IMAGINING A PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY:
CONGREGATIONAL LEARNING FOR AN INCLUSIVE AND LIVED FAITH

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Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
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DEDICATION

To Laura, my best friend and constant support.

I love you and couldn't do life without you.

To my sons - Ryan, Jake, and Ben.

I love you and am proud of you - you inspired me to do my best.

Soli Deo Gloria

IMAGINING A PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

IMAGINING A PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

IMAGINING A PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY: CONGREGATIONAL LEARNING

FOR AN INCLUSIVE AND LIVED FAITH

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Mainline Protestant congregations are struggling to adapt to the rapidly changing culture.

Grounding congregants in the biblical narrative, theological reflection, and ethical

practices have long been a function of local congregations. However, as American

culture has become more partisan and isolated, many mainline congregations have

become comfortable in their privileged place in society and have moved away from their

prophetic call to do justice as a non-negotiable component of faith formation. The

problem of separating justice and spirituality, the prophetic from the sacramental, has led

to unintended outcomes such as decline in involvement, lack of awareness of and

commitment to justice concerns, and the increase of cultural/political divides.

This disquisition will analyze how research-based practices of inquiry and leadership

development may develop increased capacity in congregational leaders for recognizing

and integrating spirituality and justice as essential components of faith formation. When

congregational leaders engage in scriptural and prophetic imagination, listen to the stories

of voices who have been unknown, ignored, or silenced in their communities, and

practice lived theology in their everyday, ordinary lives, they may more fully live their

calling "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8).

THE DISQUISITON

Western Carolina University (WCU) requires candidates for the doctoral degree in Educational Leadership to complete a disquisition, a term that originated from the Educational Leadership faculty at WCU (Crow, Lomotey, & Topolka-Jorissen, 2016). Influenced by the Carnegie Foundation Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED), the disquisition, sometimes referred to as a dissertation-in-practice, differs from a traditional doctoral dissertation in its focus on measurable improvement and practice within an organization. The disquisition follows the traditional doctoral dissertation in its commitment to rigorous methods of research and synthesis of academic literature to support its findings. The disquisition focuses on the researcher as a scholar-practitioner, one who combines the academic theory and practical application within the context of an organization. The scholar-practitioner applies scholarly-based, rigorous research methodology and inquiry to identify a problem of practice within the organization, investigate the causes of the problem, and develop and evaluate strategies aimed at improving practice (Lamotey, 2018; Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, LeMahieu, 2015; Crow, et al., 2016).

Improvement Science

The disquisition uses improvement science as its methodology. Improvement science is a framework for research to enhance performance and achieve meaningful change within organizations (Langley, Moen, Nolan, Norman, & Provost, 2009). The format of the disquisition requires the scholar-practitioner to collaborate with stakeholders, identify a problem of practice within the organization, investigate scholarly

research, develop a theory of improvement, implement improvement initiatives, use

formative assessments to make modifications to the process, and evaluate the overall goal

through summative assessments (Spaulding & Hinnant-Crawford, 2019). The framework

for improvement science focuses on three questions: (1) What are we trying to

accomplish? (2) How will we know that a change is an improvement? (3) What changes

can we make that will result in improvement? Change ideas are tested using iterations of

Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycles.

Learning Outcomes

Western Carolina University is committed to producing educational leaders who

are oriented toward continuous improvement that promotes organizational learning

through the lens of equity and social justice.   Learning outcomes for students in the

WCU Doctorate in Educational Leadership focus in five areas: (1) commitment toward

leadership for equity and social justice, (2) scholarly-practice based in research, inquiry,

and improvement frameworks or organizational learning, (3) focus on student-center

decision making, (4) orientation toward continuous improvement through the

implementation of effective improvement initiatives for organizational learning, and (5)

engagement in distributive and collaborative leadership practices

(https://www.wcu.edu/learn/departments-schools-colleges/ceap/humanserv/ed-

leadership/edd-degree-program.aspx). These learning outcomes provide the foundation

of this disquisition.

Defining Key Terms

Key terms as used in this disquisition have the following specific meanings:

1. *Deficit Ideology.* Gorski (2010) identifies deficit ideology as a problem in educational institutions that leads to blaming the victim rather than addressing the systems of power.

2. *Improvement Science.* Improvement science is a framework for research to enhance performance and achieve meaningful change within organizations (Langley, Moen, Nolan, Norman, & Provost, 2009). The framework focuses on three questions: (1) What are we trying to accomplish? (2) How will we know that a change is an improvement? (3) What changes can we make that will result in improvement? The efficacy of change ideas is tested using iterations of Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycles.

3. *Justice.* To seek justice is to identify systems of oppressive and unjust practices, advocating and acting for more equitable, asset-based, and culturally appropriate ones (Furman, 2012; Shapiro, 2017).

4. *Lived Theology.* Also referred to as lived religion or lived faith. The emphasis on the study of lived theology - the embodied and enacted forms of spirituality that occur in everyday life - has arisen from the marginal and often neglected voices of women and people of color. This understanding of religion as practices outside of institutions insists that we take seriously the experiences among ordinary people in everyday life. Though the importance of everyday spiritual practice among a myriad of people needs to be appreciated and honored, the part institutions play as a vital partner in lived

theology must be considered (Marsh, Slade, & Azaransky, 2017;

Ammerman, 2016).

5. *Protestant Churches.* The Pew Research Center divides Protestant churches

into three categories: Evangelical, Historically Black, and Mainline.

a. *Evangelical.* Evangelicals make up over 25% of those who identify as

Christians. Three primary tenets define evangelicalism: (1) the central

message of the gospel is conversion, justification by faith in Christ

and repentance, or turning away, from sin, (2) high regard for the Bible as

God's revelation to the world, and (3) a high commitment to evangelism,

sharing the gospel message. Some denominations included are: Southern

Baptists, Presbyterian Church in America, Evangelical Lutheran Synod,

conservative Anglican groups, and the Evangelical Free Church of

America (Pew Research Forum, 2011).

b. *Historically Black.* More than three-in-four African-American Protestants

(and 59% of African-Americans overall) belong to historically black

Protestant denominations, such as the National Baptist Convention or the

African Methodist Episcopal Church. Historically Black Protestants make

up approximately 6.5% of the Christian population in the US. By several

measures, including importance of religion in life, attendance at religious

services, and frequency of prayer, the historically black Protestant group is

among the most religiously observant traditions (Pew Research Forum,

2009).

c. *Mainline.* Mainline churches include eight primary denominations and

fellowships: United Methodist Church; Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America (ELCA); Presbyterian Church (U.S.A); Episcopal Church;

American Baptist Churches USA; Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF);

United Church of Christ; and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Though the U.S. has become more racially and ethnically diverse,

mainline congregations continue to have the highest percentage of white

congregants (Pew Research Center, 2015).

6. *Prophetic.* Rooted in the biblical prophets, prophetic means recognizing and

raising critical awareness of the ways in which current systems, including

religious systems, have used power dynamics in unjust ways that hurt the

most vulnerable in society.

7. *Spirituality.* Spirituality is an expansive term that provides room for many

perspectives. As it is used in this disquisition, spirituality is defined as the

universal human experience that includes a sense of connection to something

greater than oneself and involves a search for meaning and truth. Some may

describe spirituality in terms of the sacred, transcendence, feeling alive, or

awareness of an interconnectedness (Krentzman, 2016).

8. *Sacramental.* Sacramental means pertaining to a religious ceremony or

practice of the Christian Church that is regarded as an outward and visible

sign of inward and spiritual grace. Means of grace may include engagement

with Scripture, worship, corporate prayer, Eucharist/Lord's

Supper/Communion, or rites of passage (baptism, marriage, death).

CONGREGATIONAL LEARNING FOR AN INCLUSIVE AND LIVED FAITH

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM OF PRACTICE AND CAUSAL

ANALYSIS

"The two great hungers of our time are the hunger for

spirituality and the hunger for social justice – and the

connection between the two has great power to motivate

people to action" (Wallis, 2008, p.26).

It was the morning of the Sabbath in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. He was the

guest rabbi and those gathered in the synagogue were excited to listen to their hometown

boy. Stories of his Spirit-filled teaching had spread throughout Galilee and the people in

Nazareth were interested in hearing for themselves. Luke's Gospel tells the reader that

Jesus took the scroll, found the appropriate place in the prophet Isaiah, and read: "The

Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to

let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:14-30;

Isaiah 61:1-2).   Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, sat down, as was the custom of teachers

in his day, and began to teach. He said to those gathered, "Today, this scripture has been

fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21)

This Gospel narrative describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry and his initial

rejection. Jesus interprets the Isaiah text, not as comfortable words that the people had

heard many times before; instead, he begins to reveal how they have failed to live out these words, which stirs up the people. Jesus quotes two proverbs that indicate the people may have wanted Jesus to perform miracles for them as they had heard he did for others. Their familiarity and closeness to Jesus led them to assume privilege for themselves (Craddock, 1990). However, that privilege quickly turned to resentment as Jesus advocated that the grace of God extends beyond them. Former Disciples of Christ pastor and author Fred Craddock writes, "Jesus does not go elsewhere because he is rejected; he is rejected because he goes elsewhere" (Craddock, 1990, p. 63-64).

Those in the synagogue that day begin to diminish Jesus' status to negate his influence. Their amazement moved from familiarity, "Isn't this the son of Joseph, the carpenter?" (Luke 4:22) to defensiveness, "Who does he think he is?" Jesus defends his call to prophetic justice for all by appealing to their common stories from Scripture. Two of their most honored prophets, Elijah and Elisha, both were sent by God to feed and heal people who were not Jewish, people who were looked down upon as enemies. With indignation, the people try to throw Jesus off a cliff. Anger and violence become their last defense when faced with the truth of their own tradition, with Scriptures that they would rather ignore in favor of resting in their privilege (Craddock, 1990).

As congregations read and reflect on Luke's description of Jesus' purpose, they would do well to model their ministry after his Spirit-filled, prophetic life that challenged his followers to live their calling in service to those in need of healing, care, and liberation. However, mainline congregations are struggling to adapt to the rapidly changing culture. In the changing landscape of spirituality and religion in America, mainline Protestant churches often find themselves declining in attendance and influence.

Research has revealed a consistent rise in the percentage and number of Americans who

do not identify with any religious tradition, often referred to as "nones" (Beinart, 2017).

Grounding congregants in the biblical narrative, theological reflection, and ethical

practice have long been a function of local Christian congregations. In the 18th century,

Robert Raikes founded the Sunday School movement in England and Wales to enhance

literacy, culture, and religious knowledge of children and adults from the working class

(Lander, 2004). Common liturgy and belief systems also have provided a sense of

belonging and meaning to the lives of congregants (Ammerman, 2013; Beinart, 2017;

Herring & Martinson Elton, 2017; McLaren, 2017). Historically, churches have worked

for liberation and justice for the most vulnerable in society, creating schools, hospitals,

and community non-profit (Jones, 2009). Yet, as American culture has become more

partisan and isolated, many mainline congregations have become comfortable in their

privileged place in society and have moved away from their prophetic call to do justice as

a non-negotiable component of faith formation (Delehanty, 2016).

This disquisition brings together the fields of education and practical theology,

seeking to address concerns of equity through critical reflection and listening leadership

along the journey of continuous improvement (Bryk, et al, 2015; Manyozo, 2016).

Through research informed initiatives, congregational leaders will enrich their

understanding of the biblical themes of justice, listen to diverse voices in the local

community through an asset-based lens, reflect on personal assumptions and cultural

values, and participate in ongoing communities of practice to encourage continuous

learning, modeling for adult learners how lived faith bends toward justice.

Lived Theology

The emphasis on the study of lived theology, also referred to as lived religion or lived

faith - the embodied and enacted forms of spirituality that occur in everyday life - has

arisen from the marginal and often neglected voices of women and people of color. This

understanding of religion as practices outside of institutions insists that we take seriously

the experiences among ordinary people in everyday life. Though the importance of

everyday spiritual practice among a myriad of people needs to be appreciated and

honored, the part institutions play as a vital partner in lived religion must be considered

(Ammerman, 2016; Marsh, Slade, & Azaransky, 2017). Religious communities, while

lacking in racial diversity, often are diverse in other social status categories – gender,

sexual identity, socio-economics - and can offer an opportunity for interaction across

difference (Scwadel, 2009). Through biblical and theological education that offers a

framework that values each person as created the image of God and is beloved, by

promoting biblical calls to mercy and justice, by modeling inclusion in our leadership,

and by sending congregants out as public advocates for justice, churches can offer values

that seek to address the inequity in our society. Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther

King, Jr., and Paulo Friere offer models for this lived out faith that integrates spiritual

practice and the prophetic call to justice.

   Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel. Walter Rauschenbusch, as a

young Baptist pastor, served a congregation in New York City's Hell's Kitchen. In this

environment, he witnessed firsthand how the economic injustice brought about by

industrialization led to intense human suffering. Through critical reflection on his

Christian convictions, Rauschenbusch began to understand that the hope rooted in his

faith was not simply concerned with saving souls for an afterlife; instead, this hope

required action to embrace the biblical theme of the Kingdom of God in the here and now

(Lasch, 1990). Drawing upon the Hebrew prophets and the teachings of Jesus, he called

faithful Christians to seek forgiveness from both societal and personal sins that harm

others and diminished anyone's sacred worth. He spoke of a Social Gospel that brought

together both individual and social salvation. This Social Gospel obliged the strong to

stand in solidarity with those suffering on the margins (Nelson, 2009).

     Rauschenbusch recognized that many root causes of injustice were focused in the

economic realm that gave power to the Market over human need. He reminded the

Christian community that the Market was not divine, only the God of Scripture was

divine (Lasch, 1990; Nelson, 2009). Out of the Social Gospel movement, which brought

together continuous cycles of theological reflection and prophetic action, the Church has

seen the rise of the modern ecumenical movement, Christian feminist and womanist

ethics, and liberation theology, as well as having a profound effect on historically black

congregations in America (Nelson, 2009). Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, ''It has been

my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion which professes to be

concerned about the souls of men [and women] and is not concerned about the social and

economic conditions that scar the soul is a spiritually moribund society''' (King, 1958,

para. 6).

     Social Gospel critics linked Rauschenbusch to a Western ideology of racism,

sexism, and colonization (Lander, 2004), while others contended that he was naïve in his

belief that the self-interest of human nature could be overcome (King, 1958). The term

Social Gospel, despite its disuse in adult education, has continued to provide the

grounding philosophy of many organizations, such as the YMCA, YWCA, and Red

Cross, and other non-profit programs that seek to meet needs of people who are

homeless, to protect adults and children who flee abusive situations, and to help people

who struggle with substance abuse find a road to recovery, along with other initiatives

that work for equity and care (Lander, 2004). Social gospel themes can be found in the

words of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Paulo Freire, who proclaimed faith in a God who

does not oppress but becomes incarnate in Jesus to witness to God's love for all and to

call his followers to work for justice, equity, and hope (Friere, 1985; King, 1958; Lander,

2004).

     Martin Luther King, Jr. and Privilege. In his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail,*

Martin Luther King, Jr. critiqued white churches and their leadership who isolated

themselves from the civil rights struggle, who were committed to a faith that separated

individual salvation focused on the life to come from the deep needs of those who suffer

indignity and injustice in the present (King, 1963). King appealed to the history of the

early church, which did not and could not settle for comfortable privilege but found

power in suffering for their beliefs, and the Black church which provided the language

for redemption and reconciliation (Erskine, 2016). King (1963) wrote, "In those days,

the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of

popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society" (para. 32).

The White church's silence and participation in the status quo, he believed, led to its

being ineffectual and irrelevant. King recognized racism as evil and faith's role in

overcoming injustice which he believed must come through a theology of reconciliation

to restore relationships and communities broken by division (Erskine, 2016). His call to

the privileged white congregational leaders was to "recapture the sacrificial spirit of the

early church" or it could lose the next generation of young people who dismiss it "as an

irrelevant social club with no meaning" for their lives (King, 1963, para.34).

Dr. Cecil Sherman, former pastor at First Baptist Church in Asheville, ministered

to the congregation during the Civil Rights movement and lead with wisdom and courage

to open the membership to black people. Following the assassination of Dr. King, Dr.

Sherman allowed the community to use the church facilities for a memorial service and

was one of a small number of white leaders who participated in a march in honor of Dr.

King in downtown Asheville. He modeled Dr. King's hope of church leaders to integrate

spirituality and justice (Baxley, 2019).

Paulo Friere and Critical Pedagogy. Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and

philosopher who advocated a critical pedagogy that recognized that knowledge is not

neutral, and teaching is not divorced from issues of justice. The goal of this critical

pedagogy was an awakening of consciousness that would lead to freedom from

oppression and to understanding teaching as a political act that seeks justice for all

(Giroux, 2007). Friere (1985) argued that churches are not abstract entities but are rooted

in history. Therefore, they cannot make claims of neutrality because failure to take a

stand in the conflict between those in power and those who have no power is not to be

neutral, but to maintain the status quo and to side with those in power. Instead, when the

church dies to its privilege, it can be resurrected on the side of those who experience

oppression. Congregations must give up the "myth of superiority, of their purity of soul,

of their virtue, their wisdom, the myth that they save the poor, the myth of the neutrality

of the church, of theology, education, science, technology, the myth of our own

impartiality" (Freire, 1985, p.123). If the faith community refuses to question the social

order or the theological framework that should inform it, then the causes of injustice and

inequity will continue to focus on the individual and can lead to further marginalization

(Gorski, 2011).

Freire (1985) suggested that praxis, by which equity can be carried out, must

involve both action *and* reflection. He questions the trite phrases that some Christians

use to avoid the real needs of those who have been marginalized by a system of power. It

is not enough, he contends, to talk about praying together as the bond that keeps families

together when the church neglects the fact that families need food, shelter, employment,

education, and autonomy to experience dignity and to thrive as a family. Educational

leadership must be an instrument of transforming action whose goal is the liberation of all

people.

The Problem of Practice

The problem of practice in many mainline congregations is the removal of justice

as a non-negotiable component of faith formation. The problem of separating justice and

spirituality, the prophetic from the sacramental, theory from practice, has led to

unintended outcomes such as decline in involvement, lack of awareness of and

commitment to justice concerns, and the increase of cultural/political divides (Barna,

2017; Beinart, 2017; Chaves & Anderson, 2014). A causal analysis of the problem of

practice (Figure 1) illustrates various causes for the lack of integration of the sacramental

and the prophetic in Christian formation and practice (Bryk, et al., 2014). After exploring

academic literature and conducting collaborative conversations with clergy and laity, I

used a fishbone diagram (Langley, et al., 2009) to delineate the causes of the problem. I

categorized the contributing factors in the following ways: deficit ideology, lack of

openness to diverse voices, external negative perceptions, political systems, biblical

illiteracy, and insufficient leadership capacity. I contend that congregations have both

contributed to the inequity and injustice of our communities through their isolation and

inaction *and yet* provide one of the best opportunities to dismantle the systems that create

divisions and inequity among those in our community.
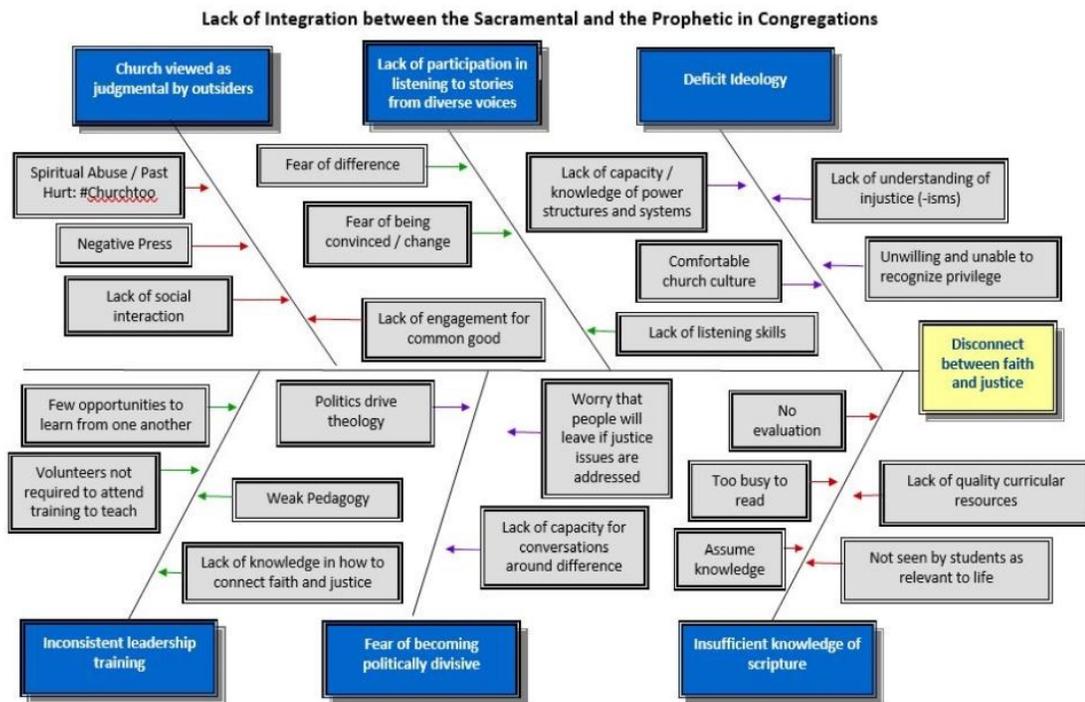
Figure 1. Causal Analysis Diagram (Fishbone). Identified causes of problem of practice.

The Problem of Separating Spirituality and Justice

Equity was a model of the earliest church in Scripture. The second chapter of the

Acts of the Apostles describes the church as having all things in common with one

another, giving to one another as there was need, sharing meals together, and worshiping

together. The early Christian movement was inclusive and counter-cultural. One guiding

scripture (Galatians 3:28, NRSV) speaks of unity in Christ, in which there is no longer

male and female (gender), slave or free (socio-economic status), Jew or Gentile (race)

(Wallis, 2016). This oneness was not uniformity, but a recognition that all are created in

the image of God and that the tapestry of our difference reflects the Divine.

Rauschenbusch described this vision as a ''cooperative commonwealth'' founded on the

values of compassion, solidarity, and justice (Nelson, 2009).

However, congregations have not continued this practice of equity and prophetic

justice. Martin Luther King Jr., in 1963, called Sunday morning the most segregated time

of the week (Washington, 2015). Not much has changed since that time. It is

challenging for congregations to speak about racial disparities in leadership, due in large

part to their reluctance to address privilege or even to talk about issues related to race

(Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Todd, McConnell, & Suffrin, 2014; Wallis,

2016).

Throughout history, many White congregations have used Scripture and theology

to justify a culture of insiders and outsiders, which devalues and de*forms* the lives of

those who are in some way different from the privileged group (Estes, 2017). This

dualistic thinking that reduces identity to 'us' and 'them' leads to separation and conflict.

According to Miroslav Volf (1996), exclusionary practices can be categorized in four

ways: (1) eliminating a group out of fear, which can lead to the justification of violence,

(2) assimilating, which allows inclusion only if people become like 'us', (3) dominating,

which allows groups to exist as long as they are a weak minority, and (4) abandoning

those who are different, ceasing to welcome or care for their needs. These power

dynamics can be seen in many dimensions of society, even in congregations, which

makes it vital for congregational leaders to have honest discourse on how churches

participate in exclusion and injustice.

Congregations can create a narrative for this exclusion of others through the

symbolic language of Scripture, often taken out of its cultural context. The apostle Paul

writes to the church in Thessalonica, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this

command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10, NRSV).

This text has often been used to speak against governmental support programs that are

aimed at the most vulnerable in our society. Other Scriptural texts, selectively applied,

have been used against women: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a

man; she is to keep silent" (1 Timothy 2:12, NRSV). *Clobber verse* is the common term

for verses used to attack people who identify as LGBTQ as sinners and outsiders. When

Scripture is selectively used to name insiders and outsiders, churches can become

isolated, seeing themselves in a positive light and blaming victims of oppression rather

than addressing the systems of power (Estes, 2017; Gorski, 2010). Leaders must equip

congregants with biblical literacy that incorporate texts of welcome, inclusion, care, and

diversity for a more generous and inclusive faith (Estes, 2017)

Rise of the Unaffiliated

The Pew Research center conducted its second U.S. Religious Landscape Study in

2014. The first was conducted in 2007. Both studies relied on telephone surveys of over

35,000 Americans. Reviewing the data from the study, researchers distinguished five key

findings when comparing the data between 2007 and 2015: (1) Those who identify

themselves as Christian are declining in percentage of the populations and in overall

number; (2) The largest declines have been in mainline Protestant traditions and

Catholics, while evangelicals have had only a slight decrease of 1%; (3) The decline of

Christians has correlated with the rise of those who have no religious affiliation, the

"nones"; (4) The decline of Christians and rise of the "nones" are not limited to those in a

younger generation and/or are men, but have occurred in some form across many

demographic groups; and (5) Those in America who identify with non-Christian faiths,

such as Islam, has slightly increased. (Lipka, 2015).

Why is the decline in Christian identification and participation a problem?

Research has indicated a variety of reasons that the increase of religious unaffiliation

hinders the call to seek justice. (1) As faith has become de-institutionalized, technology

has allowed people to absorb the essence of the Christian language without the benefits

and practices of the community itself. In the age of rapid technological development,

Christian education practice has moved away from a communal approach, one that relies

on a shared story, and toward an online, individualized spirituality that leads to isolation

and division (Beinart, 2017). (2) Though secularism is increasingly overtaking

institutional religion in our society, it has not led to more tolerance. When conservatives

and liberals alike disengage from organized religion, they are no more inclined to be

tolerant. Conservative White Christians who do not attend church regularly may be less

hostile to gay people, but they also tend to be more hostile to persons who are Black,

Latino, and/or Muslim (Beinart, 2017). They were also more likely to vote for Donald

Trump in the 2016 presidential election (Beinart, 2017). (3) The ethics of love,

forgiveness, and reconciliation emphasized by many civil rights leaders in the 1960's

shared a common language that crossed color lines. The post-Christian perspective of

both conservatives and liberals, black and white, focus more on identity politics (Beinart, 2017).   While many commentators argue that identity politics minimizes the various qualities of individuals into one characteristic, others recognize the power of group identity to create greater self-awareness and social belonging (Walters, 2017). This focus sees identity politics as a form of civil rights that empowers those who have been placed on the margins to counteract the dominant narrative and negative stereotypes to bring to light their vision and hope (Walters, 2017). (4) Secularism isn't easing political conflicts but is rather further dividing national and racial concerns. Those who do not attend church, both evangelical and secular, tend to redraw boundaries of identity, de-emphasizing morality and religion and emphasizing race and nation (Beinart, 2017).

The need to integrate the sacramental and the prophetic

Christian education has failed to unify the alternating currents of sacramental and prophetic imagination (Scott, 2016). How we talk about education determines how we interact with the world. Sacramental imagining sees people and creation through the lens of wonder, love, and praise. In this stream, teaching moves beyond a focus on a schooling model of techniques and methods and into a sense of life-long learning in which everyone and everything educates. This spiritual and sacramental imagining is only one side of the coin. Prophetic imagining must also see injustice in all forms and call the congregation to repentance. Justice without the sacramental can lead to negativity and anger. Spirituality divorced from the prophetic prompts a naive sentimentality (Scott, 2016). To move beyond the failure of Christian education to truly form congregants into the way of Christ, there must be a merging of the sacramental and the prophetic as essential components of each other.

Reflecting on the work of Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) discussion of the

dialectical tension between priestly and prophetic in black churches, Barnes (2004) found

that black congregations with a more priestly focus, described as an other-worldly

orientation, are just as positioned to work for justice as those with a more prophetic bent.

The priestly function gives hope to congregants of a better life to come in the afterlife.

However, the priestly function can also lead some to set themselves apart from the

secular culture rather than engage its social inequities. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990)

contend that a profound faith is foundational in sustaining acts of justice. Piety can

inspire leaders in the work of liberation and political action as the integrated and

inseparable focus of lived faith (Barnes, 2004; West, 1982). The level at which pastor's

lean toward the priestly or the prophetic in their teaching and leadership can affect the

church's mission and prophetic work in the world (Barnes, 2004).

African-American scholar Cornel West conceptualizes a prophetic spirituality that

impacts the everyday lives of Black people in the United States, bringing hope in the

midst of the prevalent systems of racism (Dantley, 2008). From elements of West's

prophetic spirituality, Dantley (2008) develops connections for educational leadership,

which he calls *principled*, *pragmatic*, and *purposive*. Principled leadership is committed

to equity and justice, knowing that one's actions are grounded in ethical standards that

lead to what is in the best interest of students. Critical self-reflection is at the core of

principled leadership requires addressing both personal and organizational privilege that

leads to discrimination and marginalization. Pragmatic leadership advocates for critical

action that seeks to effect change in the status quo. Purposive leadership "involves the

spiritual work of crafting possibilities when real substantive change appears to be close to

non-existent" (Dantley, 2008, p.458). These purposive leaders lament the realities of the

oppressive systems that seem overwhelming, but they also understand their role as a

calling and so act with hope that circumstances can change. Referencing the crucifixion

and resurrection of Jesus, purposive leaders are apt to say, "It's Friday but Sunday's

coming." Understanding these leadership stances help leaders recognize how prophetic

spirituality is a calling that is vital to creating a community of hope and justice.

How Congregations Understand Justice

Todd and Rufta (2012) examined how religious persons and congregations

understand and work for social justice. Findings revealed multiple definitions of social

justice that included caring for basic needs, working to address social structures that

produce inequity and the devaluing of human dignity, and the responsibility of

congregations to participate in this work. In mainline Christian congregations, when

congregations seek to make a positive difference in their communities, they actively

participate in acts of service as well as political engagement. Results also suggested the

need to include a development process that exposes injustice, promotes social justice

mentors, creates opportunities to participate in a social justice community, and seeks to

educate others along the way.

While churches have always been engaged in acts of service, it seems how they

engage is changing. In an analysis of national surveys to assess how patterns of church

service have changed over time, findings illustrated that activities related to acts of

service have increased, while political engagement has waned (Fulton, 2016). As

congregations consider acts of service, defined as short-term relief to meet immediate

needs, while also seeking justice through long-term solutions, the decline in political

participation may hinder their ability to accomplish that mission. The "comfortable church culture" takes an individualistic approach to serving, caring for needs while neglecting to address the larger systemic issues that create injustice, which maintains the status quo of power dynamics (Delehanty, 2016, p. 38).

In researching the connection between white privilege, religious belief, and social justice action, Todd, McConnell, and Suffrin (2014) found that when justice is sanctified as an essential component of faith, then congregants exhibit a greater awareness of their privilege and an increased commitment to social justice. In more conservative strands of Christianity, justice is less connected to faith. More conservative belief systems focus on a personal relationship with Jesus, place value on individualism, and hold that social structures are not necessary to promote equality (Delehanty, 2016; Todd, et al., 2014). These beliefs, which lessen the connection between spirituality and justice, lead to less willingness from congregants to focus on their privilege and result in less commitment to causes of justice.

The academic literature agrees that the problem of separating justice from faith leads to the lack of justice commitment and to a lack of influence of congregations in the community. To address this problem of practice, congregations can become learning organizations that seek to increase the capacity of their leaders to integrate spirituality and justice, to hear the diversity of stories beyond the four walls of their building, and to deepen biblical knowledge of the connection between the sacramental and the prophetic.

SECTION 2: LOCAL CONGREGATIONAL CONTEXT

This section addresses my position within the organizational context and what led me to explore this issue. It will also include my axiology, the values and assumptions I bring to the improvement process which may influence how research and interpretation is done. Understanding the location, history, and values of the congregation in which this improvement initiative occurs provides background and context for this study.

Scholar-Practitioner Positionality and Axiology

As a scholar-practitioner, my interest in researching and addressing the problem of practice is both professional and personal. I am ordained clergy and have served as Minister of Christian Education and Spiritual Formation at First Baptist Church of Asheville since December 2004. I also have participated in peer learning groups, lead workshops, and worked with ecumenical groups to serve our community for the common good. These experiences have increased my awareness of injustice, as well as the many opportunities for congregations to affect change that can lead to a more just, equitable, and loving society. My desire is to bring the best of educational research to inform leadership practices that guide continuous improvement in congregations.

In American society, I am a person of privilege - White, middle-class, educated, employed, Christian, heterosexual, middle-aged, married man with three children, who has a support system and safety net of family and friends. Many days, I forget that the dominant cultural norms reflect my skin color, sexual identity, and gender. What I see on television, what I read in books, and who I sit beside in the pew at church trick me into forgetting my privilege and subconsciously defining people who are different from me as

somehow inferior. For the most part, I spend time with people who are like me, who

share my privilege, and as a result, I and my friends and congregants often fail to hear the

unique, beautiful, and sometimes tragic perspectives of those who have different

experiences that we do. I have come to believe that the first step in educating for social

justice is to recognize and share the part my own privilege plays in maintaining a culture

of injustice and inequity.

One of my earliest questions was why any person would be excluded. I

remember, in elementary school, inviting my friends from school to a party at my house.

A parent of my best friend protested my invitation of another friend who was Black,

telling my parents that her son would not be allowed to come if my Black friend did.

Though I do not remember the party or who came, I have not forgotten the hurt of having

to choose between friends based solely on skin color. This childhood experience

continues to inform my desire to include all persons and to see justice as an essential

component of my faith.

I recognize that my position as clergy serving in this congregational context and

as a person of privilege may influence how I interpret the reflections of congregational

leaders, what literature I read, and what bias I bring to the process (Holmes, 2014).

However, my experiences have provided me with a rich theological background that has

formed me to recognize the inherent and sacred worth of all people. In designing this

improvement process, my desire was that leaders have an experience that included

different voices. I deeply value the sharing of personal narratives and assume that

theology is deepened and better understood when we listen to the unique stories of others.

When people are seen not as objects but are known as beloved children of God and

afforded inherent dignity and worth, I believe leaders will be motivated to work for the wellbeing of those who are oppressed.

In the choice and analysis of articles and findings from data, I regularly reflected on how my personal faith, my role as clergy, and my privilege influenced what I considered most appropriate and how these prompted my conclusions. I believe that the value of this study is in its ability to directly affect the practices of congregations for critical reflection, humble listening, and seeking justice. An assumption that I bring to this study is that congregational leaders are in positions of influence and positively shape those they lead. By building capacity in these leaders, I believe that they will help congregants recognize justice as an essential component of a lived faith.

Congregational Context

First Baptist Church of Asheville (FBCA) is located in downtown Asheville, in the beautiful mountains of western North Carolina. The demographics of downtown Asheville reveal a population of approximately 91,000 in city, 82% of who described themselves as White. Tourism, education, and healthcare are major sources of employment. Asheville is known as a vacation destination due to its craft brewing industry, the Biltmore estate, local restaurants, and its location in the Great Smokey Mountains with many beautiful and challenging outdoor activities. However, for those who live and work in Asheville, there is a lack of affordable housing and 16.2 % of the population lives in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017; Asheville Chamber, 2018).

Asheville is home to over 300 religious organizations, predominantly Baptist and Methodist (Pantas, 2018). The congregation of FBCA was founded almost 200 years ago and has been in its present location in downtown Asheville since 1927. There are

approximately 1,200 involved members, eight clergy, seven ministry assistants, and more

than fifty lay leaders. The church claims a progressive theology and is active in mission

and ministry in its community. FBCA welcomes non-profits to use the church facility

and provides educational opportunities to the community. The vision of FBCA reads,

"First Baptist Church of Asheville is a caring and compassionate church which, like

Jesus, accepts everyone and is committed to serving our neighbors, community, and

world" (www.fbca.net). Organizationally, the church is governed by a Collaborative

Ministry Model (CMM), sharing leadership among the congregation members, church

leadership, and ministerial staff. Teamwork, trust, care, and respect are espoused values

for this shared ministry.

Like community colleges, local congregations have an open access mission,

inviting all people in the community to participate in its mission and ministries. As seen

in Figure 2, congregations are situated in neighborhoods, cultures, national narratives,

and partnership networks. This ecological frame (Ammerman & Snyder, 2015) can

affect how congregations form their identity and their call to care for their community, as

well as their influence and attendance.
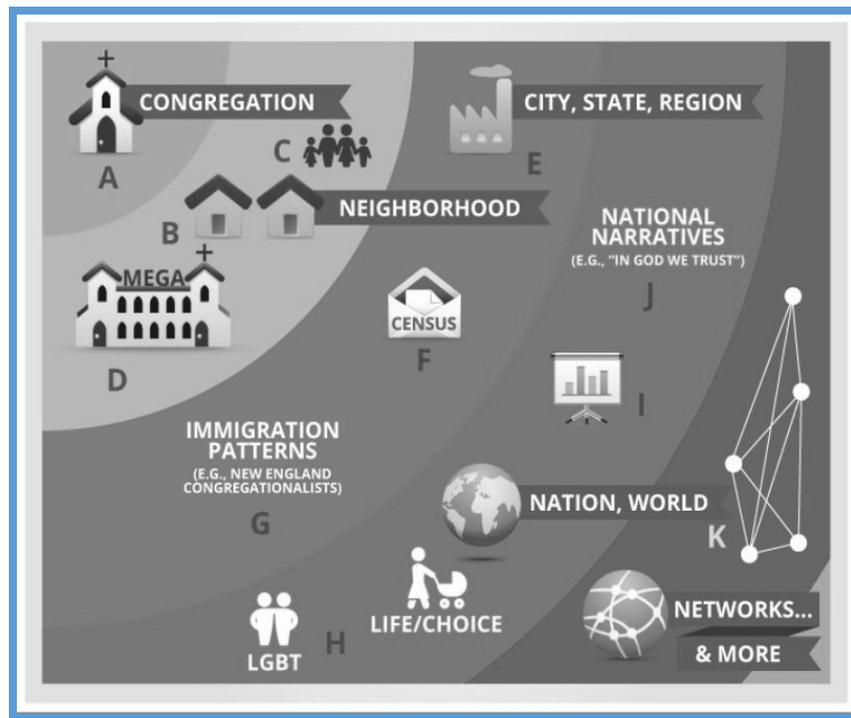
Figure 2. Ecological Frame. How other agencies, beliefs, and narrative affect churches (Ammerman & Snyder, 2015).

Since the 2007-2008 academic year, average worship attendance at FBCA has slightly, though steadily, declined. Rationales that our ministerial staff have heard from congregants indicate that competing activities, jobs responsibilities, political and theological differences, and time away visiting friends and family have led to inconsistent involvement and declining attendance. FBCA's hope is to increase involvement by becoming a meaning-making community committed to Scriptural imagination, a deep spirituality, and an active role in our community (Green, 2018).

In this context, FBCA faces similar challenges to the trends arising from the changing religious landscape as revealed in research of spirituality and justice

(Ammerman, 2013; Beinhart, 2017; Lipka, 2015). A problem faced in our

congregational teaching and practice is that we have not developed sufficient capacity in

our leaders to integrate spiritual practices and the prophetic call for justice as essential

components of faith formation. This problem has led some members to search elsewhere

for spiritual formation and/or for opportunities to act for justice. If congregations

maintain neutrality in the face of injustice (Freire, 1985), or fail to engage in Scriptural

imagination to guide prophetic actions, the church will isolate itself from its local culture

and become irrelevant to the needs and hopes of its community.

Two significant congregational processes occurred in 2018-19 that created a

backdrop to this disquisition: (1) The gathering of congregational stories to discover a

shared vision of desired futures; and (2) a discernment process aimed to reach a

consensus statement about the congregation's welcome and inclusion of people who are

LGBTQ+. These two processes required much time, emotional energy, and spiritual

discernment over the past two years.

Desired Futures

In consultation with the Center for Congregations (CFC), an Indiana group whose

mission it is to strengthen congregations by helping them find and use the best resources

to address their challenges and opportunities (centerforcongregations.org), First Baptist

Church of Asheville hosted six story-gathering events on Wednesdays and Sundays early

in the first quarter of 2018. Over 30 congregants were recruited and trained to facilitate

these gathering events and to collect the stories. There were 286 congregants who

participated, including 246 adults, 25 youth (grades 7-12), and 15 children (grades 1-6).

During these gatherings, members of the congregation gathered around tables in groups of no more than seven members plus a facilitator. These members shared meaningful stories from previous experiences at church. Participants also were asked for stories about a desired future for the church, reflecting their hopes for five years ahead. Using appreciative inquiry, two prompts were used to shape conversation:

1. Tell about a time when you felt most alive, most fulfilled, or most enthused about our congregation. Share the story of this best moment. What were you doing? Who was with you? What feeling did you have? What happened as a result?

2. Imagine that it is 2023, and our congregation is living God's call in fresh ways. What are one or two things you see happening? Who is involved? What good is happening as a result?

The CFC analyzed and interpreted the qualitative data from these story gathering sessions, as well as from interviews and minutes of leadership meetings, using an asset-based, developmental approach. The theological reason given by the CFC for using this approach was that God created a world of abundant possibility, not a world of scarcity, and that congregations thrive when they pay attention to their gifts and dreams.

The findings from the data of collected stories revealed that FBCA is an active congregation, committed to acts of mercy and charity, where relationships are valued, worship and music is seen as a means of grace, and welcome and inclusion is practiced as crucial to a lived faith. The CFC also described five themes, which arose from the second prompt and in conversation with the ministerial staff, that communicated the desired future for our congregation (Figure 3). These included:

1. *First Baptist will be a place where the parable path of Jesus is a way of life*,
    which resulted in the development of a congregational covenant and a catechetical
    guide that includes responses to questions of faith and practices for a lived faith.

2. *First Baptist will be a church that welcomes and includes all in a way consistent
    with God's love and wisdom*, which led to a discernment process on how we
    welcome and include all people.

3. *First Baptist will wrap its arms around the city of Asheville*, indicating our
    commitment to the downtown community in which we are located.

4. *Worship and music will remain essential and move beyond the doors of the
    church*, which has resulted in the expansion of the Academy for the Arts (AFTA)
    at First Baptist Church of Asheville, as well as leading worship in a local
    women's prison.

5. *First Baptist will be a church of spiritual transformation grounded in Scriptural*

   imagination, communal discernment, and lived faith. This future statement has led

   to the expansion of the Center for Faith and Life at FBCA to include a speakers

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Our Desired Future Statements

- First Baptist will be a place where the parable path of Jesus is a way of life.
- First Baptist will be a church that welcomes and includes all in a way consistent with God's love and wisdom.
- First Baptist will wrap its arms around the city of Asheville.
- Worship and music will remain essential and move beyond the doors of the church.
- First Baptist will be a church of spiritual transformation grounded in Scriptural imagination, communal discernment, and lived faith.

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and artists series, theological training for clergy and laity, learning gatherings for

theological exploration and conversation, and spirituality events which will

include pilgrimages and spiritual retreats.

Figure 3. FBCA Five Desired Future Statements. Based in congregational storytelling

gatherings, these statements reflect the congregational hopes and vision.

Discernment Process of Welcome and Inclusion

One of the most prominent themes of the desired future statement was, "First

Baptist will be a church that welcomes and includes all in a way consistent with God's

love and wisdom." In October 2018, the deacon officers at FBCA formed a 12-member

Discernment Committee, led by me, with the task of developing listening and learning

sessions to discern how to welcome and include persons who identify as LGBTQ+ and their allies. The shared hope of this Discernment Committee was to create a consensus statement that valued both unity and diversity in matters of faith and that sought "to express what 'seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us'" (Acts 15:28).

Findings in a Baltimore case study of the role of structure versus individual agency in churches' responses to issues of sexuality revealed that institutions in local communities, including schools, healthcare organizations, religious institutions and business, can shape the perception of and attitude toward people living with HIV/AIDS in their community (Cunningham, Kerrigan, McNeely, & Ellen, 2011). Understanding this influence created critical consciousness within leaders for reducing the biases that stigmatize people. Local culture may be a negative influence driving the actions of congregations or may be viewed through a theological lens that opens congregations to love and care in new ways. Like the Baltimore study, our congregation continuously navigates the waters of tradition, local culture, theology, and individual agency (Cunningham, et al., 2011).

In addressing the stigma associated with issues of sexuality, the authors of the case study pointed to three factors that may contribute to constraints on congregational responses to sexuality: (1) organizational system, including programs, policies, official teachings, and congregational culture; (2) environmental factors, such as demographics, local culture, and the larger religious community; and (3) personal experiences, including training and personal relationships. The congregation's organizational system interacts with environmental factors to determine a normative framework for sexuality that guides possible interventions. Additionally, findings revealed that individual agency, rooted in

experience and training, led congregational leaders to be more flexible in their responses, often acting in ways counter to the normative framework (Cunningham, et al., 2011).

Since the formation of the Discernment Committee, several in the congregation have expressed anxiety about the vision and direction of the church in matters of welcome and inclusion of all. Many shared their belief that the congregation was already welcoming and inclusive, yet also worried that bringing up the conversation could lead to division. Those who felt the congregation was already welcoming often stated, "We are all sinners." As pointed out in the Baltimore study, the language of sin, especially when it is placed in an identity, can undermine an offer of welcome and inclusion, relegating people who identify as LGBTQ+ to a second-class status (Cunningham, et al., 2011). Additionally, it is important to recognize that non-action would keep LGBTQ+ persons on the margins.

The Discernment Committee addressed the charge with care and compassion for all members. The Committee provided listening sessions to hear the hopes and concerns from congregational members. They hosted a panel to share what they were learning from these listening sessions, Scripture study, and readings. The senior pastor and I led Bible study sessions to explore Scripture and how it speaks of welcome and inclusion. After several months, with unanimous approval from the Discernment Team, and the support of the Deacons, a consensus statement for welcome and inclusion was presented to the congregation and read as a litany in worship on Pentecost Sunday (Appendix A).

The Statement of Welcome and Inclusion consisted of three paragraphs. The first paragraph was a quotation from 1938 that was on the cover of FBCA's church bulletin throughout that year.

"To all who mourn and need comfort – to all who are weary and need rest – to all

who are friendless and wish friendship – to all who are homeless and wish

sheltering love – to all who pray and to all who do not, and ought – to all who sin

and need a savior, and to whosoever will – this church opens wide the door and

makes free a place, and in the name of Jesus, the Lord, says welcome"

(reaffirmed, First Baptist Church of Asheville bulletin, 1938).

At the time this was written, our congregation was not fully inclusive, but the

Discernment Committee recognized this statement as an historical aspiration to welcome

and include all. Throughout its history, FBCA has been faced with questions about who it

would welcome and include in membership and leadership – African-Americans, women,

people from other traditions. In each case, the congregation voted to be inclusive, though

each time, the decision resulted in some members leaving.

The second paragraph made clear that there is no one who is not welcome to

worship and serve with our congregation.

As new creations in Jesus Christ, and as priests to one another, we joyfully

proclaim the sacred worth of all people, and we welcome all as beloved children

of God, whatever their age, race, physical or mental ability, gender, level of

education, marital status, economic circumstance, sexual orientation, and

religious background, to participate in all aspects of the life and ministry of our

congregation.

The theological proclamation of the sacred worth of all people has been a gift of this

statement that most members can agree upon. The Discernment Committee's hope was

that everyone could read these words and know that they are welcomed and included at

FBCA.

The most controversial portion of the welcome and inclusion statement was the third paragraph which clarifies, among other things, who can be ordained and who can be married.

> *Those who profess faith in the God of Jesus Christ, who are members of our congregation, and who are called by the Spirit to use their unique gifts for the building up of the body of Christ, may share in the graces of church membership over a lifetime, including baptism, the Lord's Supper, marriage, parent-child dedication, deacon ordination, ordination to Gospel ministry, teaching, and pastoral care.*

In other words, there are no second-class members.

To these three paragraphs, the Discernment Committee wrote a preamble thanking the congregation for their participation in the process and reminding them of our Baptist commitment to freedom of individual conscience. Additionally, there was a challenge given to the congregation to continue to read and study Scripture together, to listen to one another's stories, and to pray for God's Spirit to guide us all.

Since the statement was shared with the congregation, several prominent members decided to leave to find other faith communities who may be less progressive on matters of welcome and inclusion. These departures have affected friendships, church finances, and attendance. However, the congregation has also welcomed new members, strengthened our emphasis on inclusion, and has managed its finances in healthy ways.

Section 3: Theory of Improvement for Integrating Justice and Faith in

Congregations

"Love is life's purpose: being loved and loving—which necessarily

includes being heard, seen, understood, and accepted while also

hearing, seeing, understanding, and accepting others. Love

welcomes and delights in us as we are and then works and serves

to make us who we can become. To be loved and to love is why we

are here" (Sayles, 2019).

Not all congregational members welcome the integration of the prophetic call to

justice with the sacramental practices of spirituality. In our changing culture, prophetic

calls for justice rub against individualism and privilege (Todd, et al., 2014). Some

members of the congregation will prefer the comfortable church culture, one that does not

focus on seeking justice as a non-negotiable to faith formation (Delehanty, 2016).

However, if congregations hope to follow the challenging words of Jesus to care for those

who experience inequitable treatment and proclaim liberation for the oppressed, they

must be clear about listening to the voices of those who have been minoritized in our

communities and seek to share in meeting needs and working for justice alongside those

voices.

How can mainline churches educate and form congregants toward a "just and

generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes

amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all?" (McLaren, 2016,

p.2). Congregations are complex organizations. Educating for spirituality and justice must be rooted in Scripture and theology while also moving persons to act in their communities in daily life, with empathy and for the common good. The ideal of the beloved community in which all are welcomed and included is not yet here, but there is hope if congregations recognize, include, and value the giftedness of people from all walks of life.

I contend that congregations have a Scriptural responsibility to dismantle the systems that create divisions and injustice among those in our communities. Congregations form persons who live and work in society. By moving beyond deficit ideology (Gorski, 2010), which sees those outside the church as responsible for inequities, and toward an asset-based lens that views each person as gifted and valued, congregations can play a vital role in creating a more loving and just society.

Desired Aim and Drivers

The aim of this project is for congregational leaders and members to recognize spirituality and justice as non-negotiable components of faith formation. Congregations are challenged to celebrate similarities and differences, recognizing and correcting stereotypes and misinformation, if they are to understand and overcome the personal effects of discrimination. Through the telling and hearing of stories, supported by Scripture, practical theology, and research-informed resources, congregations can recognize and help eliminate injustice and scornful comments that diminish the sacred worth of others (Brown, 2004).

A driver diagram (Figure 4) was created to describe possible drivers that contribute to improvement and potential change ideas for integrating justice and

spirituality into the lived faith of congregants (Byrk, et al., 2015; Spaulding & Hinnant-Crawford, 2019). Beginning with the aim in mind, the primary drivers were categorized in the following ways: (1) educating congregational leaders in the biblical and theological aspects of justice and spirituality, (2) seeking to include voices of those who have been minoritized and excluded in our community, (3) providing intentional advising to members and leaders of how they can connect justice and spirituality in daily living, and (4) networking with congregations and non-profits to work for justice in our community.
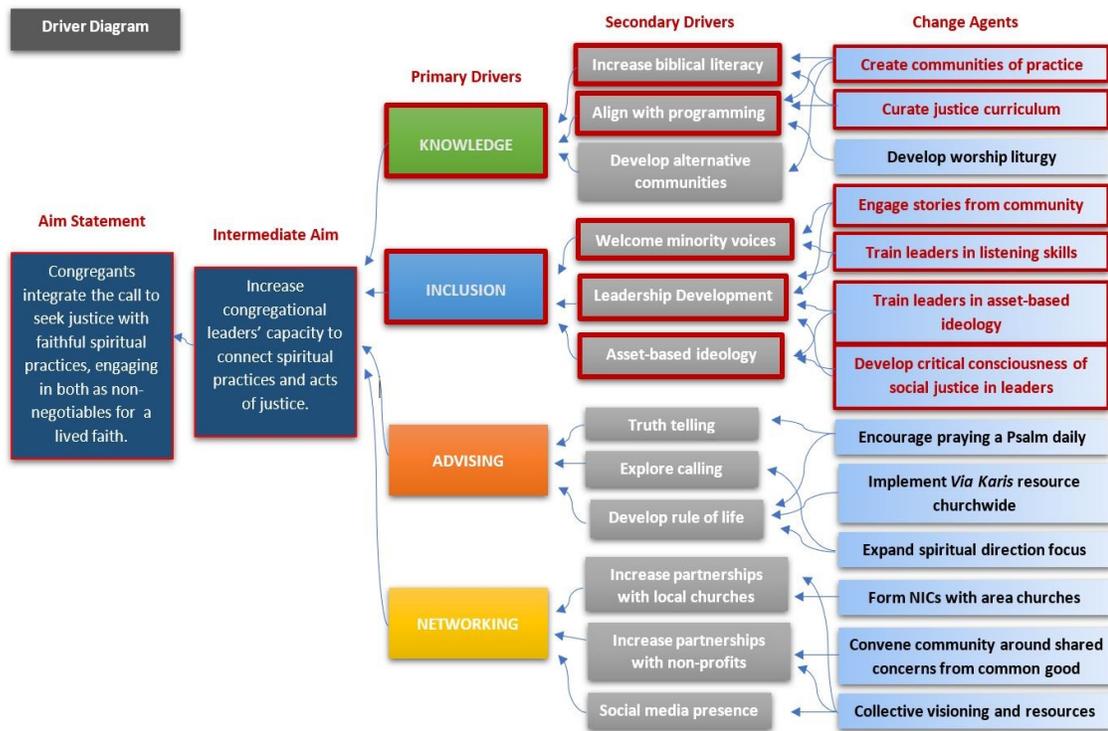
Figure 4. Driver Diagram. Drivers and change ideas that lead to achievement of the aim.

Though each of these drivers had potential to foster achievement of the aim of creating a more just and spiritually-centered congregation, I sought to leverage the

drivers of knowledge and inclusion, seeking to increase capacity of congregational

leaders in these areas. The improvement initiative focused on change ideas that promote

Scriptural imagination and knowledge, asset-based thinking, appreciative listening skills

for leadership, reflection on stories from community voices, and creation of ongoing

Communities of Practice (CoPs) that bring together leaders for critical reflection through

an equity lens. CoPs provide leaders networking opportunities, knowledge to increase

awareness of inequity, readings of interest, and ways to improve pedagogy in achieving

the goal of integrating justice and spirituality in faith formation (Farnsworth, Kleanthous,

& Wenger-Trayner, 2016; Omidvar & Kislov, 2013; Wegner, 1998).   These drivers and

change ideas were selected because they fit into the structure of the congregation and

would be achievable in the time frame of the improvement initiative.

Theory of Improvement and Components

My *theory of improvement* posits that establishing research-informed learning

processes that integrate spirituality and justice as essential components of faith formation

will increase the capacity of congregational leaders to practice and promote a more just

and lived faith, fostering a more inclusive and socially-minded congregation.

Specifically, research suggests the consideration of three components for the

improvement initiative: (1) Design and implementation of leader development workshops

and resources to meet the identified needs of leaders, (2) implementation of a community

listening project to hear stories from our community as a process of awareness and

reconciliation, and (3) formation of Communities of Practice (CoPs) to provide

congregational leaders a collaborative network for continuous improvement (Figure 5).

These components of the improvement initiative sought to re-imagine and to integrate the

sacramental practices of spirituality and the prophetic call to do justice through increasing

leadership capacity in biblical knowledge, listening leadership, and critical

consciousness, with the aim of leading congregants to connect spirituality and justice as a

way of life, a living faith.

Improvement Framework Components

LEARNING

Leadership Development

Focus on Equity / Assets-based Thinking / Spirituality and Justice

EXPERIENCING

Community Listening Project

Focus on Empathy / Assets-based Thinking

IMAGINING

Communities of Practice

Focus on identity, continuous learning and integration of spirituality and justice
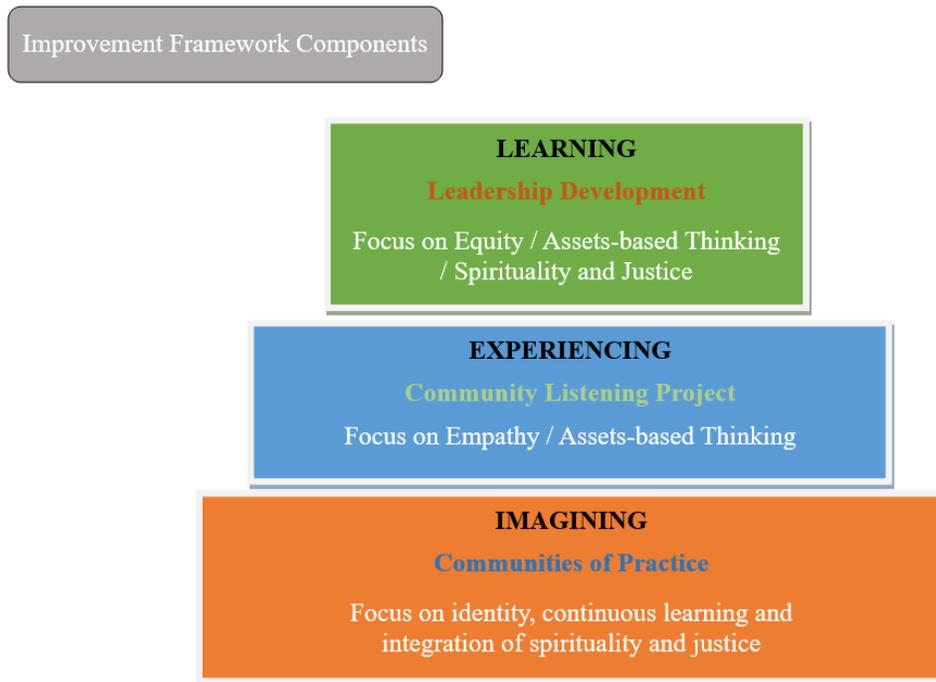
Figure 5. Improvement Framework. Three components for building leadership capacity.

The components of the improvement initiative began with learning together about

inequities in our world, the prophetic call of Scripture to do justice and deepen our

spiritual practice, and how to move from deficit-based to asset-based thinking. The

initial component of the improvement initiative brought together congregational leaders

for a series of leadership development workshops which sought to build capacity for the

integration of spirituality and justice through biblical study, curated resources, innovative

pedagogy, and asset-based training. Those leaders invited to the workshops included

chairpersons, or assigned members, from each of the congregation's five leadership

councils, deacon leaders, faculty of our Christian formation communities, and clergy.

For the second component of the improvement initiative, participants were trained

in listening skills and reviewed asset-based learning. Trained leaders began a community

listening project that reached out to community members to inquire about their gifts and

hopes, especially those whose voices have been unknown, ignored, or silenced. Rather

than asking questions about how the church might help with needs or inquiring why

community members were not active in church, this team was trained in appreciative

inquiry, an assets-based approach to learn about the gifts, passions, dreams, and

contributions of these community voices (Shapiro, 2016).

Ongoing communities of practice (CoPs) were then developed to bring together

church leaders around similar interests and leadership functions (Farnsworth, et al., 2016;

Omidvar & Kislov, 2013; Wegner, 1998). For example, education faculty formed the

core of a CoP; clergy formed another. In these CoPs, leaders were tasked with sharing

portions of their critical autobiographies, reflecting on their history of and experiences

with spirituality and justice. The purpose of the CoPs was to create a sustainable

structure to gather leaders together for fellowship, engagement in Scriptural and

prophetic imagination, and to consider ways to strengthen pedagogy that helps their

students form a lived theology.

Literature on the Improvement Initiatives

Each component of this improvement initiative - Imagining, Learning, and

Experiencing - was informed by scholarship. The following sections will highlight the

research that guides the development of these components.

To increase capacity and commitment toward leadership for equity and social justice, this disquisition will utilize research-based strategies for transformation. One strategy invites adult learners to craft cultural autobiographies to critically reflect on their life histories to better understand how their privilege and past experiences have affected the course of their lives Brown, 2004; Dantley, 2008). Leader development workshops aimed at recognizing and reducing prejudice and increasing the capacity of leaders to advocate for justice and equity are also vital for learning. Journaling is an additional practice that can transform attitudes and awareness through reflection, clarify what leaders are learning and making connections to their lived experiences (Brown, 2004). Beyond the personal benefit of journal reflections, it is important to share these ruminations with others in a safe, nonjudgmental group of people (Waters, 2015). Strategies for transforming leaders must also go beyond their personal experiences to create a relationship-driven pedagogy (Dantley, Beachum, & McCray, 2008) that listens to others who have a different background or experiences from the leader (race, religious tradition, sexual orientation, education, economic status). Listening to others can help leaders understand, appreciate, and even value different worldviews. Additional strategies to create a social justice framework include: providing adult learners with extended educational experiences with different cultures, exposing leaders to alternative literature from minority perspectives, participating in diversity panels that promote understanding of the way others have been treated unjustly, and developing plans to advocate for equity, inclusion, and justice within their spheres of influence (Brown, 2004; Dantley, et al., 2008).

Learning: Leadership Development

Scholarship guiding this component of the improvement initiative focuses on how congregations and congregational leaders learn. The Center for Congregations (CFC) suggests that formative practices in congregations can lead to continuous learning. Recognizing the increasing diversity in congregations can create critical consciousness in leaders, causing them to reflect on their privilege, which can motivate them to act for justice. Leadership development is most effective for learning when research-informed standards are applied. The following sections will expand on these areas for leadership development.

Learning Organizations. Learning organizations are known by their culture of continuous learning. Watkins and Marsick (1999) provide a model describing dimensions that build and undergird learning organizations. These seven assessments include: opportunities for continuous learning, open inquiry and dialogue, collaboration and team learning, shared learning, move toward a shared vision, connect organization to its environment, and provide strategic leadership for learning (Figure 6). These dimensions reflect an organizational culture that is continuously reinforced over time, not a set of quick-fix directives (Marsick & Watkins, 1999). The goal is a collaborative effort leading to transformation and continuous learning.
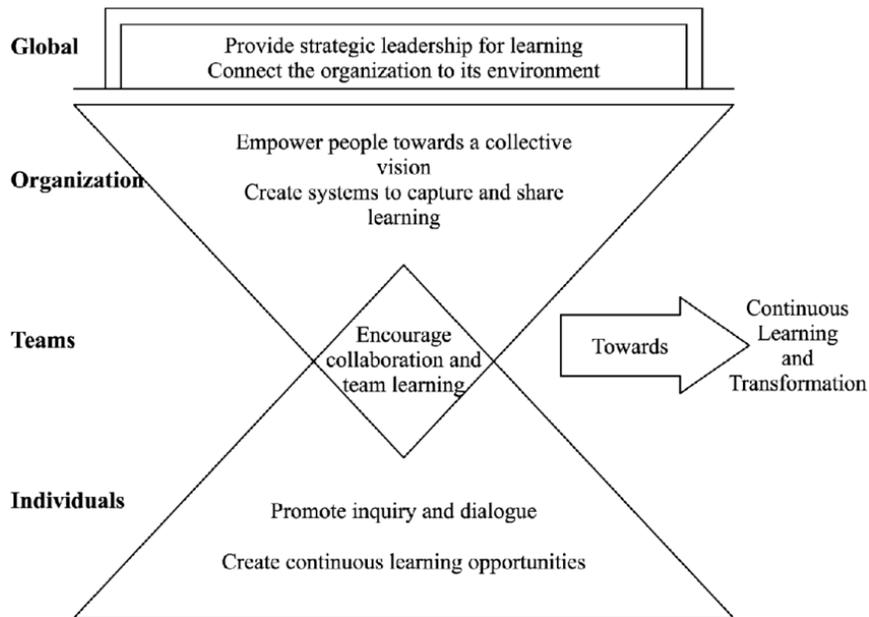
Source: Marsick and Watkins (1999, p. 11)

Figure 6. Watkins and Marsick model for learning organizations.

How Congregations Learn. Tim Shapiro of the Center for Congregations (CFC) has worked with the FBCA congregation for strategic planning. Though the CFC does not have experience working with congregations on integrating spirituality and justice, they do have experience with ways in which a congregation is a formative community (Shapiro, T., personal conversation, June 2, 2018). That is, they explore what congregational activities form a people of faith into a particular way of life that includes action around the prophetic call to justice. These formative practices include: (1) means of grace – engagement with scripture, worship, and the sacraments; (2) healthy relationships; (3) story - narratives that hold significance in people's lives and are held through careful listening and affirmation; (4) reflection on practices, supported by virtues, that may include hospitality, table fellowship, artistic expression, discernment,

and conversation; and (5) liminal experiences - cross-cultural encounters that hold some

quality of ambiguity or disorientation which allow new forms of character and insight to

be realized.

The journey of congregations becoming learning organizations includes not only

defining a challenge and exploring the issues surrounding the challenge, but also includes

the possibility of disappointment and/or discovery. Sometimes the journey will require

taking on something new and at other times, letting go when a process or event has

fulfilled its purpose. Once an innovation is implemented and validated, new challenges

will occur in a new culture of continuous learning (Shapiro, 2017; Figure 7).

Figure 7. Tim Shapiro's model for learning congregations (Shapiro, 2017).

From a learning congregation perspective, leaders will focus on articulating the

vision of the congregation and guiding the congregants to increase their capacity for

theologically informed action, helping congregants interpret the culture in which they live

and reflecting the congregation's values and ministry to their community (Fleischer,

2004; Price 2004). Though spiritual practice is often framed in individualistic terms,

communal expressions are vital. Congregations gather on a regular basis to reflect on

Scripture and its application to their daily living, and they must also consider models for

communal practice throughout the week to address justice issues and interact with the

complex networks of power systems (de Kock, 2015; Fleischer, 2004; Gallagher &

Newton, 2009).

Traditioned Innovation. L. Greg Jones (2009), senior fellow in Leadership

Education at Duke University, describes vibrant Christian institutions as those that

nurture traditioned innovation, honoring the wisdom of tradition while practicing

continuous learning. Traditioned innovation focuses on the work of the Holy Spirit to

guide followers into future faithfulness. Jones (2009) contends that vibrant congregations

create laboratories of innovation in which people learn the way of love as a way of life.

Transformative learning is not change simply for the sake of change. Generative

leaders recognize wisdom embedded in tradition that needs to be conserved.

Transformative innovation is rooted and grounded in love, in the redemptive work of the

God who was, who is, and who is to come. This innovation is transformative because it

seeks vitality and meaning, adapting overly institutional organizations into living

organisms (Jones, 2009).

As congregations develop laboratories of innovation to attend to the needs and

hopes of both those within the congregation and those who are unaffiliated with any

congregation, it is vital to listen deeply to take seriously the unique life stories, concerns,

and burdens that shape people. Congregations need to share the reason behind cherished

traditions to provide understanding and meaning. Congregations need also to develop

relationships beyond the walls of the church facility to participate in new networks that truly engage the community's culture (Zuber, 2015).

Increasing Diversity. Congregations have witnessed increasing levels of diversity within their membership, as highlighted in the third wave of the National Congregations Study (NCS-III) was conducted in 2012. Previous iterations of this study were conducted in 1998 and 2006-07. The NCS-III asked questions about congregation's ethic composition, activities, structure, and ministry programming. Five trends emerged from the findings: (1) congregations were increasing in ethnic diversity, (2) affirmed greater acceptance of LGBTQ+, (3) were less formal in worship styles, (4) were declining in attendance, and (5) were less likely to be affiliated strongly with a denominational identity. In 2012, only 1 in 10 churches were identified as all-white, which is a significant decrease from approximately 1 in 5 in a 1998 survey (Chaves & Anderson, 2014). Additional studies have suggested that connecting social justice to a faith-based framework, recognition of a common humanity, and interconnection with diverse populations can lead privileged group members to engage in justice work (Goodman, 2000; Todd, et al., 2014). Recognizing the increasing diversity in our congregations offers churches the opportunity to model inclusion and equity in their leadership to reflect those who are participating in the life of the congregation.

Building social justice capacity in leaders involves both reflection and action spanning various dimensions that include personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological (Furman, 2012). Leadership begins with self-reflection that invites congregational leaders to recognize and address their susceptibility to bias and how prejudice may affect their leadership practices (Dantley, 2008). Leaders also must

develop a critical awareness of the nature of injustice in their world, develop a socially just pedagogy that is active and reflective, continue to build a toolkit of resources to that help them audit their processes, and resist barriers to deficit-thinking (Freire, 1986; Gorski, 2010).

       Standards for Professional Learning. *Learning Forward* (2018) is an educational association that strives to help members capitalize on professional learning to influence positive and sustainable change. Their Standards for Professional Learning include seven characteristics of professional learning, which are: (1) learning communities that are committed to improvement, communal responsibility, and alignment with mission, (2) skillful leadership who develop capacity for professional learning, (3) resources are curated and coordinated to foster learning, (4) qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analyzed to plan, assess, and evaluate learning, (5) educational research, theories, and model of learning are incorporated to achieve learning outcomes, (6) educational research on change and sustainability guide learning for long-term improvement, and (7) alignment of intended outcomes with performance an curriculum standards. These standards were incorporated in planning for the leadership development workshops.

Experiencing: Community Listening Project

       "In order to know what is just in a person-to-person encounter, love listens. It is its first task to listen. No human relation, especially no intimate one, is possible without mutual listening. Reproaches, reactions, defenses may be justified in terms of proportional justice. But perhaps they would prove to be unjust if there were more mutual listening. All things and all [people], so to speak, call on us

with small or loud voices. They want us to listen, they want us to understand their intrinsic claims, their justice of being. They want justice from us. But we can give it to them only through the love which listens" (Tillich, 1954, p. 84).

Inviting others to tell their stories creates a relationship that seeks understanding and promotes healing. As a growing number in our community and nation choose not to identify with any religious affiliation, congregational leaders can better understand the hopes and talents of these "nones" by humbly listening without agenda (Schein, 2013). In describing the background of a congregational listening project, this section will also consider Freire's pedagogy of listening to explore the importance and richness of listening leadership.

Institutional Practices and Experiments in Innovation to Connect with "Nones." To address the cultural narrative of the disconnect between justice and spirituality, learning congregations have the opportunity to experiment with new models that attend to the hopes expressed by the non-affiliated, such as the need for authentic community and ways to live meaningful lives. Actual engagement in ways that connect to the hopes and needs of others strengthens relationships between congregations and their communities. When relationships among diverse people are formed, when trust is developed that risks listening and sharing pain, and when leaders seek to understand more than being understood, an empathetic knowing arises. This empathetic knowing has the ability to lead toward greater compassion and patience, and away from judgment, which are keys to transformative learning (Price 2004).

Community Listening Project. Knowing someone's story and connecting with

them to make a difference in the world are steps toward greater understanding. It is not

enough for the church to care from a distance. Rather, the church has the unique

opportunity to see everything it says and does as participation in God's mission to

welcome justice into our communities. Recognizing the gifts of those in our community

whose voices have been silenced or ignored and including their insights into the church

culture has the potential to enriched both the church and the community in unexpected

ways (Gorski, 2010). Including these voices from the margins requires leaders to learn

how to negotiate difference and to recognize that their own experience is but one of many

(Dantley, 2008). This listening leads not only to welcoming diversity into our

congregations; it means including all people in leadership and decision-making. Vernā

Myers said, "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance"

(Sherban & Rashid, 2017, para. 2).

Churches do well to educate their members by reading Scripture from the

perspectives of marginalized voices. When Scripture is read only from a Western, male

perspective, the minority voices of women, global cultures, and LGBTQ+ persons are

ignored (De La Torre, 2002). The Bible, however, was written by people who were

oppressed to remember who they were and to tell their story. Exposing leaders to

literature and commentaries by women and people of color to hear these often-neglected

minority voices is an important pedagogical practice that can bring new light to Scripture

and Scripture's call to justice (Dantley, et al., 2008).

A Pedagogy of Listening. Listening is not simply being quiet while someone

else is speaking. Manyozo (2016) writes, "Listening to others implies that we get out of

our empirical and intellectual comfort zones of theories and models, and humbly subject

ourselves to intellectual scrutiny by others so as to gauge as to whether our knowledge

can stand the test" (p. 957). For Friere (1996), listening is an ethical and political duty

which may require admitting mistakes and seeking guidance from others. Freire

understands listening as both a virtue and practice of tolerance. Tolerance, as he depicts

it, is not naive acceptance but is rather an opportunity to learn from and share experiences

with different people. Listening and learning from people with diverse experiences,

beliefs, opinions, and practices does not require the listener to lose her autonomy or

personality, but instead is an act of faith that allows them to celebrate the uniqueness and

spirit of another person.

   Scholar-practitioners need to strengthen the capacity of leaders to practice the

three forms of listening described by Friere to implement effective improvement

initiatives that will enrich the church and community. The three categories of listening

leadership are: (a) listening to evidence; (b) listening to ourselves; and (c) listening as a

form of speaking (Manyozo, 2016).

   First, leaders must listen to evidence. In a new age of social media, cable

television, community engagement models, and other participatory media, people have an

increased ability to speak out (Manyozo, 2016). The question, however, is whether

anyone is listening and to what purpose. It is tempting to maintain stereotypes and only

listen to those with whom we agree.

   Leaders must also take time to reflect. Listening to oneself requires self-

assessment and willingness to recognize our hidden motivations. If leaders are to be

effective in listening to others, recognizing our biases will help them set aside deficit-

thinking and move toward a more generous listening that looks for the gifts in others

(Gorski, 2010; McLaren, 2016).

Lastly, Friere contends that leaders should listen as a form of speaking. Simply by listening, educators can establish friendships, which deepens commitment to liberation because loving friendships promote mutual understanding and care among equals (Gutiérrez, 1971). Through this listening, we affirm our solidarity with the oppressed and speak for their liberation. "To listen therefore, is an act of sincerity, a celebration of our faith in humanity, a triumph of our firm solidarity in ideals of democracy, equality and social justice. It allows us to become students of society and participants in the pedagogy of listening" (Manyozo, 2016, p. 958-959).

Imagining: Communities of Practice

While congregational leaders often facilitate small groups of congregants, there are fewer opportunities for them to participate in ongoing communities of practice with fellow leaders that focus on continuous learning and deepening their understanding of Scriptural and prophetic imagination.

Scriptural and Prophetic Imagination. Scriptural and prophetic imagination are formational practices for congregations. Walter Brueggemann (2001) views the heart of the Bible, not as an ancient history, but as prophetic imagination that speaks to a world other than the one in front of us. Scriptural imagination means to see the world in which we live through the lenses of the Bible's images and stories (Hays, 2013). Imagination, in this context, is not associated with fantasy. Instead, it suggests that one's physical, emotional, and spiritual self be involved in interpreting the world though Scripture to create a vision of love, equity, and justice for the common good. In this sense, imagination is lived. Scriptural imagination invites the student to imagine the world

shaped by the God of Scripture and to structure daily life in the patterns of this vision

(Rowe, 2013; Scott, 2016).

    Communities of Practice. There are several models of professional learning

communities, and each has its own advantage and disadvantage based on the mix of

leadership, membership, context, and culture. One model of communal learning is the

community of practice (CoC). In a CoC, membership is voluntary and is selected based

on interest of the topic and expertise. Leadership may involve both formal and informal

leaders, both within the congregation and outside of it. CoCs function best when the

culture of the organization values knowledge sharing and is open to innovative thinking

(Blankenship & Ruona, 2007).

    The concept of communities of practice (CoPs) was developed by Etienne

Wegner to challenge the common understanding of learning that focused on the

individual. Wegner contended that learning was a social process located in history and

context. The theory of CoPs seeks to focus on the negotiation of identity and meaning, as

opposed to simply acquiring information, as a core component of learning. The theory

distinguishes between three modes of identification: imagination, engagement, and

alignment. Listening to stories contributes to learning, which Wegner asserts happens in

relationship between the individual and the social (Farnsworth, et al, 2016; Omidvar &

Kislov, 2013; Wegner, 2000).

SECTION 4: IMPROVEMENT METHODOLOGY FRAMEWORK AND DESIGN

The challenge often experienced in developing capacity in congregational lay

leaders is guiding critical reflection on teaching and practice from the lens of justice and

equity. After examining the possible drivers for change, I have chosen to focus on

increasing capacity in congregational leaders and experiencing difference through

welcoming minority voices (Figure 8). Though other drivers have potential to impact the

problem of practice, congregational leaders - deacons, council and committee members,

and Christian education faculty - have a significant presence in planning and teaching.

They have the influence to affect change and are best in position to pay attention to

balancing measure of unintended consequences from the improvement initiative
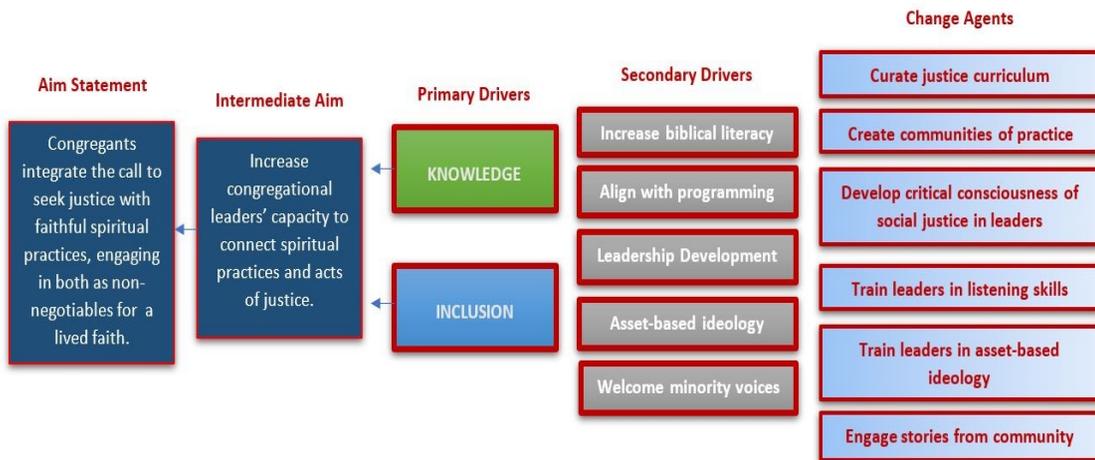
components.

Figure 8. Drivers and Change Ideas. Focus of the Improvement Initiative and

Components.

The proposed improvement initiative will be implemented at FBCA through

council leadership and Christian education faculty and by listening to stories of people in

the downtown Asheville community. Components of the improvement initiative include

leadership development workshops, a community storytelling project to build listening

capacity and empathy, and Communities of Practice (CoPs) for sustained conversation

around spirituality and justice integration (Figure 9).
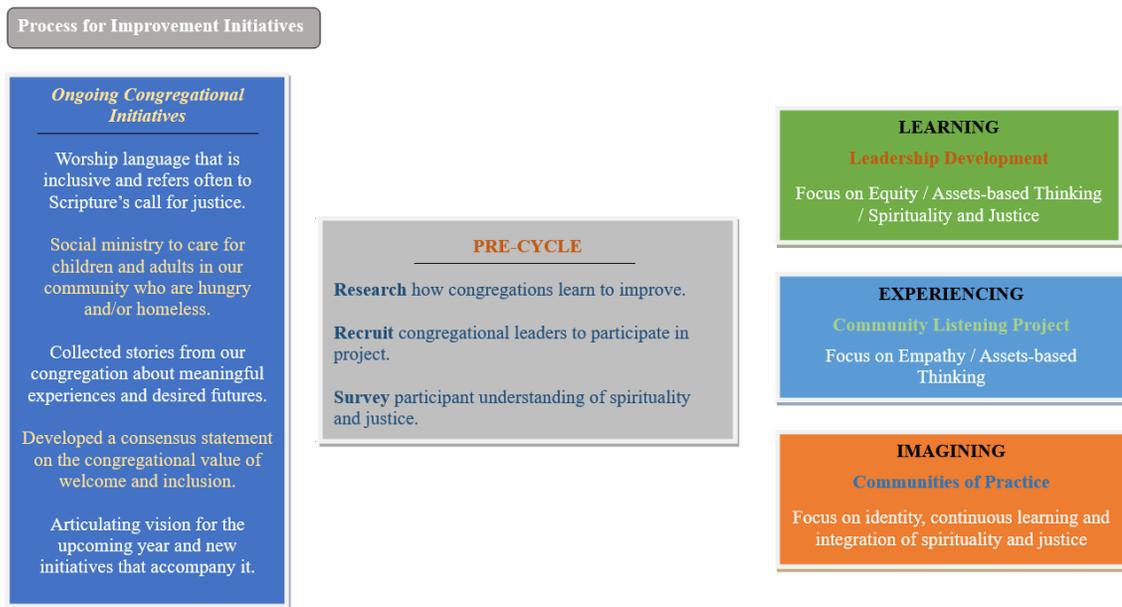
Figure 9. Process for Improvement Initiative.

Establishing research-informed congregational learning processes and practices

will increase biblical understanding and transform leadership performance of

congregational leaders, leading to a more welcoming and inclusive congregation.

Providing biblical understandings of justice, experiences of listening to different voices,

and supporting leaders through an ongoing network of peers will increase leadership

skills and promote an asset-based approach to ministry. When leaders increase capacity,

they will better lead others.

Improvement Initiative Design

     Pastoral Ethnography. There are many theories and methods used by

researchers to understand the underlying motivations of people, but combining the fields

of practical theology and ethnography yields a pastoral approach that can "enliven the

stories people and congregations tell and open the way for creative improvisation as a

community composes the chapters of its shared life" (Moschella, 2010, p. 67).

     Ethnographic research is a qualitative method that seeks to empirically study

people and cultures from the perspective of the subjects. Through observation and

interviews, ethnography is a method able to collect and analyze the narrative of spiritual

persons, faith communities, and networking communities (Todd, 2012). As a research

method, ethnography invites participants to tell personal, community, and faith stories, to

understand the meaning behind them (Swinton, 2014). As a pastoral practice, it provides

religious leaders with a process to carefully listen to the longings and needs of

congregants. These stories "have the power to calm and comfort as well as the power to

disturb and disrupt life as usual" (Moschella, 2010, p. 67).

     Congregations are complex organizations. To better understand the complexity of

people and organizations, "qualitative research methods remind us that the search for

truth and faithfulness is a complicated process wherein we recognize the complexities of

the world and work together to move toward a fuller understanding of the world in which

we live" (Swinton & Mowatt, 2014, p.254). Practical theology examines and reflects on

theology practiced in daily life in order to understand which practices are true and faithful

and how theology and practice can be more fully integrated (Miller, 2015; Swinton &

Mowatt, 2014). Practical Theology is not simply interested in gaining information but is

rather intended to use qualitative data to imaginatively dialogue with tradition, informed

by scriptural interpretation, to deepen understanding of God and form lives to become

faithful and integrated (Swinton & Mowatt, 2014; Moschella, 2010; Miller, 2012).

Pastoral ethnography combines the ethnographic emphasis on collecting stories,

practical theology's emphasis on doing theology, attentive to daily practices of lived

theology, and the pastoral listening that invites trust and faithfulness among congregants

and the community.

Timeline. The improvement initiative timeline began with a pre-cycle (CFAT,

2013) in summer of 2019 with focus on recruiting the design team and developing a

charter (Figure 10). Adjustments to the timeline were made throughout the process to

attend to participant schedules and church programming. Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA)

Cycles for each component were considered by the design them and implemented along

the timeline (Langley, et al., 2009).
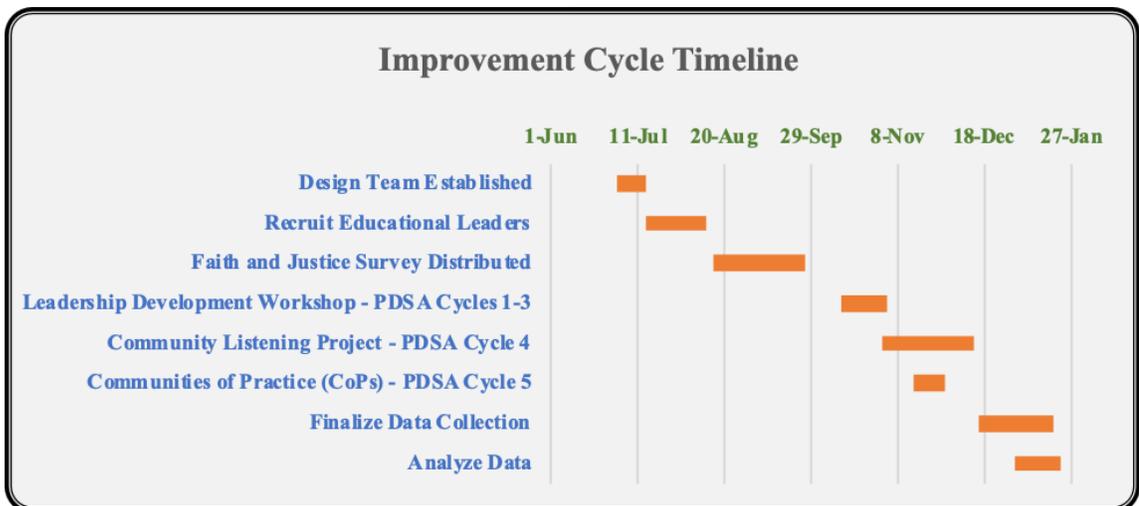
Figure 10. Timeline for Improvement Project.

Design Team. FBCA is governed through a collaborative ministry model (CMM), which includes congregational members from whom deacons, committee members, and council members are selected. In the congregational structure, there are five ministry councils that develop objectives and strategies to achieve the vision and mission of FBCA. These councils include missions, communications/outreach, worship, and two Christian formation councils (children/students and adults). The chairpersons of each council (or someone they appoint from the council) were invited by email to serve on the design team. These council leaders covered the breadth of ministry areas in the congregation and will be instrumental in increasing the scale of the improvement initiative to the entire church.

There are thirty-five Christian formation study communities with at least one teacher or facilitator in each group. Three people from the Christian formation faculty were selected to serve on the design team, with an intentional effort to create diversity on the team. The entire Christian formation faculty was invited to participate in the components of the improvement initiative.

The beginning process of implementation began with committee approval of the disquisition proposal and approval from the Instructional Review Board (IRB) of Western Carolina University (WCU). Once the proposal was approved, the design team was confirmed and met together to develop a charter that outlined agreed upon commitments, aims, readings, timeline, and outputs. They finalize the proposed design of the improvement initiative and its components, giving insight into goals and potential unintended consequences. The design team also took the pre-survey, which was based on the Christian Reformed Church of Canada's Faith and Justice Research Survey (Faith and

Justice, 2014).

Improvement Initiative Goals

Improvement initiative goals for building leadership capacity that integrates

spirituality and justice through leadership development, appreciative inquiry, critical

reflection, and ongoing support through communities of practice include:

- 50% of Christian formation faculty and chairs of ministry councils participate in

  leadership development sessions.

- Twenty church leaders (clergy and laity) will be trained to initiate asset-based

  conversations with congregants and the people of our surrounding community,

  guiding them to better articulate hopes for spiritual growth and commitment to

  work for justice.

- Congregational leaders at First Baptist Church of Asheville report that they are

  invested more deeply in their spiritual practices *and* in intentionally living their

  daily lives through a lens of inclusive love and justice.

If these intermediary goals are achieved, I predict it will result in the following outcomes:

(1) increased biblical literacy and positive association of the intersection of spirituality

and justice, (2) increased sense of belonging leading to greater involvement and

engagement in spiritual formation and justice, and (3) voices that have been marginalized

or silenced are heard and respected.

Evaluation of Improvement Methodology

Improvement science is a framework for research to enhance performance and

achieve meaningful change within organizations (Bryk, et al., 2015; Langley, et al., 2009;

Spaulding & Hinnant-Crawford, 2019).   Using an improvement science model,

leadership considered three questions to guide the improvement process: (1) What are we trying to accomplish? (2) How will we know that a change is an improvement? (3) What changes can we make that will result in improvement? The team used an iterative process of Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) to facilitate continuous learning as they sought to implement the change components (Figure 11). The Plan phases of this cycle include finalizing of the design of the improvement components - developing the development workshop to improve leadership capacity for integration of spirituality and justice, designing the community listening project, and forming communities of practice - and making predictions on what will happen as a result of implementing these components. In the Do phases, the varied improvement components were implemented and data collected. The Study phases analyzed the results from the data and observations to determine if the predictions were realized and to consider insights to guide the next cycle. Finally, the Act phases allow the leaders to make changes to the improvement process, decide on next steps in the process based on what they learned, or abandon the component as not resulting in an improvement. These PDSA cycles continued as needed throughout the improvement initiative with hope that the process could be scaled up to be successful in other congregations (Langley, et al., 2009).
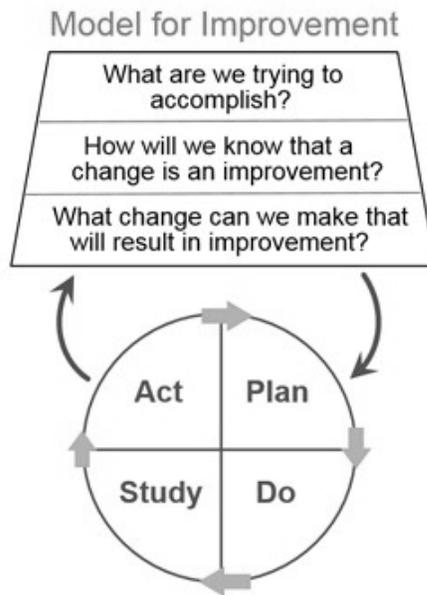
Figure 11. Model of Improvement. Three Questions of Improvement and PDSA cycle

(Langley, et al., 2009).

SECTION FIVE: FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT OF IMPROVEMENT

METHODOLOGY

To ensure that the improvement initiative moves closer to the achievement of the aim, formative assessment measures were used to evaluate the benefit of each component (Hinnant-Crawford, 2019). The assessments used a mixed-methods approach to data collection, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative measures (Bryk, et al., 2016; Miles, et al., 2014; Tanner, 2012). Process measures were put in place to evaluate the way the improvement components were being implemented. Outcome measures reflected the extent to which the improvement components impacted the capacity of congregational leaders to integrate spirituality and justice in faith formation. Balancing measures paid attention to possible unintended consequences along the way (Figure 12).

Guiding Questions	Type of Measure	Data Collection	Frequency	Data Analysis Strategy
Is it working? Are leaders building capacity to integrate spirituality and justice in faith formation?	DRIVER • Knowledge • Inclusion	Focus Group Reflections	After each improvement initiative: • CoP Formation • Development Workshops • Community Listening Project	Transcription, In Vivo, Values
How is it working?	PROCESS	Workshop Session Minutes	After each workshop session	Descriptive

		(attendance, content, etc)		
Learnings, surprises, questions, frustrations, ideas		Observation Field Notes	During community listening project	Descriptive
		Journal Notes		In Vivo, Values
			After each workshop session and community listen session	
		Focus Group Reflections		Transcription In Vivo Values
			After each improvement initiative	
Is it working as intended? Are there any unintended consequences? How are participants feeling?	BALANCING	Focus Group Reflections	After each improvement cycle	Transcription In Vivo Values

Figure 12. Formative Assessment Measures Chart

Pre-Cycle

Prior to conducting the improvement initiative components, the pre-cycle focused on the roles and responsibilities of the design team, recruitment of congregational leaders, and distribution and initial findings from a pre-implementation survey.

Pre-cycle: Design Team Charter. After the design team formed, it was

important for the team to understand the characteristics and tools of improvement

science, as well as to consider research-informed practices that contribute to

congregational learning. Prior to our initial meeting, I created a video in which I

described the disquisition project and the drivers I hoped to leverage to build capacity in

leaders and emailed it to the design team. When we met for the first time, I taught the

design team the basics of improvement science, how these improvement tools were being

applied to the project, and invited them to read and reflect on recommended articles to

enhance their knowledge of the tools and techniques related to the improvement design.

The team develop a charter together that included the aim of the improvement cycles,

questions, shared readings, a proposed timeline of the cycles, and a team-developed

covenant to guide the design team's work throughout the process (Appendix B).

Throughout the components of the initiative, individuals from the design team checked in

on the progress and gave input into areas of improvement. We also communicated as

needed through email and phone calls.

     Pre-cycle: Recruiting Participants. Participants in this study consisted of

clergy, deacons, council members, and educational leaders in the congregation of First

Baptist Church of Asheville**.** The deacons, council leaders, and educational leaders are

chosen by the congregational members and are volunteer, non-paid leaders. Recruitment

for the participants occurred through an email invitation to current deacons, education

faculty, and council leaders in the congregation of FBCA, totaling 70 invitations. The

email offered a brief description of the project and what participants would be asked to

do, specifying the importance of participation in leadership development workshops,

communities of practice, and a community listening project. Forty-four of those invited

responded positively and agreed to participate. The congregational leaders who agreed to

participate serve in one or more leadership capacity: Clergy (N=4), deacons (N=17),

council members (N=14), and educational leaders (N=24) (Figure 13).
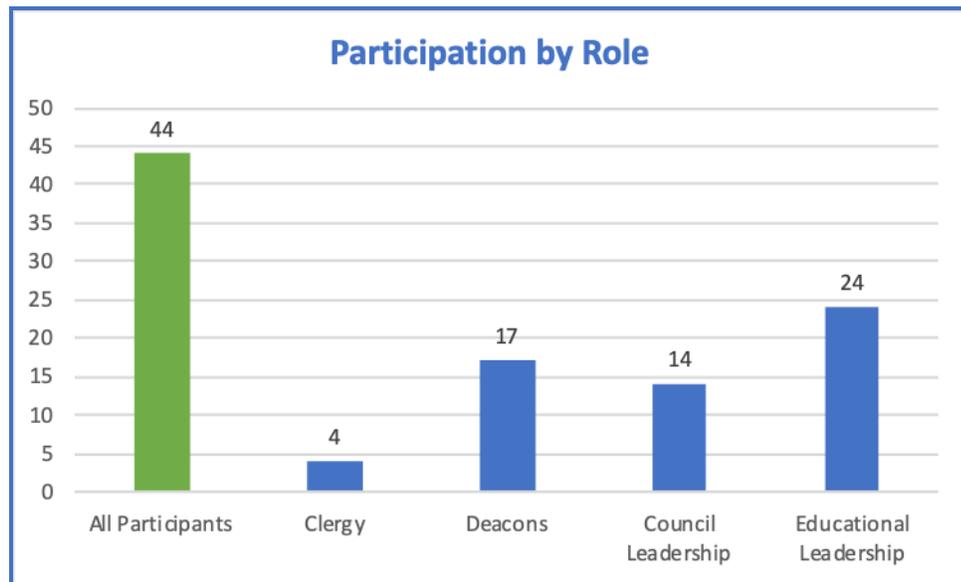
Figure 13. Number of participants and their roles within the congregation.

Pre-Cycle: Faith and Justice Survey. Congregational leaders who agreed to

participate in this improvement project were administered an online Qualtics survey to

determine their understanding and practice of personal spirituality and prophetic justice,

as well as collecting descriptive data, i.e., how long they have been a member of FBCA.

The survey instrument administered was adapted from the Christian Reformed Church of

Canada's Faith and Justice Research Survey (Faith and Justice, 2014), which was

developed in collabortion with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC),

the Centre for Philosophy, Religion and Social Ethics (CPRSE) at the Institute for

Christian Studies, and the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR). The adapted

survey consisted of 26 questions to create a baseline for the later summative analysis

(Appendix C).

Initial Findings. Upon collection and review of the pre-implementation survey

data, I developed charts to visualize responses of leaders describing several areas: the

important practices and beliefs in their faith formation; their understanding of the

meaning of justice and its relationship to faith; how they practice doing justice; what

obstacles they encounter in the desire to do justice; and avenues that aid them in learning

about justice. Of the 44 leaders who agreed to participate in the improvement initiative,

only 33 completed the pre-implementation survey. Based on conversation with those

who did not complete the survey, leaders communicated that they were unable to follow

through on the commitment to participate. Several of those who did not complete the

survey did attend one of the first two workshops before officially stopping their

participation. These leaders were not included in the data collected.

Activities and their importance to the life of faith. Leaders were asked to rank

the importance of a list of practices to their Christian faith (Figure 14). These initial

results showed that congregational leaders placed high priority on acts of mercy and

charity and on engaging in life-long discipleship, listing both as either extremely

important or very important. The congregations' emphasis on missions and Christian

formation across a lifespan support these findings. What was surprising were the two

lowest priorities based on the leader responses – believing the Bible and important church

teachings and practicing spiritual disciplines. Consistent study of Scripture and the

practice of prayer are professed values of congregants, yet these results suggest that not

all leaders find authority in the Bible, church tradition, or prayer.
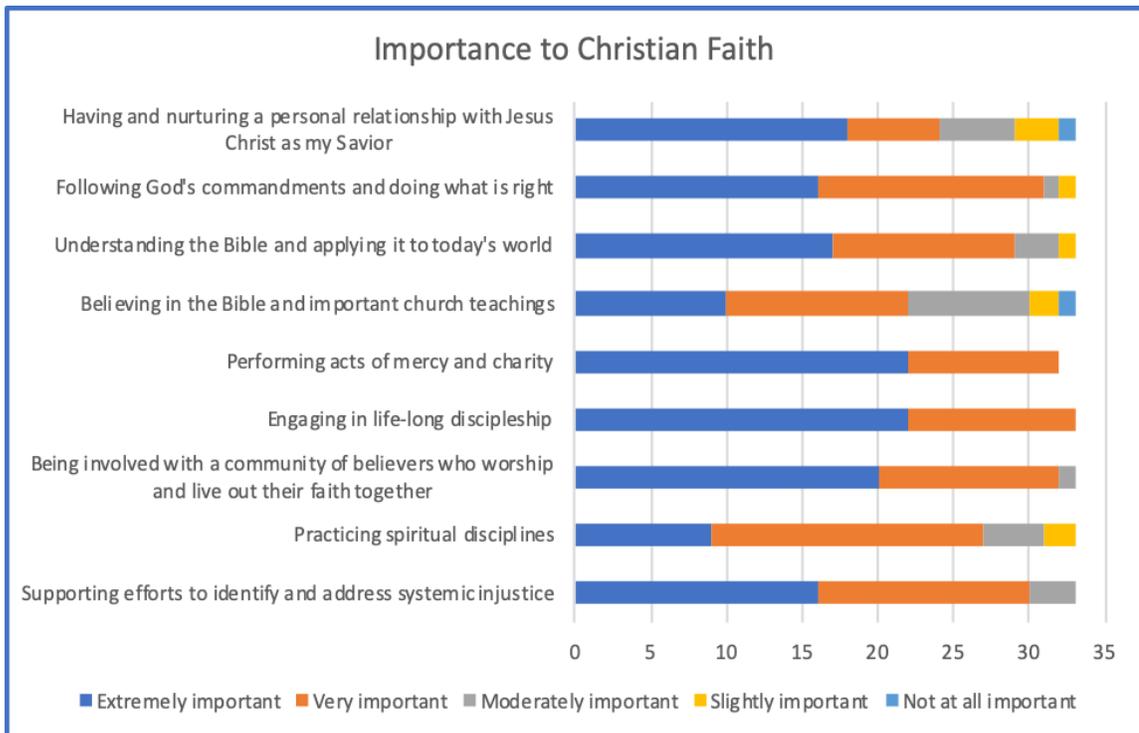
Figure 14. Importance of practices to Christian faith. Pre-implementation survey data based on leader reponses to the question, "To what extent are the following important to your life of faith?"

The meaning of justice and its relationship to faith. When asked what justice meant to them, leaders primarily focused on addressing "root causes" that keep people powerless and dismantling systemic barriers than lead to injustice (Figure 15). A large majority strongly or somewhat agreed that justice was about fairness, though this was also the second highest percentage of disagreement. Justice as getting what was deserved received the most varied reponses. When asked to define justice, words like "equality," "impartiality," and "fair" were used by several leaders. One respondant responded, "Justice feels like more of an action word." Other leaders focused on the spiritual

components of justice, using the Golden Rule of "treating others as you want them to treat you," as well as references to the Kingdom of God and biblical texts, such as Micah 6:8 (NRSV), which includes the call to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. The various understandings of the meaning of justice indicate its complexity.
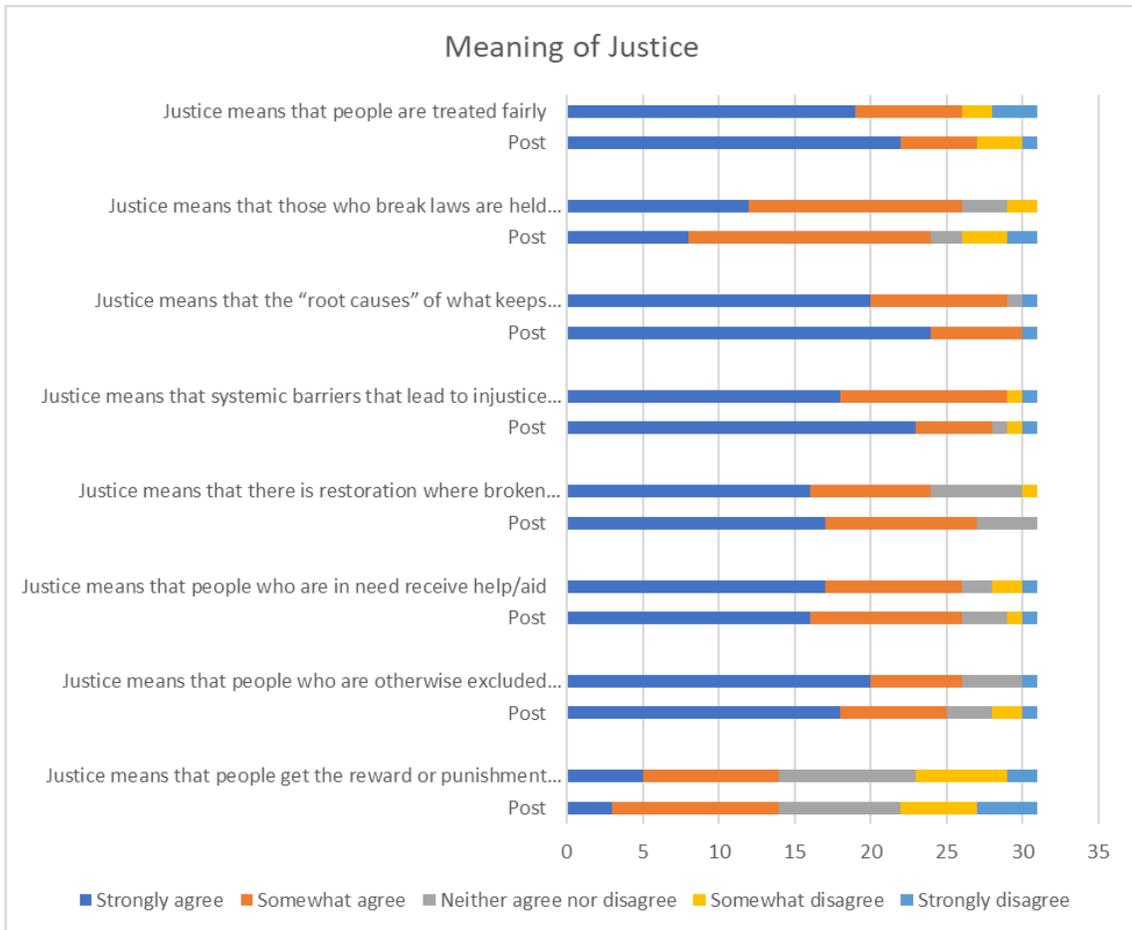
Figure 15. Meaning of Justice. Pre-implementation survey data based on leader reponses to the question, "To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the meaning of justice?"

As seen in Figure 16, leaders report a positive indication of the relationship between justice and faith. The first five questions, which inquired about the connection

between spirituality and justice, received no disagreement. The final question affirmed

the belief that pursuing justice is related to faith.
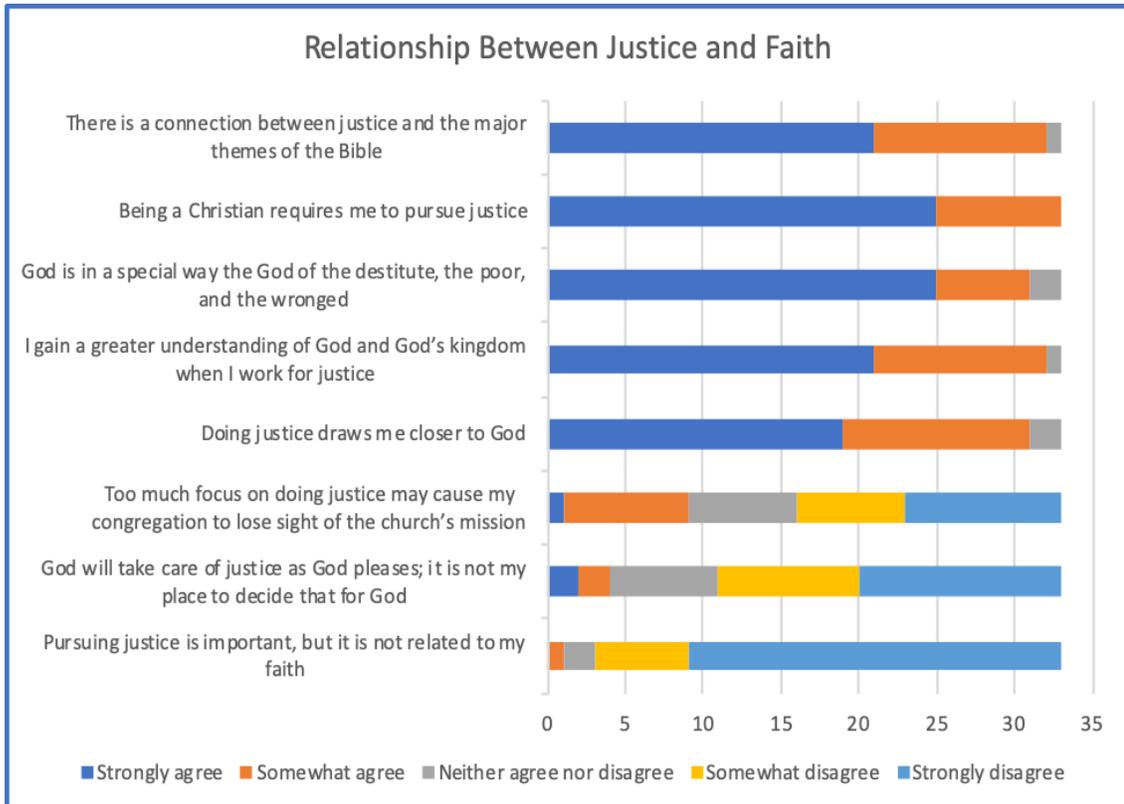
Figure 16. Relationship between justice and faith.

How justice is done. Previously, leaders expressed the importance of acts of

mercy and charity to their practice of faith. In this question, acts of charity and serving

people in need was positively associated as an act of justice (Figure 17). Interestingly,

leaders recognized justice as a lifelong pursuit that is a way of life, an identity more than

actions. As one leader wrote, this identity as an advocate for justice was rooted in

"following Jesus' example and teachings to be fair, kind, inclusive, and involved."

Another leader defined justice as "living . . . with the love and loving action God intends

for every person." Though leaders have expressed fear that partisan politics in congregations causes division, political advocacy had 27 leaders affirm its role in facilitating justice.

Figure 17. How Justice is Done.

Leaders also reported four main obstacles that prevent them from working for justice (Figure 18). Time was the major barrier, which was consistent with personal conversations I had with leaders. Job responsibilities, family, church, and extra-curricular activies compete for their attention and their time. The complexity of justice led many leaders to express that they did not know what to do to address the inequities, which prevented them from acting. A third obstacle identified by leaders was the lack of church partnerships to work together for justice in our community. Fourth, isolation from people who experience injustice creates barrier to understanding the experiences, hopes, and needs of others. However, it seemed positive that leaders did not report

discouragement from the congregation as a barrier.
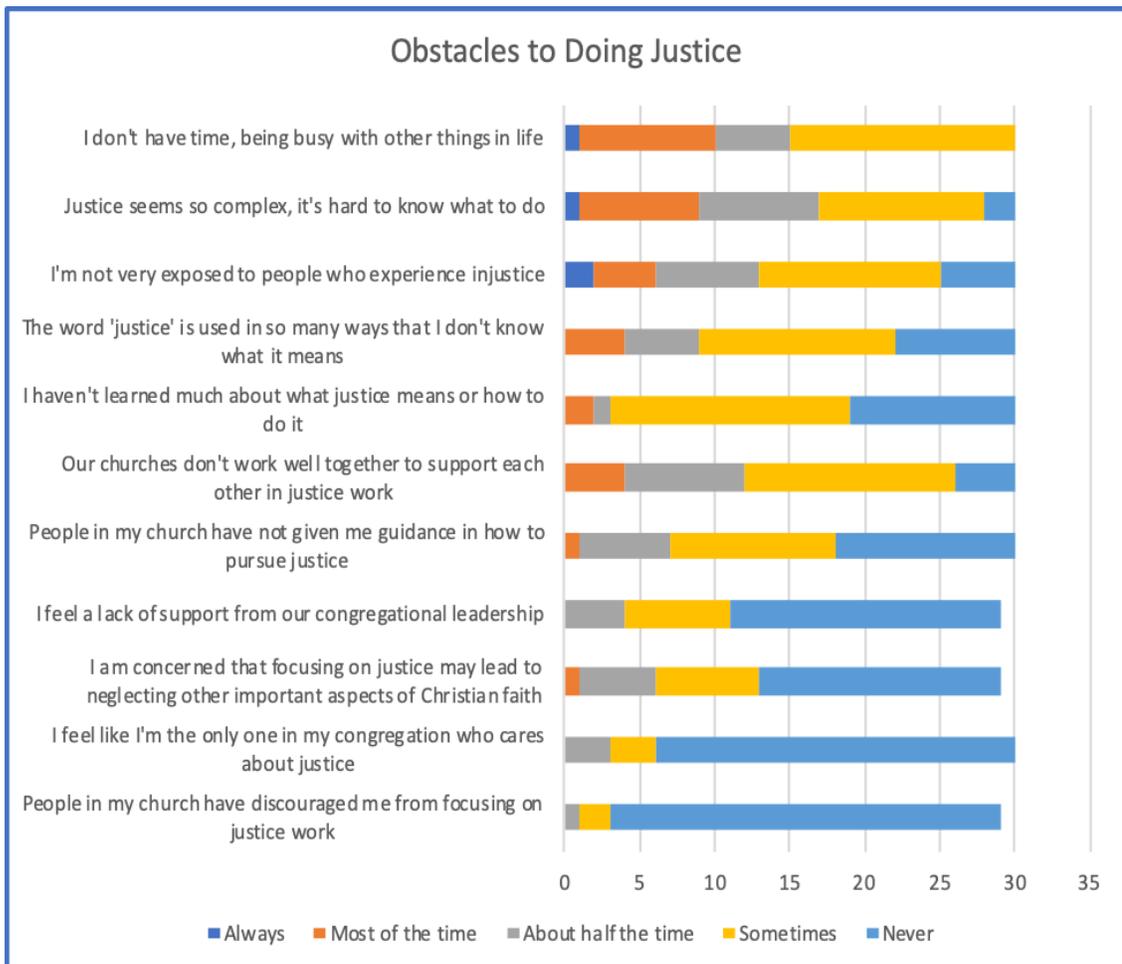
Figure 18. Obstacles to Doing Justice.

When asked about how leaders can better understand about justice, listening to

stories of people who experience injustice ranked highly, with 28 leaders describing this

act as extremely or very effective (Figure 19). Bible study done in community was listed

by 26 leaders as an extremely or very effective avenue to learn more about justice.

Teachers, mentors, and sermons were similarly ranked, which suggests learning from

others with knowledge and experience was important as seem from a slightly lower

ranking for personal Bible study.
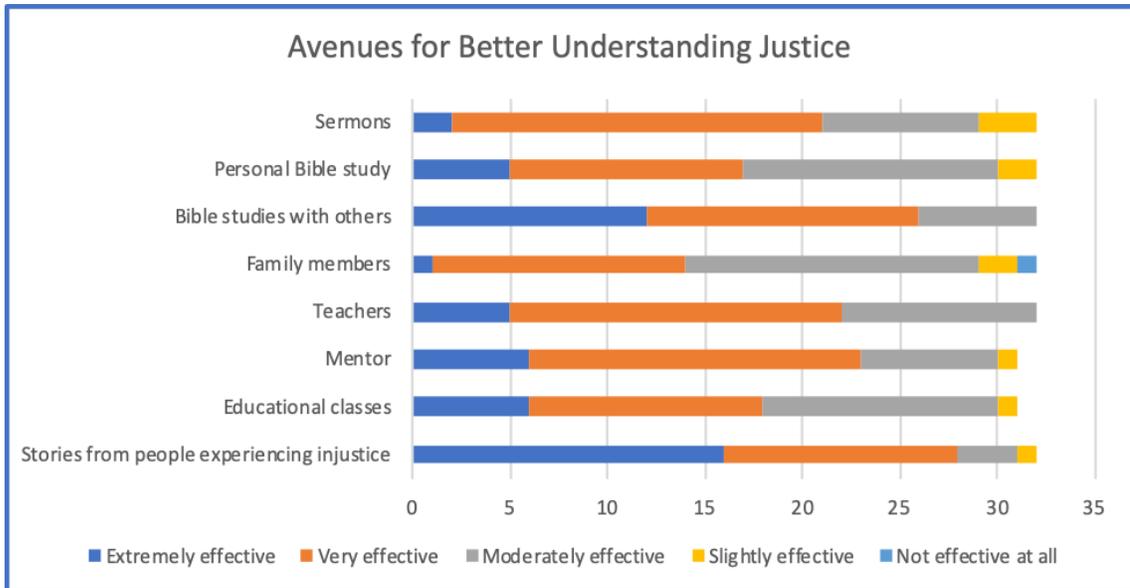
Figure 19. Avenues for Better Understanding Justice.

Data Collection

Process Measures: Leadership Development Sessions – Spirituality and Justice. The initial component of the improvement initiative focused on developing capacity in congregational leaders for understanding the essential connection of justice and spirituality in faith formation. All Christian education faculty, deacons, council leaders, and clergy were invited to attend three leadership development sessions, each lasting 90-120 minutes. Invitations were sent through email, as well as by memos placed in classrooms. The process goal for attendance was that 50% of congregational leaders invited would attend the leadership development sessions, measured by data collected on attendance and compared with number of leaders invited (Appendix K). Attendees

would also reflect on the effectiveness of the sessions through focus group reflections, administered at the end of each session to measure the perceived benefits of what was learned (Appendix M).

The agenda for the leader development sessions included Scriptural interpretation that focused on justice as an essential component of faith formation, asset-based thinking that overcomes deficit-ideology, understanding micro-aggressions, and developing critical autobiographies. The outcome goals for the leadership development component included participants moving from a deficit-ideology to an assets-based approach of leadership, understanding prophetic and Scriptural imagination as non-negotiable for faith formation, and reflecting on how they understand their privilege and history with social justice.

For each component of the improvement initiative, participants were asked to keep a journal (written or online options) throughout the process to record their learning, surprises, frustrations, and ideas for personal and organization improvement (Appendix L). The journals were collected, coded In Vivo (focusing on the actual spoken words of the participants), descriptive, and values-based, to determine common themes, and then analyzed (Miles, et al., 2014). The balancing measure was taken from reflections on the process from the participants' written reflections.

Process Measures: Community Listening Project. The design team helped determine the training needs and project design for the community listening project. Leaders were recruited, mainly from those who attended the leadership development sessions, to form a listening team. The team learned to recognized how gender, sexual identity, race, and socio-economic factors contribute to the listening goals. The process

goal was to have 20 people recruited and trained in listening skills by October 2019. An

asset-based approach to the listening project focused on humble, appreciative inquiry

(Shapiro, personal conversation, 2018; Schein, 2013).

Listening team leadership developed a plan to recruit community members,

through posters in the downtown area, on community bulletin boards, and at local college

campuses. The team also suggested neighbors, work colleagues, and participants who

came to local social ministries. The instruction given to leaders was to interview people

who had different experiences than they have had. The main limitation was that leaders

needed to hear from people who were not involved in a local Christian congregation.

This sample gave the team the ability to examine how spirituality and justice enters the

discourse of people who are spiritual but not involved in a religious community, as well

as those who are neither spiritual nor religious. The listening team were asked to listen

for differences from people over a range of privilege and oppression. I was a participant

observer, present during the conversations to record field notes on observations of the

interaction, including the time, date, length, and location of each listening session

(Appendix O). In some instances, leaders recorded their interactions, with approval of

those who were telling their story, to later be transcribed, coded In Vivo, and analyzed to

reflect on themes, comparing them to observations and journals of the listener. The

listening team were given journal prompts for reflection of their listening conversation

(Appendix P). Balancing measures for this assessment involved reflections on the

process via the written or online journal to determine any unintended outcomes or gaps in

skills needed. The goal for this component was for 50 community members to tell their

stories through a guided listening session.

Reflections on learning and next steps happened through leader journals.   As previously mentioned, leaders were asked to keep a journal, electronic or hand-written, throughout the listening project sessions. In the journal, guided questions invited them to record areas in which they were surprised, found an interaction to be meaningful, or participated in any way that integrated spirituality and justice (Appendix P). They included how effective the listening skill training was to their experience of listening to community stories, and how effectively they accomplish their tasks.

Data was regularly collected, transcribed, coded and analyzed in Vivo and to look for trends and values reflected in the data (Miles, et al., 2015). Formative qualitative analysis considered how participants change their perceptions of our community based on their experience of listening, without an agenda to invite the community to church. Balancing measure questions asked about unintended consequences that added to their stress level. An outcome goal was that leaders will positively rate that their level of empathy and understanding increased through the process, which will be assessed through journal reflections.

Process Measures: Communities of Learning and Practice. Communities of Practice (CoPs) were developed, comprised of congregational leaders based on their roles or interests. Formative evaluation measures included focus group reflections (Appendix R) as process measure, focusing on what they were learning, suggestions for improvements, future topics of interest, and the benefit of the CoP to their leadership. Data analysis of the meeting data from the CoPs considered the percentage of leaders taking part in these learning communities and determined if there are needs for different formats, different meeting times, better communication of the purpose, or the need for

these CoPs to continue.

The outcome goal for the CoPs would be that 50% of congregational leaders participate in a CoP and find value in it for their faith formation and leadership development. These CoPs would provide regular networking opportunities, increased awareness of equity issues, information sharing, recognition of the value of creating a culture of diversity and justice, and encouragement for ongoing self-assessment. These goals will be measured by attendance and focus group interview to determine the benefit to participants.

Data Analysis and Reporting

Quantitative analysis at this formative evaluation stage was primarily descriptive, including number of participants. The main analysis was qualitative as seen in actual quotations that undergird the themes of the analysis. These findings will be shared in the Study phase of each PDSA cycle.

Data analysis in qualitative research is a meaning-making process which involves the. rigorous process of data consolidation and reduction with the interpretative process of identifying patterns, concepts, and themes (Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010; Ruona, 2005; Patton, 2002). The goal of the analysis is intended to "capture and communicate someone else's experience of the world in his or her own words" (Patton, 2002, p.47), to understand the complexity of their experiences and concerns, and to test how the theory of improvement leads to learning (Wholey, et al., 2010). As a scholar-practitioner in this research, it was a challenge to be an objective bystander. My personal history, beliefs, characteristics, and privilege influence my interaction with the congregational leaders and my interpretation of the data (Ruona, 2005). Sharing themes

with fellow clergy and design team leaders helped validate the accuracy of the

interpretation.

For each initiative, I used a framework for the analysis of qualitative data

developed by Ruona (2005) that follows four steps: data preparation, familiarization,

coding, and meaning generation. Preparing the data included transcribing the participants

reflections, properly storing the data, removing material that may identify participants,

and organizing the data for the different cycles. The second step involved reading through

the data and becoming familiar with the data on a more in-depth level. In this step the

data were segmented to pull out meaningful sections from the leaders' reflections and

recorded in a table (Figure 20) connected to the appropriate PDSA cycle. If a response

was to a question, the question number was listed in the first column. The memo section

allowed me to write and reflect on what was being said and how my interpretation and

involvement could influence the process, allowing me to refocus on the congregational

leaders and to seek to find meaning in the data (Ruona, 2005).

Q#	Text Segment	In Vivo	Codes	Memos and Notes

Figure 20. Sample table used for qualitative data analysis

In the coding step, I reviewed the data to discover values, patterns, and common

themes, which were then identified by codes. In analyzing qualitative data, it is important

to capture the participants' experiences and reflections to better understand the processes

and measure outcomes (Ruona, 2005). Coding In Vivo, I selected portions of the actual

words of the leaders. Common themes that flowed from these words and phrases were

bracketed. More detailed codes were described with a "+" or "-" to indicate positive or

negative indications. As the coding happened, ideas and questions that arose were added

to the notes and memos section (Figure 21).

Q#	Text Segment	In Vivo	Codes	Memos and Notes
Clergy Reflections	Integrating faith and justice is only simple when clear lines are drawn between "us" and "them"; the more we tear down racial / cultural / historical / socio-economical walls, the more our cherished biblical stories of compassion and justice will threaten our own positions of privilege, comfort, and certainty.	"us and them" "biblical stories" – "threaten privilege"	[Awareness of Privilege] [Importance of Scripture]	Important to break down barriers of attitudes that cause us to forget we belong to one another. Scripture can be a threat to the power structures
	Prophetic spirituality is a revolutionary call to live one's life beyond the desires of self. It costs a lot to hear this call, much less to live into its way. Like many difficult things, it is most effective when it can be learned as a living story, with honest passion and intensity. True listening is immensely difficult and necessary. But it has the power to convict us individually in profound ways. And, once a person has had their life interrupted with the living story of an "other", that person can make radical strides towards prophetic spirituality and social justice in action.	– "costs a lot" + "living story" + "true listening" "has power to convict" "story of other"	[Complexity of Justice] + cost [Importance of Listening] [Recognize Sacred Worth] + openness	Are we willing to yield privilege if it costs? When we hear the story of others, we are affected. How can we encourage others to take the risk of being changed?
	In our wider communities of faith, blind spots are commonplace, and emerge from our own historical rootedness / contextual situatedness.	"blind spots are commonplace"	[Awareness of privilege] – blind spots – history	What blind spots might clergy have? Are we hearing only from members or are we out in the community?

Figure 21. Example page of coding.

The final stage of the qualitative analysis considered the coded data across the

cycles of the improvement initiatives for comparison. Segments were highlighted as

examples of themes that clearly reflected the depth and richness of the theme. In this step

of generating meaning, I explored the connections that emerged from the data and applied

my learning from research and as a practitioner to interpret the data and to communicate

the meaning and implications that arose (Ruona, 2005).

Findings from Improvement Initiative Components

The findings from each of the PDSA cycles were shown in the Study phase and

based on the reflections of the leaders who participated.

Leadership Development Workshops: Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycle One

The initial PDSA cycle began the first of three planned leadership development

workshops seeking to develop capacity in leaders for understanding the importance of

integrating personal spiritual formation and the prophetic call to act justice.

Plan. The planning for this initial cycle took place in the summer of 2019. In

conversation with the design team, a Sunday afternoon was chosen for the workshop

because a significant number of the congregational leaders have other responsibilities

during the week. Sunday is a day most of the leaders are present at the church campus.

This first leadership development workshop was facilitated by me. I developed

an agenda (Appendix E) and a PowerPoint presentation for the workshop that included an

overview of the problem of practice that we were addressing, how Scripture speaks of

doing justice, and the ways in which privilege affects how we individually and

communally address injustice.

To begin connecting personal spirituality with the prophetic call to do justice, I

made a list of several verses from the prophetic books of the Bible to indicate how the

call to justice is echoed throughout the Bible. Three main verses from biblical prophets

were shared and discussed:

> *Isaiah 58:6-7.* [6] Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to
>
> undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every
>
> yoke? [7] Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor
>
> into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself
>
> from your own kin?
>
> *Amos 5:24.* But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-
>
> flowing stream.
>
> *Micah 6:8.* He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does
>
> the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk
>
> humbly with your God?

I also reviewed the concepts of *shalom*, primary justice, and reactive justice. *Shalom* is

the Hebrew word for peace and wholeness. Lisa Sharon Harper (2016) describes *shalom*

as God's original vision of good news and hope for our broken world:

> *Shalom* is what God declared. *Shalom* is what the Kingdom of God looks like.
>
> *Shalom* is when all people have enough. It's when families are healed. It's when
>
> churches, schools, and public policies protect human dignity. *Shalom* is when the
>
> image of God is recognized in every single human. *Shalom* is our calling as
>
> followers of Jesus's gospel. It is the vision God set forth in the Garden and the
>
> restoration God desires for every relationship. *Shalom* is what our souls long for
>
> (para. 1).

Primary justice returns to this original vision of *shalom*, where dignity and equity are

afforded all of God's creation simply because they are made in God's image. Reactive

justice is also found in Scripture anytime primary justice is violated and requires a

response (Fileta, 2014).

To seek justice is to identify systems of oppressive and unjust practices that

impair *shalom*, advocating and acting for more equitable, asset-based, and culturally

appropriate ones (Furman, 2012; Shapiro, 2017). In the New Testament, the Greek word

dikaiosune (from the Hebrew *sedeq*) can be translated into English as either "justice" or

"righteousness" (or both). *Dikaiosune* is rooted in Hebrew covenantal theology bound to

hope in God, the creator and judge of the world, who would save God's people from their

enemies. It also implies human participation as covenant partners, modeling God's own

character, and acting to bring righteousness and justice into the world (Wright, 1988).

Do. Congregational leaders were invited to the workshop via email. The

workshop location was the church dining room, with leaders assembled at round tables.

As participants arrived, they picked up an agenda and a journal. Attendance was taken.

Topics presented were the challenges posed by separating justice and spirituality, how

Scripture connects justice as an integral part of spirituality, and how we define justice.

Participants were also encouraged to begin writing their critical autobiography.

Following the presentation, participants were invited to share reflections and then write

their responses down. The workshop was approximately 90 minutes.

Study. This first workshop was attended by 25 leaders. In the participants'

reflections in the workshop, several themes developed. One leader mentioned, "This

workshop served as a 'reboot' for my own spirituality which has been lacking of late."

Several others mentioned that the workshops served as a reminder of "all the ways that people are hurt through the lack of justice"

Scripture is foundational. Many of the leaders identified justice as a major theme in both the Old and New Testaments and affirmed that studying and understanding Scripture leads to action. One leader commented that people in our congregation "need to spend more time studying and reflecting on the Old Testament prophets as a basis for understanding the mandate to DO justice." Another leader expressed the desire to integrate the guidance of Scripture and acting for justice as one, hoping to become "more biblically literate regarding social justice. . . to be able to more completely integrate my 'spiritual/devotional' self with my 'working for justice' self so that the two may someday become seamless and one." Acknowledging the complexity of justice and its tangled history in our society, a long-time Bible study teacher said, "Scripture cuts to the heart with a simple clarifying stroke." Participants often referred to Micah 6:8 and to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) as examples that illuminate the call to justice and mercy.

Privilege is complex. As the group asked questions and responded to one another, one leader brought up the struggle for others to recognize that privilege is a reality that gives advantages to certain characteristics over others. "Privilege cannot be eliminated!" exclaimed one person. That truth was affirmed, though several leaders were only beginning to wrestle with their privilege. One leader stated plainly, "I am a product of my experiences and upbringing," which may be taken either as a defense of their privilege or a recognition that others may have different experiences and upbringings that has led to their being minoritized by those in power. Another stated that we all "need to

learn to be honest and thoughtful about biases and privilege."

One council leader was honest in assessing the process and wrote, "I learned that I have been very comfortable separating my spirituality and the topic of social justice. I'm not certain that I am ready to fully embrace joining them together. I see the justification for it but I'm not sure that I am there yet." From a different perspective, a leader who described himself as non-privileged confessed, "I definitely look at sensitivity towards justice because I am so affected by it." Other leaders agreed that being neutral is not an option for Christians, yet privilege makes it easy to avoid challenges and escape to the status quo. One person was reminded that silence is not the same as peace. "My first inclination is to try to avoid conflict and keep the peace. I was reminded by this experience that when I'm silent or inactive, I'm neither making nor keeping peace." Another questioned, "How do I 'manage' my privilege, so others don't continue to 'pay' for it?"

Getting involved. "I need to get my hands into justice work in more meaningful ways," said one of the participants. "God expects faith and justice to be <u>lived</u> out." This theme of getting more involved in justice work was echoed by many of the church leaders, who sincerely wanted to know what they could do to make a difference:

"How can I – one person – make a difference?"

"What does doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly look like day to day?"

"Am I doing enough?"

As a result of her involvement in the workshop, a deacon expressed that it had "reinforce[d] my belief that justice and being a follower of Christ cannot be separated."

Leaders also asked, "How can I connect with others who are striving for justice?" A common refrain accentuated the value of joining together with others to increase awareness and work together on common goals. "Where can we find others to dialogue with (safely) about privilege and ways to work for a more equitable city, neighborhood, etc?" an educational leader asked. The motivation to act justly was present in many leaders, yet the longing for mentors and peers to come together to lament, listen, and act was not yet a reality.

Importance of creating safe spaces for discussion. Several participants expressed value in hearing the different voices of people within our congregation.

"Discussion with others who have a differing opinion is vital. Growth does not happen when all opinions are the same as yours."

"We are different, but we all have something to bring to the table."

"Personal stories add much to the understanding of Scripture."

Bringing together these different voices encouraged leaders because, as one leader expressed, "it showed the depth of our concern." Hosting safe spaces for discussion also brought together faith, societal concerns, and backgrounds into one conversation. "Raising awareness of the interplay of Scripture, the headlines concerning justice and injustice, and personal history, all increase sensitivity that these issues are not disparate, happening in isolation from one another."

Balancing measures. The balancing measures in this cycle asked if participation in this workshop produced additional stress or unintended consequences. One participant shared that the workshop brought up "feelings I tend to push down." Others mentioned that their lives were busy, and that participation was and may be a challenge. Two

leaders withdrew themselves from the project following the workshop expressing time

constraints and other responsibilities. However, these same leaders who removed

themselves from the process were positive about the work being done and kept track of

the progress over the entire initiative.

The fear of becoming partisan weighed on one leader who wrote, "I question how

much I want my church congregation to be vocal politically. It is one thing to serve those

in need, to accept the unwanted, and to defend the oppressed. But I have concerns about a

church being outspoken on any specific topic solely based on a perceived consensus." I

had anticipated that some leaders who have yet to integrate justice and spirituality may

understand any call to justice as partisan politics. Many congregational members have

expressed over the past years that they did not want the church bringing in the divisions

caused by partisanship.

Act. Because some leaders were unable to attend this initial session, I developed a

website – www.fbca.net/prophetic-spirituality - to list resources, video portions of the

workshop, journal prompts, and next steps (Appendix J). Six additional leaders engaged

with the workshop online. In reflecting with several leaders, we acknowledged the

importance of continuing the conversation on privilege, especially the question of how

we manage privilege while working for justice. Reminder emails were sent to participants

to communicate the time of the next workshop cycle. Because I led the first workshop

cycle, it was important to invite guests to lead the next workshop for leaders to hear

different perspectives.

Leadership Development Workshops: Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycle Two

The second PDSA cycle applied what was learned from the first leadership

development workshop to continue the progress of leaders to understand how they may unknowingly participate in injustice and to share insights that may deepen their capacity to recognize how primary justice and personal spirituality are both essential to a lived faith.

Plan. To gain a different perspective, I invited three guests to come speak about the connection between spirituality and justice. Two of those invited were grateful for the opportunity but had conflicts. Rev. Sara Wilcox, a United Church of Christ pastor and social justice advocate, accepted the invitation to speak. In a phone call prior to the workshop, I shared the aim of this disquisition, insights and questions from the previous workshop, and brainstormed ideas for this next cycle of workshops. Rev. Wilcox mentioned that her desire was that no one be unseen, which became the theme of the workshop. To further express the idea of seeing others without bias and hearing from a variety of voices, I planned to show video from a TED talk by Chimamanda Adichie about the "Danger of a Single Story" (Adichie, 2009) in which she warns listeners about making assumption based on outward appearances. The workshop would allow for additional conversation about yielding privilege, understanding and avoiding microaggressions, and unlearning deficit-ideology. A major theme of this workshop focused on the temptation for people who have privilege to normalize their experiences, then mistake *difference* for *deficit* (Gorski, 2010).

Do. Congregational leaders were reminded about this second workshop via email. For the sake of consistency, the workshop location remained in the church dining room at the same time of day as the previous workshop. As participants arrived, they picked up an agenda (Appendix F) and if needed, a journal. Attendance was taken. The workshop

began by my sharing information about deficit-ideology and how we can move toward

seeing others not as objects but as people with gifts, hopes, and dreams. We watched the

video of Chimamanda Adichie, despite some initial technical difficulties. Participants

were also encouraged to begin or to continue writing their critical autobiography. After a

brief discussion of micro-aggressions and review of the handout, I introduced and turned

the workshop over to Rev. Wilcox. Following her presentation, participants were invited

to share reflections and then write their responses down. The workshop lasted

approximately 90 minutes.

Study. This second workshop was attended by 29 leaders, with six additional

leaders engaging online. Themes revealed in the reflections of leaders included listening

through prayer, practicing self-examination, understanding privilege, and working with

others for the common good.

Spiritual practice as a good place to start. After the workshop, many leaders

were impressed to hear about the myriad ways that justice work was happening in our

community. With so much good going on, finding one's place could feel overwhelming.

One leader, a retired ethicist, pointed out that *"one cannot take on all areas and issues of*

justice." Though energized by hearing all ways our community is involved in justice, she

spoke of the importance of "hearing the voice of God pointing to the area [where] I can

be useful. It means spending time in prayer, with open mind and heart. This will

enhance me to identify gifts and see openings to work for justice." This recognition that

spiritual practice undergirds and guides our just actions was a positive corrective to the

temptation to separate the two.

Listening to God, for some leaders, first required self-examination and confession. One leader stated that he needed "to acknowledge how I avoid seeing other people because of what it requires of me." A deacon, who is committed to acts of mercy and justice, suggested that "self-examination is hard and requires painful honesty." Reflecting on their interaction with the phrases discussed as microaggressions, one leader, who is passionate about respect for all people, said, "Naming some of the commonplace micro-aggressions was helpful as a launch point for self-critique and sensitivity." When asked if this workshop was helpful in helping connect personal spirituality to justice, a deacon leader confessed, "Absolutely, but I also feel guilty about my lack of sensitivity."

Charity and Justice. Rev. Wilcox expressed concern that charity is sometimes a substitute for justice and can often hinder work for equity. One leader mentioned that she "appreciate[d] the difference between charity and justice being clarified . . how charity can contribute to us ignoring injustice." Some leaders were uncertain about the difference and were "still wrapping [their] heads around that." Rev. Wilcox told the group that charity assumes we know what people need, rather than listening to the voices of people impacted by injustice. In response, a leader wrote that "we often don't want to give [what they need] to them because it would require us to change." Another leader spoke of what she was learning, "It helped me reflect and identify my bind spots created by my story."

Privilege. In this workshop, we continued to discuss and struggle with privilege. A term used by Rev. Wilcox in our pre-workshop phone conversation stuck with me. She spoke of "yielding" privilege. Many leaders recognized that privilege was not

something that could be discarded or given up. Yet many wanted to find language to talk

about what they do with their privilege. Yielding means acknowledging privilege, and

yet not using it as power over another. One leader shared her reflections about privilege

in her journal.

> In recent years, I have thought a lot about "white privilege." I think a lot of white
>
> people react strongly to the phrase because they don't think they should be made
>
> to feel guilty over social and economic injustices that started long before they
>
> were born. Feeling guilty doesn't fix anything. But it is important to have an
>
> awareness of the ways I have benefitted because of the family I was born into, the
>
> place I grew up in and the opportunities I have had. For me it is important to work
>
> for economic and political systems that treat everyone fairly.

Feeling guilty, or not, does not do away with privilege. Yet as leaders become aware of

their advantages, they are more inclined to seek justice for others (Todd & Rufta, 2012).

The ministers who participated in the workshop understood the concerns about

ignoring justice while doing good through acts of mercy. One clergy member wrote,

"Existing programs and ministries are also effective antidotes to contemporary conviction

about justice, meaning that we willingly allow our good deeds to justify any and all

limitations to equality and liberation at the local sphere." While this reality is shared

among clergy, the laity who plan programming often find it easier to serve a meal to

people who are homeless rather than address systems of power that lead to people not

having enough to eat. A congregational leader said, "Striving for a clearer definition for

justice is very important . . . [one that is] holistic, connected to spirituality and systemic

revolutions."

Leaders who were able to recognize their privilege also began to recognize and grapple with how privilege harms them. Isolation is one negative result of privilege. One leader commented, "I'm discovering truths I never knew regarding our city, the people in it, and their needs. I'm challenged by those who have been thinking outside the box regarding how we can live our faith and seek justice." Another shared, "I am still quite isolated from 'others" with the primary measure [being] my whiteness." "It has become clearer to me how ingrained privilege is in our culture and language...from an early age," mentioned one of the clergy. "I am more mindful about language I use and what I teach children and how I speak with children."

Leaders confessed that they had "a lot of room to grow," didn't "react often enough to problems of privilege," and needed "to learn to listen" to those who did not share their privilege. However, one leader talked about enjoying her privilege which had made her lazy, "disinclined to do much."

Getting Involved. Having heard of the good work being done in the Asheville community in general and through the Land of Sky UCC in particular, leaders were newly motivated to make a systemic impact in our community. One leader communicated surprise at justice ministries happening all around. She wrote, "How little I know about other churches and their programs to address justice." One leader summed up how spiritual faith necessarily led to acting justly. "Spirituality is not real unless, by becoming more like Christ, we then help others change their lives for the better, and advocate within our societal structure and institutions to help those who cannot help themselves."

After participating in the workshop, one leader indicated how his attitude had changed. He said, "I tend to ignore the needs of others – I can work to make a difference," Another shared this desire to come together and affect systems, saying, "I want to be part of [a] community/ congregation that contributes in more meaningful ways to radical/social justice." The question of how we contribute to radical justice was a consistent refrain with one person asking, "How do we impact the system?"

Importance of Discussion in Community. A theme that continued from the first workshop was the importance of gathering for conversations about common concerns. One leader mentioned that it was encouraging to know "that I'm not the only one who is concerned about justice." Other leaders valued the new insights and accountability that being together in a safe space brings to the community. One leader admitted, "I use busyness and charity to help me feel like I'm 'doing justice.'" Another said, "We believe what we know. Without new experiences we may not be able to relate to others as well, or to the Scripture." There was a sense among leaders that without a group of trusted peers and mentors with insights and experiences that were shared, transformation of practice could not happen.

Balancing measures. Once again, the leaders were asked if participation in this workshop produced additional stress or unintended consequences. The same anxiety was mentioned about full schedules and finding time to do all that needed to be done. Hearing about the many ways of seeking justice and being motivated to participate in this good work, leaders shared that they lacked the time and energy needed. Two additional leaders withdrew from the process at this point stating that their "plates were full." I encouraged other leaders who worried that they were behind but wanted to participate.

There were continuing concerns expressed about being too political. However, these same leaders speak of their political affiliations on social media and to their small groups in the church. One leader asked, "How do we get prophetic spirituality separated from political parties?" Another question might be how we encourage a prophetic spirituality *within* our political parties.

Act. There was energy from participants about how they could find out more about the actions and resources that Rev. Wilcox mentioned in her presentation. I created an additional page to the website with a video of her presentation and links to the resources she mentioned. Because of scheduling concerns expressed by a few participants, the decision was made to offer two times for the third workshop to give options for Wednesday evening or Sunday morning to accommodate the times when most leaders would be present.

Leadership Development Workshops: Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycle Three

The third PDSA cycle trained leaders to develop their listening and interview skills based in appreciative inquiry. This workshop was connected to the Community Listening Project cycle.

Plan. The plan for this cycle was to focus on listening leadership. In conversation with congregational leaders, we chose to offer two options: Sunday morning prior to Bible study and Wednesday evening during our congregation's weekly fellowship meal. I reserved a classroom to use for these smaller gatherings. Leaders were reminded of the session via email and encouraged to review the last workshops online if they were unable to attend. To prepare for this session, I reviewed concepts of appreciative inquiry and prepared questions to help get people thinking about asking appreciative questions. I also

prepared a Story Project poster for participants to share throughout the community to

recruit community members who were willing to share their hopes and dreams (Appendix

H). I made copies of the community consent forms for the leaders to review (Appendix

I).

      Do. The workshop location was in a classroom near the dining room, which

allowed attendees to bring in food and drinks. As participants arrived, they picked up an

agenda (Appendix G) and copies of the Story Project flier. Attendance was taken. After

reviewing information on asset-based thinking, I led them to look over the appreciative

questions and guided a discussion about temptations, potential pitfalls, and other

questions they may ask in the interviews. I then reviewed the community consent form

and reminded them that I would observe the interviews. We discussed how to record

interviews, either digitally or in writing. Finally, we talked about how to recruit

community people for this component and where they might take the fliers. Each

workshop lasted approximately 45 minutes.

      Study. The total number of participants in the two sessions was 20. No clergy

participated, but each of these ministers were trained previously in listening through

appreciative inquiry. Those who came to one of the sessions expressed interest in the

concept of appreciative inquiry and were glad to be asking only positive questions. The

major concern, which some expressed as stressful, was who they would be interviewing,

how they would recruit, and where they would meet. Three people shared names of

colleagues that they were uncomfortable interviewing themselves but who they thought

would be potential interview candidates. In reviewing the Story Project flier, participants

suggested that any connection to FBCA was left off the flier that might prevent

participation and instead, wanted to keep the focus on participation as part of a WCU doctoral project. They placed fliers at Asheville-Buncombe Technical College, University of North Carolina at Asheville, a local shelter for women, a community racial reconciliation workshop, the weekly community lunch at FBCA, and other locations around downtown Asheville. Those who participated in this workshop did not complete a reflection form until after the community listening project.

Act. Based on input from the leaders, I made the changes to the Story Project flier and made copies for leaders before they distributed them. Scheduling the times to meet for interviews with the leaders was a challenge, so I sent an email encouraging everyone to let me know when an interview was scheduled which I put on my calendar. Leaders spoke to me individually about how to work the technology and how to best schedule time to meet and where that would fit with each of our schedules.

Community Listening Project: Plan-Do-Study-Acts Cycle Four

The second element for the improvement initiative took place throughout the months of October – December, focused on listening to the stories of people in our community with different experiences than those of the interviewers.

Plan. The planning for this component involved making copies of consent forms for community participants (Appendix I), developing an interview protocol to share with leaders (Appendix N), and scheduling times to meet for the interviews. Questions to invite listening were asset-based rather than needs-based (Shapiro, T., personal conversation, June 2, 2018). Examples included:

- What is one activity that you find particularly meaningful?

- What gift do you have that you feel is underused?

- Tell a story about a time when you feel you helped someone with a challenge.

- Where (how) do you experience the holy?

- What are you doing when you feel you are at your best?

- What is one thing you would do to make downtown a better place?

Do. Most leaders took initiative to set up interviews with community members. In two instances, at a community lunch and a ministry for women who were homeless, I announced that we were asking for people to share their stories with our leaders who were present at that time. These requests yielded several people excited to tell their stories. Interviews occurred in restaurants, church, homes, and businesses. I spoke with the participants about our desire to listen appreciatively to people in our community, without agenda, and to hear about their gifts and dreams. The participant and I signed the consent form together. The leaders began the interview and I observed the interaction and took notes.

Study. The goal for this component of the improvement initiative was to have twenty leaders participate in this project. There were 17 leaders who led at least one interview and others who shared potential names. Reasons mentioned for not participating were time restraints, not knowing who to interview, and discomfort in the process. One leader for whom listening was part of her job commented, *"I have utterly failed with regard to interviews. I have thought about it and realize I am not comfortable asking someone, in an interview, about his/her spiritual life. . . I am not afraid of the topics. But it feels too intimate, even too holy, for an interview."* This discomfort with the intimacy of listening to another as part of a project is understandable and was echoed by others.

Surprised. Leaders who did complete an interview with a community member often expressed relief, surprise, and intrigue. One leader wrote,

> Completed my first interview. I found it interesting that it wasn't as uncomfortable for me as I thought. It was actually fascinating to hear the story and put it with the face of an individual. The honesty was appreciated as was the passion with which the story was told. This experience gives me pause to what the stories of others may be, and how they 'look' on different folks.

Another leader, who had initially shared trepidation about how others would perceive this project and her part in it, said, "I was concerned that the folks I interviewed would think I just wanted to be nosey – to look at them as a 'project' that needed to be fixed. Or to see them as less valuable members of the community…I experienced none of that."

As a result of participation in the listening project, one leader drew this conclusion about her was learning, "Assumptions can be shattered and depth of the person's thoughts surprising. It is becoming increasingly apparent how short-sighted our ideas of others can be." Leaders came up to me often through this component, wanting to talk more about what they had experience and some of the insights they had gained. In talking about a person she interviewed, one leader wrote, "I was drawn into her enthusiasm and positive vibes, even though I didn't understand her methodology. I was grateful for her care for others and our world. Listening was a pleasure." Others spoke of the impact listening had on them. "I was surprised at how comfortable and easy the experience was for me. I had dreaded it, but it was a positive experience for me."

Seeing Others. One leader described the person to whom she listened as "someone who gave me the gift of herself through sharing her story." Though it is easy

to ignore or avoid people who are different and cluster around people who share our backgrounds, interests, and experiences, leaders began to learn through this listening exercise that seeing others and engaging them in conversation can open us to new experiences of growth. "This project is helping me to begin opening my eyes more to what is happening around me – to really see people – wonder what their lives are really like – to start engaging people more in conversation." One leader spoke of her interview with a woman who is Muslim. She wrote, "I was so impressed with her kindness, her depth of faith, and how similar we are in so many ways despite the fact that she is Muslim and I am Christian." Recognizing the common concerns and values within our diversity can lead to empathy and connections that lead congregations to work for the common good.

   Listening Leadership. Internal emotions and thoughts can distract leaders from listening effectively (Steil & Bommelje, 2004). Interruptions also occur often. In this process, leaders began to learn that paying attention and being present were essential to listening well. One leader commented, "I learned that I can be a good listener if I try – but that I have to focus on that instead of trying to offer my own opinions." Several participants struggled to listen without guiding the conversation and offering opinions. In my observations, leaders relaxed throughout the interview as time passed, and many began to ask more probing questions, which opened up community member to share more. In other cases, just being present and quiet seemed to give permission to the one sharing to be honest. One man kept apologizing for saying too much, but the leader affirmed his story and thanked him for sharing the positive as well as a past hurt. Leaders talked about being reminded that their "thoughts and ways aren't the only ones."

Listening and being present is a way to live out faith and follow the way of Jesus. One leader said, "Jesus taught us to love others; sometimes that love is demonstrated by just being with others." One longtime Bible study teacher recognized that in small, faithful acts, leaders make a difference. She wrote,

> I would like to say that I am so inspired that I am going to change the world. That is not going to happen, but if I find one place, one person, develop my listening skills to really 'hear' the needs of one person, [I] and we can make a difference, one persona at a time.

Meeting the needs of others and demonstrating love through attention and non-judgment impact both the one telling her story and the leader in positive ways.

Appreciative inquiry. Leaders were invited to ask positive, hopeful questions. Tim Shairo (personal conversation, June 2, 2018) says that thinking about the areas that are going well, the gifts we have to offer, and the hopes for the future give us energy and life. Focusing on all that is broken can lead to despair. Leaders found this appreciative approach helpful. "I do think this appreciative/humble approach made it easier for him to talk about his feelings and experiences, realizing that I was not going to judge him in any way – just wanted him to feel free to share whatever he liked. I believe he did this." Another shared of the excitement when one community person was asked a question. "D's face lit up when I asked him, 'What is one activity that you find particularly meaningful?' He immediately said 'Teaching!' I could see that his just being able to talk with someone about his gift was uplifting and powerful." For some leaders, the interview did bring up hard stories. One leader described her experience with a woman who was struggling with housing:

> She was outgoing, positive, and a good conversationalist. I was shocked when we
>
> sat down to talk personally. Her thoughts were dark and very depressing
>
> concerning her life. It was as though giving her my undivided attention and asking
>
> probing questions gave her a platform to 'bare her soul.' I was pretty low when it
>
> was finished.

The risk of listening is that it requires humility and compassion (Schein, 2013). I talked

to leaders who struggled with the temptation to move from listening to fixing. For this

project, I had encouraged leaders not to offer to make things better, but simply to be

present in both the hope and despair. One leader said, "It was helpful to just listen and

not try to 'fix' anything." Another leader wrestled with the relationship of listening and

acting.

> It is very hard for me to listen and to not feel like there is something I must do to
>
> help bring about change. Is this the prompting of the Spirit or is it my own ego?
>
> Am I hearing God's call or am I operating out of a place of privilege and power
>
> that thinks I know what is best?

These questions are important for self-examination and discernment. Having a learning

community of leaders allows these reflections to happen in a safe space.

> *Advocacy.* In this workshop, leaders were exposed to injustices all around our

community, such as the lack of affordable housing and continuing forms of racism.

Leaders expressed desire to address these systemic concerns. One leader reaffirmed her

commitment "to be an advocate in FBCA's own dreaming, visioning, planning to address

the dire need for and help create housing options." Another leader lamented how others

"have life anxieties and seemingly impossible circumstances." Hearing about these needs

and the work that was already happening served as catalysts for leaders to know more about what was happening, find ways to advocate on behalf of those being harmed by the system, and get involved with groups seeking to care for others and seek change. One leader commented, "There is a long road ahead of us – many bumps along the way."

 Balancing Measure. The main stress for leaders continued to be time constraints. However, this component caused some leaders to worry about whom to interview. "Trying to figure out whom to interview, then make arrangements to do it has been stressful. . . But it was definitely worthwhile – for both of us."

 Act. For this community listening project, the benchmark goal was set based on the assumption that fewer leaders would participate because of discomfort or time restraints. Participation did drop, but 17 leaders participated in this part of the improvement initiative. I sent two follow up emails to all leaders who had agreed to participate in the overall project to give them opportunity to participate in this component. Based on the reflections and conversations, non-participating leaders were not comfortable interviewing someone across difference, unsure whom to interview, or too busy to find time to engage.

Communities of Practice: Plan-Do-Study-Acts Cycle Five

 This third initiative component brought together leaders to share their critical autobiographies and to talk about what they have learned.

 Plan. Leaders were divided into CoPs based on categories of leadership: clergy, deacons, educators, council/team leaders. Each community was assigned a leader who was emailed instructions about gathering the CoP together. All leaders were given their assignment via email and encouraged to meet with their CoP, during which they would

share a brief portion of their critical autobiography with the group and what they were

learning from their participation in this improvement initiative. Reflection on their

experience with their CoP would be written in their journal or emailed to me.

Do. Group leaders arranged gathering times and locations with those people in

their assigned CoPs. Group members shared from their critical autobiographies and

reflected in journals about their insights.

Study. Twenty-six leaders participated in a Community of Practice.

Conversations with the leaders indicated that the busyness of the holiday season made

participation a challenge. One CoP leader who was assign the role to gather a group did

not contact them. Members of that group talked but did not meet officially. Other groups

struggled to find a common meeting time but scheduled a time and space that worked for

as many as possible. CoPs were assigned to bring together leaders with similar roles with

the hope that they would continue beyond the scope of the improvement initiative,

becoming rooted in the congregational culture.

The Value of Healthy Staff Relationships. The CoP for clergy included the four

ministers who participated in this project of an eight-minister team. I was invited to

participate in this CoP but did not to allow honest and open input. Each week, the

ministers meet to discuss pastoral care needs, schedule upcoming events, plan worship,

engage in theological imagination, and follow up with guests. Following our regular

meeting, we have lunch together to nurture relationships with each other through personal

stories and laughter. One clergy leader reflected, "As a staff, we are gifted with healthy

and active peer relationships, colleagues and friends with whom we can regularly learn,

grow, challenge, experience, and discern what God is doing in our midst and what God

would have us do." These collegial relationships extend beyond the ministers at FBCA

to other clergy friendships in our networks.

With the overall aim of the improvement initiative in mind, one minister reflected

on his understanding of the call and challenge of integrating the prophetic call to do

justice with personal spirituality. Highlighting the power of listening to sacred stories, he

wrote,

> Prophetic spirituality is a revolutionary call to live one's life beyond the desires of
>
> self. It costs a lot to hear this call, much less to live into its way. Like many
>
> difficult things, it is most effective when it can be learned as a living story, with
>
> honest passion and intensity. True listening is immensely difficult and necessary.
>
> But it has the power to convict us individually in profound ways. And, once a
>
> person has had their life interrupted with the living story of an "other", that person
>
> can make radical strides towards prophetic spirituality and social justice in action.

Another clergy leader addressed the gift of diversity among the staff. She said, "I am

better because I am formed in a community of people who agree and disagree with me,

who ask questions and respond to mine, who wrestle, celebrate, grieve, wonder, and

respond with me."

Spiritual Practice and Accountability. In a recent worship service, the

congregation prayed for and commissioned a team to travel to FBCA's sister church in

Cuba. One leader reflected on this commissioning, "We learn[ed] about clean water for

Cuba and health care in Haiti and so we pray. The prayer and the work are connected –

directly." This connection between our spiritual practice in community sending others

out to serve, not using their privilege for charity, but working for justice is our goal as a

congregation.

A leader in one CoP wrote, "We could all agree that Scripture speaks a lot about

our responsibilities as Christians regarding how our faith informs and directs our social

justice efforts." One deacon remembered her time many years ago and how her pastor

modeled a prophetic spirituality. She recalled,

> Cecil Sherman, former pastor of FBCA, played a critical role in developing my
>
> sense of justice and community. His approach to integration and how we interpret
>
> Scripture provided a clear road map for me in terms of acceptance of all and of
>
> 'justice for all.'

Another leader mentioned how community is necessary for accountability, "Sharing our

own ideas and faith walk helps curb the possibility that we might misinterpret Scripture

and go off on a tangent into false doctrine if left to our own counsel."

Giving thanks for a community rooted in faith and action, one leader summarized

it as follows,

> The foundation of my faith tradition is that Jesus teaches us to love and be kind to
>
> all. Feed the hungry, provide clothing for those without, provide homes for the
>
> homeless, and work against injustices. Although this shouldn't matter, knowing I
>
> am with a group of like-minded individuals gives me comfort, fully participating
>
> in this CoP gathering.

Many leaders commented on the common history many in their CoP shared, telling

stories of growing up in the era of the Civil Rights struggle. Several leaders found the

time together edifying, with one commenting, "It was meaningful for me in that I enjoyed

hearing everyone's story. Although our stories were different, there was a degree of

commonality in them." Though not all groups develop into a close-knit community,

these CoPs, "if the right mix, can offer encouragement, validation, and support, and helps

keep each other within the lanes."

    Resistance and openness. Hearing stories from peers who may have grown up in

a different time or place can be a challenge. Older adults and younger adults often have

different lenses through which they see the world. A younger participant noted, "During

the gathering of the CoP I had my eye opened a bit. I heard stories of separate water

fountains and facilities, back of the bus realities, and other social concerns of times

before the years of my experience."

These differences among those who have much in common can create tensions. One

leader disclosed,

> I unfortunately have a negative impression of one participant who was resistant to
>
> the idea that White people still are a part of the problem (since that person did not
>
> feel that they had personally done anything to Black people). I think I understand
>
> this resentment of this assertion – it is shocking and humbling. But looking in the
>
> mirror can be the first step in our social justice. We may not like what we see, but
>
> we cannot change it until we admit it is there.

One leader used the metaphor of life as a constantly changing journey. She wrote,

> I do not want to feel shamed because of my privilege. I cannot change what I was
>
> born into, my race, etc. All I can do is what I can to improve social justice
>
> philosophy. I can be welcoming. I can acknowledge my biases/fears and work to
>
> improve or correct those. Life is a journey. Change is a constant. Nothing is

permanent. I expect my own opinions/experiences with social justice to evolve. I

pray I will keep my mind open and my heart willing to continue the conversation.

This desire to recognize one's own sacred worth is important and may lead to greater

openness to acknowledging the sacred worth of all people. Privilege should not bring

shame, but responsibility suggested one leader. "My task is to seek to be a faithful

follower of Christ – to name and fight injustice where I see it and to leave the rest to

God."

The CoPs were mainly educated persons who describe themselves as White. As

leaders became more aware or reminded of privilege, injustice, and power, several were

motivated to act more justly. One suggested that it takes faith and courage to stand up

against injustice,

> It is the responsibility of us who are White to take a stand, fight racism, name it,
>
> confront it – it is not the responsibility of POC to educate us. God's justice calls
>
> us to stand, to be a voice, to work to bring down the systems that perpetuate white
>
> privilege at the expense of all others. How do we change the world outside the
>
> walls of the church if we are not willing to do the work it takes to change
>
> ourselves first?

One leader expressed a more urgent call to act, "Learning more about justice is not what I

seek – I seek ways and places to connect with others and do justice together. Time to get

out of my head and act what I know or act on what I say I believe."

Yet for some other leaders, the path was just beginning to unfold. A leader spoke

of learning that developed through embracing the process despite her fears and growing

through embracing honesty. She wrote, "I began this journey feeling unsure of the

expectations, even though they had been explained. Maybe I was afraid to face some realities, or maybe I was feeling defensive about my role in social justice. I feel like I embraced some honesty during this process." Learning and growth together in these communities "gives me hope," one leader professed. "It further supports working together to put an end to racial injustice and prejudices."

Balancing measure. In this final PDSA cycle of the improvement initiative, one leader commented, "Time is at a premium . . . but I can see the light at the end of the tunnel and know already that it is worth the effort." Several leaders spoke of the difficulty of meeting during the holiday season. Looking forward, it will be important to encourage CoPs to find meeting times that fit into the busy seasons of the lives of the leaders.

Act. The holiday season made finding time for CoP gatherings challenging. Through conversation with design team members and other leaders, we recognized the value of these times to reflect and share with people who love and respect one another. The desire of many leaders is to explore ways to continue these CoPs in the future and discover ways to deepen spiritual practices and move outward into our community to advocate for justice.

SECTION SIX: SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT OF IMPROVEMENT

METHODOLOGY

Following the implementation of the improvement initiative components,

summative assessment of the improvement methodology provided overall measures to

determine whether the aims were achieved and what effects the initiatives had on the

congregational leaders' capacity to integrate justice and spirituality in their understanding

of faith formation. The overall improvement initiative lasted six months. Each leader

was given a post-survey based on the Faith and Justice survey that they completed during

the pre-cycle of the improvement process. Quantitative data was analyzed using a paired

samples t-test (Tanner, 2012). Qualitative data used In Vivo, descriptive, and values

coding, and was then analyzed for themes (Miles, et al., 2014).

Guiding Question	Type of Measure	Data Collection	Measurement Level	Frequency	Data Analysis
Did it work? AIM: Congregational leaders and members understand spirituality and justice and non-negotiable components of faith formation.	OUTCOME Baseline data and summative evaluation	Faith and Justice survey Focus Group Reflections	Ordinal Interval Nominal	Pre- and post-project At end of project	*Quantitative:* Descriptive Paired Samples T-test *Qualitative*: Transcription In Vivo, Values

Figure 22. Data Analysis: Summative measurements and assessments chart.

The guiding question of the summative assessment is, "Did it work?" The overall theory of improvement and long-term goal of the improvement initiative components was to build the capacity of congregational leaders to integrate spirituality and justice as essential components to faith formation and their everyday living. If leaders develop this capacity, I believe it will affect the adult students they teach and lead over time. Ultimately, this impact on the congregation will lead to greater advocacy for social justice in the greater Asheville community.

An additional way to measure the impact of the improvement initiative will be to survey the entire congregation with the Faith and Justice survey and compare it to the pre- and post-survey of congregational leaders. A future goal would be to survey the congregation over several years to see if the data reveals a positive increase in their integration of spirituality and justice in their lived faith. However, these congregational measures are beyond the timeline of this disquisition.

Summative Evaluation Results

My *theory of improvement* suggested that establishing research-informed learning processes that integrate spirituality and justice as essential components of faith formation would increase the capacity of congregational leaders to practice and promote a more just and lived faith, fostering a more inclusive and socially-minded congregation. Through leader development workshops, a community listening project, and formation of communities of practice, leaders would exhibit a greater awareness of privilege and increase leadership capacity through biblical knowledge, listening leadership, and critical consciousness, with the aspiration of leading congregants to connect spirituality and

justice as a way of life, a living faith.

Progress Toward Improvement Initiative Goals. The goals of this

improvement initiative were grounded in leader participation in development workshops,

training in appreciative inquiry and listening to the voices of people in our community,

and increased recognition of the justice as essential to a lived faith. The following

section considers the progress made toward achieving the improvement initiative goals.

Goal 1: 50% of Christian formation faculty and chairs of ministry councils

participate in leadership development sessions.

PDSA Cycles	Invited	Attendance / Participants	Online	Total	%
1: Workshop One	70	25	6	31	44.3%
2: Workshop Two	70	29	6	35	50%
3: Workshop Three	70	20	5	25	35.7%

Figure 23. Leader participation in workshops.

First Baptist Church of Asheville (FBCA) has eight ministers, five ministry

councils, each with a chairperson, and 30 adult Christian formation classes led by 50

faculty, and 30 deacons. Because some of these people overlap serving in more than one

role, the total of potential participants for these workshops was 70. In worship one, 36%

of potential leaders (N=25) attended the workshop in person, which increased to 44%

when the online option was added (N=31). Workshop two had 41% of leaders participate

in person (N=29), 50% total (N=30). The third workshop was mainly connected to the

community listening component of the initiative. Participation among possible leaders

was at 29% in person (N=20) and 36% when adding the online option (N=25). Based on

these figures, the goal of having 50% of possible leaders participate in the workshops was

not met.

Goal 2: Twenty church leaders (clergy and laity) will be trained to initiate asset-

based conversations with congregants and the people of our surrounding community,

guiding them to better articulate hopes for spiritual growth and commitment to work for

justice.

PDSA Cycles	Invited	Attendance / Participants	Online	Total	Percentage
3: Workshop Three	70	20	5	25	35.7%
4: Listening Project	25	17	N/A	17	68%

Figure 24. Leader participation in listening project.

In the third workshop, participation (N=25) exceeded the goal of training 20

leader. However, only 17 of those trained chose to engage in the community listening

project (68%). I hoped 20 leaders would interview a total of 50 people. The data show

that only 33 interviews were conducted by the 17 leaders.

Goal 3: Congregational leaders at First Baptist Church of Asheville report that

they are invested more deeply in their spiritual practices and in intentionally living their

daily lives through a lens of inclusive love and justice. This finding for this goal were

assessed through the comparison of the pre- and post-implementation survey results,

along with formative qualitative measures.

Comparison of pre- and post-implementation survey results. The pre-

implementation survey was administered in August 2019 to all congregational leaders

who agreed to participate in the improvement initiative outlined in this disquisition. A

post-implementation survey was sent to leaders and was completed in December-January,

2019-2020. The survey, based on the Christian Reformed Church of Canada's Faith and

Justice Research Survey (Faith and Justice, 2014), explored questions concerning leaders'

understandings of and priority given to practices of spirituality and justice. The survey

also including descriptive demographic data. A paired sample t-test design was used to

analyze the data to show if any changes in perception and priority were significant

(Tanner, 2012). Of the 44 leaders who initially agreed to participate in the improvement

initiative, 36 completed the pre-implementation survey. Of those who completed the pre-

survey, 31 completed the post-implementation survey. The paired samples t-test was used

to compare only the leaders who completed both the pre- and post-implementation

surveys.

Activities and their importance to the life of faith. In comparing the pre-

implementation and post-implementation survey results, the two responses with the

highest mean differences were "being involve with a community of believers who

worship and live out their faith together" ($\Delta=0.23$; $p=0.07$) and "practicing spiritual

disciplines" ($\Delta=0.26$; $p=0.28$). For both results, $p>0.05$ so it cannot be concluded that

these changes were significant. The remainder of the responses had insignificant changes,

each with a mean difference of less than 0.1. None of the mean differences in the

comparisons of the responses were statistically significant.

Though the ranked responses did not result in a statistically significant change,

many leaders spoke of the importance of each area. Prayer was a vital element of their

spiritual disciplines, and leaders believed it to be essential for recognizing injustice and

working to make a difference in the world. One leader wrote, "I believe that serious,

quiet prayer is at the heart of human transformation. That embodies how I understand

spirituality. Seeking justice flows out of prayer. The first step is learning to recognize the

injustice."

Table 1

Elements Important to Participant's Life of Faith

Response	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey					
	M_1	SD_1	M_2	SD_2	Δ	t	df	p
Having a nurturing personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior	4.39	1.13	4.35	1.02	-0.04	-0.14	30	0.89
Following God's commandments and doing what is right	4.42	0.72	4.39	0.92	-0.03	-0.15	30	0.88
Understanding the Bible and applying it to today's world	4.39	0.80	4.35	0.88	-0.04	-0.14	30	0.89
Believing in the Bible and important church teachings	3.84	1.07	3.90	1.04	0.06	0.25	30	0.81

Performing acts of mercy and charity	4.68	0.48	4.71	0.53	0.03	0.23	30	0.82
Engaging in lifelong discipleship	4.68	0.48	4.71	0.59	0.03	0.27	30	0.79
Being involve with a community of believers who worship and live out their faith together	4.58	0.56	4.81	0.40	0.23	1.88	30	0.07
Practicing spiritual disciplines	4.03	0.84	4.26	0.68	0.26	1.10	30	0.28
Supporting efforts to identify and address systemic injustice	4.39	0.67	4.48	0.68	0.09	0.59	30	0.56

Seven of the eight statements increased the number of leaders who responded to the statements as "extremely important," with the exception being the response to the phrase "believing the Bible and important church teachings," which remained constant.

Importance to Christian Faith
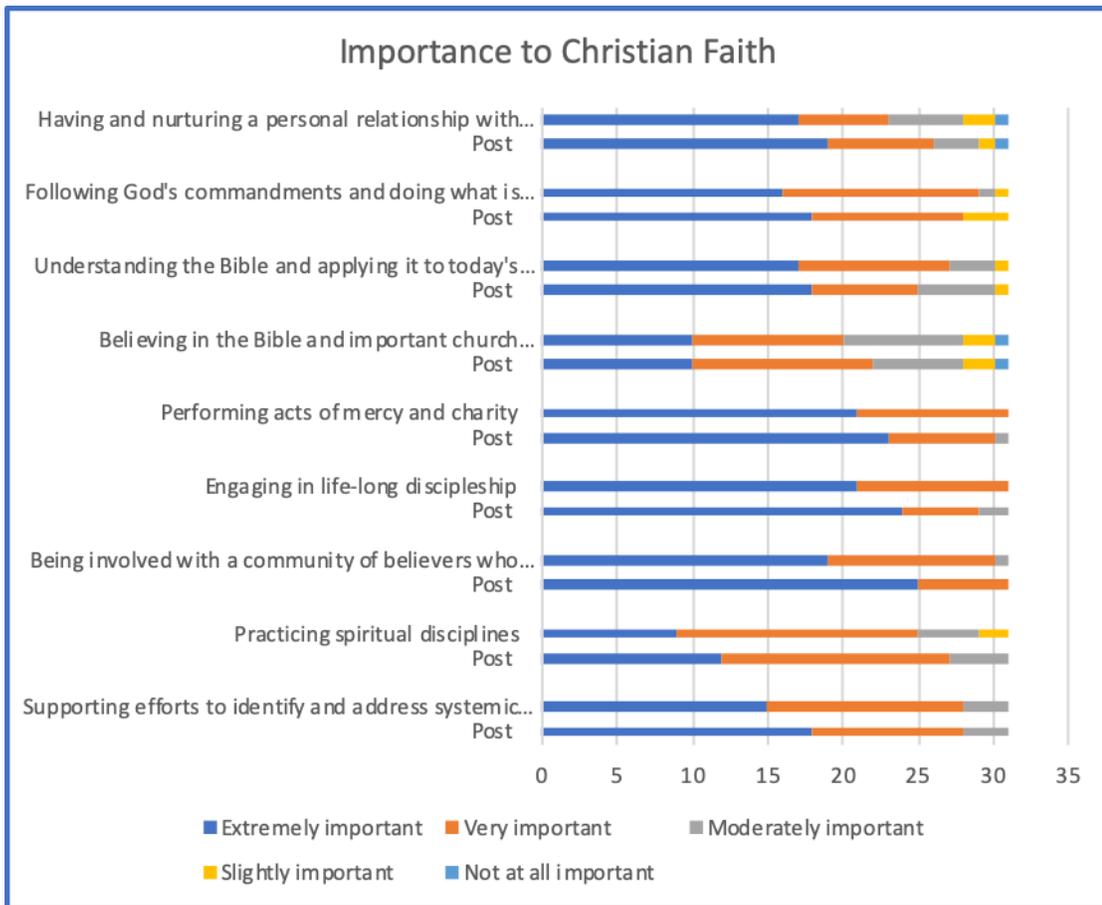
Figure 25. Comparison of responses to the importance of practices to Christian faith.

The meaning of justice and its relationship to faith. A second question asked leaders to consider what justice means, followed by an additional question about the connection between justice and faith. Leaders continued to focus on addressing "root causes" that keep people powerless and dismantling systemic barriers than lead to injustice, with the mean difference increasing slightly (Figure 26). Most leaders define justice as fairness, which increased following the improvement initiative (Δ=0.23; p=0.46). In conversation with the leaders, fairness was connected to equity. Some leaders, however, struggled with justice as fairness because they believed fairness did not

address the systems of power that were inherently inequitable. Because p>0.05 in all

comparisons, the changes are not to be seem as statistically significant.

When asked to define justice, leaders had a variety of responses. Many spoke of

justice in terms of "fairness," "dignity," "equity," and "sacred worth." One leader wrote,

"Justice is seeing all people as worthy - worthy of love, worthy of forgiveness, worthy of

living a life of dignity." Another agreed, "Justice is what results when we yield our

privilege, abilities, and goods for restoring another in need, because we recognize their

sacred worth is the same as our own." As in the pre-implementation survey, leaders

continued to use language of the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you want them to do

unto you." Though the quantitative rankings do not indicate statistically significant

change, the definitions from the leaders closely connect their spirituality with the call to

do justice.

Table 2

Meaning of Justice

	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey					
Response	M_1	SD_1	M_2	SD_2	Δ	t	df	p
People are treated fairly	4.19	1.33	4.42	1.12	0.23	0.75	30	0.46
Those that break the law are held accountable	4.16	0.86	3.80	1.14	-0.36	-1.54	30	0.13
The "root causes" of what keeps people in	4.52	0.85	4.68	0.79	0.16	0.74	30	0.47

need and powerless are addressed								
Systemic barriers lead to injustice are dismantled	4.42	0.92	4.55	0.96	0.13	0.52	30	0.61
There is restoration where broken relationships are made right again	4.26	0.89	4.42	0.72	0.16	0.71	30	0.48
People who are in need receive aid/help	4.26	1.06	4.26	1	0	0	30	1
People who are otherwise excluded are now included	4.42	0.96	4.26	1.09	-0.16	-0.60	30	0.56
People get the reward or punishment they deserve	3.29	1.16	3.12	1.20	-0.17	-0.54	30	0.59
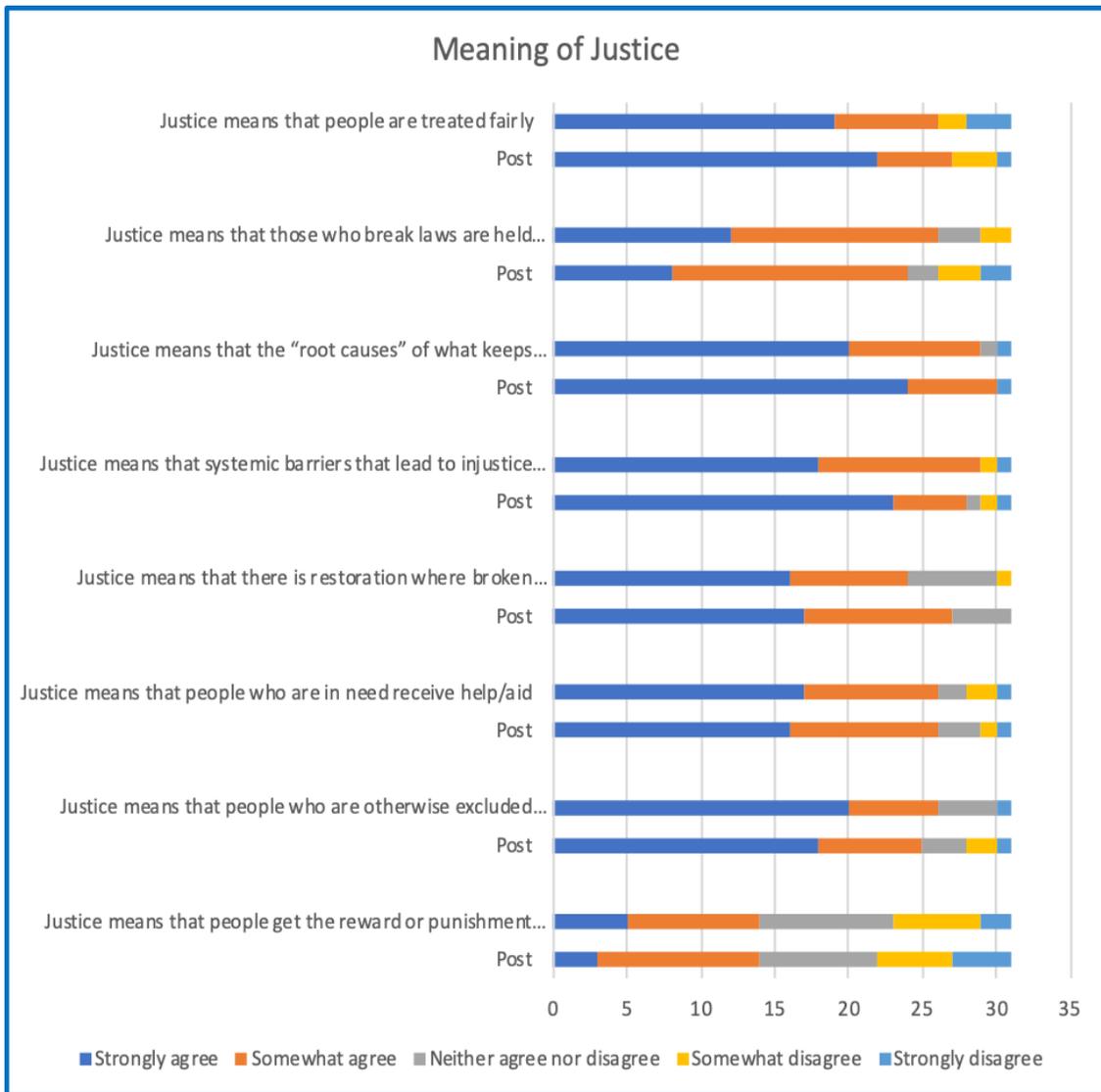
Figure 26. Comparison of responses to meaning of justice.

Table 3

Connection between spiritual practice and justice

Response	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey					
	M_1	SD_1	M_2	SD_2	Δ	t	Df	p
There is a connection between justice and the major themes of the Bible	4.61	0.56	4.58	0.81	-0.03	-0.23	30	0.82
Being a Christian requires me to pursue justice	4.74	0.44	4.81	0.75	0.07	0.40	30	0.69
God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged	4.71	0.59	4.58	0.85	-0.13	-0.66	30	0.51
I gain a greater understanding of God and God's kingdom when I work for justice	4.61	0.56	4.42	0.89	-0.19	-0.90	30	0.37
Doing justice draws me closer to God	4.52	0.63	4.48	0.89	-0.04	-0.15	30	0.88
Too much focus on doing justice may cause my congregation to lose sight of the church's mission	2.52	1.29	2.26	1.32	-0.26	-0.87	30	0.39
God will take care of justice as God pleases; it is not my place to decide that for God	2.10	1.22	2.10	1.42	0	0	30	1
Pursuing justice is important, but it is not related to my faith	1.39	0.76	1.65	1.02	0.26	1.14	30	0.26
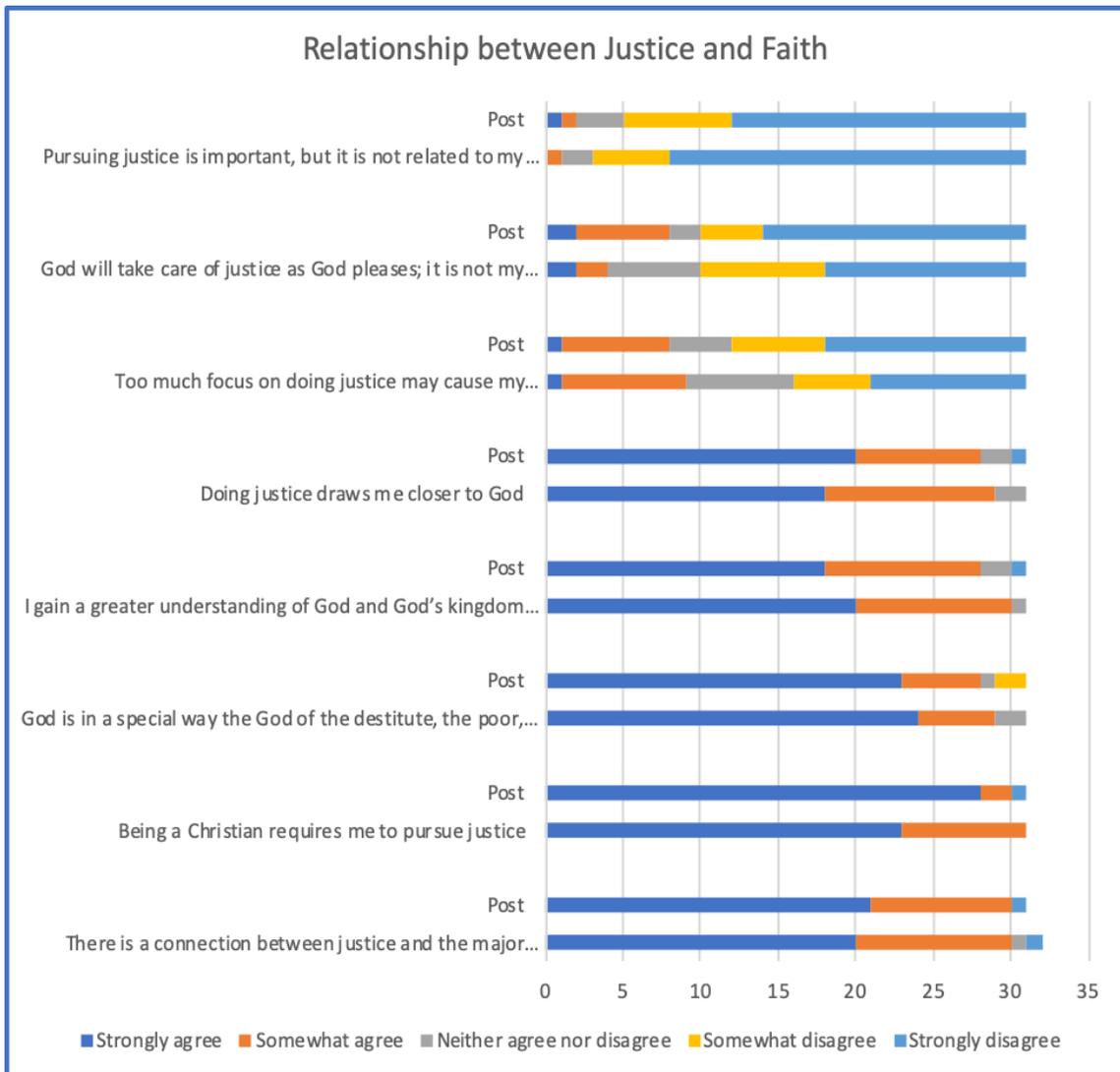
Figure 27. Comparison of responses of relationship between faith and justice.

Doing justice. A deacon leader commented, "Justice means that we address/repair barriers that render people powerless, excluded, and in need." The leaders all strongly or somewhat agreed that doing justice is more than our actions; it is a way of life (N=31). The highest mean difference following the improvement initiative was the ranking that "justice is done through making people aware of injustice" (0.26; p=0.17). In

a journal reflection, one leader commented on the life-long journey of deepening our

spirituality and attending to justice, "This is not an easy fix, or quick, or immediate. But

we are in this for the long run. We probably will experience frustrations and

complications. But it will be worth it if this results in helping even one person whose life

will be forever changed." One surprise was the slight increase in the connection between

charity and justice ($\Delta=0.19$; $p=0.23$). This result is inconsistent with the formative

assessment following the second workshop in which several leaders reflected on the

distinction between charity and justice, recognizing the "charity can contribute to us

ignoring injustice." Acts of charity and mercy often became how leaders understood

their work for justice, despite the instruction that justice requires a systemic approach and

that serving through mission and ministry can sometimes prevent something more

expansive.

Table 4

Doing Justice

	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey					
Response	M_1	SD_1	M_2	SD_2	Δ	t	Df	p
Justice is more than our actions – it is a way of life, a part of who we are	4.74	0.44	4.68	0.48	-0.06	-0.57	30	0.57
Justice is done through making people aware of injustice	4.16	0.82	4.42	0.56	0.26	1.39	30	0.17
Justice is done through serving people in need	4.39	0.62	4.45	0.72	0.06	0.39	30	0.70

Justice is done through community development activities	4.35	0.66	4.32	0.65	-0.03	-0.19	30	0.85
Justice is done through political advocacy	4.23	0.62	4.19	0.75	-0.04	-0.18	30	0.86
Justice is done through acts of charity	4.29	0.69	4.48	0.51	0.19	1.24	30	0.23
Justice is done through judgments made by wise people (e.g., clergy, court judges)	3.48	1.09	3.19	1.35	-0.29	-0.91	30	0.37
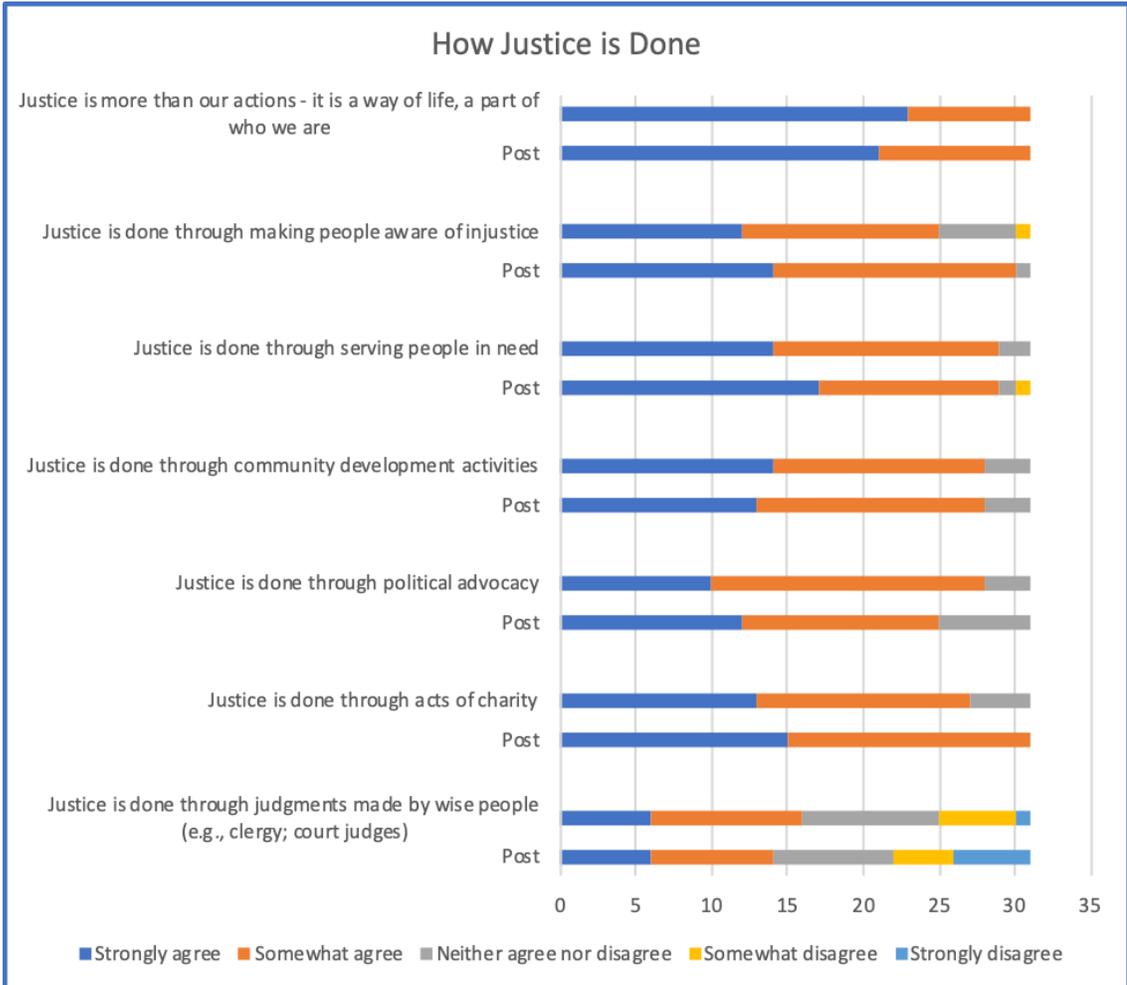
Figure 28. Comparison of responses to how justice is done.

Avenues for better understanding justice. Leaders indicated the most

compelling avenue to better understanding justice was through listening to the stories of

people who experienced injustice, with most leaders ranking it as extremely or very

effective (N=27). This response was not surprising, though of the 27 who positively

indicated the effectiveness of listening to stories, only 17 of them participated in the

community listening project. While most areas decreased in ranking from the pre-

implementation to the post-implementation results, personal Bible study increased as an

avenue to better understand justice from 17 to 22 leaders identifying it as extremely or

very effective. This result seems somewhat inconsistent with the previous result that

"believing the Bible" was not highly ranked in the first question about areas important to

faith. It is interesting, however, to see the connection of personal spiritual practice and

listening to people on the margins both increasing in importance, bringing together the

spiritual and the prophetic.

Table 5

Avenues for understanding justice

Response	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey					
	M_1	SD_1	M_2	SD_2	Δ	T	Df	p
Sermons	3.62	0.76	3.61	0.76	-0.01	0	30	1
Personal Bible study	3.68	0.79	3.84	0.73	0.16	0.90	30	0.38
Bible studies with others	4.19	0.75	4.10	0.83	-0.09	-0.52	30	0.61
Family members	3.32	0.79	3.29	1.01	-0.03	-0.13	30	0.90

Teachers	3.84	0.69	3.74	0.82	-0.10	-0.49	30	0.63
Mentor	3.90	0.75	3.52	1.03	-0.38	-1.75	30	0.09
Educational classes	3.77	0.80	3.68	0.87	-0.09	-0.39	30	0.70
Stories from people experiencing injustice	4.35	0.80	4.35	0.88	0	0	30	1
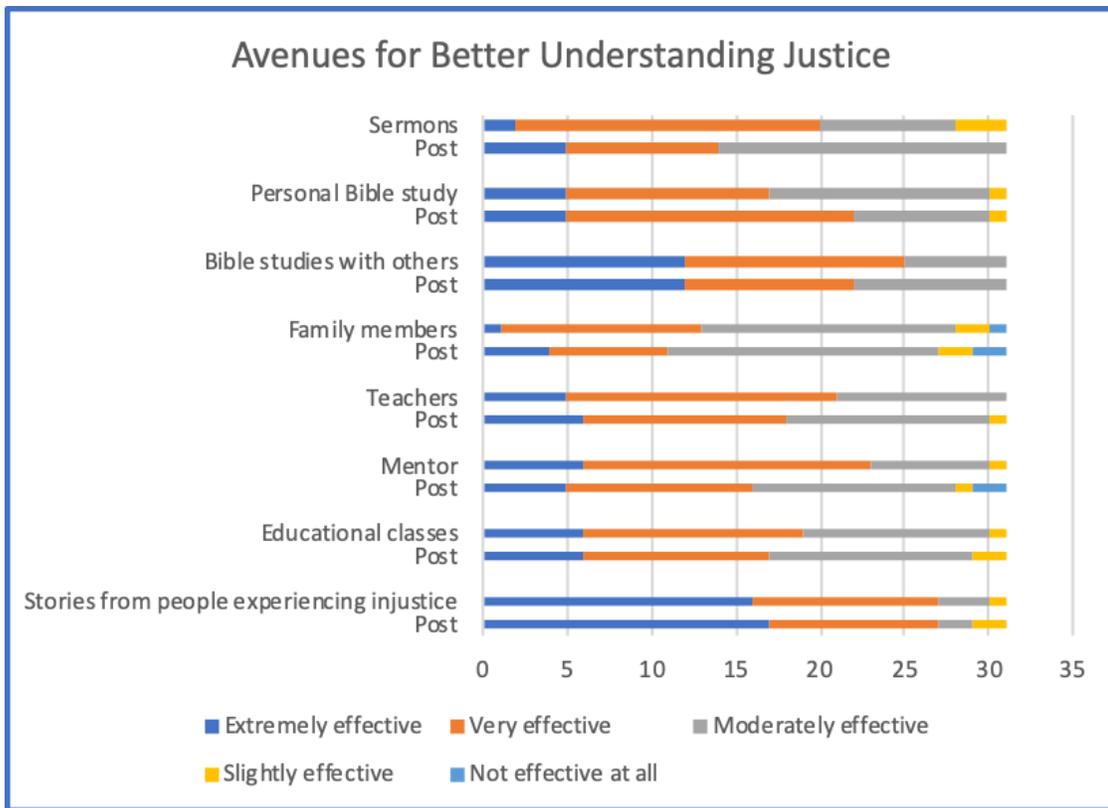
Figure 29. Comparison of responses of avenues for better understanding justice.

Obstacles to Doing Justice. An additional question on the survey asked leaders

to rank items that prevented them from working for justice. Most leaders agreed that the

church cares about combatting injustice, and they did not feel discouraged by the

congregation in their commitment to justice (N=27). One leader commented in her

journal, "I love our church and the directions we are heading." She then shared her desire

to participate in work around racial equality, affordable housing, homelessness, and

education of unjust public policies. She also listed over a dozen of the church's mission

and ministry work that she said she deeply values.

The barriers that received the highest ranking were those of time, complexity, and

exposure to people who experience injustice. Leaders describe their lives as busy,

finding it difficult to make time to learn about or work for justice. Time restraints were

cause by competing goods, such as family, job responsibilities, civic connections, church,

and travel. Prioritizing the work of justice seemed untenable to many of the leaders,

despite the aspirational desire to do so. The complexity of justice concerns and not

having regular interaction with people who experience injustice were ranked as barriers

to doing to the work of justice, though each slightly decrease following the improvement

initiative. Surprisingly, the largest mean difference was understanding the term justice,

"The word 'justice' is used in so many ways that I don't know what it means" ($\Delta=0.37$;

$p=0.09$). This increase following the improvement initiatives suggests that justice is a

term that must be defined often and rooted in Scripture and the life of the congregation.

It also indicated a need for continuous improvement and learning. None of the changes

were found to be statistically significant.

Table 6

Obstacles to working for justice

Response	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey		Δ	t	df	p
	M_1	SD_1	M_2	SD_2				
I don't have time, being busy with other things in life	3.13	0.97	3.23	0.97	0.10	0.42	29	0.68
Justice seems so complex, it's hard to know what to do	3.17	1.02	3.10	1.06	-0.07	-0.25	29	0.80
I'm not very exposed to people who experience injustice	3.47	1.14	3.57	1.17	0.10	0.38	29	0.71
The word 'justice' is used in so many ways that I don't know what it means	3.83	0.99	4.20	0.55	0.37	1.78	29	0.09
I haven't learned much about what justice means or how to do it	4.20	0.81	4.30	0.79	0.10	0.45	29	0.66
Our churches don't work well together to support each other in justice work	3.60	0.89	3.50	0.82	-0.10	-0.46	29	0.66
People in my church have not given me guidance in how to pursue justice	4.13	0.86	4.30	0.79	0.17	0.74	29	0.47
I feel lack of support from our congregational leadership	4.47	0.73	4.53	0.57	-0.06	0.39	29	0.70
I am concerned that focusing on justice may lead to neglecting other important aspects of Christian faith	4.30	0.88	4.37	0.10	0.07	0.26	29	0.79

I feel like I'm the only one in my congregation who cares about injustice	4.70	0.65	4.90	0.40	0.20	1.36	29	0.18
People in my church have discouraged me from focusing on justice work	4.87	0.43	4.90	0.31	0.03	0.37	29	0.71
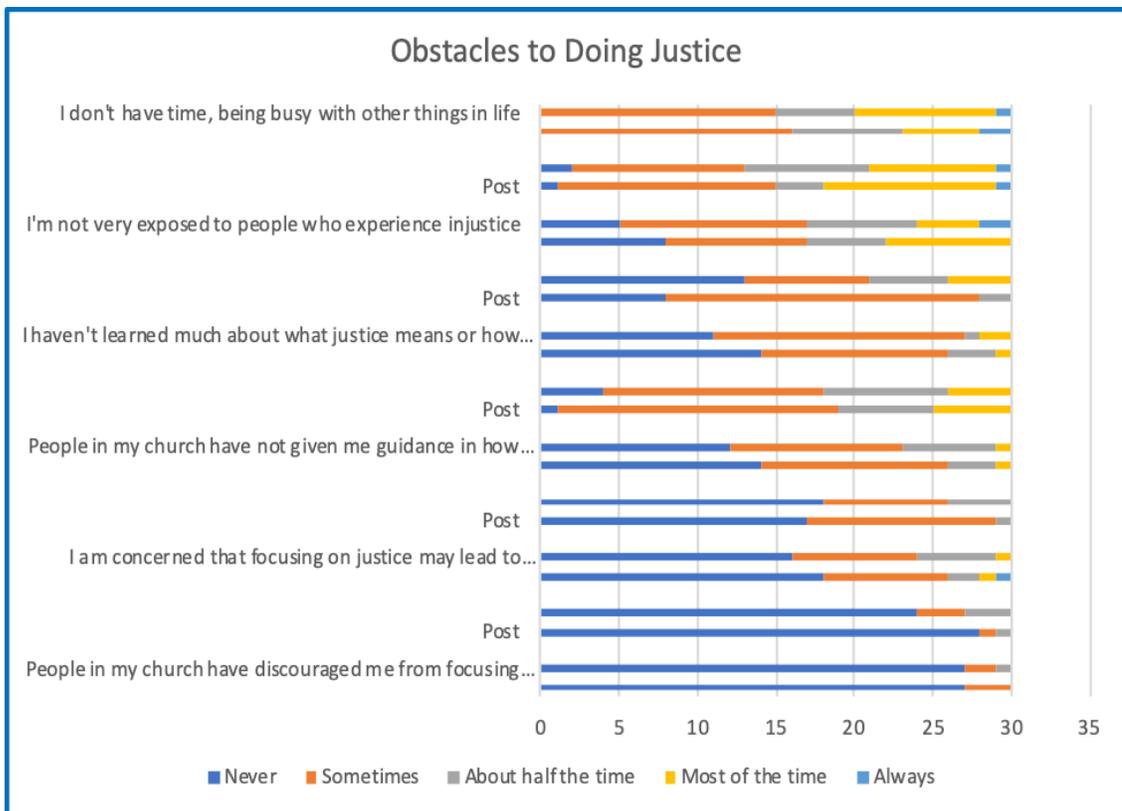
Figure 30. Comparison of responses to obstacle in doing justice.

In reviewing the formative and summative data, the improvement initiative did result in an improvement. There were challenges along the way, which included scheduling times for the leaders to come together for the workshops and communities of

practice. Because the non-clergy leaders are volunteers, many additional responsibilities

competed for their attention. Additionally, the Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas

seasons occurred just after the workshops were completed. The time constraints

identified by many were related to additional seasonal events, along with expectations of

friends and family. This challenge could have been alleviated with a longer timeline.

Those involved in the improvement components found the time together to be meaningful

in their understanding how justice and spirituality interact.

SECTION SEVEN: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP PRACTICE AND

CONTINUED SCHOLARSHIP

Throughout the improvement process, congregational learning took place as

leaders wrestled with understanding privilege, considered the prophetic call to justice

rooted in the Bible, and heard narratives and dreams of people in our community.

Congregational learning takes place as leaders and congregants continue to learn.

However, one barrier to learning was the challenge of busy schedules that left little room

for mindful reflection on priorities and the ability to acknowledge and work against

injustice. Lumby and Coleman (2007) contend that for leaders to effect change within

their communities, they must be self-aware of their impact as a change agent. As leaders

acknowledge the need for improvement, they must also be willing to deal with lament,

anger, resistance, and despair in the face of injustice. Once this emotional work has

begun, a willingness to live with uncertainty and varied levels of success and failure will

mark the ability of leaders to practice continuous learning.

The fear of division was an additional concern for several leaders. In the

aftermath of the congregational discernment process that resulted in the welcome and

inclusion statement, several members left the congregation. Leaders spoke of keeping

partisan politics out of the church, which tended to separate working for justice in the

community and country from the sacramental elements of Bible study, prayer, and

worship. Helping others through acts of mercy and charity was lauded, but addressing

governmental and corporate policies that oppressed people on the margins was deemed

political. Research finds that the sanctification of justice leads to a greater awareness of

privilege and an increased commitment to social justice (Todd, et al., 2014). Justice must

be sanctified as an essential component of faith and grounded in Scripture if leaders are

to transcend, and maybe even transform, politics.

Lessons in Leadership and Recommendations for Leadership Practice

The improvement initiative was designed to develop a leadership culture that

connects spiritual practices with the prophetic call to do justice, rooted in continuous

learning and growth. Through critical reflection and listening to the voices of our

neighbors in Asheville, leaders had the opportunity to recognize their own privilege,

deepen their awareness of injustice, and increase their empathy toward those who

experience suffering, leading to increased advocacy and action to do justice, love mercy,

and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8, NRSV). This section identifies leadership

lessons learned and implications for effective leadership practice in congregations as

interpreted from the gathered data. My hope is that these lessons will inform

congregational leaders, both laity and clergy, in their efforts to promote a prophetic

spirituality.

Lament as leadership practice. Leaders often focus on quickly solving

problems, or ignoring them, rather than expressing lament at the inequalities in our

communities. In creating a space for lament, leaders can offer solidarity with those who

have been minoritized, acknowledging the depth of suffering rather than avoiding it

(Lantz, 2019). In an expression of lament, one congregational leader wrote:

> The inequities of life in this world are staggering. Why is one person repeatedly
>
> abused by their father/mother while another has a happy home with caring/loving
>
> parents? Where is God's grace, mercy, and justice in all of this? Why do some

enjoy safe, warm housing while others are unable to find any place to call home?

How do those who suffer so much evil at the hands of others still have a sense of

God being with them during their suffering and continue on? What in this world

does it mean to do justice and love mercy?

The honesty of lament has been recorded in Scripture, found in books such as Job,

Lamentations, Ezekiel, and more than one-third of the Psalms. The language of lament

expresses the voices of those who suffer and calls out for their experiences to be heard

(Lantz, 2019). Lament pushes against the comfort and privilege of individualistic

approaches to serving that neglect to address the larger systemic issues that create

injustice (Delehanty, 2016). For congregations to address injustice, leaders must listen to

these cries, yield privilege, and advocate for change on a systems level that can alleviate

suffering and promote equity.

A recommendation moving forward is for leaders to create spaces to share in

suffering and grief. One example is a service of lament and hope for those who grieve

during holiday seasons, when suffering is often heightened, which may include memorial

candle lighting, prayers for those who have died, reading Psalms of lament, music, and a

message of hope.

Listening Leadership. Fred Rogers, known to the world as Mr. Rogers, once

said, "The purpose of life is to listen – to yourself, to your world, and to God and, when

the time comes, to respond in as helpful a way as you can find . . . from within and

without" (Steil & Bommelje, 2004). Effective listening leadership requires centering the

other person instead of oneself, not positioned socially but cognitively (Lumby &

Coleman, 2007). Leaders are accustomed to leading through persuasion. However, when

they take the time to listen, leaders yield their power, can be open to new insights and learning, and empower the voices of others. Following the improvement initiative, several leaders expressed regret at not interviewing a community member. Taking time to listen requires letting go of the urgent, yet unnecessary, distractions that fill up schedules. Paying attention to boundaries creates space for attentive listening (Steil & Bommelje, 2004).

Waters (2015) explores the value of storytelling to foster vulnerability and empathetic listening skills within an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. She reviews how claiming and sharing one's story can lead to change, create and deepen relationships, and promote healing. She further encourages Christian congregations to learn from AA's model and to intentionally create environments of storytelling and empathetic listening that provide safe places to build community.

A recommendation for congregational leaders is to create a culture of storytelling that invites honest reflection and open listening. Congregational leaders who interviewed community members related that the experience of listening, without an agenda, opened their eyes to see others in their daily lives. They became curious about the histories and hopes, the wounds and the dreams, of those all around them. Leadership practices are formed through a "spirit of recognition and affirmation of group difference . . . and the primacy of embracing a rigorous curiosity" (Dantley, et al, 2008, p.128). However, making connections with people can be a challenge. For people to share from their experiences, trust must be developed, and relationships must be formed, which requires engaging others and individuals (Lumby & Coleman, 2007).

To create a culture that values the stories of all people, especially those who may

have different backgrounds and experiences, intentional training in appreciative inquiry

and humble listening must occur (Schein, 2013, Shapiro, 2017). While many leaders say

that they are good listeners, several who participated in the community listening project

told of the challenge of listening without trying to "fix" the other person's problems. In

my observations, leaders had different ways of engaging the storyteller, some probing

deeper and making sure they understood by rephrasing what the person had said, while

others remained silent and did not veer away from the questions. Leaders need regular

training to be effective listeners.

Moschella (2010) contends that stories have the power to disrupt the status quo, as

well as the power to comfort and create connections. Leaders who engage in listening are

not passive observers, but as research suggests, are active participants who are affected

by the relationship. The impact of relationships leads us to wholeness (Dantley, et al.,

2008). However, many leaders did not know how to connect with others outside of their

friends or church group. Leaders must find ways to reach out to the community and

invite voices that have been ignored or unheard to speak to the congregation. Building

relationships in the downtown community will take effort, but the impact on the

congregation, its leaders, and the community can lead to a more inclusive and loving

partnership for the common good.

Casting a clear biblical vision of justice. A common theme that arose in the

formative and summative findings was the importance of understanding Scripture's call

to do justice in our community and world.

Addressing the political nature of Scripture. A few leaders expressed fear that the

church was in danger of becoming political. One leader said, "I have friends who have

reject organized religion primarily on the grounds of its being judgmental and political."

Casting a clear biblical vision of justice as an integral component of faith can build a

foundation that transcends partisan politics, maybe even transforming our political

dialogue. Congregations can offer Bible study on the biblical prophets that emphasizes

the themes of justice and concern for those on the margins. Congregations could

encourage memorization of Micah 6:8, which many leaders quoted throughout the

improvement process, as well the teachings of Jesus in Luke 6. Giving congregants

biblical language that serves as a lens for interpreting the world will affect how they view

the needs of others.

> *Studying Scripture from the perspectives of those who have experienced injustice.*

Most of the leaders in mainline congregations interpret Scripture based in our social

location, culture, and education. Interpretations are passed down from respected people

in our lives, whether family members, mentors, or clergy. Miguel de la Torre (2002), in

his book *Reading the Bible from the Margins,* writes,

> No biblical interpretation is ever developed in a social or cultural vacuum. Most
>
> interpretations are autobiographical, where we ascertain the meaning of texts
>
> through the telling of our own stories, projecting onto the Bible how we define
>
> and interpret the biblical story in light of our own experiences (p. 3).

A recommendation for congregations is to read the voices of people from historically

oppressed groups to gain new perspectives on how Scripture connects spirituality and the

prophetic call to do justice. When congregants only read commentaries or listen to

sermons from people who look like and think like them, they find themselves in an echo

chamber in which all their interpretations are reinforced by the privileged group.

Sinner or Neighbor? Religious institutions are rooted in traditions and belief systems that may differ from others in their community. Some hold in tension the call to care for those in need while not affirming a lifestyle that they consider immoral. It is not uncommon to hear the maxim, "Hate the sin; love the sinner." Though many espouse this phrase in a desire to navigate the call to care and to live morally, they may unwittingly contribute to the stigmatization of those who are already marginalized. The phrase is not found in the Bible. However, the Bible does implore the followers of Jesus to love God and neighbor, even or especially when the neighbor is one whom we do not like or trust very much. One leader expressed this conflict in two statements. First, he stated, "I would like to live long enough that a conversation with me did not include the unnecessary words 'a black man' or 'a black woman,' or a Mexican or Korean." His hope was that all people would not be judged by their ethnicity or gender but simply as neighbor. One the other hand, this same leader confessed, "I cannot support LGBT weddings in a Christian Church. . . I will not attend a gay marriage." In reducing a person to a sinner, that leader limited full participation based on his belief.

A recommendation for congregations is to avoid the language of "hate the sin; love the sinner" because it reduces a person to one aspect of their humanity that is identified as sinful. In our congregation, one's primary identity is found in baptism, when we proclaim them as beloved children of God in whom God takes great delight and has gifted to live into God's calling for them. Scripture speaks of all the believers coming together as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12, NRSV), with a variety of gifts and skills to be used in concert to love and serve others. Lumby and Coleman (2012) write,

> Diversity . . . did not start from a deficit model, but an assumption that the
>
> differences between people were to be celebrated and integrated, not in the sense
>
> of all becoming the same, but all working together harmoniously, making positive
>
> use of different life experiences, perceptions, attributes, and skills (p. 23).

Congregants have beliefs that they hold dear, but stigmatizing people and excluding them from their desire to worship are not Christian values.

Create Safe Space for Connection and Conversation. Each of the above recommendations requires critical reflection and awareness of privilege. A recommendation for leaders is to develop communities of practice that combine honest dialogue around difficult issues, a covenant of care among its members, and a commitment to love mercy and to act justly in their everyday lives (Wegner, 20.

Build internal and external partnerships. One recommendation is for leaders to form a Diversity and Inclusion Team. This team would be reflective of the diversity within the congregation and include those who work closely with people in the community who have been oppressed. This team would explore the questions, "From whom do we need to hear? What are the vital interests in downtown? How can we be involved?" Congregations can easily become isolated from the community around them, focusing inwardly (Delehanty, 2016). Building these partnerships will require leaders to show up, listen, and follow consistently. In a personal conversation with a leader, who is a person of color and works with a diversity initiative in our community, she mentioned that many people want to be allies with others who face injustice. However, she said, "Allies cannot call themselves allies, but must simply show up, yield privilege, and support. Only the people who have been minoritized can recognize a person as an ally."

Leaders in the improvement initiative regularly mentioned working with other congregations and non-profits, bringing together advocates for justice in our community. Congregational leaders need to curate resources in the community and connect congregants to areas to which they feel called. These resources should provide involvement at all levels, for extroverts and introverts, children to senior adults. One idea is to have local agencies set up booths in the church to provide educational materials and opportunities to confront injustices.

Lessons for Implementation

In seeking to build capacity in leaders, my desire was to develop a congregational culture, rooted and grounded in love (Ephesians 3:17, NRSV), that integrates both spiritual practice and acting for equity and justice as essential for faith formation. Because new congregational leaders will arise across time, it will be important to discern, articulate, and pass along the shared values of lived faith. For each new generation of leaders, a biblical foundation of the prophetic call to seek justice must be an intrinsic component of the congregation's curriculum. Training new leaders and providing opportunities to listen to stories of the lived experiences of people who have been minoritized needs to be the way of life for congregations. In communities of practice, leaders can reflect together on the temptation to compartmentalize spirituality, use privilege in harmful ways, and ignore systemic injustice. When communities are honest about these failures, this realization can lead to repentance and a renewed calling to proclaim the sacred worth of all people and to work for equity in our neighborhoods. To sustain these values over time and through changing leaders will require that each of these components be incorporated into the collaborative ministry model of the

congregation.

As a scholar-practitioner in this improvement process, I have grown in my leadership capacity and have witnessed more clearly the gifted leaders with which I serve. (1) The opportunity to listen to the people who were interviewed provided me with a new perspective on the dreams and needs of our larger downtown community. (2) The constant refrain of the importance of relationships convinced me that creating connection is at least as important as teaching content. (3) Through this journey, I developed a boldness to use my voice to advocate for equity and inclusion for others. (4) I also discovered that my privilege has given me blind spots, and I still have much to learn. (5) A gift of this initiative was my deepened appreciation for the leaders with which I work. They encouraged me and each other along the way. They thoughtfully reflected on what they were learning and shared their wisdom that came through vulnerability. A renewed trust developed among us that will guide our congregation into the new challenges ahead.

I plan to present the findings from the improvement initiative to other congregational leaders who were not able to participate. Lessons learned from this improvement initiative would be shared with the entire congregation through a newsletter article that highlights the findings. Learning is a life-long process that implies interaction and reflection, so findings could suggest next steps for congregational planning. I will share the process and findings with both state, national, and local partners, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) and Alliance of Baptists, as well as local congregations in the Asheville area.

Though not in the scope of this disquisition, CoPs will gather regularly to discuss

continuous improvement, to consider how to engage adult learners in reflection on daily living, specifically how spirituality and justice inform a lived faith. A study resource will be curated or developed to explore biblical justice and how scriptural imagination calls congregants to a lived faith. My hope is that the leaders of our Bible study communities will take on the qualities of these CoPs and reflect more deeply on how their faith intersects with all aspects of their lives.

Limitations and Recommendations for Continued Scholarship

The findings from this disquisition are limited to a particular congregation, tradition, and location, so its contributions are subjective and cannot be generalized (Miller, 2015). However, I have had clergy colleagues share similar problems of practice within their own congregations. Components of this improvement initiative may be adapted to their context in ways that may expand the aim of a prophetic spirituality that promotes congregational learning and inclusion.

The drivers and change ideas used in the improvement initiative for this study were focused in the areas of knowledge and inclusion. To further study how leaders develop capacity for a prophetic spirituality, the additional drivers of *advising* and *networking* might be considered. What effect might intentional advising have on leaders to connect justice and spirituality for a lived faith? Leaders in this study mentioned the need to network with other congregations and non-profits to work for justice in our community. An exploration of networked improvement communities among churches and non-profits could lead to interesting processes for developing partnerships in pursuit of a shared vision for spirituality and justice (Bryk, et al., 2015).

SECTION EIGHT: CONCLUSION

''Let us go slow, but let us hurry up about it.''

- Walter Rauschenbusch (Nelson, 2009)

This disquisition has provided an overview of how leaders in a local congregation

understand their personal spirituality, the prophetic call to act justly, and the integration

of the two as essential for a lived faith. The research revealed the importance of justice

rooted in biblical ethics, the insights of listening to others who have different

experiences, and the barriers and hopes to mobilize the congregation to work for justice,

rooted in the Shalom of God. These initiatives sought to provide a framework for future

actions within the congregation.

In the quickly changing landscape of religion and culture, the impact of these

initiatives may not be evident to the congregation or the community for several years. As

partisan politics continue to compete for the hearts and minds of our culture, the church

needs to be vigilant to provide an alternative voice to division and isolation. The church

claims a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1, NRSV), including Walter Raschenbush

and Martin Luther King Jr., who asserted that the Gospel requires we work to achieve the

kingdom of God in the present, attending to economic and racial justice now. We can

learn from their examples and the many who followed in their footsteps. I believe the

church must reclaim the prophetic voice of Scripture and imagine its value in our own

time to speak for liberation and equity of all.   As the congregation continues to welcome

people from diverse walks of life, it is important to know how we include them and give

them a loving place to be nurtured and to serve. This desired future will require

intentionality and continuous learning and improvement along the journey.

Congregations need leaders who can bring together spirituality and justice to help

church members develop a critical stance with a moral and ethical imperative for equity

and social justice (CFAT, 2013). However, social pressures can cause congregations to

become inwardly focused and turn a blind eye to the inequities in their communities. To

live the life God is calling the church to live, it must understand its belovedness and its

call to love everyone, always. Through attending to Scriptural and prophetic

imagination, listening with love to those whose voices are crying out to be heard, seeking

to live a just and generous life, rooted in love and compassion, the church can embody,

promote, and reveal the beloved community that is already among us.

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Appendix A - Welcome and Inclusion Statement of Consensus

WELCOME AND INCLUSION STATEMENT

Preamble

The Discernment Team of First Baptist Church of Asheville is grateful for everyone who shared in our listening sessions, attended the March Bible study, spoke with one of our ministers or committee members, and prayed for our process of discernment. We heard your stories, hopes, and fears, and "weighed carefully" everything you said (1 Corinthians 14:29).

We learned that when you put two Baptists in a room, you often have three different opinions. That is one of the gifts of our church's identity. We value the freedom of conscience, the freedom to read and study Scripture in community, and the freedom to hold differing views while still loving one another.

Based on what we heard in the discernment sessions and through much prayer, we offer this consensus statement to express what "seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

Consensus Statement

"To all who mourn and need comfort – to all who are weary and need rest – to all who are friendless and wish friendship – to all who are homeless and wish sheltering love – to all who pray and to all who do not, and ought – to all who sin and need a savior, and to whosoever will – this church opens wide the door and makes free a place, and in the name of Jesus, the Lord, says welcome" (reaffirmed, First Baptist Church of Asheville bulletin, 1938).

As new creations in Jesus Christ, and as priests to one another, we joyfully proclaim the sacred worth of all people, and we welcome all as beloved children of God, whatever their age, race, physical or mental ability, gender, level of education, marital status, economic circumstance, sexual orientation, and religious background, to participate in all aspects of the life and ministry of our congregation.

Those who profess faith in the God of Jesus Christ, who are members of our congregation, and who are called by the Spirit to use their unique gifts for the building up of the body of Christ, may share in the graces of church membership over a lifetime, including baptism, the Lord's Supper, marriage, parent-child dedication, deacon ordination, ordination to Gospel ministry, teaching, and pastoral care.

Charge to the Congregation

For generations, we have aspired to welcome all, hoping that those who come will find love, friendship, and grace. We charge the congregation to continue to read and study Scripture together, listen to one another's stories, and pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We encourage everyone to seek out the rich stories in our congregation, for they are gifts from God. As we listen to one another, may we deepen our friendships and experience God in new ways.

While our Baptist distinctive of the freedom of conscience makes room for differing views on faith, our highest calling is to embody Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one…so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). May all people know that we are Christians by our love, as we live the way of grace and the mission of unity in Christ.
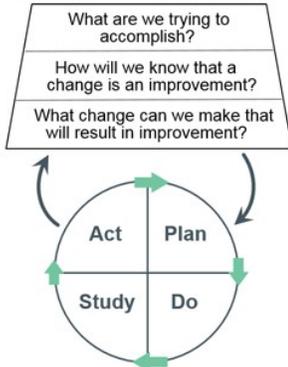
First Baptist Church of Asheville, 2019

Appendix B - Design Team Charter

DESIGN TEAM CHARTER

Project Name:

Imagining a Prophetic Spirituality:
*Congregational Learning for an
Inclusive and Lived Faith*

Start Date: July 1, 2019

End Date: December 1, 2019
(anticipated)

Model for Improvement

What are we trying to accomplish?

Aim statement: My *theory of improvement* posits that establishing research-informed learning processes that integrate spirituality and justice as essential components of faith formation will increase the capacity of congregational leaders to practice and promote a more just and lived theology, fostering a more inclusive and socially-minded congregation.

Background: Dr. Cornel West (2011) famously said, "*"Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public."* Historically, churches have worked for liberation and justice for the most vulnerable in society, creating schools, hospitals, and community non-profits (Jones, 2009). Yet as American culture has become more partisan and isolated, many mainline Protestant congregations have neglected the prophetic call to do justice. Education in congregations often has focused on personal spirituality and morality at the expense of public commitment to equity and inclusion.

> *"The two great hungers of our time are the hunger for spirituality and the hunger for social justice – and the connection between the two has great power to motivate people to action"* (Wallis, 2008, p.26).

The problem of separating spirituality and justice, the personal from the public, love of God from love of neighbor, has led to unintended outcomes for congregations such as decline in involvement, lack of awareness of and commitment to justice concerns, and the increase of cultural/political divides.

Improvement Objectives: *The objective of this auto-ethnographic study is* to apply an Improvement Science framework to analyze how research-based practices of critical

reflection (Biag, 2019) and appreciative inquiry (Shapiro, 2017) lead to an increased capacity in congregational leaders to integrate spirituality and justice as essential components of an equitable, inclusive, and active pedagogy.

Desired Impacts:

- Move beyond deficit-ideology to asset-based lens that strengthens capacity for equitable treatment of all.
- Congregation viewed by community as caring and willing to listen without agenda.
- Leaders can define/articulate justice and spirituality and understand how each is essential to faith formation.
- Congregational leaders understand daily living as practice of theology.
- Increased involvement and engagement among membership that arises from an integration of spiritual formation and justice for a lived theology.
- The church will welcome and include all in a way consistent with God's love and wisdom.

Team:
- ███████████ chair (CFFC-Adults)
- ███████████ (CFFC-Students/Children)
- ███████████ (Missions)
- ███████████ (Communications)
- ███████████, ███████████ (Christian Formation Leaders)
- ███████████ (Ministerial Staff)

What changes can we make that will result in an improvement?

This study brings together the fields of education and practical theology, seeking to address concerns of equity through critical reflection and listening leadership along the journey of continuous improvement (Manyozo, 2016; Bryk, et al, 2015). *Improvement initiatives for this study will (1) form communities of learning & practice that bring together leaders for critical reflection through an equity lens, (2) provide leadership development workshops to enrich understandings of biblical themes of justice, (3) train leaders to practice skills of appreciative inquiry with people whose voices have been largely unheard or ignored, and (4) provide resources that scale learning beyond the classroom into a daily, lived faith.*

Through these initiatives, congregational leaders will increase their biblical/theological literacy, listen to diverse voices in the local community through an asset-based lens, reflect on personal assumptions and cultural values, and participate in ongoing communities of practice to encourage continuous learning, modeling for adult learners how lived faith bends toward justice.

PDSA Cycles and Timeline

L

LEARNING
Leadership Development Workshops
Focus on equity, assets-based thinking, integration of personal spirituality and the prophetic call to justice, and biblical literacy.

s

hip Development Workshops (September - October 2019)

EXPERIENCING
Community Listening Project
Developing skills for listening leadership, focusing on building capacity for empathy and assets-based thinking.

u

nity Listening Project (November – December 2019)

IMAGINING
Communities of Learning & Practice
Practicing critical reflection, focusing on continuous learning, and developing ongoing communities of trust.

o

mmunities of Practice (November 2019 – January 2020)

How will we know the change is an improvement?

Key measurements and intended results: The project will use a mixed methods approach to assess whether the initiatives result in an improvement. Quantitative data will be collected through a pre- and post- survey. Qualitative data will be collected by observation field notes, focus group interviews, workshop session logs, and participant journals.

Findings will provide a basis for further scholarly exploration of theories and practices to integrate justice and spirituality for the common good. The intended results of this study are (1) that listening appreciatively to the voices from our community and sharing their hopes and gifts will lead to greater awareness and openness to their perspectives and skills and (2) that the capacity of leaders to see our community concerns and assets through an equity lens will lead to the development of networked improvement communities (NICs) among congregations, educational institutions, and community agencies.

Faith and Justice Survey

Consent Block

By participating in the study, you are agreeing to provide the most honest answers you can. Any responses you provide will be anonymous, so that neither the research team nor other respondents will know which are yours.

By selecting "I agree" you are consenting to the conditions listed above.

○   I agree (1)

○   I do not agree (2)

ID Block

✳

Please create a pseudonym for data management purposes. Choose two random letters or numbers then, add the number of your birth month and day (The pseudonym should be six characters). For example: Random number = 28, July 9 = 0709, so the pseudonym would be 280709. Please keep a record of this pseudonym. You will use this number each time you complete a survey.

_____

Question Blocks

Q1 How long have you attended this congregation?

○   Less than 2 years (1)

○   2-4 years (2)

○   5-9 years (3)

○   10-24 years (4)

○   25+ years (5)

○ Do not attend (6)

Q2 What is your age?

Q3 To what extent are the following important to your Christian faith?

	Extremely important (6)	Very important (7)	Moderately important (8)	Slightly important (9)	Not at all important (10)
Having and nurturing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as my Savior (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Following God's commandments and doing what is right (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Understanding the Bible and applying it to today's world (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Believing in the Bible and important church	○	○	○	○	○

teachings (4)

Performing acts of mercy and charity (5)	○	○	○	○	○
Engaging in life-long discipleship (6)	○	○	○	○	○
Being involved with a community of believers who worship and live out their faith together (7)	○	○	○	○	○
Practicing spiritual disciplines (8)	○	○	○	○	○
Supporting efforts to identify and address systemic injustice (9)	○	○	○	○	○

Q4 How would you best describe your political affiliation?

○ Independent (1)

○ Republican (2)

○ Democrat (3)

○ Green (4)

○ Libertarian (5)

○ Other (6) – Please specify.

◯ Prefer not to answer (7)

Q5 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the meaning of justice?

	Strongly disagree (22)	Somewhat disagree (23)	Neither agree nor disagree (24)	Somewhat agree (25)	Strongly agree (26)
Justice means that people are treated fairly (1)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Justice means that those who break laws are held accountable (2)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Justice means that the "root causes" of what keeps people in need and powerless are addressed (3)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Justice means that systemic barriers that lead to injustice are dismantled (4)	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Justice means that there is restoration where broken relationships	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

are made right again (5)					
Justice means that people who are in need receive help/aid (6)	○	○	○	○	○
Justice means that people who are otherwise excluded are now included (7)	○	○	○	○	○
Justice means that people get the reward or punishment that they deserve (8)	○	○	○	○	○

Q6 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree (15)	Somewhat agree (16)	Neither agree nor disagree (17)	Somewhat disagree (18)	Strongly disagree (19)
There is a connection between justice and the major themes of the Bible (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Being a Christian requires me to	○	○	○	○	○

pursue justice
(2)

God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged (3)	○	○	○	○	○
I gain a greater understanding of God and God's kingdom when I work for justice (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Doing justice draws me closer to God (5)	○	○	○	○	○
Too much focus on doing justice may cause my congregation to lose sight of the church's mission (6)	○	○	○	○	○
God will take care of justice as God pleases; it is not my place to decide that for God (7)	○	○	○	○	○
Pursuing justice is important, but it is not related to my	○	○	○	○	○

faith (8)

Q7 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly agree (15)	Somewhat agree (16)	Neither agree nor disagree (17)	Somewhat disagree (18)	Strongly disagree (19)
Justice is more than our actions - it is a way of life, a part of who we are (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Justice is done through making people aware of injustice (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Justice is done through serving people in need (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Justice is done through community development activities (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Justice is done through political advocacy (5)	○	○	○	○	○
Justice is done through acts of charity (6)	○	○	○	○	○

| Justice is done through judgments made by wise people (e.g., clergy; court judges) (7) | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

Q10 To what extent have these other avenues helped you better understand justice?

	Extremely effective (1)	Very effective (2)	Moderately effective (3)	Slightly effective (4)	Not effective at all (5)
Sermons (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Personal Bible study (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Bible studies with others (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Family members (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Teachers (5)	○	○	○	○	○
Mentor (6)	○	○	○	○	○
Educational classes (7)	○	○	○	○	○
Stories from people experiencing	○	○	○	○	○

injustice (8)

Q11 Briefly name one or two stories in the Bible that you think illustrate God's understanding of justice.

_____
_____

Q12 If you had to write a one sentence definition of "justice," what would it be?

_____
_____
_____

Q13 To what extent is justice a priority in your own Christian faith?

○   Very high priority (1)

○   Moderately high priority (2)

○   Moderately low priority (3)

○   Not a priority (4)

Q14 To what extent is justice a priority for people in your congregation?

○   Very high priority (1)

○   Moderately high priority (2)

○   Moderately low priority (3)

○   Not a priority (4)

Q15 How likely would you say it is for you to pursue justice if it meant changing your present lifestyle?

○ Extremely likely (15)

○ Somewhat likely (16)

○ Neither likely nor unlikely (17)

○ Somewhat unlikely (18)

○ Extremely unlikely (19)

Q16 How likely would you say it is that people in your congregation would pursue justice if it meant changing their present lifestyle?

○ Extremely likely (15)

○ Somewhat likely (16)

○ Neither likely nor unlikely (17)

○ Somewhat unlikely (18)

○ Extremely unlikely (19)

Q17 Please indicate which of the activities below you and/or your congregation are involved locally (two column choice of yes/no)

☐ Meals for persons who are hungry (1)

☐ Homeless shelters (2)

☐ Food pantry (3)

☐ Community gardens (4)

☐ Refugee Support (5)

☐ Meals on Wheels (6)

☐ Environmental care (7)

☐ Home repair / Habitat for Humanity (8)

☐ Disaster relief (9)

☐ Supporting education / Tutoring (10)

Q18 Select the top three topics or issues that seem to generate the most interest and energy for you.

☐ Global poverty (1)

☐ Abortion and beginning-of-life issues (2)

☐ Religious liberty (3)

☐ Disability issues (4)

☐ Poverty (5)

☐ Immigration and Refugee Support (6)

☐ Environmental/creation care (7)

☐ Peace and conflict (8)

☐ Mental health (9)

☐ Restorative justice (10)

☐ Women's issues (11)

☐ Undoing racism (12)

☐ LGBTQ+ Issues (13)

☐ Human traffiking (14)

☐ Corporate social responsibility (15)

☐   Criminal justice (16)

☐   Euthanasia / end-of-life issues (17)

☐   Homelessness / Affordable Housing (18)

Q19 Select the top three topics or issues that seem to generate the most interest and energy for your congregation.

☐   Global poverty (1)

☐   Abortion and beginning-of-life issues (2)

☐   Religious liberty (3)

☐   Disability issues (4)

☐   Poverty (5)

☐   Immigration and Refugee Support (6)

☐   Environmental/creation care (7)

☐   Peace and conflict (8)

☐   Mental health (9)

☐   Restorative justice (10)

☐   Women's issues (11)

☐   Undoing racism (12)

☐   LGBTQ+ Issues (13)

☐   Human traffiking (14)

☐   Corporate social responsibility (15)

☐ Criminal justice (16)

☐ Euthanasia / end-of-life issues (17)

☐ Homelessness / Affordable Housing (18)

Q20 Select the following items that have helped or motivated you to work for justice? (select all that apply)

☐ A clearly articulated vision for pursuing justice (1)

☐ Seeing the examples of others who promote and do justice (2)

☐ Hearing stories of justice work (3)

☐ My personal involvement with people who are experiencing injustice (4)

☐ The work of other faith-based, justice-related agencies (5)

☐ Becoming directly involved in justice work myself (6)

☐ My congregation's involvement in works of justice (7)

☐ Experiencing injustice in my own life (8)

☐ My congregation's stated vision for pursuing justice (9)

☐ Events or conferences that promote justice awareness (10)

☐ My theological and philosophical tradition (11)

Q22 To what extent have the following prevented you from working for justice?

	Always (1)	Most of the time (2)	About half the time (3)	Sometimes (4)	Never (5)

I don't have time, being busy with other things in life (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Justice seems so complex, it's hard to know what to do (2)	○	○	○	○	○
I'm not very exposed to people who experience injustice (3)	○	○	○	○	○
The word 'justice' is used in so many ways that I don't know what it means (4)	○	○	○	○	○
I haven't learned much about what justice means or how to do it (5)	○	○	○	○	○
Our churches don't work well together to support each other in justice work (6)	○	○	○	○	○
People in my church have not given me	○	○	○	○	○

guidance in
how to pursue
justice (7)

I feel a lack of
support from
our
congregational   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○
leadership (8)

I am
concerned
that focusing
on justice may
lead to
neglecting   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○
other
important
aspects of
Christian faith
(9)

I feel like I'm
the only one in
my
congregation   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○
who cares
about justice
(10)

People in my
church have
discouraged
me from   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○
focusing on
justice work
(11)

Q23 What else makes you hesitant or skeptical about working for justice?

_____

Q24 To what extent would the following be of help if you wanted to working for justice more?

○ Having a clearly articulated biblical vision of justice (1)

○ Being better educated about matters of justice and injustice (2)

○ Having places/events where justice issues can be openly talked about (3)

○ Seeing more church leaders promoting and doing justice (4)

○ Having more opportunities to practically confront justice (5)

○ Seeing better collaborations in our community with regards to justice (6)

○ Having a mentor who would support me in making justice a deeper part of my life (7)

Q25 To learn about justice, I would be most likely to (check all that apply):

☐ Talk to my friends or fellow church members (1)

☐ Find a faith-based organization that matches my interests (2)

☐ Search online for information (3)

☐ Find a book to read (4)

☐ Visit the church or agency websites (5)

☐ Talk to my church leader (6)

☐ Start a Bible study or join a Bible study (7)

☐ I'm not interested in learning more about justice (8)

Q26 List any specific justice projects or issues with which you would like to get more involved.

_____

Q27 How would you describe your ethnic identity?

_____

Q28 How would you describe your gender identity?

_____

Q29 What is your occupation?

_____

Appendix D - Informed Consent Document - Leaders

Western Carolina University
Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study

You are being invited to participate in a research study of the integration of spiritual practices and the prophetic call to do justice in faith formation. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a congregational leader at First Baptist Church of Asheville. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Participation is completely voluntary.

Project Title: Imagining a Prophetic Spirituality: Congregational Learning for an Inclusive and Lived Faith

This study is being conducted by: Rev. Thomas J. Bratton, Jr., M.T.S.; Dr. Brandi Hinnant-Crawford, PhD

Description and Purpose of the Research: You are being invited to participate in a research study about the integration of spiritual practices and justice in faith formation. By conducting this study, we hope to learn the effects of involvement in communities of practice, engagement in scriptural imagination, deepening understandings of social justice, and listening to the stories of marginalized voices for increasing the capacity of congregational leaders to integrate spiritual practices and justice in their leadership roles and in their everyday, lived faith.

What you will be asked to do: Participants who choose to participate, after having the opportunity to ask any questions, will sign this informed consent form with the principal investigator. Participants are then expected to (1) participate in a Community of Practice, (2) complete an online survey about Faith and Justice, (3) participate in three leadership development sessions, each lasting approximately 90-120 minutes, (4) participate in a community listening session, which would require meeting with several community members for 45-minute conversations, and (5) participate in a transformative teaching component, lasting approximately 90 minutes. Following each component, groups of ten will gather for a focus group interview. The Communities of Practice (CoP) will include conversations on the negotiation of meaning, practice, community, identity, and competence. The leadership development sessions will bring together the CoPs and seek to develop critical consciousness through biblical understandings of justice and equity, understanding current systems of power and oppression, and developing appreciative and humble inquiry skills. During the community listening session, the principal investigator will observe and take field notes on interactions between participants and people who are in minority groups in the Asheville community. Following the listening sessions, participants will be asked to reflect on their interactions through journal prompts and in focus groups to measure how they increased in their social justice sensitivity and how it connects to their spirituality. Audio recording may be used for the purpose of recalling direct quotations and coding the focus group conversations.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no anticipated risks from participating in this research. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, take a break, or stop your participation in this study at any time.

Benefits: The main benefit from this study is that participants may take a more active role in learning the importance of integrating justice and spirituality in their faith formation. Participants may increase their biblical knowledge and their interaction with people who may have different experiences and perspectives from them. On a congregational learning level, the study may help churches better understand if/how congregational leaders' participation in communities of practice and community listening sessions positively associate to an inclusive and lived faith, fostering a more inclusive and socially-minded congregation.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security: The data collected in this research study will be kept confidential. Participation in research may involve some loss of privacy. We will do our best to make sure that the information about you is kept confidential, but we cannot guarantee total confidentiality. Your personal information may also be given out if required by law, such as pursuant to a court order. While the information and data resulting from this study may be presented at faith-based meetings or published in a faith-based journal, your name or other personal information will not be revealed.

We will collect your information through an online Faith and Justice Qualtrics survey, audio recordings, journals, focus groups, and observation field notes. This information will be stored in a restricted access folder on an external hard drive with PIN, located in restricted office closet at First Baptist Church of Asheville. Any identifiers will be removed from the data as soon as possible and subject codes used. Pseudonyms will be used for direct quotations. Data will be stored for three years after the project is completed. Consent forms will be stored in a locked office cabinet, separate from the data.

Data Collection using Online Qualtrics Survey: The research team will work to protect your data to the extent permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that an unauthorized individual could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. This risk is similar to your everyday use of the Internet.

Focus Group Data Collection: We will request that all participants respect the confidentiality of the group and do not share any other participant's responses outside of the group. However, we cannot guarantee your privacy or confidentiality because there is always the possibility that another member of the group could share what was said. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant, and during the course of the interview and in all notes, you will only be referred to by your pseudonym.

Audio Recordings: Audio recordings will be collected during this study and used for accurate recalling of direct quotations. The recordings will be destroyed after transcription. The recordings will not be shared with the general public or other researchers. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in this study.

Direct Quotations: If you give the research team permission to quote you directly, the researchers will give you a pseudonym and will generalize your quote to remove any information that could be personally identifying.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If you choose not to participate or decide to withdraw, there will be no impact on your leadership position.

Compensation for Participation: There will be no compensation for participation.

Contact Information: For questions about this study, please contact Rev. Thomas J. Bratton, Jr. at ███████████████████████. You may also contact Dr. Brandi Hinnant-Crawford, the principal investigator and faculty advisor for this project, at ████████████████

If you have questions or concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, you may contact the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board through the Office of Research Administration by calling 828-227-7212 or emailing irb@wcu.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential to the extent possible.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

I understand what is expected of me if I participate in this research study. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and understand that participation is voluntary. My signature shows that I agree to participate and am at least 18 years old.

I do □ or do not □ (check one) give my permission to the investigators to quote me directly in their research.

The investigators may □ or may not □ (check one) digitally record my participation in focus groups.

Participant Name (printed): _____

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E - Leadership Development Workshop Handout – PDSA Cycle 1

Leadership Development Workshop One

Imagining a Prophetic Spirituality:
Scriptural Imagination for a Just and Lived Faith

"The two great hungers of our time are the hunger for spirituality and the hunger for social justice – and the connection between the two has great power to motivate people to action."

– Jim Wallis

Practical Theology for Leaders
- Taking both practice and theology seriously
- Faith as embodied and communal
- Aligning what we do with values of God

The very good gospel is when Shalom is restored. Shalom is what God declared from the beginning. Shalom is what the Kingdom of God looks like. Shalom is when all people have enough. It's when families are healed. It's when churches, schools, and public policies protect human dignity. Shalom is when the image of God is recognized in every single human. Shalom is our calling as followers of Jesus's gospel. It is the vision God set forth in the Garden and the restoration God desires for every relationship.

- Lisa Sharon Harper

Privilege
- Church cannot be neutral
- Connection between awareness of privilege and commitment to justice
  - Writing a critical autobiography
- Spiritual and prophetic imagination are indispensable to each other

Integrating Spirituality and Justice in Faith Formation
- Justice is rooted in the nature and character of God
- Prayer and Justice
- Scripture and Justice
- Spirituality and Justice

Recognition of Sacred Worth
- Sin is anything that distracts us from the love of God (idolatry), diminishes the worth of another person (injustice), treats creation as commodity rather than gift (possession), or ignores one's own identity and calling (forgetfulness).
- "We joyfully proclaim the sacred worth of all people."

Appendix F - Leadership Development Workshop Handout – PDSA Cycle 2

Leadership Development Workshop

Imagining a Prophetic Spirituality:
Scriptural Imagination for a Just and Lived Faith

"The two great hungers of our time are the hunger for spirituality and the hunger for social justice – and the connection between the two has great power to motivate people to action."

– Jim Wallis

Unlearning Deficit Ideology

- Normalizing our experiences, then mistaking *difference* for *deficit*
- "The Danger of a Single Story" - Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (TEDGlobal 2009)
- Strengths and Systems
  - "The opposite of the deficit view is not a strengths-based view. We can acknowledge student strengths while ignoring conditions that oppress them or focus on assets while we harbor a racist ideology. Opposite of a deficit view is a clear, unbending commitment to racial justice." – Paul Gorski

Microaggressions

- A white woman clutching her purse when walking past a black man (signaling black men are dangerous criminals)
- Asking someone who isn't white, "Where are you really from?" (signaling they are not American)
- Mistaking a female physician for a nurse (signaling women aren't as capable as men)
- Job ad for a "recent college grad" (signaling older adults need not apply)

"Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public."

- Cornel West

No One Unseen – Rev. Sara Wilcox

Rev. Sara Wilcox pastors Land of the Sky United Church of Christ, celebrating its tenth birthday this year. She helped co-found this church during which time she served as the Director of New Church Initiatives for the Center for Progressive Renewal. She lives in Asheville with her husband, Jeff, and daughters Anna and Ella. She is blessed beyond measure to serve a community of people seeking **to live justly, love abundantly, and walk humbly in the ways of Jesus**. God is still doing a new thing in the church and she is grateful to be a part of it every single day.

Questions and Response

Appendix G - Leadership Development Workshop Handout – PDSA Cycle 3

Leadership Development Workshop

Imagining a Prophetic Spirituality:
Listening Leadership

"The two great hungers of our time are the hunger for spirituality and the hunger for social justice – and the connection between the two has great power to motivate people to action."

– Jim Wallis

Review: Unlearning Deficit Ideology

- Normalizing our experiences, then mistaking *difference* for *deficit*

Appreciative Inquiry

Questions to invite listening will be asset-based rather than needs-based. Examples include:

- What gets you out of bed each morning?
- What lights you up and makes you feel most alive?
- What is one activity that you find particularly meaningful?
- What gift do you have that you feel is underused?
- Tell a story about a time when you feel you helped someone with a challenge.
- Where (how) do you experience the holy?
- What are you doing when you feel you are at your best?
- What is one thing you would do to make downtown a better place?

Consent

- Completing Consent Forms
- Recording Interview
- Completing the Interview
- Observation

Recruiting People for Interview

- Story Project flyer

Questions and Response

Appendix H - Story Project Flyer

LISTENING project

We want to listen to your story

We are inviting people, not connected to a local Christian church congregation, to participate in a listening project to share their unique stories with someone who will listen with openness and appreciation.

People who have been trained in appreciative inquiry will listen without judgment to community members to explore where they find meaning, what are their hopes and dreams, and what gifts they feel they can use to contribute to the common good.

The **purpose** of listening to these stories is simply to encourage community members to reflect on their skills, gifts, and hopes. Often, people focus on deficits and may categorize people without listening to their unique stories. Our hope is to seek to understand where you find meaning and purpose. **There is no sales pitch, proselytizing, or hidden agenda.**

Our **goal** is simply to listen with appreciation to those whose stories are different from our own. We believe that is how we develop trust and how we grow in understanding.

This project is an educational study for a doctoral dissertation-in-practice through Western Carolina University.

Here are some sample questions:

- What is one activity that you find particularly meaningful?

- What gift do you have that you feel is underused?

- Tell a story about a time when you feel you helped someone with a challenge.

- Where or how do you experience the holy?

- What are you doing when you feel you are at your best?

- What is one thing you would do to make downtown a better place?

If you are interested in sharing your story, please contact Tommy Bratton at tommybratton@gmail.com.

Tommy Bratton is a doctoral candidate at Western Carolina University. He is conducting an educational study that explores the relationship between spirituality and justice.

Appendix I - Informed Consent Document - Community

Western Carolina University
Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study

You are being invited to participate in a research study of the integration of spiritual practices and the prophetic call to do justice in faith formation. You were selected as a possible participant because of your response to the request for community members to participate in this study. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Participation is completely voluntary.

Project Title: Imagining a Prophetic Spirituality: Congregational Learning for an Inclusive and Lived Faith

This study is being conducted by: Rev. Thomas J. Bratton, Jr., M.T.S.; Dr. Brandi Hinnant-Crawford, PhD

Description and Purpose of the Research: You are being invited to participate in a research study about the integration of spiritual practices and justice in faith formation. By conducting this study, we hope to learn the effects of listening to the stories of people in the Asheville community for increasing the capacity of congregational leaders to deepen empathy and to integrate spiritual practices and justice in their leadership roles and in their everyday, lived faith.

What you will be asked to do: Community members who choose to participate, after having the opportunity to ask any questions, will sign this informed consent form with the principal investigator. Participants are then expected to meet for one 45-minute conversation with an interviewer who will listen to the community member's story. The interviewer will ask appreciative inquiry questions about meaning, identity, and dreams. During this conversation, the principal investigator will observe and take field notes on interactions between the interviewer and community member. Audio recording may be used for the purpose of recalling direct quotations and themes.

Risks and Discomforts: There are no anticipated risks from participating in this research. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, take a break, or stop your participation in this study at any time.

Benefits: The main benefit from this study is to be able to share hopes and dreams with another person who is trained to listen. These community listening sessions may lead church leaders to develop a more just and lived faith, fostering a more inclusive and socially-minded congregation.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security: The data collected in this research study will be kept confidential. Participation in research may involve some loss of privacy. We will do our best to make sure that the information about you is kept confidential, but we cannot guarantee total confidentiality. Your personal information may also be given out if required by law, such as pursuant to a court order. While the information and data resulting from this study may be presented at faith-based meetings or published in a journal, your name or other personal information will not be revealed.

We will collect your information through an audio recording and observation field notes. This information will be stored on the Western Carolina University mainframe through VAULT, a cloud storage system. Any identifiers will be removed from the data as soon as possible and subject codes used. Pseudonyms will be used for direct quotations. Data will be stored for three years after the project is completed. Consent forms will be stored in a locked office cabinet, separate from the data, at the Department of Human Services, Killian 210-A, College of Education and Allied Professions, Western Carolina University.

Audio Recordings: Audio recordings will be collected during this study and used for accurate recalling of direct quotations. The recordings will be destroyed after transcription. The recordings will not be shared with the general public or other researchers. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in this study.

Direct Quotations: If you give the research team permission to quote you directly, the researchers will give you a pseudonym and will generalize your quote to remove any information that could be personally identifying.

Voluntary Participation: Participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

Compensation for Participation: There will be no compensation for participation.

Contact Information: For questions about this study, please contact Rev. Thomas J. Bratton, Jr. at 5 Oak Street, Asheville, NC 28801, 828-252-4781. You may also contact Dr. Brandi Hinnant-Crawford, the principal investigator and faculty advisor for this project, at Killian 210-A, College of Education and Allied Professions, Western Carolina University.

If you have questions or concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, you may contact the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board through the Office of Research Administration by calling 828-227-7212 or emailing irb@wcu.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential to the extent possible.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records. Please sign below.

I understand what is expected of me if I participate in this research study. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and understand that participation is voluntary. My signature shows that I agree to participate and am at least 18 years old.

I do □ or do not □ (check one) give my permission to the investigators to quote me directly in their research.

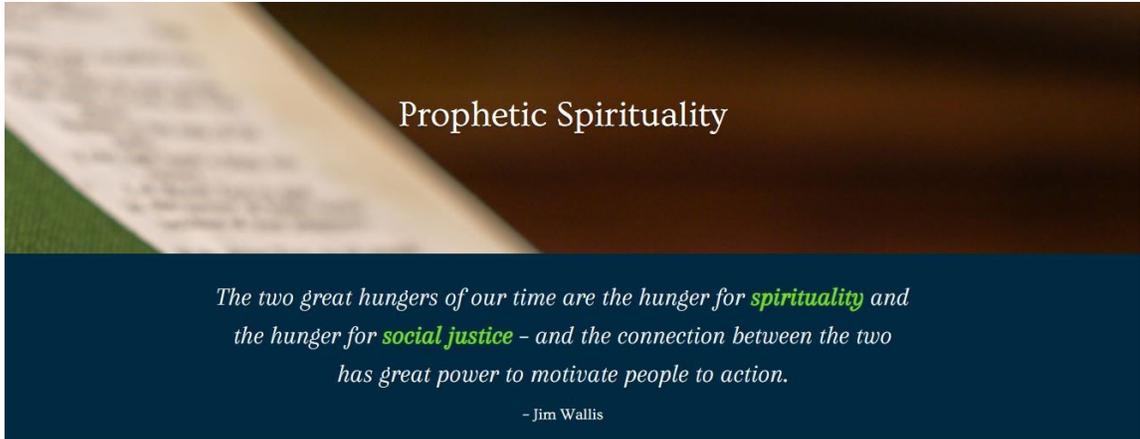The investigators may □ or may not □ (check one) digitally record my participation in focus groups.

Participant Name (printed): _____
Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent: _____
Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix J - Prophetic Spirituality Website

Prophetic Spirituality

*The two great hungers of our time are the hunger for **spirituality** and the hunger for **social justice** – and the connection between the two has great power to motivate people to action.*

– Jim Wallis

Thomas J. Bratton, Jr.

My doctoral research brings together the fields of education and practical theology, seeking to address concerns of equity through critical reflection and listening leadership along the journey of continuous improvement. My hope is for congregational leaders to enrich their understanding of biblical themes of justice, listen to diverse voices in the local community through an asset-based lens, reflect on personal assumptions and cultural values, and participate in ongoing communities of practice to encourage continuous learning, modeling for adult learners how lived faith bends toward justice.

Imagining a Prophetic Spirituality

Congregational Learning for an Inclusive and Lived Faith

Rev. Tommy Bratton, M.T.S. • Western Carolina University

Workshop 1 - Integrating Spirituality and Justice

Workshop 2 - No One Unseen

Workshop 3 - Listening Leadership

Communities of Practice

Journal Prompts

Articles, Videos, & Resources

Workshop 1:

Integrating Spirituality and Justice

This initial workshop for congregational leaders introduces the importance of integrating personal spirituality with the prophetic call to do justice, seeing both as essential components of faith formation. We explored the concept of *shalom*, justice as part of the nature and character of God, the distinction between primary justice and reactive justice, and began a conversation about privilege. The video to the right is an overview of the session with the PowerPoint presentation. This workshop took place on Sunday afternoon, October 13.

Resources for Workshop 1

- Agenda
- Critical Autobiography Description
- Focus Group Questions
- Journal Prompts

Next Steps

- After watching the video, complete the focus groups questions and return to Tommy.
- Begin working on your Critical Autobiography
- If you have not received a journal, pick one up from the church office.

Workshop 2:

No One Unseen

The second workshop for congregational leaders introduces the importance of mindfulness, being aware of one's own thoughts, words, and biases. Our guest for this session was Rev. Sara Wilcox, pastor of Land of Sky United Church of Christ in Asheville. This workshop took place on Sunday afternoon, October 20.

Resources for Workshop 2

- Agenda
- Critical Autobiography Description
- Journal Prompts
- TEDTalk: *The Danger of a Single Story*
- Focus Group Questions
- Land of Sky congregation
- Book: *White Fragility* by Robin Diangelo
- Book: *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond
- BeLoved Village

Next Steps

- After reading through resources and watching the video, complete the focus groups questions and return to Tommy.
- Complete your Critical Autobiography
- If you have not received a journal, pick one up from the church office.

Appendix K - Session Logs (PDSA Cycles 1-3 Leadership Development)

PDSA Cycles 1-3 : Leadership Development Sessions

Session Log

Date:

Location:

Focus: Workshop Title [ex. Developing Listening Skills - Appreciative and Humble Inquiry]

Attendance: [percentage of number present]

Content: [developed by design team]

Appendix L - Journal Prompts (PDSA Cycles 1-3 Leadership Development)

PDSA Cycles 1-3: Development Workshops

Date:

Journal Prompts

As you reflect on the development workshop, use these prompts to guide your thinking.

- What surprised you?

- What did you learn that you did not know?

- What did you discover about yourself?

- What questions or ideas did this workshop bring up for you?

- How did this development workshop increase your understanding of and sensitivity toward justice issues in our community?

- Did this workshop help you integrate spirituality and prophetic justice in your faith formation?

- Are there any unintended consequences to participating in these workshops that you would like to share?

- Has participation led to any increases stress? (Time restraints, faith challenges, fears, etc.)

Appendix M - Focus Group Reflections (PDSA Cycles 1-3 Leadership Development)

PDSA Cycles 1-3: Development Workshops

Date:

Focus Group Questions

As we reflect on the development workshops, the following questions will guide
our discussion.

<u>**Questions:**</u>

- What stands out to you as beneficial to your faith formation in these development
  workshops?

- What surprised you?

- What did you learn through this experience about yourself?

- What questions did these workshops bring up for you?

- Did any of these workshops increase your understanding of and sensitivity toward
  justice issues in our community? How?

- Did these workshops help you better integrate spirituality and prophetic justice in
  your faith formation?

Appendix N – Interview Protocol

Imagining a Prophetic Spirituality:

Community Listening Project

Purpose and Goals

- The **purpose** of listening to these stories from our community is to encourage community members to reflect on their skills, gifts, and hopes. Often, we may focus on deficits and categorize people without listening to their unique stories. Our hope is to seek to understand where people in our community find meaning and purpose. **There should be no sales pitch, proselytizing, or hidden agenda.**

- Our **goal** is simply to listen with appreciation to those whose stories are different from our own, which is how we develop trust and how we grow in understanding.

- For the purpose of this listening project, participants should be informed that the project is part of a research study for a doctoral candidate at Western Carolina University. You do not need to mention the church in your introduction, but that fact is not a secret, so if asked, be transparent.

Impacts

- Build trust in community by listening appreciatively, without agenda, to the stories of community members who have different experiences than ours.

- Leaders deepen empathy and understanding of those in our community.

Before the Interview Checklist

- ❑ Know how you will be recording the interview and how to work the technology. If you will be transcribing the interview, make sure you have paper and pen.

- ❑ Each community participant must complete a **consent form** before being interviewed. Tommy Bratton will have those available, will explain the form to the participant, and will help them complete the form.

- ❑ Review the questions you will be asking and remember to listen appreciatively.

- ❑ Begin the recording.

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is [insert name] and I am conducting this interview as part of a doctoral study through Western Carolina University. The purpose of this interview is to listen to your story. Please be honest. This is a safe space and the recording will be kept confidential – no names attached – and will be used for this study. This interview will be around 30 minutes.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Appreciative Inquiry Questions

Though we are focusing on listening, participants may want to know about you. Feel free to build rapport by sharing some basics, if asked, such as family members or where you grew up. Keep the talk about yourself limited, but be open to sharing. Below are several questions to initiate conversation. Listen carefully and if someone goes in a different direction, let that happen. These questions seek to be asset-based rather than needs-based.

- When you feel engaged, energized and enjoying life, what's happening?
  Prompt, as necessary:
    ◦ What gets you out of bed each morning?
    ◦ What lights you up or makes you feel most alive?

- What is one activity that you find particularly meaningful?
  Prompt, as necessary:
    ◦ How often do you get to do it?

- Tell a story about a time when you feel you helped someone with a challenge.

- Where (how) do you experience the holy?
  Prompt, as necessary:
    ◦ Do you have regular spiritual practices? What are they?
    ◦ Share a memorable experience you have had where you experienced the holy.

- What are you doing when you feel you are at your best?
  Prompt, as necessary:
    ◦ What gift do you have that you feel is underused?

- What is one thing you would do to make downtown a better place?

CONCLUSION

Those are all the questions I have for you today.

- Is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you very much for your time.

<END INTERVIEW>

After the Interview Checklist

❑ Stop the recording.

❑ Express gratitude to the one being interviewed. Remember that the purpose is to listen without agenda, so simply say, "Thank you for sharing your story with me."

❑ Send the audio file or transcript to Tommy Bratton.

❑ As you reflect on the community listening session, describe your thoughts and feelings about the process of appreciative/humble inquiry and about your interaction with the other person in your journal or through an email to Tommy Bratton. Here are some prompts to consider:

   o Briefly describe the details of the listening session (time, setting, length of session).

   o What surprised you about the interaction?

   o What about the appreciative/humble approach to inquiry did you find helpful? Restrictive?

   o What did you learn through this experience about yourself?

   o What questions did this interaction bring up for you?

   o How did this listening session increase your understanding of and sensitivity toward justice issues in our community?

   o How did Scripture or your faith tradition provide a lens through which you were able to listen with compassion?

   o Are there any unintended consequences to participating in this initiative that you would like to share?

   o Has participation led to any increased stress? (Time restraints, faith challenges, fears, etc.)

Appendix O - Observational Prompts (PDSA Cycle 4 – Community Listening)

PDSA Cycle 4: Community Listening Project

Date:

Observational Prompts for Field Notes

During the community listening sessions, I will be a participant observer, gathering first-hand information of leaders' interactions with people from traditionally marginalized groups who may share different experiences and perspectives. Descriptive and reflective field notes will be taken using the following prompts.

1. Describe the setting, time and date, length of observation, participants.

2. Does the leader ask questions that are based in appreciative or humble inquiry? Is the language asset-based or does it reveal a deficit-ideology? Describe.

3. Describe the leader's body language during the interview. Ex. Does the leader seem rigid or open? Is eye contact made?

4. Does the one to whom the leader is listening seem willing to share openly? How or does this change during the conversation?

5. Do any of the participants used spiritual language? How is it used?

Appendix P - Journal Prompts (PDSA Cycle 4 – Community Listening)

PDSA Cycle 4: Community Listening Project

Date:

Journal Prompts

As you reflect on the community listening session, describe your thoughts and feelings about the process of appreciative/humble inquiry and about your interaction with the other person.

- Briefly describe the details of the listening session (time, setting, length of session).

- What surprised you about the interaction?

- What about the appreciative/humble approach to inquiry did you find helpful? Restrictive?

- What did you learn through this experience about yourself?

- What questions did this interaction bring up for you?

- How did this listening session increase your understanding of and sensitivity toward justice issues in our community?

- How did Scripture or your faith tradition provide a lens through which you were able to listen with compassion?

- Are there any unintended consequences to participating in these workshops that you would like to share?

- Has participation led to any increases stress? (Time restraints, faith challenges, fears, etc.)

Appendix Q - Focus Group Reflections (PDSA Cycle 4 – Community Listening)

PDSA Cycle 4: Community Listening Project

Date:

Focus Group Questions

As we reflect on the community listening sessions, the following questions will guide our discussion.

<u>**Questions:**</u>

- Were the development workshops helpful in your preparation for these listening sessions? In what way?

- What about the appreciative/humble approach to inquiry did you find helpful? Restrictive?

- What surprised you?

- What did you learn through this experience about yourself? Injustice in our community? Inequity? Deficit or asset mentality?

- What questions did this interaction bring up for you?

- How did this listening session increase your understanding of and sensitivity toward justice issues in our community?

- How did Scripture or your faith tradition provide a lens through which you were able to listen with compassion?

Appendix R - Focus Group Reflections - PDSA Cycle 5

PDSA Cycle 5: Communities of Practice

Date:

Focus Group Interview

> "The process of identity formation in practice takes place at two levels. One is how you negotiate your identity as a participant in a community of practice - how you express your competence in that community, how others recognize you as a member or not. The other is, how does your participation in that community enter into the constitution of your identity as a person more generally? How do you inherit some of the identity characteristics that reflect the location of your practice in the broader social landscape?" (Farnsworth, Kleanthous & Wenger-Trayner, 2016).

As we reflect on the Community of Practice model, the following questions will guide our discussion.

Questions:

- What does it mean for you to negotiate meaning, competence, identity, and practice in a CoP instead of individually?

- What surprised you?

- What did you learn? What is becoming clearer?

- How does learning and practicing together affect your faith formation?

- How did Scripture or your faith tradition provide a lens through which you were able to participate fully?

- Are there any unintended consequences to participating in this Community of Practice that you would like to share?

- Has participation led to any increases stress? (Time restraints, faith challenges, fears, etc.)