comes through the emptiness the culture around us discovers, the invitation for the rest of the Body of Christ is to embody a faith that recognizes the sensitivity of so many socioeconomic realities. In a culture for many where so many can practice "I can have it so I buy it," perhaps a new imagination in practice may mean to embody a death of desires, wants, and perceived needs. In doing so, a reclaiming of some of the lost witness to Gen Z can be discovered.

Summary

This chapter has established a realistic look into the life of a Gen Z teen. On one hand, there has been an explanation of their diverse and inclusive nature, their tendency toward safety, the relationships with their parents, their natural inclinations for technology, their desire for connection, and even understanding the relationship with the church, morals, and faith. On the other hand, there is an impact that creates a vulnerability that is not just problematic but can be extremely destructive. It becomes problematic as Gen Z students navigate a world pushing into a narrative of isolation and independence. It becomes destructive as each of them seeks to discover what this means for how they see the world and how they will contribute to the world around them.

During the pandemic and when school shutdown, the writer heard from some students in the middle school he mentored who said they would never take for granted being in school ever again. The undertone of that statement was about being together with

their friends. This made him think about whether Generation Z has a more profound desire for in-person connection over their technology. It shows they like the idea of having their friends around them but would still utilize their devices to connect on a much deeper level.

This impact can be so destructive to this generation's future in the very isolation caused by their dependency upon technology. Whereas Generation Z utilizes technology to meet their human longing to connect, this watered-down form of connection is not entirely satisfying. It does not meet the needs of a developing teenager. This lack of development can lead to profound feelings of loneliness. Understanding the problem of loneliness and recognizing the destructive risks involved with loneliness. Through recognition of loneliness, the church can see it has a place in changing the painful narrative attacking Gen Z students.

Chapter 2

The Loneliness Reality

Song lyrics can capture the essence of emotions and feelings to expose what is going on in a songwriter's heart and mind. Many listeners can attach themselves to song lyrics and often listen to them repeatedly to relate. In his hit song from 1975, "All By Myself," Eric Carmen weaved together lyrics in a way that has brought a connection to many people for decades. He sings, "All by myself, don't want to be, all by myself anymore, all by myself, don't want to live, all by myself, anymore." These lyrics were written as a cry for connection with another, specific person, and these words are also a consistent theme throughout humanity.

While the need for connection is true for all of humanity, it has been highlighted

that Generation Z similarly cries out for connection. How they connect is different than

previous generations. When looking at the song lyrics in the chorus for the song "Modern

Loneliness," the artist Lauv highlights the attempts to connect through digital devices, yet

loneliness still grips him. Lauv sings, "Modern loneliness, we're never alone, but always

depressed, yeah. Love my friends to death, but I never call, and I never text, yeah. La-di-

da-di-da. Yeah, you get what you give, and you give what you get, so modern loneliness.

We love to get high, but we don't know how to come down." In an interview with Lauv,

Brittany Spanos says,

> "Lauv filmed the video for "Modern Loneliness" while in
> quarantine, with director Jason Lester capturing footage of
> Lauv remotely. The video features an iPhone screen that
> jumps between reflecting on Lauv as he stares at it all day
> and what he's actually doing on his device: checking
> Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and his text messages. The
> video ends with
> him FaceTiming his mom as he sings "Modern loneliness,
> we're never alone but we're always depressed."

The video tied to these lyrics is a realistic look at the teenager of Gen Z. The longing to

find connection through digital avenues is leaving a void for Generation Z that is

elevating a growing problem amongst this generation to loneliness. Chapter two will look

at the problem of loneliness for Gen Z while highlighting the connected impact of this

chronic issue on this generation's mental health, as shown through increased rates of

depression, anxiety, and suicide. From there, the focus will turn more specifically toward

the church community and explore the impacts of loneliness on this current generation of

students who attend these faith communities.

   The rise of loneliness is a result of increasing levels of disconnect. With the

amount of time invested in digital devices, the decrease in actual human interaction elevates the problem. In the book *Braving the Wilderness,* Brené Brown quotes John Cacioppo, a neuroscience researcher, when she states, "…loneliness is 'perceived social isolation.' We experience loneliness when we feel disconnected. At the heart of loneliness is the absence of meaningful social interaction—an intimate relationship, friendships, family gatherings, or even community or work group connections." A deeper look into this specific definition of loneliness begins to expose the risk to an individual. Brown continues, "When we feel isolated, disconnected, and lonely, we try to protect ourselves. In that mode, we want to connect, but our brain is attempting to override connection with self-protection. That means less empathy, more defensiveness, more numbing, and less sleeping." Hesitancy for connection can continue in a way where the spiral of risk increases. In their book *Loneliness*, John Cacioppo and William Patrick, "Loneliness becomes an issue of serious concern only when it settles in long enough to create a persistent, self-reinforcing loop of negative thoughts, sensations, and behaviors." Getting caught up in these self-destructive cycles can easily lead an individual to formulate elements of perceived truth. Loneliness serves as an important wake-up call as well. "In the same way that physical pain serves as a prompt to change behavior—the pain of burning skin tells you to pull your finger away from the frying pan—loneliness developed as a stimulus to get humans to pay more attention to their social connections, to reach out toward others, to renew frayed or broken bonds." The cry of loneliness is for connection, but Generation Z's attempts to fill the void of disconnect are made through means that often fall short. For example, this generation's proclivity to greater phone engagement can be considered risky behavior.

In relationship to Generation Z and their levels concerning their phone usage, Twenge notes, "Just as for happiness, the results are clear: screen activities are linked to more loneliness, and nonscreen [sic] activities are linked to less loneliness. Teens who spend a lot of time with their friends in person are much less likely to be lonely (with their risk cut nearly in half), and those who visit social networking sites every day or nearly every day are 11% more likely to be lonely." Based upon this research, the increase of Generation Z's phone engagement, partnered in continuous cycles of cyclical behavior, will potentially lead to a lowering of risky activities, such as drinking, sex, and traffic tickets, but lead to a greater longing for connection. This increased longing is paired with attempts to find connection through activities that tend to perpetuate loneliness. As loneliness takes a grip upon an individual, it spills out into the growing areas of mental health specifically related to depression, anxiety, and suicide.

Physical and Mental Health

With the relationship between the usage of digital devices and its impact upon loneliness in mind, individuals find themselves at a greater risk for other damaging realities than mental health and physical health. Jena Hillard, referencing the Cigna Loneliness Index from 2018, states in her article, "Half of respondents who rarely have in-person interactions reported they are in fair/poor health, while just 12% of those who have daily in-person interactions also say they're in fair/poor physical health (52% vs. 23% of those who are socially active) and mental health (51% vs. 12%)." This concrete reality informs the reader of the importance of in-person and face-to-face interaction. Hillard continues, "Loneliness and social isolation are incredibly harmful to overall health. Not only can loneliness exacerbate certain pre-existing health conditions, such as

anxiety and depression, but it can also increase the risk of heart disease and stroke."

These realities about health point to loneliness manifesting itself deeply profoundly

within many individual areas beyond just connection.

        Cacioppo and Patrick look at the correlation between loneliness and depression
and

illuminate the complex, conflicting relationship between the two. These authors state,

> "An even greater challenge to sorting out the exact
> dimensions of loneliness is that it rarely travels alone.
> Loneliness affects how you feel about your relationships.
> Depression reflects how you feel, period. Loneliness, like
> hunger, is a warning to do something to alter an uncomfortable
> and possibly dangerous condition. Depression makes us
> apathetic. Whereas loneliness urges us to move forward,
> depression holds us back. But where depression and loneliness
> converges is in a diminished sense of person control, which
> leads to passive coping. This induced passivity is one of the
> reasons that, despite the pain and urgency that loneliness
> imposes, it does not always lead to effective action."

When looking at adolescent development, the reader begins to discover the importance

loneliness can play in the formation and transition into adulthood and how loneliness and

depression partnered together can hijack this essential process. Twenge tells us, "Many

parents and educators worry that teens' constant smartphone use, especially the constant

thrum of social media and texting, has created an emotionally fragile generation prone to

depression." Cacioppo, Patrick, and Twenge are alluding to the distinct vulnerability that

comes to Gen Z in this combination that can ultimately prove very destructive to the

teenager's development and hinder a healthy transition into adulthood.

        When anxiety manifests itself in a developing adolescent, there can be a profound

impact on the individual's image, identity, and ability to connect. Twenge analyzes the

reasons why smartphones can play into this process and ultimately increase the risks of

depression. She says, "Not getting a reply to your text or social media message has a high potential for causing anxiety—a common precursor to depression." While an adult may have the mental discipline and more formed identity to wrestle with this disappointment and perceived rejection, the devastating lack of replies or likes can easily send a developing adolescent into a destructive spiral that spills into questioning identity, belonging, and purpose.

Twenge continues her analysis by referencing work conducted by the US Department of Health and Human Services, noting screening done since 2004 on assessing clinical-level depression. This work analyzes a sample of around 17,000 teens (ages 12-17) across the country every year. This screening showed a shocking rise in depression in a short period of time: 56% more teens experienced a major depressive episode in 2015 than in 2010, and 60% more experienced severe impairment. Tragically, the results do not stop there. Twenge continues, "More young people are experiencing not just symptoms of depression, and not just feelings of anxiety, but clinically diagnosable major depression. Even more than the data on rising loneliness and depressive symptoms, these gold-standard data suggests that something is seriously wrong in the lives of American teens." The grip and power of loneliness and the impact on mental health are leading our teens today into a tunnel that will impact not just today but into their future. This reality's dire implications can even lead to a tremendous loss we can experience, death itself.

Without the power of direct connection and a sense of belonging, there is an intersection for some Gen Z students and their futures and how to respond. Tragically for many, the decision has been to turn to suicide. Suicide appears to be a real consideration

for those overwhelmed by the ramifications of loneliness mixed with anxiety and depression without an actual in-person encounter of connection. "After declining during the 1990's and stabilizing in the 2000s, the suicide rate for teens has risen again. Forty-six percent more 15- to 19-year-olds committed suicide in 2015 than in 2007, and two and a half times more 12- to 14-year-olds killed themselves." The Centers for Disease Control affirmed these realities and noted that for people between ages 10-14, suicide rates declined from 2000-2007 but tripled between 2007-2017. The rate of suicide for persons aged 15-19 was stable from 2000 to 2007 and then increased 76% from 2007 to 2017. The pace of increase was greater from 2014 to 2017 (10% annually, on average) than from 2007 to 2014 (3% annually). While the statistics speak for themselves, it leaves room to contemplate the reasoning of such increases. The timing of increases correlates with the saturation of smartphones in our society amongst students.

There is a study that Brené Brown references in *Braving the Wilderness* that should be noted in the exploration of how best to support and connect with Generation Z. She says, "In a meta-analysis of studies on loneliness, researchers Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton found the following: Living with air pollution increases your odds of dying early by 5 percent. Living with obesity, 20 percent. Excessive drinking, 30 percent. And living with loneliness? It increases our odds of dying early by 45 percent." This astonishing reality should awaken people to the profound risk occurring with this up-and-coming generation and cause the reader to look inward and outward in considering what can be done about it. In looking at the crucial aspects of both mental and physical tendencies related to loneliness, the risks are significant if experienced loneliness levels continue to increase. Unfortunately, as generational

characteristics are both factored into these realities and compared with other prior generations, data seems to allude to a trend heading in the wrong direction.

Depending on which studies you look at, some say Gen Z is the loneliest generation, and others may say the millennial generation is. In 2018, Cigna put out a report on loneliness. In surveying over 20,000 adults across different generations, they discovered Generation Z adults (18-22) topped the charts on the loneliness scale (based upon UCLA's loneliness index) at 48.3 compared to 45.3 for millennials and 45.1 for those in Generation X. The debate around this appears to be connected to what dates are included defining when Gen Z begins. For those starting Gen Z a bit later, the population base within that realm reduces numbers. Whether Gen Z is defined as starting in 1995, like many would say or later, it appears to be trending that way. Jean Twenge believes the reasoning has to do with smartphones because they attempt to replace in-person interactions. Twenge states, "…smartphones are the most likely culprits, increasing loneliness both directly and indirectly by replacing in-person social interaction. With teens spending less time on activities that assuage loneliness, and more time on those that don't, it is not surprising that loneliness has increased. She continues, "It seems much more likely that smartphones became popular, screen time increased, and thus teens' loneliness increased. Whether it is smartphone use or social media use, a digital device in the hand of a Gen Z student points to a greater risk of loneliness for that student.

Debate on Social Media

When separating the concept of using a smartphone and social media, the data shows that social media is surprisingly not the sole predictor of loneliness. In looking at the Cigna report, a briefing article entitled "Gen Z May Be the Loneliest Generation"

noted that "Respondents who never use social media have an average loneliness score of 41.7 compared with avid social media users, who score 43.5." Looking at these closely related numbers illustrates that social media alone is not the number one factor in loneliness's causation. Hillard says, "Gen Z and Millennials were identified as the loneliest generations and social media is thought to be the main contributing factor of loneliness in these young generations." In comparing these two, what we discover is that social media is guilty of contributing to loneliness. Still, many other factors could be explored that may play into the equation: socioeconomics, race, family dynamics, etc. The problem of loneliness amongst this generation is moving in a dangerous direction, and the year 2020 has enhanced the danger.

Coronavirus Pandemic

In March of 2020, the global coronavirus pandemic began to take over the world. As it made its way throughout the United States, it impacted businesses, church communities, schools and forced people to adapt to something no one alive today knew how to navigate. As safety measures were put in place and schools were transformed into virtual learning, the timing of this could not have been worse for Generation Z and their pre-existing struggles with loneliness.

The day school was let out early in Gig Harbor, Washington, where the author resides; his son was embarking on his first middle school basketball game with his friends. Making the team was a rite of passage of sorts for him in working for something he set his talents to and even more so playing alongside several of his friends. What appeared to be a delay in his season eventually turned into the season being canceled. That cancellation created a great sense of loss for his love of sports and competitive heart,

but even more so for his friends' loss of interaction.

As the months carried on and the school remained virtual, the author began hearing amongst his peers and even his 11- year-old daughter a deep longing linked to adolescence's vital development aspect. This longing was for the education that is acquired outside the classroom setting in social environments. The common phrase heard was, "I just want to be with my friends at school" or "I will never take for granted going to school in a building ever again." These phrases point to the issue of social isolation that plagues Gen Z and only increased by the pandemic.

Found within a chapter written in the book *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, authors Jenny De Jong Gierveld, Theo Van Tiburg, and Pearl Dykstra speak on social isolation. They state,

> "Social isolation concerns the objective characteristics of a situation and refers to a small network of kin and non-kin relationships. There is a continuum running from social isolation on the one end to social participation on the other. Persons with an absence or a small number of meaningful ties are, by definition, socially isolated. Research has shown that socially isolated persons run a greater risk of becoming lonely, and that being surrounded by a social network of meaningful personal relationships is crucial for feeling socially embedded and for the alleviation of loneliness."

When taking this information and correlating it to the current teens that are a part of Gen Z, the number of people it takes for someone not to feel isolated may look different. Someone more introverted may need fewer people than an extrovert. The truth holds that personal relationships are a necessity for everyone. Just because you are present with other humans does not necessarily mean you are connected.

Recently the author's church youth group held an event at his house with around

twenty teenagers present outside for a time to eat and share life. A student came because her mother had deep concerns about her levels of engagement in various social settings. Watching her amongst the group, she made it evident that she was not interested in engaging with anyone who was there through her body language. While she was physically there, she was mentally and emotionally distant. She intentionally put herself in spaces distanced from everyone, and when the time was allowed for kids to hang out, she disappeared as far away from the other students as possible. While the author does not know much of her backstory, and there can certainly be more factors at play, her actions at this event depict what can occur when social isolation is a reality. When factoring in several weeks of digital learning with peers, more time on screens, and limited activities for social engagement, you find a student like this who is at risk for more significant problems, the longer social disconnection is a part of our society. Knowing our universal need for connection, he was aware she needed it but may lack the skills to engage in healthy ways. Distancing herself from her peers became her natural response. While the long-term social effects of the pandemic on Generation Z will not be discovered until a later point, research shows that coronavirus is only perpetuating the problems of loneliness in our society.

In May of 2020, the 4-H Council did some research with 1,516 respondents between the ages of 13-19, exploring the state of mental health in light of the pandemic. What arose as the top stressors for these kids that produced anxiety and made them feel depressed were schoolwork (71%), thinking about my future (65%), no identifiable reason (58%), pressure from family (55%), and social isolation (48%). It would make sense that schoolwork would rank as a top trigger. The initial transition to virtual learning

in the spring has continued into the fall, in which disruption has caused trouble in expectations of student' success. Within the author's community, grades were not emphasized in the spring, but now things are changing again for the fall term. With ever-changing expectations and added misunderstanding coming from parents, who are also concerned because of work schedules and accountability, students recognize and absorb the stress from around them into their own lives.

As Generation Z thinks about the future, they are overwhelmed by the current conditions they see around them that fill the future with nothing but unknowns. They find themselves in a pandemic that seems to have no end in sight, racial turmoil saturating the news, protests in the streets, an election year fraught with back and forth lies and fake news, and the economy and unemployment skyrocketing. With so much devastation in mind, Generation Z looks around them with question marks wondering what their world will be like in the future.

When 58% of today's teenagers have no "identifiable reason" for their increased rates of depression and anxiety, Gen Z kids are showing a response to a world that is so overwhelming that they cannot put what they feel or think into words. The overwhelming amount of information they are processing through outlets like their phones, televisions, friends, and parents during this time creates the image of these students throwing his/her hands in the air signifying, "I got nothing." All of these factors contribute to deeper levels of stress in their lives.

Forty-eight percent of Generation Z students live in social isolation, which adds to their anxiety and depression levels. The fact that so many in-person activities have been eliminated due to the pandemic is fueling the risk of loneliness for this generation. In an

article published by *Business Insider,* Dominic-Madori Davis notes, "Social-learning

network StuDocu polled over 1,600 students between March 24 and April 17 (the height

of the pandemic), [sic] and found that 62.4% of Gen Zers said isolating during

COVID-19 has worsened their mental health. The top emotions for those polled were

stress, frustration, anxiety, and loneliness. Only 18.5% reported that they often feel happy

during the pandemic." The impact of the pandemic is taking its toll. Five to ten years

from now, there will be more information on how great a toll the pandemic played on

Gen Z students' loneliness factor.

In the report noted earlier from the 4-H Council, 61% of teens say the COVID-19

pandemic has increased their loneliness feelings. There is also a fascinating journey of

Gen Z students through the pandemic done through the website medium.com. At the time

of this writing, their work has been tracking Gen Z students from mid-March of 2020

until most recently, August 10, 2020. When it comes to loneliness, on a report noted from

April 1, 2020, Mary Noel states,

> "Despite all of the tech at their fingertips, most acknowledging
> it's a poor comparison to IRL (in real life) interaction, and
> they are missing it. When we asked, 'What is one thing
> technology cannot replace?' Gen Z placed a big emphasis
> on what is 'real,' 'genuine,' and 'human.' There is a pervasive
> loneliness people are experiencing even if they are able to
> connect virtually. 71% say elements of true connection
> are irreplaceable, including face-to-face interaction and
> physical touch."

While the pandemic has certainly wreaked havoc on society with its devastating, negative

effects, it also has led to Generation Z possibly developing a deeper appreciation for face-

to-face interaction than initially was noticed. As Mary continued to report, on May 27,

2020, mental health issues maintained a constant amongst this generation. "As young people continue to experience anxiety over the pandemic, loneliness and disconnection under social distancing restrictions, and a general sense of overwhelm at the mounting injustices with the loss of innocent Black lives, it's not surprising that in the past week 65% say mental health has become more important to them in light of COVID." The news also seems to feed this dynamic with a constant flood of traumatic stories layered onto what they are already carrying. In light of what has been shown here, the increased levels of loneliness amongst this generation are currently heading in the wrong direction. The despair is getting more profound as the pandemic continues to hold the culture at bay with one another. Looking a bit closer at Generation Z and their relationship with the church reveals a different side of this generation.

Gen Z and the Church

Within every church dynamic, there are people from all walks of life. Each path is a unique narrative in the Story of God. Each person comes with biases and experiences that have shaped how they see the world and their understanding of how they fit within the Story of God. Different family dynamics, socioeconomic realities, educational backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and locations where they live all add to the diversity of a church community. Within the diversity of a given church community, there are distinct generational preferences on how a worship experience is "supposed to go" and preferences on musical style, leading to different church attendance balances. Those within Gen Z can teach us a lot about their worship preference, their relationship with the church community, and what we can learn about loneliness.

A student within this writer's church community has watched grow within his children's ministry and now in his youth ministry over the last five years. When he arrived at this church community in 2015, she was in the 4th grade. She is now a 15- year-old and has a personality that can light up a room. She is athletic and extremely personable. Her social media regularly shows her interactions with her friends on the volleyball team and her sibling's love. She has several relationships with different people throughout our church community of all ages. With these qualities in mind, one may assume she would be less lonely than her peers. In a recent conversation with her, she indicated how the pandemic had increased her levels of loneliness. She has turned to her cell phone and social media as a means to cope but has indicated it is only like a band-aid and does not satisfy her longing to be with others and desire to be at school. As an avid participant in our local church community, even attending a livestream service has taken its toll on her. When exploring the church community's role in this dynamic, it appears that church communities are not doing enough to combat loneliness.

The rate of church attendance in the United States has been on a steady downward trend. Examining the rate of church attendance amongst different generations shows this reality. The attendance by Gen Z students shows this reality too. In an article written by Melissa Deckman, she writes, "When it comes to attendance at religious services, Gen Z Americans are far more likely to skip church than attend on a regular basis. Overall, 45 percent of Gen Z Americans report rarely or never attending church while just 1 in 4 report attending weekly or more." This generational discrepancy points to the larger trends in our world today. One contributing factor to this attendance decline can also be

attributed to extracurricular activities taking precedence over local church activities. When the writer of this work was a kid growing up in Southern Idaho, he remembers Wednesdays were understood as "church nights." There were no scheduled games, and practices tended to finish early enough so teenagers could get to their prospective youth groups. His ministry experience has watched this reality dissolve while travel sports and other activities with financial investment on the part of parents have increased. These activities take place to the detriment of church attendance, and financial investment on the part of parents and guardians will carry more weight in where a student spends his/her time. Deckman continues, "While these numbers are lower than the national average— studies from the past few years suggest between 36 and 39 percent of Americans report attending church weekly or more overall—they are pretty close to church attendance reports among Millennials, at least with respect to attending church frequently. In 2014, Pew finds that 27 percent of Americans aged 18-29 report attending church weekly or more often, compared with 25 percent for Gen Z Americans." While these numbers have not changed dramatically between these two generations, comparing that to other generations shows the gap.

Jean Twenge helps us here. "iGen'ers and the Millennials are less religious than Boomers and GenX'ers were at the same age. The recent data on Millennials, who are now in their family-building years, indicate that they are less likely to attend services than Boomers and GenX'ers were at that age. The decline in attending religious services for this group in their prime family-building years has been just as steep as that for young adults ages 18 to 24." This decline has a fallout that plays out long-term in a significantly

changing religious landscape. The decline in attendance will spill into an affiliation for

religion, shaping the lives of others. Twenge again,

> "Affiliating with a religion was once a near-universal experience
>
> for young people: In the early 1980s, more than 90% of high
>
> school seniors identified as a part of one religious group or
>
> another…Then that changed. Beginning in the 1990s and
>
> accelerating in the 2000s, fewer and fewer young people
>
> affiliated with a religion. The shift was largest for young
>
> adults, with the religiously affiliated dipping to 66% by
>
> 2016. iGen'ers are more likely than any generation before
>
> them to be raised by religiously unaffiliated parents. In the
>
> 2016 college survey, 17% of students' parents did not
>
> belong to a religion, up from only 5% in the late 1970s.
>
> The drop in student's own affiliation is even steeper; by
>
> 2016, 31% did not affiliate with a religion.

This trend in attendance and affiliation has led to Generation Z being tagged as the first

truly post-Christian generation in our world. Twenge thinks the results of this are because

more iGen'ers are being raised in nonreligious households. More iGen teens have decided

not to belong to religion anymore, and that begins to take place as they are asking more

questions in their development, somewhere between 8th grade and young adulthood. It is

interesting to note that for a generation seeking connection, it shows they are not seeking

it within a church community's confines. It appears the allure and impact of a church

community are being lost, and they are turning elsewhere to find it. We are learning about

another rise in this generation and their belief systems: the rise of atheism.

In Barna's report, it mentions that "For Gen Z, 'atheist' is no longer considered a dirty word: The percentage of teens who identify as such is double that of the general population (13% vs. 6% of all adults). This trend finds itself in alignment with the stats mentioned above concerning both church attendance and church affiliation. The normalizing of atheism in our culture and the trend that Gen Z appears to be setting with this statistic shows the rate at which unbelief in the Christian community will have for a long time in the local church. When factoring in the pandemic and a lack of attendance in our world today, it leaves the reader to wonder which way the pendulum will swing when society begins to return to its new reality.

Perhaps claiming the title of 'atheist' will be more of a badge of honor in the future more than it is now.

One sobering article from the Barna research mentioned in an article for John Brown University states, "Of Generation Z individuals, ages 13 to 18, interviewed for the Barna study, 23 percent said that they stopped going to church because Christians are hypocrites, and 15 percent said it was because they believe there are too many injustices in the history of the church, among other reasons." The disconnect created in our world today when it comes to church leadership and integrity has been lost. Early in the 2000s, in the writer's ministry, he recalls when mentioning he was a pastor came with a level of respect. Over the last ten years, that level of respect has declined. The number of stories of infidelity amongst church leaders in the news has led to greater skepticism of the effectiveness of church communities in partnerships with the content mentioned above

and the leadership of church communities.

Barna's research takes a good look at the morals in our world and looks closely at Generation Z. Their research splits their breakdown into five groups: Engaged Christian, Churched Christian, Unchurched Christian, Other Faith, and No Faith. Looking at each grouping's viewpoints in light of certain morals reveals a pivotal aspect to what the writer believes shows as a connection between loneliness and those connected to a church community's life. For instance, in asking whether lying is morally wrong, those engaged show a 77% agreement, those that are Churched Christians agree at 38%. Those that are Unchurched Christians show agreement at 37%. Looking at a marriage between one man and one woman and someone engaged in their faith agrees at 91%, a Churched Christian at 46%, and someone with no faith affiliation agrees at 5%. Abortion as being wrong shows 80% for those engaged, and for those that are just churched, it drops to 44%. The reader should note the significant connection between a Gen Z student and their engagement with their faith and those who just attend as a churchgoer. These statistics highlight the importance of discipleship and relational engagement with a local church community as necessary for the local church. Barna's research sums it up by saying, "Church attendance alone does not create distinctive believers." This distinction highlights the relationship between Gen Z students and their loneliness levels in partnership with church attendance.

A recent project put together by the Springtide Research Institute in 2020 focused upon 1,000 students aged 13- 25-years old. Their project looked to see what they could learn from the relationship between loneliness and those who attend religious gatherings.

What they discovered was not all that affirming toward religious gatherings. In comparing their entire sampling (ES) with those who attend religious gatherings (RG), they found that loneliness levels are pretty much the same with those that do not attend. Here is what they learned when they asked the following statements and received the levels of agreement with them: "I have no one to talk to" (39% ES vs. 36% RG), "I feel completely alone" (33% ES vs. 30% RG), "I feel as if no one understands me" (45% ES vs. 43% RG), "No one really knows me well" (36% ES vs. 33% RG), and "It is difficult for me to make friends" (41% ES vs. 38% RG). Their conclusion, "Participating in religious groups has virtually no protective effect against the experience of loneliness. Where we expected to find a buffer between a young person and the rising tide of isolation, we found only more loneliness." The sting of this research implies a much deeper problem that exists within local churches. It also reveals that a higher percentage do experience levels of connection in some way. While that is to be celebrated, the local church should be where a relationship is high, and loneliness is low. It exposes the reality that loneliness will be found without connection and a sense of belonging to a community.

This reality seems to push against Jean Twenge's research when it comes to religious services and depression. When she looked at screen activities and non-screen activities, she notes, "Eighth graders who are heavy users of social media increase their risk of depression by 27%, while those who play sports, go to religious services, or even do homework cut their risk significantly. Comparing the two projects, we see how religious services may help with depression but not necessarily affect the impact of loneliness upon a Gen Z teenager. What is important to note is the awareness of

connection is crucial to either statistic. The greater connection a teenager has with someone else in the context of a church community can positively impact depressive tendencies and dispositions toward loneliness.

Summary

When it comes to loneliness and Generation Z, there are problems both in society and our church communities. The longing for connection runs deep for all of humanity. It may be a young child who cuddles next to a parent, a new employee looking to develop relationships with colleagues, or a visitor who has not been to a church building in a long time or ever. It could look like an incoming sixth-grader wandering the halls on the first day of school when all his friends attend the school across town or the homeless person on the street looking to develop eye-contact with a passerby. Whatever the circumstance, we all long to connect.

How the means of connection are pursued matters in our relationships too. Some can easily walk into a room and begin interacting. Others are comfortable in showing up at a neighbor's home to deliver cookies. In our world today, we hear phrases like "social distancing," and it implies being apart. Social and physical distancing can be two different things. In a world full of people longing to connect, we have Generation Z young adults, teenagers, and tweens who long to connect. The practices they are leaning on to do so are creating a pseudo-connection that is void of qualities of genuine connection, such as tone of voice and body language. A FaceTime call or "snap" sent via social media may give a bit more but still lack the genuine connection found in personal

contact. While this problem continues to permeate our society, shape our teenagers, and leave far too many students in loneliness and risk for further destruction, change can happen when hope is possible.

For the student that sat outside the circle, the student in the author's church community who speaks to loneliness being greater during a pandemic, or the student in the home who is seeking validation from so many various outlets on their phones and comparing themselves to false identities manufactured through edit buttons on photos, authentic connection is possible. The church can be a great answer to this problem if it will rise and embody the God of scripture who models it for us. Knowing Generation Z and learning about the struggle of loneliness and its effects, attention is turned toward a solution that can help Christian leaders begin becoming proactive people in bringing about the change necessary for this generation.

Chapter 3

Deepening Our Theological Understanding

Through the previously discussed experience of returning to middle school in chapter one, the author discovered opportunities to combat loneliness. Even amid struggle and wondering if being a part of this small group of students was impacted, he realized the importance of showing up and simply being present. Fostering an environment of hospitality and showing up provided the space for relationship, community, and belonging. The hope is for transformation to occur for the student both in the class and in their social and emotional development. What is discovered is that exploring within the confines of scripture are the same components to help someone see there can be an impact in church communities today. Recognizing the Christian community is a significant answer to helping us combat loneliness for Generation Z today is an important reality. Chapter three will examine the power and necessity of hospitality as highlighted

in scripture while illustrating how it can be utilized to create community and belonging as established through vulnerability and presence. Discovering a sense of belonging within a community through building relationships can begin the transformation process that leads us further down the path of seeing the fullness of the image of God in our humanity and enabling Gen Z students to discover that reality too.

Hospitality

Hospitality is a concept that impacts all societies all over the world in differing cultures and in and different ways. In Western culture, the term hospitality is seen regularly within our lives when someone sees a hospital as they drive throughout communities. Differing companies emphasize hospitality, whether it be restaurants, hotels, or entertainment venues. Christine Pohl, in her book *Making Room, says,* "Over the past few centuries, the scope of hospitality as a term has diminished; it now chiefly refers to the entertainment of one's acquaintances at home and the hospitality industry's provision of service through hotels and restaurants." The focus is to create an experience where the customer feels welcomed and cared for so the customer will return and speak highly of their experience.

The importance of hospitality also exists within our homes' culture when we are thinking of hosting people. It comes with a list of things done both ascetically within the space and within the relationship to the people who will be present. While the list of specifics may differ from home to home, the ultimate goal of individual home hospitality is to create an experience where visitors walk away feeling as though their time was well spent and relationships have been established or deepened. While these examples have components of hospitality, it falls short of a Christian understanding of hospitality.

Within the culture of church communities, hospitality also has its place. Many churches show hospitality by welcoming those who attend regularly and those visiting for the first time. They also often have a plan of follow-up to encourage those visiting individuals to return. In this vein, churches often resemble our homes or companies because there is a "product" (whether it be an experience, item, or relationship) sought for good feedback in the future. These approaches open us up to the necessity of discovering what the true meaning of hospitality is and whether or not Christians practice it at all.

When it comes to the application of hospitality by followers of Jesus, the focus is on the benefit of another.

Luke Bretherton, in his book *Hospitality as Holiness,* says,

> "I have defined hospitality as a Christian social practice that
> recapitulates the ascension/Pentecost moment of the Christ-event.
> As a social practice hospitality is central to shaping relations
> between the church and its neighbors and takes many forms in
> the Christian tradition. Care for the sick and the poor, hospitality
> to strangers, educational initiatives, and peace-making endeavors
> are all examples of ways in which the church hosts life together of
> its neighbors and enables that life to bear witness to its eschatological
> possibilities."

For Bretherton, the Christian life's actions point toward the importance of Jesus and the potential life within a relationship to Christ himself. This life in Christ is accomplished through the care of the sick, poor, and strangers.

In his book *Face to Face, Steve Wilkins writes*, "We can define hospitality, then, as the art of receiving and ministering to strangers by showing biblical love to them. Hospitality is humble and sacrificial, and it imparts blessing and refreshment. It is based upon the gracious nature of God that is good to strangers and rooted in His goodness and grace." Like Bretherton, Wilkins highlights the importance of hospitality being centered

in the work of Christ through the receiving of hospitality from God and then embodying that hospitality toward strangers among us.

Rosaria Butterfield and Letty Russell are both lesbian, feminist, female authors who see hospitality in a similar way. For Russell, she emphasized, "I understand hospitality as the practice of God's welcome, embodied in our actions as we reach across difference to participate with God in bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis. In what she calls Radical Ordinary Hospitality, Butterfield alludes to hospitality as the words you speak that show you belong to Christ, it sanctifies us by being sacrificial for others, gives us access to people's broken hearts so the Spirit of God can work through us despite our limitations, partners us with the great cloud of witnesses, and gives street credibility to our post-Christian neighbors. Although there are commonalities in their definitions of hospitality, there are also stark differences in their lived experiences that are important to highlight. Russell's life moved her towards a more progressive way of living and Butterfield more complete in her definition by moving deeply into conservatism and rejecting her sexual orientation. What holds them together is the reality that both of them sought to centralize their living for the sake of the other and live lives that directed others toward the way of Jesus. For each of them, they sought to align hospitality in alignment with the person of Jesus and therefore make their definitions for another person's sake.

Turning again to Christine Pohl to help us examine an additional definition, she has often been referred to in many books for her work on the topic of hospitality. She says, "By definition, hospitality involves some space into which people are welcomed, a place where unless the invitation is given, the stranger would not feel free to enter." What

is seen is the importance of a definition that involves a stranger, where people are welcomed, and someone has an experience that gives a sense of life to another. Looking at all these definitions leaves the critical task of coming to a definition of hospitality through a Christian lens beneficial to this project. To get there, Pohl furthers some help:

> "Hospitality is not optional for Christians, nor is it limited to those who are specially gifted for it. It is, instead, a necessary practice in the community of faith. One of the key Greek words for hospitality, *philoxenia*, combines the general word for love or affection for people who are connected by kinship or faith (*phileo*), and the word for stranger (*xenos*). Thus, etymologically and practically, in the New Testament, hospitality is closely connected to love. Because *philoxenia* includes the word for stranger, hospitality's orientation toward strangers is also more apparent in Greek than in English."

To take on the work of Pohl and embrace fellow brothers and sisters of the faith she has sought to work toward a more biblical expression of what it means to understand hospitality. Therefore, the author's definition of Christian hospitality is "an intentional and mandated action of sacrifice and welcome toward both a stranger and acquaintance for the mutual edification of both involved whereby Christ and his life are put on display for the world to see and moves both people into the realm of God's desire for holiness and the revealing of the image of God within humanity." Without any emphasis upon the stranger in any way, it fails to be hospitality in a Christian sense at all. An industry that fails to be central in this way may have some characteristics of hospitality but falls significantly short of what genuine hospitality is. The same goes for followers of Jesus as well as church communities. For this definition to have merit, it is essential to look to the common texts found within scripture to assess such a definition's validity. The necessary attention begins with an examination of the Old Testament.

Scripture

Scripture is saturated with the themes of necessity and identity when it comes to hospitality. Within the Torah are constant reminders to the Israelites that they are people who understand deep within their roots what it means to be a stranger. In Exodus 23:9, we read, "You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt." The history of the people tells the powerful story of the necessity for hospitality. They had been strangers in Egypt under the oppression of Pharaoh. This experience is tied to responding how toward other people. The Israelites' posture is also directly connected to those of us who identify with the way of Yahweh.

Bretherton shows support of this identity characteristic when he highlights Leviticus 19:33-34, "God commanded his people to provide hospitality to strangers: 'The alien who resides within you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God, (Lev. 19:33-34). This theme is found within their identity and is referenced by Yahweh multiple times to help the Israelites capture and embody this important necessity to their existence as a people. The truth of this is further expounded by Bretherton when he states,

> "Stories of hospitality constitute a leitmotif throughout the Old Testament;
> for example, Abraham and Sarah entertaining angels, Abigail placating
> David, and the widow of Zarephath caring for Elijah. At times this hospitality
> is not only offered but also demanded, as when Lot insists the Angels spend
> the night with him (Gen. 19:1-3). At other times it is extended to enemies as
> a sign of the reconciling work of God, as when Isaac made a feast for
> Abimelech (Gen. 26:26-31), or Elisha mediated a peace between the Arameans
> and the Israelites (2 Kings 6:8-23). It is linked with the renewal of creation
> (Ecc. 10:16-17), and ultimately it comes to include all creation and all the
> nations at the messianic banquet, as depicted and anticipated in the prophets.

These words by Bretherton are helpful additions to understanding hospitality's narrative within the Old Testament and also continue within the New Testament. Both the life of Jesus Christ and Paul's words illuminate the power and necessity of hospitality practice for followers of Jesus.

To Pohl, the most important New Testament passage regarding hospitality is found in Matthew's Gospel is the story of caring for those who need feeding, clothing, a drink, care, and visitation. She says, "'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' resounds throughout the ancient texts, and contemporary practitioners of hospitality refer to this text more often than to any other passage. Acts of welcoming the stranger, or leaving someone outside cold and hungry, take on intensely heightened significance when it is Jesus himself who experienced the consequences of our ministry or the lack of it." Pohl highlights how quickly one might jump at the opportunity to serve if it was known that it was Jesus being served. The hope is that hospitality becomes second nature to followers of Jesus so that it may be practiced. This second nature means that as Christians keep applying the work of biblical hospitality to their lives, it becomes a natural part of who they are as Christians. Their responses are innate and more reflective of the way of Jesus as well. To see the true humanity in another is to embody Jesus himself in the practice of hospitality.

The Good Samaritan story in Luke 10:30-37 speaks about hospitality in postures of living that show the sacrificial nature of hospitality to the truly marginalized strangers in society and thus the often most despised people around us. This story highlights the time-consuming nature of hospitality and how the care and welcome of another are costly when it comes to time and resources. The priest and the Levite's convenience to keep on

going highlights the importance of the tension between hospitality and their busyness. It also reveals the costliness of time and resources in the process of hospitality as we see in the Samaritan and his willingness to stop, mend, and see that the man was cared for beyond his immediate needs. Whether it be in success, money, possessions, and activities, our world's competitive nature is a significant obstacle in the biblical practice of hospitality. This text invites the reader to think about how this is revealed in his/her own life.

There is a need for sacrificial acts on Christians' part related to people who would be considered a stranger. We see this by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12 when we are reminded in verses one and thirteen, "…present your bodies as a living sacrifice" and "Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home." In looking at how modern Christians embody hospitality compared to what Romans twelve illustrates to us. Wilkins says this, "We certainly do not think of it (luxury) as a central expression of Christian holiness and the glory of God. Paul corrects this notion. If we are not practicing hospitality, we are not loving, and when we do not love, we cease to be a living church. It is bound up with our profession of faith and our sacrifice of self to God." For Wilkins, there is a tragic loss to the kingdom of God when hospitality is treated exclusively, and he points to Paul to remind readers that the effectiveness of our witness is found in our ability to show hospitality in how it was intended. The kingdom of God speaks of the sacrificial importance that goes into the process of hospitality as well.

The culture of the United States celebrates the grandiose. The mantra of "the bigger, the better" has often found a home in the foundation of our spiritual formation. As we equate sacrifice being more valuable, the larger the sacrifice appears to be. Pohl says,

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"While we might imagine sacrifice in terms of one moment of heroic martyrdom, faithful hospitality usually involves laying our lives down in little pieces, in small acts of sacrificial love and service." In the recognition that small acts of hospitality are sacrificial, Christians can experience the power of Christian living when it is also understood that we practice it for the sake of the other. In so doing, we invoke the beauty of God's image of God both for ourselves and others. In our culture today, it is imperative for Christians to find a renewed embrace of the value of small intentional acts over a desired grand scale of impact.

First Peter 4:9 is another familiar scripture that is commonly used to emphasize the importance of hospitality practice for the sake of another. It states, "Open your homes to each other without complaining." Peter is writing this scripture during a time of persecution. While this passage is certainly relevant during times of danger, it also appears to have merit in the mundane moments. Wilkins says it this way, "The imminence of death should make love abound even more. However incredible the idea of hospitality during persecution may seem to us, it was Peter's command. These unique circumstances only highlight to a greater degree how central this virtue is to the church, for it is to be practiced at *all* times, not merely favorable ones." The verse before verse 9 expresses the importance of showing sincere love toward one another. The author would contend that while danger exposes the urgency of hospitality in Peter, it was a reminder that hospitality and love to another person were within the DNA of following Jesus fully. It also must come with a willing spirit.

In their book, *Practicing Hospitality*, Pat Ennis and Lisa Tatlock look at the 1 Peter passage and note a critical necessity in the service of hospitality. "First Peter 4:9

builds on the instruction to practice hospitality and reminds me that my attitude is of utmost importance—I am to practice hospitality without complaining! This verse challenges me to conduct a heart search to discern what my attitude is and whether I am approaching this opportunity to minister enthusiastically." Tatlock and Ennis highlight an extremely important and perhaps easily overlooked part of the process of hospitality. Attitudes set the tone of hospitality, and when attitudes are aligned correctly toward hospitality, people are doing the work of making it a part of who we are.

Jessica Wrobleski furthers this in her book *The Limits of Hospitality* by stating, "The opening of human hearts to God is the basic precondition for the opening of human hearts to one another." Wrobleski wants the reader to recognize the connection in hospitality as someone works to establish a Christian reflection. The outpouring of hearts and lives shows through the expression of hospitality. It is connected to the very heart of God. Therefore, attitudes and willingness must be linked in those ways to best practice this in someone's life.

In the Book of Hebrews, the notion of hospitality is once again illustrated as a way of life for a follower of Jesus. It says, "Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it." Here the writer of Hebrews gives the reader a call to action and reminds the reader that to follow Jesus means to practice hospitality by showing through actions the importance of the stranger in someone's midst. This passage in Hebrews aligns itself with the notion of Matthew 25. The risk involved in hospitality is to think the sole beneficiary may be the person who is receiving the hospitality or even the one who is doing the hospitality.

The true nature of hospitality is reciprocal for both the guest and the host because

of the reflection being shown toward both parties. There is both give and take in the

nature of the encounter. The model for this comes in realizing how often in scripture

someone sees the idea of a meal or banquet expressed within the confines of Jesus.

Bretherton says,

> "There is a cycle of feasting parables and motifs within Luke's
> Gospel all of which form part of the justification for why Jesus
> is a *guest of*, and a *host to*, 'tax collectors and sinners.' This cycle
> begins with Luke 14 and culminates in the banquet at the end of
> the Prodigal Son parable in Luke 15. This table fellowship with
> sinners, and the reconfiguring of Israel's purity boundaries which
> this hospitality represents, signifies the heart of Jesus' mission."

As Jesus shows up as the guest, there are notions that his life turns to that of the host.

However, this paradigm is challenged when illustrated that it is in his heart for all people

to benefit from shared mutual relationships. The same can be said when Christians live

out this idea of hospitality and recognize that both parties bring something to the table.

Often this is expressed in conversation when a perceived guest becomes a person of

welcome. In the context of dialogue, each person may switch roles in a reciprocal manner

depending upon the topic being discussed. Through this process, the reciprocal nature of

exchange is gifted upon one another.

Pohl says, "Practitioners view hospitality as a sacred practice and find God is

especially present in guest/host relationships. There is a mutual blessing in hospitality;

practitioners consistently comment they receive more than they give." This mutual

blessing highlights the importance of recognizing a need for mutual vulnerability to occur

in the guest/host relationship. When this mutuality is shared, it provides a place of

belonging for both. Butterfield says it this way,

> "In radically ordinary hospitality, host and guest are
> interchangeable. If you come to my house for dinner

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> and notice that I am still teaching a math lesson to a
> child, and my laundry remains on the dining room table
> unfolded, you roll up your sleeves and fold my laundry.
> Or set the table. Or load the dishwasher. Or feed the dogs.
> Radically ordinary hospitality means that hosts are not
> embarrassed to receive help, and guest know that their
> help is needed. Host and guest are permeable roles."

It is important to emphasize what Pohl and Butterfield say here so it does not get overlooked. The sense of mutuality they both describe suggests that not only does belonging take place, but the community is formed in the process. This active practice develops the relationships of everyone involved and thus embraces the mission of Jesus. Watching how Jesus lived by stepping into places with people he differed from means that hospitality is best embodied when we can exist in the tension of our differences as well.

For Russell, this was of high importance to her in her journey of hospitality. For hospitality to take on its fullness, there needed to be intentional steps toward another despite the differences. She notes, "Just Hospitality requires us to recognize the 'otherness' in the relationship of hospitality and to respond in a manner reflective of God's welcoming example. Inclusion is certainly a linchpin of any definition of hospitality." The recognition of the other in the midst of hospitality moves the focus away from myself. When you do this, you are getting into the heart of hospitality and the heart of God. This recognition is shown through loving our neighbors as ourselves. Just as we recognize the other in hospitality, there is an essential ingredient in the guest/host practice: intentionally placing ourselves as the stranger in environments that lead us to vulnerability. In doing so, we enter into a space that can cultivate a deepening of the image of God within ourselves as Christians.

Someone may think hospitality is only be manifested in places familiar to the one who is hosting. Hospitality continues in its fullness when Christians practice being hospitable in unfamiliar and uncomfortable spaces and locations so they can live out hospitality there too. It is in this very idea that Christine Pohl would disagree with me. She states, "When we describe everyone as a stranger, we wash out some of the crucial distinctions between socially situated persons and persons who are truly disconnected from social relations. If we see ourselves only as strangers, and reject the responsibility associated with being hosts, then we squander opportunities to create hospitable environments and situations." What Pohl is getting at is that knowing one's position is important. Still, Christians run the risk of missing out on mutual formation and edification when the assumption is that we are continually helping the other. Too much emphasis on prescribed roles also runs the risk of creating unhealthy power dynamics if not fostered well. The location is a crucial part of this argument. Hospitality can be shown toward another in a venue or location that is unfamiliar. Jesus illustrated this when he would show up to eat with tax collectors and the Pharisees or when he broke bread after a day walking on the Emmaus road. By merely showing up as the stranger in someone else's location, Jesus was able to still show hospitality toward those that were present. How Jesus models his presence in this space is an invitation for each of us as well.

Regarding Gen Z students, Christians are called to enter into their world in ways that initiate a relationship. Many people do not necessarily understand the world a Gen Z student navigates regularly. Still, as Christians, the call of hospitality is to take a faithful step into their world both as showing hospitality and as a stranger so that the space being shared will enhance both parties. This very posture reflects the heart of scripture and the

very nature of God.

Vulnerability

Just as being friends is risky, fostering vulnerability is risky and the journey of initially forming friendships. When it comes to being vulnerable, practicing as the one who goes first is a powerful way to set the tone of vulnerability for others. Erin Davis, in her book, *Connected* and examining vulnerability, says, "Vulnerability is the birthplace of belonging." She is alluding here to the importance of recognizing that being friends comes with vulnerability, and in this vulnerability, one is practicing the way of Jesus. Practicing vulnerability is a spiritual practice that leads to wholeness. There is a unique and special space where vulnerability can lead to a friendship.

To further the idea of vulnerability, Riggall quotes Ronald Rolheiser in his thesis *Not Good To Be Alone: The Role of the Local Church in Reaching the Lonely and Isolated* and speaking about the importance of the local church as it pertains to being present, "…the antidote to loneliness, the path to intimacy and togetherness, lies in vulnerability and nakedness of spirit." This statement speaks to the importance of what a relationship makes possible. Looking inward at ourselves to recognize the need for deep connection gives one the ability to turn to another and connect to enhance relationships and growth for both people. What is held back in this statement is that the loss of vulnerability both within the culture and even in church communities today has imprisoned relationships and kept individuals captive from fully being known, which further fuels the power of loneliness even more. Until church communities can refocus the importance of vulnerability in relationships, churches will miss out on a critical component to both shaping Christianity and shaping the lives of Gen Z relationships.

Henri Nouwen would call this space a location of hospitality. He writes in his book *Reaching* Out, "But still—that is our vocation: to convert the *hostis* into a *hospes*, the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced." The beauty of making space for friendship in a posture of hospitality is what Nouwen would argue is a necessary point for relationships to occur. Nouwen continues, "…if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality. It is one of the richest biblical terms that can deepen and broaden our insight in our relationships to our fellow human beings." Hospitality fosters the necessity of presence. Within the spaces of friendship, we recognize Christians' need to move into these spaces with intentionality in the journey to wholeness. It is a cry of the lonely.

Bretherton would concur with this important reality. He states,

> "Thus a reciprocity, or a giving and receiving from each, of a new understanding of who God is revealed to be by Jesus Christ, is matched by a giving and receiving of hospitality. The Book of Acts proposes that by going out to the world, and actively participating in it, Peter was able to enjoy greater communion with God. For a central dynamic of the church's neighbor relations, as articulated in this encounter (Acts 10), is that going out is the way of coming home….holiness or purity is defined by communion with God and communion is enjoyed by seeking the welfare of the poor, the impure and pagans."

Bretherton is reminding us that the aspect of going into the world is to take with you a heart of hospitality that will provide avenues for this to be practiced and shared in our everyday lives and locations of living. By merely recognizing the reciprocity of hospitality, the author would say this provides a unique angle into what it means to experience the holiness of heart and life. While acknowledging the difference is helpful, it

is in the movement toward another where hospitality can give us a greater reflection of who we are being formed.

Holiness

Within the Church of the Nazarene, there is a high focus upon holiness. Thinking about the idea of holiness and hospitality, Bretherton attempts to help us get at the importance of how practicing and living out hospitality is crucial to the wholeness we strive for as followers of Jesus. He says,

> "Jesus does not resolve the tension between hospitality and holiness present in the Old Testament, but he does relate these two imperatives in a particular way. Jesus relates hospitality and holiness by inverting their relations: hospitality becomes the means of holiness. Instead of having to be set apart from or exclude pagans in order to maintain holiness, it is in Jesus' hospitality of pagans, the unclean, and sinners that his own holiness shows forth."

The idea that holiness is found in the model of Jesus is something to reclaim in modern-day Christianity. In the practice of hospitality, we experience the wholeness of heart and life. Bretherton calls the reader back to the power that comes in its entirety when hospitality is expressed and lived in this way. This is a movement that is deeper into God's intended creation from the beginning. In connecting hospitality with Jesus, whom we believe is the source of our wholeness, we recognize the profound invitation that comes to us in living Christian hospitality for the sake of fully becoming all God has called and created us to be.   Years ago, when the author's son was battling Leukemia, he and his wife found themselves in a position of extreme

vulnerability. Not knowing the future and whether their son would survive or not, they had recently moved to Pasadena, California, in a new ministry role and tried to establish some semblance of a routine. Many mornings found them taking a quick walk across the street to get some fresh air and a bite to eat. Most of their meals were eaten out of paper bags, so they were not gone too long.

There is one meal they will never forget. A couple in the author's church had asked if they could bring them dinner one night. Many wanted to do something to help, and often a meal was a great expression of care. They received a text from a church member telling them to come to the waiting room down the hall. When they walked into the waiting room, they discovered a table set with the finest china, cloth napkins, ceramic napkin rings, actual silverware, and a homecooked meal. It was not just these congregants' meal that had an impact, but their presence and willingness to listen and share in this couple's pain, unsureness of the future, and love. It was that experience where both couples left changed. As Christian leaders, the call recognizes the power of vulnerability in the roles played in church communities. Through vulnerability, Christians receive and embrace a powerful model that gives witness to a God that has come near to creation.

Hospitality is the framework that cultivates the soil that leads to transformation. It is in a lack of this cultivation of hospitality that students in Generation Z are crying out. They long to experience and be known in ways that will lead them to a place where the full expression of what it means to be found in the image of God can take place. As this framework unfolds, we discover the space for a relationship to be established and for a community to be formed. This framework creates a path for belonging to be experienced

and a life that is transformed and moves closer to reflecting God's image that can be fully experienced and whole.

Image of God and Presence

As the power of hospitality and vulnerability is recognized and the role each plays in the formation of followers of Jesus, we look again toward scripture to guide further the pursuit of the image of God within our lives. As loneliness lingers in an individual's heart, it exposes a different type of vulnerability, leaving the person wondering if anyone cares. This struggle can push deeper into wonderings of self-worth and distort the image of God found within God's human creation. Attention now turns toward the image of God within individuals and the God who is present among creation. In the connection of presence, people can see their role as people who practices God's presence in and through them. Through that presence, there is recognition of the wholeness of God that existed in the creation story. This presence helps us discover the movement toward becoming whole when people are present with others. Presence has been God's intention for creation all along. This communal presence becomes a visual model given in Jesus Christ's life that establishes the importance of relationship and belonging within community to combat loneliness. Arriving at this place in relationship to Jesus, one discovers the power of presence from the very beginning.

Within the creation account of Genesis chapter 1:2, we learn that chaos hovered over the face of the deep. Because of a creative God who longed to create order and structure, God creates what we read about in the remainder of the chapter. In the latter part of chapter one, we discover the creative and ordered God creates humanity, and a relationship begins. This humanity shared within itself an image that reflected this

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creative God. This relationship was established in perfection and wholeness and reflected an overwhelming sense of God's presence in all moments. This was the way it was meant to be shared forever until this relationship changed.

Genesis chapter three speaks about how humanity decided to try and go a different way and fractured this relationship through disobedience. It was a heart-wrenching movement away from the plan that God desired for this relationship. Some may want to say the image was gone. Anthony Hoekema, the author of *Created in God's Image,* says, "We may indeed think of the image of God as having been tarnished through man's fall into sin, but to affirm that man had by this time completely lost the image of God is to affirm something that the sacred text does not say." God's hope was and always is to have a relationship be with creation in the way it was initially created to be. Due to the entrance of sin and the sin nature humanity is now born into, there is a back-and-forth movement that exists. It is between a movement back to the chaos of Genesis one and a movement toward reestablishing the relationship in which it was intended to be. This intended life we are invited to live reflects the reestablished health of this relationship and pieces together more of God's reflection and image in humanity. Though God's image was distorted through sin, it is important to highlight the relationship with God was distorted as well, and the work of God's presence was distorted too. Even though this initial relationship was distorted, there is a present reality where God continues working to pursue his creation and works to be present among them.

Looking back at the Genesis account again, we see that God recognized that it was not good for man to be alone and raised a companion to be present alongside Adam. The presence of God among both Adam and Eve shows the important reality that God has

been present with his people since the beginning. In his book *Faithful Presence,* David Fitch says this, "Humanity was created to be in God's presence, and Eden was God's sanctuary." After the Fall, even through this perfect presence, we learn, "…they hid themselves from the presence of the LORD." Tim Gardner, the author of *The Naked Soul*, puts it this way, "But even after they chose to disobey God, they adopted the soul-killing pattern of isolation. God came to them, as He undoubtedly had done many times before. But this time, instead of running to their Father with the joy of two-year olds, (sic) they hid." These factors led to the image being distorted, and God's presence is distinct in its relationship to humanity. This occurrence and initial distortion have spilled into today and significantly impacted Gen Z lives today. The tendency to run and hide has been a natural temptation for all of humanity. It remains a reality today in pushing against the power of presence and away from being present with Generation Z kids too.

The author has seen this tendency play itself out many times in ministry. In youth ministry, he would watch a student who seemed to be doing well slowly disappear from the local church ministry when things were not going well. Reaching out and seeing how he/she was doing led to a response of, "How did you know?" His observations have tended to be that students would isolate themselves further from the communities that longed to be present and encourage them. The same has been true of his experience as a Lead Pastor too. While church attendance has tended to be sporadic at best in the Pacific Northwest, his experience has shown that individual withdrawal tends to be the same as well. Some congregants will avoid spaces of encouragement amid struggles. While there can be many reasons for this, like work schedules, family commitments, sports, or lack of connection, it is those with whom he has close relationships where he sees this

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withdrawal response a lot of the time. The movement back into the chaos of isolation further grounds the seeds of loneliness.

The rise of loneliness in the United States today amongst all Gen Z students is a movement back into Genesis's chaos before God's creative act. It has reached levels we have not previously seen. In her book *Connected: Curing the Pandemic of Everyone Feeling Alone Together*, Erin Davis says, "A pandemic affects large numbers of people. It is not constrained by social status or geographical borders. It is caused by something (unpleasant) spreading like wildfire." She continues, "Is loneliness spreading like wildfire? A recent study found that a decade ago, 10 percent of Americans self-identified themselves as lonely. Today, that number has doubled and nearly 40 percent of Americans report a desire to find a place among a few good friends." Although it may be tempting to look at loneliness as something of a new growing reality, the pain of loneliness has been a factor of profound consequence for a long time.

Henri Nouwen writes about loneliness in 1975 in his book *Reaching Out,* says, "The contemporary society in which we find ourselves makes us acutely aware of our loneliness. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists speak about it as the most frequently expressed complaint and the root not only of an increasing number of suicides but also of alcoholism, drug use, different psychosomatic symptoms—such as, headaches, stomach and low-back pains—and of a large number of traffic accidents." The painful, pre-existing reality of loneliness that continues to be found in the fabric of our country today is also a result of presence being initially altered because of the fall of humanity at creation. This persistent heartache shows that this phenomenon has not been a recent problem but rather prevalent in our society for a long time. As attention turns towards

Generation Z, the importance of being present to this generation will be crucial.

David Fitch says it this way, "But this sense of God's presence has been lost in our modern world, even among Christians. Daily, we obsess about holding our lives together. We walk in isolation and protection from other people. As a result, there's a distrustful distance between people in all types of relationships. We are empty and long for some kind—any kind—of presence." In this longing, we have turned to our own technological devices as a means to cope, and in desperation, we desperately try to portray ourselves as worthy of any type of presence. Gardner asks, "Does it make sense that everywhere you look, people are receiving pages or talking on cell phones, and yet the number of people being treated for depression (a condition often associated with emotional isolation) grew by more than five million reported cases over a recent decade?" Gardner's question calls out the perpetuated chaos that seems to weave itself through our society's fabric. With this in mind, it may leave someone with the wonder of where God is and what can be done to help us move from the chaos around us and toward the wholeness that existed in the beginning.

To begin looking into how God can help us in our loneliness, there must first be an acknowledgment of the universal cry for presence. Walking through scripture, one can see the ways God still brought presence even in the midst of a broken relationship. In quoting A.W. Tozer, Fitch says that God's presence is the central fact of Christianity and that God is waiting for us to lean deeply in an awareness of that presence." Fitch helps us as he says,

> "After the Noahic flood, God set out to restore his presence
> with his creation. God called Abraham and birthed a people
> to bless the nations. God would be present in this nation. The
> nation ended up in slavery in Egypt and God manifested his

> presence to Moses at the burning bush and sent Moses to deliver
> the people. In that sending, God promises to be 'with' Moses."

This promise and constant reminder of God's presence was yet another way that God, out of his love for his creation, kept moving toward humanity as an invitation for humanity to strengthen the relationship and trust that existed in the beginning. God's character attribute opens the door of hope to the transforming narrative of God that has always existed and still exists today.

Moses's story finds itself wrapped up in the people of Israel choosing to move deeper into the waves of chaos through their disobedience. God sets in motion through humanity's constant moving away to remove his presence from Israel, but Moses refuses to go anywhere unless God's presence goes with them. Fitch aptly says, "God's people are not his people apart from his presence." While the struggle between chaos and wholeness continues, humanity wrestles with the reality of their need for God's presence among them. Loneliness does not have to be the way. There is yet another way that God seeks to reveal a reality of presence that could deepen the power of presence to help humanity see a visible example possible to model our lives after.

To restore God's image within humanity and see the power of presence, we are given Jesus. The visible Jesus becomes a perfect example of what God looks like to humanity. Hoekema says it this way, "…we must learn to know what the image of God is by looking at Jesus Christ." The New Testament gives us ample examples of how God has revealed his presence to humanity in Jesus.

In Matthew 1:23, we learn the name of the Christ child is Emmanuel, God with us. In John 1:14, God made flesh and made his dwelling among us. As humanity watched

and learned from Jesus, many began to recognize the invitation of the image of God could continue its restoration work in their lives as they gave themselves over to follow Jesus in his way of living. Through the very presence of Jesus, humanity discovered the life of Jesus restores the broken relationship between God and humanity. Yet, God did not stay on earth.

In Acts chapter 2, the Holy Spirit is being sent as a presence to the people who will continue the mission of Jesus to humanity. Fitch shares, "God's presence in Jesus does not end with Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. In Jesus, God extends presence by giving the Holy Spirit to his people, and subsequently sending them into the world." In the great restoration project at work in the world, the discovery is the invitation that awaits us to begin accepting the image of God within us and to take our place in participating in a mutual relationship. For Gen Z students, this presence enables followers of Jesus to become visible representations of Christ himself to this generation looking and longing for people's very presence.

Relationship

One of the central realities to making this happen comes in the form of relationships and friendship. As people who long for presence, the call of restoring the image of God within our lives comes in the form of being visual extensions of relationships with Jesus through intentional relationships with others. Gardner says it this way, "When it comes to relationships, we need more than God alone. We need one another." As humans who are working toward God's intended wholeness for his creation,

we become the visual instruments of God's presence in the lives of others. As followers of Jesus and as God's redeemed, we are the answers to the problem of loneliness in the world.

Both Christ's and humanity's presence as representatives of Christ (the church) is the answer to our loneliness problem. Erin Davis reminds us, "God's presence is the eternal answer to our lonely state." Even the local church exemplifies the opportunity to combat loneliness in its ability to be the church in its vocation. Being in a church does not equate to connectedness and relationship. It must come through intentionality. In his thesis *Not Good to Be Alone: The Role of the Local Church in Reaching the Lonely and Isolated,* Craig Riggall says, "But presence in the same location is not enough. There must also be relationship. There must be love. Love involves the extension of oneself toward another person, the very opposite of insulating oneself in isolated loneliness." Riggall highlights the importance of intentionality related to being a visual presence to another struggling in loneliness. This intentionality must find itself in a reciprocal relationship. Riggall reiterates, "When it comes to loneliness, there can be an expectation that the lonely individual needs to *receive* more than *give*. But this fails to account for the fact that every Christian is called to participate in one-anothering; every Christian is called to *give*." Through the relationship, loneliness can be done away with because an individual works to be in a reciprocal relationship of friendship that allows the presence to do its work in the people sharing presence. In this sense, both are enhancing the wholeness of God's image in moving together in relationship.

John Perkins, in his powerful book, *He Calls Me Friend,* says, "Friendship with others is commanded in Scripture. Jesus taught that we were to love our neighbors as

ourselves." Perkins' emphatic reminder of the job description of a follower of Jesus should cause any believer to be reminded that to follow Jesus in a relationship is to be in a relationship with humans and live in ways that look like Jesus. He continues, "Not caring is not an option if we are friends of God and if the Holy Spirit is reproducing the character of Christ in our hearts and lives. Not caring, for someone who is a friend of God, is like not breathing. We have to breathe to survive. And we have to care to survive—because caring is what makes us alive spiritually." For the image of God to shine in us and to gain ground between wholeness and chaos, Perkins reminds his readers and those who profess to follow Jesus that for the spiritual work to be continually thriving, we have got to learn to be friends.

In the culture of individualism in the United States and tragically within the church, this has caused a deepening of isolation even among people groups. The labels we have cast upon one another have caused us to stop seeing the humanity in front of us. When we place labels upon one another, we minimize who they are, and it causes isolation in our relational connections. For Perkins, this is not only not okay; it is not the way of Jesus and his kingdom. He asks and then declares, "Who are the ones that you don't associate with? Are they poor people…rich people? Are they black people…white people? Are they educated people…uneducated people? Are they Democrats…Republicans? Are they Christians…atheists? If you are a friend of God and the character of Christ is being developed in your heart, the lines represent sin. We must cross every line, just as Jesus did." The Christian church's invitation is to see humanity first in another human being and learn the power of becoming friends. Christians should be the ones going first in this practice.

One of the key elements that cause hesitancy in humanity is the risk involved, and as people weigh the risk of being friends, people shy away into places of safety. Perkins reminds us being friends is messy. "Friendship can be messy business because people can hurt us. You can't be in relationship with people and avoid being hurt." Yet the powerful reminder is identity is wrapped up in Jesus, and the work continues in valuing the image of God and wholeness more than pain. The way of Jesus when the hurt is present reminds us that forgiveness is the way of wholeness. Friendship is possible when both sides begin to see they want the same thing.

When the author was at Children's Hospital Los Angeles heading in for treatment with his son, he will never forget a scene he watched play out. He was sitting in the waiting room when he noticed on one side of the room was a member of the Crips gang and on the opposite of the room was a rival member from a gang called the Bloods. The common denominator in the room was they both had little kids waiting to see a doctor. Their kids' health was more important to them at that moment than how they identified with their particular gang. It allowed them to be in the same space together. He remembers the nod exchanged between them in that space as if to say, "There's no need to hate today." While he does not believe they became friends that day, he does believe they recognized something more important than hate. Even in this example, we see how a location can hold the importance of hospitality to find a step toward wholeness. By a brief nod, these two individuals were able to step closer toward the image of God.

John Perkins affirms this as he tells the story of being a black man who became friends with a member of the KKK. "A KKK member and a black man can become friends when they realize that they both want the same things. They both want the world

to be a safe place for their families; and they want life to be better for their children. Since we all want the same things, these common goals can serve as a basis for friendship." The way of Jesus says we must step into the difficult places and messy areas of our lives and culture so the work of peace may be found.

As we look to the person of Jesus as our model, what is discovered is the power of being with someone and the mutual impact it can have on the individuals involved. Perkins states, "Jesus was with His disciples for more than three years before He died on the cross. He ate, slept, and did the work He came to do *with* them. Friendship is time spent together." Being with someone is to be present with them. The lie of technology says we are accomplishing this, but it hinders our ability to be fully present. When we think about the power of being hospitable and vulnerable, this is a necessity in our reality as well. In the model of Jesus, we discover this at work when he continually goes to the spaces and places alongside "others." Jesus is led to be with many different types of people that the Pharisees did not care to associate with in any way. We see an example of this in his encounter with Zacchaeus in Luke 19 when Zacchaeus (a despised tax collector) seeks to see Jesus, and in doing so, Jesus moves closer to him, establishes a connection, and shares space in his home. In this encounter, Zacchaeus finds a sense of belonging in the community of believers and his life is transformed, and his decisions lead him to actions of reconciliation. Through this story, Christian leaders can see the hospitality of Jesus and how the presence of Christ helped to shape the context of their relationship. This same idea leads us to respond in ways that move beyond the particular labels that may hinder an ability for a relationship to move forward. As hospitality is shown and moves into a relationship, there is a representation of Jesus to everyone

around. Through these channels of living in the way of Jesus, the doors open to a deeper invitation to Jesus and bring the possibility of community and belonging.

This very modeling of relationship found in the way Jesus moves closer to another is the very invitation of relationships that Christian leaders and Christians are called to pursue combatting loneliness. In-person encounters with others are the ticket needed in developing relationships with Gen Z students. The digital isolation of so many students is crying out for these encounters. The opportunities for such encounters are available now.

Community

The powerful work of Peter Block entitled *Community* looks at the importance of community. In it, he looks at the work of John McKnight. He alludes to the significance of what he calls the "associational life." He states, "…groups of people voluntarily coming together to do some good." The idea is that coming together is one thing within a community, but when you participate in something together, it brings about a sense of belonging. Within the church community, this means that gathering for worship is one thing. Still, participation in a worship service should work to draw the community as a whole together. Hence, when their gathering has ceased, they continue to develop steps of relationship that lead toward furthering the community formation in their everyday lives. Block references Robert Putnam's work entitled *Bowling Alone*, which explores social capital's power in building community. He says, "…he discovered that the one thing that distinguished the more successful from the less successful towns was the extent of social capital, or widespread relatedness that existed among its citizens. Community well-being simply had to do with the quality of the relationships, the cohesion that exists among its citizens. He calls this *social capital*." When brought into the conversation with local

church communities, and Gen Z in particular, the gathering must move into relational connection so that community is formed amongst those gathered. However, when this gathering of people becomes centered on the person of Christ in a Christian community, a more profound sense of belonging can take place for everyone represented.

The work within the journey of wholeness reminds Christian communities the work is never done. The invitation is a call on all people who claim to follow Jesus to look back into the realms of God's intention for humanity in their relationship. There is the wholeness of the relationship that existed between God and humanity and was God's original intention and remains God's intention today. The God who was present in the Old Testament is the God who became flesh in the New Testament. Jesus Christ has become the visual of where the restorative work of wholeness can be found. What Christ has done in his living, dying, and resurrecting is an invitation to take the place of vocation as a follower of Jesus, which is to become a visual presence to those in the world struggling in loneliness and broken relationships. This work comes not as optional but as a necessity, as we practice being the kind of people who move into the spaces of intentional friendship with all of humanity. Through these spaces, we recognize the power of vulnerability and reclaim hospitality that fosters the posture of friendship. When friendship forms, the seeds for mutual growth take place. As followers of Jesus, who have been transformed by the presence of God in Jesus Christ, we hold the keys to combatting loneliness and broken relationships as people who are being transformed by the presence of Christ (through the Holy Spirit), and we must get to work. When these practices are implemented, one finds himself/herself on the path of fully restoring the image of God.

The process of hospitality is about entering into the journey of trust. The mutuality

of hospitality brings about the ingredients necessary for beginning the process of restoration to wholeness as bearers of the image of God. As trust is established, we get to experience a relationship's power, and this relationship can then be found as a part of a community and brings about a sense of belonging. This belonging is moving forward to the fullness of the image of God. As these factors find themselves in motion, the movement is toward the holy life. As followers of Jesus, this rhythm is of the utmost importance not only for the sake of the church and its future but for the body of Christ and Gen Z kids. All of this is made possible because it comes from the heart of God. God's actions of presence and God's love for creation make this wholeness possible because of his love for us found in Jesus. For followers of Jesus, this establishes the 'why' for our movement. This is our pursuit because Christ has pursued humanity, and all deserve to be a part of this process.

For the Gen Z student found in the walls of our church communities and the broader communities around us, each of these students may not yet realize this is the very call of church communities for them as they age and become a part of society all share. Their loneliness is merely an invitation to get involved in their lives in church buildings and beyond.

Chapter 4

Changing Church Culture on the Road to Hope

In 2010, having been in youth ministry for eight years and serving in his second church community, the author found himself a bit frustrated in his calling in ministry. This frustration stemmed from a previous church assignment where he had walked with students for five years. Many students whom he had walked with for several years, invested in, and who were consistent attenders in the life of the ministry he was leading were becoming apathetic to matters of faith. While the temptation was to cast blame toward others, he began to question whether his approaches to youth ministry were a contributing factor in the development of apathy toward faith he was seeing in the hearts of so many students.

While he held this question in his heart, he was allowed to walk alongside a cohort of churches from various denominations and from across the country in a partnership with the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Seminary. This experience began to explore teenagers' lives and the ways local churches go about helping to create change. Through this experience, especially the sessions that dealt with change within a church community, his heart began to shift toward what it would mean to make sustainable change both in the local church and in the local church's approach to the inclusion of young people in their church community.

For relationships with Generation Z to deepen, chapter four will build upon chapter three and foster a framework for Christian leaders in understanding key concepts of change. Discovering these concepts on change and the implementation will show how connection through relationship can yield a sense of belonging and develop a culture with the church community where combatting loneliness is made possible. This understanding enables the church community to recognize how they are a key resource in this process and can take ownership of the possibilities for change to occur with Generation Z kids.

Change

As someone who has been a part of a church community and grown up in the United States, the author can attest to the constant change that has taken place in the world. The stability of church communities gathering weekly has provided a sense of normalcy for many people for many years. In his book *The Innovative Church*, Scott Cormode says, "The basic contours of church have not changed, even as the world has been transformed. The church as we know it is calibrated for a world that no longer exists." The difficulty of this statement lies in the truth and discomfort of it. Cormode would not move away from the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ has not changed. He would contend that our approaches to how the gospel is embodied and presented needs to change. It is in this necessity that Christians can think about the importance of leading differently for Generation Z.

The truth of change is that it is linked to tradition and our inheritance of it. Our connection to the message and mission of Jesus Christ means the results are not found in our abilities but the work of Christ himself. As followers of Jesus, we take in this work to maintain the relevancy of the gospel. Cormode likes to use 1 Corinthians 3:6 as a way to

help the listener understand this, "I (Paul) planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth." In explaining this, Cormode says, "In Christian leadership, God's action is the decisive work. We nurture people by creating an environment conducive to growth, then we hand our people over to God. Only God can give the increase." A leader's work is to practice holding the gospel of Jesus Christ while working to establish and cultivate the soil necessary to the context of their calling. This cultivation is then followed by trusting in the Spirit's work in his/her leadership.

In partnership with the idea of looking at Christian leadership and today's culture, Tod Bolsinger writes about this in his book *Canoeing the Mountains*. He describes Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's work on President Thomas Jefferson's exploratory mission to discover the Northwest Passage and the Pacific Ocean's water route after the Louisiana Purchase. With canoes in hand and in anticipation of getting to the top of a mountain pass and expecting to see this route they had envisioned, they discovered nothing but more mountains and no route to the Pacific. They had a decision to make. It meant they could either turn around and go back or they could put down their canoes and explore the unknown in front of them. Bolsinger correlates this metaphor with the reality we see in church leadership today. He indicates the importance of valuing the necessity of adapting in Christian leadership. As we look to the church's reality today, we look to an unknown future and, as leaders, recognize that things need to change. As we look at Generation Z and what it means to walk alongside them in their lives and combat loneliness, we find ourselves recognizing the need to put down our canoes and start navigating into the unknown.

Bolsinger's book was written in 2015 and the truth of his metaphor is even more

pertinent today than ever. In a global pandemic with churches either shutdown or meeting in a fraction of what they were built for, we look to an unknown future. This unknown future carries the weight of how much Generation Z students will be a part of that future. We can try to keep the canoes in our hands, or we can put our canoes down and recognize there is an opportunity before us unlike we have ever seen in our lifetimes. The church finds itself with an opportunity to bring forth change to revolutionize the Christian community and its witness to the world. To recognize the necessary change that needs to come, it is vital to understand the difference between adaptive challenges and technical challenges.

Adaptive Change and Technical Change

To grasp the importance of change in church cultures, we must understand the kinds of challenges we face. Scott Cormode helps us understand the difference between the two types of challenges present. "With a technical problem, some combination of money, time, and expertise can make the problem go away." Within a church community, this could look like a security system that has broken. A broken security system is a technical problem. By spending some money and getting a new security system, the problem will go away. When it comes to an adaptive challenge, Cormode says, "Adaptive challenges happen when we ask people to adopt new beliefs, when we hope people will pursue better values, or when we help people see that the ways they have been doing things in the past will not work for them." In a church community, this may look like the challenge of not having many young people attending. What Cormode would say is, "You cannot use technical means to reach adaptive ends." To spend money and hire a youth pastor is an attempt to deal with an adaptive challenge with a technical means. It would

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be necessary for a church community to understand why young people do not attend to identify the primary problem and potentially recognize that something needs to change on a deeper level.

When it comes to adaptive change and a church community, it is painful and costly because it will require ownership of how things are done to get to where one wants to go. This ownership is the identifying and naming of systems, programs, and approaches that bring about the flaws that hinder change. When thinking about the local church and Generation Z, the path to combatting loneliness will require church leaders to evaluate how things are currently done and adapt approaches to connect and establish relationships that foster belonging and community. The problem of loneliness is an adaptive problem where spending money won't cause the problem to disappear. Money can help, but the adaptive work of combatting loneliness where things will constantly be shifting and scenarios of loneliness are individualized, needs to be different.

Mental Models

One way to help navigate change within a local church community is to do the necessary work of understanding the mental models of that community. What is meant by mental models are the ways we understand how the world works or how we make sense of it. To help the listener understand how this may work in a church setting, think about Worship's Order during a worship service. Without a worship folder in hand, one familiar with worship service orders could probably speak about what the order would look like on any given Sunday. A mental model like this would be to expect it to go the way it usually does. However, if someone showed up at a church community and the sermon was first, followed by a song, a prayer, three more songs, the Benediction, and then the

offering was being received, one would probably internally be saying, "That's not how this is supposed to go!" When someone's mental models are changed, it can easily leave them with feelings of discontentment, and conflict can arise.

When Christian leaders think about their local church communities, they each have a mental model of what a Lead Pastor should be doing. They have mental models on how a sermon should be, how a pastor should dress, how the money should be spent, what kind of staff should be hired, and how those particular ministries should be run. A more specific example of a mental model within church communities is how a youth ministry should be run and how they should understand Jesus. If those mental models are not being met from the standpoint of a congregant or parent and students are not growing in Christ, being discipled, and connecting, we probably have an adaptive problem that needs to be explored. Change needs to be implemented. It is important to highlight that adaptive change will be costly.

Afraid of Loss

In quoting Ronald Heifetz, Tod Bolsinger continues the conversation on adaptive change and what it takes to lead effectively when he states, "Adaptive challenges, by contrast, are those that 'cannot be solved with one's existing knowledge and skills, requiring people to make a shift in their values, expectations, attitudes, or habits of behavior.'" This frame of thought can be found in what could be considered a spiritual AA moment. To begin the healing process from alcoholism, one must admit they are an alcoholic and own who they are before beginning the twelve steps to put them on the road to recovery. Church communities struggle to move forward when they cannot identify their adaptive challenges and need to grasp and name the very things hindering movement

forward.

The problem of loneliness with Gen Z kids is an adaptive problem. There is no set time, a certain amount of money, or quick fix to make this problem go away. While the issue of loneliness amongst this generation is with us, there will be necessary adaptation along the way as church leaders work to navigate their local church context.

Cormode supports this notion when he says, "Adaptive change is painful. It costs something to respond to an adaptive challenge. It requires a lifestyle change." Ronald Heifetz highlights an important distinction when he says, "People don't resist change, they resist loss." Cormode elaborates, "People are not afraid of change. They are only afraid of changes that will cost them something." Each of these statements points to an important reality for local church communities that think about a process of combatting loneliness. Each church community must recognize the reality of the narrative they are living. Both leadership and the church community must come together in doing the hard work of a paradigm shift that focuses upon students and their situations. There must be a communal acknowledgment that the process will cost everyone time, mental models, and in doing so, there is the risk for conflict in the process.

In the author's frustration of youth ministry and his quest to discover how he participated in the anemia of faith for students, he remembers when he had entered into what he called "risky youth ministry." The mental models of so many parents revolved around having a ministry their teenagers wanted to participate. If he was doing events, entertaining, engaging, and speaking about scripture, the students wanted to come. This type of youth ministry meant parents would usually not complain to his superiors in the church community. When he recognized the importance of spiritual formation and that

many students were wrestling with more significant issues amongst their peers, he knew we needed to bring that into the fold of what they were doing and talk about how Jesus interacted in those spaces. It also meant they needed to discuss them when they were together as a group of Christians seeking to understand how faith interacted with their everyday lives.

One night he created "conflict night." He asked 4-5 controversial questions throughout the night and had the students get up and pick a side on whether they agreed or disagreed. After they picked a side, each side was given time to state why they agreed or disagreed while the other side sat and listened. After doing this for the night and journeying through some challenging discourse, he asked, "So, many of us in this room claim to follow Jesus. Who is right?" After no replies, he then went on to say that they would do the more complex work of inviting Jesus into the hard issues and conversations of their day as a youth ministry. He knew parents probably would not be happy. That night did create tensions for him as a leader with parents, but many of those students point to that night as a pivotal starting point in their faith formation or a key moment in their youth ministry experience.

A story like this serves as an invitation for church leaders. We are invited to remember that as we look at the culture around us, we must be willing to adapt to the challenges we find ourselves a part of in our leadership roles. Work like this with Gen Z students is the necessary struggle leaders must walk through as they lead churches in the future with Gen Z kids present. The process of adaptive change embraces the scripture earlier described by Cormode of 1 Corinthians 3:6 in the sense that we are cultivating in our adaptation the soil by which God does the growing. Leading in such a way can serve

as a reminder to church leaders that the work is never done. The call of cultivating a church culture should be the consistent approach we take and not the rarity. This kind of leadership within a church community calls on a new imagination just like we read in the opportunistic words of Ephesians 3:20-21: "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen." Incorporating these concepts and ideas as church communities can consider how God can transform them through their leadership. This incorporation is done as leaders take up the responsibility of partnership with God's activity among them so their church communities can think about how the change will sustain the church for the future with Generation Z students thriving alongside us within them.

Shared Story of Future Hope

In thinking about the scripture from Ephesians 3, God invites people to dream and imagine. Scott Cormode defines vision as a "shared story of future hope." He says, "Vision inspires people and entices them to participate in something that is larger than themselves. To reiterate, people are not changed by plans or doctrines; rather, people are transformed when they connect with a story that compels them to alter their trajectory." As followers of Jesus, we have a story worth living, the gospel, the good news of Jesus. This is our story! Christian leaders have the responsibility to take this gospel story, look at their context, and recognize that for this story to be embraced by people, it must be a story they can connect with that also holds the gospel's power within it!

Looking at Generation Z, the problem of loneliness is an experience that suggests the hope of this story has not been captured and experienced in the relationships found

within a church community's confines. Therefore, as the hard work of leadership in bringing about change is understood and implemented, Gen Z students can discover the narrative of loneliness does not have to be the driving force of their regular life experience. As leaders who hold biases and mental models on how a church community should be run, the invitation to Christian leaders is to look at the opportunities in front of us. As church leaders look to create a shared story of future hope within our church communities that works at a resolution for loneliness, there is hope.

A shared story looks at the future and imagines what that church community could become if they had one where no children experienced deep levels of loneliness. A shared story imagines what that church community does and practices to ensure that no kids struggle with loneliness. Loneliness for Generation Z is an adaptive challenge and one that will never stop needing to be navigated. Addressing this shared story will mean the mental models and approaches of all people in both leadership and laypersons will need to grow and change so the community can become all that God calls it to be. For a church community to have a shared story that combats loneliness, it must dream big on what they envision it to be and then look at who they are today. Acknowledging what steps need to be taken to deplete loneliness in Generation Z students' lives will come as this work is done.

Listening

Part of the significant work of leading during an adaptive challenge such as loneliness is listening, which is a mandatory component of the process. Once again, Scott Cormode emphasizes the importance of listening in the journey of leading a community to change and combatting loneliness. He says, "Leadership begins with listening.

Everything that we do as Christian leaders flows from there." It has been said there is a reason God gave us two ears and one mouth. The power of listening enables us to hear necessary truths about our contexts. Cormode goes on to explain we need to: listen to God, we need to listen to those entrusted to our care, and we are called to listen to the tumbleweeds. What he means by tumbleweeds is people that blow into our lives that we may not realize God is bringing to us as ones entrusted to our care. When listening is done well, it is a practice in a discipline done with and for others. It gives information that can enable leaders to see if their thoughts and ideas are resonating with where God is leading. Listening provides value to those we have been called to serve.

Storytelling

Whenever a story is told, people are changed. Whether that story is good or bad, no longer are people the same after that story is heard. Stories have the power of evoking emotion and motivation, and often these factors lead people to take action as they make sense out of what they have just heard. When considering the importance of stories and developing change, stories need to be a part of the journey of helping a group of people come together to imagine a story that could come to be and can begin to move in the direction of creating a reality.

In his book *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years,* Donald Miller tells a story about the importance of living a good story. He speaks of a man named Jason and the struggle he has with his daughter, specifically who she dated, and her apathy to life. The story says the story she was living was the best story made available to her. It is an intriguing thought to think that people live in the story most made available to them.

Everyone wants a role to play, and to feel the role they are playing is making a difference. For Generation Z to live into the gospel story, they must hear the stories of God's faithfulness both from parents and others who have embraced the gospel story as well. When this happens, they put themselves into their own story and are invited to look at both the story they live and the story they would like to live.

Knowing it was important for students to hear stories of God's faithfulness, the author decided as a youth pastor it would be a necessity to create intentional spaces where this could take place. He invited Gini, a 75-year-old lady who was still on staff with them and working in finance to come and share her story with the youth group.

Gini grew up in a Christian home with parents who always made space in their family to love and invest in kids. She got married when she was nineteen. Five months into her marriage, she got pregnant with her first child. After her husband had rehearsed and prepared to serve in the church in her ninth month of marriage, he got up and fell over dead. Gini found herself widowed and about to become a single mom.

Three years later, she got married again. In her second marriage, she had two more boys, and her husband was unfaithful for many of those years and left her after ten years. At thirty years of age, Gini was a mother of three and had been widowed and divorced. It was then she moved from the East Coast to California to be with her sister. After this move, she was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and lupus.

Eight years later, she got married again. Two weeks after she got married, her husband got sick, and they discovered he had terminal cancer and died four months later. After this she took in his sixteen-year-old troubled daughter.

When she was fifty-one, she got married one last time to the man she called Doc.

They were married for twenty-one years. After sixteen of those years, Doc was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. He also had Parkinson's and battled Leukemia as well. She shared with the students that he did not even know who she was for the last three years of his life.

With stunned silence in the youth room that day, Gini summed her life experience by stating this, "While I know I may not fully understand what it is like to be a student growing up during these days, let me tell me you about the faithfulness of God in all my trials. In the struggles you find yourself in today, God is faithful and will be faithful in the midst of all of it." Gini shares that as she walked out of the youth room, she heard a young lady say, "Wow, if she can go through that, I can get through the struggles I am facing."

The power of story-sharing must be a reclaimed practice in our church communities' lives as people work to combat loneliness. While these stories of impact from other people help shape the power of God's faithfulness and serve as invitations to the gospel story, what takes place in the home when parents and guardians are willing to share their stories carries a significant impact well. Gen Z students require hearing these stories of faithfulness so they may listen to how God has been faithful in their lives. In doing so, it becomes an invitation for these students to share their own experiences of God's faithfulness. This mutuality in storytelling is a significant component in combatting loneliness for this generation.

The tragedy of storytelling is that it appears to be happening less and less. In Kara Powell's book, *The Sticky Faith Guide for Your Family,* she gives many examples of practices that can help students maintain a faith that sticks beyond high school. She

speaks to parents' importance and the need to share their testimony and articulate their faith with their kids. A sobering thought is found when she shares an example of one specific youth pastor who was curious about how many students could articulate their parents' testimony. This youth pastor was on a mission trip with students and asked twenty of them to share their parents' testimony. Not one of those students could do so. While there is no guarantee that sharing your testimony with your kids will guarantee faith, having an understanding from a parent or guardian about life, faith, struggle, and how Jesus has made a difference can help shape a teenager's narrative. For Gini, she mentioned how her parents always talked about their struggles and listened to their witness in the storytelling. Amid her struggles, she says she knew because of her parents sharing stories of their own lives that she could get through her struggles. When we can listen well and hear the stories around us of God's faithfulness, it fosters an environment where a connection is made possible.

Connection

The author met Jesse on a golf course a few months after he moved to Western Washington. Jesse was a high school junior and attended the author's church community. They instantly hit it off and found conversation easy whenever they would hang out because of our mutual love of sports and competitive nature. Getting to know Jesse's story a bit deeper, he began to hear more about the deeper parts of his life and where his passions were, the struggles of being a high schooler today, his temptations, and his struggles in faith. Their relationship eventually led to the opportunity to be present in some of the deepest moments of pain for him.

Over the last six years, this journey has led him to discover a faith that is his and finding gifts beneficial to their church community's life. It has meant placement for him in leadership with youth and children where these gifts can be fostered and developed as he continues to grow in his faith. He currently serves as an intern in his church and is pursuing a degree where he is can discover what the call of God on his life may entail.

One key avenue in all of this is the connection he has made with the author's son. They have discovered some of their own connections. The author hopes the connection he has with can lead to a relationship with his son where Jesse serves as a spiritual guide. The truth is the relationship when both lives share authentically together means both are experiencing transformation in the process

This example highlights a challenge from the Fuller Youth Institute on the importance of connection that can serve as a proposed solution to loneliness. In their book, *Sticky Faith*, Dr. Kara Powell and Dr. Chap Clark allude to something they call the 5:1. It says, "What if we said we want a 5:1 adult-to-kid ratio—five adults caring for each kid? We're not talking about five Sunday school teachers or five small group leaders. We're also not talking about five adults to whom you outsource the spiritual, emotional, social, and intellectual development of your kids. We're talking about five adults whom you recruit to invest in your kid in little, medium, and big ways." Jesse fits into the realm of my 5:1. As leaders work to cultivate an environment where God brings the increase, what Christians can experience in the 5:1 ratio is an environment where discipleship occurs. These types of relationships also usually result in both lives being transformed.

When thinking about connection, Arthur Coombs, in his book *Human Connection* says, "Connection comes when we are uplifted and renewed by the relationship and when

we receive energy, honesty, and life from time spent together." Coombs highlights the importance of connection that enables relationship and comes when time is spent together. Many of our church communities today are extremely isolated from one another generationally. Many of our mental models have come to expect that reality. This isolation neglects the ability for deep connections to take place and for valued relationships to be fostered. For too many years in the writer's youth ministry leadership, he heard older generations say things like, "The future of the church is going to Hell in a handbasket" or younger people saying, "Older people cannot teach me anything about faith. They have no idea what it is like to grow up in the world that we are growing up in." When it comes to generational connection, what tends to happen is people avoid what they do not understand. The author has seen this reality amongst the different generations. He often would follow those statements up with a question like, "Can you give me the name of one person you have a relationship within the generation you just criticized?" More often than not, in church settings, the relationship's depth ended at knowing someone's name if they had even taken steps to learn that at all. Cultivating Gen Z students' environment means developing the necessary connections whereby they see they are a part of something bigger than they see in front of them or realize.

Peter Block, in his book *Community*, recognizes the importance of these relational connections. He says, "Nothing guarantees that a young person will see a new possibility, but we can create the conditions where that choice is more likely. The transformation we seek occurs when these two conditions are created: when we produce deeper relatedness across boundaries, and when we create new conversations that focus on the gifts and capacities of others." What Block is alluding to are the ways we intentionally engage in

relationships that foster connections. As Christians and as leaders, looking at where time is spent and how ministries are planned and coordinated are crucial elements in church communities' connection process.

When the writer was youth pastoring in Southern California, he began to think and dream about fostering better generational connections. The Senior Adult Pastor came to him one day and said, "I'm tired of taking old people on trips. There has to be a way to do more than just help donate money and pray for your trips. I'd like to propose we take a Senior-to-Senior trip with our senior adults and the high school students." Having a personal desire to produce change within young people through important connections, the author thought this would be a great idea.

The Senior Adult Pastor's idea was to go to Manzanar, a World War II Japanese internment camp in Central California. He reasoned that they had a lady attending their church community who was five years old when she was placed in that camp. She agreed to be a tour guide for us.

Since it was fall, they put a date on the calendar for spring of the following year so they had time to plan everything out and make sure this experience would foster connections amongst those that attended. Tragically, a few months after they planned this trip, the Senior Adult Pastor died after suffering several strokes.

His loss did not lead his leadership committee to cancel the trip. In their words, "This event was a dream of his, and we will see it through. In partnership with their youth leadership and the Sr. Adult committee, they rented a fifty-five-seat bus and filled it with half high school students and a half with senior adults. When they all got on the bus, the youth sat in the back and the older adults sat in the front. No one tried to break the ice and

converse with someone older than or younger than their age.

After an hour into the trip, one young lady approached the seats closer to the front and asked, "What do I talk to these people about?" The author told her to find a couple and ask how they fell in love because he knew that they love to tell that story more often than not. On a mission, she found a couple and asked how they fell in love. To their delight, they reveled in thinking back and sharing about those special days when they were younger to the melting heart of a 17-year-old girl.

When she was about to walk away, the older gentleman grabbed her shoulder and said, "Sweetie, I just taught you something about my life. Now you teach me something about yours." Caught off guard, she asked, "Do you know what a selfie is?" His response, "I have no idea what you just called me." After a bit of laughter, she informed him what a selfie was, and he wondered why anyone would want to take a picture of themselves. Having learned so many in the back of the bus were taking selfies, he caved in and agreed to take one. When she showed him how to do it on her phone, he accidentally held the button down. She replied, "You just took fifty-seven photos of yourself," which led to more laughter. She sauntered to the back of the bus and shared about her experience with her friends. An hour later, they stopped for dinner at a restaurant the older generation would enjoy.

Unbeknownst to them, the older generational folk got off the bus and quickly entered the restaurant. When the teenagers walked in, all of the older people had saved 1-2 seats for the youth so they could share a meal. Over the next hour, they listened to what milk cost, what dating was like, why so many kids are stuck with their phones, etc. When everyone got back on the bus, the age segregation was gone. The next morning as

they drove into Manzanar, everyone anticipated what they would experience together. At certain points on the tour, they had to get out and walk to specific locations. It was a sight to watch the teenagers escorting the older generation and making sure everyone made it okay.

At the end of the tour, everyone gathered to watch a movie about Manzanar at the entrance. When the ranger came in and saw that they were together, he indicated that he had never seen older and younger people sharing this space in all the years he had done this. One thing the author recalls is when the ranger said, "Some of you in this room have read about World War II, and others of you experienced it. I can't imagine the amount of connection that has taken place between you all today." The tears that flowed from the author's face on the drive home were grieving that his Sr. Adult Pastor could not experience his dream. The tears also represented what he believed reflected what a local church community should be together. The connections that were made on that trip cultivated an environment where lives in both generations were changed. Our older Gen Z students could see how the church community can foster relationships that matter.

Peter Block says, "Communal transformation, taking back our collective projections, occurs when people connect with those who were previously strangers, and when we invite people into conversations that ask them to act as creators or owners of community." The experience in Manzanar enabled two groups initially isolated from one another to experience connections they would never have intentionally done on their own. What was attempted to be accomplished at Manzanar is what Scott Cormode would call "Experimenting on the Margins." Experimenting on the margins is attempting to try new things to bring about the kind of change you are hoping for rather than rolling out a new

project, giving it a name, and developing a logo. Seeking to bring about the change we hope for in our church communities through curating intentional relationships will require churches to develop and execute experiments on the margins. These experiments will create purposeful connections and relationships for students in Gen Z. These connections that form into relationships will give students a stepping-stone into the 5:1 ratio that can help combat loneliness in our church communities.

When a church community begins the process of curating connection through an intentional relationship with Generation Z, it is important to highlight that just knowing an individual's name and saying "hi" when you see them does not necessarily equate relationship. In chapter three, the power and importance of presence and showing up were mentioned. Taking the step of an intentional relationship may look like showing up at a recital, a ballgame, serving as a surrogate grandparent for a kid at school, or hitting balls after school at the driving range. It also may be taking a trip to an outlet mall to do some shopping, going for a walk, a hike, or spending time doing something that is a mutual time of enjoyment.

Belonging

In 2015 when the author's family transitioned to Western Washington, he and his wife decided they would seek to live out in front of the people entrusted to their care. They sought to live out everything they hoped for in their church community for the first few years since both of them were so new to this role and location. One thing they decided to do was to learn the name of every child that came to their ministry. He (author) wanted the role of Lead Pastor to embody that it was for all people. In his third year, he knew it was going to be important to shift some mental models on what they expected of

people within their worship service and what those people did within the context of their service. He decided it was time to include the children in helping to serve communion.

Having a sense of belonging comes when you provide the space for people to serve. The first month he tried it, he had pre-selected a few kids in partnership with some of their ushers to serve together. He explained to their congregation the importance of making space for people to serve of all ages in their church community. After having a couple of kids serve, he had five kids tugging on my pants and asking, "Pastor can we serve that cracker thing and juice too?" He told them all the next time they served in this way they all could help. He firmly believes their interest was linked because of his connection with them and a desire to be a part of something.

The next time they served communion, a five-year-old young man dressed up and ready to help. The pastor placed him alongside his head usher and told him to stay with Mr. Jim and do what he did. When it came time to serve, the pastor watched as this 5-year-old, with hands folded like Mr. Jim, mirrored everything he did. The pastor handed him a tray of the elements and told him to go with Mr. Jim to help serve.

When the young man returned after serving, the pastor knelt to his eye level and asked if he had ever taken communion before. With a shake of his head, the pastor asked if he would like to. After the young man indicated he did, the pastor served the young man the elements and told him to sit with his mom. He watched as his mom explained to her son what this meal was all about. The story of this young man emphasizes that connection brings about a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging deepens the relationship with the local church community. That young man is a nine-year-old now and he continues to serve in our church community as opportunities arise.

As church communities begin walking through evaluating who they are now and who they would like to become, cultivating the soil of the future means that to combat loneliness for Generation Z teenagers, it means to give them responsibilities in the church community. As evaluation is done within the confines of the church building in leadership roles, often those places are reserved for "older and more experienced adults." Giving space for young people to lead does not mean the elimination of older adults from those roles. It means serving alongside one another where both relationship and belonging can be fostered and sustain leadership in those positions into the future.

In their book, *Growing Young*, Dr. Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and Jake Mulder speak about this idea in Keychain Leadership. The concept of Keychain Leadership belongs to a research project done on learning about six core commitments they learned about church communities that were helping young people stay connected within the church's life. It is crucial to emphasize the importance of belonging when it happens through action. This action can be taking the necessary steps to help bring in a Generation Z student into the fold of ministry alongside other leaders. It is also those within the Gen Z age range taking action for themselves in this way. When leaders explore their local church context, an essential practice is determining who the church says it is versus what they do in practice.

Bringing younger people into roles within our local church context is risky. As leaders, bringing in younger people with less experience means it is going to be costly. That cost often comes in the form of time. It will take time to explain, walkthrough, answer questions, and even show repeatedly what this ministry is all about. When leaders choose to take things on themselves, they know things will get done their way and on

their schedule. It also means the leader will have a significant lapse in help when he/she is no longer in leadership. The author's experience as a leader has taught him that leadership often says young people have a place at the table, but in actual practice, that table is separate and sits several feet away. In 5-10 years, if a church community evaluates current volunteers and the ages of those volunteers, it may be found there is a void in volunteer help in the future if younger leaders are not present and serving right now. The importance of combatting loneliness for Gen Z students is to invite them into spaces of service with other volunteers to generate experience and confidence in the role Gen Z students are asked to serve in.

Leaders need to recognize that effective leadership is always about adapting. Leadership must take the responsibility to adapt. When these things occur in a church community, the church community's life functions as a 'work of the people' and not necessarily 1-2 people doing everything. Knowing some of these realities and recognizing adaptation is important. Still, adaptation is crucial to move from saying Gen Z students belong to seeing them serving in crucial leadership roles. Doing this becomes a visual reality of belonging.

The author's local church had an office administrator position open up. He knew it was an opportunity for them to practice being what we hoped to be. He decided to hire a young woman who had some interest and had taken a few accounting classes at a local college. She was newly married and new to the Christian faith. He knew their denominational expectations for reporting would be foreign to her, and it would take time to get her up to speed in learning both their reporting methods and their software that dealt with accounting. He placed her in partnership with their church treasurer, a CPA, to

teach her all about accounts payable, payroll, and learning the program.

Not too long after she was hired, she got pregnant with her first child. As a leadership team, they decided to make space in the nursery after the baby was born to continue her work and be close to her child when needed. It was a way they could invest in her desire to continue learning her role, be a mother, and continue to develop skills to help her succeed. She now has taken a more significant share of the responsibilities in the church's operations. They continue adding more of the administrative duties she can handle. She has since had two more kids and the practice of making space for her to continue to develop has not alluded to them, and their church community is better for it.

Right now, in church communities all over the United States, there are Generation Z students who have gifts and talents that are waiting for opportunities to serve. Many are waiting to be asked. Many have skills that exceed a leader's expertise. Combatting loneliness means taking an intentional investment into the service needs of their church communities. Creating a list of people waiting to be asked just might make the difference in belonging. The future of church communities and the future of Generation Z's involvement may lie in a leader's current willingness to adapt their approaches for the church's sake. It is an opportunity that cannot be missed.

Community Enrichment

As each of these steps is lived, practiced, and implemented, people recognize they are a part of something bigger than themselves. They get to live in the story of God. Peter Block helps to summarize this when he says,

> "Restorative community is activated by language of connection
> and relatedness and belonging, spoken without embarrassment.
> It recognizes that taking responsibility for one's own part in
> creating the present situation is the critical act of courage and

engagement, which is the axis around which the future rotates.
The essence of restorative community building is not economic
prosperity or the political discourse or the capacity of leadership;
it is citizens' willingness to own up to their contributions or agency
in the current conditions, to be humble, to choose accountability,
and to have faith in their own capacity to make authentic promises
to create the alternative future."

Block highlights an important factor as it relates to the power of community. When someone has a relationship and a sense of belonging, there is a deepened desire to participate and contribute so that the church community's life is enhanced. This lived and communal experience begins the process of showing how others get to be a part of this process. It is the reciprocal nature of the gospel. When an experience of God's love is found through the life of another, it contributes and embodies the love of God so others may come to embrace it too. When it comes to Gen Z, this means the opportunity to combat loneliness comes in a leader's ability to be transformed by Jesus so that others may be transformed by Jesus in knowing those who follow Him.

One of the first things the author did when he moved to Gig Harbor, Washington, was to get involved with his local Little League. Within their first two days of living there, they met a family that was a part of their baseball team. For the last several years, that baseball connection has turned into a relationship that has fostered itself into the life of their church community. Their son, Cash, has become an active part of their youth ministry, and the author has been able to share life with both his parents in various capacities as their friendship has flourished.

One key thing that has happened has been with Cash. He is a part of the Boy Scouts in our community. When it came time for him to decide where to do his Eagle

project, he turned to the local church community that has invested in his life. In the spring of 2021, he will be leading is Eagle project for us. What started as a coaching relationship has now developed into the church community being transformed by the relationship with this family. Because of that, each of them has a greater sense of belonging.

Summary

Thinking about loneliness and Generation Z, an understanding of change is a crucial step in this process. Understanding the different types of change and knowledge about mental models, loss, a shared story, listening, and storytelling enables church communities to create connection, belonging, and enriched communities that foster the culture where Gen Z students can participate. Through this, Christian leaders can develop a methodological approach that can be contextualized in the location he/she serves so a shared story of hope can be realized. Bringing to life these approaches through illustration was meant to help leaders recognize how change can be made possible. The stories serve as invitations for leaders to do the hard work of naming their realities so that change can be fostered for a future that he/she never thought possible. Doing this as a leader is the hard work of transformation that Gen Z students long for in local church communities. These practices are working against the struggle of loneliness for this generation. The hope generated within this chapter is establishing the opportunities that lie in front of church communities as they look not only to their realities now but also into the future. With these practices in mind, they can engage with Generation Z for the years to come. This vital work is needed with Generation Z right now. It has long-term implications for those that fit within this generation and for the church in the United States. Leaders of church communities today must continue the work of constant evaluation and learning in

this process and see to it they are taking leadership steps within their realms of influence. Doing this helps to reframe the church for Generation Z students and help bring the gospel's narrative into today for them. As we do this and practice this, it will require them not only to listen but bring into dialogue the very voices of those we intend to walk alongside in this journey.

Chapter 5

Shaping Our Ecclesiology in Mission

When the author was a thirteen-year-old, he attended a denominational youth event at Northwest Nazarene University. He remembers a particular service where the speaker began to speak about a life of vocational ministry. Feeling a prompting in his heart and processing what this could mean for his dreams of becoming a professional baseball player, he reluctantly went forward and told God he would serve in vocational ministry if that is what he was being called to do. As a thirteen-year-old, saying yes to this type of call to ministry left the author thinking he was probably going to move to Africa away from his family. At such a young age, he had a very loose understanding of what being a part of an ecclesiological family system meant. He understood mission as something you went to be a part of in another country. Chapter five will explore the concept of ecclesiology as the idea of being a part of a family and do so through an understanding of mission as something we are actively a part of while participating

through the inclusion of Generation Z students. It will place both systems in the context of what it means to approach each of these with an internal and external understanding of the mission of God. It will help the family of God become all God is forming them to be, especially for Generation Z students so the fullness of an ecclesiology will be experienced through the work of combatting loneliness.

Ecclesiology

The idea of ecclesiology is wrapped up in the concept of a particular narrative that people are a part of living. In his book *The Church and its Vocation*, Michael Goheen contributes, "Ecclesiology is first of all about the church's identity—who we are and who we serve. And if the biblical story is not the place where our identity is forged, then by default, this place will be somewhere else, almost certainly in our cultural story and social location. That will mean we are no longer the people we are called to be and will be serving the wrong master." Goheen emphasizes the importance of an ecclesiology that is wrapped up in the story of God. Each church community can embody and lead to help ecclesiology find its place in a particular location.

When the United States is brought into the conversation of ecclesiology, it shows its version of complexity as layers of history are uncovered, especially as it pertains to the United States' language of freedom. In their book *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America*, Craig Van Gelder, and Dwight J. Zscheile comment, "Freedom is a powerfully recurring theme in American life. The first English settlers came to America to exercise religious freedom, followed by waves of peoples from around the world who saw America as a place where they could express their faith without government interference." Within that statement alone, we see that

while freedom has its benefits, all the peoples from Europe seeking a more unrestrained religious expression brought with them their perspectives, theologies, and ecclesiologies. While blending them in partnership with others who came later from other parts of the world and with different beliefs of their own is great for God's story and global ecclesiology. Yet, it comes with its baggage and complexity like all other ecclesiology's and theologies.

With the hope of "what could be in America" and the draw for freedom, freedom alone comes with deep-rooted pain for so many different people groups. Van Gelder and Zscheile say, "Like the ideal of American exceptionalism, the ideal of freedom also has a deeply problematic underside. American history is full of oppression and the denial of freedom to some members of society—based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other factors. The cardinal example of course, is slavery. For those enslaved or oppressed, freedom is something to dream about and long for." Embedded within the hope for freedom is a tainted ecclesiology, but it is still a contributor to God's story. Each one brings his/her hopes and the difficulties of the journey in life that have brought him/her to this place. Each is a vital piece in the structure of a developing and experiencing a whole ecclesiology. The same is true for religious diversity too.

Religious Christian diversity in the United States finds itself with many different expressions. These expressions may be ethnic and denominational. It can also mean the different ecclesiologies that are represented in different locations all across the United States. With them comes a plethora of options depending on where one is from and the ecclesiologies he/she brings with him/her. The concept of freedom brings a "take your pick" mentality when settling in with a specific ecclesiology. This approach has found

itself reflective of our history. Van Gelder and Zscheile contend, "These structures, (different voluntary religious societies formed in the 1800's) while reflecting the democratic principles being nurtured in the still-developing United States, were also the natural extension of the logic of the voluntary basis of the church with regard to a free-church ecclesiology." That still holds true today. Even within modern Christianity's framework in the United States, someone can go to different places (cities, towns, states, regions, etc.) and discover a subculture of beliefs. If truly Christian, each one is working to tell the story of God through their unique ecclesiological perspective. Many people have been oppressed who have fought for a more unified ecclesiology in the storytelling journey. Each contribution must be remembered as such as it links up with the story of God.

Consideration is made for people who have walked in the Christian faith. Listening to the stories of their lives, one can begin to hear not only the importance of the story of God but the critical role it plays in humanity. As listening occurs, there is an invitation, and this invitation is not just to listen well to those who speak but also to pay attention to our own lives. It calls leaders to look at where they were raised, grew up, attended school, have lived, and recognize that every one of us has a role to play in the story of God as well. This story requires all to contribute to the ecclesiological work.

For Christian leaders, it invites them to look at the ecclesiological influence in each of those places. As church leaders, they need to recognize the story their church communities are telling in partnership with the global Body of Christ. This finds itself as an expression that is in a local church community and can reveal to a leader how their story speaks to the surrounding community in which the church community is located. It

truly matters, and the story of God needs church communities to do its part as a connected entity to the global ecclesiological story. The reasoning behind this communal calling is because the story of God has to come to completion somehow. There must be an avenue, or a means to bring it to its whole. That is how the story of God began: complete and whole. Yet, it has been broken since the fall of man in Genesis three, but the story of God at the beginning of scripture tells us it was intended to be whole, and it was God's intention. It will be made whole again as Christian communities endeavor to live out their stories and understand the important contributions they make to this process.

Generation Z students today are vital to the process of a developing ecclesiology. The experiences of their lives, their interpretation of the world around them, and the information they process in the Christian faith are part of God's story. This story is listened to in working toward wholeness as the body of Christ. In the pursuit of getting there, Christians cling to the hope that it can and will be made whole again. As a Gen Z ecclesiology partners with another, there is a collective and communal responsibility for the body of Christ that beckons working together. In fact, Gen Z wants to be a part of this inclusion and a healthy ecclesiology is dependent on how they feel connected to a particular church community. The Barna Group, in partnership with the Impact 360 Institute, put out a second research project speaking about engagement with local church communities and Generation Z students. In their work they speak of Gen Z students and their different levels of Christian experience: resilient disciples (active, attend church at least monthly, engage with church attending, trust the authority of the Bible, committed to Jesus and affirm his death and resurrection and a desire to transform the world as an outcome of their faith), habitual disciples (identify as Christian and attend at least once a

month, but do not hold to foundational beliefs like resilient followers do) and nomads

(those who still consider themselves Christian but do not regularly attend church). In their

report and comparing the resilient group and the habitual group, it states,

> "Habituals who lack deep, personal connections with their
> communities are further from resilience than those who
> enjoy these connections. This latter group is ready to be
> activated for resilient faith and disciple-making, ready for
> their church to engage them more intentionally in the church's
> communal life—ready to stop being the Church of tomorrow
> and to start being the Church of today."

This report highlights a crucial necessity for a healthy ecclesiology. A church community

has a healthier ecclesiology when Gen Z students are more deeply engaged with their

faith and have a sense of belonging to that church community. The students that fall into

the resilient category are more proactive and have a depth the church community and it is

directly linked to their level of connection. This not only portrays a healthy ecclesiology

for the church community but is a contributing factor to a healthier ecclesiology

connected to the global body of Christ.

The Barna report above also highlights how connection is linked to the levels of

involvement we see within Gen Z and their participation within a community. It affirms

the again the power of Keychain Leadership that was noted in chapter four. The ability for

a Gen Z student to have a place to serve increase their level of connection to a local

church community and increases ecclesiological health that a church community needs as

it moves forward together. This sense of connection and belonging places the Gen Z

student deeper into what it means to be identified as a member of a family.

Understanding Ecclesiology as Family

Growing up as the middle child in a middle-class family in Southern Idaho, the

author's understanding of family was shaped by his experiences. Having been raised by a mom and dad with a few siblings, he filled a role in a dynamic that shaped what it meant to belong to this particular group of people. He understands there are many ways to look and understand family. Some of that is through economics, ethnicity, parental presence, discipline, and educational opportunities. No matter what he said or did, his family dynamic showed him there was nothing he could do to get away from being a part of this family. They were in this together, whether it was beautiful or messy. Understanding church communities through a family mentality and approach can significantly enhance people's knowledge of ecclesiology. His own experience has shown him that as a Lead Pastor, some people are a part of a church community merely because of people that attend and not necessarily over denominational core beliefs. His experience has taught him that people can easily be a part of the church community based upon what it is they envision it to be. A leader's job is to help them fully see and embrace what it means to reflect this family.

Without thinking about a church community as a family, it limits a healthy ecclesiology important for all people. Thinking of a church community as a family means that each person works to do his/her part to help the family move forward together. Each person brings to the family his/her gifts while discovering the role he/she plays to help the church community become all that it can be. There will be disagreements within this church community like any family, and there will be different likes and dislikes. The same holds for Gen Z students. How a church community views them and how they are invited into the role of belonging is important. If they are accepted and seen as members that belong, a deepening of their familiar identity with the body of Christ will be found.

Thinking about this based upon Goheen's definition of ecclesiology above, Christians can discover that they are a part of something bigger. Even the pain and dysfunction that can be found as a part of a family dynamic will not separate whether they move forward together. The ecclesiology is strengthened as we move into the future. Tragically for so many, the understanding of a church community is limited as something separate from a family or the treatment of them says they do not belong. This reality hinders and holds back the church community's ability to function the way it was intended.

One element that has saturated the North American mindset is individualism. This mindset has found itself within the realm of church communities as well. The impact of individualism upon ecclesiology has hindered its health. In his book *When the Church Was a Family*, Joseph Hellerman speaks to this impact. He states,

> "Our uniquely individualistic approach toward life and relationships, so characteristic of American society, subtly yet certainly sets us up for failure in our efforts to stay and grow in the context of the often difficult but redemptive relationships that God has provided for us. Radical individualism has affected our whole way of viewing the Christian faith, and it has profoundly compromised the solidarity of our relational commitments to one another."

What cannot be overlooked is the reality individualism has had on our church communities and abilities to have a healthy ecclesiology. As individualism has invaded our church communities, it has given an approach to leave that church community and go find a "better" location that fits one's needs when expectations are no longer met. While there are reasons to leave some of these communities, the invasiveness of leaving because

individualism has a stronger sway is detrimental to a healthy ecclesiology.

Despite this, Hellerman offers a New Testament approach on decision-making and the family that could help the health of a church community, but also improve how that community sees those within a particular community. Hellerman notes,

> "The world in which Jesus and His followers lived was a distinctly strong-group culture in which the health of the group—not the needs of the individual—received first priority. And the most important group for a person in the ancient world was the family. It is hardly accidental that the New Testament writers chose the concept of family as the central social metaphor to describe the kind of interpersonal relationships that were to characterize those early Christian communities."

The New Testament's emphasis upon the family and decision-making speaks profoundly to the church's understanding of a healthy ecclesiology. The New Testament approach serves as an invitation to the church communities today to look at their decision-making as something that thinks about the group as a whole. This even invites church leaders to approach leadership in the same way.

As it relates to Gen Z students, this type of mentality is exactly the kind of inclusion that could help to combat loneliness as well. When a church leader is able to make decisions not for the sake of the church communities, but the generations represented as a part of that church community, it shapes the overarching future and trajectory of the church community. It elevates the potential for a healthier ecclesiology as well. For the Gen Z student, it also invites them to think about their formation in light of a supporting church community when this becomes the approach. These types of inclusions and relationships within a church community cultivates the environment for

the people to move forward in mission together. The truth of this is found in the Manzanar trip that was referenced in chapter four. Spending time on a bus, sharing in meals together, listening to the stories of history, and taking time to be together fosters the important space for a healthier ecclesiology as it moves from an idea into an executed reality.

Mission

To mention God's mission is to open up a gamut of potential wonderings about what all is entailed within it. The mission is both individual and communal. Each person has a distinct role to play. This role is partnered with the necessity to belong to a community of believers within the mission, so the story is moving towards completion. That community of believers is understood to be the church, and the church is at work in the world telling the story of God so that all may join in. There are critical elements within the mission of God that make the mission possible.

In Goheen's book *The Church and Its Vocation*, Goheen focuses on Lesslie Newbigin's work, a well-known missionary to India. He says, "For Newbigin, the Christian faith finds ultimate truth in a story that is centered in Jesus Christ." While it may seem a bit arbitrary to mention this mission's centrality, the centrality of Jesus in the gospels is the visual and driving force of God's mission. The telling of God's story is about everyone participating in completing the work in this story. Goheen continues, "The Bible is cosmic history because it begins with the *origin* of the whole world in creation; there, God reveals his purpose for the creation and for humankind. The Bible finds its *goal* in the renewal of whole creation; there, the purpose for the world is disclosed. The story of God's dealings with Israel and the church, and ultimately in Jesus

Christ, disclosed the *meaning* of the creation and of human life." Goheen shows that through Newbigin's life, there is a timeline helping everyone see where this story began, where it is going, and the process necessary to get there.

Goheen says, "Israel is chosen to bear and embody the meaning of the whole, Jesus fully reveals and accomplishes it, and the church is sent to make it known among the nations. It is a universal story revealed in a particular nation, a particular man, and a particular community." While this is the story, it is to be understood that the people caught up in this story who believe in the centrality of Jesus Christ and his invitation to us, do their part to continue the mission where they are. The truth lies in the reality that mission is always in process. While there is an understanding it is going somewhere and that it has an eventual end, the work of individuals and church communities in their contexts collectively need to claim God's mission as the driving force that moves us toward this end.

Generation Z students are a vital necessity to this work of fulfilling the mission. As these students are viewed and seen as a necessary part of the work of mission to the world, the vibrancy brought to this work is refreshed for the church community's entirety and helps Gen Z kids see they are needed. Doing so helps to sustain the life of faith for these students and gives sustaining life back to the church community moving forward.

The power of successful mission takes place in serving alongside one another. The author recalls a trip that was taken in 2013 when his church community committed to take an intergenerational mission trip to Nicaragua. With sixty people attending and one-third of them high school students, they worked in three different portions of the country building parks, church buildings, putting on Vacation Bible School, and having a medical

clinic. The success of this trip was not found in the teenagers doing a separate project while the adults did the "important stuff," but the success was found working in all of these areas together. The work probably would have been faster, more efficient, and with higher quality, but the invitation of the adults to have the teenagers work with them in all these areas did more than just accomplish the goals of the projects but gave life to each person, both the adult and the teenager. Without realizing it, the gained a healthier ecclesiology as they participated in mission together and it spilled over into the life of the overall church community as the relationships that flourished on the trip were seen by others in the congregation that did not attend. The entire church community shared in the benefit of this trip.

Scripture gives us a distinct look into Jesus' words given both to Mary Magdalene and the disciples. In John 20:17, Jesus, after Mary Magdalene's eyes are opened, and she realizes Jesus has been raised from the dead, is told, "Go to my brothers and sisters tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" He tells Mary to go and tell. This telling is a crucial understanding of the mission of God. The mission of God again invokes the importance of the words found in Matthew 28:19-20, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." Jesus gives the responsibility to his followers and calls them not just to go but also to proclaim the message of salvation as a partner to God's story. Part of the mission's driving force is the imperative reminder that we as leaders do not have followers, but Jesus does. Our missional work is to direct people to the one whom we follow.

The concept of a missionary in North America is an identity that must be shifted to begin to get at the importance of the mission of God for all people. North America's tendency to think that a missionary is someone who goes to another country to take God's mission (often a North American perspective) to people "over there" is problematic to our role of being a people on mission. The name missionary is a name that must be reclaimed for all followers of Jesus scattered around the world. Again, this missionary identity is both individual and communal. It takes up the spaces in our lives as followers of Jesus connected to the body of Christ in the church worldwide. Van Gelder and Zscheile see it this way as well when they state, "Being missionary is, in fact, something the church is. The doing flows out of the being. Jurgen Moltmann notes that 'it is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church, creating a church along the way.'" The affirming identity of a missionary in the body of Christ calls the missionary to embrace and embody God's mission within the story of God as partners with Jesus to this message.

Gen Z students find themselves captivated by this longing for the church to embody this in North America. As they walk through daily life, each of them carries the burden of having a life of impact to the world around them. They are looking at the church in North America and inquiring the kind of missional people the church will be. Generation Z students will seek to participate in having an impact on the world around them in some capacity, but the church must decide at what level they will include Gen Z students in the process. Gen Z students offer a passion for mission and impact the church communities need to see and experience.

Suffering in Missional Pursuit

Considering the importance of this as it relates to Gen Z students, this generation longs for that witness. Lessening their loneliness is contingent upon a church communities' ability to help shape their identity and see themselves as missionaries to the world around them. By doing so, a church community becomes an ecclesial reflection of God's intent for creation around the world. It establishes a witness to the world of what it means to be a Christian and moves beyond just language and into action.

If the central message of God's story revolves around the person of Jesus Christ, a missionary going and telling must understand this partnership could potentially come with suffering just like Jesus. In his book *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission,* Christopher Wright speaks not only to suffering but also to its necessity as it relates to our role and partners in the story of God. "Those who take up the mission of God's people by simply living, working and witnessing in the public square so dominated by the gods of this world, who choose to live by the distinctive ethical standards that flow from their biblical worldview, who confess Jesus as Lord, and not Caesar or Mammon—such people will suffer in one way or another." For Wright, the going and being Jesus wherever they live and work is the call of all missionaries. For Wright, this becomes a normal reality to a follower of Jesus. This part of the narrative is lost on many believers today, especially in North America, because suffering has not been a part of the discipleship narrative nor an embraced identity in understanding mission linked to our ecclesiological understanding.

Newbigin addresses the importance of missionary identity in unity. He says, "So mission is dependent on unity, and unity is dependent on mission. When the church does

not grasp its missionary vocation, it is little concerned about unity. There is the closest possible connection between the acceptance of the missionary obligation and the acceptance of the obligation of unity. That which makes the Church one is what makes it a mission to the world." Far too easily, the people of God can get caught up in doctrinal, theological, and conversations that foster an environment of disunity. They forget the centrality of Jesus in unifying the people of God in the process of the story of God.

What has been dismissed must also be reclaimed in the partnership with Jesus and the mission. Followers of Jesus do not get to choose whether they agree or disagree with the role. Wright continues, "The mission of God's people is our participation in the mission of God. The suffering of God's people in mission is a participation in the suffering of God in mission. And the mission of God is God's determination, through the whole biblical narrative, to bring about the redemption of his whole creation from the ravages of sin and evil." While suffering is not ideal, it needs to be understood for many as something we open ourselves to as a possibility as going and telling just may be in our suffering as the story of God's redeeming work in mission happens in us. There is a global call to all of us that we are a part of something that connects us. Gen Z students, connected to this narrative for the people of God, discover a unity where the purpose behind their existence carries further than the labels placed upon them. They join alongside others, believe and live out the calling of God upon their lives, and discover not just more about themselves but the intent of God for creation.

Concerning Loneliness and Generation Z

For a healthy ecclesiology to become fully realized in church communities, the viewpoint members have when it comes to understanding family is crucial. When the

family becomes united together for God's mission globally, it means the mission has both an internal and an external need for intentionality. This realization empowers Gen Z students to join in and be a part of this mission. When they join, it elevates the people of God and reflects a healthier ecclesiology. Concerning a local church dynamic, our ecclesiological understanding will need to evaluate the approaches taken with how students in Generation Z are brought into the fold of God's mission. Systems of isolation that are set up, whether intentionally or unintentionally, run the risk of creating levels of disunity that will counter the togetherness of the mission of God.

For unity to be a reality in our local contexts, all ages must look around and see those that attend as a family. When a church encompasses unity as a family, there is the ability to combat loneliness and sustain the church's future as the mission of God moves forward. This means we take the hands of those around us and urge one another on in the pursuit of Jesus.

With all the responsibilities that pastors have in leading church communities, it can be easy for relationships to fall to the wayside. When this happens, a critical ecclesiological element is lost. Leadership must embrace and embody all the people who walk into church communities' lives and see them as family. To do so means we will discover leadership roles, volunteer positions, and spiritual formation, reflecting the generations' balance.

This work of inclusion is not just for all generations, but it means the local church's future is at stake for Generation Z. The church of today cannot afford to sacrifice a generation looking for hope. While this intentionality may look different in its approach, its importance cannot be lost in the body of Christ. This work aims to continue

to flesh itself out because the mission for all people never ends in a local church community. To bring those around us is to be a healthy expression of ecclesiology and embraces the purpose of God's mission, which is Jesus found in the instruments of his people.

It is here we may need to remind the reader about Gen Z students and their tendency toward safety that was mentioned in chapter one. A tension arises in the passion for impact that Gen Z carry and the safety of that passion. If the definition of mission for a local church community revolves around an impact that is safe in nature, we may be perpetuating a missional problem down the road. In order for mission to finds its fulfillment and an ecclesiology that is healthier, it will require intentional efforts on the part of local church communities and a willingness to risk on the part of Gen Z students to see the fulfillment become a reality. It will take intentional effort on all generations to break away from the apathy of unhealthy ecclesiology. All generations need one another in this process. Just like a family needs all members of it to find itself complete, church communities need all generations to be the healthy ecclesial family it is meant to be.

The future of the church is also at stake externally. A healthy ecclesiology that practices God's mission must do the work that extends into the present world. This extension means our workplaces, our schools, neighborhoods, homes, and social gatherings. The urgency of the mission of God into the world cannot be overemphasized. Looking around at North American culture, we can see the implications when a missional people stop their movement as they exit the church building. Christian leaders are responsible for developing a healthy ecclesiology into the lives of those entrusted to his/her care.

A church community that intentionally invests with those inside the walls of a building can combat the deep levels of loneliness in our world. The church expresses itself as reflections of the mission in our everyday living. A family member is representative of their family wherever they go. Missional expressions into Gen Z students' lives in our schools, sports teams, music groups, places of work, hangouts, and in our homes can move the mission into our world. The fostering of these relationships for the Kingdom of God can begin to do the work of combatting loneliness both within the church building and in the surrounding locations where they are.

When purchasing and moving into an older house, there is often a lot of work that needs to be done. A buyer needs to see not what the house is but what it can become. Often in the process of renovations and upgrades, you discover more work that needs to be done. Projects like this cause the owner to have a spirit of adaptability as homeownership work is never done. There is always something to improve.

This metaphor is a lot like the implications of combatting loneliness as the people of God. The work will never be done. Some things need our priority both internally and externally as Christian leaders, and there are things we need to adapt to accomplish what needs to be done. The work we do as leaders is about the mission of God because of Jesus Christ. Combatting loneliness is one of these adaptations we must be about now. The work of our Christian family's mission moves ahead both within the walls of our buildings and into our communities when adaptation becomes normal.

Within the tradition of the Church of the Nazarene, which the writer finds his denominational home, prevenient grace is a phrase that shapes our understanding of the Holy Spirit's work in the world. It means that God's grace has gone ahead of us before

we have arrived at a location, in a conversation, or place of mission. While the work may never be done while we walk this life, a healthy ecclesiology embraces the reality that God has gone ahead of the church in the United States. It means that God is at work in the lives of Gen Z students before the involvement they have within our church families. As we embrace God's prevenient grace, we can walk in confidence the work of God's church is not done as we obediently walk in faith in the mission we are called to walk.

Future Implications

Success for the best athletes is a reflection of their response to failure and disadvantage. The shortest kid on a basketball team with minimal playing time can put in the hustle and extra practice to earn more playing time. A baseball player struggling to hit can put in more reps outside of practice to develop weaker skills. Success is linked to their mental acuity and their response. When an athlete spends time comparing the abilities of others around them, a mindset that feels defeated may either lead one to quit or just plateau.

Looking at Christian leaders and toward Generation Z students and the problem of loneliness, leaders' response to this will dictate the future of the church in North America and for Generation Z students. The implications of our responses will greatly affect our ability to have a relevant impact and witness in North America. Unless there is an attempt to get at this problem right now, church communities will not only suffer, but the impact in the United States will as well. Church communities will feel the impact of this as they watch Gen Z students' response to the attempts that are made. To respond proactively as leaders means there will be a cost to church attenders as they decide whether to be a part of the shift toward this generation. As they recognize responding to Gen Z students will

cost their comfort, the discovery many churches will experience will be a healthier ecclesiology and purpose in mission. Not responding to this urgency may tragically lead to the closure of more church buildings as well.

Fear and facts may not lead to enhanced change. Yet, if church communities can link up with the hope that is found in Jesus Christ while being the church that represents Jesus in people's lives, and more specifically with Generation Z students, the discovery of hope for a sustainable future may be found. As we lead both internally and externally as reflections of Jesus Christ into our world, a future beyond all we could ask or imagine just might be the result.

Summary

Some of the most life-giving moments in people's lives have come through real, authentic conversation. Sometimes it is around a table with family members reminiscing about stories from long ago. Other times, it has been walking and talking for hours on end with a small group of people on a specific topic, or even one on one with a friend over multiple cups of coffee. Sometimes these conversations lead to laughter, anger, confusion, wonder, or deep disagreement. Hopefully, in all of these conversations, those in dialogue can discover the opportunity to learn and grow together.

An offering is a powerful thing. It is a gift that is granted to help those that are the recipients of that gift. The posture of many churches has been about teaching young ones about what the church can offer to their lives. It is time for the church to recognize what Generation Z kids can offer to the life of church communities both now and into the future. If the church can see itself as a family with members who contribute uniquely to the whole, they will recognize that Gen Z students bring levels of empathy the church

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needs to see again. They bring experience in technology that can help other generations

maintain connections both within and outside the walls of the building for the sake of the

kingdom of God. Their desire for inclusion shows the ways they see humanity in the

world they are growing up in and invites others within the church to see that humanity as

well. Through each of these offerings that Gen Z students bring, they bring about

perspectives that can help the Church of Jesus Christ move forward with the mission we

are all called to live. When this pursuit becomes the reality of a church community, that

community lives into not just a healthier ecclesiology, but shows Gen Z they are a crucial

part of the family of God. Gen Z students can hold church communities accountable in

keeping the mission moving forward.

As was mentioned in chapter four and the importance of living into the story best

made available for each of us, the story of Gen Z students is still being written and will

continue to be written for decades to come. The story of the Church of Jesus Christ is still

being written too. Church communities have the opportunity to reciprocate inclusion of

Gen Z students so the story they embody will have the church in partnership with them or

a story being written without them. The time to rise up and be a family is here. A family

learns what it means to be a family by trial and error. Experiments foster the opportunity

to learn and grow. The same will be true of church communities as they work through the

tensions of inclusion for Gen Z students. Van Gelder and Zscheile put it this way,

"Learning through trial and error is nothing new in a biblical perspective. This is how

God's people have always participated in God's mission: not in having the correct

strategies and plans to follow, but improvisationally (sic) discerning the Spirit's

leadership. Mistakes and failures certainly didn't prevent Abraham, Sarah, Moses, David,

or the disciples from playing their role in God's mission." As the people of God keep trying to live the mission in new and creative ways, God's name will be glorified as kingdom expressions find themselves being lived out through this family we call the body of Christ.

This project may be new for some and as a continuing conversation for others. The topic of loneliness and the church is one that must keep going. The work toward wholeness for all people can be looked upon through the lens of Christ, his Church, and our mission together. Writing this dissertation during the pandemic has given a little bit of content to think about when it comes to loneliness. Still, the long-term implications of loneliness and its impact on Generation Z students during the pandemic will take time to discover and unpack. Whatever the outcome, the church of Jesus Christ has an opportunity. An opportunity to step deeply into the struggle many in Generation Z are having and show up as the people of God for them. The hope is that all people will experience the wholeness that God has intended for all of creation, and this project could be a part of contributing to that wholeness as well.

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