

## **ABSTRACT**

### **HEALTHY CHURCH PLANTING: USING SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES IN TRAINING CHURCH PLANTERS**

by

Thomas C. Tanner, Jr.

Church planting is gaining momentum around the world. Many believe it to be the best and most effective way of reaching the unchurched. As important as this venture is to the expansion of God's kingdom, there is something lacking in the training resources available to church planters today. Many experts believe that the resources available are heavy in pragmatism and light in spiritual development. Most of the training is aimed at the building of the church and not much at the building of the planters themselves. Many church planters feel very stressed and overworked. Oftentimes the pressure of success leads to planters failing to establish healthy boundaries for themselves and their families. Many church planter families describe the planting process as a time that was unhealthy for them and even hurtful.

The purpose of this study was to explore the possible benefits of emphasizing spiritual disciplines in the training of church planters and to see if these spiritual practices could prevent some of the unhealthy experiences common among church planters. Data was collected from focus groups and semi-structured interviews with church planters. The interviews were conducted using questions about the planters' connection to God, their use of spiritual disciplines, and the overall spiritual, relational, and emotional health of the planter and planters' family during the planting process. The interviewees were

also asked questions about what they would do differently if they could go back and start over. The research consisted of two focus groups and six semi-structured interviews with church planter couples. There was a total of twenty participants. One of the focus groups and all of the semi-structured interviews were done with people from the Atlanta Metro area. One focus group was made up of people from various places in North America.

The research pointed to several unhealthy pitfalls that were common to many of those interviewed. Also, several healthy practices were found to be common among the church planters and their families. The hope is that the findings of this research will lead to the development of more resources aimed at producing leaders that last and not just methods that work.

HEALTHY CHURCH PLANTING:  
USING SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES IN TRAINING CHURCH PLANTERS

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by

Thomas C. Tanner, Jr.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES .....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ix
CHAPTER 1 NATURE OF THE PROJECT .....	1
Overview of the Chapter .....	1
Personal Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	4
Purpose of the Project.....	4
Research Questions .....	4
Research Question #1 .....	4
Research Question #2 .....	4
Research Question #3 .....	4
Rationale for the Project .....	5
Definition of Key Terms .....	6
Delimitations .....	7
Review of Relevant Literature .....	7
Research Methodology .....	7
Type of Research .....	8
Participants .....	8
Instrumentation .....	8
Data Collection .....	8

Data Analysis .....	9
Generalizability .....	9
Project Overview .....	9
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT.....	10
Overview of the Chapter .....	10
Biblical Foundations .....	13
Leaders Have Relationship with God .....	14
Leaders Seek to Have Healthy Relationships with Their People .....	16
Leaders Need Healthy Boundaries.....	17
Leaders are Encouraged to Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle.....	18
Theological Foundations.....	19
Relationship to God .....	20
Serving Others .....	21
Equipping People for the Work of the Ministry .....	23
Church Health .....	27
Healthy Leaders .....	34
Spiritual Health .....	38
Relational Health .....	45
Healthy Relationships with Congregation .....	46
Healthy Relationships with Family.....	48
Healthy Friendships .....	52
Physical Health .....	54
Emotional Health .....	56

Research Design Literature .....	59
Summary of Literature .....	59
CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT.....	60
Overview of the Chapter.....	60
Nature and Purpose of the Project .....	61
Research Questions .....	62
Research Question #1 .....	62
Research Question #2 .....	63
Research Question #3 .....	63
Ministry Context(s).....	63
Participants .....	64
Criteria for Selection .....	64
Description of Participants .....	65
Ethical Considerations .....	65
Instrumentation .....	66
Pilot Test or Expert Review .....	67
Reliability & Validity of Project Design .....	67
Data Collection .....	69
Data Analysis .....	70
CHAPTER 4 EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT.....	71
Overview of the Chapter .....	71
Participants .....	74
Research Question #1: Description of Evidence .....	76

Research Question #2: Description of Evidence .....	80
Research Question #3: Description of Evidence .....	83
Summary of Major Findings.....	86
CHAPTER 5 LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT .....	87
Overview of the Chapter .....	87
Major Findings.....	87
First Finding .....	87
Second Finding.....	89
Third Finding .....	90
Fourth Finding .....	92
Ministry Implications of the Findings.....	93
Limitations of the Study.....	95
Unexpected Observations .....	96
Recommendations.....	96
Postscript .....	97
APPENDIXES.....	99
A. Interview Schedule and Questions.....	100
B. Ethical Considerations Worksheet .....	103
Consent Forms Template .....	103
Confidentiality/Anonymity .....	105
WORKS CITED .....	106
WORKS CONSULTED .....	113



## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 4.1. Top Pitfalls of Church Planters.....	73
Table 4.2. Spiritual Disciplines Beneficial to Church Planter .....	79
Table 4.3. Spiritual Disciplines Beneficial to Families .....	83

**LIST OF FIGURES**

	Page
Figure 4.1. Age of Participants .....	75
Figure 4.2. Race of Participants .....	75
Figure 4.3. Gender of Participants .....	76

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have accomplished nearly as much as he did, were it not for the frank opinions of his wife, Clementine.” Melissa, you are truly my “Clementine.” Thank you.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **NATURE OF THE PROJECT**

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

Planting churches is difficult. At times it can seem like an overwhelming task that is all-consuming. It is very easy for a person with a passionate call to church planting to forget about family, personal health, and their relationship with God. Sometimes the kingdom of God is advanced to the detriment of marriages, families, or a leader's relationship with God. This project explores the impact that an emphasis on spiritual disciplines might have on the training of church planters for the next generation.

Chapter One of this project provides the foundation for exploring the impact of an emphasis on spiritual disciplines upon church planters of future generations. The researcher will provide personal experiences that led to the decision to investigate this issue and describe the purpose of the project as well as the methods used to develop, implement, and measure the impact of the project. In this chapter the problem is clearly stated, the intended purpose of the project is laid out, and the research questions are defined. The researcher also answers the questions of why this project is important theologically, biblically, and practically. Chapter One defines terms used and what they mean in the context of the project, identifies the participants in the project, and identifies relevant literature used in the research of the problem.

#### **Personal Introduction**

I am currently the lead pastor of Riverstone Church and the president of Transformation Network Incorporated (TNI), a church planting network in the northwest area of Metro Atlanta. I have been at Riverstone for twenty years, and we started the church planting network in 2007.

Over the last thirteen years we have planted seven churches. I have been a pastor for almost forty years.

My wife and I were married in 1979. During our first four years of marriage I allowed ministry to consume my life. I was determined to be the best. I worked hard, spent countless hours on the job, brought the job home, and rarely made decisions based on what was best for my marriage. My identity and my value were tied to how others viewed me and, in particular, whether they approved of how I was performing in my job. In the middle of year four everything fell apart. My wife was hurt and lonely. She decided if this was what serving God looked like, she wanted no part of it. For the next three years, we lived apart.

I continued in ministry and continued to make life decisions based on what I believed would make me successful, or at least appear successful. Looking back, it is clear that I was not healthy. I loved God and wanted to please Him. However, my immaturity and insecurity usually got the best of me. I often relied on personality and human effort more than obedience to God or the presence of His Spirit in me. Somewhere along the way I asked myself the question, “Why would God call me to something that would hurt my marriage?” I became convinced over time that the reason ministry had wounded my marriage was because I was doing it wrong. That began a journey of learning to set priorities and live on purpose.

God miraculously healed our marriage, and my wife and I began to walk this journey “on purpose” together. Soon we were blessed with two wonderful children. We determined together that we wanted three things for our children. We wanted them to love God. We wanted them to love us. We wanted them to love the church. We had many ministry friends whose marriages had suffered like ours and whose children had grown to resent the church and even walked away from God because of the demands and difficulties that ministry often places on families. We

knew that if we wanted our children to hit the three goals we had for them, we would have to make choices accordingly. We had to intentionally develop a lifestyle that increased the likelihood of these goals being realized.

Over time I began to realize what should have been obvious from the start. God is more interested in men and women who obey out of love than in methods that work. It is my belief that two of the most important characteristics for a church planter to possess are a deep love relationship with God that fosters the ability to hear God and the desire to obey Him, as well as a love for neighbor that leads to prayerful action. Joshua did not have a good strategy for taking Jericho. He had a word from God and a willingness to obey. Gideon did not have a good strategy. He had a word from God and a willingness to obey. Peter said to Jesus, “We’ve fished all night with no success, but because you say to...” The early church’s strategy seemed to be: “It seems good to us and the Holy Spirit.” More than cutting edge strategies, it seems to me a deep connection to God is what is most needed among church planters today. Our children are now thirty-one and twenty-eight. They love God. They love us. And they love the church.

In my role as president of TNI, I am realizing that church planting has the potential of swallowing up a marriage and a family more quickly than almost any area of ministry. As we have planted churches over the last twelve years, I have noticed that there seems to be a correlation between the health of the pastor’s marriage and the health of the church. My hope in this project was to explore the possible benefits of placing an emphasis on spiritual disciplines in church planter training. This emphasis could help to produce healthier planters who are better equipped to deal both with the difficulties of ministry in general and those that are specific to church planting. I believe that the key to both spiritual and relational health is a deep heart connection with God. Throughout history spiritual disciplines have served as tools for helping

people connect more deeply with the Lord. It is my belief that healthy leaders are more likely to plant healthy churches than are unhealthy leaders.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Church planting can have a negative effect on the marriages, the families, and the personal and spiritual lives of church planters. The demands of this important task can literally take over a person's life. Priorities get confused, and relationships that should be primary get pushed to the back burner. This project explores the impact of an emphasis on spiritual disciplines on both the vertical and horizontal relationships in the life of a church planter. The goal is to show how the practice of spiritual disciplines could have a life transforming effect on planters, their families, and the churches they plant.

### **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of the project was to explore how an emphasis on spiritual disciplines might enhance the training and development of church planters for the next generation.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Research Question #1**

What are some spiritual disciplines that are particularly beneficial in the life of a church planter?

#### **Research Question #2**

What are spiritual disciplines that help planters and their families thrive?

#### **Research Question #3**

What are the expected benefits for church planters trained with an emphasis on spiritual disciplines?



### **Rationale for the Project**

Church planting is important. Stetzer and Im say that it is “essential” (7). It is not enough to simply plant churches. These churches must be spiritually healthy and authentically present the message of the gospel. God builds churches, but he uses people in the process. Healthy leaders are more likely to build healthy churches than unhealthy leaders are. Leaders who are healthy spiritually, physically, emotionally, and relationally have the best opportunity to have positive impact on the people they lead. Too many families in ministry get wounded or burned out. This results many times in their children walking away from the faith. What good is it to win the world if families are lost in the process? Much, if not most, of what is available to church planters today is pragmatic at best. The emphasis seems to be on methods that work.

This project is important because it speaks to the importance of training and equipping leaders who are dependent on God and not just methodology. When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment, he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:35-40). Jesus’ answer emphasizes the essential relationship that exists between individuals’ relationships with God and their ability to have life giving relationships with their neighbors. Church planting is both a vertical and horizontal venture. However, there is a reason why loving God was given priority over loving neighbor in Jesus’ answer to the question. Loving one’s neighbor can only be done effectively when one is in right relationship with God. To plant churches that effectively engage and love their neighbors, church planters must be trained to effectively engage and love God.

Spiritual Disciplines throughout the history of the church have served as vehicles for encountering God. Richard Foster says, “they are the *means* for receiving God’s grace” (262).

Every spiritual discipline seems to have an inward impact that results in an outward expression. Using spiritual disciplines in the training of church planters could have a tremendous impact on both the planters' love for God and their ability to love others well. There are too many church leaders today who are burning out or failing. At least part of the reason is a failure to put first things first. Revelation 2:4 says it this way: "you have forsaken the love you had at first." Church planters may begin with the right priorities, but the demands and pressures of the task can cause them to allow priorities to shift.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

1. Transformation Network, Inc. (TNI) is a church planting network in Northwest Atlanta.
2. Atlanta Metro Church Planters is a group of church planters in the Atlanta metro area known to the researcher and recruited to be participants in the project.
3. U.S. Church Planters Outside of Atlanta is a group of church planters in the U.S. that live outside of the Atlanta area and were recruited to participate in this study.
4. Lead pastor couples refers to the primary pastor of each church in Transformation Network, Inc. and his or her spouse.
5. Church planting is the process of starting new churches for the purpose of reaching the unchurched of a particular area.
6. Church planters are people who have planted churches. In this study they are the lead pastors of the churches they currently serve.
7. Spiritual disciplines are specific practices that allow people to experience the love of God more deeply and lead them into a deeper love for God and neighbor.

### **Delimitations**

This study is limited to the people currently leading churches they planted. The study includes the Transformation Network Incorporated (TNI), which is located in the Northwest metro area of Atlanta, Georgia. The researcher is the president of this network. A group of church planters in the Atlanta area were recruited by the researcher. This group is made up of people the researcher knows and people who were recommended to him. A group of church planters outside of the Atlanta area were recruited to participate in this study. There is one African American planter. There is one female church planter and two husband-wife teams that serve as co-pastors. All of the pastors interviewed are from and serve in the U.S.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

Current books and journal articles on church planting were consulted for this project as well as books and journal articles on spiritual disciplines. Research also covered books, both current and classic, on discipleship for the purpose of spiritual growth and several books on prayer and the role that it plays in the life of a leader. Journal articles on the importance of leader health in ministry in general and church planting in specific were also considered. Dallas Willard and Richard Foster, who are considered key voices in the area of spiritual disciplines, were drawn from as well.

### **Research Methodology**

In this project, participants participated in focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The focus groups were conducted with lead pastors of churches that they planted and were currently serving. The semi-structured interviews were held with pastor couples from the Transformation Network, Inc. The interviews were done with each individual couple and not as a group.

**Type of Research**

This project was pre-intervention in nature. Since gleaning stories and reflecting on practices were critical to this study, the researcher chose to use a qualitative method. Data was collected through focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

**Participants**

The participants in this project were the lead pastor couples of five Transformation Network churches, five church planters from the Atlanta Metro area, and five church planters from outside of the Atlanta Metro area. The researcher chose the Transformation Network pastors because he had been in relationship with them for many years and had walked with them through the church planting journey. He conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the five couples. Two focus groups were held: one comprised of church planters known to the researcher in the Atlanta Metro area and held at the researcher's church; the other a group of church planters outside of the Atlanta area, recruited through connections of the researcher, and held online via Zoom conference. The participants were between the ages of 25 and 55. There was one African American member and one Asian member.

**Instrumentation**

The instrumentation used in this project were focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

**Data Collection**

The data for the project was collected through taping and transcribing two separate focus groups made up of church planters as well as five interviews with church planter couples from the TNI. Each focus group consisted of five church planters. Questions for both the interviews and focus groups were aligned with the projects' research questions and purpose statement.

**Data Analysis**

The interviews and focus groups were taped and transcribed. The researcher and the researcher's assistant read over the transcriptions multiple times. They made notes in the margins and color-coded significant statements. After several readings, they made lists of common themes, practices, and ideas and wrote ideas on a white board and photographed them for future use. The most prominent ideas were divided into two lists: practices and pitfalls, using graphs and charts to display the data.

**Generalizability**

This project is significant because it has the potential to strengthen church planting for the next generation. An emphasis on the use of spiritual disciplines in the training of church planters is something that can be used worldwide. Spiritual practices may vary from one denomination to another, or even from one part of the globe to another, but spiritual disciplines are vast enough to impact one's connection to God no matter the context. As church planting continues to gain momentum around the world, it is vital that training of planters be rooted in spiritual development.

**Project Overview**

This project explores the possible benefits of emphasizing spiritual disciplines in the training of church planters. Chapter Two discusses what the most influential writers and leaders in the church planting world have contributed to the subject. Chapter Three outlines the various ways the research questions were investigated. Chapter Four contains an analysis of the findings deduced from the sample study through interviews and focus groups. Chapter Five outlines the major findings of the study and how those findings can impact future church planters.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

#### Overview of the Chapter

The goal of this project was to explore the impact that an emphasis on spiritual disciplines could have in the training of church planters for the next generation. Church planting is gaining momentum in the world today. Many are realizing the importance and even necessity of church planting towards the fulfilment of the Great Commission. “The energy and enthusiasm about church planting in North America is at an unprecedented high. More resources are available today than at any other time in our history” (Stetzer and Bird 41). Ed Stetzer and Daniel Im in *Planting Missional Churches* say, “church planting is essential. Without it Christianity will continue to decline in North America” (7). However, much of church planting, especially in the western hemisphere, seems to be more about methods that work than about leaders that last. “There is a danger of being dominated by pragmatism when we approach the question of church planting, and this is understandable since we want to know how to plant churches in order to have a more effective ministry. However, pragmatism can lead us astray” (Vajko 119-120). Robert Vajko defines pragmatism as the idea that “if it works, it must be right.” The implication is that church planting is simply a matter of following a formula. The lust for success that is measured by numbers is rampant. There also seems to be a desire to grow fast which often means “transfer growth.” Transfer growth, or people moving from one church to another, is not actually growth at all, and because it is easier than reaching the unchurched it is actually detrimental to the overall mission of the church.

Too often the principles that are taught do not include the longer process of prayer and obedience in sharing Christ with the lost. Roland Allen is talking about more than the repetition of principles when he describes spontaneous expansion:

This then is what I mean by spontaneous expansion. I mean the expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining to others the Gospel which they have found for themselves; I mean the expansion which follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian Church for men who see its ordered life, and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of a life which they instinctively desire to share; I mean also the expansion of the Church by the addition of new churches. (7)

According to Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, “there is a difference between sound wisdom and crass pragmatism in which the end justifies the means. Further, the best methods are no guarantee of success - only Christ can build his church” (11). The future of church planting hinges on the spiritual lives of its leaders. Unless this movement is led by men and women who are deeply rooted in Christ, the results will be temporary at best and tragic at worst. The end result of theories and practices for church planting that are geared towards easy and quick fruit could be churches that are superficial and shallow. It is not enough to just plant churches. Church planters need to plant churches that are healthy, growing, and able to multiply. The goal of church planting should always include as its highest priority the reaching of the unchurched. Church plants that are designed to reach the lost and actually dissuade transfer growth would be welcomed by the existing churches of the community. A healthy partnership among neighboring churches is much needed today.

Throughout history, the spiritual disciplines have served as tools or practices that help people engage the presence of the living God. Every discipline is designed to encounter God in a

way that brings inward change that results in outward expression. The spiritual disciplines are not magic, but they have a way of positioning people to encounter God. Richard Foster says, “God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving His grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us” (6). Discipline is training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior. Spiritual disciplines are activities or behaviors that enhance spiritual growth. Believers are not godly because they practice them. They are made godly by Christ in them. Spiritual disciplines put people in a posture or place that encourages His work in them. The Spirit of God engaged in the discipline changes people, not the discipline itself. The righteousness of God cannot be earned. The disciplines help put people in a place to be changed by God. Grace and growth are not earned, but believers must take up a consciously chosen course of action both privately and publicly if they expect to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. The spiritual disciplines are designed to lead Christians into life and make them healthy.

While not much has been written specifically about the importance of leader health in regard to church planting, much has been written about the importance of healthy leadership in general and healthy church leadership in particular. There also seems to be a good bit written about the characteristics of healthy churches. This literature review examines the emphasis placed on healthy leadership in both the Old and New Testaments. It looks at the importance of spiritual and relational health and examines the importance of leaders being emotionally and physically healthy. The goal of this review is to lay a foundation for a theological and practical basis for the use of spiritual disciplines to promote health in leaders in general, but church planters in particular.



### **Biblical Foundations**

Leadership is a theme that runs throughout the Old and New Testaments. There are abundant examples of those who got it right as well as of those who were bad or even evil. In the Old Testament kings were bad and good. Some were said to have followed the Lord and others did not. Some start out good and become bad. It seems in the Old Testament they conquer, gather wealth, grow in fame, and battle with glaring weaknesses. Saul was anointed by God as Israel's first king. By the end of his reign, his kingdom was a mess. Some leaders in scripture are mostly good, but not altogether good. David is called a man after God's heart, but he had some obvious flaws. Solomon is considered wise, but the Bible's description of him has the phrase, "The Lord became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel" (I Kings 11:9 NIV, 2005). Good leaders are important in the biblical narrative. Obviously, God does not need human leaders. He is God and can do whatever He wants, but He has chosen to use men and women to carry out His plan. God has chosen to use leaders to accomplish his purposes. 2 Kings 22:2 says that Josiah "...did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed completely the ways of his father David, not turning to the right or to the left." In Acts 13:22 Paul says, "After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'" Genesis 15:6 says, "Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." It is clear from the pages of scripture that God is looking for men and women who trust Him and want to be a part of His plan. II Chronicles 16:9 says, "The eyes of the Lord search to and fro throughout the earth, that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His." God's primary purpose is to bring his creation back into healthy relationship with him. He is not

necessarily looking for the smartest or most talented people. He is looking for those who are deeply connected to His heart.

In Genesis 1 God created man and gave him dominion over creation. Man was created in God's image to take care of all that God had created. Paramount in the stewardship of creation was the relationship that existed between Adam, Eve, and God. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in Genesis 3, the destructive effects of sin upon relationship were seen for the first time. As sin permeates relationships, things like fear, shame, and blame eat at the core of love and trust.

Leaders are called to love God and neighbor. Their mission is to make disciples. The development of both their personal relationship with God and the making of and mentoring of disciples can be greatly influenced by the practice of spiritual disciplines. In the practice of spiritual disciplines spiritual leaders give themselves to the transforming power of God. He in turn empowers them in life giving ministry to others.

### **Leaders have Relationship with God**

Abraham had an intimate relationship with God that was based on trust and belief. He is one of the first leaders identified in the Old Testament. God and Abraham talked. God made promises to Abraham, and he believed God. Isaiah 51 says that God called Abraham, blessed him, and gave him increase. James 2:23 says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend." "The attribution 'God's friend' is not found in the Old Testament as such, but the Hebrew of Isaiah 41:8 has God referring to Abraham as 'my friend,' and in 2 Chronicles 20:7 Jehoshaphat refers to Abraham 'your friend'" (Nystrom 155). Isaac followed in his father's footsteps into relationship with God. Genesis 24 says that he went out into the field to meditate. Genesis 26:24 describes in detail an encounter between God and Isaac. This encounter is a form of prayer and results in an act of worship. The life and

journey of Jacob is filled with prayer, worship, and encounter. His life is forever marked by a wrestling match with “the angel of the Lord.” In Genesis 32:30 Jacob says, “I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” The most important part of the encounter was what happened at the end. Genesis 32:29 says “God blessed him there.” Jacob had carried a name since birth that meant to grab or take. His life was characterized by his name. In his encounter with the angel of the Lord he is given a new name (Genesis 32:27-28). This encounter with the angel of the Lord changed his name and identity. According to John H. Walton, “The blessing comes in the form of a name change. This is significant for Jacob since his name has embodied his character throughout the narrative. A name change therefore signifies a character change” (606).

Throughout the Old Testament no relationship is described to be as intimate with God as that of Moses. Not only is Moses known for leading the Jewish people out of Egypt, he is also known for the profound nature of his relationship with the Lord of Israel. Exodus 33 describes the encounters between God and Moses in “the tent of meeting.” Exodus 33:11 says that the Lord “would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.” I Samuel 13:14 calls David “a man after God’s heart.” I Samuel 16:7 also in reference to David says, “The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” The prophet Isaiah describes an encounter with God that caused him to see his weakness and sinfulness but also declared his forgiveness and called him into service. The core of this project is the necessity of developing leadership that is rooted in connection with God. There is a tendency to look at a person’s outward appearance or success and not take the time to examine the heart.

The New Testament demonstrates how Jesus took a band of twelve men who did not have any particularly outstanding qualities and called them simply to “follow him.” Over the

three plus years that they spent with him they heard him teach from scripture, saw him work miracles, and witnessed his deep and intimate relationship with his heavenly father. At one point they were so impressed with his life of prayer that they asked him “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Paul says in Philippians 3:10, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” Paul in turn encourages Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God” (2 Timothy 1:6) and to remember the power within him because of the Holy Spirit. The ultimate leader in all of scripture, Jesus had a perfect relationship with his heavenly father. Jesus said in John 5:19, “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” The starting point for all healthy biblical leadership is not gifting or talent or even intellect. It is a healthy and deep heart relationship with God. The purpose of spiritual disciplines is to facilitate and enhance this relationship.

### **Leaders Seek to Have Healthy Relationships with Their People**

Moses was intentional in how he developed relationship with Joshua. Moses invited Joshua into his tent. He did not hide his life from Joshua. In fact, Moses did the opposite; he allowed Joshua to see behind the curtain. Joshua served as an aide to Moses and was invited into the tent of meeting. When the time came for leadership of Israel to pass from Moses to Joshua, Moses stood Joshua before all of the people and commissioned him and gave him authority so the people would follow him (Numbers 27:18-23).

Jesus chose twelve to invest in and give responsibility to. He invited them to participate in His life in a way that allowed them to know Him intimately. They traveled together, ate together, and prayed together. They were not only witnesses to His miracles and parable

teachings; they were in an inner circle that offered them insight and personal instruction that others did not have.

Paul had a relationship of investment with Timothy. Paul encouraged him, prayed for him, and reminded him of who he was in Christ. Walter L. Liefeld says, “The most important factor of all in the life of Timothy may be discerned in these few words in verse 3: ‘Night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers’” (230). Scripture identifies a pattern: healthy leaders lead their people into healthy relationship with God both by instruction and example. Joshua was Moses’ aide. Joshua served Moses but was also able to watch him. When Moses met God face to face in the tent of meeting, Joshua was there. The disciples listened to the parables and got the “insider” interpretations from Jesus. They also saw Him pray and heal the sick. Later on their ministry of healing and miracles was a catalyst in the rapid growth of the early church.

### **Leaders Need Healthy Boundaries**

Maintaining a balance between family and kingdom responsibilities can be a challenge. Adam quickly blamed his sin on Eve; Cain murdered Abel. Abraham and Sarah did not have a marriage without issues; he lied about her to save his own skin. His lie actually put her in danger. She got impatient with God and coerced Abraham into taking things into his own hands and trying to “make” the promise of offspring come true. She was then extremely jealous of Hagar and eventually had both Hagar and Ishmael expelled. David’s relationships with Bathsheba and with Absalom were troublesome. Isaac and Rebekah were not the perfect family. She favored one son; he favored the other. Her manipulation resulted in the estrangement of Jacob and Esau. Samuel’s sons “did not follow his ways” (1 Samuel 8:3). The Old Testament is fraught with examples of leaders whose families were less than perfect. However, the New Testament places very specific expectations on potential leaders when it comes to families. 1 Timothy 3:4 says of

an overseer, “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect.” If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, he cannot be expected to be able to take care of God’s church. Titus 1:6 says “An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.” The importance of leadership in both the church and the family require that people be intentional in both. Too often the perceived urgency of church needs and decisions have led to neglect of family time. In Titus elders and overseers must be able to navigate both responsibilities. “The dominant idea in both lists (I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6) is that an elder must have an untarnished reputation” (Liefeld 312).

### **Leaders are Encouraged to Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle**

Leader health is important in scripture. Some have argued that the Jewish dietary laws in the Old Testament are health related. Most studies indicate they are not. The story of Daniel refusing to eat the food of the king is used by many to promote certain diets aimed at weight loss; however, Daniel’s story is not so much a story of rejecting unhealthy food as it is a story of resisting a bad king. One of the best Old Testament examples of the importance of personal health for healthy leadership is the story of Jethro and Moses in Exodus 18. When Jethro, Moses’s father in law, observes Moses sitting in judgment over the disputes of the people from “morning to night,” he was concerned: “What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy; you cannot handle it alone” (Exodus 18:17-18). Jethro encouraged Moses to divide the work. He told him to assign leaders who were “capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens” (Exodus 18:21-22). “This adjudication between parties proves too much for Moses. He is dead

tired after keeping up the pace all day. Jethro sees what is happening to his son-in-law and offers sound advice: Get some help” (Enns 371). The New Testament is even more specific in regard to the characteristics of a leader and includes descriptions such as “not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent” (Titus 1:7). If one adheres to the idea that Old Testament figures serve as general “types” of what is to come, then it makes sense that the idea of leadership qualifications and characteristics are more specific and complete in the New Testament (Prelipcean 394).

### **Theological Foundations**

Leaders must be rooted in Christ as they lead. As Beeley says, “Christian leadership is fundamentally theological in its source, substance, and ends” (11). Christian leaders cannot allow an “end justifies the means” type mentality to enter into leadership in the church. “Many evangelical groups and churches are in big trouble today because they have broken Christian principles in their pursuit of growth and success. A passion for Christ and the lost (which should have caused people to be obedient to Christ in all things) seems to have been replaced by a passion for growth that tempts them to use questionable means to achieve it” (Fernando 85). The theology of leadership comes from the story of the Bible. The Bible is a love story. Whether one approaches the Bible as a story of covenant or a story of kingdom, the key is the same. The Bible is the story of God’s love for His creation and His desire for that creation to thrive. “Life is the telos of scripture. Love is the ethos of scripture” (Dongell). John’s gospel says, “For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Jesus said, “I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). A biblical theology of leadership includes both God’s invitation to man and His desire for man. “The exemplary leaders of the early church exhort us to see that

Christian leadership is theologically centered in the ministry of the word through preaching, teaching and personal counsel, within the church's sacramental life" (Beeley 18-19).

### **Relationship to God**

A biblical theology of leadership begins with the leader's relationship to God. Stetzer and Im in *Planting Missional Churches* put it this way: "many contemporary church planting and church growth movements lack theological depth because they emphasize technique, paradigms, and methodologies rather than genuine biblical and missiological principles" (24). A Biblical theology of leadership begins with the leader's relationship to God. S. J. Hill writes, "There is a place within you—a deep place—that only God can touch. It's in that place that God's echoing invitation emerges and penetrates your spirit. It's the invitation not only to pursue Him but also to enjoy Him. This call comes out of an even deeper place, a deeper longing, in the heart of God. As much as you may want Him. He wants you more" (8).

Many have written that the best theological source for leadership is the relationship of the trinity. Jim Horsthuis writes, "the Trinitarian concept of perichoresis...establishes leadership as a participative movement of grace that originates within the Triune God...we do not lead for God, or in light of God, but as participants with God" (83-86). As Verna Harrison describes, "the Father gives all He is to the Son. In return, the Son gives all he is to the Father, and the Holy Spirit, too, is united to the others in mutual self-giving" (qtd. in Horsthuis 88-89). Eugene Peterson, in *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* interprets this perichoresis relationship of the trinity as "dancing around" (44-45). He goes on to say, "He invites our participation, He welcomes us into the Trinitarian dance" (305). The idea of leadership being rooted in an invitation to "dance" with the Trinity places the emphasis of



leadership not on the gifts or abilities of a person, but rather “in a movement of grace that begins with and in the Triune God” (Horsthuis 94).

Spiritual disciplines are designed to help people dance. They “partner” each person with a God who desires to be known intimately. As people dance, they do well to remember that He leads. “Christianity, at its deepest essence, is a practice of followership” (Huizing 58). Good leaders are good followers. Leadership is about following God in His mission. “Mission doesn’t happen until the leader knows what it means to embody Christ and is already on the path of faith to which others are invited and are empowered to join” (Strawbridge 74). A sound theology lies at the center of sound Christian leadership. “The more that church leaders root themselves in the theological core of their identity, the more they will empower all the baptized to live out their own ministries for the sake of Christ’s kingdom” (Beeley 30). Spiritual disciplines are made spiritual by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual disciplines are actions, not attitudes. The goal is what is produced by God, through action. The goal is to encounter God, to be changed, and to become better. People are not godly because they practice spiritual disciplines. They are made godly by Christ within them. Spiritual disciplines put them in a posture or place that encourages His work within.

### **Serving Others**

A biblical theology of leadership must also include a commitment to leading other believers into a healthier and more mature relationship with God. Beeley says the leader’s chief purpose is “to shepherd God’s people toward their heavenly life with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit” (17). St. Gregory of Nazianzus said, “The aim of our treatment is to provide the soul with wings, to rescue it from the world and give it to God to protect what is in God’s image if it abides, to take it by the hand if it is in danger, or to restore it if it is ruined: to make Christ dwell

in the heart by the Spirit, and in short to deify and bestow heavenly bliss upon those who have pledged their allegiance to heaven” (Beeley 17). Leadership implies movement or direction. Old Testament leadership is about moving towards the coming of the messiah. New Testament leadership is about reigning with Him upon His return or second coming. “Jesus is the leader who goes before, opens the way, and makes possible the entrance of the community into the future that God has promised them” (Aitken 34). The leader’s job is to point the way and help facilitate others in the journey. This type of leadership is not accomplished through force. It truly is a labor of love. “A distinctive mark of Christian leadership is that it is not authority driven” (Bilezikian 6). If leadership is a dance with the trinity, leading is a grace given in relationship and for relationship.

In the very beginning the Triune God, in relationship, created humanity for relationship. Man was created by God, for God, but also for one another. In Genesis 2:18 the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him.” Leadership is a product of God’s desire for His creation to thrive. Jesus, in John 17, lays out very clearly the theology behind leadership:

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. (John 17:6-8)

The leadership of Jesus was to give to his followers “everything” He had been given. The story of God is a love story, and leadership is meant to be an expression of God’s love for His people.

As Fiddes says, “authority cannot be imposed but only won through humble service” (100). A biblical theology of healthy leadership has a focus on and commitment to strong ecclesiology.

### **Equipping People for the Work of the Ministry**

Finally, a biblical theology of leadership will empower and equip those who believe to reach out in love to those who have not yet believed. Ephesians 4:11 says, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:11-12). As people continue their dance with the Triune God, they must give attention to the fact that God is a sender. Martin Kahler stated over a century ago: “Mission is the mother of theology” (Stetzer and Im 18). Understanding the sending nature of God is fundamental to understanding His mission or the role leadership plays in that mission. Christopher Wright refers to mission “as that which God has been purposing and accomplishing from eternity to eternity” (Stetzer and Im 21-22). Jesus made His mission clear to the disciples prior to his ascension: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). “Though there is no explicit command in the Bible to go and plant churches, the biblical record leaves no mistake that church planting is essential to God’s salvation purposes and the fulfillment of the Great Commission” (Ott and Wilson 20). George Peters said “the apostles seemingly did not go out to plant churches...They were sent forth to preach the gospel. Yet wherever Acts 1:8 was faithfully discharged, a church was born...We may confidently state that the church is germinal in the gospel as evangelism is germinal in a New Testament church” (qtd. in Ott and Wilson 23). In the United States, according to Mike Breen, “96% of church

growth is due to transfer growth and not churches striking into the heart of our enemy's territory...That's not a win! That's a staggering loss" (28).

The life blood of church planting is evangelism. Leaders must be committed to growing churches through evangelism. They are called to participate in His mission and invite others to join them in the mission as they train and equip them, all the while knowing that what they are doing and what they are inviting others to do is only possible through the promise of His presence within themselves. "Mission arises from the heart of God himself, and is communicated from his heart to ours" (Wright 24). When it comes to what is expected of a leader, the range of opinions seems to go from those who believe the leader should do everything to those who believe the leader does nothing but give orders. A biblical understanding of leadership falls somewhere in the middle. The job of the leader is both to instruct and model: "A leader is there to meet some basic need of the people and to help all the people to achieve as many good things as possible" (Houston 227). Just like a biblical theology of leadership is "participation with God" (Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* 305), biblical leading is participating in ministry with those who are led. "It has become a truism that Christian leadership must be none other than servant leadership" (Koenig 29). A biblical theology of leadership will include knowing God, helping others to increase in their knowledge of Him, and working with them to carry the knowledge of God to others. "The emotionally unhealthy leader is someone who operates in a continuous state of emotional and spiritual deficit, lacking emotional maturity and a 'being with God' sufficient to sustain their 'doing for God' (Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* 25).

Leadership in church planting must be life giving and not simply consist of strategic methods. If leadership really is a dance with the living God and if church planting is one of the

most effective means to introduce and connect God to those who do not know Him, then there is no more important dance on the earth than that of the church planting team being led by an intimate knowledge of a loving God. Methods are not evil, but without the anointing of God, they are empty. “No amount of study, training, and experience can substitute for the call, leading, and power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of church planters” (Ott and Wilson 308). “A deepening spiritual walk with God is required if one is to withstand pressure, respond graciously to opposition, and trust God in unpredictable circumstances” (Ott and Wilson 309). In his book, *Jesus Driven Ministry*, Ajith Fernando says, “There is a great interest in ministry technique today, and technique is important. In a world that places high value on excellence and quality, our ministries must reflect a professional excellence that will favorably adorn the gospel and commend Christ to this generation...But I believe the greatest crisis facing Christian leadership today concerns lifestyle-always the burning issue.” He goes on to say, “Christian leaders are failing in the way they live and are bringing great dishonor to Christ. Perhaps the greatest need in the training of leaders today is to provide guidelines to help them live as biblical men and women” (Fernando 14). Leaders need instruction and equipping that points to a way of living and leading that is both costly and yet life giving; one that depends on the infinite supply of God, rather than the overwhelming need of the world. An emphasis upon spiritual disciplines would help to provide such leaders.

In a world where the church no longer wants to look “churchy” and pastors would rather look hip than holy, people desperately need leaders who look like Jesus. “The practice of spiritual disciplines should be well established. In many cross cultural settings, church planters must nurture their spiritual life without the support of an established local church” (Ott and

Wilson 309). In her book *The Sense of the Call* Marva Dawn references George Bernanos' book *Diary of a Country Priest*:

This compelling book shows numerous virtues such as these in this unpretentious servant: his utter humility and sense of failure in himself—leading to great dependence on God; his total honesty and receptivity to say what God gives him to say; his deep compassion for the human race, which often leads to tears; his constant effort in prayer—and recognizing himself as the disciple Peter not able to stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane; his utter accessibility so that all felt able to talk to him; his faithfulness in doing even humdrum little duties; his realization by others' deaths and the coming of his own that he is simply to do the work at hand. (qtd in Dawn 279)

Church planters do not plant churches just to say a certain number of churches exist. Rather, they believe that planting churches is one, and perhaps THE most effective, way to reach those who have yet to believe the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ. If they want these churches to be healthy and lasting, they must do all they can to assure that those who plant and lead are putting their faith in Christ and not simply repeating methods and practices that seem to have worked in other places. There is no better way to ensure that future church planters are strong in theology, ecclesiology, and evangelism than having a spiritual disciplines focus in their training. Emphasizing the practice of spiritual disciplines will help assure that church planters stay connected to the God of the mission and not just the mission itself.

Much has been written about churches being healthy. Some equate growth and health. Often healthy churches are growing churches, but not all growing churches are healthy churches. “Many church planters are finding fulfillment as their God-given dreams come to fruition. Yet many more struggle with the personal and professional demands of planting a church and

nurturing it to mature, healthy, reproducing viability” (Stetzer and Bird 41). What follows is a review of what experts in both church growth and church planting have to say about the importance of church health, healthy leadership, and the training of church planters.

### **Church Health**

To get the best history of the current church health movement, one must look back to the church growth movement. Donald McGavern in *Understanding Church Growth* says, “church growth has always been characteristic of healthy churches and basic to the power of the Christian movement” (qtd. in Adams 25). Robert E. Logan says, “healthy churches are growing churches” (qtd. in Adams 26), and Peter Wagner says, “If we concentrate on church growth we get to the heart of the great commission” (qtd. in Adams 25). At some point, church leaders realized that the emphasis on growth with its focus on mere numbers led to have some unhealthy characteristics within churches.

At that point there seems to have been a shift from thinking growing churches are healthy churches to thinking healthy churches will grow. Rick Warren, pastor of the megachurch Saddle Back, says “the key issue for churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is church health, not church growth” (qtd. in Adams 26). Christian Schwarz, in his book *Natural Church Development* examined the connection between church health and church growth. Schwarz identified eight qualities that healthy churches carry and actually defined church health based upon the connectedness or balance of these qualities. Schwarz believed that the church growth movement was more pragmatic than spiritual (qtd. in McKee 27-28). He feared that the emphasis on growth was causing leaders and churches to use methodology to accomplish what only God can do. Robert J. Vajko in “Church Planting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” stated “There is a danger of being dominated by pragmatism when we approach the question of church planting...if it works, it must be right”

(120). Vajko goes on to say, “If church planting is not solidly built upon the gospel in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, we will be planting churches that are not truly biblically or theologically solid” (130). The debate is endless. Some say growth equals health. Others say health produces growth. Still others, like Gary McIntosh of the Journal of American Church Growth, say they are the same thing by different names. Most, however, seem to agree that health and growth are not the product of one quality or characteristic, but many “parts are interacting to function as a whole and to maintain balance” (qtd in Adams 44).

Warren, Macchia, Galloway, Hemphill, Anderson, and others have lists of what they believe are the characteristics of healthy churches. The following list of eight characteristics encompasses the most prominent characteristics of the many lists available:

#### 1. Empowering Leadership

Empowering leadership is leadership that intentionally and effectively inspires and equips people to become involved. Empowering leaders are willing to take the time to make sure that people actually understand what it means to be a part of the body of Christ and that they have a vital role to play in the “ministry of the saints.” Paul had a mentoring relationship with Timothy that was very empowering. “Timothy was spotted by Paul when he was in his mid-teens. He was still described as a youth fifteen years later when Paul wrote his first letter. Yet Paul did not hesitate to bring him into his team and start giving him responsibility right away” (Houston 229). Paul did not just tell Timothy how to lead. He took him with him and showed him. “Timothy had an apprenticeship with Paul. From his teens he traveled with him as part of the team. It is a well tried way of bringing a person to maturity” (Houston 230). Jesus took twelve men and spent the better part of three years with them. He invested in them, modeled for them, and gave them opportunities to both succeed and fail. Empowering leaders are leaders who do not care who gets



the credit as long as the kingdom of God is advanced. They are determined to help people find their strengths and gifts. Empowered leaders are those able to cast vision in a way that is understandable as well as contagious. They also understand that all worthwhile ministry is Spirit-led. Actually, it is done by God through his people. “A distinctive mark of Christian leadership is that it is not authority-driven. It relies on instruction, exhortation, and persuasion to fulfill its mandate” (Bilezikian 6). To lead, there must be people following. “A leader must win the support of all whom he leads. You must not assume that because you have a position or a title that people will automatically follow you” (Houston 228). In *the Servant as Leader*, Robert Greenleaf describes servant leaders as those whose first inclination is to serve, not to lead (Greenleaf 79). “Jesus modeled the essential nature of leadership as a servant leader. In Matthew 20:25-28 he declared that greatness is found in servanthood. He modeled this value through humbling himself, taking the role of a servant, and washing his disciples’ feet” (Taylor 61). “All of God’s people have gifts to contribute to the body of Christ, and they have a part to play in its ministry. Pastors practicing sustainable ministry help these believer-priests understand both theologically and practically that they are ministers—that their baptism includes ordination to service” (Creech 34).

## 2. Inspiring Worship

Inspiring worship is worship that is designed to encourage people to encounter God. Healthy churches have a high value for the presence of God. Worship for them becomes more than just singing songs about God. They actually believe that corporate worship is an opportunity to join with the body of Christ in worshipping God in person. “The healthy church seeks to glorify God through its worship so that through revelation and response, the worshipper responds to all that God is with all of their being” (Taylor 57). The style of worship is not the issue. The

key to inspiring worship is a God who is present and people who are genuine. “Healthy worship should inspire and be culturally relevant. The unchurched are interested in experiencing the presence of God in worship. This kind of authentic worship has a strong evangelistic potential” (Taylor 58). It is important that worship be something that is participated in, not simply observed. “For our service to become truly holistic, we must offer our lives to God. In the Great Commandment, the part about loving your neighbor as yourself is the second half. It depends on the first half: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’ (Mark 12:30)” (Sider, Olson, and Unruh 130). This love relationship between God and His creation is the purpose of and reason for worship. Churches with a true understanding of worship recognize that in corporate worship, they are not just singing songs about God or to God, but with God. He is actually present.

### 3. Authentic Community

Authentic community is the grace of God lived out in relationships. According to the creation story in Genesis, God made people for relationship. He made them first for Himself, but also to live in relationship with each other. Everyone wants friends. No one wants to be completely alone. “Cultivating a sense of belonging is a transformational process that takes place through many small steps” (Sider, Olson, and Unruh 157). According to Adams, “the church exists as God’s (holy missional) community. By its very nature, the church is community” (Adams 23). Bill Wilson says “Congregational health is a by-product of loving relationships. The church is one of the few places in society in which genuine care and intimacy can be experienced among all participants in the congregation” (Wilson 337). According to Wilson, four symptoms are present in healthy churches: “clarity of mission and vision, transformational conflict, authentic community and transparent communication” (Wilson 334).

Healthy churches intentionally create places where community is more likely to happen. This is often found in the small groups of the church, especially in larger churches where community is more difficult to find in the regular corporate worship service. Macchia in *“Becoming a Healthy Church: Ten Characteristics,”* (qtd. by McKee 32) says that there are seven components to building community:

- Express unconditional love and acceptance;
- Encourage authenticity, transparency, honesty, and integrity;
- Exhibit grace, mercy, and forgiveness;
- Communicate and resolve conflicts;
- Establish means for bearing each other’s burdens;
- Welcome diversity into your fellowship; and
- Equip families through intentional ministries.

#### 4. Outward Focus

Having an outward focus is often described as being missional. “Missional means adopting the posture of a missionary, joining Jesus on mission, learning, and adapting to the culture around you while remaining biblically sound” (Stetzer and Im 1). Alan Hirsch says “A missional theology is not content with mission being a church-based work. Rather, it applies to the whole life of every believer. Every disciple is to carry the mission of God into every sphere of life” (Hirsch, “Defining Missional”). A healthy church has an outward focus but does not consider being missional a “program of the church,” rather the lifestyle of the body of Christ. In a consumer driven society it is easy to become inward looking as a church. In a secular society, some churches become a place of escape for their people. A healthy church is not consumer driven or isolationistic. Healthy churches look outward and instead of seeking to escape the

community are intent upon transforming it. The church with a healthy outward focus is more concerned with giving to the community than receiving from it. Leaders in this type of church will often ask, “Is the community better because we are here?”

## 5. Functional Structures

Having a healthy structure is essential if a movement is to have longevity. Healthy churches prefer to have lives looking for structure rather than a structure begging for life. Structure is flexible and can be changed in a healthy church. The message and mission of the church should be served by the structure and not inhibited by it. Taylor says “The structure must be the servant of the purposes and the movement of the Spirit within the Church. Structure and organization is adaptable while biblical purposes remain fixed and certain” (Taylor 49). In *User Friendly Churches*, Barna says “The ministry is not called to fit the church’s structure; the structure exists to further effective ministry” (Barna 137-138).

## 6. Theologically Sound

Paul McKaughan, O’Brien, and O’Brien say, “if we don’t have missional strategy driven by solid theological and ecclesiological principles, we simply perpetuate culture driven models of church and mission” (22). Healthy churches are committed to being true to scripture. With the common emphasis today on the methodologies of church planting and church growth, the potential for shallowness in growing churches is dangerously high. No matter how many other resources are made available to church planters today, the Bible is the manual. “At the heart of all great movements is a recovery of a simple Christology (essential conceptions of who Jesus is and what he does), yet one that accurately reflects the Jesus of the New Testament faith - they are in a very literal sense Jesus movements” (Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* 92).

## 7. Passionate Spirituality

Healthy churches have a passionate spirituality that is characterized by an emphasis on relationship with God, personal as well as corporate prayer, and a reliance upon the infilling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Scott McKee says “Healthy churches seek God and his power and direction. Characteristics of passionate spirituality include hunger for revival, inspiring times of prayer, renewed interest in spiritual disciplines, and a raised sense of expectation” (56).

#### 8. Mobilized Laity

Healthy churches mobilize the laity. This does not mean teaching or even releasing them to do “church work.” It means equipping and encouraging them to find their ability and reason for living in God and His mission. Bosch said “Perhaps for congregations seeking to become more healthy and missional, a release from the presumed need to do something into a deeper knowledge that, because of the work of God in Christ, they already are a part of what God is doing in the world would foster a new energy and faithfulness” (*Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* 376). McKee says, “A healthy church is one that moves its people from simple membership into a life-changing ministry of evangelism and service” (McKee 50). In a healthy church, members have a strong sense of identity. Knowing that they are sons and daughters of their heavenly Father allows them to move from doing for God to allowing Him to work through them. “Healthy churches mobilize their laity in ministry, helping them to discover God’s unique calling on their lives” (Taylor 56).

If these are truly the characteristics of healthy churches, an emphasis on Spiritual Disciplines in the training of future leaders could only increase the likelihood of these characteristics being present in churches. In fact, it is difficult to imagine these things being produced on a regular and lasting basis in a place that does not emphasize deep connection with

God. One of the best ways to increase such a connection is through the practice of spiritual disciplines.

### **Healthy Leaders**

It stands to reason that healthy leaders are more likely to plant healthy churches than are unhealthy leaders. God uses leaders in the accomplishment of His will on the earth. He does not “need” leaders, rather He has chosen to include people in His plan of redemption and chosen to use certain of them to lead others in the pursuit of His will. He does not necessarily need gifted or special people. He spoke through a donkey to Balaam (Numbers 22:28). The group he chose to lead the birthing of His church on the earth was not all that impressive. Throughout the Bible one can see evidence that He chooses leaders differently than people do. In choosing David to be king, God said to Samuel, “Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord sees not as a man sees; for man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). God chooses heart over talent. He looks at the heart and finds those who are humble and teachable. The decision to look inward to the heart rather than the outward appearance is another way of saying health is more important than talent. This is a “super-star” world. It seems everyone wants to be famous. God is looking for men and women who want to be faithful. “The work of church planting calls for someone who has a humble heart and is willing to do whatever the Lord has called them to do” (Bevins 24). As Stetzer and Im put it, “a newcomer to a church needs to leave a church service being amazed by the awesome God the church planter serves, not by what a cool preacher the church has” (3). Fame is not necessarily a friend to those in ministry. The goal in church planting is not to impress people. The goal is to be used by God to reach people with the love of Christ and

teach them how to love Him. If people are to be able to lead others into a vital relationship with God, they have to go there themselves.

This section reviews what experts in church growth and church planting have to say about healthy leaders. Ed Stetzer says, “Clearly churches are facing a leadership gap, and we need to figure out a way to solve it” (Stetzer and Im 334). He says this in response to shrinking numbers: “in 2004, 80,140 students were enrolled in a North American seminary, but ten years later the number shrank to 72,014” (Stetzer and Im 333). Others would say the crisis is over more than just numbers. Jay Pinney, Quebec coordinator for Church Planting Canada, writes,

While there are a growing number of rich resources which relate to the methodology of church planting, little is focused directly upon the church planters and the stresses which they and their families undergo as they attempt to plant churches. Though the church planter himself is an essential component of the church plant, the planter’s personal and spiritual life has yet to receive adequate attention in current literature and training. (Ott and Wilson 305)

Others point to the heavy burden that a call to ministry entails as a culprit to the health crisis among the clergy.

It seems to me that the spiritual, emotional, social, and physical health of many pastors, associates in ministry, educators, musicians, and civic leaders in North America and elsewhere is in crisis because of overburdens and obstacles, because of misunderstandings of call, because of failure to set limits, and because of a lack of genuine support by an alternative Christian community. (Dawn xi)

According to Patricia Chung, “Clergy are leaving parish ministry in greater numbers and after shorter tenures” (qtd. in Mulloy). Betty Mulloy of the Pastor’s Retreat Network reports that

“the average pastor changes churches every three years.” According to H.B. London and Neil B. Wiseman, “90% of pastors feel inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands, and 70% do not have close friends” (qtd. in Mulloy). “Although attrition in professional ministry is apparently not at the epidemic level often reported, men and women experience burnout in ministry far too frequently” (qtd. in Creech 287). “Church planting is an exciting—but often exhausting—venture of faith that touches every part of the lives of church planters” (Ott and Wilson 305).

While there is a wealth of material available for church planters on strategies and methods for planting, there is not as much available that speaks to the importance of pastors, leaders, and planters being and remaining healthy. However, there are a few authors that address this topic. Aubrey Malphurs of the Malphurs group lists 15 Characteristics of Healthy Church Leaders:

1. Life-long Learners
2. Read Scripture Often
3. Spend Time in Prayer
4. Rest Regularly
5. Love Their Family More Than the Church
6. Develop Leaders
7. Embrace Spiritual Disciplines
8. Clarify Their “Why”
9. Strive to Obey, But Ask for Forgiveness
10. Worship in Multiple Contexts
11. Create Movements



12. Content, Yet Discontent
13. Follow as They Lead
14. Fueled by Vision
15. Characterized by Love on Mission (Malphurs).

Tim Peters of Sayge has a list of 10 Keys to Being a Healthy Pastor:

1. Let God restore your soul daily
2. Give your marriage priority attention
3. Work with your personal rhythms
4. Keep your Sabbath rest
5. Do the things only you can do-and delegate the rest
6. Focus on results- not time at work
7. Get regular exercise and eat healthy
8. Ask for help
9. Let God heal your anger
10. Don't be crushed by criticism (Peters 1-3).

Thom Rainer, President and CEO of Lifeway, lists Five Characteristics of Healthy Leaders:

1. They spend time in prayer and the Word
2. They have longer tenure in the church
3. They demonstrate obvious love for the people in their congregations
4. They have a consistent missional leadership push
5. They lead toward incremental change (Rainer 1-3).

Ed Stetzer says, "If God is calling you to plant a church, he is calling you to be a spiritual leader" (Stetzer and Im 373). Each list of "characteristics of healthy leaders" seems to point to

the importance of intentional spirituality. An emphasis on spiritual disciplines again seems to be an obvious solution for much of what ails the church planting community.

The remainder of this chapter reviews what experts have to say about the how and why of being healthy spiritually, relationally, physically, and emotionally and the role that spiritual disciplines play in that pursuit.

## 1. Spiritual Health

If the calling of leaders is to lead people into a more healthy and vibrant relationship with God, nothing in the life of the leader is of more importance than his or her own spiritual health. “The spiritual health of the pastor and other key leaders is intimately intertwined with that of the congregation. A congregation will rarely grow beyond the health of its pastor and key leaders” (qtd. in Sider, Olson, and Unruh 188). “Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843) who was mightily used by God to bring revival in Scotland though he died at age twenty-nine, said ‘My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness’” (Fernando 158). “Probably all of us in leadership positions realize that the servant’s own private devotional time is absolutely fundamental for ministerial health. Jesus gives us the best model by His frequent times of solitary, intimate conversation with His Father, as well as by His habitual participation in Jewish corporate worship and festival celebrations” (Dawn 72). “No amount of study, training, and experience can substitute for the call, leading, and power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of church planters” (Wilson and Ott 308). Speaking of the role of the Holy Spirit on the behavior and ministry of leaders Fernando says, “The result of neglecting the...Holy Spirit’s work is that we are seeing high incidence of moral and spiritual failure among people with powerful ministries that demonstrate some of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit” (Fernando 33). Winfield Bevins says, “As a church planter, it is vital that you have a personal, ongoing experience of the Holy Spirit”

(61). He goes on to say, “Church planting begins with a clear sense of hearing God’s call. Any other motivation, no matter how good it may be, is not enough” (Bevins 91). Unfortunately, there are many today who plant churches for less than ideal reasons. Some are angry or wounded from experiences at other churches and believe that they can go and start something in another place and not carry any of the harmful issues with them. They soon find that “the desire to prove themselves” is not a very sustainable calling.

One would be hard-pressed to find leaders who do not believe that their own walk with God is important. Most, if not all, begin with a calling that has been born out of a vibrant relationship with God. And yet Aubrey Malphurs says, “I find that many church leaders are so busy that they often don’t believe they have time to read Scripture outside of their preparation for a bible study and/or sermon.” Beverly Vos says, “our effectiveness in leading others into spiritual growth is entirely dependent upon the extent of our own spiritual growth” (100). David Bosch says that missionaries cannot survive unless they hear Christ offering both the acceptance and commissioning found in his words: “You did not choose me; I chose you. I appointed you to go on and bear fruit, fruit that shall last’ (John 15:16)” (Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road* 90). In his book *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*, John Ortberg says that the primary goal of the life of Christians is to be transformed spiritually (21). Thom Rainer, speaking of healthy senior pastors, says, “These leaders are incredibly busy, but they have deemed time with God and His word as one of their highest priorities” (Rainer).

Many church leaders have become focused upon and enamored with the methods and strategies for leadership, in general, and church planting, in particular. The pressure to succeed is accompanied by an unhealthy sense of competition with other planters and churches. “While we devote much time, energy and money to rallies and crusades, we have neglected the apostolic

method of church growth: prayer and ministry of the Word” (Mateer 146). Many pastors feel threatened when a new church is planted in their area. Because they are not “centered” in Jesus, their need for security, meaning, and purpose has to come from illegitimate places. What is needed is pastors and church planters who find their identity in Christ rather than how many people attend the churches they lead. In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says “The classical Disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living to the depths” (Foster 1). “One of the primary activities of Christian ministry is to make and grow disciples of Jesus. But in order to be effective at making disciples, we need to become disciples ourselves” (Vos 100-114). Nowhere is this more important than in church planting.

If church planting has its proper focus of reaching the lost and unchurched, discipleship that is intentional and consistent is a necessity. “Discipleship is not something we can accidentally drift towards or into. It is something we must give our full attention to, intentionally determining to make ourselves Jesus’ apprentices, no matter what the cost” (Willard 327). Vos says that “many of us are distracted by what Willard calls the ‘vessel’ mode of ministry (how we do church) rather than the ‘treasure’ mode of ministry (what the church should be about) (101). Willard says, “If I am Jesus’ disciple that means I am with him to learn from him how to be like him” (Willard 303). In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster says, “The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people” (Foster 1). He goes on to say, “God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving His grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us (Foster 6). People serve a God who is more than they can know. His glory is incomprehensible and unapproachable. He is completely “other,” and yet, He draws near to us and says “come closer.” In his book *Ministry in the Image of God* Steve Seamands says, “The

ministry into which we have entered is the ministry of Jesus Christ, the son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world” (15).

More important than grasping the latest methods is understanding the necessity of depending on God. “For spiritual leaders faith is less about the what, and it’s more about the who” (Stetzer and Im 368). Spiritual disciplines are specifically designed to help people connect with the “who” of their faith. Peter says, “his divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him” (II Peter 1:3). “One of the great weapons in the revolutionary leader’s arsenal is to cultivate a sense of holy dissatisfaction-to provoke a basic discontent with what is and so awaken a desire to move toward what could be. It must be holy because it is very easy to awaken the unholy variety of discontent” (Frost and Hirsch 236). Scripture has several examples of strategies given by God to leaders which seemed at best, odd. Telling Gideon to reduce the size of his army and telling Joshua to march circles around Jericho are just two examples. If church planting is reduced to methods that have worked, it closes off the opportunity for divine initiatives that have no precedent. There is no record prior to Gideon of anyone winning by reducing their army to a ridiculous minority. When it comes to church planting, or ministry in general, obedience is the key, and obedience sometimes does not fit the proven methods. “For the church planter who is a spiritual leader, ...faith is not in their own ability to get it done, while they do exhibit confidence; their faith is in the God who can get it done according to His ability” (Stetzer and Im 368). Beverly Vos says, “We need to be transformed spiritually if we wish to minister to people effectively” (103). Tim Keller says,

Prayer is the only entryway into genuine self- knowledge. It is also the main way we experience deep change—the reordering of our lives. Prayer is how God gives us so many of the unimaginable things he has for us. Indeed, prayer makes it sage for God to

give us many of the things we most desire. It is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God as God. Prayer is simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life. (18)

Prayer is the doorway to intimacy. Intimacy is the water of life that allows people to grow in Christ. The Bible describes eternal life in John 17 as “knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent.” This knowing is not an intellectual understanding. It is closer to the relationship of a husband and wife than that of teacher and pupil. Andrew Murray says, “The first thing the Lord teaches His disciples is that they must have a secret place of prayer” (23). Nouwen says, “the discipline of prayer is the intentional, concentrated, and regular effort to create space for God” (18). Bonhoeffer says, “for the pastor it (prayer) is an indispensable duty and his/her whole ministry will depend on it” (66). Richard Foster says that prayer is the “central avenue God uses to transform us” (30). Keller says,

If we give priority to the outer life, our inner life will be dark and scary. We will not know what to do with solitude. We will be deeply uncomfortable with self-examination, and we will have an increasingly short attention span for any kind of reflection. Even more seriously, our lives will lack integrity. Outwardly, we will need to project confidence, spiritual and emotional health and wholeness, while inwardly we may be filled with self-doubts, anxieties, self-pity, and old grudges. Yet we won’t know how to go into the inner rooms of the heart, see clearly what is there and deal with it. In short, unless we put a priority on the inner life, we turn ourselves into hypocrites. (22)

E.M. Bounds once wrote, “Some preachers pray too short in private and too long in public” (Fernando 226). Robert J Vajko says, “churches that are planted and are faithful to the Word of God will have Christ’s discipleship vision strongly rooted in them and will be teaching

incarnational truth in their midst. If discipleship is separated from church planting it can only lead to the planting of superficial churches that will not make the salt and light impact that they should” (126). He goes on to say, “if church planting is not solidly built upon the gospel...we will be planting churches that are not truly biblically or theologically solid” (Vajko 130).

If prayer is the center or primary source of the spiritual life, the gospel is the foundation of the spiritual life. “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). Vajko says, “Church planters in this new century must know how to communicate the gospel in its integrity if they are to plant churches that make a difference” (131). Not only must church planters be leaders who are vitally and personally connected to God in prayer, they must be leaders who understand and can communicate the theological basis for church planting. The idea that a church planter should have a healthy spiritual life seems to go without saying. “But to be realistic about the state of church planting in North America and in many areas of the world today, let’s admit something: many church planters are by nature entrepreneurs, mavericks, free spirits, sometimes even misfits. That energy can be harnessed and focused to be used for God’s glory but only if the church planter is Christ centered and transformed by the power of the gospel” (Stetzer and Im 2-3). There is a need for young creatives in the church planting world but they must have a vital spiritual life and a deep connection with Jesus. According to Jurgen Moltmann, “God’s mission is nothing less than the sending of the Holy Spirit from the Father through the Son into this world, so that this world should not perish but live...For the Holy Spirit is ‘the source of life’ and brings life into the world-whole life, full life, unhindered, indestructible, everlasting life” (19).

If the work of church planting is about reaching the lost with the “life giving message of the gospel,” it would seem that a healthy spiritual life in its leaders would be paramount. There is no better way to intentionally increase the spiritual life of leaders and church planters than to teach them to use Spiritual Disciplines to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. Moltmann says, “It is only when our Christian mission follows the divine sending and corresponds to it that it is a mission with confidence in God and an assured faith” (19). He goes on to say, “God’s word and his Spirit belong together, like God’s breathing and speaking” (93) and again, “For people who experience themselves in the presence of God’s Spirit, two different movements follow...the gathering of Christians in the church; the sending out of the church to Christianity in the world” (Moltmann 95). Church planting that does not place a strong emphasis on healthy spirituality is something other than Christian.

We must not regard the Church purely as an institution or an organization...The Church, like Christ, lives and acts in a manner at once human and divine. Certainly, there are imperfections in the human members of Christ, but their imperfection is inseparably united to his perfection, sustained by his power, and purified by his holiness, as long as they remain in living union with him by faith and love. (Merton 54)

In chapter 8 of his book *Power from on High*, Charles G. Finney gives what he calls “suggestions” to preachers whereby they may save themselves from “sorrow and failure and from disapproval and reproof of Him who has called them to His service.” Number 3 reads “See to it that you have a heart and not merely a head call to undertake the preaching of the gospel” (Finney 66). Number 4: “Constantly maintain a close walk with God” (Finney 66). “One Latin American leader offered this advice to cross-cultural church planters: ‘Don’t come with ready-made agendas and plans, but come to learn.’ Another said: ‘Work with a



spirit of prayer, trust, humility, respect, and above all, with the infilling of the Holy Spirit” (qtd. in Ott and Wilson 309). Alan Hirsch says, “We can’t help but be genuinely inspired by those amazing Jesus movements that seem to just instinctively get it right without a lot of theory. This phenomenon has to be one of the secret works of the Holy Spirit” (Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* 133). Speaking of the importance of healthy spiritual leaders, Sider, Olson and Unruh say, “What does a church need to make a difference? Leaders with a growing relationship with God and a passion for sharing Christ’s love with the lost and broken. Leaders who minister with bold faith, gracious humility, risk-taking flexibility and a balanced perspective on life and ministry” (203-204). Sider went on to say, “I dream of a new movement of Christians who immerse all their activity...in all night prayer meetings. I dream of a movement that thinks as it prays; that plans careful strategies as it surrenders to the Spirit; that prays for both miraculous signs and wonders and also effective social reform; that knows in its heart that nothing important will happen unless the Spirit blows through its plans” (qtd. in Sider, Olson, and Unruh 144). In order to maintain a healthy level of spiritual life among church planters today, there is nothing more useful than an emphasis upon spiritual disciplines.

## 2. Relational Health

One purpose for spiritual health is the role that it plays in relational health. Every Spiritual discipline seems to bring inward change that produces outward action. The connection between the Great Commandment and the Great Commission cannot be overstated. From the beginning God created people to be in relationship. Ken Hemphill says, “Any claim to a vital relationship with God that does not find expression in human fellowship is a fraud. Christian community is not a sentimental easy attachment of a random selection of individuals, but the

profoundly mutual relationship of those who remain in Christ and therefore belong to one another” (qtd. in Taylor 44). Keith Taylor says, “Authentic community is defined as the expression of the Christian life in the context of relationships” (Taylor 44). In the creation story of Genesis, only one negative statement is made. “It is not good for man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). God created people to live in community together. They are made for relationships by a relational God. Spiritual health is key. None one has the ability to live and love the way God intends apart from Him. Jesus came with a two-fold message. Love God and love each other. He even went so far as to say that the world would be able to identify people as His by the way they loved each other (John 13:35).

God created the world and humankind to display the glory of who he is. Adam and Eve, who were supposed to image God’s character, didn’t. Neither did the people of Israel. So God sent his Son to image his holy and loving character and to remove the wrath of God against the sins of the world. In Christ, God came to display God. And in Christ, God came to save. Now the church, which has been granted the life of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, is called to display the character and glory of God to all the universe, testifying in word and action to his great wisdom and work of salvation. (qtd. in Adams 19)

God’s desire is that everyone would draw from their relationship with Him in order to live together in community.

### **Healthy Relationship with Congregation**

Leaders lead best through relationship. “The way God’s people live together in community is a significant part of how they bear God’s image and witness to the surrounding nations” (Adams 20). The relational health of a leader can either facilitate or obstruct this

purpose. Andrew Adams says, “unhealthy churches are oftentimes led by pastors who are themselves unhealthy. This exhibits itself in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is that ‘leadership can never be challenged’ (Thomas), or that pastors don’t confront conflict in a healthy manner (McKeever)” (qtd. in Adams 28).

Some may argue that biblical leadership, especially in the New Testament, is plural and not singular. In his article “Church Leadership that Kills Community”, Gilbert Bilezikian argues that “Christian leadership is a team function” (5). One must consider whether the Old Testament model of leadership through Abraham, Moses, and David has given way to a team or community approach. Perhaps the more important question is not “how many” but “how?” Bilezikian says the role of the senior pastor “should essentially be a lead person whose task is to develop, nurture, and empower others for ministry” (7).

The research also considers how the relational health of leaders or church planters affects the lives of those they lead and live with. According to experts one of the key characteristics of a healthy church is authentic community. Bill Wilson says, “Congregational health is a by-product of loving relationships” (337). Wilson goes on to say that “Coursing through the life of a healthy church is a culture of openness and a degree of transparency in communication. Healthy churches work hard at creating this culture of transparency. They speak the truth in love. They tell the truth and trust the people. They communicate a compelling vision in a consistent manner. They invite feedback and listen to those who disagree” (338). Aubrey Malphurs says that “A healthy church begins with healthy church leaders.” To be an effective leader requires that one be able to have healthy relationship with those being led. Creech says,

Affection is also a necessary practice for sustainability in ministry. The Apostle Paul frequently and unashamedly declared his affection for his brothers and sisters in his

congregations. He told those in Philippi, ‘For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus’ (Phil 1:8; cf. 1 Thess 2:7-8; Gal 4:19-20) ...The relationship between pastor and congregation, as well as between pastor and the community in which the ministry is offered, is healthiest when marked by a genuine affection for the people and the place. (Creech 289)

Robert A. Sizemore, in his dissertation project “Calling, Affinity, and Personal Growth: Key Factors in Long Term Ministries,” quotes one of the participants in his project: “The honest truth is I love the people here and they love me. Sometimes ministers are told not to get too emotionally involved in the people’s lives but some of that love that I have for our members and our members have for me and my family has kept me here so long” (qtd in Creech 289). Corey Johnsrud, in his study of healthy missional churches, discovered among the churches he studied that although “77.5 percent of participants indicated a strong agreement that a spirit of collegiality and trust between leadership and congregants is vital for any congregation, less than 40 percent of respondents indicated that such collegiality and trust existed” (33). He goes on to say, “The work of the healthy, missional church is really the work of the Trinity, and we participate in it through the power of the Spirit” (Johnsrud 39).

### **Healthy Relationships with Family**

Healthy leaders are intentional about caring for their families. Jay Pinney says, “While there are a growing number of rich resources which relate to the methodology of church planting, little is focused directly upon the church planters and the stresses which they and their families undergo as they attempt to plant churches” (qtd. in Ott and Wilson 305). In an article on “Developing Leaders for Pastoral Ministry,” which focuses on five large churches in the Southern Baptist Convention, Scott Douglas says, “With 80% of pastors believing ministry has

negatively affected their family, and 94% of ministry families sharing the stress of the pastor's work (Pastoral Care, Inc., 2013), these high-performing churches made sure family was a priority for their ministry team" (86). The Barna Group released a report in February of 2017 entitled "How Healthy Are Pastors' Relationships?." Their study, done in partnership with Pepperdine University, concluded that 70% of married clergy consider their marriage "excellent" while another 26% responded "good." Overall, 96% said they were satisfied with their relationship with their spouse. The study reports that, by comparison, only 46% of American adults rate their marriage as excellent. Only 10% of Protestant pastors have ever been divorced, and that number for American adults is 27%. However, pastors who rate high on their "risk metrics" report "lower satisfaction with their relationships ("How Healthy Are Pastors' Relationships?").

The Barna Group report also says, "pastors who are high on burnout risk are more likely to rate their marriage as average or below average, and to say their relationship with their children is merely average." They also report that pastors who are considered at high "spiritual risk" are more likely to rate their marriage as average or below average. Sixty percent of participants in the study say that their relationship with their children under 18 is excellent, while 36% report a "good" relationship with their children under 18. Forty percent of clergy parents surveyed wished they had "spent more time with their children." Thirty four percent of senior leaders report having at least one child who no longer attends church while 7% say they have a child who no longer considers themselves a Christian. Twenty six percent report having had significant marriage problems and 27% had significant parenting problems. Forty percent said that ministry has been somewhat difficult on their family. The study concludes that "The effect

of ministry on a pastor's family, whether positive or negative, is tied to the pastor's ministry satisfaction" ("How Healthy Are Pastors' Relationships?").

Malphurs says healthy leaders "love their family more than the church" (Malphurs). God designed the marriage covenant relationship to make life better. The Genesis creation story states, "it's not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). God never intended for there to be a competition between marriage and ministry. Malphurs says, "Effective leaders have a strong and loving home life, which provides them the support they need to lead the church well" (Malphurs 3). Too many in ministry have allowed their marriage and family to be pushed to the back burner. Ajith Fernando says, "I asked my wife for some examples from home-life, which is perhaps our most important arena for identification;" one of her responses was that "when I was working on a book or involved in a big program or problem, it is easy for me to be so preoccupied that I do not participate fully in the conversation at mealtime. I would be physically there but not there emotionally" (24). It is unlikely that God would call people to become spouses and parents and then call them to a ministry that damages or diminishes the family. For healthy leaders, having a healthy home life is an essential. In Charles Ridley's thirteen characteristics of effective church planters, "spousal cooperation" is listed and described as "a marital partnership in which the church planting couple agrees on ministry priorities, each partner's role and involvement, and the integration and balance of ministry with family life" (qtd. in Stetzer and Im 50). Ajith Fernando, in his book *Jesus Driven Ministry* says of leaders, "As we strive for success in ministry, we can neglect our families" (85). It is certainly possible to have a successful ministry while neglecting one's family. By all accounts A.W. Tozer was one of the most respected and successful pastors of his day. Yet, in Lyle Dorsett's book *A Passion for God-the Spiritual Journey of A.W. Tozer*, the author writes, "The conclusion is inescapable that the

more time Tozer spent with God, and said yes to invitations to travel and speak, he drove a wider gulf between himself and Ada (his wife). She felt—at least to some degree—alone and abandoned, especially after the older boys left home for college and to build lives of their own” (Dorsett 122-123). There is a better way. God did not create two institutions, the family and the church, that cannot exist side by side. Rather, they are intended to enhance each other. In his book *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, Peter Scazzero says that early in his ministry he believed as leaders “lead, we are ultimately seeking to build Christ’s kingdom and extend his love through our efforts. What could be more important?” (83). He now teaches leaders to lead out of their marriage. He says, “If you want to lead out of your marriage, then you must make marriage-not leadership-your first ambition, your first passion, and your loudest gospel message” (Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* 92). He also says, “My definition of leadership success was transformed beyond merely growing the church to nurturing a passionate marriage that overflows to the rest of the world” (Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* 99). The literature suggests that those who are most fulfilled in marriage are also more fulfilled in ministry. The health of one seems to have a direct impact on the health of the other. Peter Scazzero, in writing about the disconnect that exists in regard to the importance of marriage and family in ministry as they relate to leadership, says,

Among Christian leaders today, the default thinking about marriage and singleness in standard practice goes something like this:

A leader’s highest priority is to build an effective and successful ministry to reveal Jesus’ love to the world. We give our best time and energy to achieve that objective. Marriage or singleness is important, but secondary on the priority list.

A leader's connection or oneness with Jesus is separate from his or her connection to a spouse (if married) or close friends and family (if single).

How a decision might impact a leader's marriage or singleness is a secondary rather than primary consideration in ministry discernment and decision making.

Leaders need to get as much training and equipping as possible to improve their leadership skills. They should get training and equipping for marriage or singleness if they have problems or a crisis.

Christian leaders need sound doctrine and a foundational theology, but they can't be experts on everything. There are more essential things to know and understand than a theology of marriage, singleness or sexuality.

Christian leaders don't need to be overly concerned about marriage or singleness of their team members. Senior leaders, in particular, should know how to care for these aspects of their lives by the time they get into higher levels of leadership. (Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 90-91)

### **Healthy Friendships**

Stanley Hauerwas says,

What has been constant with me is the importance of friendship. I think that is why God gave us Christ, to make us friends with God, and friends with each other, so that our relationships are nourishing and not so alone in this world. Loneliness is the besetting pathology for Americans. It's a part of the human condition, but Americans are worse because we don't want to have to depend upon anyone. Learning to be vulnerable again is crucial. So I continue to praise God for the people who claim me as a friend. That's what the church makes possible. (qtd. in Pickard 51)



The literature suggests that authentic community is found in the expression of the Christian life in the context of relationship (Taylor 44). Sometimes it seems that this is expected and provided for everyone but the pastor. The research reported in “How Healthy Are Pastors’ Relationships?” suggests that pastors do not, as a rule, have many close friends. Although two-thirds of those surveyed said they were happy with their friendships, only one-third of pastors expressed the strongest level of satisfaction with their friendships, giving them an excellent rating, and another third reported a “comparatively low satisfaction” with their friendships (“How Healthy Are Pastors’ Relationships?”). The literature also seems to indicate that older pastors are more secure in their friendships than are younger pastors (“How Healthy Are Pastors’ Relationships?”). This is of particular concern to church planting since more church planters fall into the young category. The research also reports that those who have “true friends” tend to be happier in their role as pastor and less likely to suffer burnout: “When it comes to having true friends, there are dramatic differences between pastors who say they are satisfied with their church and vocation and those who are not, and between leaders who fall at various points along the spiritual and burnout risk metrics. The correlations between higher friendship satisfaction and lower overall risk make a compelling case for the necessity of genuine friendships among pastors” (“How Healthy Are Pastors’ Relationships?”). Research also indicates that more established churches are more likely to have supportive elder boards or leadership teams that support and give accountability to the pastor (“How Healthy Are Pastors’ Relationships?”). According to H.B. London, Jr. and Neil B. Wiseman, 70 percent of pastors “do not have a close friend” (qtd. in Mulloy). Winfield Bevins says, “Planting a church is hard work and can be a very lonely business because a church planter and his or her family often encounter difficulty in adjusting to a new cultural setting. In addition to this, planters may experience culture shock,

spiritual warfare, spiritual fatigue, and even burnout. When planting a new church alone, there is also a lack of fellowship and accountability” (37). The impact of pastor’s relationships to God on their relationships with friends, family, and even strangers cannot be overstated. God wants to fill people with His love so He can love others through them. Spiritual disciplines could also be called “relational disciplines.” The practice of these disciplines has an immeasurable impact on relationships of all kinds.

### **Physical Health**

Literature suggests that the physical health of pastors and leaders is an issue. Paul Vitello, in his article “Taking a Break from the Lord’s Work,” says, “Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen” (1). Vitello reports,

In May, the Clergy Health Initiative, a seven-year study that Duke University began in 2007, published the first results of a continuing survey of 1,726 Methodist ministers in North Carolina, compared with neighbors in their census tracts, the ministers reported significantly higher rates of arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure and asthma. Obesity was 10 percent more prevalent in the clergy group.” He also reported that surveys done by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, showed that “69 percent of its ministers reported being overweight, 64 percent having high blood pressure and 13 percent taking antidepressants. (Vitello 4)

Healthy leaders are intentional about rest: not just getting a good night of sleep but also being intentional about taking a day off during the week and taking both short sabbaticals throughout the year as well as extended sabbaticals periodically. Malphurs says, “Effective

leaders make sure they get rest and give their body time to recalibrate.” Betty Mulloy says, “Without question, commitment to regular times of personal retreat is among the most important contributors to a pastors’ health.” Richard Foster in *Celebration of Discipline* says, “we must seek out the recreating stillness of solitude if want to be with others meaningfully. We must seek the fellowship of others and accountability of others if we want to be alone safely. We must cultivate both if we are to live in obedience” (85). Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in *Life Together*, “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community...Let him who is not in community beware of being alone...Each by itself has profound pitfalls and perils. One who wants fellowship without solitude plunges into the void of words and feelings, and one who seeks solitude without fellowship perishes in the abyss of vanity, self-infatuation, and despair” (77-78). Eugene Peterson in *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* says, “A sense of hurry in pastoral work disqualifies one for the work of conversation and prayer that develops relationships that meet personal needs” (61-62). One suggestion that a number of health experts have suggested is to take more time off. Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, an assistant professor of health research at Duke University, reports, “These people tend to be driven by a sense of duty to God to answer every call for help from anybody, and they are virtually called upon all the time, 24/7” (Vitello 1). Scazzero advocates “more vacation time for members of the clergy, Sabbath-keeping, and a ‘rhythm of stopping’ or daily praying, that he learned from the silent order of Trappist monks” (Vitello 3). God presents a great model to follow in the creation story. Work for six days and then take a day of rest. “One of the greatest gifts for my life as one who serves God is observing the Sabbath” (Dawn 33). Literature suggests that in addition to rest, boundaries and learning to say “no” can improve the health of those in ministry. In his article “8 Habits of Healthy Spiritual Leaders”, Matt Brown says to “set healthy margins.” He suggests, “For everything we say ‘yes’

to, we are inadvertently saying ‘no’ to something else. So be careful what you say ‘yes’ to” (Brown). He continues “...Margin in the life of the leader allows space for creativity to flourish, thinking and decision-making to be possible, helps highlight the important over the urgent, and keeps you enjoying life and leadership over the long haul” (Brown). Marva Dawn gives “Hints for Saying No” in her book *The Sense of the Call*: “Avoid desperate requests. Go with your gifts. Suggest someone else. Put a limit. Ration your Time. Reaffirm that you should not feel guilty” (145). Young church planters especially an enormous drive to succeed. Often times the way they measure success is not altogether right or healthy. This push for success is causing many to burnout, which takes many forms. Some get stressed to the point of quitting. Others have moral failures. In this “driven” world, few things are more helpful in moving towards health than learning to stop, be quiet, rest, listen to God and be refreshed. Observing a sabbath could actually save ministries, marriages, and lives.

### **Emotional Health**

Emotional health can be severely tested while church planting. “When church planters move into their new place of ministry, they leave many things behind including church, extended family, and other emotional support systems” (Ott and Wilson 314).

“Ministry is messy and people are sinful. Receiving criticism and second guessing is the fate of every leader in a church. But leaders of healthy churches love the people anyway...they love unconditionally because they are loved unconditionally” (Rainer). The goal of a leader is to bring people along. “Ultimately, the effectiveness of a church leadership team is not dependent on their constitutional texts but on their heart disposition” (Bilezikian 7). Peter Scazzero defines the emotionally unhealthy leader as “someone who operates in a continuous state of emotional and spiritual deficit, lacking emotional maturity and a ‘being with God’ sufficient to sustain their

‘doing for God’” (*The Emotionally Healthy Leader* 25). Scazzero also says, “the sad reality is that most of us will not go forward until the pain of staying where we are is unbearable” (*Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* 22). Scazzero gives ten characteristics of “unhealthy spirituality:”

1. Using God to run from God
2. Ignoring the emotions of anger, sadness and fear
3. Dying to the wrong things
4. Denying the past’s impact on the present
5. Dividing our lives into “secular” and “sacred” compartments
6. Doing for God instead of being with God
7. Spiritualizing away conflict
8. Covering our brokenness, weakness, and failure
9. Living without limits
10. Judging other people’s spiritual journey. (*Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* 23).

Scazzero also says, “The deficits of emotionally unhealthy leaders impact virtually every area of their lives and leadership” (*The Emotionally Healthy Leader* 27). It is not always clear why so many leaders are emotionally unhealthy. Dan B. Allender says,

A good leader will, in time, disappoint everyone. Leadership requires a willingness to not be liked, in fact, a willingness to be hated. But it is impossible to lead people who doubt you and hate you. So the constant tug is to make the decision that is the least offensive to greatest number and then to align yourself with those who have the most power to sustain your position and reputation in the organization. (14)

Allender goes on to say, “If you lead, you will eventually serve with Judas or Peter. Betrayal in some form is as sure as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west” (31). There are also issues specific to church planting. “Every planter needs to prepare for a degree of culture shock, a feeling of disorientation while relating to so many unchurched people during the start-up phase of a new church” (Stetzer and Im 140). In the early 2000’s the Lilly Endowment committed \$84

million to research projects focused on pastors with the intention of identifying ways to improve pastor health and effectiveness (Miller 77). One of those studies was done by Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie, entitled the “Pastors Summit Project.” Chapman reported, “The research on the lack of physical and emotional health in our pastors was rather shocking to us...how many pastors were on sick leave due to stress related illness, and how many were obese, or had heart-related illness, compared to the general population” (Miller 77). The Pastors Summit focused on identifying positive practices required to stay in ministry. According to Miller, they identified five areas where pastors should seek to grow: 1. Spiritual formation 2. Self-care 3. Emotional and cultural intelligence 4. Marriage and family 5. Leadership and management (77). One pastor who participated in the study said, “The stress of ministry has pushed me and my marriage away from the practices of emotional honesty, reflection, and dialogue” (Miller 86). Elliot Grudem, in response to this study, said “If these are the characteristics that promote healthy, sustainable ministry, we must continually attend to and grow in these areas. If we don’t, we won’t be healthy, our churches won’t be healthy, and the church planters we develop won’t be healthy” (qtd. in Stetzer and Im 339). Growth in these areas will only occur as pastors intentionally and purposefully develop rhythms of life that build themselves up rather than tear themselves down. Using spiritual disciplines in the training of church planters could go a long way towards achieving this goal. Steve Seamands says, “Bringing our hurts to the cross, then, is not a quick-fix method of healing. Deep wounds require deep healing. And deep healing involves a slow difficult process” (*Wounds That Heal* 12). The spiritual discipline of confession could go a long way in helping leaders find both healing and health.

### **Research Design Literature**

This project was a pre-intervention design, using qualitative research methodology. The researcher used two focus groups and five semi-structured interviews to collect data. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and then transcribed by an independent professional transcriber. Seidman says, “I believe that to work most reliably with the words of participants, the researcher has to transform those spoken words into a written text to study. The primary method of creating text from interviews is to tape-record the interviews and to transcribe them” (114). The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions that allowed the interviewees to elaborate on the questions and help determine the direction of the interview. Sensing says, “Interviews allow people to describe their situations and put words to their interior lives, personal feelings, opinions, and experiences that otherwise are not available to the researcher by observation” (103). The purpose of the interviews was to collect data from several different church planters from varying locations in order to compare their experiences in regard to the research topic.

### **Summary of Literature**

Church planting has gained much momentum over the last few years. This carries with it both good and bad characteristics. The good is that more is being written and taught about the importance of church planting than at any time in recent memory. The bad would be that church planting has become “popular” or “trendy.” This could lead to people choosing to be church planters because they think that it is the cool thing that people of faith are doing. The fact that so much of what is being written leans more towards the pragmatic side of church planting could possibly reinforce this possibility. The tone of much of this material conveys, “Here’s a kit.

Follow the instructions. And ‘voila’- you have a church.” Church planting could become the next big “do it yourself” craze.

Ministry is difficult. Church planting can be extremely difficult. In order for people to last as church leaders, everything must be done to ensure that they are healthy. Pastors as a group are really bad at self-care. Somewhere in their souls they have believed the lie that taking care of themselves and their family is selfish. The books on church planting that are being written are great; yet, there needs to be a renewed emphasis on the building of leaders that last. Leader health is one of the most critical subjects in the church planting discussion. A renewed emphasis on spiritual disciplines is key to church leader health of the future. An intentional emphasis on spiritual disciplines in the training of church planters could change both the church planters of the next generation and the churches they plant for the better. Churches that are planted for the glory of God, rather than the glory of the pastor, would be a huge step forward for the western church. This culture tends to stir up a lust for more. Often in church world that means more recognition or fame. This causes leaders to give honor to people and things that are not honorable. In a culture where everything, including church life, has become consumer driven, a return to the basics of the spiritual disciplines and the growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus that they promote would be a breath of fresh air.

### **CHAPTER 3**

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

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

This chapter describes the method of research used for this project. Following a brief description of the nature and purpose of the project, the research questions are presented accompanied by the instrumentation used for each question. Next is a description of the ministry



context and participants as well as a description of the types of instrumentation used for data collection and the approaches to data analysis.

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

The purpose of the research was to explore the practice and impact of spiritual disciplines in current church planters to determine the importance of spiritual formation in developing healthy new church planters for the next generation. Much of the training currently offered to church planters is what would be considered pragmatic in nature. Although there is certainly much to be gained from this emphasis on methodology, there is a need for a greater focus on the spiritual side of training and equipping. Ministry in general, and church planting in particular, has the potential of taking over a person's life. Because it is such a worthwhile cause, it can be difficult at times to know when to say "no" and how to set proper boundaries.

Ironically, a call to plant churches, something that is born out of a person's love for God and commitment to His will, can sometimes lead to a diminishing of the very relationship that gave that calling birth. The role of those who train church planters is not just to give them methods that work but to help them discover a rhythm of life that will help assure that they last and thrive. Unhealthy practices and some obvious gaps in training have created a bit of a health crisis among pastors today. Paul Vitello in his article "Taking a Break from the Lord's Work" says "Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen." Vitello reports,

In May, the Clergy Health Initiative, a seven-year study that Duke University began in 2007, published the first results of a continuing survey of 1,726 Methodist ministers in North Carolina, compared with neighbors in their census tracts, the ministers reported

significantly higher rates of arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure and asthma. Obesity was 10 percent more prevalent in the clergy group. Taking a Break from the Lord's Work, Paul Vitello

He also reported that surveys done by the Evangelical Luther Church in America showed that "69 percent of its ministers reported being overweight, 64 percent having high blood pressure and 13 percent taking antidepressants" (Vitello). Far too many young and gifted church planters are burning out or experiencing some sort of "fall from grace." The purpose of the research was to explore the practice and impact of spiritual disciplines in current church planters to determine the importance of spiritual formation in developing healthy new church planters for the next generation. In order to address these issues, this study identifies the spiritual disciplines that are particularly helpful to church planters both at home and at work. It also identifies common stumbling blocks to church planters as well as spiritual disciplines that can help avoid or overcome those obstacles.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions used in this project were designed to help determine the usefulness of spiritual disciplines in producing a healthy spiritual life for those involved in church planting. They also were used to attempt to identify spiritual disciplines that were helpful in maintaining healthy family life in the midst of the pressures of the church planting world.

#### **RQ #1: What are some spiritual disciplines that are particularly beneficial in the life of a church planter?**

The purpose of this question is to determine the spiritual disciplines that are particularly helpful to church planters. To collect data for this question three researcher-designed focus groups were held with a number of church planters from Atlanta and other areas in the U.S.

These groups were entitled the (1) Atlanta Metro Church Planters, (2) U.S. Church Planters Outside of Atlanta, and (3) Transformation Network Planters. Questions 1-4 of the study established the credibility of those being interviewed. Questions 5-9 addressed specific experiences and practices of the interviewees during church planting, and question 10 allowed for further discussion to cover anything missed.

**RQ #2: What are spiritual disciplines that especially help planters and their families thrive?**

To determine the impact that an emphasis on spiritual disciplines could have on family life in church planting, semi-structured interviews were held with church planter couples in the Transformation Network. A series of open-ended questions were asked that centered around what church planting had been like for their marriages and families.

**RQ #3: What are the expected benefits for church planters who are trained with an emphasis on spiritual disciplines?**

To answer this question data was analyzed from the focus groups and interviews as well as research from the literature review for this project.

**Ministry Context(s)**

This study brings together members of the current generation of church planters in the Atlanta area and in other regions in the United States, to determine how a greater emphasis on spiritual disciplines during training can enhance the planting experience as well as give a greater quality of life and opportunity for success to future church planters. Church planting is important. Some believe it is the most effective way to reach the unchurched. Ed Stetzer and Daniel Im in *Planting Missional Churches* say “church planting is essential. Without it Christianity will continue to decline in North America” (7).

Jesus said that people would know they were His by the way they loved each other. Churches today are filled with people who have been hurt, both leaders wounded by the people they are leading and people wounded by their leaders. Today's culture places high value on being busy. Many in the work force find their identity in how hard they work and how many hours they can bill in a week. This culture carries into the church planting world. Pastors are expected to be on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Many feel guilty for taking days off or going on vacation. In the Atlanta area there are several large mega-churches. The pressure of measuring up to the unrealistic standards of these large churches makes it even more difficult for young church planters to set healthy boundaries around work hours and family priorities. For young planters to base their identities on who God says they are and not how they compare to others, they need to be trained in spiritual disciplines that help them stay connected to the Father's heart.

### **Participants**

#### **Criteria for Selection**

The participants in this project were church planters and their spouses between the ages of 25-55. All participants are married. Some couples are co-pastors of their church plants, while other couples have only one spouse serving as the pastor, although both are involved in the life of the church. The focus group participants were planters who have planted at least one church in the US. Because the investigator is a church planter and a trainer of church planters, many of the participants were planters that he knew from planting networks, conferences, and small groups in the Atlanta area. Some planters were included who are outside of the Atlanta area. They were also known to the researcher or connected through friends who are also church planting leaders. The investigator also issued an invitation to participate to the members of the Atlanta Church Planting Alliance. This organization is made up of church planting leaders in the Atlanta Metro

area. Participants received a personal invitation from the researcher by email or phone call.

Participants had to have planted at least one church and been active in church planting for at least two years. All of the planters who participated were married. Following the focus groups semi-structured interviews were done with the Church planters and spouses of the Transformation Network.

### **Description of Participants**

The participants in the study were all church planters who were married as a vital piece of the research was geared towards helping planters' marriages and families. There were fifteen church plants represented. The research included interviews with husbands and wives together and focus groups. Planters who were sought are currently leading a church they planted and have been with that church for a minimum of one year. The participants were ages 25-55.

The church planters who participated were both male and female. Some were husband and wife teams who served as co-pastors. At least one was a female church planter whose husband was a part of her church but not on staff. There was one African American member and one female member included in the group. Most of the participants had children. The participants came from various networks and groups and had received training from multiple sources. Some of the participants were seminary trained and some were not.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Those invited to participate were informed of the nature of the study through an informed consent letter. A copy of the letter is attached as Appendix A. To protect confidentiality, all names were changed in the study. Denominations, group affiliations, and geographical areas were not reported. When referencing individual participants, pseudonyms were used that were only recognizable to the researcher. The raw data from the study, including transcripts from the

focus groups and interviews, were only studied by the principal researcher. Only research findings using pseudonyms were shared. All recordings were done on password protected devices known only to the researcher.

### **Instrumentation**

The instruments used in this project were focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Both instruments were researcher-designed. The research was designed to start at a very general level and progress into deeper, more significant issues. The purpose was to discover common themes and challenges in church planting and best spiritual discipline practices to address said themes and challenges.

First, focus groups were convened to assess the general difficulties, stumbling blocks, and potential burn out issues of church planting. Focus groups are group interviews. According to Sensing, “The synergy of the group will often provide richer data than if each person in the group had been interviewed separately” (120). The focus groups were asked nine questions. The first four were of a general nature designed to establish who was being interviewed and what qualified them to be involved in the study. Questions 5-8 were aimed at digging deeper into the life of a church planter. The last question was an open-ended question intended to give participants the opportunity to voice things that had not been covered or elaborate on things that had been discussed earlier. The focus group protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Once the focus groups were concluded, the recordings were transcribed and studied in order to identify common themes, practices, and potential stumbling blocks. These findings were given the title “Practices and Pitfalls”. These “practices and pitfalls” were then examined in semi-structured interviews. Roulston says of semi-structured interviews, “In these kinds of interviews, the interviewers refer to a prepared interview guide that includes a number of

questions. These questions are usually open-ended, and after posing each question to the research participant, the interviewer follows up with probes seeking further detail and description about what has been said” (15).

Next, the church planter couples of the Transformation Network were interviewed to determine if the couples had encountered similar struggles to those discussed in the focus groups and to probe into how they had addressed these issues. The protocol for the interviews can be found in Appendix C.

Finally, the discoveries made from the focus groups and interviews were combined with findings in the literature review for the purpose of determining how inclusion of an emphasis on certain spiritual disciplines could enhance church planter training and help planters and their families thrive in the church planting world.

### **Pilot Test or Expert Review**

Dr. Ellen Marmon, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Asbury Theological Seminary, and Dr. Milton Lowe, Associate Doctor of Ministry Director and Academic Coach at Asbury Theological Seminary, reviewed the instruments used in this project. They sent feedback on any items that were misleading, unclear, or potentially harmful to the participants. The most helpful feedback from Dr. Marmon was advice on making sure that questions were not able to be answered with yes or no. Doing this kept the conversation flowing and encouraged thoughtful answers.

### **Reliability & Validity of Project Design**

In this project, the researcher used a grounded theory design to evaluate and analyze the data. “Grounded theory as an approach to the design and conduct of research, and analysis of data has been enormously influential within the field of qualitative inquiry, and the analytic

processes described by grounded theorists have also been taken up by qualitative researchers who may not situate their studies as contributions to grounded theory work” (Roulston 155).

In this project, focus groups were used to explore what spiritual disciplines would enhance the training of church planters. The focus groups were framed by the study of literature around the topic as well as the experience of the researcher. This allowed for the designing of questions that would flow naturally from general to more specific. The data from these groups was analyzed to identify common themes among the responses given by the participants. Repeated stumbling blocks and helpful spiritual disciplines were recorded under the heading “Practices and Pitfalls”.

Using focus groups for this project provided multiple perspectives of life as a church planter. It also provided opportunity for interaction among the participants, which produced a deeper level of conversation and more thorough data. Bogdan and Biklen say of focus groups, “Group participants can stimulate each other to articulate their views or even to realize what their own views are” (109).

Because the project seeks to explore the possible impact upon the training of church planters that spiritual disciplines may have, it was important to receive information and detailed experience from a number of church planters from different contexts. Using focus groups made this possible. After completing the focus groups made up of US church planters from both inside and outside of the Atlanta area, semi-structured interviews were held with the couples in the Transformation Network. The purpose of the interviews was two-fold: to go deeper into the common “pitfalls and practices” discovered in the focus groups and to gain insight on the impact of church planting on marriage and family by including spouses. The flexibility of the semi-structured interview allowed for a deep dive into some of the focus group discoveries.



Finally, compilation and analysis of the data allowed for the identification of best practices for the inclusion of an emphasis on spiritual disciplines in the training of church planters.

### **Data Collection**

This project was pre-intervention, exploring a current ministry issue and suggesting ways to improve it. The project used qualitative research. According to Bogdan and Biklen, “the qualitative researchers’ goal is to better understand human behavior and experience. They seek to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are” (43). Sensing says, “Qualitative research produces culturally specific and contextually rich data critical for the design, evaluation, and ongoing health of institutions like churches” (58). This project uses interviews and focus groups to record the experiences, good and bad, of church planters and their spouses in the church planting process in order to explore whether the process would be enhanced by an emphasis on spiritual disciplines in the training of church planters.

The first qualitative instrument used was the focus group. Two focus groups were held, including between four and six participants. The total number of participants was ten. One of the focus groups was done in person and one online via Zoom call. The sessions were recorded and transcribed from the recordings.

The second research tool used was semi-structured interviews. Five interviews were conducted with church planter couples from the Transformation Network. The interviews were used to dive deeper into the findings of the focus groups. The interviews examined the “Practices and Pitfalls” and also asked specific questions geared towards determining the effectiveness of spiritual disciplines in creating quality of life for the couples interviewed. The interviews were done in person and were audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed and studied to find

common themes and practices among the couples interviewed. Field notes were made by the researcher immediately following each interview.

### **Data Analysis**

These transcriptions were examined by the researcher to find common themes emerging from both what was shared as well as emotions behind words and things left unsaid. A list of common themes, good and bad, was made covering three areas, titled Spiritual Disciplines, Family Practices, and Other Practices and Pitfalls. The researcher also compiled field notes after each focus group. Kathryn Roulston says, “It is crucial for qualitative researchers to have an understanding of and an ability to theorize the application of qualitative interviews to investigate research problems in social science research, and the researcher-relationships inherent in each research study” (3). Themes came primarily from things that were said. However, attention was also paid to the emotions behind words and things left unsaid. These findings, or themes, were named and arranged according to the focus group protocol. From this, four lists were made, “Spiritual Disciplines” (SD), “Pitfalls” (PI), “Family Practices” (FP) and “Other Practices” (OP). Under each heading was a numerical list of subheadings (SD1, SD2, and so on).

The transcripts and field notes from the semi-structured interviews were examined in the same manner as the focus groups and findings were named and categorized. Notes were also made on the interaction, non-verbal communication, and emotional reactions of the participants as they reflected on the planting experience and the impact that spiritual disciplines had on that process.

The lists made from the two instruments were then compared and studied by the researcher to identify similarities and differences. These were detailed in notes. These findings were compared to information contained in the literature review in order to identify specific

spiritual disciplines that could be of help in areas of difficulty in the church planting process. The researcher also looked to the literature review to determine possible benefits to planters who are trained with an emphasis on spiritual disciplines. For this, the section entitled “Characteristics of Healthy Leaders” was very important.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT**

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

Church planting is increasingly becoming one of the primary methods for evangelism and expansion of God’s kingdom in the world. With this emphasis, the training of planters is of vital importance. Many books are being written on the importance of this venture, and many networks are forming around the world to assist church planters in this process. The planting of healthy churches is more likely to happen when the church planters themselves are spiritually, emotionally, and relationally healthy. Most of the resources available to church planters today is pragmatic in nature and content. This project seeks to give a central role to the use of spiritual disciplines in the training of church planters. Planters who are deeply rooted in their relationship to God are better equipped for the intense demands that church planting presents. Two quotes from one of the focus groups conducted underscore this belief:

“this calling will turn your life inside out and upside down. So, count the cost. Are you ready to wreck your life for something great? It’s totally worth it. If you’re looking for something comfortable, safe and fun, do something else.”

“I was ill prepared for the pressure. The stress on my health and things like that, I felt that stress and I had to make adjustments in Sabbath in order to be more deeply rooted...so I’m not a workaholic. To be driven in a Holy way, not an unhealthy way.”

The interviews and focus groups revealed several common “pitfalls” among the church planters. The top four pitfalls were:

### 1. Anxiety and stress

Twenty percent of those interviewed said that church planting had produced high levels of anxiety and stress in their lives. One participant commented, “I started pulling back, not because I wanted to, but my whole state started breaking down and I had to.” One pastor said, “I felt like I was running as fast as I could. I was just tired and anxious.” Another said, “Both of us felt anxiety and exhaustion.” Several talked about the overwhelming demands and expectations. One pastor said he felt he was “emotionally compromised.” He went on to say, “I think the thing that caused me the most trouble was self-pressure. Constantly putting pressure on myself and waiting for the next week to see if it would be the week where it all fell apart.”

### 2. Hurt

Forty-five percent of the participants said that they had experienced some type of hurt or wounding during the planting process. One pastor said, “I decided early on not to keep pastor/parishioner distance. That means I’m very vulnerable to being hurt. And I’m often hurt.” Another said, “It’s extremely lonely and burnout potential is high.” Several talked about struggling with the desire to please people and how this led to disappointment and hurt.

### 3. Over working/ bad boundaries

Eighty percent of those interviewed said that they overworked and felt that their boundaries between home and work were not good. One said, “If it weren’t for the mercy of God, I would have done that. Been a workaholic.” Another said, “I felt like I was a bit of a workaholic. In hindsight I would’ve had better boundaries. I enjoyed it. That was the problem. It was life giving, because it’s something I’m good at. It was too much. I didn’t have enough

boundaries.” Almost all of the participants admitted to struggling with keeping good boundaries. One said that she was on the computer 24/7. Another said that the church planting process had exposed their “workaholic” tendencies and that they were still trying to recover. More than one said that most of their conflict at home was because they could not leave work at work.

#### 4. Insecurity and comparison

Thirty-five percent of those interviewed said that they wrestled with thoughts of insecurity or the fear of failure. One pastor told a story about holding a joint service with a church that was planted after his. He was embarrassed that the younger church had more people and seemed to be further along than his. He said, “In that moment I felt exposed and felt like a failure. I was embarrassed.” One participant said he was emotionally terrified. Several struggled with the temptation to compete with those around them.

The purpose of this project was to explore the possible benefits that an emphasis on spiritual disciplines within the training process could have upon church planters, their families, and the churches they plant.

**Table 4.1. Top Pitfalls of Church Planters**

<b>Pitfall</b>	<b>Number of Participants Affected by Pitfall</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Anxiety & Stress	4	20%
Hurt	9	45%
Overworking/Bad Boundaries	16	80%
Insecurity & Comparison	7	35%

## **Participants**

The participants in this project were church planters and their spouses between the ages of 25-55. All participants are married. Some couples are co-pastors of their church plants, while other couples have only one spouse serving as the pastor, but both are involved in the life of the church. The focus group participants were planters who have planted at least one church in the US. Because the investigator is a church planter and a trainer of church planters, many of the participants were planters that he knew from planting networks, conferences, and small groups in the Atlanta area. Also included were some planters outside of the Atlanta area that he knows or is connected with through friends who are also church planting leaders. Participants had to have planted at least one church and been active in church planting for at least two years. Following the focus groups, semi-structured interviews were done with the Church planters and spouses of the Transformation Network, Inc.

The church planters who participated were both male and female. Some were husband and wife teams who served as co-pastors. At least one was a female church planter whose husband was a part of her church but not on staff. There was one African American member, one Asian American, and six female members included in the group. All of the participants have children. The participants came from various networks and groups and had received training from multiple sources. All participants are college graduates. Some of the participants were seminary trained and some were not. Seven of the twenty participants have Master Level degrees.

Figure 4.1. Age of Participants

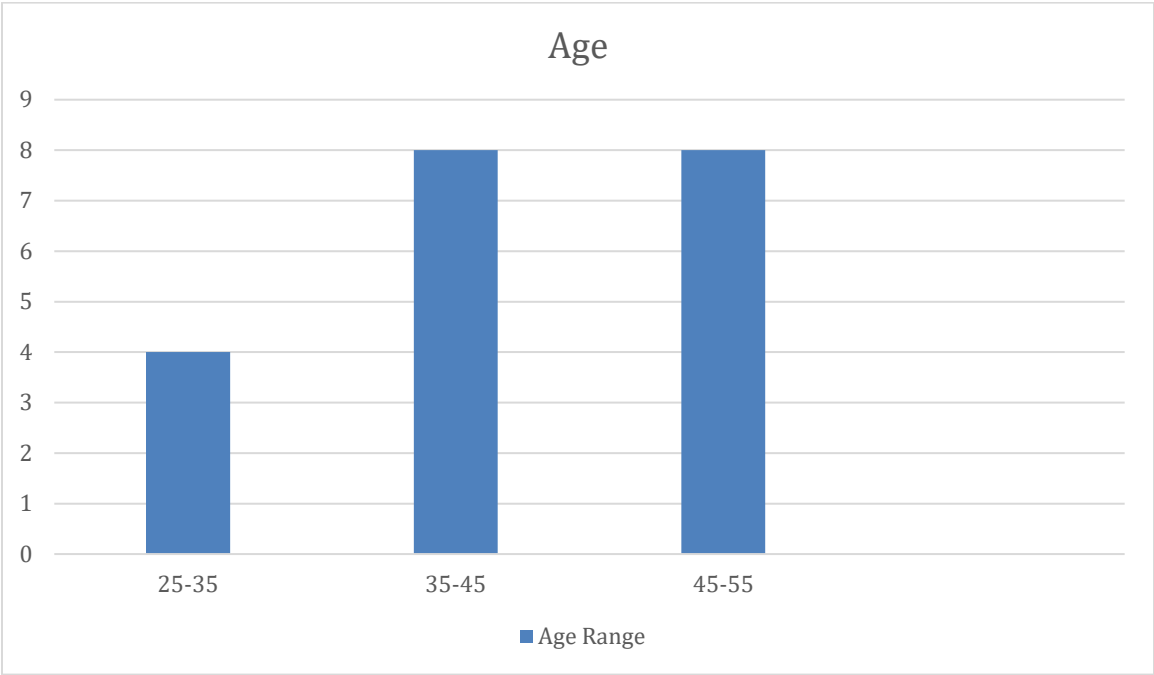
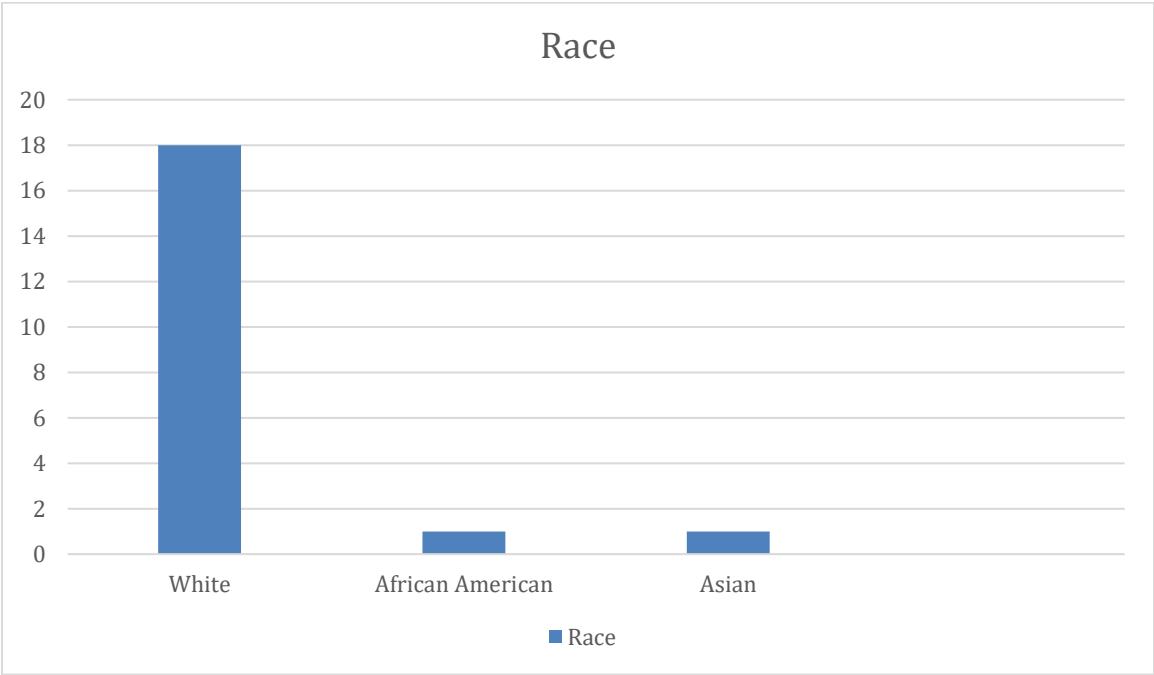
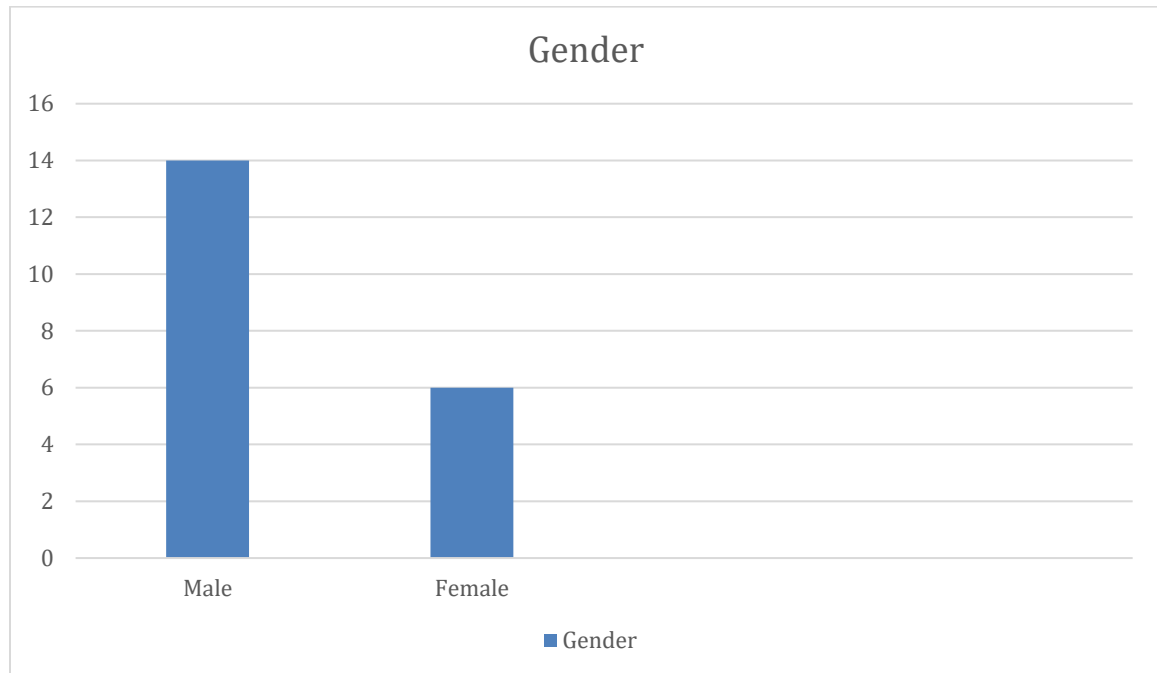


Figure 4.2. Race of Participants



**Figure 4.3. Gender of Participants**

**Research Question #1: What are some spiritual disciplines that are particularly beneficial in the life of a church planter?**

Every person interviewed indicated that spiritual disciplines were an important element in their life with God and essential in the walking out of their calling. One participant said, “For me, spiritual disciplines really started coming to life in a way they never had...you could see the body (church) growing while you’re personally shrinking on the inside and that was happening pretty rapidly to me in the first few years...the disciplines ended up being probably lifesavers for me.” Twelve different disciplines were mentioned either as things they depended on or wish they had depended upon more. The five disciplines most often mentioned were prayer, bible study, keeping a sabbath, solitude, and fasting.

**Prayer**

Prayer was the most often mentioned discipline, both in terms of use and the desire to use more. Thirteen of the twenty participants listed prayer as vital to their church planting



experience. A common response was, “If I could do it over, I would pray more, spend more time in the Bible, and be busy less.” One pastor said, “Church planting requires more prayer than you can anticipate or imagine.” Several of those interviewed spoke of the importance of having a strong prayer life when things “fall apart.” One said, “That’s why your prayer life has to be so solid. Things don’t just fall apart, they break.” Several talked about the importance of getting up early and spending time in prayer every day. One participant described prayer as being particularly helpful in the early years of planting in this way:

I’d say prayer as it relates to intercession, really crying out to God on behalf of what we’re going after or individual situations.” Another said, “If I were to go plant now, I would be spending a lot more time in prayer than I probably did on the front end.”

Several indicated how, as the process played out and got harder, they spent more time in prayer. One said “Five years ago, I had a pretty decided shift in the way and amount of time I spent praying. That’s been really big.

## **Solitude**

Solitude as a spiritual discipline was the second highest on the list. It was named by eleven of the participants. One pastor said, “I know I need solitude. If I have a very people-heavy day, the next day needs to have more solitude in it.” Another said, “It was actually the discipline of solitude and silence that saved my life.” Several commented on how solitude allowed them to get away from the busyness and the many voices and just listen for the one voice. One pastor talked about how he struggled with a fear of being left. He thought his church would fail and everyone would leave. Solitude for him became a way of believing and reaffirming the promise from the Bible that God would never leave him. Several spoke of how the discipline of solitude

and silence helped them to recover from the busyness, the crazy pace, and the unrealistic expectations placed on them by themselves and others.

### **Bible Reading (Study)**

Nine of the participants identified Bible reading or study as one of their go-to spiritual disciplines. The participants varied in the specific way they used the Bible for spiritual formation. Some were adamant about the need to dive deep into scripture every day. Others said they benefited greatly from memorizing scripture. One participant commented, “I know, for me, scripture memorization has been huge. It’s really formed an anchor.” One participant recounted how in a particularly dark time when he felt himself getting angry with God, he began memorizing Romans 8. He felt it “recalibrated” his mind. Another said, “I can’t find another way than the day in/day out practice of doing it. So, everyday prayer and scripture study. Every single day. That’s been the bedrock for me, and that’s what kept me from going off the deep end.”

### **Sabbath**

Keeping a consistent weekly Sabbath was considered very important by a number of the participants. Seven of those interviewed mentioned that this as a discipline was particularly beneficial to them as church planters. Some commented on the idea of a Sabbath being new to them. The participants varied in how they used their sabbath time as well as whether it was personal or family oriented. A large number of the participants struggled with bad boundaries and overworking. They all seemed to agree that the practice of sabbath was extremely helpful in combating these. One pastor said, “I think for both of us, Sabbath...has been extremely important.” More than one participant talked about how important it was to actually have a day in their week where they did nothing. One said he liked to look at a river and watch it flow

“without his help.” It reminded him that God was in charge and helped him to relax and not feel so much pressure to perform. Several identified having a consistent Sabbath as something that was very important in providing protection for their families. Most participants intentionally used Sabbath as a way to intentionally combat the overly busy culture they live in. One pastor talked about the fear of taking two weeks off as a Sabbatical. He wondered if there would be a pile of work waiting when he got back. Still he said, “If I could have worked in a more regular Sabbath, that, I think, would have been life changing for us.” Several spoke of the importance of rest. One participant talked about the importance of not just taking a Sabbath, but actually developing a personal “theology and practice” of Sabbath.

### **Fasting**

Five participants listed fasting as a spiritual discipline that they found to be very helpful. One pastor talked about a “standing fast, in the sense of several 40-day fasts, over the first few years and a lot of asking the Lord for vision for our community.” One pastor’s wife commented, “We established long ago every Friday morning is fasting and every Friday lunch we go out.” The husband agreed that the long-term commitment to fasting from Thursday dinner to Friday lunch was important to him. Some talked about establishing a rhythm of prayer and fasting. One pastor talked about how fasting regularly made him feel more grounded internally: “I feel more connected and at rest.”

**Table 4.2. Spiritual Disciplines Beneficial to Church Planter**

<b>Spiritual Discipline</b>	<b>Number of Participants who found it beneficial</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Prayer	13	65%
Solitude	11	55%
Bible Reading (Study)	9	45%
Sabbath	7	35%
Fasting	5	25%

**Research Question #2: What are some spiritual disciplines that help planters and their families thrive?**

Protecting and providing for family was a desire for every participant. Some were very honest about their failures in this area during the planting years. One participant was told by a friend that the planting years would be terrible for his family, but he could make up for it later. Another said, “Our family didn’t realize how much it was affecting us.” One planter said if she could go back and start again, she would “separate out more of the church planting from our life and have it not so enmeshed and engrained.” The spiritual disciplines mentioned most often were self-examination, sabbath keeping, fellowship and prayer.

**Self-Examination**

Twelve of the twenty participants named some form of self-examination as key in providing for their families’ well-being. This was an unexpected finding. They identified their own tendencies towards overworking and failure to maintain good boundaries as reasons for self-examination being necessary. One pastor said that his children said things like, “You’re always on the phone,” or “We’re always going to church.” Statements like this, whether completely true or not, caused him to step back and reflect on boundaries and priorities. One pastor spoke about a retreat he does twice a year with five other pastors. They take time to share their hearts, talk about their struggles, and pray for each other. They include their spouses in one of the retreats. He called it a very life-giving practice. Another participant talked about learning to say “no” to more things in order to create time for family. One planter shared how he evaluated his life and determined “to be the best dad I’ve ever been in the church planting process, the best husband I’ve ever been in this process.” Another talked about constantly “re-centering” in an effort to combat the business of church planting. One participant talked about meeting with a life coach to

examine every area of his life. He said, “The idea was not just to focus on your relationship with God, but to focus on your relationship with God first and then your personal growth, your marriage, and your kids. Your identity. Your most important relationships and roles.” He went on to say, “I’m working really hard, but my marriage sucks right now.” Another planter spoke of his need to be “present” in the moment. He especially felt he needed to be more intentional with his family. One participant said that if he could go back and start over, he would be more intentional in caring for his own heart and soul. He said, “It was so phrenetic and busy especially in the early years, that I did not see soon enough the value of solitude and quiet.” Another talked about the role of self-examination in identifying her weaknesses. “I burn out pretty quickly, ...to meet everyone’s needs, say yes to everyone. I used to say yes to every meeting. I can’t do that anymore.” One of the couples shared that it has been very helpful to them to regularly ask the question “Where am I?” The wife went on to say, “At any moment in your life or day, you can stop and ask yourself and you can really evaluate, ‘Where am I? Am I ignoring God? Am I trying too hard?’”

### **Keeping a Sabbath**

Eight of the twenty participants identified keeping a weekly sabbath as a key to helping their family to thrive in church planting world. Several said that they felt that keeping a regular sabbath kept them from working too much. More than one mentioned their children complaining about them being on the phone or computer too much. The regular sabbath was used by many of them as a way to be intentional about family time. One couple described their sabbath this way: “It’s like a slow Friday or Saturday morning where we make pancakes and eat outside, and the kids run around. We don’t have plans.” Several participants related how they had taken short sabbaticals (two or three weeks) to get away from church life and just be together as a family.

One participant took a three-month sabbatical. He said it was really good for him and for the church. One participant said, “One thing we began to be intentional about was creating a Sabbath, a time of rest, a time of protection for us individually but also as a family.” Another couple called their Sabbath “Do nothing Friday.”

### **Fellowship**

Eight of the participants identified “Fellowship” as an important discipline for their family. They talked about the importance of having friends to spend time with and talk to in order to combat the loneliness that many experience in ministry. One said, “I knew going in that planting in community with other people speaking into our lives was important.” He went on to say, “It’s been healthy for our marriage because they’ll come and say you’ve got to get away and you’ve got to slow down. It’s been really, really helpful.” One planter commented that when they planted, their kids asked why they had to leave their friends. One planter said, “for me it’s the practice of community.” He went on to talk about the importance of inviting trusted friends and church leaders into his “hardships, sins, struggles, and fears.” He said that the intentional pursuit of community has been life-giving. Another talked about how having a “tight community” helped him avoid burnout and other ditches. “There was a band of brothers who I could trust and bare my all, and trust they would speak into me as well.” Others talked about the importance of having people to “do life with.” One speaking of the importance of fellowship said, “God never called us to be an island to ourselves and we’ve got to learn to...trust people, even if it means taking risks, because without doing that you’re going to burnout.”

### **Prayer**

Forty-five percent of the participants indicated that prayer was an important spiritual discipline for their family. Family prayer included both praying as a family and being intentional

to pray for the family. One planter in particular felt that the planting season was unusually wrought with spiritual warfare. He said he felt the need to “take time to pray for and fight for” his family. One pastor talked about making prayer a normal part of life—like breathing. He didn’t want his daughters to feel that their spirituality was forced on them. Another said he tried to free his wife from expectation. One participant talked about the importance of prayer this way, saying that it “was constant. It was my wife and me still getting up every single morning, Bible study and prayer.” One couple talked about being very intentional in leading their children into a life of prayer. They encouraged times of silence and stillness and engaging in imaginative prayer with them. They also took them on a retreat for the purpose of “hearing from God.” One participant, when asked what he did to help provide for and protect his family in the church planting process, responded, “My one thing is prayer!” Another talked about keeping a regular family rhythm of prayer time every night.

**Table 4.3. Spiritual Disciplines Beneficial to Families**

<b>Spiritual Discipline</b>	<b>Number of Participants who found it beneficial</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Self-Examination	12	60%
Keeping a Sabbath	8	40%
Fellowship	8	40%
Prayer	9	45%

**Research Question #3: What are the expected benefits for church planters who are trained with an emphasis on spiritual disciplines?**

Determining the benefits produced through the use of spiritual disciplines by the participants required an in-depth study of the transcribed interviews. It was important to notice

before and after statements. The researcher identified themes that were repeated the most often by the most participants. There were four themes that seemed to carry the most importance to the participants. The four themes were:

1. Having a Stronger Connection to God
2. Having a Clearer Sense of Identity
3. Developing Better Boundaries
4. Being More Self-Aware

### **Stronger Connection to God**

One participant, in talking about the difference that being intentional about spiritual disciplines had made in their life, said he felt like he had grown in creating margin and giving priority to connecting with God, and that the result was more margin and better boundaries for the family. He also talked about slowing down and listening for God's voice. The disciplines of study, prayer, and solitude were the ones most often mentioned in producing a stronger connection to God. The benefits mentioned by the participants as a result of the stronger "God connection" were better decisions, better margins, slowing down, feeling better equipped when trouble came, and being more successful in avoiding their own typical "ditches." One participant said, "I would go into the sanctuary alone and worship. It was a place to just be with God. I think looking back that was a huge lifeline for me." Another said that at one point he began to be much more intentional about time in prayer. He said this made him feel more grounded. He also said that he felt more at rest and internally connected. One planter commented, "I think spiritual disciplines invite us into the mystery of God and the beauty of God."



## **Identity**

One participant said that being in God's presence was the place he found his proper identity. Another said that spiritual disciplines taught her that value came from her relationship with God and not from her role in ministry. The disciplines most often mentioned in connection with realizing proper identity in Christ were prayer, study, reflection, and community. One participant talked about how time in prayer helped her not to be so "desperate for success." Several said that spiritual disciplines reminded them that their identity comes from who they are and not from what they do. One commented, "Spiritual Disciplines help me not to get my identity from people pleasing and keeps me from attaching my value or identity to performance and production." The participants identified weaknesses such as pride, unholy ambition, and comparison to others as things that focusing on spiritual disciplines helped them with. One participant said "Having a sabbath meant that for one seventh of my life I did nothing. This is good for me because I tend to define myself by what I do."

## **Better Boundaries**

The spiritual disciplines that the participants pointed to most in the creating of better boundaries were keeping a sabbath, self- reflection, and prayer. Some confessed that being intentional was difficult because they were so busy. One participant said that spiritual disciplines helped him grow in understanding the importance of having margin in his life. Another said that living in community and allowing others to speak into his life has helped him to grow, stay sane, and protect his family. Several identified keeping a Sabbath as the key to establishing healthier boundaries. One couple said that before discovering Sabbath, their life was "enmeshed" in the life of the church. Other benefits listed in association with keeping a Sabbath were less stress, not working too much, and having more family time.

## **Self-Awareness**

Another benefit attributed to spiritual disciplines was more self-awareness. The specific disciplines listed most often were solitude, confession, prayer, self-reflection, study, meditation, and community. One participant said that through engaging in the use of spiritual disciplines, they learned how to be self-aware and how to confess and learned to specifically position themselves for the Spirit to work. One of the most common benefits mentioned was the recognition of weaknesses and becoming more deeply rooted. One participant said that spiritual disciplines helped them to see their spiritual immaturity, and to recognize that they can't be spiritually mature if they are emotionally immature. Another said that reflection, prayer, and community made him aware of his brokenness. One planter said of self-reflection, "It helped me know I own too much, feel too much, and sometimes believe I deserve things." One pastor said that because the use of spiritual disciplines they do not hate themselves or their people.

## **Summary of Major Findings**

Ministry in general can be difficult and demanding. The work of church planting is potentially one of the most difficult types of church ministry. The data from the interviews and focus groups conducted in this study indicate a strong tendency among church planters towards overworking and not maintaining healthy boundaries. These tendencies inevitably produce high levels of anxiety and stress. The purpose of this study was to explore the possible benefits that an emphasis on spiritual disciplines in training might produce among church planters. There were four major themes that emerged from the data analysis. These will be further analyzed in chapter five:

1. Church planters who spend significant time in prayer, Bible study, and solitude develop a stronger connection to God.

2. Church planters who practice spiritual disciplines such as solitude, confession, prayer, and self-reflection are more aware of their weaknesses and brokenness and more likely to develop spiritual and emotional health.
3. Church planters who practice spiritual disciplines develop and maintain better boundaries.
4. Practicing sabbath regularly benefits church planters and their families.

## **CHAPTER 5**

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

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

#### **Major Findings**

This project set out to explore the benefits of emphasizing the use of spiritual disciplines in training church planters. It was born out of the researcher's own experience with church planters over the last ten years as well as his personal journey early in ministry. He approached the task using a qualitative lens to learn from the experiences of other church planters. The data collected revealed the following major findings.

#### **Significant time in prayer, Bible study, and solitude produces a stronger connection to God**

During the last ten years, most of the resources and training available to church planters has been pragmatic in nature. There is very little that focuses on the planter as a person and as a disciple of Christ. During that time span, many stories of burnout and wounding from church planters have emerged. To try and understand this more clearly, interviews were designed that would help to identify practices that church planters use to care for their souls as well as pitfalls that many church planters seem prone towards. Many times during the research it was said that "someone should write or teach something about the importance of the church planter's

relationship to God and how to stay connected.” Most of those interviewed identified prayer and Bible study as the main things that kept them connected to God. This was expected as it is commonly accepted that these two disciplines are primary in developing a relationship with God. Surprisingly, many of the pastors involved in the project also depended upon solitude to feed their soul and stay grounded.

The chapter two literature focused extensively on leader health. Several experts in church and leader health, as well as some of the key voices in church planting today, pointed to the importance of leaders maintaining a healthy and vibrant spiritual life through a commitment to Bible study and prayer. Stetzer and Im contend that an emphasis on “technique, paradigms and methodologies” has caused many church planting movements to “lack theological depth” (24). Many point to the need today for leaders to prioritize their attention to their inner life rather than putting so much emphasis upon what is visible on the outside. Beeley says, “The more that church leaders root themselves in the theological core of their identity, the more they will empower all the baptized to live out their own ministries for the sake of Christ’s kingdom” (30). The literature recognizes the potential of church planting to take over a person’s life. The experts do give warnings about balance and boundaries. Ott and Wilson believe, “A deepening spiritual walk with God is required if one is to withstand pressure, respond graciously to opposition, and trust God in unpredictable circumstances” (309). It seems that every expert recognizes the importance of soul care, but few, if any, take the time to make it a focus of church planter training. Not as much attention is given to the importance of solitude in the literature. This was much more prominent in the interviews than in the chapter two literature review.

This focus on the inner life of the church planter is true to the scriptural description of a leader. David is called a “man after God’s heart” not because of what was visible, but because of

the inner qualities of his heart and soul (I Samuel 13:14). David also says in Psalm 119:11, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” The key moments of Moses’ leadership were born out of his “meetings with God.” The strongest voice in favor of a life of prayer and solitude is the life of Jesus. Matthew 14:23 says, “After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. Mark 6:46 also mentions solitary prayer: “After bidding them farewell, He left for the mountain to pray.” The idea of leaders having a deep soul connection to God is very true to the biblical description of a leader. The place of prayer and God’s Word in that development is unquestionable. The practice of solitude in the life of Jesus as outlined in scripture underscores its importance in those called to follow Him.

**Solitude, confession, prayer, and self-reflection lead to greater self-awareness and help produce spiritual and emotional health**

The interviews for this project were designed to help identify both the extent of the problem of burn out and wounded church planters as well as possible solutions. These issues seem to be very avoidable. The researcher was surprised by the depth of hurt that some of the participants had experienced and continued to carry. Church planters were expected to be overworked but not expected to be quite so wounded. It was also surprising that some of the participants were not aware of some of their “pitfalls.” One in particular talked about how “life giving” the planting process was for them and in the next sentence admitted to being “absent and unavailable” to their family. The number of those interviewed who spent great amounts of time in self-reflection was impressive. It was hard to tell whether it was altogether healthy. Some of the reflection seemed to be born out of insecurity. That said, the majority of those interviewed seemed to be at least moving towards spiritual and emotional health. There was a surprising

amount of emphasis on prayer and practices like journaling. Those interviewed seemed to have a genuine desire to know their strengths and weaknesses.

The chapter two literature points to stress and the demands of church planting as key reasons that church planters drift into places of unhealthy emotional and spiritual life. Many are operating out of what Peter Scazzero calls “a spiritual deficit” (*The Emotionally Healthy Leader* 25). The literature indicates that as they get busier and busier trying to grow and establish their churches, planters spend less time with God and less time with their families. Over and over in the research literature, the importance of spending time alone with God in prayer was echoed by leaders like Keller, Fernando, Murray, and Nouwen. Several additional experts suggest that the personal and spiritual lives of church planters is being neglected in the current literature. Some even state that they feel the emotional and spiritual health of church leaders in North America is in crisis. The sections of the literature review that focus on leader health agree that time alone with God in prayer and reflection adds to leader health.

The biblical framework for this study focuses on the importance in scripture placed upon healthy relationship. Jesus himself placed high priority on solitude. Mark 1:35 says, “In the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there.” The men and women in scripture who are identified as leaders were not chosen because of the talents or abilities they possessed. They were people who had something different on the inside. They were people who spent time with God and “knew” Him. They were aware of their weaknesses and were often surprised that they had been chosen by God.

### **Spiritual Disciplines help develop better boundaries**

It was surprising how many planters in the literature seem to justify their bad boundaries. It is easy to convince oneself that the cause is worthy and therefore any amount of time spent on

“kingdom work” is legitimate. One participant was told by a friend that his family would suffer during the planting process, but he could make it up later. God loves the family. He would not call people to something that would hurt or destroy it. If people plant churches the way God intends, it will strengthen their families. The stronger their connection to God is, the better they will be at setting appropriate boundaries and living at a life giving pace. Spiritual Disciplines strengthen the God connection.

The chapter two literature shows that the majority of church planters believe that the planting process has had a negative impact on their family. In an article on “Developing Leaders for Pastoral Ministry,” Scott Douglas says as many as 80% of pastors believe that ministry has “negatively affected their family” (86). Almost all would say that it caused stress in the home. In his book *Jesus Driven Ministry*, Ajith Fernando says, “As we strive for success in ministry, we can neglect our families” (85). The research definitively points towards a tendency among church planters to have bad boundaries. Several of the participants in the focus groups and interviews identified spiritual disciplines such as keeping a prayer journal or self-reflection as keys to becoming aware of their need for better boundaries. One disappointing and somewhat contradictory finding in the research was discovering facts about the family life of A.W. Tozer. Although his writing is inspiring, it is disheartening to read how disconnected he was from his family.

The biblical foundation for this study is learning to live with a focus on obedience rather than obligation. Jesus lived his life with a divine rhythm. He often left towns at the peak of their interest in him. He was never in a hurry. He was often moved with compassion, but he wasn’t moved out of ambition, guilt, or a sense of obligation. Moses as a leader started with bad boundaries and learned with the help of his father-in-law to share the load. The primary purpose

of spiritual disciplines is to build a stronger connection to God. One of the results of that connection is the ability to hear Him more clearly and follow Him more closely. An observation through scripture of how Jesus did this reveals a life of really good boundaries. Jesus only did what the Father wanted.

### **A regular Sabbath benefits church planters and their families**

The project interviews demonstrate that the establishment of a regular sabbath was one of the most beneficial practices for the interviewees. The research literature underscores the importance of rest. Many of the experts, in addressing the problem of burnout, point to the practice of sabbath as a way to keep a healthier life rhythm. The literature contains multiple lists of healthy leader characteristics. Almost every list contains either rest, sabbath, or both. The literature emphasizes the importance of leaders having a deep connection with God. The spiritual health of the leader is viewed as an essential component of the church's health. The practice of a sabbath and the incorporation of regular times of silence and solitude seem to be key in the development of spiritual health. Marva Dawn in her book *The Sense of the Call* says she considers the observing of a regular sabbath "One of the greatest gifts for my life as one who serves God" (33). The research says that healthy leaders have a strong and loving home life. The literature does not point directly to the benefits that the practice of sabbath has upon families. The emphasis seemed to be more on the spiritual and emotional health of the leader. However, in the interviews it was apparent that the practice of a regular sabbath was both life-giving and healing for families. The literature reports that 40 percent of pastors surveyed wished they had spent more time with their children. Many of the planter couples connected the practice of a regular sabbath with family activity.



The practice of sabbath is biblical. One of the ten commandments is “remember the sabbath and keep it holy.” The practice of sabbath was an important part of the Jewish faith. The point of this project is not just the practice of the disciplines, but the importance of what the disciplines help to produce in the lives of church planters. The biblical practice of sabbath is not just about resting, but also connecting. As with all of the spiritual disciplines, there is an inward connection that empowers an outward expression. In other words, what God does in people has a positive impact on those around them. When it comes to family this is especially true.

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

This project underscores at least two implications for the future of church planting. First, because most of the available resources are pragmatic in nature, there has not been an emphasis in church planter training upon the importance of being spiritually and emotionally healthy. Some of the experts in the field believe that leader health is at a crisis point. The emphasis on pragmatism has led to a false sense of success, and an overemphasis on “doing.” Many church plants are growing fast and have the appearance of success, but a closer look reveals that much of their growth is transfer growth. This project and its findings will encourage those involved in the training of church planters to approach that training from a more wholistic point of view. The pragmatic how-tos are good and helpful, but they are best used in the hands of men and women who are deeply connected to God.

An emphasis on spiritual disciplines in church planter training will help produce planters who are better equipped to handle the unique challenges that church planting presents. In the last three years, TNI, the network the researcher is a part of, has begun to see the benefits of training planters in this way. These planters are spiritually and emotionally healthy, have good boundaries, are self-aware, and are willing to be vulnerable with each other. They are very

honest about their weaknesses and perceived failures. Most of all, both as a group and individually, they have a deep hunger to know God intimately and see others come to know Him in that way as well. One of the byproducts of this spiritual and emotional health has been a clearer call to the heart of church planting. There is less transfer growth and an increase of intentionality towards reaching the unchurched and under-churched.

There also seems to be more of a focus on discipleship. These planters are not content with filling a room on Sunday morning but rather are focused on equipping their people to do the “work of ministry” Monday through Friday. Also, healthy leaders are more likely to plant healthy churches than unhealthy leaders are. Training planters with an emphasis on spiritual disciplines will produce healthier planters both spiritually and emotionally. This, in turn, will produce healthier churches. Healthy churches are more likely to multiply. The key to the church planting movement is not just planting churches but planting churches that plant churches. Healthy leaders and healthy churches are more likely to reproduce.

Second, training church planters in spiritual disciplines will provide for healthier church planter families. Ministry in general, and church planting in particular, can be hard on families. One of the more painful facts revealed in this project was the level of hurt that church planters and their families carry. One pastor commented that there was a time in the church planting process where his wife no longer believed his sermons. Others talked about how the process had been hurtful to their children. Training church planters in spiritual disciplines, especially practices like sabbath rest and self-reflection, help to create healthier families. Church planters in this network have called the discovery of spiritual disciplines life-saving. Some expressed that prior to learning about spiritual disciplines, their personal lives and their church lives were enmeshed to an unhealthy degree. Spiritual disciplines have helped these planters to understand

the importance of having healthier boundaries. One planter commented, “spiritual disciplines help me stay sane and protect my family.” Nothing can derail a ministry more quickly than family failure. The most beneficial aspect of this study may be teaching church planters to use spiritual disciplines in order to help them build into their lives practices that protect and provide for their families.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Fortunately, every person scheduled to be interviewed or participate in a focus group actually followed through. If repeated, adding another focus group and interviewing planters whose plants have failed or who left the ministry because of the difficulty of the task would be good. It would also be informative to interview or hold a focus group with the children of church planters, whether grown or still in the home.

The instrumentation for the project worked well. Interviews and focus groups were the best way to access the information needed because the researcher needed to hear the participants’ stories. The questions used in the both the focus groups and semi-structured interviews could be made more specific. For instance, the questions asked planters and their spouses what spiritual disciplines they found helpful in providing for and protecting their families; asking questions about specific spiritual disciplines could have provided more detailed or specific feedback. Some of this happened naturally as interviews progressed. Making the questions open-ended was definitely important. Still, there were times when the conversation dragged. This study could be used in almost any church planting demographic. Most of the people interviewed knew the researcher well enough to feel safe and be honest. This could impact responses if the study was repeated in an area where that was not the case.

### **Unexpected Observations**

The participants' lack of self-awareness was surprising. One interviewee said how life-giving the planting process was for them and then in the next sentence talked about how unavailable and disconnected they were from family. The most surprising result was learning of the enormous benefit experienced by those who practice a regular time of sabbath rest. The practice of a regular sabbath was reported to meet multiple needs. Some used it to help build healthy boundaries and keep them from working too much. One planter said he felt that having a sabbath day kept him from working all the time. Others used the sabbath as a way of having intentional quality time with family. Still others found the practice of a sabbath day of rest accompanied by solitude and silence as a way to stay connected to God. Prayer and Bible study were expected to be the key components to being spiritually and emotionally healthy, and while it was expected that there would be other practices that were significant, it was surprising that one of the most spiritual things one can do is rest. In the fast-paced and intense world of church planting, establishing the practice of sabbath rest is essential to long term health.

### **Recommendations**

This project was designed to address an underemphasized aspect of the church planter training process. As stated earlier, the pragmatic content is not inappropriate or irrelevant; it is, however, incomplete.

Church planting groups and networks around the world must realize the importance of focusing on the spiritual and emotional health of potential church planters and make that focus a key component in their training. All church planting groups should develop of a curriculum to train church planters in the practice of spiritual disciplines. This project can serve as a catalyst to begin shifting the focus from methods that work to leaders that last, which is a step in the right

direction. In developing this training curriculum there are a few things which this research points to as important:

1. This curriculum should be applied early in the assessment process. It is important that these spiritual habits or practices be established before the onslaught of church planting hits. There should also be ongoing training and accountability with coaches and mentors.
2. The curriculum should focus on the importance of “being” and not just doing. Church planting can be a “doers” world. For it to be done in a lasting way, it will help if planters are taught to “be.” The curriculum should involve some teaching on the origin and use of spiritual disciplines in history. This should include a list of spiritual disciplines with definitions and explanations as one cannot assume that people understand what this means.
3. For best results, this research should be used with planters, their spouses, and the planting team if there is one. There are huge benefits to be had by husbands and wives exploring the world of spiritual disciplines together.
4. Finally, users should understand that “one size does not fit all.” There will need to be some time spent to determine which spiritual disciplines they connect with, what their strengths are, and where they tend to struggle.

### **Postscript**

This journey has been amazing. I may not have said that early in the process. I can remember going back to my room after the first dissertation training class feeling completely overwhelmed. I lay on the bed and looked at the ceiling and said to myself, “Why? I loved my life. Why did I do this?” Now almost three years later I can answer that question. From the very

beginning of the DMin course work at Asbury Theological Seminary, I have been challenged to learn and grow. Every single book assigned has helped me to better understand my calling and the importance of church planting in the world today. This research project has helped me to understand better the ditches that exist for church planters who are not careful to stay grounded. I feel I am better equipped to stay spiritually and emotionally healthy and to help others do the same. I cannot say enough about the professors I have sat under, especially Dr. Bevins, Dr. Marmon, and Dr. Collier. With all of that said, if you ask me the most valuable part of this experience, I would say without hesitation that it was the people I met along the way, especially my small group. The men in my legacy group will be my friends for life. They will continue to shape me from now on. I am so grateful for this journey.

## **APPENDICES**

A. Interview Schedule and Questions

B. Ethical Considerations Worksheet

Consent Forms Template

Confidentiality/Anonymity

## **Appendix A: Interview Schedule and Questions**

### **Schedule:**

June 11, 2019 at 2pm: Interview with TNI Couple 1

June 18, 2019 at 3pm: Interview with TNI Couple 2

June 19, 2019 at 2pm: Focus Group with Atlanta Area Church Planters

June 20, 2019 at 2pm: Interview with TNI Couple 3

June 20, 2019 at 4pm: Focus Group with US Church Planters

June 21, 2019 at 9am: Interview with TNI Couple 4

June 22, 2019 at 10am: Interview with TNI Couple 5



### **Questions Used for Both Focus Groups**

1. (The first question is a round robin to get things rolling). Around the circle- What is your name and where do you live?
2. How long have you been at your current church? Did you plant the church you currently serve?
3. What was your age when you launched your first church plant? Were you married? Did you have children?
4. (This is a transition question to get people thinking more deeply). If you were inviting a friend to plant a church, what would you say in the invitation?
5. Think back, what was your life like in the early days of church planting? On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being good, would you say it was good or bad for you? For your family?
6. What were some things that caused you trouble in your soul? At home?
7. What were some things you did to stay connected to Jesus?
8. What were things you did well or wish you had done better to protect or provide for your family?

Is there anything we haven't covered that you think is important to mention?

### **Interview Questions Used for TNI Couples**

1. Tell me a little about yourselves...

How long have you been married? How many children do you have?

How long have you been in vocational ministry?

2. What made you want to be a church planter?

(for spouses) How did you feel initially about church planting?

3. Think back to the early days of planting...

- On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being good and 1 being bad- how would you rank your church planting experience?
- How was it for you spiritually?
- How was it for your family?
- How did it affect your marriage?

4. During those early years, were there spiritual disciplines that were particularly helpful to you as a church planter? (talk more about that...)

5. Were there spiritual disciplines that were particularly helpful in providing for or protecting your family? (Can you give specific examples?)

6. As you have grown and matured and gotten deeper into the church planting world, what changes have you made? If you could start over today, what would you do differently?

7. If there was a young couple in your church who wanted to become church planters, what would you say to them?

8. Are there questions I should have asked that I didn't ask?

## **Appendix B: Ethical Considerations**

### **Consent Form**

#### **Informed Consent Letter**

My name is Tom Tanner, and I am a Doctor of Ministry student at Asbury Theological Seminary, conducting research on church planter training and the use of spiritual disciplines. My research is seeking to identify specific “practices and pitfalls” in the life of a church planter in hope of helping future planters and planter families avoid the burnout and other difficulties that seem to be too common in the world of church planters. My telephone number is: 6783845207. You may contact me at any time if you have questions about this study.

This letter invites you to participate in the study by participating in an oral interview with you and your spouse. If you consent, you and your spouse will be asked several questions in an interview held at Riverstone Church. The interview will last 1-2 hours and will be audio recorded for the purpose of being transcribed.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. Also, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

There are no risks associated with this interview. However, it is possible that you might feel uncomfortable in the course of the conversation. If this occurs, please let me know promptly.

There is no guaranteed benefit, however it is possible that you will enjoy participating in the interview and possibly find it meaningful. This study is intended to help church planters and their families in future generations.

Your name will be kept confidential in all of the reporting and or writing related to this study. In the written transcript of our interview, your name will be replaced by keyword and any

other identifiable names and or places will be changed or removed. The recordings will only be heard by myself and the transcriber. The recordings from our interview will be deleted within one year of completion of the degree program.

There is a possibility that this study will be published or referred to in future writings. In this event, I will continue to protect your identity through the use of pseudonyms.

By signing below, you are agreeing to an audiotaped interview for this research study. Be sure that any questions you have are answered to your satisfaction. If you agree to participate, a copy of this form will be provided to you.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

Print name \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers name \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

Print name \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

## Confidentiality Agreement

Training Church Planters with an emphasis on spiritual disciplines.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, will be assisting the researcher by transcribing recording of interviews and focus groups. I agree to abide by the following guidelines regarding confidentiality:

1. Hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be revealed during the course of performing research tasks during the process of the research and after it is complete.
2. Keep all research information shared with me confidential. I will not discuss or share the research information in any form (tapes or transcripts) with anyone but the researcher.
3. Keep all research information in any form secure throughout the duration of the study (e.g. using a password-protected computer).
4. Return all research in any form to the researcher when I have completed my tasks.
5. After discussing with researcher, erase or destroy all research in any form regarding this project save what is returnable to the researcher upon completion of the research tasks.

Your signature \_\_\_\_\_

Please print your name \_\_\_\_\_

Date : \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Please print name \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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