

## **ABSTRACT**

# **THE CHURCH HAS LEFT THE BUILDING: THE BENEDICTION AND MISSIONAL WORSHIP**

By

Nathan Leslie Carden

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a missional benediction in corporate worship to encourage parishioners to engage in Christian behavior between Sundays. The biblical witness reveals a God who not only gathers people but sends them. Corporate worship should orient Christians outward to join God's redemptive work in the world.

The Literature Review revealed sustained arguments that mission beyond the walls of the church is the natural response to corporate worship, and therefore informs the shape of corporate worship. This study sought to evaluate the impact of utilizing a specific sending of the congregation with a missional challenge, compared to the proclamation of a blessing.

This project employed an intervention mixed-methods model of research to study the relationship between the Sunday worship and everyday discipleship. The research context was Contact Modern Worship, which takes place at 8:45 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. on Sundays at Trinity United Methodist Church, in Birmingham, Alabama. Qualitative data was collected through a ten-person focus group, and quantitative data from e-mail surveys distributed to sixty participants in two weekly worship services across the four Sundays of Advent 2016. Results indicated that services in which a missional benediction was offered, compared to services that only received a blessing, participants engaged in Christian behavior at an increase of 14.91 percent. Both sets of data affirmed the positive impact of a missional benediction offered at the

conclusion of corporate worship upon the behavior of Christians throughout the week beyond the church walls.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

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THE BENEDICTION AND MISSIONAL WORSHIP**

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Nathan Leslie Carden

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THE BENEDICTION AND MISSIONAL WORSHIP

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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by

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter shares the inspiration for this research project and the statement of the problem to which it seeks to respond. It also offers a synopsis of the literature covered in Chapter 2 and introduces a description of the participants. Next, the research methodology and data collection strategies are outlined, followed by data analysis and the generalizability of the study.

### **Personal Introduction**

In October of 2012, the stewardship campaign at Trinity United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, included a three-week sermon series based upon the three-fold composition of our mission statement: Gathering people to Christ, growing people in Christ, and going to serve Christ in the world. My responsibilities in this yearly campaign included leading our Contact modern worship service, which was averaging 350 people in worship at the time and is comprised of approximately 50 percent young adults ages 18-34.

On the third and final Sunday, I preached about our mandate to “go and serve Christ in the world, given by Jesus in Matthew 25. The message was intended to challenge our members to evaluate their current engagement in this area of Christian discipleship, and was set against the backdrop of our thematic stewardship efforts. In other words, the congregation was invited to prayerfully consider their financial support for the coming year within the context of the stewardship of the whole of their lives. The sermon was, by my estimation, a thoughtful exegesis of both the text and of my congregation, and included appropriate content and descriptive material. Following the service, I received some routine compliments and affirmations. So, with an affirmed spirit, I departed for home.

At the lunch table at home that day, I extended my weekly invitation to my wife for her evaluation of worship and my message. She responded with, “I thought it was a really good sermon. I liked how it developed logically so that at the end I had a new way to think about Matthew 25. I have never thought of that as being the culmination of his teaching in that Gospel.” I smiled in satisfaction: mission accomplished.

Then she added an unsolicited addendum,

“But then you dropped it. You didn’t give me anything to do. You can’t preach a sermon telling me to serve others in Jesus’ name and then fail to tell me how to do that. I was fired up and wanted do something, but we just sang a song and left. It was a bit underwhelming.”

Then in the midst of the silence in our conversation, there was a subtle high-pitched whistle of air escaping my deflating ego. I hesitated to ask, but I needed further clarification. Kameron went on to remind me of how Rev. Earl Parker, my friend and pastoral mentor in my first full-time ministry position, would often close the service with a specific challenge to the congregation as a part of the benediction for how they could respond during the week. “I always liked that,” she recalled, “I always left church knowing one thing I could do that week to practice my faith in response to the message.”

She had a point. I had adequately described the needs of the world and created a hunger in our congregation to join God’s work to meet those needs. I had not just given them new information to feed their cognitive appetite, I had peppered my sermon with descriptive material intended to help them encounter the text. Then I left the congregation without marching orders. The benediction had just been a canned scriptural blessing. In fact, according to this testimony from my wife, perhaps I had tried to design worship, albeit prayerfully, with a comprehensive experience for the parishioners in mind, and failed to consider how

they might carry worship with them as they departed to the mundane routine of their life outside of church.

Her critique that Sunday awakened within me a need to evaluate my understanding of worship, as connected to Christian life beyond corporate worship. Since that conversation, I have continued to reflect upon how worship can be truly missional, how the corporate gathering of Christians can be inspired to engage in kingdom work between Sundays. I have also critically evaluated how I utilize the final spoken act of worship, the benediction. Can it be used not only to bless the congregation but also to send them forth for missional Christian work? Can it be framed as a commissioning of the congregation to specific acts of personal engagement? Is it possible to send the congregation out into the world between Sunday mornings to join God's work to redeem the world?

### **Statement of the Problem**

Through the experience of weekly corporate worship, believers are offered both the challenge and hope to honor Christ and their neighbor when they depart through the six days until they gather again. Worship should not only be a refuge from the worries and challenges of life, it must be an equipping encounter with the risen Lord who empowers Christian service beyond the corporate worship experience.

Therefore, the plot and components of worship should be designed so it opens up possibility for response by putting faith into action between Sundays. Through the gathering, greeting, giving, singing, bathing, eating, confessing, and sending in Jesus' name, Christians must be directed being the walls of the church toward service in the world. This means that the final spoken act of worship, the benediction, must not only pronounce blessing upon the people,



it must send them forth in power and with purpose, that they may live in the power of the Spirit, in both their private and public lives.

### **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the impact of offering a missional benediction, upon the behavior of the worshipping community between Sundays, across the four Sundays of Advent 2016 at Contact Modern Worship at Trinity United Methodist Church, Birmingham, Alabama.

### **Research Questions**

The questions addressed and researched in this project were drawn from the scholarship in the field of missional worship. The research questions guided the data collection plan to test the prospectus question.

#### **Research Question #1: Pretest Question**

What effect does corporate worship have upon Christian behavior between Sundays?

#### **Research Question #2: Posttest Question**

What effect does missional corporate worship have upon Christian behavior between Sundays?

#### **Research Question #3: Focus Group**

What aspect(s) of missional corporate worship services, if any, inspired the worshippers toward Christian behavior between Sundays?

### **Rationale for the Project**

The apostle Paul encourages believers at Rome to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, fully acceptable to God in all that they do (12:1). The Christian life is not simply

cognitive ascent to propositions about the nature of God in Jesus Christ. The Christian life is also the decision to pattern one's life after the example of Jesus alongside other believers in Christ's Church. This project was born out of the desire to see Christian behavior more consistently embraced beyond when Christians gather to worship once per week.

Additionally, in the United States, Christianity as measured by traditional markers of worship attendance, baptisms and new church members, is in near universal decline. Research indicates that young adults in the United States are increasingly suspicious of institutionalized religion. This project seeks to alter the perception that Christians are Christians in name and worship practice only, and offer a new embodied faith that serves neighbor and is devoted to God, across the six days when corporate worship is not offered.

Further, pastoral ministry is a highly qualitative occupation. Sermons are preached, weddings officiated, funerals lead, meetings convened, parishioners counseled, and classes taught. These various responsibilities are expressions of our participation in God's redemptive purposes, and that the Holy Spirit is preveniently at work in every corner of ministry. Week after week, ministers trust that God is watering seeds of truth proclaimed from the pulpit, but the data to measure the growth is sparse and incomplete.

Pastors can chart weekly worship attendance, professions of faith, budget surpluses and shortfalls, and new members, but how can ministers measure the increased attentiveness a working father is giving to his wife and children? How can the small acts of charity that are growing as young professionals are moved to acts of mercy and compassion, be measured? Is it possible to gauge how much more freely forgiveness is beginning to flow for an adult woman estranged from an abusive father? This project offers the benefit of measuring faith embodied

through action, beyond weekly worship, so that pastors can prayerfully plan worship that makes a measurable difference.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

*Benediction*: the concluding spoken act in corporate worship, addressed to the congregation, in God's name.

*Blessing*: to invoke God's favor upon a person or congregation through spoken word.

*Liturgy*: a form or formulary according to which public religious worship, especially Christian worship, is conducted.

*Millennial(s)*: a generational term used to describe young adults in the United States born from 1981-1996.

*Missiology*: a field of theological study that recognizes that missions is not a program among others offered by a local church, it is the sweeping redemptive work of God, in which the Church participates.

*Missio Dei/mission of God*: God's redemptive purposes for creation in which the Church is called to participate.

*Missional Worship*: the ways that liturgy informs and encourages a missions-oriented response beyond the gathering for corporate worship.

*Sending*: the final spoken pastoral act of corporate worship in which the congregation is given direction and purpose prior to departure.

### **Delimitations**

Birmingham, Alabama, is located in what is commonly described as the "Bible Belt," a highly-religious region of the southern United States. The research context for this project was

Contact Modern worship, which includes two contemporary style services at 8:45 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. each Sunday morning at Trinity United Methodist Church. Trinity is a 3,700-member congregation and in 2016, Contact averaged 525 in weekly attendance. Trinity is located in the neighborhood of Homewood, on the south side of the city. Homewood was established and settled in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and has experienced a significant revitalization in the last twenty years as younger families have sought out its sidewalk and tree lined neighborhoods. As the neighborhood has grown younger, so has the membership of Trinity.

From 2012-2013, the average age of a new member at Trinity dropped to 37.2 years, down ten years on average than in 2002. Over the past three years, over 70 percent of the new members to join Trinity are under the age of 40, with over 40 percent of new members between the ages of 22-32. The sixty participants in this study were divided evenly between male/female and millennial/nonmillennial aged adults, with neither gender nor age categories comprising more than 60 percent of the participant pool. All participants were baptized adults who are regular attendees at Contact Modern Worship.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

The literature for this project drew upon biblical, theological, liturgical, and missiological resources. The first was a biblical survey to review “sending” themes in the Old and New Testaments, scriptural blessings, and New Testament benedictions. Specific attention was paid to God’s creative activity in Genesis and God’s subsequent sending of Israel to be a light and blessing to the nations and the prophets to offer correction and hope to a struggling nation. Throughout the Old Testament, the Hebrew verb “to send,” *salah* appears over eight hundred times, including seventeen times alone in the stories of the Exodus of Israel from

slavery in Egypt. In short, the people of God were saved and then sent for the salvation of the world.

In the New Testament, the Gospels capture Jesus' sent-ness, particularly in the Johannine writings, where the language of sending appears more than forty times. Jesus quickly sends his followers out into mission (Matt. 10; Luke 9) even prior to his Great Commission in Matthew 28, following his crucifixion and resurrection. The history of the early Church records Jesus' command for the disciples to be sent to "Jerusalem...all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8b). The apostle Paul in his letters repeatedly ties instruction for Christian behavior with his blessings (e.g., 2 Cor. 13:11-13; 1 Cor. 15:58; 2 Thess. 3:6). In the New Testament there is a close thematic relationship between the doxological blessing of the people and the behavior they are encouraged to exhibit personally and corporately.

The field of missiology was the larger context for the scholarship informing this project. The seminal works of Darrell Guder, Graig Van Gelder, David Bosch, Dwight J. Zscheile, and Clayton Schmit were invaluable in situating missional worship within theological scholarship. These authors elucidate why it is of critical importance that the mission of the Church arise from the *missio dei*. Darrell Guder proposes, "'Mission' means 'sending,' and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God's action in human history" (Guder 4). Until both practical and theoretical scholars elevated missiology to have cosmic implications, mission was often consigned to a sub-category of local church structure, describing the ministries that are oriented outside the church walls.

The recent scholarship surrounding missional worship was critical to understanding how the posture of the final spoken act of worship. Major contributors to this field included David Bosch, Reggie McNeal, Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, and Ruth Meyers. These authors reflected

upon the connection between the gathering of the congregation in praise and thanksgiving to the end of being sent out in mission to glorify God through acts of compassion, reconciliation, healing, and justice. Ruth Meyers defines missional worship as the “patterns and understandings of worship as a form of participation in the mission of God” (Meyers 2). In other words, the glory of God and service to one’s neighbor cannot be severed. Worship and mission live in a dialogical circle, each informing and forming the other.

Finally, within the field of missional worship, the specific liturgical elements and movements were evaluated. The purpose was to understand how each element of worship, specifically the final spoken act of corporate worship is appropriated to direct, instruct, and inspire God’s people for mission. The final spoken act of worship ranged from dismissal to blessing to benediction to sending forth. Constance Cherry, one of the few scholars attending to the final spoken act of worship, proposes, “A blessing without a charge lacks connection to the service; a charge without a blessing lack the sense of power needed for service” (Cherry 115). However extensive reflection upon the function and form of the benediction in missional worship is yet to emerge. Other contributors to this narrowly studied field includes J.R. Woodward, Michael Goheen, and Clayton Schmit.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods intervention model of research to measure the impact of missional worship, with a specific emphasis upon a missional benediction, upon the behavior of worshippers between Sundays. This interventionist method “is a type of action research where the researcher becomes a co-participant with the community in the process of gathering and interpreting data to enable new and transformative modes of action” (Sensing 63). My research context, Contact Modern Worship at Trinity United Methodist Church, was

comprised of two identical worship services each Sunday morning at 8:45 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. For the research, these services mirrored each other in content and style (e.g., identical order of worship, media, scriptures, etc.), with one simple exception.

In the 8:45 a.m. service, the final spoken words offered a traditional blessing over the congregation based upon the primary themes of the sermon and larger service. The 11:00 a.m. service each week replaced the final spoken act of worship from 8:45 a.m., the blessing, with a missional benediction. Through this element the congregation was given a specific missional challenge to respond to over the subsequent six days. The purpose was to encourage worship to the lived-out faith of worshippers, beyond the corporate gathering. The challenge invited some specific behavioral engagement beyond worship and prior to the following Sunday. The overall intent was to measure the impact of the missional worship, and specifically the benediction, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in a mixed-methods approach.

For my quantitative research, an e-mail survey was sent, via Survey Monkey, to the sixty total participants, thirty for each service, each Saturday evening at 6:00 p.m. following the Sunday prior, during the four-week series. A survey was the most appropriate means to measure a statistical difference in responses to worship because as Tim Sensing writes, “The purpose of a survey is to describe characteristics or understandings of a large group of people” (Sensing 115). Across the four weeks, 240 surveys were distributed, and 233 collected. The survey was designed to capture the behavioral tendencies of the control and test groups along indicated demographic markers.

Because surveys are not effective at identifying the causation of beliefs and behaviors, a more qualitative tool was utilized to uncover participant’s motivations. A group interview was preferable over individual interviews because “[t]he synergy of the group will often provide

richer data than if each person in the group had been interviewed separately” (Sensing 120). At the conclusion of the four-week series, a focus group of ten participants from the test group was assembled. The participants were invited to volunteer for this component of the research, and were divided equally between the two age groups. Assigned numbers identified participants so their responses could remain anonymous, and before each person spoke, they would identify themselves by their number.

The focus group met for a light lunch and conversation two Sundays following the conclusion of the four-week worship series. Following the lunch, a third party adult who was not a research participant was recruited and trained, facilitated this focus group by stating the questions and probing responses. The focus group was recorded using an audio recorder from which a transcript was produced. The focus group conversation lasted 47:09 and yielded valuable responses, which identified, among other things, the missional benediction as the primary catalyst for inspiring missional behavior between Sundays across the four-week Advent worship series.

### **Type of Research**

This study employed a mixed methods intervention model of research to measure the impact of missional worship, with a specific emphasis upon a missional benediction, upon the behavior of worshippers between Sundays. This interventionist method “is a type of action research where the researcher becomes a co-participant with the community in the process of gathering and interpreting data to enable new and transformative modes of action” (Sensing 63). The vetting of this research methodology required a varied approach, which covered both the quantitative and qualitative strategies. Quantitative surveys, the more objective of the two measurements, are, firstly, found to be reasonable by judgment of the researcher. Secondly, the



job performance of the survey can be evaluated in the outcome of survey results (Wiersma & Jurs 327). In other words, the validity of the survey is the integrity in the relationship “between the test being validated and the criterion measure” (Wiersma & Jurs 327). In designing the survey tool, the data must be interpreted by the researcher in a manner that is congruent with original purpose of the research and with regard to the structure of the survey. Put another way, the “validity of measurement addresses the question, ‘Does the instrument measure the characteristic, trait, or whatever, for which it was intended?’” (Wiersma & Jurs 326). The manner in which the data is collected is as important as the results the data contains.

The survey seemed an appropriate choice to evaluate the control (8:45 a.m. worship service participants) versus test group (11:00 a.m. worship service participants) because it is unbiased in measuring “attitudes, opinions, or achievements-any number of variables in natural settings” (Wiersma & Jurs 155). The survey measures the same experience of both groups, designed to avoid any potential direct or indirect steering by the structure of the tool or researcher bias. Constructing the survey with both affirmative and negative options for response encourages participants to thoughtfully consider each option and discourages them from developing a uniform pattern of response (Patton 38).

For the second data collection mode, a more subjective and open instrument was necessary because “qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience” (Sensing 57). For whereas “surveys can provide answers to the questions What? Where? When? And How?, but it is not easy to find out Why? Causal relationships can rarely if ever be proved by survey method” (Bell 14). The focus group allowed respondents to offer a free and individual perspective on the questions before them. To gather this data, questions were posed before the group and participants were invited to respond openly

and without prompting. Sensing affirms that this tool provides more varied and nuanced data because “the group responds to a series of questions that allows the researcher to quickly gather from several points of view” (Sensing 120). A synthetic reading of both the quantitative surveys and qualitative focus group responses provided a diverse and rich evaluation of the impact of missional worship and missional benedictions.

### **Participants**

Each participant was 18 years old or older. Each of the four weeks, participants were required to indicate their age as between 18-35 and 36-older in the demographic questions in the survey. The participant pool included both genders, and neither gender made up more than 60 percent of the overall participant pool. This same participation rate applied to the age classifications. The participants were overwhelmingly college-educated or enrolled in a degree-seeking program, although neither were prerequisites for participation in this study. All participants were professing Christians who regularly attend Contact Modern Worship.

### **Data Collection**

The data was gathered using two methodologies: e-mail surveys and a focus group. Because the problem this project addressed required a measurement of behavioral engagement and the identification of the catalyst for the behavior, a mixed-methods approach was most appropriate. For the quantitative measurement, sixty participants were recruited to attend Contact Modern Worship service across the four Sundays of Advent. The pool of participants was divided into two groups, thirty to attend the 8:45 a.m. service, which served as the control group. The control group responses served to address the first of the research questions, which sought to investigate the behavioral impact of corporate worship upon Christian behavior during

the week. Control group responses offered a baseline of response against which the test group could be measured.

For the thirty participants in the 11:00 a.m. service, the only differentiating component of the services was the control group (8:45 a.m.) received a blessing as the final spoken act of worship, and the test group (11:00 a.m.) received a missional benediction. Then, on the four Saturdays each following the four Sundays of Advent, at 6:00 p.m., the participants received an e-mail survey from Survey Monkey, inviting them to respond to a five-question survey. The surveys were analyzed statistically to measure the difference in behavioral engagement between control and test groups. The inclusion of the 11:00 a.m. participants served to address the second research question, which evaluated the impact of missional worship upon Christian behavior between Sundays.

The third research question was addressed by the focus group conversation following the four-week worship series. The ten-person focus group was assembled from test group participants from the 11:00 a.m. service. The group was balanced between male/female and millennial/nonmillennial adults. The focus group conversation consistently identified the missional benediction as the primary catalyst for inspiring increased behavioral engagements.

### **Data Analysis**

This project utilized both quantitative surveys to determine the likelihood of increased specific responses to worship and a qualitative focus group to ascertain why, if at all, participants responded more specifically to missional benedictions. The Survey Monkey survey responses allowed the researcher to evaluate the increased likelihood of responding with specific action to the corporate worship experience, along different categories for age and gender. Each of the five questions on the survey offered a categorical response in one of two

options. For this reason a minimum response was statistically assigned as 1 and a maximum was statistically assigned as 2. This simplicity of design ensured that the mean, median, and standard deviation were always within a modest range of variation, between 1 and 2. Statistics as a clinical tool can be defined as “a branch of science that deals with the collection, organization, analysis of data and drawing of inferences from the samples to the whole population” (Winters, Winters & Amedee 213). While the survey results generated quantitative data, because the responses were limited to predetermined options, the statistics were categorized as qualitative.

The focus group transcripts were analyzed using documentary analysis. Specifically, Mary Clark Moschella’s three practices of reading data was utilized to thoroughly evaluate the meanings behind the literal reading of the participant’s responses (172-73). Moschella suggests that a “literal reading” would gather quotes and listen for formal structures in the data, an “interpretive reading” identifies “implied or inferred meanings,” while a final “reflexive reading” gives attention to the role and his/her beliefs and impact upon the reading (172-73). The focus group transcripts were read and interpreted using all three reading strategies listed above.

### **Generalizability**

Every worship context is unique in the effect the corporate worship experience has upon worshipers. However, regardless of the various traditions, the introduction of a missional benediction compared to a traditional blessing as the final spoken act of corporate worship, should bear quantifiable results between a test and control group. This is especially true if the survey choices are descriptive in nature, allowing for only predetermined responses. The participants were largely college-educated. They were not informed about the nature of the study, prior to the collection of data, so as not to taint the test pool.

Focus groups also did not know the nature of the research, and therefore it is reasonable to predict that repeating this study in another context with a wholly different participant pool would yield similar responses. There is always concern for bias in any research project, and this study is no exception. One possible concern for this study was an anecdotal observation from the 8:45 a.m. service at Trinity United Methodist Church (from which the control group participants were recruited), which revealed markers that indicated a deeper financial commitment and consistency in attendance relative to participants in the 11:00 a.m. service. However, neither of these factors could directly correlate to study outcomes, and in fact, would seem to favor a higher response to corporate worship for the control group. For Protestant churches located in suburban areas in the United States, offering a contemporary worship style, the study could be generalized.

### **Project Overview**

Chapter 2 will offer a review of literature covering biblical/theological sources, missiology, missional worship, and blessings/sendings. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology for the mixed-methods approach including quantitative e-mail surveys and the qualitative oriented focus group. Chapter 4 reports the statistical findings from the e-mail surveys and focus group transcript analysis. Chapter 5 interprets the findings from Chapter 4, offering conclusions and suggesting for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

#### Overview of the Chapter

This chapter includes a review of literature relevant to the study of missional worship and benedictions. The research in this chapter was categorized into four sections. Because both worship and mission are given shape by scriptural theology, the first section will explore the biblical foundations for blessing and sending. The second section will provide a theological overview of missional worship. The final section will review the emerging resources that address the utilization of the benediction to commission the worshipping community into response beyond corporate worship.

#### Biblical Foundations

As a Wesleyan Christian, the first and primary source of God's revelation is the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments. Throughout the Old Testament alone, the Hebrew verb "to send," *salah* is found over eight-hundred times. The following section is a survey of the Old and New Testaments of the theme of blessing and sending. This will include the biblical theme of God's sending activity, and the appropriate scriptural benedictions, which each point toward God's sending nature.

#### Old Testament: The Pentateuch and Law

The opening chapter of Genesis witnesses creation's procession from the spoken word of God: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth... Then God said, 'Let there be light'" (Gen. 1:1, 3a, NRSV). This movement of God to speak creation into existence does not conclude once the land, sea, sky, and living organisms are in place. God's plan for the

setting to rights of God's good creation, soiled by sin in Genesis 3, includes God's sending of Abram into a new land just nine chapters later:

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Gen. 12:1-3).

This covenantal blessing of Abraham includes the promise of God's blessing through Abraham's descendants upon all nations of the earth. As Christopher Wright puts it, “[T]he mission of God is to bless all nations on earth... Israel in the Old Testament was not chosen over against the rest of the nations, but for the sake of the rest of the nations” (Wright 99-100). Israel is sent forth into the world so that through their keeping of the Law, they serve as signs and agents of God's cosmic salvation. Johannes Blauw observes that “[t]he election of Israel is a matter of divine initiative which has as its goal the recognition of God by all the nations over the whole world” (Blauw 24). God's calling and sending of Abraham establishes God's posture toward Israel throughout the Old Testament.

Each of the Old Testament patriarchs has their paths directed by God. God lays out a path for Isaac in Genesis chapter 26, and sends Jacob to Bethel in chapter 35. Even into the fourth generation, Joseph, having been unjustly sold into slavery by his brothers, reframes his experience to identify God's sending purposes. In Genesis 45:7-8a, Joseph confesses to his brothers, “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.”

Following their four hundred years of captivity, God sends Moses to return to Egypt and become God's spokesperson for the liberation of Israelite slaves. In Exodus 3 God speaks to Moses, saying:

“So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.” But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations (Exod. 3:10-15).

Tom Wright connects the theological dots regarding God’s action, saying, “The language of sending permeates the narrative of Exodus 3 and is linked at one end to God’s compassion and at the other end to God’s identity as the covenant-keeping God” (*The Mission of God’s People* 3804). Following their liberation from slavery in Egypt, Israel’s identity is continually formed as those who are brought out of slavery so that they may be sent into the world as God’s people. Francis Dubose writes, “In the book of Exodus, there are some seventeen references to sending, all of them related in some way to the mighty salvation event of the Exodus” (42). God’s sending activity continues as Israel wanders the desert and moves into the Promised Land. As their story unfolds in the Pentateuch, Israel is not always happily compliant with God’s sending them, as referenced in Deuteronomy 9: “And when the Lord sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, ‘Go up and occupy the land that I have given you,’ you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God, neither trusting him nor obeying him” (Deuteronomy 9:23).

Gerrit Scott Dawson shares,

“[Aaron, the High Priest] who had put the names of the Israelites on his breast as he went into the Holy of Holies then came forth and through his blessing was the means by which the Lord put his name onto all Israel. Invoking the name of the Lord in this



benediction transferred the name, the identity and presence, of God onto his people. The blessing was a kind of branding” (122).

In addition to the theme of sending, the theme of blessing permeates these early books as well. Several commonly used blessings occur during these first five books of the Bible, but perhaps none so commonly used as Numbers 6:24-26: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” This benediction is commonly utilized as a benediction in the contemporary church, yet clearly emphasizes the theme of blessing over sending.

### **Old Testament: The History**

Following the conquest of Canaan as Israel settles into the Promised Land, God’s sending refers less to the people of Israel being sent to a new land, and more to God’s sending of leaders to justly direct Israel’s affairs and prophets to convict and correct them. In the book of Judges, when the Israelites cried to the Lord on account of the Midianites, the Lord sent a prophet to the Israelites; and he said to them,

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt, and brought you out of the house of slavery; and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians, and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you, and gave you their land; and I said to you, ‘I am the Lord your God; you shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.’ But you have not given heed to my voice” (Judg. 6:7-10).

After the period of Judges, when Israel pleads for a king to lead them, God sends Saul in 1 Samuel 9:16:

“Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be ruler over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have seen the suffering of my people, because their outcry has come to me.”

Then following Saul's administration, when King David fell into the sin of adultery and murder, 2 Samuel 12:1a records the story of when "the Lord sent Nathan to David...", so the prophet could call him to account for his sinfulness.

### **Old Testament: Wisdom Literature**

The wisdom literature in the Old Testament highlights a variety of activity regarding God's sending. Chapters 5 and 37 of the book of Job reference God's cosmic and creative power over creation, which God directed through divine speech. Psalm 104:30 testifies, "When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground" echoing the role of the Spirit of God in the Genesis 1 account of creation. Recognizing the present tense of God's saving activity, Psalm 147:15 exclaims, "He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly." Additionally, Psalm 105, which recounts God's mighty acts of salvation through Moses to deliver them from slavery and sending them to be God's people in the world, as highlighted in verses 43-45:

"So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing. He gave them the lands of the nations, and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples, that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws. Praise the Lord!"

### **Old Testament: The Prophets**

The theme of God's sending becomes direct and clear as prophets are called to speak to Israel prior, during, and subsequent to periods of exile. God sent prophets to correct and warn them when they had strayed, and to preserve hope when they felt abandoned. Theologian David J. Bosch argues that God's sending of prophets to Israel is indicative of God's embodiment of that role. He writes, "If there is a missionary in the Old Testament, it is God Himself who will, as his eschatological deed *par excellence*, bring the nations to Jerusalem to worship him there together with his covenant" (171).

These prophetic figures were obedient to this calling, even though they were not popularly received as is noted in 2 Chronicles: “Yet he sent prophets among them to bring them back to the Lord; they testified against them, but they would not listen” (24:19). Regardless of their reception, God sent prophets, like Malachi, to be God’s mouthpiece, promising,

“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 3:1).

The well-known example of God’s sending call is found in Isaiah’s obedient response in Isaiah 6:8-9a: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’ And he said, ‘Go...’” The prophet writes later, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). However, Isaiah also emphasizes that the work belongs to God in Isaiah 55:10-11,

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it”.

The prophet Jeremiah also confesses,

“Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you”’ (Jer. 1:6-7).

While frequently resistant to God’s call, the prophets are sent anticipating rejection from the communities they are to speak to for God.

### **New Testament: The Gospels**

The New Testament provides a very different theological understanding for sending, shaped first by the reality of the incarnation. The Gospel of John opens with the description of the world being created and re-created through God’s Word, present before time and in time as

God became flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1). In this depiction, through God's power and goodness, life proceeds from the very nature of God. It is fitting then that when filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus' followers represent his body on earth and are commissioned to move out into the corners of the earth, sharing the Gospel of the risen Son of God.

Following the Incarnation of the Word, Jesus commissions his disciples for kingdom proclamation during his three-year ministry with them. Having given them power over illness and spiritual darkness, Matthew 10 tells, "These twelve Jesus sent..." Then at the conclusion of his earthly ministry, Jesus,

"came near and said to them, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'" (Matt. 28:18-20).

The command to go is accompanied by the promise of God's companionship.

The first chapter of the Gospel of Mark captures the sending nature of Jesus' ministry in his invitation to the disciples, saying, "And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people'" (Mark 1:17). Mark's Gospel echoes the Great Commission of Matthew when in chapter 16 Jesus instructs his followers to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Matt. 16:15).

Luke records the inauguration of Jesus' ministry as Jesus stands in the synagogue in Nazareth and embraces his own sent-ness, saying,

"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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

Then, five chapters later, Luke follows Matthew's Gospel in recording Jesus' sending of the disciples on a short-term mission, saying, "Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Luke 9:1-2). This is followed in chapter 10 by the sending of the seventy:

"After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves'" (Luke 10:1-3).

Finally, in his post-resurrection appearance, Jesus offers a sending and blessing upon his followers:

"This is what is written: the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead the third day, and repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And look, I am sending you what My Father promised. As for you, stay in the city until you are empowered from on high" (Luke 24:46-48).

This concluding sending passage in Luke solidifies the theme throughout the synoptic Gospels, that Christ's ministry is shared with his followers and they are authorized to continue kingdom-building work beyond the reach of Christ's human ministry.

The Johanne corpus differs from the synoptic witness in two primary ways. First, the language of sending saturates the Gospel, appearing more than forty times (e.g., John 3:17, 34; 4:34; 5-8; 11:42; 17:18). Second, the presence of the third person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is present throughout the narrative. Jesus promises the Spirit to the disciples in his pre-passion sermon in chapter 15, saying, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf" (John 15:26). Then following the resurrection, John records Jesus' blessing and sending of the

disciples: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you’” (John 20:21). John’s sending language permeates the entire Gospel and ties it closely to the processional character of God’s triune nature.

### **New Testament: Acts**

The book of Acts records the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and the subsequent birth of an inclusive church community. Acts opens with Jesus’ promise to the disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In fact, throughout Acts, the gospel spreads geographically out from Jerusalem, into the greater Palestinian area and beyond into larger Mediterranean region.

In chapter 8 of Acts, an angel instructs Phillip to go the south end of Jerusalem (Acts 8:26-27). Then, the Holy Spirit sent him to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch to witness to the gospel (Acts 8:29). Finally, after Philip evangelizes the eunuch and baptizes him in the river, the Spirit “snatches” him away to another place (Acts 8:39). Faithful to the theological development of Acts, the book closes with Paul addressing the local Jewish leaders, saying “Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (Acts 28:28). Recognizing the reverberations of Jesus’ sent-ness upon the Church, Albert Curry Winn argues, “If the sense of having been sent defines who Jesus is, from henceforth it must define what the church is” (47).

### **New Testament: Epistles, Letters, and Early Christianity**

The New Testament letters provide many of the commonly used blessings and benedictions used in corporate worship. Some of these include a theme of sending, others simply pronounce blessing. Paul writes to the church at Rome and promises,

“For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (Rom. 10:13-15).

Paul’s writings often include messages intended to guide Christian behavior as Christians are sent into the world, but they are typically interspersed throughout his letters, and not limited to his farewell addresses. He encourages the Corinthian church in his first letter to them, “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Because much of Paul’s task is to help Jewish believers to embrace gentile converts, and for pagan converts to adopt Christian behavior, Paul’s typical structure includes some teaching on Christian conduct followed by a word of blessing. This is the case in 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, as he writes,

“Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

It should be noted that in verses 11-12, Paul addresses Christian behavior in Christian community, and in verse 13, invokes God’s blessing through a Trinitarian formula.

Paul writes in his first letter to the church at Thessalonica for believers to work diligently “so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one” (1 Thess. 4:12). For Paul, there is a close connection between daily missional postures and evangelism. He also marries ethical instruction with God’s blessing. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6a, he writes, “Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” before listing off several instructions for Christian living. Then he ends the chapter with a blessing in verse

16: “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.”

In Hebrews 13:20-21, the author of the book of Hebrews connects words of blessing with the expectation of Christian conduct, as the Father works through the power of the Son in the hearts of believers:

“Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

In Revelation, John records that the seven spirits of God are “sent out into all the earth” (5:6). Throughout the New Testament, there is a close relationship between the doxological blessing of the people and the behavior they are encouraged to exhibit personally and corporately.

Alan Roxbough submits that theme of the people of God being sent, for both Israel and the New Testament Church, must inspire how we organize our faith communities now:

The narrative imagination of Scripture challenges our assumptions about what God is up to in the world... An important role of a missional leader is cultivating an environment within which God’s people can discern God’s directions and activities in them and for the communities in which they find themselves... We, like the people in these biblical stories, are invited to cultivate our imagination to see the possibilities of what the Spirit wants to do in and among the people we are called to lead (Roxbough & Romanuk 16-17).

Beyond the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, the earliest witnesses to life in Christian community consistently point toward the close relationship between worship and mission. Justin Martyr records in 1 Apology 67,

“To those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need.”



Theologian Ruth Meyers extrapolates from this text,

“In Justin Martyr’s description of the Sunday service in the mid-second century, the final actions engage the assembly in work for the common good, not only the good of the Christian community but also the good of any who are in need” (183).

There is evidence in early Christianity of an integral connection between the gathering of believers to worship and the leaving to serve in the name of the resurrected one.

### **Missiology**

Alongside the classic fields of theology, history, biblical studies, and practice of ministry, the field of missiology emerged as a new and primary field of practical theology in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Van Gelder, “Missiology is a theological discipline that seeks to understand and define both the creating and the redeeming works of God in the world” (Van Gelder & Zscheile 23). If evangelism has primarily been understood as the methods by which the Good News is proclaimed, missiology considers the role and impact of the gospel within a specific cultural context. In this sense, “Mission is not primarily about *going*. Nor is mission primarily about *doing* anything. Mission is about *being*. It is about being a distinctive kind of people, a countercultural . . . community among the nations” (Peskett & Ramachandra 123).

In addition to the scriptural witness, the theological foundations for missional worship are centered in the character of the God of creation. Missiologist Brad Brisco writes about the biblical “sentness,” saying, “While its usage is most often found in a variety of non-theological idioms and nuances, (McDaniel 12-15) it is employed more than two hundred times with God as the subject of the verb (Kaiser 11). In other words, it is God who commissions and it is God who sends. The first and second covenants together witness to a God who partners with human beings, sending us into the world to participate in God’s mission. As *The Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* defines it, mission is “the divine activity of sending

intermediaries whether supernatural or human to speak or do God's will so that God's purposes for judgment or redemption are furthered" (534).

Professor Leslie Newbigin, formerly a missionary to India, set the stage for the modern missiology conversation in his reflections on his missionary observations in India. He writes of the mission of the Church:

We are not engaged in an enterprise of our own choosing or devising. We are invited to participate in an activity of God - which is the central meaning of creation itself... All things have been created that they may be summed up in Christ the Son. All history is directed toward that end. All creation has this as its goal. The Spirit of God, who is also the Spirit of the Son, is given as the foretaste of the consummation, as the witness to it, and as the guide of the Church on the road toward it" (78).

In short, Newbigin offers an eschatological positioning of the mission of the Church, inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus. Mission, therefore, is God's work in the world, seen and unseen, in which we are invited to participate. This is a shift away from previous thinking in the church.

In the early 1990s, David Bosch taught,

"We have to distinguish between *mission* (singular) and *missions* (plural). The first refers primarily to the *mission Dei* (God's mission), that is, God's self revelation as the One who loves the world... in which the church is privileged to participate... *Missions* (the *mission ecclesiae*; the missionary ventures of the church) refer to the particular forms, related to specific themes, places, or needs, of participation in the *mission Dei*" (10).

This nuance between objective (divine) and subjective (human) missiology may seem subtle, but it has monumental ramifications. In missiology, words matter.

In 1998, Darrell Guder helped promote the use of missional language across the seminary landscape. The primary premise of *Missional Church* is that in order to truly think missionally, there is a fundamental shift in thinking of missions as one of the programs of the church toward understanding the church as a part of a larger *missio dei* (Van Guder 3-10). The

use of the word “missional” itself is indicative of the shift in thinking in the American Church. In fact, the very use of the word “represents a changed relationship between the church and its local context, one that calls for a renewed understanding of the church’s identity in God” (Gelder & Zscheile 1).

Guder argues that mission begins with the nature of the triune God, rather than with a strategic planning committee at the local church. He writes:

“[w]e have learned to speak of God as a ‘missionary God’ ... God’s character and purpose as a sending or missionary God redefines our understanding of the Trinity ... This Trinitarian point of entry into our theology of the church necessarily shifts all the accents in our ecclesiology” (4-5).

In this way, the mission programming of localized ministries are residual of God’s self-revelation. He continues, arguing,

“Mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending,’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history. God’s mission began with the call of Israel to receive God’s blessings in order to be a blessing to the nations” (Guder 4).

Other early voices in the missional church conversation “shifted the focus from understanding mission primarily in terms of the ‘mission of the church’ to understanding that the church’s mission instead derives from the ‘mission of God’” (Van Gelder & Zscheile 8).

Gary Nelson also ties missional theology directly to the imminent character of God, suggesting,

“The *missio Dei* emerges from the very nature of who God is. It takes place long before the church is formed, and it implicates everything we do. As we reimagine the church in our crossover to the borderlands, we do so in the profound belief that we are not taking God there; God is already there” (39).

Essentially, our missional imagination rises from knowing who this God is. Put another way, “At the heart of the argument of *Missional Church* is an understanding that the triune God

is a missionary (sending) God who sends the church into the world to participate in God's mission – the *mission Dei*" (Van &elder & Zscheile 52).

Leading missiologist Ed Stetzer writes, "Missional is an important word because it doesn't describe what we *do* as Christ-followers; it describes who we *are* as Christ-followers ... Our mission isn't our mission at all. It's Gods" (10). Hugh Halter offers a similar narration of mission, writing, "Missional isn't a *form* of church. It's a label we give to the qualitative or descriptive aspect of how a church actually lives" (Halter & Smay 52).

Prominent missiologists Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch ground much of their missiological perspective in the act of God becoming flesh in human history. They teach,

"When we talk of the Incarnation with a capital 'I' we refer to that act of sublime love and humility whereby God takes it upon himself to enter into the depths of our world, our life, our reality in order that the redemption and consequent union between God and humanity may be brought about. This "enfleshing" of God is so radical and total that it qualifies all subsequent acts of God in his world" (*Shaping* 35).

Or, put simply by Darren Hammond, "God had only one son, and he sent him to us as a missionary" (Cronshaw & Hammond 46).

Alan Hirsch, the founder of Forge Mission Training Network imagines the implications of allowing the incarnation to shape our missiology, writing, "If God's central way of reaching his world was to incarnate himself in Jesus, then our way of reaching the world should likewise be *incarnational*" (133). This essential doctrine has infinite repercussions for practical ministry in the local church. Hirsch writes,

"By living incarnationally we not only model the pattern of humanity set up in the Incarnation but also create space for mission to take place in organic ways. In this way mission becomes something that 'fits' seamlessly into the ordinary rhythms of life, friendships, and community and is thus thoroughly *contextualized*" (135).

With the incarnation as the foundational Christian doctrine, Hirsch proposes the following visional formula for working in a post-Christian culture: “Christology determines missiology, and missiology determines ecclesiology” (142). Simply put, the Church can only know how to move missionally into the world when the focus is solely upon the one from whom the mission arises, Jesus Christ.

Arguing for a robust pneumatology for their missional ecclesiology, Van Gelder and Zscheile point us toward the critical role of a Holy Spirit-shaped imagination, saying, “The Spirit is the primary way in which God acts in the world in the present ... The missional church is a community led by the Spirit” (118-19). Discipleship, therefore, is “following Christ into participation in God’s mission in the world in the power of the Spirit” (Van Gelder & Zscheile 148). This affirms a critical relationship between the formation of the Christian in corporate worship and the Christian witness they embody beyond the gathering of the community together. Because a missional church is led by the Holy Spirit,

“there is no model for what a missional church looks like.... Missional church is a habit of mind and heart, a posture of openness and discernment, and faithful attentiveness both to the Spirit’s presence and to the world that God so loves” (Van Gelder & Zscheile 149).

The impact of a missiological worldview upon the local church is both philosophical and practical in nature. Michael Frost asks the prodding question, “What could it look like if churches saw themselves more like monastic missionary orders, communities of encouragement, support and training we emerge from to live as Christians in the workplace and to which we return for reflection and renewal?” (211). Prompted by Frost’s question, a critical evaluation of the modern day Western church may uncover an institution more concerned with self-perpetuation through membership accumulation than a mission leaning movement determined to transform hearts and social landscapes. Yet, “Mission is not simply an occasional

activity or a program of the church; rather, it defines the church's core identity, where all disciples are called to be missionaries in their spheres of life" (Van Gelder & Zscheile 153).

Ed Stetzer implies that the church must join in God's mission with humility, for, "God doesn't limit himself to working only through the church. Though the church is God's plan for reaching the world, He isn't limited to us to build His kingdom on earth ... So what we are doing isn't 'Taking God to others' by any stretch. We're really simply pointing out to people the presence of God who is already among them" (24).

This humility does not require forgoing robust Christocentric evangelism. Instead, it arises from the simple recognition that salvation begins and ends with God. As Frost and Hirsch echo, "God's mission in this world is his and his alone. The glory of God, not the church, is the ultimate goal of mission. Our role as the church, however, is a humble participation in his grand scheme – the Kingdom of God" (29-30).

In this sense, the Church is being called back to her historical roots. Graves and Schalfer offer,

"If we remind ourselves of our main task as preachers ... We are called to proclaim a narrative that people could not conjure up out of their own resources, the gospel narrative, and then to help people let that narrative become the story that shapes, guides, and clarifies their lives and gives them their primary identity" (129).

In *Postmodern Pilgrims*, Sweet sets out to develop a plan for ministering to a contemporary audience:

"Ministry in the twenty-first century has more in common with the first-century than with the modern world that is collapsing all around us. *Postmodern Pilgrims* aims to de-modernize the Christian consciousness and reshape its way of life according to a more Biblical vision of life that is dawning with the coming of the postmodern era" (17).

Howard Snyder believes a sharp dichotomy between the church view and the kingdom view will assist Christians in thinking about the command to participate in God's renewal of creation. He writes,

“Church people think about how to get people into the church; kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. Church people worry the world might change the church; kingdom people work to see the church change the world” (157).

Reggie McNeal offers a similar invitation to a missional mindset, stating, “When we finally realize that our existence is to improve the world, and not escape it, we will grasp that the church is not the point. The kingdom is the point” (*Missional Communities* 24).

### **Missional Worship**

Given the renewed attention in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to developing a theology of mission in an increasingly globalized world, it is no surprise that theologians quickly began to imagine the implications upon corporate liturgies. As early as 1967, theologian J.G. Davies recognized, “Worship and mission are treated as two totally distinct objects of theological investigation” (9). Davies argued that the conclusion of corporate worship is “not a cozy rounding-off of a cultic act but a part of the sending of God’s servants in mission” (Meyers 140–41). His perspective became one of the earliest contributions to the missional worship conversation. He wrote, “In the past, the theological understanding of worship has been developed mainly in one direction, i.e. *inwardly*: for example, it has been interpreted as that which builds up the Body of Christ” (Davies 9).

Davies proposed further, “I think the time has come when we must adopt another approach, which is complimentary rather than an alternative; we must seek to understand worship *outwardly* in terms of mission” (9). Davies’ voice is timely for the modern-day Western Church as the Church grasps for relevance in an increasingly secularized culture.

Missiologist Ruth Meyers offers a definition of missional worship as “patterns and understandings of worship as a form of participation in the mission of God” (2). Recognizing and electing to participate in God’s mission means that the Church will be stretched beyond the

comfortable bounds of older paradigms of ecclesiology prior to missiology. Put another way, “[W]hat the new missional paradigm will do is to stretch us by requiring that we take seriously again the sent-ness of all God’s people” (Ferguson & Ferguson 11). This may require a dismantling of programmatic approaches to ministry design, for “[t]oday’s church has posed itself a serious challenge: to live according to its missional nature rather than simply organize around mission activities” (Bergquist & Karr 75).

Necessarily, missional theology considers both insiders and outsiders as constituents of sorts, for it “invites us to recognize the integral role of the neighbor, the stranger, and the wider world in the congregation’s life and imagination” (Van Gelder & Zscheile 154). The conventional dichotomy of worship and mission has been connected only in how one predicates the other. Ruth Meyers describes this relationship, saying, “Worship is what we the church do inside; it nourishes and strengthens us for the mission we engage in outside the church doors” (30). In describing a conventional inside/out model of missional worship, Thomas Schattauer writes that “worship serves the purpose of mission not because it directly accomplishes the task of evangelical proclamation and diaconal service, but because it offers access to the means of grace that propel the individual and community as a whole into such activity” (2).

Yet, the relationship between the two is not simply linear, nor can worship be severed from mission. Innately, “the praise of God’s people is missional. The mission of God’s people includes doxology” (T. Wright 4800). Guder renders a poetic vision for missional worship, writing,

“God’s mission unfolded in the history of God’s people across the centuries recorded in Scripture, and it reached its revelatory climax in the incarnation of God’s work of salvation in Jesus ministering, crucified, and resurrected. God’s mission continued then in the sending of the Spirit to call forth and empower the church as the witness to God’s good news in Jesus Christ” (4).



Put another way, worship and mission live in a dialogical circle, each informing and forming the other. This relationship implies that mission shapes the form and function of church, and therefore, “We must first plant the gospel in the hearts and lives of people and then see what form of ecclesia emerges from the transformed community ... Churches should grow out of the mission, not the other way around” (Ferguson & Ferguson 113).

Everything offered in praise of God by Christians has a missional end. Meyer’s asserts, “Missional worship is not about particular techniques but about an approach to worship and to Christian faith and witness in the world (15). The sending of the church must have provided the spiritual formation necessary to sustain her witness. Hugh and Smay offer, “Regardless of our specific church form, the process of spiritual formation in our church must help move people out of consumerism and toward the life, actions and devotion of Jesus” (95).

J.R. Woodward submits, “Every church has a liturgy, but in order to create a missional culture in the congregation, it is important for the weekly gatherings to intertwine worship and mission together” (177). Tim Lomax agrees, arguing,

“If missional liturgy forms, it also sends. An increasing number of churches don’t see this sending as being sent back into the world ... so just as Jesus sent the twelve and the seventy-two, he sends us into or places of work, neighborhoods, families and places of leisure” (101).

Similarly, Patrick Keifert has developed the use of the *leiturgia*, the public work of worship, to expand the definition of worship beyond the gathering of baptized individuals seeking to grow their private faith, to also include the Christian participation God’s cosmic redemption (*Welcome the Stranger* 142). Both of these writers find agreement with Michael Goheen’s claim that “[t]he same elements of liturgy can direct attention either inward on ourselves or outward to the nations” (203).

Bruce Benson distinguishes between *intensive liturgies*, which sustain Christians through word and sacrament, and *extensive liturgies*, which direct “what happens when Christians when Christians leave the assembly to conduct their daily affairs” (1983 – 1988). As Christians gather at the table of the Lord, “In Word and sacrament, we are nourished and renewed in order to be sent forth in service and mission, to live lives of sacrificial witness to God (Van Gelder & Zscheile 153).

Meyers believes that “[m]issional communities will seek opportunities in worship and in their common life outside worship to tell these stories to one another and to their guests, and so learn and follow God’s ways in Christ” (193). Truly missional worship,

“compels us to go where we would not choose to go, to love those whom we would not choose to love or whom we probably do not like at all, and to share with others who we would not choose as friends” (Marshall 194 – 95).

This perspective gives worship a *telos* beyond spiritual edification of the baptized.

Woodward contends that “[m]issional liturgies do more than meet felt needs or tell a story, they reshape people to inhabit God’s story in their everyday life” (177). In other words, as Tim Lomax writes, “Missional worship has consequences” (86). Futurist Leonard Sweet submits a prophetic critique of Christians seek a faith experience devoid of missional urgency:

Many also seek the ‘sanctuary’ of universalism or the ‘sanctuary’ of ecumenism or the ‘sanctuary’ of political correctness to avoid going ‘out’ into the evangelistic mission field to resonate the voice of Christ to the world. When our churches becomes ashamed or embarrassed to utter the name of Jesus and no longer believe that Christ’s saving grace is good news worth sharing, the Christian mission has already died within its walls. Our sanctuaries have become our tombs (174).

So, worship must have a purpose deeper than simply managing congregant’s personal spiritual relationship with God. Stated directly, “A missional community’s worship is not a presentation people come to watch. Instead, it is an invitation for the whole community to participate in the story of God’s saving work through acts that engage the heart, mind and body”

(Hugus, Schwanz, & Veach 170). Even the United Methodist liturgy for word and table echoes this simultaneous movement of gathering and sending in the prayer of epiclesis over the elements:

“Pour out your Holy Spirit on us here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory ...” (*United Methodist Hymnal* 10).

This equipping of the Church must “move people from the classroom and the sanctuary back into homes, streets, and the natural places of connection with the world” (Hugh & Smay 96). Terry Timm adds that “God’s goal is that we would live integrated lives and that our worship would extend beyond the walls of the sanctuary into the places we live, learn, work serve and play” (171). Taken one step further, Reggie McNeal predicts that in the future, “Much of the kingdom movement will be focused “outside” the organized church, exercising its influence in the world beyond the church by bringing church into every domain of culture” (*Missional* 14 – 15).

For this reason, the Church must simultaneously acknowledge that while God is especially present in corporate worship, God is not confined to it. As such,

“spiritual formation or Christian discipleship, from a missional view, cannot be merely an in-house affair. We must engage the curriculum of the world as we expect to encounter God’s presence in the neighbor or stranger” (Van Gelder & Zscheile 150)

Bolger echoes their sentiment, writing, “Because emerging churches decenter the church service as the primary spiritual activity of the week, they seek to notice God in all of creation. Spirituality is a 24/7 experience for them, and they worship in many venues...instead of all gifts being shared at the church service, they share their gifts outside the service, often to those

outside the community” (179). Speaking of a new missional era, author Patrick Keifert proposes,

“Those congregations that are faithful, effective, and efficient will be a part of transforming mission. They will be transformed by the missions – called, gathered and centered in Word and sacrament, and sent into the mission of God in daily life” (*We* 37).

### **Blessings, Benedictions, and Sendings**

So, how should a minister plan to simultaneously mark the ending of corporate worship and the beginning of missional living? Historically, the liturgies of both Eastern and Western Christianity offer little theological delineation between blessings, benedictions, and sendings. The word “benediction” is handed to English-speaking Christians from the Latin-speaking Romans. Etymologically, benediction is comprised of the Latin *bene* meaning “good” and *diction* meaning “words.” Dan Boone offers a literal definition suggesting, “Benediction means ‘to say good words’” (202).

Roman Catholic liturgical scholar Susan Roll has researched the commonly used term “dismissal.” She proposes that the shared derivation from the Latin, between mission and dismissal, dismissal indicates a shift “from one context to another, from worship within the church to living out one’s Christian commitment in all other aspects of one’s life” (636). Ruth Meyers agrees, writing, “The Latin word for *dismissal* is linguistically related to the word *mission*, both derived from the Latin word meaning *to send*” (194).

Yet, simply because the theological case for a dismissal can be made, its modern usage may suggest that everything meaningful has ended, and parishioners may reenter the “real” world. Lutheran theologian Clayton Schmit cautions,

“[w]rongly construed, the moment of sending can give the sense that worship is a containable set of activities bracketed by a musical prelude and postlude, and contained

within itself. This is the message conveyed when worship's final action is understood not as sending, but as dismissal" (47).

Further, framing the final movement of worship as dismissal may imply the congregation is,

"to be set free from participation in an activity ... Dismissal at the close of worship has the power of adjournment, where the activities of worship are suspended until worshippers reconvene at a later time" (47).

This should not be the objective of the minister's benediction. When a pastor reduces the final act of corporate worship to a dismissal, he or she functionally communicates to the congregants that they can now gather their belongings and collect their children from the nursery, for their cognitive and spiritual attentiveness toward God's presence is no longer expected.

It is when the blessing or benediction is properly situated within the larger drama of the liturgy that it can embody a posture of sending. Michael Goheen argues, "The way worship is structured, the hymns that are chosen, the way various elements are introduced and related to one another, the way the gospel is preached all can focus our attention on the story of God's mighty deeds – past, present, and future – in which we find our place" (203).

Some scholars argue for a more intentional connection between the proclamation (sermon) and the sending (benediction). Theologian David Lose writes that we must "[i]nvite congregants to leave worship to 'look for' the biblical message they just heard interpreted in their daily lives" (107). While not an overt claim about the form and function of the benediction, Ronald Byars believes that

"[i]t is the Holy Spirit who may be trusted to engage our hearing in a way that goes beyond merely following the sense of spoken language, so that the words and thoughts and images of Scripture and sermon may engage us in mind and heart, so becoming for us the 'living word' (1 Peter 1:23)" (51).

William Willimon says that preachers “perform the Word in our sermons so that the congregation might perform the word in the World ... We preach in the awesome awareness that the church is, for better or worse, the physical form that the Risen Christ has chosen to take in the world” (65). Willimon hints at how the church must engage in the *missio deo* in response to the spoken word. Similarly, Barbara Brown Taylor writes that “[t]he Church’s central task is an imaginative one ... to envision new realities”, and these new realities are in the world beyond the church walls (39).

Homiletician Tom Long teaches that services should be planned so “[p]reaching becomes woven into the dramatic structure of the larger service of worship, which itself is a witness to the gospel,” so that “preaching is not merely a deed performed by an individual preacher but rather the faithful action of the whole church” (52). Church preaching should be placed within a community sustained by significant and unique practices and beliefs that all work together to form the congregants in Christ-likeness.

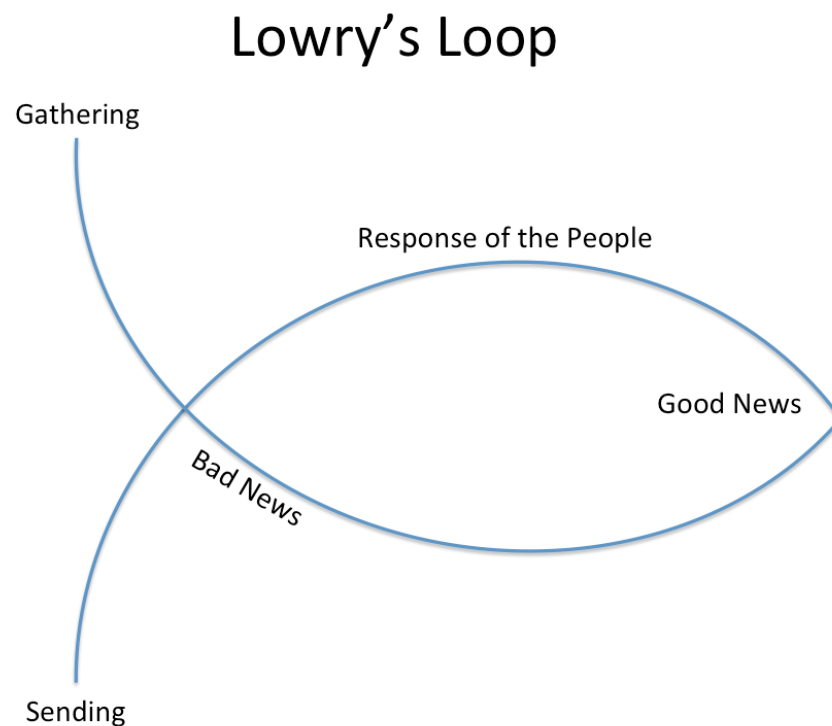
Russell Mittman offers a vision of preaching inspired by the Incarnation. The sermon is the vehicle for how the stories of Jesus are proclaimed in Christian worship, and as the congregation receives the word and embodies the Good News in their living, the Word of God takes on flesh again (22). He writes:

Proclamation of God’s news is more than the delivery of a sermon, more than the arrival of a newspaper on a strange doorstep under the cover of night. Proclamation that is the engagement of a biblical text with a worshipping community occurs throughout the liturgical interaction of the community in its conversation with God. All aspects of the worship experience from gathering to dismissal, including sermon and sacraments, are interrelated parts of a unified engagement with the Scriptures and a unified enactment of the Word of God (16).

Willimon supports this notion when he writes that preachers,

“perform the Word in our sermons so that the congregation might perform the word in the World ... We preach in the awesome awareness that the church is, for better or worse, the physical form that the Risen Christ has chosen to take in the world” (61).

Homiletician Tom Lowry offers a framework upon which a weekly doxological drama may be designed. Lowry’s Loop not only engages the interest of the hearer through creating anticipation, but within the sermon progression, the listener is drawn into the sermonic world and through participation becomes a character. So, he writes that “a sermon is not a logical assemblage: a sermon is an event in time which follows the logic born of the communication interaction between preacher and congregation” (8).



**Figure 2.2. Lowry’s Loop.**

In the final stage, the listener's eyes are opened to how he or she may respond to the gospel call in his or her own life. Although this stage causes the listener to reflect upon how he or she may respond, it does not lay the burden of transformation at his or her feet. Lowry argues,

“[t]he focus of preaching is upon the decisive activity of God, not upon us, and hence the climax of any sermon must be stage four – the experiencing of the Gospel. Human response is subsequent to that experience – and consequent of it” (83).

While Lowry's model is specifically designed to give shape to preaching, it is impossible to bifurcate the form of the sermon from the benediction, if sending is the end goal.

Moving beyond the connection between sermon and sending, other liturgical scholars emphasize considering each element of worship in relationship to the whole. Gregory Pierce, writing out of Catholic tradition proposes, “When we are sent forth from the Mass, we are sent forth to go out and try again to help transform the world along the lines that God intended and Jesus preached” (38 – 39). Orthodox scholar Ion Bria agrees with this premise, writing,

“[s]ince by the Eucharistic event we are incorporated into Christ to serve the world and be sacrificed for it, we have to express in concrete *diakonia* [service], in community life, our new being in Christ, who is a servant of all” (38).

Some traditions offer some liturgical resource in addition to those utilized in corporate worship to equip worshippers for mission. The Episcopal tradition offers the following charge for laity taking communion elements to the infirm:

“In the name of this congregation, I send you forth bearing these holy gifts, that those to whom you go may share with us in the communion of Christ's body and blood. We who are many are one body, because we all share one bread, one cup” (325).

Seminary training in Protestant traditions in recent decades has offered little instruction in the theological significance and practical application of this liturgical element. In a standard



textbook for United Methodist seminarians in the 1980's, author Thomas Anderson Langford III dedicates only a brief paragraph to instruct student on how to conclude corporate worship. He writes, "The Benediction or Dismissal sums up the whole service, and sends forth the people into the world with power. This is a blessing by God on the people" (57). Such a simplification of this worship element leads liturgical scholar Constance Cherry to surmise, "The sending is one of the most overlooked parts of the conversation between God and God's people today" (112).

If pastors desire their congregation to engage in Christian behavior beyond the minimal weekly time in corporate worship, the final spoken word of worship must be more intentionally pointed. Goheen claims starkly, "Our closing charge to the congregation and benediction can either send us with God's blessing for our own comfort or empower us to embody the good news in a world that needs to see it" (*Introducing* 204). Thus, worship leaders must realize "[a] blessing without a charge lacks connection to the service; a charge without a blessing lack the sense of power needed for service" (*Introducing* 115).

Pastor and author Dan Boone attempts to merge blessing and sending in his instruction, writing,

"A pastor lifts his or her hands and pronounces blessing on the people who have gathered in God's presence, been honest about the bad news, received the good news, and responded to grace. These people are sent into the world where Jesus has already gone. They will serve the people of their world, empowered by the Spirit, in the name of Jesus" (*The Worship Plot* 202).

In its relationship to the previous components of worship, the benediction is "the denouement of the drama, where we hear we are better off than we were" (*The Worship Plot* 13).

Cherry echoes Boone's commitment explaining that the benediction is comprised of two actions, blessing and sending. First, as a blessing, a benediction is "words spoken to another of God's behalf" (114). The person offering this blessing invokes God's blessing upon the congregation with raised hands. Further, she adds,

"Biblically speaking, a benediction is not just a matter of being hopeful that God will do something for someone else ... There is faith employed in a spoken benediction; it is a reminder that one can rightfully expect God to act favorably upon all who are his children..." (114 – 15).

Secondly, the benediction serves as a sending of the congregation beyond the context of corporate worship into the world, so therefore, "[p]rayers are directed to God, benedictions are directed to people" (115).

James Smith offers that "[t]he blessing speaks of affirmation and conferral – that we go empowered for this mission, graced recipients of good gifts, filled with the Spirit, our imaginations fueled by the Word to imagine the world otherwise" (207). Yet for worship to become missional, a pronouncement of blessing alone is never enough. Cherry thus writes, "We do not want to give and receive blessings without committing ourselves to living in ways that are consistent with the purposes of the blessing" (115). These two theological movements are inherently practical as well, for "[w]e are blessed, benedicted; we are infused with the conviction that God is with us in the journey from interior activities (of centering) to exterior activities (of serving), that God's spirit is leading us..." (Schmit 52). Bob Rognlien describes this commissioning of the congregation, suggesting both "proclaiming God's powerful blessing and calling to the congregation at the end of the service" (194).

Emerging missiological studies imagine how the final act of corporate worship commissions the congregation to go and be the Church in the world. In return, an increasing number of contemporary Protestant pastors and scholars have begun positioning this final act of

worship as a more intentional sending. Rev. Mark Berry shared in a sermon at Safe Space, a worshipping community, “Liturgy, (the Eucharist) is always the entrance into the presence of the triune God and always ends with the community being sent forth in God’s name to transform the world in God’s image” (90).

Viewing worship as a sequential gathering, and then sending, would suggest, “mission is conceived ... as ‘the liturgy after the liturgy’, the natural consequence of entering into the divine presence in worship” (Gray-Reeves & Perham 90).

In other words, “The gathering movement of worship is complemented by a sending movement into the world” (Van Gelder & Zscheile 153). Goheen suggests the practice will mold a missional worldview, writing, “A constant reorientation to the horizon of our calling—the world God loves – by continued repetition and redirection through all the common areas of worship Sunday after Sunday will gradually nurture a missional people” (204). This recognized sequential movement of gathering to sending rarely utilizes a blessing alone to conclude worship.

Van Gelder and Zscheile ask, “How is it that ordinary Christians can authentically imagine and enter into participation in God’s mission in their workplaces, homes, neighborhoods, and world...how can it be comprehended within daily life? How can their congregations form and equip their members for such missional witness?” (153). Clayton Schmit offers a response to these questions, identifying four foundational movements that should unify Christian worship across denomination boundaries and worship styles: “called gathered, centered in word and sacrament, and sent (Schmit, 44). Schmit proposes that “[a] richer view of worship emerges when the final movement in the liturgy is understood at *sending* ... the implication is that worship is consists of two kinds of activities, those within the church walls and those without” (48).

Rognlien offers a similar perspective suggesting, “It is good to program other inspiring and empowering elements near the end of the service so that they act as a springboard for living out the message the other six days of the week” (199). The minister’s sending of the congregation must therefore charge the congregation with “active, daily discernment of God’s movement in ‘secular’ spaces in which they spend the great majority of their days ... it is a call to recognize that those spaces are pregnant with missional possibilities...” (Van Gelder & Zscheile 154). Schmit adds that sending “is not an afterthought nor a casual ‘see ya later’, but a force-filled word of compulsion” (52).

Yet, this sending is not intended as a guilt-inducing charge to compel the congregation to missional behavior. Cherry offers a timely corrective to this misstep, suggesting, “Ultimately, the sending is joyful, for we have been together in the presence of God, we have heard from God’s word, we have been fed at Christ’s Table, and we have lingered to respond to the Word” (116). Cherry believes that the sending forth should be likened to how we would communicate with guests preparing to leave our home. She writes, “As your conversation concludes, you do not abruptly shove your guests out the door. Instead, a good host would wish his/her guest well, encourage them in their journey, and make them feel welcome to return” (119). This sending should be a clear invitation to move into the world and join in the redemptive work God is always doing. Boone adds, “We depart to serve under His smile and favor, invigorated by His Spirit” (*The Worship Plot* 64). The invitation must also be hope-filled, Schmit writes, for “[w]e are sent forth, not on our own, to make the best of the coming days, but with God” (52).

While there is a growing recognition that the people of God must be sent forth into a missional life beyond the church walls, there is less practical scholarship giving shape and form to the sending of the church. For churches that shape the liturgy missionally,

“key discipleship tools such as prayer, giving, service are built into our missional liturgies, not just in ways that resource Sunday faith, but in ways that nurture a Christian way of life throughout the week by providing spiritual and liturgical tools to be built into daily life” (Lomax 101).

Few scholars and pastors utilize a specific missional charge to the congregation as they prepare to depart. Lomax argues that missional worship must demonstrate that “the liturgy enables whole-life Christian discipleship, that what we are doing together in worship – our encounters with God, our fellowship, teaching and prayers – impact Monday morning just as much as Sunday morning” (101).

The employing of a missional benediction would challenge the congregation to engage in a specific action or behavior in the following week. Dan Kimball proposes ways for how to shift from traditional worship to emerging worship, and provides examples of worship orders from emergent communities. Yet, across the various emergent church services he draws examples from, only one appears to specifically construct the benediction within a missional posture. He shares the closing of Vintage Faith Church, writing, “A prayer of benediction is offered after about three minutes. It commissions people for their mission to be the Bride of Christ throughout the week” (192).

These missional benedictions can vary between vertical orientations as acts of deeper devotion to God or horizontal orientations as acts of justice towards our neighbors. Situated as such,

“Sending is the primary element of preparation for a demanding aspect of worship (action) that lasts typically from one Sunday morning to the next. During the week the faithful are engaged in outward worship, the work of God’s people, which might be called ‘the living liturgy of discipleship’” (Schmit, 52).

In other words, the sending is more than the conclusion of corporate worship; it is the beginning of Christian living beyond the church walls.

While not tethered explicitly to corporate worship of the people, missiologist McNeal tells of how one church staff was challenged to utilize the practice of prayer missionally:

Each member of the staff at one church was instructed to go to a coffee shop, sit on a park bench, or stand in a mall parking lot and pray a simple prayer: “Lord, help me to see what you see.” They were to listen for an hour to the voice of God and then reconvene to share what they had heard. This simple outing radically changed their outlook as they realized that what was in the heart of God was much bigger than typical church concerns. They began to see broken families, homeless people, at-risk children, stressed teenagers – all people they were not engaging with their church ministry. (*Missional Renaissance* 70)

In his additional research of the Soma Communities in Washington state, McNeal observes that as worshippers depart from missional gatherings, “Each person in the community is also expected personally to intentionally and tangibly bless people each week as part of living on a mission” (71).

In *The Worship Plot*, author Dan Boone offers several sample service templates for designing worship along the lines of a plot. In a sample service entitled “Holy Habits Rarely Seen: Eating With Unlikely People” following communion, he offers the following benediction:

How do we reciprocate such a gift? By going from this table to live in the grace and acceptance of God. By eating with the unlikely people of our world. By extending our table boundaries to include anyone God directs us to. By remembering how it feels to be included in the kingdom of grace. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord be with you at each meal and open your eyes to His presence. The Lord make holy the table throughout this city in the week to come. Amen. (90)

Terry Timm has developed some creative suggestions for how to encourage his people to engage in specific Christian behavior beyond community gathering. He shares examples of how to “bless people by pronouncing a benediction upon them: send a text message, post something to someone’s Facebook wall, send a direct message via Twitter, or go old school and make a phone call” (171). This specific form of sending must challenge the congregation to

allow God to engage them in specific activities between worship gatherings. This makes the sending “the ‘so what’ of the blessing; we are blessed for a purpose” (Cherry 115).

Master communicator Andy Stanley, pastor of Northpoint Church in Atlanta, Georgia, highlights the importance of giving the congregation concrete directions at the end of worship. He writes, “As long as you are dishing out truth with no *here’s the difference it will make* tacked on to the end, you will be perceived as irrelevant by most of the people in your church, student ministry, or home Bible study” (114). For Stanley, this direction is not only a practical tool for engaging insiders, it is a necessary ingredient for convincing outsiders that Christianity is relevant and useful. In this way, a missional benediction may actually inspire people who would not have responded to worship if a simple blessing had been employed. Related research from specific fields indicates that gender and generational age may play key roles in the effectiveness of a missional benediction.

Research by Thom and Jess Rainer indicates that millennial Christians may be particularly receptive and responsive to missional challenges at the end of corporate worship. Millennials participate in traditional church worship and ministry at a lower rate than previous generations. Pew Research Center reports that in older American adults, 43.5 percent report attending religious services weekly or more, compared to only 27 percent for millennial Christians (“The Gender Gap”). This is likely in part because “[m]ost Millennial Christians see local churches as business as usual, focused inwardly, more concerned about the needs of the members than the needs of the community and the nations” (Rainer & Rainer 257). This claim is validated in an interview response from a millennial Christian male called “Jason,” asking his perspective on the mission work of the local church. He replied, “I want churches to give a lot

of their funds for mission work ... It's just that when all we do is give our money, it's not enough ... We need to be personally involved as well as giving" (266).

Andy Stanley suspects that a specific charge at the conclusion of worship may help bridge the gap between skepticism and belief for the unchurched and dechurched. He writes, "Unchurched, unbelieving people are attracted to communicators who have *here's what to do* tacked on the end of their messages. This is true even when they don't agree with or understand the premise of what we are talking about" (114). The final word must be practically – oriented, especially for millennials, who are less drawn to traditional spiritual practices. Pew finds 63.25 percent of Americans 36 years and older indicate that they pray daily, compared to 42 percent of adults ages 18 – 35 ("The Gender Gap"). For missional churches, in order for this *what to do* to be effective, it must be outward focused because "[m]illennials don't ask what the community can do for the church; they ask what they can do for the community" (Rainer & Rainer 260).

In addition to generational studies, a related area of study assesses the differences in spiritual engagement between men and women. Pew Research Center found that "[a]cross all measures of religious commitment, Christian women are more religious than Christian men, often by considerable margins. In the 54 countries where data were collected on Christians' daily prayer habits, Christian women report praying daily more frequently than Christian men by an overall average gap of 10 percentage points" ("The Gender Gap").

Here in the United States, the differences were slightly more pronounced. Pew reports that "[i]n the United States ... women are more likely than men to say religion is 'very important' in their lives (60 percent vs. 47 percent)" ("The Gender Gap"). In the same study, the gender spirituality gap was most evident when it came to specific daily behavior. Regarding the



issue of daily prayer, there was a 17 percent difference with 64 percent of women reporting they pray daily compared to only 47 percent of men.

The missional benediction is a simple tool to enable pastoral leaders to inspire and direct more frequent engagement beyond the church walls, whether daily prayer or other engagement.

Lomax advances the notion that,

“‘[s]ending’ goes on and on – missional liturgy has no end. After all, the ‘sending’ isn’t simply the conclusion of the service, a moment in time when we acknowledge that we now leave the confines of the church. It is all that follows – conversations, projects, school work, appointments, disagreements, tensions joys, and sorrows – and how our faith enables us to engage with all these” (102).

A missional benediction necessitates that when the service ends, the service to God and neighbor begins. The sending is the beginning.

### **Research Design Literature**

The effectiveness of employing of a missional benediction should be measurable quantitatively and it should be identifiable qualitatively. In order to measure the impact of a missional benediction as a catalyst for changed behavior, an interventionist model of research was required. The interventionist method “is a type of action research where the researcher becomes a co-participant with the community in the process of gathering and interpreting data to enable new and transformative modes of action” (Sensing 63).

The interventionist model measured the behavioral responses of a control group before then measuring the behavioral responses of the test group. The e-mail surveys, the more quantitative of the two methods are in their design, found to be reasonable by the judgment of the research. Additionally, the efficacy of the survey can be evaluated in the outcome of survey results (Wiersma & Jurs 327). Put another way, the validity of the survey is the integrity in the relationship “between the test being validated and the criterion measure” (327).

The e-mail survey was an appropriate choice because it is unbiased in measuring “attitudes, opinions, or achievements – any number of variables in natural settings” (Wiersma & Jurs 155). When employed in an interventionist model, a survey measures the same experience of both groups and offers a measurable discrepancy between them. It also diminishes the tendency for direct or indirect directing, when structured in an objective manner. In this study, the survey was constructed with binary positive and negative responses for each of the five questions. In doing so, it discouraged participants from developing a uniform pattern of response (Patton 38). Additionally, the survey had to be found dependable for the purpose for which it was intended. Wiersma and Jurs write, “[V]alidity of measurement addresses the question, ‘Does the instrument measure the characteristic, trait, or whatever, for which it was intended?’” (326). Put another way, the integrity in the means of data collection is as important as the data results.

However, before the quantitative survey could be considered a valid means of evaluating the specific effectiveness of the missional benediction, it was necessary for the missional benediction to be identified as the catalyst for any potential change in behavioral engagement. The second data collection method was more subjective and qualitative in nature, in order to help identify the basis for any changed behavior. The focus group was an open-ended forum that allowed participants to offer up, without stated direction, any subjective impetus for inspired behavior over the four weeks. Sensing writes, “[Q]ualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience” (57). This qualitative tool was necessary because whereas “surveys can provide answers to the questions What? Where? When? And How? ... it is not easy to find out Why? Causal relationships can rarely if ever be proved by survey method” (Bell, 14). The focus group allowed respondents to offer a

free and individual perspective on the questions before them without prompting. This research tool gathers more nuanced and varied data because “the group responds to a series of questions that allows the researcher to quickly gather from several points of view” (120).

The combination of the more objective quantitative surveys with the more subjective qualitative surveys identified both the causation for the behavior and the degree of impact the missional benediction had upon Christian behavior between Sundays. Interpreting the results of both data gathering strategies painted a more synthetic and holistic picture than either strategy could have independent of the other.

### **Summary of Literature**

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the theme of God’s sending of people is consistent. God’s creative action processes forth from God’s spoken word. God sends Abraham and his descendants, the children of Israel, forth into the world to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. In the fullness of time, God took on flesh in Jesus and by God’s Spirit, became a human embodiment of God’s mission. When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the Church at Pentecost, the Church was endowed with power to proclaim the Gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

Paul and other New Testament authors instruct the Early Church on specific beliefs and behavior suitable for Christian living. Believers are sent into the world with God’s blessing and to model a Christian ethic in their behavior. Engagement in Christian behavior outside of corporate worship is both a sign and agent of the kingdom of God breaking into the world.

Over the past three decades the field of missiology has taken a more prominent position in scholarly theological conversations. Conceptually, mission has moved away from being a subset of evangelism or social justice ministries. Mission has been understood instead as the

overarching redemptive work of God in the world, in which the church is invited to participate. Scholars have emphasized that mission must proceed forth from Christ through the Church, rather than from the Church through Christ. God's cosmic redemption is not limited to our temporal ecclesiological paradigms, while it is not exclusive of them either.

The missional worship conversation rises from the field of missiology and considers how the gathering of the Church body must equip the body to be sent forth into God's work beyond worship. Scholars recognize that God's glory is the primary end of Christian worship. Yet, they also heed the voice of the prophets who remind Israel that God not only desires sacrifices, but justice, mercy, and humility. Christianity may be comprised of an internal faith, but it is evaluated on its practical ethics. In other words, the Christian life glorifies God when men and women and children reflect the love and holiness of God in their everyday lives. Missional worship seeks to point worshippers toward the God who is out in the world, working to convict, heal, and restore broken and sinful people. Missional worship asks the question, "How should doxology connect with missiology?"

Historically, since the earliest recorded liturgies, the final spoken act of corporate worship has been dominantly framed as a blessing of the people as they go forth into the world. The blessing was simply an act prior to the going forth by the congregation, and not intentionally tied to it. The term "benediction" was a broader label to describe speaking good words over the congregation. At times, the worship service ended with a "dismissal," loosely implying that all meaningful engagement by the congregation had concluded.

Yet, the rise of missiology in recent decades has caused pastors and scholars to critically evaluate the manner in which the congregation is sent into the world. While many missiologists and liturgists are elevating the importance of pointing the congregation beyond the worship

gathering, much of the writing remains within the realm of theological values and theoretical platitudes. Few leaders have talked about the utilization of the benediction as a missional sending toward a specific end, offered as a challenge to the congregation to be engaged in Christian behavior beyond worship. No scholar was identified as having measure the quantitative or qualitative impact upon Christian behavior between Sundays.

Because there is limited research on the utilization and impact of sending the congregation forth to engage in specific behaviors, I conducted a research project to that end. Utilizing e-mail surveys to gather quantitative data and a focus group to gather qualitative data, I sought to evaluate the impact of a missional benediction upon increasing Christian behavior beyond corporate worship. Further, I sought to understand the ways in which gender and generational differences came into play.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

The Christian life is formed by both personal devotional practices and corporate worship ritual. Regular corporate worship invites believers to engage in a pattern of worship and reflection that is intended to guide their lives beyond the hour of worship once per week. This project evaluates the connection between corporate worship and Christian life and how it may be strengthened through the benediction. This chapter outlines the methodology for the research, which analyzes the effectiveness of employing a missional benediction at the conclusion of corporate worship, for the purposes of encouraging specific Christian behavior between Sundays.

#### **Nature and Purpose of the Project**

This project employed an intervention mixed-methods model of research to study the relationship between corporate Sunday worship and everyday discipleship. It arose from the field of study of missional church and missional worship. Specifically, it sought to evaluate the impact of utilizing a missional benediction within corporate worship. The purpose of this project was to evaluate the impact of missional worship, with a specific emphasis on a missional benediction, upon the behavior of the worshipping community between Sundays, at Contact Modern Worship at Trinity United Methodist Church, Birmingham, Alabama.

#### **Research Questions**

##### **Research Question #1: Control Group Question**

What effect does corporate worship have upon Christian behavior between Sundays?

The Christian life is formed by both personal and corporate practices. Weekly corporate worship with other Christians helps shape participants behavior beyond that weekly experience, in their thoughts and actions. This first question functioned to measure how, if at all, participants were engaging in specific Christian behavior as a response to their experiences in corporate worship. The responses served to establish a base line, a controlled measurement, for the effects of corporate worship upon Christian behavior.

### **Research Question #2: Posttest Question**

What effect does missional corporate worship have upon Christian behavior between Sundays?

This second research question sought to measure the impact of corporate worship, with a specifically missional emphasis, upon the behavior of participants, in the week following the worship experience. The responses of participants, the test group, compared to the control group's responses gathered in RQ1, gave a dependable measurement for evaluating the impact of missional worship.

### **Research Question #3: Focus Group**

What aspect(s) of missional corporate worship services, if any, inspired the worshippers toward Christian behavior between Sundays?

The third question was answered more qualitatively than the first two. Whereas a survey was utilized for RQ1 and RQ2, this question was answered through the use of a focus group of five to ten participants. The focus group allowed for participants to identify the specific elements of corporate worship that inspired their response during the subsequent week, and if the missional benediction was a significant catalyst for that inspiration.

## Ministry Context

The ministry project arises from a ministry context of Contact Modern Worship service at Trinity United Methodist Church, in Birmingham, Alabama. Trinity is a 3,700-member congregation located in the neighborhood of Homewood, on the south side of the city. Homewood was settled in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and has experienced a significant revitalization in the last twenty years as younger families have sought to settle into its sidewalk and tree-lined neighborhoods. Homewood currently offers one of the highest prices per square foot of any zip code in the state of Alabama. As the neighborhood has grown younger, so has the membership of Trinity. In 2013, the average age of a new member was 37.2 years old.

The chief demographic markers indicate that our worshipping community is over 90 percent white, and middle to upper middle class economically. More than half of the worshipping community resides within the Homewood neighborhood. The significant majority is college-educated with many professional occupations represented.

The research context was the worshipping community of Contact Modern Worship service, which meets at 8:45 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings at Trinity United Methodist Church. Both services follow the same format each week. The average weekly worship attendance in 2016 was 525 per week with both services combined. Over the past two years, over 70 percent of new Trinity members were under the age of 40, with over 40 percent between the ages of 22 – 32. Participants in the research will be adults (18 years or older) representing all ages, genders, races, and tenures of involvement at Trinity.

The service style offers a modern translation of historical Christian worship and could be categorized as “neo-liturgical.” The service incorporates contemporary instrumentation, multimedia, and a casual atmosphere, as well as multiple scripture readings, recitation of the



Lord's Prayer, confessions of faith, and frequent sacramental rites. It also offers multiple and varied experiences for parishioners to participate in worship. These include filling out prayer cards and placing them in a large wooden bowl up front which is lifted during the pastoral prayer, offering two prayer kneelers and candle lighting stations near the front of the room, positioning the baptismal font on the floor and filled with water from the Jordan River so that worshippers may remember their baptism by dipping their hands into the water. In addition to these weekly opportunities, specific experiences in certain worship series are also offered.

## **Participants**

### **Criteria for Selection**

Each of the sixty, two groups of thirty, persons invited to participate in this study was a regular attendee at Contact Modern Worship service at Trinity United Methodist Church, Birmingham, Alabama. The participants were all baptized adult Christians and represented the congregation in age, race, sex, and length of time as baptized Christians. No more than 60 percent were comprised by either gender. They were chosen as a representative sample of the worshipping community of Contact worship services, including both the 8:45 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. worship services. Participants were also selected based upon their demonstrated commitment to attend worship.

### **Description of Participants**

Each participant was 18 years old or older, and was asked to indicate his or her age as between 18 – 35 and 36 – older in the demographic questions in the survey each week. The participant pool included both genders, and not a single gender to make up more than 60 percent of the pool. Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba recommend employing “maximum variation sampling” to ensure that participants represent the breadth of diversity of a potential participant

pool (234 – 35). The selected participants were overwhelmingly college-educated or enrolled in a degree-seeking program, although neither are prerequisites for participation in this study. All participants were professing Christians.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to participation, each participant signed a consent form and was given information regarding the nature of the study and steps to maintain confidentiality. For participants in the survey, their e-mail addresses were collected. Survey Monkey was utilized to collect the survey data each of the four weeks. However, individual participant responses were anonymous per the survey design. Participants were invited to share which age group, 18 – 35 or 36–older, they belonged to, but no other identifying criteria were included.

For the focus group participants, each was assigned a number to identify them. Participants 1 – 5 were in the first age bracket while participants 6 – 10 fell into the second age bracket. Their responses were numerically code and so the researcher would not know their identities. Anonymity was preserved for all participants throughout both data collection methods.

### **Data Collection**

This study employed a mixed-methods intervention model of research to measure the impact of missional worship, with a specific emphasis upon a missional benediction, upon the behavior of worshippers between Sundays. This interventionist method “is a type of action research where the researcher becomes a co-participant with the community in the process of gathering and interpreting data to enable new and transformative modes of action” (Sensing 63).

My research context was Contact Modern Worship at Trinity United Methodist Church, comprised of two identical worship services each Sunday morning, at 8:45 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.

For the research, these services will mirror each other in content and style (e.g., identical order of worship, media, scriptures, etc.). However, the 11:00 a.m. service each week incorporated more missional language and practices. Introductory statements prior to prayers, creeds, readings, and giving, connected these acts of worship to mission. This emphasis upon connecting worship with living and faith with service to others culminated in the concluding act of worship, shaped as a missional benediction, in which the congregation was given a specific challenge to respond over the subsequent six days.

In the 8:45 a.m. service, the benediction offered a scriptural blessing spoken over the congregation with no specific challenge to them or request made of them. In contrast, the 11:00 a.m. service will offered a missional benediction, which will be a charge to the congregation, inviting a specific behavioral engagement beyond worship and prior to the following Sunday. The intent was to measure the impact of the missional worship and specifically the benediction, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in a mixed-methods approach.

For my quantitative research an e-mail survey was sent, via Survey Monkey, to the sixty total participants, thirty for each service, each Saturday evening at 6:00 p.m. following the Sunday prior, during the four-week series. A survey was the most appropriate means to measure a statistical difference in responses to worship, because as Tim Sensing writes, “The purpose of a survey is to describe characteristics or understandings of a large group of people” (115). The survey intended to capture the behavioral tendencies of the control and test groups, to understand their differences.

The survey was structured as follows:

- 1) Which Contact worship service did you attend last Sunday?  
8:45 a.m. or 11:00 a.m.

2) What is your gender?

Male or Female

3) What is your age?

18 – 35 or 36 – older

4) Did you take any specific action throughout this week in response to worship last Sunday?

Yes or No

5) If you answered “yes” to question 4, how many times did you engage in specific actions this week in response to worship last Sunday?

A) Once

B) Twice or More

Because “causal relationships can rarely if ever be proved by survey method”, a more qualitative tool was utilized to uncover participant’s motivations (Bell 14). A group interview was preferable over individual interviews because “[t]he synergy of the group will often provide richer data than if each person in the group had been interviewed separately” (Sensing 120). At the conclusion of the four-week series, a focus group of ten participants from the test group was assembled. The participants were invited to volunteer for this component of the research, and were divided equally between the two age groups and no gender made up more than 60 percent of either age group. Assigned numbers identified participants so their responses could remain anonymous, and before each person spoke, he or she would identify him or herself by a number.

The participants met for a light Sunday lunch the week following the conclusion of the four-week worship series. Following the lunch, a third – party adult who was not a research participant was recruited and trained, and facilitated this focus group. The focus group was recorded using an audio recorder from which a transcript was produced. The focus group

questions were as follows, with the moderator having received permission to probe responses further:

Question 1: Thinking back over the last four weeks, what about your experience in corporate worship inspired you to take specific action in response?

Question 2: Why did that element of worship inspire your specific action?

Question 3: Do you find receiving a challenge to respond at the conclusion of corporate worship to be preferable to simply receiving a blessing? Why or why not?

Question 4: Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion of worship and challenges offered within worship?

### **Data Analysis**

This project utilized e-mail surveys once per week over four weeks to determine the likelihood of increased specific responses to worship over the six days following corporate worship. These survey results were designed to yield quantitative data by offering a dual-choice response so that each response could be categorically sorted and rules could be applied to analyze the data statistically. This quantitative data allowed for the impact of the missional benediction to be measured by comparing the responses of control and test groups. It also allowed for comparisons among categories of gender, generation, and frequency of behavioral engagement.

The statistical analysis was uncomplicated given that it was descriptive in nature. Statistics as a clinical tool can be defined as “a branch of science that deals with the collection, organization, analysis of data and drawing of inferences from the samples to the whole population” (Winters, Winters, & Amedee 213). Each of the five questions on the survey was designed in binary form, limiting responses to one of two options. For this reason, one of the

options is represented by the value “1,” and the other is represented by the value “2.” The binary nature of the responses means that reporting the proportions of participants choosing each response can summarize the results. This simplicity of design means that each variable can be summarized with a proportion between 0 and 1. Note that though the responses are coded as 1 and 2, because these represent categories of response and not actual measurements, the variables should be considered qualitative, not quantitative.

The second of the mixed-methods of data collection was a focus group. The focus group was utilized to ascertain why, if at all, participants responded at a higher rate, and what, if any, elements of worship they could identify as catalysts in this effort. The focus group was comprised of ten of the thirty participants from the test group, the 11:00 a.m. worship service. At the focus group, each participant was presented with a card stock table tent with a number, one through ten. On the back of the table tent, the participant circled which of the two previously established age groups they fell into, 18 – 35 or 36 – older. They also identified their gender by circling either male or female. Throughout the course of the group conversation, each respondent identified himself or herself only using the number assigned to them on his or her table tent. This allowed the researcher to sort anonymous responses according to the relevant demographic qualifiers of the study.

The focus group transcript was analyzed using documentary analysis. The coding system mentioned above was useful to sort participant responses to align them with the quantitative data and to identify nonquantifiable themes for participants. A careful reading of the transcript identified the primary qualitative question: “If there was an increase in specific Christian behavior in response to worship, what was the primary source of inspiration?”

Generally, Mary Clark Moschella's three practices of reading data was utilized to thoroughly evaluate the meanings behind the literal reading of the participant's responses (172 – 73). Moschella suggests that a literal reading would gather quotes and listen for formal structures in the data, an "interpretive reading" identifies "implied or inferred meanings," while a final "reflexive reading" gives attention to the role and his/her beliefs and impact upon the reading (172 – 73). Patton suggests, "Sufficient description and direct quotations should be included to allow the reader to enter the situation and thoughts of the people represented in the report" (500). The focus group transcripts were interpreted using all three readings listed above and lifting up direct quotes and inferences by participants.

### **Reliability and Validity of Project Design**

The vetting of this research methodology required a varied approach, which covers both the quantitative and qualitative strategies. Quantitative surveys, the more objective of the two measurements, are, firstly, found to be reasonable by judgment of the researcher. Secondly, the job performance of the survey can be evaluated in the outcome of survey results (Wiersma & Jurs 327). In other words, the validity of the survey is the integrity in the relationship "between the test being validated and the criterion measure" (327). In designing the survey tool, the data must be interpreted by the researcher in a manner that is congruent with original purpose of the research and with regard to the structure of the survey. Put another way, the "validity of measurement addresses the question, 'Does the instrument measure the characteristic, trait, or whatever, for which it was intended?'" (326). The manner in which the data is collected is as important as the results the data contains.

.. The survey seemed an appropriate choice to evaluate the control group (8:45 a.m. worship service participants) verses test group (11:00 a.m. worship service participants) because

it was unbiased in measuring “attitudes, opinions, or achievements – any number of variables in natural settings” (Wiersma & Jurs 155). The survey measured the same experience of both groups, designed to avoid any potential direct or indirect steering by the structure of the tool or researcher bias. Constructing the survey with both affirmative and negative options for response encouraged participants to thoughtfully consider each option, and discouraged them from developing a uniform pattern of response (Patton 38). Additionally, there really were no difference between the two groups, then the probability of obtaining random samples with results as different as these is 9.18 percent. This is termed the “p-value,” and provides moderately strong evidence that the difference is not due to random chance.

For the second data collection mode, a more subjective and open instrument was necessary because “qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience” (Sensing 57). For whereas “surveys can provide answers to the questions What? Where? When? And How?, but it is not easy to find out Why? Causal relationships can rarely if ever be proved by survey method” (Bell 14). The focus group allowed respondents to offer a free and individual perspective on the questions before them. To gather this data, questions were posed before the group and participants were invited to respond openly and without prompting. Sensing affirms that this tool provides more varied and nuanced data because “the group responds to a series of questions that allows the researcher to quickly gather from several points of view” (120). A synthetic reading of both the quantitative surveys and qualitative focus group responses provided a diverse and rich evaluation of the impact of missional worship and missional benedictions.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

Wesleyan Christianity is not simply a cognitive ascent to a number of propositions about the nature of God; it is also the adoption of an orthopraxis mirroring the example of Jesus Christ. It is essential that Christian faith be embodied in everyday life. Furthermore, corporate worship should provide resources to shape participant's lives around the ethics of Jesus Christ. In other words, weekly corporate worship gatherings should inspire a missional posture for participants in the time between gatherings. This project sought to quantitatively gauge the effectiveness of missional worship and to qualitatively evaluate the impact of a missional benediction upon increasing specifically Christian behavior between the primary weekly worship services.

#### **Participants**

All sixty participants in this research project were baptized Christians who regularly attend Contact Modern Worship Service at Trinity United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The quantitative research was conducted across the four Sundays of Advent 2016, which began on Sunday, November 27, 2016. Participants agreed to attend a minimum of three of the four Sundays of Advent with thirty participants agreeing to attend the 8:45 a.m. service each week, and thirty participants agreeing to attend the 11:00 a.m. service. Following worship attendance, each participant would respond to the e-mail surveys shared on Saturday evenings subsequent to each of the four Sundays. The qualitative data was collected from a focus group conducted on Sunday, January 15, 2017, (originally scheduled January 8, 2017, but delayed a

week by a snow storm) following corporate worship. The focus group was comprised of ten participants recruited from the pool of thirty attendees at the 11:00 a.m. service.

Each participant was 18 years old or older, and was asked to indicate his or her age as between 18 – 35 and 36 – older in the demographic questions in the survey each week. Each of the two worship services had thirty of the sixty total participants, and each group of thirty was divided equally into the two age groups of 18 – 35 and 36 – older. These four participant subsets of fifteen included both genders, and not a single gender made up more than 60 percent of the pool. The participants were overwhelmingly college – educated or enrolled in a degree-seeking program, although neither were prerequisites for participation in this study.

**Table 4.1. Participant Profiles**

	<b>8:45 a.m. Worship Participants</b>	<b>11:00 a.m. Worship Participants</b>	<b>Focus Group Participants</b>
Female 18 – 35	8	7	3
Male 18 – 35	7	8	2
Female 36 – Older	7	8	2
Male 36 – Older	8	7	3

### **Research Question #1: Description of Evidence**

What effect does corporate worship have upon Christian behavior between Sundays?

Research question #1 was addressed through a quantitative survey submitted once each week across the four weeks of Advent 2016, to the participants who attended the 8:45 a.m. worship service at Contact Modern Worship service. These thirty participants served as the control group to serve as a baseline for the first research question. Participants agreed to attend a minimum of three of the four Sundays of Advent at the 8:45 a.m. service.

The sermon series for Advent was “All Heaven Breaks Loose,” and considered the various ways God’s presence emerges through the work of the Holy Spirit directly and through the actions of Christ’s body, the Church. Each of the four worship services included the same elements and followed the same order each week:

**Table 4.2. Control Group: Worship Order**

<b>First Sunday: “Interceding for the Suffering” Isaiah 64:1 – 12</b>	<b>Second Sunday: “Peacekeeping vs. Peacemaking” Isaiah 2:1 – 5</b>	<b>Third Sunday: “Called to Repentance” Matthew 3:7 – 11</b>	<b>Fourth Sunday: “When God Depends on Us” Matthew 1:18 – 25</b>
Gathering	Gathering	Gathering	Gathering
Singing	Singing	Singing	Singing
Welcoming	Welcoming	Welcoming	Welcoming
Singing	Singing	Singing	Singing
Lighting	Lighting	Lighting	Lighting
Singing	Singing	Singing	Singing
Praying	Praying	Praying	Praying
Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading
Listening	Listening	Listening	Listening
Giving	Giving	Giving	Giving
Eating	Eating	Eating	Eating
Responding	Responding	Responding	Responding
Blessing	Blessing	Blessing	Blessing

The concluding element of each of these worship services was the blessing. This blessing took a typical biblical format of invoking the Spirit of God upon the congregation to guide and bless them as they departed back into their lives.

**Table 4.3. Control Group: Blessings**

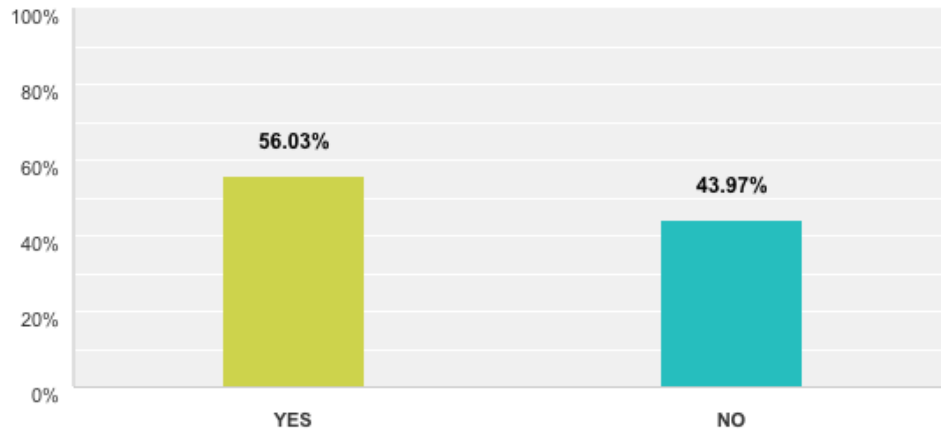
<b>First Sunday: Blessing</b>	Go forth from this place wrapped in the promise of a Savior this Advent season – a savior who comes to bring good news to the hurting. Have faith that during your season of waiting God is with you in the silence, in the longing, and with never leave you or forsake you. May we plead like Isaiah for heaven to come down and redeem our world, through us. Amen.
<b>Second Sunday:</b>	As you leave this peaceful sanctuary, remember that while the world around us is not always at peace, God can grant us a peace that surpasses any explanation. And now that Christ has put us

<b>Blessing</b>	at peace with God, he entrusts the ministry of reconciliation to us. Move forth into the world to work for harmony and justice that through us all heaven will break loose. Amen.
<b>Third Sunday: Blessing</b>	When the Kingdom of God breaks into our lives we can either confront our sinfulness with honesty and humility, or we can lie to ourselves and live in darkness. But when we own our brokenness and turn to God, we receive forgiveness and freedom. God from this place with the confidence that you are forgiven. Trust that God's promises are true. Praise be to God. Amen.
<b>Fourth Sunday: Blessing</b>	This Christmas we can sit back and wait for God to create a miracle, or like Joseph we can be the vessels God uses to enact one. The truth is, when all heaven breaks loose, God also depends on us. God chooses us to be agents in the drama of redemption. Therefore, let us recognize the things that will not be made right in our world without our help, and let's do something about it – through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Survey responses indicated a strong engagement in Christian behavior during the week. While there were not direct challenges offered during the 8:45 a.m. worship services, the content of the sermons each of the four Sundays did reflect upon how Advent awakens us to the ways God is breaking into the world. Across the four weeks, each of the thirty participants was invited to take four separate surveys, sent out by e-mail at 6:00 p.m. on Saturday. Out of 120 potential total responses, 116 surveys were answered. Of these 116, 56.03 percent of respondents indicated they had taken specific action in response to worship since the previous Sunday, with 43.97 percent responding that they did not take specific action.

### 8:45a Participants: Did you take any specific action throughout this week in response to worship last Sunday?

Answered: 116 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses	
▼ YES (1)	56.03%	65
▼ NO (2)	43.97%	51
Total		116

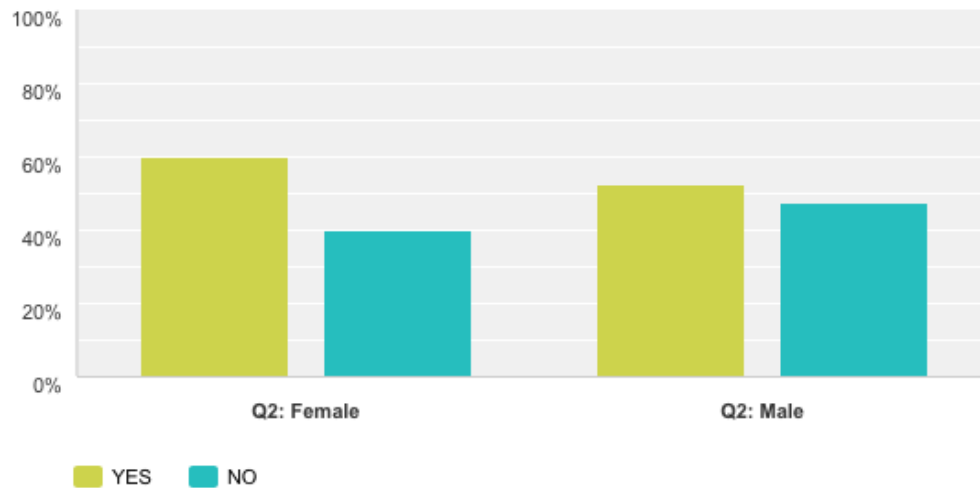
Basic Statistics				
<b>Minimum</b> 1.00	<b>Maximum</b> 2.00	<b>Median</b> 1.00	<b>Mean</b> 1.44	<b>Standard Deviation</b> 0.50

Figure 4.1. 8:45 a.m. Service: All Participants

A look at the 8:45 a.m. responses along gender lines revealed a slightly higher response rate among females as opposed to male, though not markedly higher. Female participants across both age groups took a specific action in response to worship at an average rate of 7.54 percent higher than male counterparts.

### 8:45a Participants: Did you take any specific action throughout this week in response to worship last Sunday?

Answered: 116 Skipped: 0

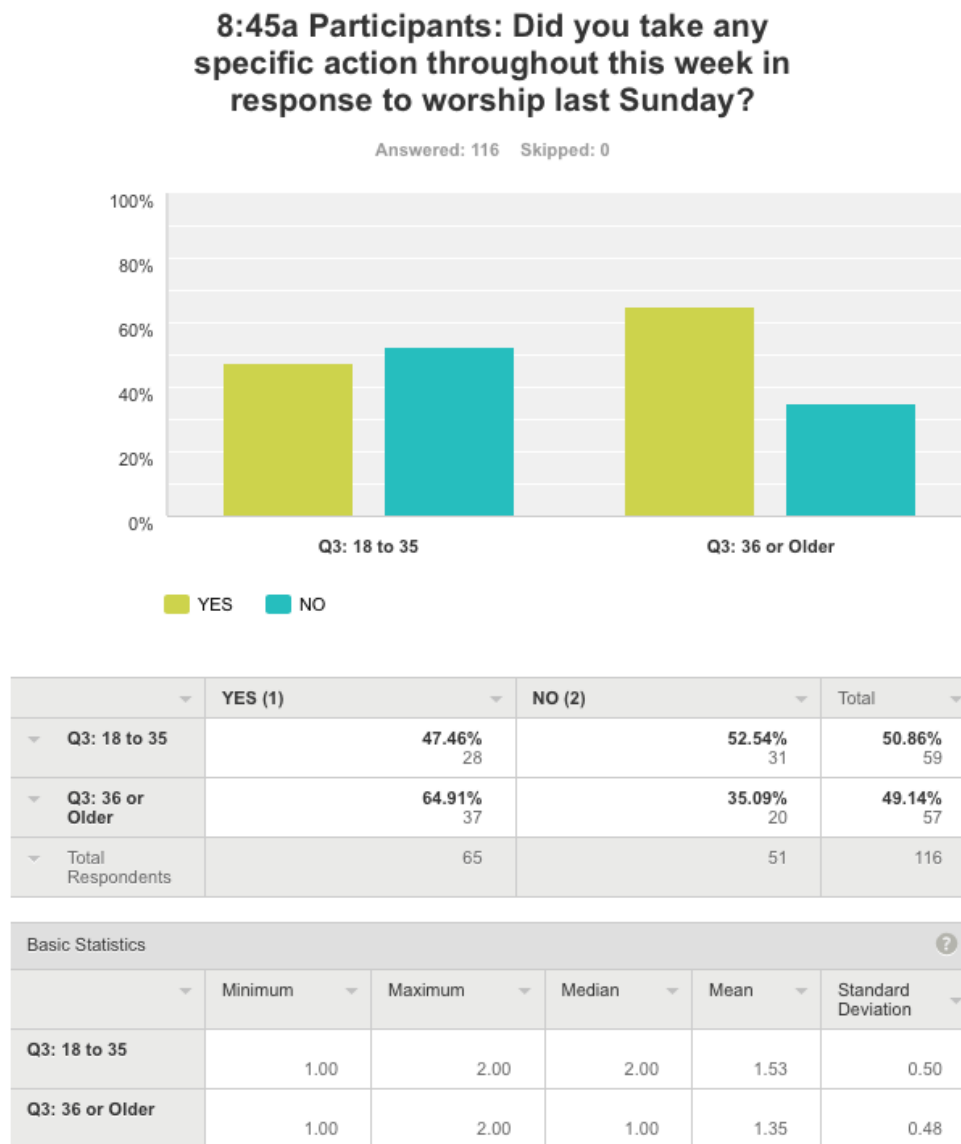


	YES (1)	NO (2)	Total
Q2: Female	60.00% 33	40.00% 22	47.41% 55
Q2: Male	52.46% 32	47.54% 29	52.59% 61
Total Respondents	65	51	116

Basic Statistics					
	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q2: Female	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.40	0.49
Q2: Male	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.48	0.50

Figure 4.2. 8:45 a.m. Participants: Male/Female Comparison

Evaluation of the two primary age groups, 18 – 35 years and 36 – older, revealed that a higher participation rate among older adults. Out of 116 total participants across the four weeks, fifty-seven adults 36 – older participated. Out of this pool, thirty-seven indicated they responded with some specific action, a total of 64.91 percent. Millennial adults recorded significantly lower response rates, with only twenty-eight of fifty-nine total responses, or 47.46 percent indicating they engaged in a response to worship.

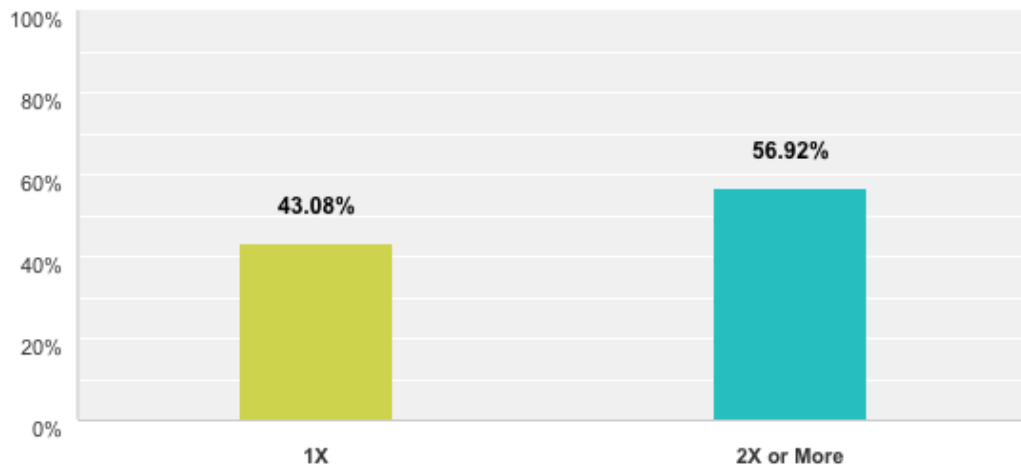


**Figure 4.3. 8:45 a.m. Participants: Generational Comparison**

The final metric for RQ1 dealt with the frequency of participation following an affirmative response to the fourth question. The 65 of the 116 participants who answered “yes” to question four were invited to indicate if they engaged in specific actions only once that week, or two or more times. The comparison tilted in favor of multiple responses, with 56.92 percent of participants indicating they responded two or more times during the week, compared with those who indicated on a single response, at 43.08 percent.

**8:45a Participants: If you answered "YES" to question 4, how many times did you engage in specific actions this week in response to worship last Sunday?**

Answered: 65 Skipped: 51



Answer Choices	Responses
1X (1)	43.08% 28
2X or More (2)	56.92% 37
Total	65

Basic Statistics				
Minimum 1.00	Maximum 2.00	Median 2.00	Mean 1.57	Standard Deviation 0.50

**Figure 4.4. 8:45 a.m. Service: Frequency of Action**



## Research Question #2: Description of Evidence

What effect does missional corporate worship have upon Christian behavior between Sundays?

Survey responses indicated a strong engagement in Christian behavior during the week. The 11:00 a.m. worship services across the four weeks of Advent offered the same worship elements as the 8:45 a.m. services except for the concluding act of worship. In the 8:45 a.m. service, the benediction offered a scriptural blessing spoken over the congregation with no specific challenge to them or request made of them. In contrast, the 11:00 a.m. service offered a sending, a missional benediction, which was a charge to the congregation inviting a specific behavioral engagement beyond worship for that week.

**Table 4.4 Test Group: Worship Order**

<b>First Sunday: “Interceding for the Suffering” Isaiah 64:1–12</b>	<b>Second Sunday: “Peacekeeping Versus Peacemaking” Isaiah 2:1–5</b>	<b>Third Sunday: “Called to Repentance” Matthew 3:7–11</b>	<b>Fourth Sunday: “When God Depends on Us” Matthew 1:18–25</b>
Gathering	Gathering	Gathering	Gathering
Singing	Singing	Singing	Singing
Welcoming	Welcoming	Welcoming	Welcoming
Singing	Singing	Singing	Singing
Lighting	Lighting	Lighting	Lighting
Singing	Singing	Singing	Singing
Praying	Praying	Praying	Praying
Reading	Reading	Reading	Reading
Listening	Listening	Listening	Listening
Giving	Giving	Giving	Giving
Eating	Eating	Eating	Eating
Responding	Responding	Responding	Responding
Sending	Sending	Sending	Sending

**Table 4.5 Test Group: Missional Benedictions**

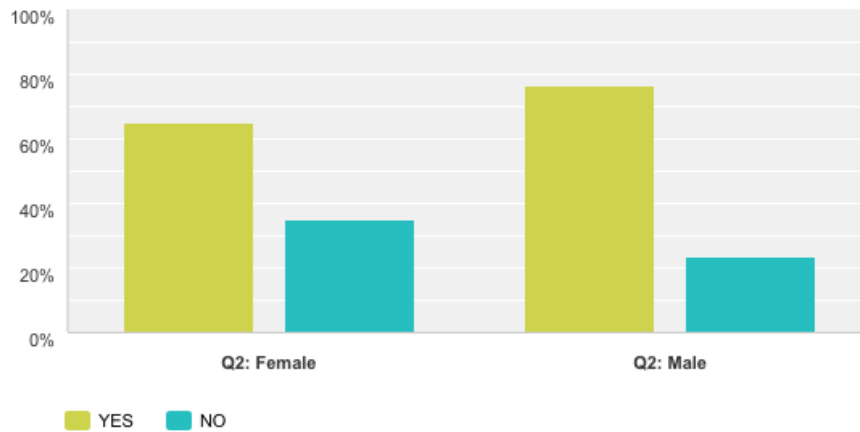
<b>First Sunday: Missional Benediction</b>	<b>Interceding for the Hurting</b> 1) Identify some broken corner of our city, which you pass on your way to work, play, church, or home. 2) Pray over the broken corner you observe, and write it out on one of these prayer tags. 3) Bring the tag to our prayer wall in the commons area as a visible witness to our petitions on behalf of the hurting.
<b>Second Sunday: Missional Benediction</b>	<b>Guide to Peacemaking:</b> 1) Pray for your own inner peace and wisdom. 2) Approach your loved one with gentleness and love. 3) Without minimizing their pain, encourage reconciliation. 4) Pray with and for him or her.
<b>Third Sunday: Missional Benediction</b>	<b>Taking Away Our Sin:</b> 1) Get together with a trusted Christian friend. 2) Share a temptation in your life you must guard against. 3) Ask for prayers for you to be strong in the Lord and invite accountability.
<b>Fourth Sunday: Missional Benediction</b>	<b>Place this card in a prominent location (bathroom mirror, refrigerator door, or desk) for the next six days and pray the following prayer once each day:</b>  “Gracious Lord, in Jesus Christ you have come to our rescue. His kingdom is now breaking into our world. God, open my eyes to see one good thing that needs to be done in your name—that the Holy Spirit empowers me to do. I consecrate myself to be available. Grant me a holy unrest to care for hurting people and the courage to sabotage systemic brokenness in your world. Amen.”

Across the four weeks, each of the thirty participants was invited to take four separate surveys, sent out by e-mail at 6:00 p.m. on Saturday. Out of 120 potential total responses for each service, participants at the 11:00 a.m. service filled out 117 surveys, while the 8:45 a.m. participants responded to 116 surveys.

The 11:00 a.m. service comparisons along gender lines revealed that men engaged in specific Christian behavior at 11.76 percent higher rate than women when offered a missional benediction at the conclusion of worship. This stands in stark contrast the internal 8:45 a.m. comparison, in which females responded at an average rate of 7.54 percent higher than male counterparts. This indicates that the missional benediction had a significant impact in increasing engagement comparatively between genders.

### 11a Participants: Did you take any specific action throughout this week in response to worship last Sunday?

Answered: 117 Skipped: 0



	YES (1)	NO (2)	Total
Q2: Female	64.91% 37	35.09% 20	48.72% 57
Q2: Male	76.67% 46	23.33% 14	51.28% 60
Total Respondents	83	34	117

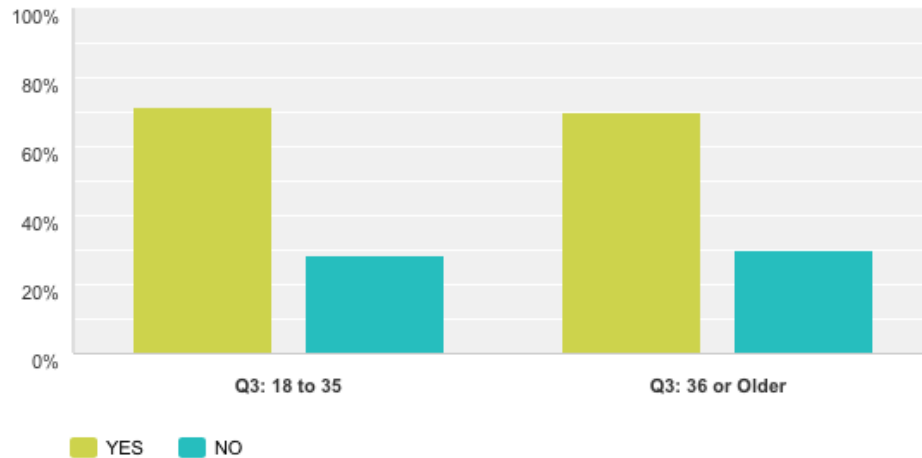
Basic Statistics					
	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q2: Female	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.35	0.48
Q2: Male	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.23	0.42

**Figure 4.5. 11:00 a.m. Service: Male/Female Comparison.**

The second demographic qualifier of the two ages groups revealed very little difference in weekly behavioral engagement when a missional benediction was offered. Millennial adults responded at a rate of only 1.49 percent higher than adults older than 36 years, which is statistically insignificant.

### 11a Participants: Did you take any specific action throughout this week in response to worship last Sunday?

Answered: 117 Skipped: 0



	YES (1)	NO (2)	Total
Q3: 18 to 35	71.67% 43	28.33% 17	51.28% 60
Q3: 36 or Older	70.18% 40	29.82% 17	48.72% 57
Total Respondents	83	34	117

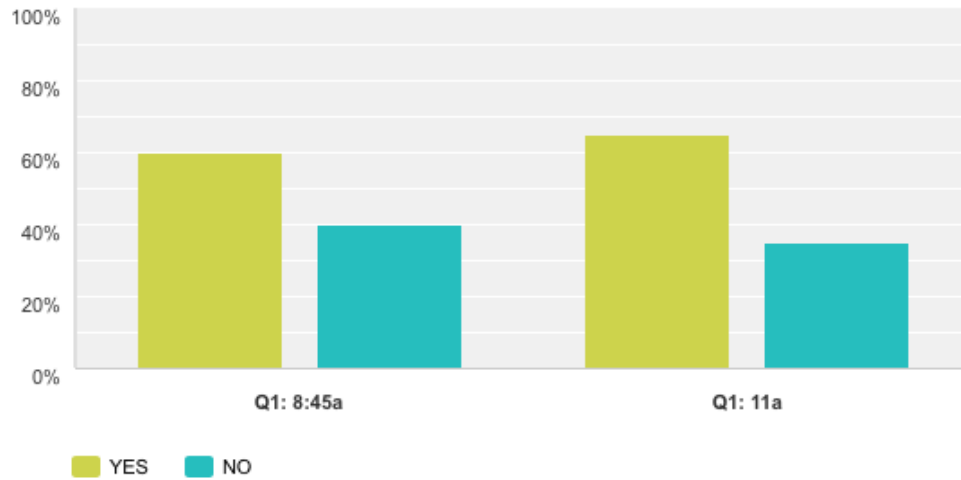
Basic Statistics					
	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q3: 18 to 35	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.28	0.45
Q3: 36 or Older	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.30	0.46

**Figure 4.6. 11:00 a.m. Service: Generational Comparison**

Moving beyond the internal service comparisons to comparisons between the test and control group, a small change in the behavior of female participants was revealed. In the 8:45 a.m. control group, participants responded to corporate worship at a rate of 60 percent. For the 11:00 a.m. test group participants, the rate was only 4.91 percent higher, at 64.91 percent.

### Female Participants: Did you take any specific action throughout this week in response to worship last Sunday?

Answered: 112 Skipped: 0



	YES (1)	NO (2)	Total
Q1: 8:45a	60.00% 33	40.00% 22	49.11% 55
Q1: 11a	64.91% 37	35.09% 20	50.89% 57
Total Respondents	70	42	112

Basic Statistics					
	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q1: 8:45a	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.40	0.49
Q1: 11a	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.35	0.48

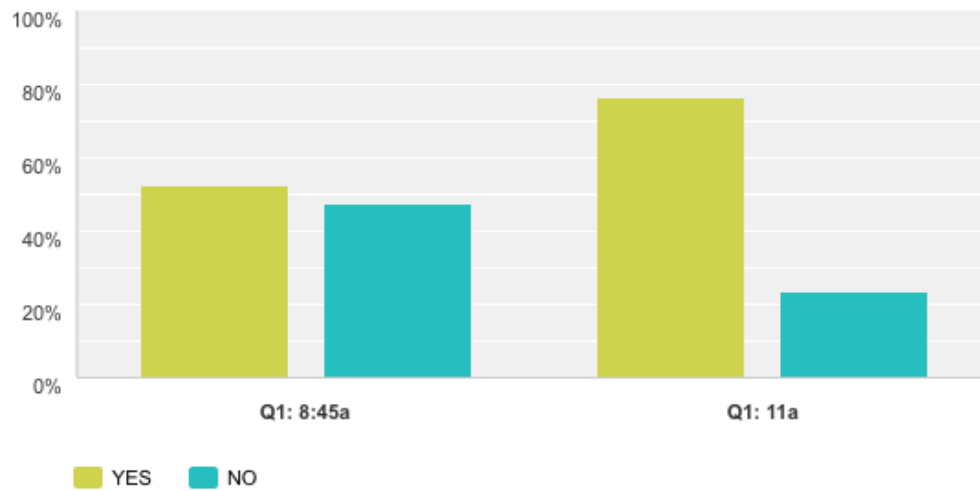
**Figure 4.7. 8:45 a.m./11:00 a.m. Services: Female/Female Comparison.**

A similar comparison for male participants revealed one of the most statistically significant differences of all indicators. Men who attended the 11:00 a.m. service in which the

sending was formed as a challenge responded at a 24.21 percent higher rate than those who attended the 8:45 a.m. service in which a blessing was offered.

### Male Participants: Did you take any specific action throughout this week in response to worship last Sunday?

Answered: 121 Skipped: 0

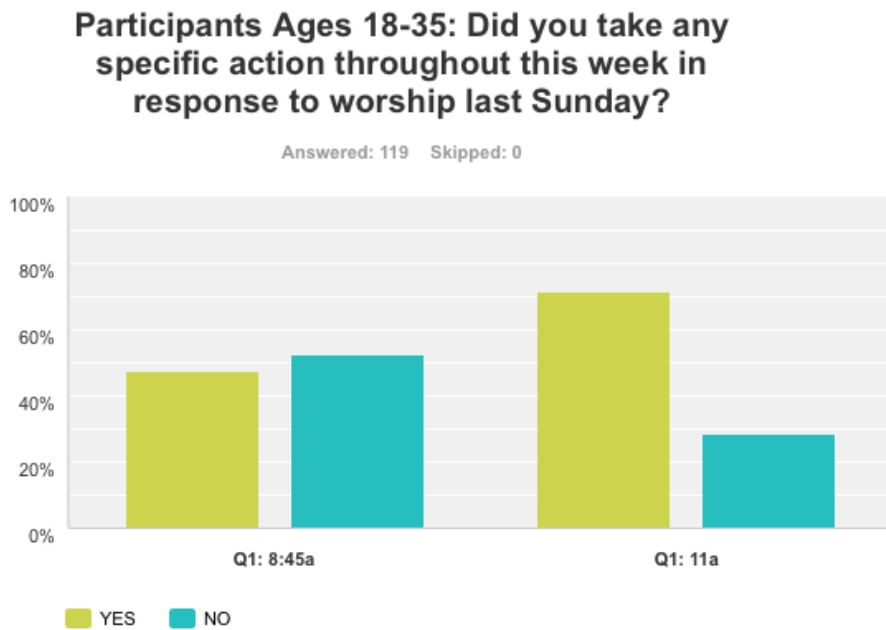


	YES (1)	NO (2)	Total
Q1: 8:45a	52.46% 32	47.54% 29	50.41% 61
Q1: 11a	76.67% 46	23.33% 14	49.59% 60
Total Respondents	78	43	121

Basic Statistics					
	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q1: 8:45a	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.48	0.50
Q1: 11a	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.23	0.42

Figure 4.8. 8:45 a.m./11:00 a.m. Services: Male/Male Comparison.

Young adult Christians ages 18–35 showed a significant increase in responding to worship with specific behavior when offered a challenge at the conclusion of corporate worship. When a missional benediction was offered, participants engaged at a rate of 71.67 percent. When the service ended with a traditional blessing, the response rate was 47.46 percent, a difference of 24.21 percent.



	YES (1)	NO (2)	Total
Q1: 8:45a	47.46% 28	52.54% 31	49.58% 59
Q1: 11a	71.67% 43	28.33% 17	50.42% 60
Total Respondents	71	48	119

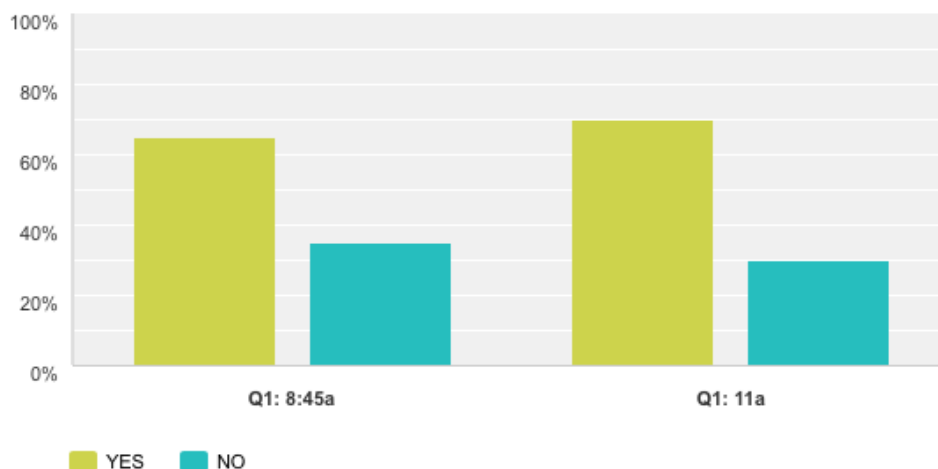
Basic Statistics					
	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q1: 8:45a	1.00	2.00	2.00	1.53	0.50
Q1: 11a	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.28	0.45

**Figure 4.9. 8:45 a.m./11:00 a.m. Services: Millennial Comparison.**

Unlike the young adults in the study, adults ages 36–older showed much more consistent response rates between control and test group worship services. Test group participants who received a missional benediction responded at a rate of engagement of 70.18 percent, only 5.27 percent higher than the control group rate of 64.91 percent.

### Participants Ages 36-Older: Did you take any specific action throughout this week in response to worship last Sunday?

Answered: 114 Skipped: 0



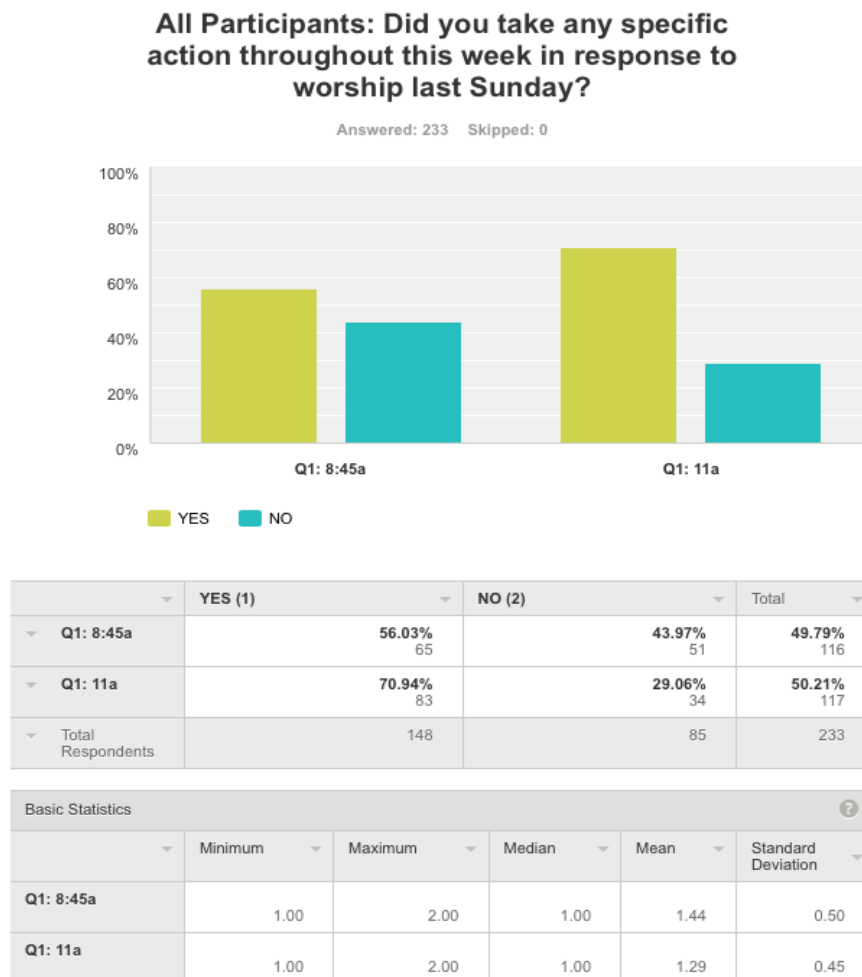
	YES (1)	NO (2)	Total
Q1: 8:45a	64.91% 37	35.09% 20	50.00% 57
Q1: 11a	70.18% 40	29.82% 17	50.00% 57
Total Respondents	77	37	114

Basic Statistics					
	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q1: 8:45a	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.35	0.48
Q1: 11a	1.00	2.00	1.00	1.30	0.46

Figure 4.10. 8:45 a.m./11:00 a.m. Service: Nonmillennial Comparison.

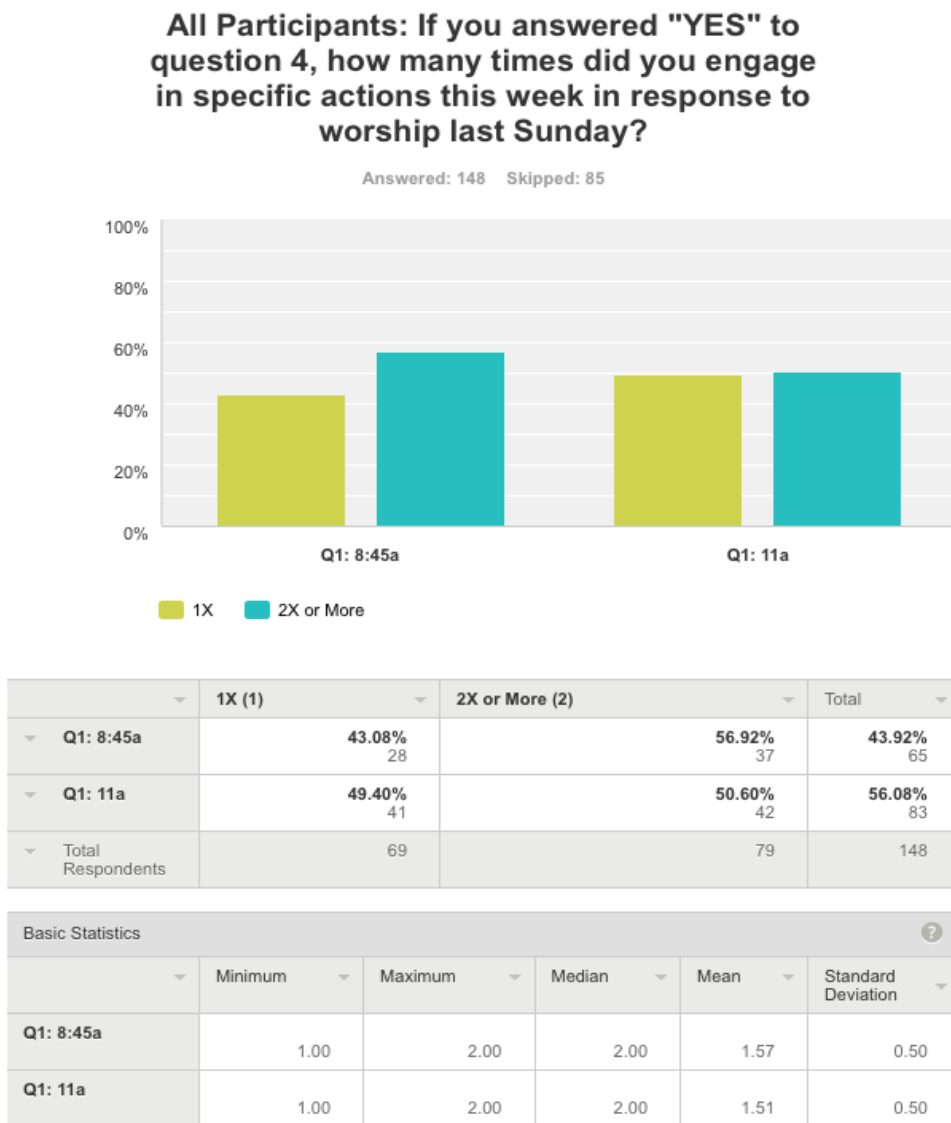


The comparison of all participant responses on the fourth survey question rendered data to address the most central question of the project, which dealt with a quantitative measurement of the impact of a missional benediction upon adult Christian behavior. Participants who attended the 8:45 a.m. service, wherein a blessing was utilized, indicated a response rate of 56.03 percent, with a converse lack of response in behavior at 43.97 percent. However, 70.94 percent of 11:00 a.m. service respondents, who received a missional benediction, indicated they had taken specific action in response to worship since the previous Sunday, with 29.03 percent responding that they did not take specific action.



**Figure 4.11. 8:45 a.m./11:00 a.m. Services: All Participants.**

The final quantitative measurement compared the responses to question five from all participants in both services. The 148 total positive responses indicated that the 8:45 a.m. participants engaged in specific behavior in response to worship two or more times per week at approximately 6 percent higher rate than 11:00 a.m. participants. Conversely, the 11:00 a.m. participants responded at around a 6 percent higher rate than 8:45 a.m. participants for those who responded only once to worship.



**Figure 4.12. 8:45 a.m./11:00 a.m. Services: Frequency of Action.**

### Research Question #3: Description of Evidence

What aspect(s) of missional corporate worship services inspire(s) the worshippers toward Christian behavior between Sundays?

The qualitative data was collected from a focus group conducted on 15 January 2017, following corporate worship. An independent moderator guided the participants through four questions, prompting and questioning to bring further depth and clarity to responses. The total time of conversation was 47:09. The focus group was comprised of ten participants recruited from the pool of thirty attendees of the 11:00 a.m. service. The participant pool represented the diversity of thirty participants of the 11:00 a.m. test group by both age and gender.

**Table 4.6 Focus Group Demographics Compared to Test Group**

	11:00 a.m. Worship Participants	Focus Group Participants
Female 18–35	7	3
Male 18–35	8	2
Female 36–older	8	2
Male 36–older	7	3

#### **Focus Group Question 1: Thinking back over the four weeks of Advent, what about your experience in corporate worship inspired you to take specific action in response?**

Focus group participants quickly identified the missional benediction as the primary catalyst for their specific action on the weeks when they took them. Throughout the discussion of this first question, nine of the ten participants spoke up to identify and affirm that role of the missional benediction in increasing the likelihood of their engaging in specific acts of Christian behavior.

Respondent 8, a male in the older age division remembered, “We were left with a challenge I think each week in the sermon to do a specific thing based on whatever the thing that week was. For example, hope or love, and that challenge inspired me to follow through.”

A female participant age 18–35, identified as number ten added,

“I think that was the one about being a peace maker not a peace keeper, was the one that sticks out in my mind. That I felt like I did the, if you can say the best job, or I felt like I really did something that mattered. Maybe, in response to that one, with a coworker and was kind of able to use that. It definitely did help me to kind of enact my faith particularly in that week.”

Participant 1, an older male also added,

“I know I specifically, one of the weeks it was a challenge to reach out to somebody ... I went that week to drop a couple notes that I wouldn't have done to somebody. Just to reach out, not necessarily go in to too much detail, but kind of a peace offering type thing so to speak type of note.”

Participant 10 younger female, succinctly offered,

“If you went to school and they just told you, ‘Okay, we taught you this, now just go home and do something so you can remember it.’ How many of us are going to make homework for ourselves that's really going to make any impact? I think having specific challenges is important, because sometimes we're not going to do the hard work that you need to do because you know it's hard.”

In addition to identifying the concluding challenge as the source of their actions, participants noted the value of having something to take away with them as a reminder to respond to the challenge. Participant 6, a female in the younger age group commented,

“I'll say that in addition to just having Nathan give us a specific homework assignment, having the tear-away cards ... and saving it at home, and keeping it in a place that I go to every day was a reminder to continue to follow through with the homework assignment throughout the week.”

Participant 9 was an older female who echoed a similar sentiment, saying, “I still have the tear-away cards that I keep as inspiration, so I think it's gone beyond that particular week ... They're with my Bible. I do Bible study daily.”

Further, participant 5, a male age 18–35 offered,

“I also really enjoyed having the bulletin to take home. There were two Sundays that I didn’t do the bulletin ... Those weeks I had to reply to the survey that, no, I didn’t do anything that week in response. It really was a constant reminder.”

He continued, commenting on the impact of having the hard copy with him through the week:

“I put my one with the prayer, it’s in my car and it’s still sitting there in my car. I can’t pull in to my work without first seeing it before I get out of my car. That’s been much more impactful than the weeks where it was like, I know that there was something I was supposed to do, but I didn’t have the physical paper with me as a reminder.”

A young male, participant 7, recounted,

“The tear-away card also was one of the things that reminded me throughout the week. Okay, I remember that I did this. Because in my life I’ve read a lot of sermons, and I have a tendency to after a sermon is finished, I may or may not remember that sermon because I’ve heard so many ... Having something from each week to remind you out of the church context, that is helpful.”

Participant 10, a young adult female offered feedback, confessing, “I, myself, because I am not good in the abstract and I need something more concrete and practice to internalize things; this was helpful for me because I have to have practice in order to reinforce skill in order to change my behavior. That was helpful.”

Participant 1, a male in the 36–older grouping, offered, “When people first join a church, one the first things they say is look again for and hold something tangible that they can feel that Christian feeling of helping people, or doing something.”

**Focus Group Question 2: Why did that element of worship inspire your specific action?**

Beyond simply identifying the “what,” which spurred on engaging behavior, it was critical to identify the “why” behind it. The second question in the conversation revealed a couple of primary reasons. The first reason related to the importance of worship extending beyond the closed service and into the world.

Participant 5, a male in the younger age bracket, offered the following:

“Taking it outside of the church building was I think the biggest thing for me. It wasn't response immediately after the sermon. I felt like, okay, yes, I want to make sure I do this. Wake up Monday morning, that'll probably just go on, but having it with me outside of physical Wesley Hall was what helped me A, to remember to reflect more on what was talked about on Sunday, and then wanting to go and take that step outside during the week.”

Participant 7 another 18–35 year old male, differentiated between a traditional altar call and a sending forth, noting,

“I think it's important to note that a challenge in this case is a challenge outside of the church walls. Because in the standard sermon layout ... was that you would do a sermon, then a call to response/an invitation. Typically, the challenge at the end of the sermon would be, ‘Are you going to confess Christ as your savior? Are you a member of this church? Join this church today.’”

Participant 2, a younger female, suggested that engaging in concrete Christian acts may have redemptive benefits on the part of Christian image. She said,

“One of the biggest complaints people have about the church or turn off is, ‘They're not a different person. They just go to church on Sunday, they say hello to each other, they do their Sunday thing and they go home and they are just like everyone else.’ It's really the challenge of, ‘Okay, how are we going to be different? How are you going to be the body of Christ?’”

Secondarily, a theme emerged relating to how the challenge helped listeners to recall the impact of other elements of the service. Participant 1, a male in the 36–older age bracket confessed,

“I'm human sometimes and I may drift during the midst of the sermon, I may be getting the main point he's getting and then as he finishes up, I may be just thinking more about the story that he told ... then re-summarizing it with a challenge made me remember exactly what the point of the sermon was about that I should be doing.”

While specific quotes, claims, or content of the sermon can be difficult to recall, having the challenge at the conclusion of worship helped listeners connect the thematic dots of worship. Participant 4, an older male, put it this way:

“The last story, the charge, and the handout, those kind of things, that’s what I got to hang my hat on. It really does help wrap in a lot of what I missed or wasn’t focused on up at the end, and give me something to feel I have gotten the gist of it.”

**Focus Group Question 3: Do you find receiving a challenge to respond at the conclusion of corporate worship to be preferable to simply receiving a blessing? Why or why not?**

In response to the third question of the focus group, participants began to point toward the role of the missional benediction in their own journey of Christian perfection. Participant 5, a young male, shared,

“I guess what I love about being a Methodist is we’re all in our process of sanctification, not just justification of being saved. That we are moving on to perfection, and these challenges are tangible ways that I can work on that, beyond just the read more scripture, spend more time in prayer. Just having a specific action that I can do, it’s all there and it’s coaching.”

Participant 5, an 18–35 year old male, reiterated this sentiment saying, “Being called to do something makes you feel uncomfortable ... With the challenge and the discomfort and the convictions, I want to go and do this, I want to go and live this beyond this hour of worship.”

Participant 7, a male who fell into the 18–35 age bracket, observed the difference between a missional benediction versus a dismissal. He responded to the moderator’s question offering,

“I would say ‘yes’ because a benediction typically is an end to something, whereas a challenge is a beginning. If you start off having, at the end of the service you say, ‘Okay, I’ve done my church, filled my goal, it’s been accomplished, it’s done.’ Whereas a challenge says, ‘Okay, I have now received this information and now I must go and do something with it.’”

Participant 2, a young adult female offered a vulnerable confession, saying,

“I was just going to say, I feel like I have a tendency when I go to church, I just want to consume it. It’s just like sitting down and watching a television show or watching a movie ... The challenge really brings this to where you’re interacting with it ... You’re actually part of it.”

Participant 3, a female in the older age grouping stood with the previous respondent, admitting,

“All 50 years I have come to church and sat down like a meal ... You eat the meal, you listen to the service, you breathe, you close the door and that’s it. You get so caught up in your everyday life and everything going on that most times you don't carry that with you... If we’re not challenged, how do we grow spiritually?”

Additionally, several men offered responses affirming that they took the missional benediction as something of a challenge. An older male respondent, coded as number 1, testified,

“Mine just gets back to my personality a little bit. I’m competitive, so I like to be challenged. It kind of hits to my core, I’m more apt to respond when I’m challenged with something. That’s why I like it, it’s just more of my personality when I’m challenged.”

**Focus Group Question 4: Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion of worship and challenges offered within worship?**

The final question created an opportunity for participants to comment without any directional prompting. One theme that emerged was the impact weekly challenges may have upon non-Christians. Number 7, a younger-age-bracket male, seemed to suggest that Christian behavior independent of Christian worship may have an evangelistic impact. He proposed,

“I feel like people are attracted to the body of Christ when they see the body of Christ acting like Christ. These challenges are a good way to remind us as the body of Christ to behave that way. It helps attracting others to them and to bring about salvation and sanctification at the same time.”

Number 10, a female in the 18–35 category, offered a different but similar response, saying,

“I know all of you because we all go to church together very regularly. We already have all responded to a call of invitation, but I wonder, did it make it more tangible and could it really be used in that same way for people who are not practitioners of our faith to come in, and to be given something, and for that to change them little by little in the action of doing.”



Participants also cited the necessity of the portability of the challenge. Number 1, an older male, suggested such, saying,

“I’m not a millennial but one thing, I don’t know if we’re trying to infuse technology or whatnot is if the same call to action that are on the cards, but put it on the website some way ... You have a way of going back and getting that message if you want to go look for that information.”

Number 7, a young male, spoke of his personal experience interacting with the congregation receiving the prayer cards. He testified, offering,

“I also usher and every time I’ve been doing it, I’ve never had so many people come up afterwards to ask for a bulletin as it was in those four weeks ... I think we may have run out every service, because we didn’t have enough to get people. Afterwards they were like, ‘Oh, there’s something on there for me to do throughout the week. I need to get one of those before I leave.’”

### **Summary of Major Findings**

The mixed-methods of data gathering utilized both quantitative statistics derived from multiple-choice surveys and qualitative responses derived from the focus group conversation. These two data gathering methods combined to form a comprehensive image of the effects of corporate worship upon the behavior of worshipping Christians, the effects of a missional benediction upon their behavior, and why the missional benediction was impactful. The research revealed the following five major findings:

- 1) A missional benediction quantitatively increases the likelihood of engagement in specific Christian behavior between corporate worship services, when compared to identical corporate worship services, when a blessing was utilized as the final spoken act of worship.
- 2) Young adult Christians, ages 18-35, responded to worship through specific acts at a significantly higher rate when a missional challenge was offered, than when the benediction was simply a blessing.

- 3) There was no significant difference in behavior between millennials and nonmillennial adults when a missional benediction was used.
- 4) In the services in which a missional benediction was employed, men responded at a higher rate compared to other men when the benediction did not include a challenge.
- 5) Worship attendees desire a portable reminder to take with them, whether hard copy or digital. On weeks when participants did not take the hard copy of the missional challenge with them, they admitted failing to participate in the particular action than the weeks when they had a portable directive to take home.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

Corporate worship attendance for Christians should inspire Christian living outside of worship. This purpose of this study was to measure the impact of a missional benediction in corporate worship upon Christian behavior between Sundays. The research was conducted across four Sundays of Advent 2016 by gathering quantitative data through 233 e-mailed surveys, which was interpreted through statistical analysis and qualitative data through conducting a ten-person focus group following the worship series. The analysis of both data sets yielded the following five major findings.

## Major Findings

### **First Finding: Missional Benedictions' Impact Upon Christian Behavior**

The first major finding of this research project affirms that a specific charge to the congregation at the conclusion of corporate worship, termed in this project as a “missional benediction,” increases the likelihood of worshippers engaging in specific Christian behavior between corporate worship gatherings, when compared to the speaking of a traditional blessing. Worshippers respond to being intentionally sent beyond the church walls to join the work God is doing in the world.

The qualitative data from the focus group participants identified the missional benediction as the primary catalyst for inspiring and directing their behavior, though they did not employ the term “missional benediction” in their feedback. In the participants who attended the test group, the 11:00 a.m. service, which utilized the missional benedictions the quantitative data revealed an increase in behavioral engagement during the week. Across all adult generations and genders, offering a missional benediction compared to a standard blessing increased the likelihood of a worshipper engaging in Christian behavior at a rate of 14.91 percent. Constance Cherry affirms, “A blessing without a charge lacks connection to the service; a charge without a blessing lack the sense of power needed for service” (115). Focus group participants reported that they were looking for worship to inspire change in their behavior, not just in their minds. The missional benediction was a positive catalyst to assist them in behavioral change.

The missional benediction offered at the conclusion of worship as a final word of instruction to the congregation not only increased the likelihood of engagement in Christian

behavior for that given week, but across the four weeks of data collection, created a sense of expectation in participants.

Alan Roxbough writes about how missiology must inspire how communities of faith must be organized:

The narrative imagination of Scripture challenges our assumptions about what God is up to in the world ... An important role of a missional leader is cultivating an environment within which God's people can discern God's directions and activities in them and for the communities in which they find themselves ... We, like the people in these biblical stories, are invited to cultivate our imagination to see the possibilities of what the Spirit wants to do in and among the people we are called to lead" (Roxbough and Romanuk 16–17).

Schmit adds that the benediction must be featured prominently in the worship service.

He writes,

“Sending is the primary element of preparation for a demanding aspect of worship (action) that lasts typically from one Sunday morning to the next. During the week the faithful are engaged in outward worship, the work of God's people, which might be called ‘the living liturgy of discipleship’” (52).

God's sending of God's people to engage in God's mission is a pervasive theme across both testaments of scripture. Isaiah 6 depicts the connection worship and mission as the prophet testifies, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’ And he said, ‘Go...’” (Isa. 6:8–9a). John's Gospel recalls Jesus' missional commission of his disciples following his resurrection, testifying, “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you’” (Jn. 20:21). A careful reading of this passage recognizes that in this verse there is a direct connection by Jesus between the peace that results from communing with God and the mission of God in which believers participate.

The practice of connecting worship of the risen Christ and engaging in Christian behavior in daily life echoes through the life of the early Christian community. Bartholomew

and Goheen summarize Paul's connection between belief and behavior, writing, "First he tells them what *God* has done to give them new life, and then he tells them what *they* must do to live according to that new identity" (208). The author of Hebrews connects words of blessing with the expectation of Christian conduct in 13:20–21:

"Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen."

### **Second Finding: Responses of Millennial Christians**

In addition to evaluating the impact of a missional benediction in all adult Christians, the research measured the impact of the missional benediction upon millennial Christians. The results from the quantitative surveys indicated that a missional benediction was especially effective at engaging millennial adults at increased rates of Christian behavior. Young adults ages 18–35 responded to worship through specific acts at a rate of 24.21 percent higher when a missional challenge was offered compared to a blessing offered to millennial adults.

This quantitative data affirms the research by Thom and Jess Rainer, which indicates that millennial Christians may be particularly receptive and responsive to missional challenges at the end of corporate worship. Currently, millennials participate in traditional church worship and ministry at a lower rate than previous generations. Pew Research Center reports that in older American adults, 43.5 percent report attending religious services weekly or more, compared to only 27 percent for millennial Christians ("The Gender Gap"). This is likely in part because "[m]ost Millennial Christians see local churches as business as usual, focused inwardly, more concerned about the needs of the members than the needs of the community and the nations" (Rainer & Rainer 257).

This perspective was validated in an interview response from a millennial Christian male called “Jason,” asking his perspective on the mission work of the local church. He replied, “I want churches to give a lot of their funds for mission work ... It’s just that when all we do is give our money, it’s not enough ... We need to be personally involved as well as giving” (Rainer & Rainer 266). While the Christian scriptures do not address the nuances of generational faith practices at length, there is the acknowledgment of the importance of young Christians taking initiative in their own faith engagement. Paul encourages his protégé Timothy, saying, “Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12).

For missional churches, in order for the “what to do?” at the conclusion of worship to be effective, it must be outward focused because “[m]illennials don’t ask what the community can do for the church; they ask what they can do for the community” (Rainer & Rainer 260). A missional benediction is an effective tool to motivate and direct millennial Christians toward service beyond the walls of the church, for the benefit of the community in which they live.

### **Third Finding: Comparing Generational Responses**

While the missional benediction had a significant impact upon millennial Christians when compared to a blessing offered to the same generational age, the research indicated no significant statistical difference in increased behavior between millennial adults compared to older adults. Young adults responded to a missional benediction at a rate of 71.67 percent while older adults responded at a rate of 70.18 percent when a missional benediction was used.

In the control group, where only a blessing was offered, there was a significant difference between age groups. Older adults responded at a higher rate than millennials when a simple blessing was offered. Millennial adults responded at 47.46 percent compared to 64.91

percent for older adults, for the test group participants. This makes the test group results all the more remarkable. These statistics indicated that young adult Christians are much less likely to engage proactively in specific Christian behavior unless they are challenged in corporate worship to do so.

Pew Research Center indicates that millennial adults are less drawn to traditional Christian habits. They report that 63.25 percent of Americans 36 years and older indicate that they pray daily, compared to 42 percent of adults ages 18–35 (“The Gender Gap”). Comparing Pew’s research with the findings of this study may indicate that millennial adults are less concerned with individual piety and personal devotional practices and more inspired by integrated faith, which makes a measurable difference in the world beyond corporate worship. If this is true, the missional benediction must be easily applicable and practical.

In the New Testament, there is little distinction in expectations for Christian behavior between adults of different generations. In fact, the witness of scripture levels the same expectations. In the second chapter of Acts, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, rises, and quoting the prophet Joel, proclaims:

“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17–18).

Young adult Christians appear to rise to this biblical description most consistently when offered a specific missional sending to be acted upon with immediacy in the following days.

#### **Fourth Finding: Responses Along Gender Lines.**

In addition to generational studies, a related area of study assesses the differences in spiritual engagement between men and women when a missional benediction is offered in place of a traditional blessing. The survey data indicated that in the 8:45 a.m. control group, females responded in Christian behavior throughout the week at a rate of only 7.54 percent higher than male counterparts. This difference reflects the findings of other researchers who have claimed that in the United States, women are generally more religious than men.

Pew Research Center found,

“[a]cross all measures of religious commitment, Christian women are more religious than Christian men, often by considerable margins. In the 54 countries where data were collected on Christians’ daily prayer habits, Christian women report praying daily more frequently than Christian men by an overall average gap of 10 percentage points” (“The Gender Gap”).

More specifically, regarding daily engagement in spiritual practices, the study reported the gap between genders was even higher. 64 percent of women reported praying daily, compared to only 47 percent of men, a 17 percent difference.

New Testament Christianity casts a vision of radical equality between males and females as it regards faith engagement. There is a vision of shared ministry in the Early Church in Romans 16:1–16 as Paul includes women and men among his closest partners and apostles in ministry. Paul writes in Galatians that the baptism of Christ supersedes all other cultural or biological categories: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27–28). However, in other epistles, Paul does seem to recognize the cultural roles, attitudes, and responsibilities of each gender in the context in which he writes (e.g., Eph. 5; Tit. 2; 1 Tim. 5). These two perceptions



recognize both the hope that both genders engage fully in the Christian life and that there are some differences between genders, which may be evidenced in their faith engagement.

Surprisingly, the missional benediction proved decidedly effective in increasing the behavioral engagement of men. The 11:00 a.m. service comparisons along gender lines revealed that men engaged in specific Christian behavior at 11.76 percent higher rate than women when offered a missional benediction at the conclusion of worship. Further, in the services in which a missional benediction was employed, men responded a rate of 24.21 percent higher compared to the response rate of men who attended the 8:45 a.m. service, which included only a blessing. The qualitative research yielded the response of an older male who confessed, “I’m competitive, so I like to be challenged. It kind of hits to my core, I’m more apt to respond when I’m challenged with something. That’s why I like it, it’s just more of my personality when I’m challenged.”

A millennial male contributed,

“A benediction typically is an end to something, whereas a challenge is a beginning. If you start off having, at the end of the service you say, ‘Okay, I’ve done my church, filled my goal, it’s been accomplished, it’s done.’ Whereas a challenge says, ‘Okay, I have now received this information and now I must go and do something with it.’”

A missional benediction proved to be an effective catalyst for increasing engagement in specific Christian behavior in men, beyond the walls of the church.

**Fifth Finding: Portability of Missional Benedictions.** The final major finding emerged from the focus group discussion and pointed toward the essential nature of having a “portable” reminder of the missional challenge for the week. On weeks when participants did not have a copy of the missional challenge with them, they admitted to engaging in Christian behavior at a lower frequency. One millennial male confessed:

I also really enjoyed having the bulletin to take home. There were two Sundays that I didn't do the bulletin ... Those weeks I had to reply to the survey that, “no”, I didn't do anything that week in response. It really was a constant reminder ... I put my one with the prayer, it's in my car and it's still sitting there in my car. I can't pull in to my work without first seeing it before I get out of my car. That's been much more impactful than the weeks where it was like, I know that there was something I was supposed to do, but I didn't have the physical paper with me as a reminder.

Worship attendees desired a portable reminder to take with them, whether hard copy or digital. An older male participant admitted,

“I'm not a millennial, but one thing—I don't know if we're trying to infuse technology or whatnot is if the same calls to action that are on the cards, but put it on the website some way ... You have a way of going back and getting that message if you want to go look for that information.”

Having a reminder on hand kept the challenge at the forefront of their mind, multiple times throughout the week.

The portability of the missional benediction is encouraged by Timm, who recommends that pastors “bless people by pronouncing a benediction upon them: send a text message, post something to someone's Facebook wall, send a direct message via Twitter, or go old school and make a phone call” (171). For focus group participants, having a specific, identifiable challenge made it memorable; and memorable was portable.

Master communicator Andy Stanley, pastor of Northpoint Church in Atlanta, Georgia, highlights the importance of giving the congregation concrete directions at the end of worship.

He writes,

“As long as you are dishing out truth with no *here’s the difference it will make* tacked on to the end, you will be perceived as irrelevant by most of the people in your church, student ministry, or home Bible study” (Stanley 114).

For Stanley, this direction is not only a practical tool for engaging insiders, it is a necessary ingredient for convincing outsiders that Christianity is relevant and useful. In this way, a missional benediction may actually inspire people who would not have responded to worship if a simple blessing had been employed. Related research from specific fields indicates that gender and generational age may play key roles in the effectiveness of a missional benediction.

In Exodus 3, when Moses is sent, he is given accompanying signs and tools to do the work God calls him to do. The prophet Jeremiah recognizes that God’s empowering gifts will accompany him in his mission, when he confesses,

“Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, “I am only a boy”; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you”’ (Jer. 1:6–7).

In the New Testament, Luke follows Matthew’s Gospel in recording Jesus’ sending of the disciples on a short-term mission, saying, “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:1–2).

Similar promises are echoed in the loner ending of Mark 16, as Jesus promises signs and wonders will escort the ministry of his disciples. In the life of the Early Church, Paul repeats this formula in 2 Thessalonians 3, beginning in verse 6a, saying “Now we command you,

beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...” before listing off several do’s and don’ts for Christian living. Then he ends the chapter with a blessing in verse 16: “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you.” The witness of scripture and the wisdom of the Church have each affirmed the importance of daily Christian behavior being informed by Christian ethics and practices. The missional benediction elucidates and directs such behavior when offered in a medium that is personal and portable.

### **Ministry Implications of the Findings**

It is widely accepted that pastors are eager to measure the effectiveness of the ministries they serve by counting the numbers of people who attend worship—to listen to their preaching. However, throughout the biblical witness there is little interest in measuring corporate worship attendance. To the contrary, in the ministry of Jesus, almost exclusively the numbers indicate how many people are being sent or being served (Matt. 14, 28; Mark 6; Luke 4, 10, Jn. 6). The Church would be wise to evaluate how and which numbers are being valued. Reggie McNeal predicts that in the future, “Much of the kingdom movement will be focused “outside” the organized church, exercising its influence in the world beyond the church by bringing church into every domain of culture” (14–15).

Churches must begin to think about how many people they can inspire and equip to leave church rather than simply to come to church. This research project indicated that a missional benediction offered at the conclusion of corporate worship is an effective tool to inspire Christian behavior between weekly worship gatherings. Pastors cannot simply bless the gathered body to conclude the service; they must intentionally send them into the world beyond the walls of worship, to become the hands and feet of Christ. This is especially critical for 21<sup>st</sup>-

century Western Church life. Commenting on current trends in newer churches, Bolger recognizes,

“Because emerging churches decenter the church service as the primary spiritual activity of the week, they seek to notice God in all of creation. Spirituality is a 24/7 experience for them, and they worship in many venues ... instead of all gifts being shared at the church service, they share their gifts outside the service, often to those outside the community” (179).

This missional benediction is not simply encouraging the congregation to give themselves toward humanitarian ends, regardless of the nobility of it. Neither is it a guilt-induced plea for works righteousness. The missional benediction is ultimately born out of the understanding of the nature and mission of Christ. Its posture is a hopeful invitation to go forth and join in God’s work to redeem creation, manifested in spiritual and physical ways. For this reason, the benediction is always hope-filled.

The missional benediction must be portable enough to be memorable. The offered challenge must be accessible enough each day to remind worshippers throughout the week of the expectation to engage in Christian behavior. Stanley teaches, “Un-churched, unbelieving people are attracted to communicators who have *here’s what to do* tacked on the end of their messages. This is true even when they don’t agree with or understand the premise of what we are talking about” (114). Whether a hard copy or a digital format, worshippers need reminders between Sundays of ways God may be calling them to take action. Timm practically suggests that worship leaders “send a text message, post something to someone’s Facebook wall, send a direct message via Twitter, or go old school and make a phone call” (171). People want a specific, measurable, and meaningful direction for their actions following worship, and it is the responsibility of the Church to offer them one.

Pastors who desire to increase the faith involvement of the men of their congregations can utilize a missional benediction. Men who receive a challenge at the conclusion of worship are provoked to meet the challenge. While both men and women responded to the challenge of a missional benediction compared to a blessing, men were particularly responsive.

Additionally, because millennial adults are increasingly looking for the Church to make a difference in the world, a missional benediction may be especially effective at getting their attention. Adults of all ages respond to being challenged rather than only being blessed. Yet for millennials, a demographic that is significantly less engaged in institutionalized religion than previous generations, the missional sending into the world beyond the church to be a blessing to others is a compelling addition to corporate worship. The missional benediction communicates the character of a God who calls people into redeeming relationship, then sends them forth under the commission to be a blessing to others. The missional benediction when employed from within the context of a missionally-oriented worship service and ministry paradigm is an effective means of increasing Christian behavior between Sundays.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This research project collected data from sixty participants through quantitative surveys and a ten-person focus group. While efforts were made to maintain objectivity and the integrity of the research process, there were limitations to its precision and generalizability. During the first two weeks of the survey distribution, participants had difficulty with the e-mails ending up in their “Junk” folders rather than their “Inbox.” This prompted them to reach out to the researcher and sometimes delayed their response to the survey for one to two days beyond the day they were sent to respondents. The next time an e-mail survey is used, the survey will be

embedded in an e-mail from the researcher rather than being sent directly from the survey host website.

The data collection method from control (8:45 a.m. service) and test (11:00 a.m. service) groups was designed fundamentally along the lines of existing worship gatherings. In other words, the most sensible strategy was to utilize the congregants who were already at worship at prescribed times. However, while the planned worship elements and flow of each service time are identical each week, each worship time demonstrates unique characteristics. Some of these differences are anecdotal and immeasurable, such as the engagement in sung worship or interaction with the sermon. Other qualities, such as worship attendance or financial giving per attendee, are more measurable. For instance, the 8:45 a.m. worship service represents only about 40 percent of total Contact worship attendance. Yet, it constitutes about 60 percent of total financial giving. Conversely, the 11:00 a.m. service, which generally has a higher volume of visitors than 8:45 a.m., makes up 60 percent of worship attendance, but only offers 40 percent of total financial giving.

One way in which the different service dynamics may have evidenced them was in the service comparisons to research questions four and five. Of the 148 total positive responses, the 8:45 a.m. participants engaged in specific behavior in response to worship two or more times per week at approximately 6 percent higher rate than 11:00 a.m. participants. Conversely, the 11:00 a.m. participants responded at around a 6 percent higher rate than 8:45 a.m. participants for those who responded only once to worship.

A more theoretical limitation arose from the recognition that the research project was conducted across the four Sundays of the liturgical season of Advent. Because the Advent and Christmas seasons typically encourage a benevolent spirit and sentimental piety, it is possible

that some behavior in response to worship would have been different outside of this season of worship.

Finally, the researcher's evaluation of the qualitative data in the focus group cannot be completely objective. Even while following guidelines for qualitative data analysis, researcher bias cannot be completely avoided. The nuances to each response may not have been accurately identified and reported.

### **Unexpected Observations**

One unexpected observation in the research was the frequency of engagement in Christian behavior more than once per week between control and test groups. The control group 8:45 a.m. worship attendees responded at an overall lower rate than the test group 11:00 a.m. attendees. However, of the ones who did respond affirmatively, the 8:45 a.m. participants responded at a higher rate to question five, which asked, "If you answered "YES" to question 4, how many times did you engage in specific actions this week in response to worship last Sunday?" One way in which the different service dynamics may have evidenced them was in the service comparisons to research questions four and five. Of the 148 total positive responses, the 8:45 a.m. participants engaged in specific behavior in response to worship two or more times per week at approximately 6 percent higher rate than 11:00 a.m. participants.

A second unexpected observation is that the 11:00 a.m. service internal comparisons along gender lines revealed that men engaged in specific Christian behavior at 11.76 percent higher rate than women when offered a missional benediction at the conclusion of worship. This stands in stark contrast the internal 8:45 a.m. comparison, in which females responded at an average rate of 7.54 percent higher than male counterparts. This indicates that the missional benediction had a significant impact in increasing engagement comparatively between genders.



Further, a look at the 8:45 a.m. responses along gender lines revealed a slightly higher response rate among females as opposed to male, though not markedly higher. Female participants across both age groups took a specific action in response to worship at an average rate of 7.54 percent higher than male counterparts.

A final unexpected observation arose from the focus group when members noted that a missional benediction might appeal to attendees who do not profess the Christian faith. A millennial female suggested that responding to the challenge during the week could bolster Christian witness. She said,

“One of the biggest complaints people have about the church or turn off is, ‘They’re not a different person. They just go to church on Sunday, they say hello to each other, they do their Sunday thing and they go home and they are just like everyone else.’ It’s really the challenge of, ‘Okay, how are we going to be different? How are you going to be the body of Christ?’”

People who are suspicious of the motives of Christians, or who fail to see the relevance of Christianity upon their own life, may feel an openness to Christian belief if they see the utility and charity of Christian behavior.

Another female young adult offered,

“We already have all responded to a call of invitation, but I wonder, did it [missional benediction] make it more tangible and could it really be used in that same way for people who are not practitioners of our faith to come in, and to be given something, and for that to change them little by little in the action of doing.”

Stanley, who suggests that a specific charge at the conclusion of worship may help bridge the gap between skepticism and belief for the unchurched and dechurched, supports these anecdotal ponderings. He writes, “Unchurched, unbelieving people are attracted to communicators who have *here’s what to do* tacked on the end of their messages. This is true even when they don’t agree with or understand the premise of what we are talking about” (114).

Bosch adds, “The Christians’ lifestyle should not only be exemplary, but also winsome. It should attract outsiders and invite them to join the community ... Their ‘exemplary existence’ is a powerful magnet that draws outsiders toward the church” (137). Because institutional religion is often perceived to be self-serving, McNeal predicts that in the future, “[m]uch of the kingdom movement will be focused “outside” the organized church, exercising its influence in the world beyond the church by bringing church into every domain of culture” (*Missional Communities* 14–15). Such an integration of faith and living offers a compelling witness to those who have not yet come to faith.

Biblical sendings frequently have an Evangelical bent toward introducing nonbelievers to the truth and power of the gospel. In the new covenant in first chapter of Acts, Jesus promises his disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). A missional benediction equips worshippers with the urgency and direction necessary to bear witness through Spirit guided behavior in everyday lived experience.

### **Recommendations**

Based upon the findings in this research project, persons who would benefit most directly from this research include all involved in corporate worship: preaching and teaching pastors, worship leaders, lay liturgists, and worship planning teams. I recommend that church leaders devote weekly energy in worship planning to intentionally sending their congregations forth rather than only offering a blessing, concluding prayer, or dismissal. One strategy is to research the text being preached, prayerfully consider a desired outcome for congregational behavior during the week, and then construct the form of the sermon and the flow and elements of worship so as to promote that outcome.

Additionally, pastoral leaders cannot allow their last spoken word to be perceived as the ending of God's work in the midst of the people. Pastors must begin to think not only about the missional postures in their ministry structures and worship design. They must also position worship as a launch pad for the faithful to move into the world with Spirit-led eyes to join in God's work of redemption. This would include carefully asking how each liturgical component could be framed to encourage a wider missional worldview.

Specifically, I recommend that when employing a missional benediction, it should be specific enough to be measurable, and portable enough to be memorable. The specificity of the challenge is not meant to limit the creative inspiration of the Holy Spirit upon the hearts of worshippers. Indeed, God may direct worshippers to respond to worship in any number of ways. Rather, the specificity of the challenge is intended to help worshippers evaluate whether the challenge has been properly met and engaged. The faithfulness required to accomplish the task creates a sense of reward that encourages future engagement. A hard copy or digital reminder shared through social media, text alerts, or app-based smart phone notifications could be used with great effect.

Additional areas of research include the nature and effectiveness of missional challenges for millennial adults. The research indicated that young adults were eager to connect their Sunday faith with their conduct Monday through Saturday in the world beyond their church. Further, for young adults, their engaging in specific Christian behavior bears vital witness to a faith that can be perceived as self-serving. A parallel area of study would consider the concept of masculinity and faith engagement, as the research indicated that men responded significantly more when a challenge was offered to them.

Churches utilizing missional benedictions could build ministry campaigns around the stories that would arise from the congregation engaging in missional behavior. Because missional benedictions are an effective tool for increasing missional engagement, the testimonies of such engagement could be captured and celebrated within the larger body. Social media is a healthy vehicle to promote and celebrate such initiatives and congregants can depict and describe their individual or family engagement beyond the church walls.

### **Postscript**

I was raised in the Deep South in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition of the Church of the Nazarene. I sat under the fervent preaching of my Godly father and the caring instruction of my prayerful mother. I spent summers attending my grandfather's holiness camp-meeting style revivals, surrounded by believers who were stern about their doctrine and unwavering in their commitment. The theological proclamation was that because God is holy, we must be made holy as well. Christians cannot simply be forgiven. We are called to be set apart in holiness of heart and life.

This research project in some ways was born out of that background. It has become increasingly clear to me over the last several years of research that the question of how spiritual leaders can encourage believers to engage in deeper and higher Christian behavior beyond worship is a modern application of the truth that was spoken over me as a child. Not only does this integration of faith in daily life change the person who submits his or her will in obedience to God, it bears a powerful witness to a world that is starving to observe authentic and meaningful faith.

This project has challenged me to envision worship not only as a gathering of people for the glory of God and the edification of the body of Christ. Worship must also intentionally

equip and send for the people of God to join God's work of redemption in the world. Further, this sending cannot remain an abstract posturing or theoretical, "Go forth in Jesus' name." The sending must be prayerfully planned and intentionally direct the behavior of the congregation toward specific responses each week. I now also have a deeper awareness of the necessity of missional living for men and millennial adults. Young adults long to see a connection between confession of faith and making a difference in the world, and men tend to want a challenge that they may rise to conquer. My burden to reach and engage each of these groups has intensified through this dissertation process.

Personally, the discipline required to complete this research project has strengthened my general ability to focus more intensely in other work. Working through each phase of the project from the Literature Review, to application for Institutional Review Board approval, to research collection and data analysis, and ultimately a synthesis of findings with biblical/theological resources and scholarly research, has reconditioned me to be able to dig deeper than the surface level when I am seeking to learn something new. While our reactive instinct is a valuable tool in spiritual leadership, the discipline acquired in this program and dissertation writing have fortified my ability to pause and more fully educate myself in order that I may be more wisely responsive when presented with a challenge to be addressed.

The crafting of the missional benediction also helped shaped the weekly sermon and worship planning process. By prayerfully asking, "God, how would you have your people respond this week to this scripture and teaching?" I am forced to evaluate whether the form and function of my sermon equipped and inspired people toward that end. By knowing that the people will be sent forth with a challenge, it informs how we select and format the worship

service. It has also increased public testimonials and pastoral interaction as believers have specific opportunities to vocalize how their actions have impacted them and others.

My own ecclesiological framework has been challenged. Previous to this research, I generally thought about the mission of the church as contextually-based, falling into the trap of allowing missional strategy to begin with the needs relative to church location. However the mission of the church does not begin with a planning committee evaluating contextual issues. The mission of the Church must be shaped by our understanding of who God is, as revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Put another way, a local church does not possess a mission, it is the *missio dei* that possesses a church. Missiology is foundation to ecclesiology, not the other way around. When the *mission dei* gives shape to worship, the church worship service becomes a launching pad into the world, in Jesus' name. With the Holy Spirit guiding our human responsiveness, the sending is the beginning.

## APPENDIX A

### INFORMED CONSENT LETTER FOR SURVEY PARTICIPATION

Dear Trinity member:

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Nathan L. Carden, a Doctor of Ministry student at Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you are a regular adult attendee of Contact Modern Worship services at Trinity United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

The study will be conducted in the fall of 2016. If you agree to be in the study, you will be invited to attend a series of four Contact worship services in the fall of 2016. On the four Saturdays following your attendance in these services, you will be invited to complete an email survey, using Survey Monkey. You will be asked to share your email address to participate in the weekly survey, but your email address will not be used for any other purposes or shared with any third parties. Your email address will be kept on a password-protected personal computer. The Survey Monkey survey will be deleted from the user account at the conclusion of the research process, and all original research records will be destroyed.

The survey will invite you to indicate one of two age brackets that you fall into: 18–35; 36–older. The remaining questions will invite you to give feedback about your worship experience the previous week and any subsequent behavior that was inspired by worship.

**Three-quarter attendance in worship services is required during these four weeks to participate in the research.** There is no monetary compensation offered for participation in this research project.

Your identity will be kept completely confidential throughout this process, and at the conclusion of the research any original written correspondence, including this form, will be shredded. In the research project, your responses will be coded numerically (“Respondent 1,” “Respondent 2,” etc.). If something makes you feel bad while you are in the study, please tell Nathan Carden at [nathan.l.carden@gmail.com](mailto:nathan.l.carden@gmail.com) or 205-863-0765. If you decide at any time you do not want to finish the study, you may stop whenever you want by contacting Nathan Carden at [nathan.l.carden@gmail.com](mailto:nathan.l.carden@gmail.com) or 205-863-0765. You can ask questions any time about anything in this study.

**Signing this paper means that you have read it and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper.** Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be mad if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

Gratefully,  
Rev. Nathan L. Carden, researcher

Printed Name & Date

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Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

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Preferred E-mail Address:

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**APPENDIX B**

**INFORMED CONSENT LETTER FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPATION**

Dear Research Participant:

Thank you for participating in the survey portion of my dissertation research. Your survey responses helped me gather my quantitative data.

For my qualitative data collection, I will be hosting a focus group comprised of ten persons. **I would like to invite you to participate in this focus group, on 8 January 2017, from 12–1 p.m.**

Following the 11:00 a.m. worship, you will gather in the small dining room where a light lunch will be provided. You will then engage in a guided conversation prompted by a third-party moderator, regarding your experience in Contact Worship during Advent. The lunch and conversation should conclude by 1:00 p.m.

The conversation will be recorded with a digital audio recorder. It will then be transcribed for research analysis. Your participation during the conversation will remain anonymous because each person will be identified by a numerical system rather than by name. Please feel free to ask any questions you may have about this process, should you agree to participate.

**Signing this paper means that you have read it and that you want to participate in the focus group. If you do not want to be in the focus group, do not sign the paper.** Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be mad if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

Gratefully,  
Rev. Nathan L. Carden, researcher

Printed Name & Date

---

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Focus Group

---

**APPENDIX C**

**E-MAIL SURVEY: SENT BY SURVEY MONKEY**

**1) Which Contact worship service did you attend last Sunday?**

8:45 a.m. or 11:00 p.m.

**2) What is your gender?**

Male or Female

**3) What is your age?**

18–35 or 36–older

**4) Did you take any specific action throughout this week in response to worship last Sunday?**

Yes or No

**5) If you answered “yes” to question 4, how many times did you engage in specific actions this week in response to worship last Sunday?**

1 time, or 2 times or more

## APPENDIX D

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

**Question 1:** Thinking back over the last four weeks, what about your experience in corporate worship inspired you to take specific action in response?

**Question 2:** Why did that element of worship inspire your specific action?

**Question 3:** Do you find receiving a challenge to respond at the conclusion of corporate worship to be preferable to simply receiving a blessing? Why or why not?

**Question 4:** Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion of worship and challenges offered within worship?

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