ABSTRACT

RECOVERING RECOVERY:
TOWARD A NEW MISSIONAL UNDERSTANDING IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

by

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In my experience as a church planter for the past five years, I have encountered a major disconnect between the secular culture and the church culture. In personal situations and through community surveys, I have discovered that, by and large, unchurched persons have a negative perception of church. This perception serves as an obstacle to engaging the unchurched with the message of the gospel. The reverse is also true. Persons connected to the church culture who desire to engage in mission to the secular culture do not know how to do so. The result is an ever-widening gap between two cultures that, in a certain sense, desperately need each other.

The disconnect between the secular and church cultures seems particularly pronounced in the area of recovery. A sense of distrust, even suspicion, toward the church exists from secular recovery programs I have encountered. For the church a reluctance to engage in meaningful ministry to the recovery community is too often the norm. In my experience the only contact churches have maintained with the recovery community has been to offer use of a room for an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, usually at a time when nothing else is scheduled.

This dissertation focused on the relationship between the recovery community and the church community and explored the effect a church-based recovery ministry had upon the missional understanding of the church. The project described various recovery
ministries in the neighborhood and beyond, both secular and faith-based, to understand the program of each and how it relates to the church. The study surveyed two models of the Celebrate Recovery ministry, one at Grace United Methodist Church in Cape Coral, Florida, and one at Cokesbury United Methodist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. Leaders and participants from each of the recovery programs and churches were interviewed using a protocol to guide the questions. The networks formed and the connections that exist between the church recovery ministries and non-church-based programs were explored with particular interest in the churches’ effectiveness in building bridges to the recovery community.
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“Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope.”

(Ephesians 3:20)
CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Understanding the Problem

Each week, all across the United States, millions of people attend recovery meetings patterned after the highly successful Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Groups that cover almost every imaginable issue of recovery—eating, narcotics, gambling, sex, shopping, and others in addition to alcohol—pattern their meetings after the process set out in the famous twelve-steps of AA. Further, the foundation of twelve-step recovery is a belief that a person so inclined to addictive and compulsive behaviors suffers “from an illness which only a spiritual experience will conquer” (Alcoholics Anonymous 44). Yet, in spite of AA’s insistence that God alone can “restore us to sanity” (59), and in spite of a plea for all persons involved to “find Him now!” (59), the vast majority of such groups function outside the life of the church. How the church community ever let millions of people in search of a spiritual experience get away is baffling indeed.

My own faith journey is one of recovery and finding the hope and freedom from addictive and compulsive behaviors that ultimately comes from the one, true Higher Power, Jesus Christ. According to the collective wisdom of the social sciences, I have a predisposition to addiction having been raised by an alcoholic father and in a context of addiction represented by fruit on all branches of my family tree. So, my experience of recovery in Christ helped shape my understanding of ministry and God’s call on my life. I will never forget a Friday night in 1997 standing in the Worship Center at Saddleback Community Church while attending an Advanced Church Leadership Module of the Beeson Program at Asbury Seminary. I stood with one thousand or so recovering addicts
during Saddleback’s Celebrate Recovery ministry worshipping and singing praises to God with our hands in the air. Suddenly, I started weeping profusely. The Holy Spirit spoke to me clearly saying, “This is it, David. This is why I’ve called you. This is what you will spend the rest of your life doing—helping broken people discover the hope of recovery in my love and grace.”

Since my experience at Saddleback in 1997, I have initiated efforts to establish recovery ministries in two pastoral appointments, first, as pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Russell Springs, Kentucky, and now as the plant pastor of Hope Springs Community Church, a new United Methodist faith community in Lexington, Kentucky. Using the material from Saddleback Church, I have led the formation of the Celebrate Recovery (CR) ministry in both locations. Through starts and restarts, both successes and failures, I have discovered the gap of understanding and lack of cooperative effort that exists between the recovery community and the church community.

Russell Springs is a small, rural community in south central Kentucky, population approximately 2,400. When we launched Celebrate Recovery at First United Methodist Church in the spring of 1998, we were the only church in the county that offered a targeted recovery ministry. In fact, the only other twelve-step program of which I was aware consisted of a lone Alcoholics Anonymous meeting on Wednesdays that met at another church. I initially made contact with the leadership of the AA group in hopes of finding believers in Christ with twelve-step experience as potential leaders at CR. My overtures were met with suspicion and even rejection. Even though we employed a form of the twelve steps of AA in our curriculum (albeit a Christ-centered twelve steps), I was told that members of the AA group would not be encouraged to participate because we
did not conduct a “true AA meeting.” From the church perspective, several church
members who expressed interest in the ministry had a difficult time understanding the
need for experience in recovery as a prerequisite for leading a recovery group.

The Celebrate Recovery ministry at Hope Springs Community Church is into its
third restart. Two previous efforts to launch the ministry had to be scrapped due to
leadership issues. Again, finding the persons within the church with experience in twelve-
step recovery that are willing to embrace a slightly different approach has proven to be a
challenge. While we are now in the fourth month of our third restart and experiencing
slow, steady growth, the disconnect between the recovery community and the church
community continues to surface and present challenges.

Two recent incidents highlight the problem. The first involves the willingness of
some staff members at a local women’s recovery center to embrace Celebrate Recovery
as a viable option for the center’s live-in clients. Hope Springs Church has engaged in
several efforts to build a relationship with the center from serving meals at the facility to
making our building available for portions of their program. Members of the
Motivational Track (MT) who are in the early stages of recovery use the church as a
gathering place in the mornings and for two daytime recovery classes, one in the morning
and one in the afternoon. The coordinator of the MT phase of the program is very
enthused about the relationship with the church and, in fact, actively participates in
Celebrate Recovery along with a handful of the clients. Yet, when she asked her
immediate supervisor if the women could count their attendance at CR as one of their
required outside recovery meetings (they must attend a minimum of seven per week), her
request was refused. The reason given by the supervisor was simply that the CR meetings
were not AA or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings. Subsequently, other staff members at the center have expressed their discomfort with the growing relationship between the center and the church.

A second incident highlights the disconnect from the church perspective. Recently, a girl named Cindy called the church to inquire about our recovery ministry. She introduced herself as a member of a church in a neighboring community that had recently gone to the recovery center on a Sunday afternoon to present a program of worship and dance. One of the women in the MT program had told me about the worship/dance service, so I was familiar with her connection to the center. She went on to share with me her excitement at learning that our church was intentionally engaged in ministry with the women there and that she could not wait to visit our CR program on a Friday evening soon. I asked her to tell me more about her interest in the recovery center and specifically about the program her church group presented on that previous Sunday. She responded, “Of course, you know they have AA meetings at the center, don’t you? AA is really new age, because they pray to a Higher Power. The Lord showed us before we went that we were going into enemy territory [emphasis mine].”

The view by an AA leader that a Christ-centered, church-based recovery program cannot be real recovery and the labeling of an AA meeting by a concerned Christian as enemy territory only illustrates the gap that exists between the two cultures. This gap presents obstacles to the church’s efforts at engaging in ministry to persons in need of recovery. The first obstacle is the lack of understanding of the nature of recovery on the part of the church. Second, the reverse is also true because a lack of understanding and trust in the mission of the church exists within the recovery community. A third obstacle
is simply the lack of available leaders in existing congregations with experience in
twelve-step recovery. As a result, an entire mission field of literally millions of people in
search of spiritual help is largely lost on the church. George G. Hunter writes about the
impact of the disconnect on addicted persons:

The problem of addicted people is compounded by the fact that they are
likely to be unchurched; so, typically, they have no community of faith to
dissuade them from experimenting or using, they now have no community
to help them recover, and they feel no church would really want to take a
chance on them. They usually feel “stigmatized” by church people. So the
people who often need God the most are the least likely to come to church.
(Radical Outreach 123)

The suspicions that fuel the disconnect between the two communities and the posture of
the church toward addicted persons creates formidable obstacles to the church engaging
in mission to people in recovery.

**Biblical and Theological Foundations**

In the first six chapters of the book of Acts, the church enjoyed “the favor of all
the people” (Acts 2:47, NIV). As the church at Jerusalem grew, the general population
genuinely liked the community of faith. Besides being engaged in the practice of the
means of grace (2:42) the church also functioned as a need-meeting community (2:45)
with high public visibility (2:46). The result was rapid growth as “the Lord added to their
number daily those who were being saved” (2:47). This early description of the new
community of faith, as well as several others regarding their common life in Luke’s
account (2:1-13; 3:1-11; 4:32-37; 5:12-16), give evidence to the very public witness of
the early Church. Their community life was truly on display. Ajith Fernando comments
on the public favor enjoyed by the first Christian community:

First we are told about the “awe” that everyone was filled with and about
the ministry of miracles performed by the apostles (vs.43). “Everyone”
here could refer both to the believers and to outsiders who saw and heard what was happening in the church.... Such fresh and powerful community life would win the admiration of people outside the church. And this is what happened in Jerusalem too, for the early Christians enjoyed “the favor of all the people” during their first few weeks (vs.47a). In the meantime the church grew numerically (vs.47b). Luke never writes that these new conversions took place primarily through the preaching of the apostles. The favor that all the believers had among the people would have given opportunity for them to give the reason for the obvious transformation in their lives. (122-24)

Evidence exists for a cause and effect relationship between the visible life of the community of faith and the perception of the church among outsiders. “Within the community there was a spirit of rejoicing and generosity; outside it, they enjoyed great popular goodwill” (Bruce 74). The favor enjoyed by the church within the greater community helped foster a culture of growth and expansion.

The reverse is true in the America of the early twenty-first century; the church appears to have lost favor with the people. George Barna reported in 1993 that only 16 percent of the adult population in the United States believed that Protestant churches are very sensitive to the needs of non-Christians. Even worse, only 9 percent of non-Christians believe Protestant churches are sensitive to their needs.¹ This declining perception of the church among the general population is further reflected in the declining involvement in churches across the United States. Hunter states, “A smaller percentage of the people in every church in the U.S.A. are regularly involved in a church than a decade ago; a much smaller percentage than a generation ago” (Radical Outreach 198). Over the years an unfortunate shift has occurred from the church of Acts 2 to the

¹ While these numbers are over a decade old, Barna notes in his 2005 report that change as an indicator of religious life in America “generally occurs at a glacial pace.” “The meter hasn’t budged for most of these trends we have been following over these 15 years,” Barna noted. “In general, predicting next year’s religious statistics is safer than foretelling whether the Cubs will win the World Series.” (Barna Update).
one that carries the tag of Barna’s 9 percent. Understanding the shift calls for a look at the nature of the church as it relates to the *missio Dei* (mission of God).

Being the people of God has always been shaped by a willingness to embrace the mission of God. Since the Fall in the garden, God’s plan to redeem fallen creation has involved forming a community of faith representative of his kingdom for the purpose of carrying the message of redemption to the world. The *missio Dei* was and continues to be the heartbeat of the people of God.

The story of Noah and the flood begins with God’s sorrow at the extent of humankind’s wickedness (Gen. 6:5 ff.). Yet God’s decision to destroy all living creatures was more about replenishing the earth than about destroying it. Thus Noah, the only one who “found favor with the Lord” (Gen. 6:8), was spared, and he and his descendents entered into a covenant relationship with God to replenish the earth. This work of replenishing (redeeming) runs like a thread throughout the history of salvation.

God blessed Abram to be a blessing to others so that “all the families of the earth will be blessed through him” (Gen. 12:1-5). This promise/mission was repeated at key moments of Abraham’s journey of faith (Gen. 18:18; 22:18). The mission of God continues to emerge with Abraham’s descendents (Isaac, Gen. 26:4; Jacob, Gen. 35:11; Joseph and his sons, Gen. 48). Further, as the people of God possessed the land of Canaan as the nation Israel, the call to remember and minister to those on the “outside” was woven into the very fabric of their law and communal life:

> [A]nd now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me.” Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him. And you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household. When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the alien, the
fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied. (Deut. 26:10-12)

King David remembers God’s mission to the world as he implores the people, “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples” (1 Chron. 16:24).

Later, the prophet Isaiah reminds a broken nation of God’s purpose in the coming of his chosen servant:

I, the Lord, have called you to demonstrate my righteousness. I will guard and support you, for I have given you to my people as the personal confirmation of my covenant with them. And you will be a light to guide all nations to me. You will open the eyes of the blind and free the captives from prison. You will release those who sit in dark dungeons. (Isa. 42:6-7)

The story of redemption throughout the old covenant clearly points to the fact that the blessing of belonging to the people of God was not a secret to be enjoyed by the privileged but a story to be shared by the chosen.

While the mission of God is seen in the purpose inherent in forming a people for him, it finds ultimate expression in the very nature of the triune God as a sending God (Guder et al. 4). Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee with a clear sense of being sent by God the Father. He publicly declared his identity as one sent when he read from the prophet Isaiah in Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.

When faced with the rising tide of popularity in Capernaum and the opportunity to enjoy his newfound fame, Jesus remained resolute about his sense of mission: “I must preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God in other places, too, because that is why I was sent” (Luke 4:43). Even to his closest followers Jesus grounded his self-understanding
with the reality of God’s mission. Set against the backdrop of ministry to a Samaritan woman, Jesus explained to his disciples, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work” (John 4:34).

Jesus imparted his own sense of mission to those who would form his church from the earliest days of their formation. He told his first disciples that he would make them “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). He sent out his twelve apostles to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God and to heal the sick (Luke 9:2). He later sent out seventy-two disciples to the towns he would soon visit with the same charge (Luke 10). John’s gospel records the last words of Jesus as a sort of transference of his identity with God’s mission to his post-resurrection followers: “As the Father has sent me, I also send you” (John 20:21). Darrell L. Guder et al. note the logical progression of thought in embracing the missio Dei: “We have learned to speak of God as a ‘missionary God.’ Thus we have learned to understand the church as a ‘sent people’” (4).

In addition to understanding the church as a sent people, one needs to consider to whom Jesus was sent in order to understand more fully the nature of the church’s mission today. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus defined his mission “to bring good news to the poor.” Joel B. Green describes the “poor” as “a large category of persons that includes the economically dispossessed, to be sure, but also those who are pushed to the margins of their own communities on account of gender, family heritage, disease, religious purity, ethnicity, and so on” (108). Jesus was consistently drawn to the marginalized, those on the outside of the community. He was criticized for close contact with “a certain immoral woman” (Luke 7:37). The religious establishment complained about his association with “tax collectors and other notorious sinners” for table fellowship (Luke 15:1), and the
crowds grumbled that he would be the guest in the home of a despised man named Zaccheus (Luke 19:7).

The church in America has somehow managed to lose sight of the missio Dei. Likewise, the body of Christ has practically ignored the opportunities present for ministry in the recovery community. After all, those struggling with addictions, compulsive behaviors, and other issues of dysfunctional living would most certainly qualify as “the poor” according to Green’s definition. Members of this culture should be viewed as prime targets of a people sent to carry out the mission of God.

Understanding the nature of the disconnect between the church culture and the recovery culture requires consideration of a very real tension that has always existed among the people of God (i.e., how to be in the world but not of it). A call to be holy and not conform to the values, behaviors, and objects of devotion of the world has always been present among the covenant community (Lev. 11:45; Ps. 15, 24; Matt. 7:6; Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:11-12). In praying for his followers in John 17, Jesus addresses what seems on the surface to be a doctrine of separation: “I’m not asking you to take them out of this world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They are not part of this world any more than I am” (John 17:15-16). Nevertheless, a closer examination of the various separation texts reveals a deeper purpose for holy living, a purpose vitally connected to the mission of God.

In order to send a people as a light to the nations, God first had to establish such a people. Thus, after four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, God delivered the law unto Moses in order to teach the Hebrews how to live in a way distinct from other people; however, the practices of the faith community were never meant to be self-serving. The
prophet Isaiah rebukes the people of God for carrying out the practices of their religion while ignoring the mission to those in need. He specifically calls into question the motivations behind the practice of fasting as an act of worship and of “going through the motions of penance” (Isa. 58:5). Isaiah connects the acts of worship to the call to mission and ministry:

No, the kind of fasting I want calls you to free those who are wrongly imprisoned and to stop oppressing those who work for you. Treat them fairly and give them what they earn. I want you to share your food with the hungry and to welcome poor wanderers into your homes. (58:6-7)

Now some might contend that Isaiah is addressing issues of justice more than mission, yet if a true kingdom theology sees the goal as God’s reign on earth as in heaven, then mission is an issue of justice.

The Apostle Paul’s call for the Christians at Corinth to avoid partnership with unbelievers and to “come out from them and separate yourselves from them” (2 Cor. 6:17) must be set within the context of the preceding chapter. In 2 Corinthians 5, the apostle to the Gentiles identifies the church as “Christ’s ambassadors” (vs. 20) who have been entrusted with “the ministry of reconciliation” (vs. 18). Likewise, Peter emphasizes the missionary purpose of holy living:

[F]or you are a chosen people. You are a kingdom of priests, God’s holy nation, his very own possession. This is so you can show others the goodness of God [emphasis mine], for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light…. Be careful how you live among your unbelieving neighbors [emphasis mine]. Even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will believe and give honor to God when he comes to judge the world. (1 Pet. 2:9, 12)

Jesus’ prayer in John 17 holds both ends of the tension together when he prays for his followers and their relationship with the world:
I have given them your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not. I’m not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They are not part of this world any more than I am. Make them pure and holy by teaching them your words of truth. As you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. (John 17:14-18)

These and other texts from Scripture make clear that God’s intent for his people was to engage the culture with a distinct way of living in order to redeem the culture with the good news of Christ.

Another consideration from the biblical witness that helped inform this work is the ministry of Jesus among the stigmatized of his day and the attitude of the church towards those stigmatized with the need for recovery today. In Jesus’ day people were placed outside the religious community for a variety of conditions: physical disabilities and disease such as leprosy or blindness, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and others. Nevertheless, Jesus consistently crossed those boundaries and reached out to those treated as outsiders. In today’s world medical science and other developments have taken much of the mystery away from the physical manifestations of disease and ethnic diversity is trumpeted as a reason for celebration, yet the church continues to place a stigma on people with conditions it does not understand. I would contend that the church culture has replaced the lepers with addicts (among others) as the ones who carry the stigma of being hopeless outsiders.

The events in John 9 surrounding Jesus healing a man born blind sounds like people in the church today arguing about what causes addiction. The ones who were witnesses to that miracle of healing had believed his blindness to be the direct result of sin, either on his part or that of his parents. As evidenced by their reaction to a suddenly former blind beggar, the people in the mainstream of the religious community did not
quite know how to respond to what they did not understand. Disassociating oneself from the need of someone deemed “hopeless” is much easier than engaging that person in a ministry of healing and recovery. Today great confusion and contention exists among the religious community concerning the causes of addiction, yet the mandate to serve given to the church clearly calls the people of God to reach “secular people with little or no church background, the people of many cultures now populating our cities,” and those too often seen as hopeless “that no church seems to want” (Hunter, Radical Outreach 195-96).

The Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe the relationship that exists between the recovery community and the church community and to explore the impact of church-based recovery ministry upon the missional understanding of the local church. The study analyzed the impact of the Celebrate Recovery program upon the missional understanding of two local churches and the program’s effectiveness at building bridges to the recovery community.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

Research Question #1

What is the nature of the disconnect that exists between the recovery community and the church community?

Research Question #2

What is the relationship between a church’s understanding of its mission and the presence of a recovery ministry in the church?
Research Question #3

What is the effect of the Celebrate Recovery program on building bridges between the recovery community and the local church?

Terms Defined

The following definitions help clarify terms used in this study:

Disconnect

In the study I use this term as a noun to describe the lack of consistent cooperative efforts and working relationships between the church community and recovery community.

Recovery Community

The recovery community consists of all persons consistently involved in a recovery group or program in order to seek help overcoming the negative effects of some addictive and/or compulsive behavior(s). The term has both universal and local applications and represents a distinct culture within our society with its own language, traditions, and behavior.

Celebrate Recovery

Celebrate Recovery is a distinctly Christian program for twelve-step recovery developed by Pastors John Baker and Rick Warren of Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California. Since its beginning in 1991, the program has been adopted by over three thousand churches. CR is designed primarily for use in local churches, but the ministry is transferable to a variety of settings and is used now in prisons, treatment centers, and other locations. As the ministry has grown and spread, Saddleback Church has taken steps to maintain a level of consistency, including acquiring a trademark for the
Celebrate Recovery name. The aim of the church is to establish a reproducible “DNA of an Authentic Celebrate Recovery Ministry” (Baker, Celebrate Recovery 32; see Appendix A).

The actual CR program centers around a once-a-week gathering of persons seeking recovery from a variety of recovery related issues. The typical CR evening includes intentional times of fellowship, worship, teaching, and small groups (see Appendix B). CR materials—participant guides, leader’s guide, promotional materials, visual aids, worship music, and a special recovery sermon series—are available in a program kit through Zondervan publishing or at <www.pastors.com>.

The Celebrate Recovery: Leader’s Guide offers a comprehensive plan for launching and growing the CR ministry in a local church (Baker). The guide includes a ninety-day kickoff strategy for launching the ministry, keys for keeping the ministry growing, a leadership team structure, and many other resources.

Methodology

The study is descriptive research based primarily on semi-structured interviews with a protocol. In addition, data was gathered from participant observation in which I participated in recovery groups and church-based recovery ministries. I also gathered data through written materials from various recovery programs and churches.

In exploring the relationships between the recovery community and the church community, I sought to discover the following:

- The general perceptions of one toward the other,
- The degree to which the two interact with one another,
- The nature of the interaction, whether positive or negative, and
• The existing networks within each community and at what points they overlap.

In addition, I explored the positive or negative impact upon missional understanding among selected churches who embrace recovery ministry as a key element in the church’s mission through interviews with leaders and data from church records, literature search, and participant observation.

Participants

Participants came from churches and recovery programs inside New Circle Road in Lexington, Kentucky. Churches and programs for study were selected based upon predetermined criteria regarding each connection to the other communities (recovery/church) or lack thereof. The subjects for the study depended upon the voluntary participation of churches and programs selected.

Additionally, subjects representing the Celebrate Recovery component of the study were selected from churches beyond Lexington using that particular model of recovery ministry. Each participant demonstrated a total commitment to using the program as designed and voluntarily submitted to participation in the study.

Instrumentation

The study depended on semi-structured interviews with a protocol. The protocol for those interviewed discovered perceptions (worldview) related to recovery and church ministry, theological foundations related to recovery, and behavior toward churches/recovery programs.

Written records were used to gather data from the two Celebrate Recovery churches relative to missional understanding and recovery ministry.
Data Collection

Data from the study were gathered from interviews taken after receiving informed consent: permission to interview, options for recording information and responses, and options for reporting information and responses (see Appendix C). For the two Celebrate Recovery churches, written records were collected in addition to interviews.

Delimitations and Generalizability

The study was limited to churches and recovery programs in Lexington, Kentucky, and three specific churches using the Celebrate Recovery program as developed by Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California. My personal philosophies and guiding principles related to recovery ministry have been shaped by my own participation in Celebrate Recovery and secular twelve-step programs. The effectiveness of the study depended upon the willful participation of leaders of the churches and recovery programs selected for description.

I embarked upon this journey in response to a clear sense of call that the church should take the lead in the ministry of recovery. My observation is that too few people are addressing the issue of bridging the gap that exists between the church community and the recovery community. If I can contribute to the healing of the disconnect, then the findings of this study may prove beneficial to other churches and ministry leaders who share that sense of call.

Overview of the Study

Chapter 2 consists of a review of selected literature and research pertinent to the study. The purpose of the literature review was to discover shifts in the American church’s missional understanding in relation to the unchurched population of North
America and the historical development of perceptions between the recovery community and church community. In Chapter 3 the project’s design is detailed including the methods used for data collection and evaluation. Significant findings from the study are reported in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 offers a summary review and evaluation of the study toward arriving at practical applications for developing a strategy for mission and evangelism to the recovery community by the local church.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE

The following review of literature pertinent to the study begins with a focus on the general state of the church in America regarding its mission to the unchurched population in this country. Factors contributing to a perceived loss of missional focus and the voices calling the church back to a self-understanding as a missionary body are examined. The review looks specifically at the call to mission and ministry to non-Christians as related to the recovery community in America. How perceptions developed between the recovery community and the church community is explored as well as efforts to bridge the gap between the two. Finally, consideration is given to opportunities to engage in mission to the recovery community.

The Mission of the Church

The church in the United States has forgotten why it was called in the first place. The church was called in order to be equipped, and, consequently, the church is equipped in order to be sent. In this section I review the loss of a sense of mission and what is necessary for the church to recover its mission.

State of the Church

The state of the church in America today in many ways is a state of confusion. Various indicators show that America today is as religious as it has always been. The Gallup Organization has conducted a broad survey of the religious landscape in America at least once per decade for the past sixty years, and for the most part the raw data indicates a fairly stable religious climate. George Gallup, Jr. and D. Michael Lindsay published reports based on a 1998 survey that show seven out of ten adults hold
membership in a church or synagogue, a figure virtually unchanged since it was first measured in 1937 (13). Despite an almost ten-point hike in 1958 (49 percent), church attendance has remained remarkably consistent over that same period at approximately 40 percent (15). The importance of religion to Americans and the overall percentage of adults who believe in God likewise measured consistently across the same period of time (10, 25). Surprisingly, even the percentage of Americans identified as unchurched shows little change over the past thirty years with 41 percent in 1978 and 44 percent in 1998 (16).

Given those kinds of numbers, one might conclude that the American religious scene is relatively healthy. Gallup and Lindsay also discovered evidence that seems to indicate “that the percentage of people with a deep, lived-out faith is much smaller than the overall percentages on religious belief would suggest” (23). For example, the percentage of Americans who believe the church has lost influence in society grew from a meager 14 percent in 1957 to a whopping 52 percent in 1998 (11). Conversely, the percentage of those who feel religion is relevant to their everyday lives declined from a robust 81 percent in 1957 to 63 percent in 1998 (19). Possibly reflective of feelings about the church’s relevance, the idea of the church’s mission to those in need is seen as disconnected from reality. Of those surveyed in this latest Gallup study, 55 percent of American adults “think the government should be more responsible for assisting the poor and disenfranchised members of society, but only 28 percent . . . think the burden should be primarily [original emphasis] carried by religious organizations” (134). Overall the numbers led Gallup and Lindsay to ask a burning question in spite of the continuing high level of attachment to religion: “Religion is broad, but is it deep?” (13).
In spite of this seeming state of confusion, spiritual hunger among Americans runs high in the current generation. Gallup and Lindsay show that Americans who feel a need for spiritual growth “surged twenty-four points in just four years—from 58 percent in 1994 to 82 percent in 1998” (1). Likewise, those who think about the overall meaning and purpose of their lives swelled by eleven points.

Barna, another observer of American religious trends, paints an even grimmer picture. Barna concludes, “America is in a state of spiritual anarchy today” (Boiling Point 186). He cites the disconnect that exists between the religious affiliations of Americans and the way they live their lives:

People adopt religious labels for themselves that bear no relationship to what they believe or how they live. Millions of adults say they believe in and worship God, but they have no idea what worship means, who God is, what He stands for or what He expects of those who wish to relate to Him. Importantly, nobody cares about the inconsistencies embedded within our faith philosophies, creeds and practices. (186)

The disconnect Barna observes is most pronounced in terms of the local church’s mission to the community. While spiritual interest runs high and Americans are almost desperately seeking meaning and purpose in their lives, the majority of churches seem to have lost the sense of why they exist. In another confusing set of observations that indicates a disconnect between what people say they believe and how they actually practice faith, Barna discovers that a sizable majority of those who identify themselves as “born-again Christians” believe they are responsible for sharing their faith with nonbelievers. Nevertheless, while most churches do, in fact, encourage such practice in order to fulfill the Great Commission—that is, “go and make disciples”—only “1 out of every 6 adults always thinks of himself/herself as a representative of the Christian faith” (221).
Further, very few churches engage in any formal way of praying for the unchurched. Few have any type of training to equip people to share faith effectively, and most Christians assume evangelism is someone else’s job. Another telling reality that seems to betray stated belief is that while evangelism is the ministry priority most often mentioned by senior pastors, not even half of the senior pastors of Protestant churches in America rank it in the top three of their church’s ministry priorities.

Sadly, the gap between the churched and the unchurched appears to be so wide that Christians lack the basic relational foundations to engage in mission to their neighbors even if they wanted to do so. In a 2000 study, Barna and Mark Hatch discovered that most unchurched persons in America “have never been invited to a church by a Christian” nor have they ever “been told by a Christian what it means to be a believer in Jesus Christ or invited to embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior” (Boiling Point 222). Perhaps the most alarming evidence of this disconnect lies in the discovery in that same study that “fewer than 1 out of every 5 believers knew a non-Christian well enough to share their faith with that individual in a context of trust and credibility” (222).

One should not be surprised to learn, then, that while numbers measuring affiliations and associations with churches remained fairly constant over the years, the average size of churches actually decreased from one hundred to ninety in average attendance over the past decade (221). Notably, this decrease occurred amidst a steadily growing American population with a rapidly growing interest in spiritual matters.

Barna sums up the state of confusion and even disease that afflicts the American church culture in spite of a seemingly misleading consistency of several measures:

The result we have found in study after study is a nation of churches filled with people who are dispassionate about evangelism, theologically
incapable of accurately representing God’s principles and standards, and relationally and methodologically unable to lead a person to Christ. One way of evaluating the evangelistic commitment of churches is to note that they will spend more money on buildings and maintenance this year than on evangelism and follow-up by a factor of more than 4 to 1! (Boiling Point 221)

Barna’s assertion, then, that “the local church in the U. S. has come on hard times … in terms of its image and influence” (235) seems to reflect accurately the challenge facing those seeking to call the church back to its missionary roots.

Identity Theft

How the church ever lost sight of its self-understanding as a missional people and what factors contributed to replacing its identity as an agent of transformational change with what Guder et al. identify as “merely a vendor of religious goods and services” (84) is important to consider. Historically, the church in Western nations—Europe and North America—was the largest sender of missionaries to the rest of the world. Now, the West represents a vast mission field itself. Hunter estimates at least “120 million functionally undisciplined people (aged 14 or older)” live in the United States alone, and a strategy to reach this population “will require as sophisticated a mission strategy as any mission field in the world today, or at any time in history” (How to Reach Secular People 25). Hunter cites six major cultural events occurring over several centuries as first causes of the growing secularization of the West.

1. The Renaissance’s rediscovery of ancient Greek philosophy, science, and literature introduced a competing humanistic worldview to challenge the church’s understanding of life and the world.

2. The Reformation brought about the breakup of Christendom, which diminished the church’s influence upon Western life by dividing the church and turning its attention
away from “the management of society and inward toward renewal, reorganization and theological matters” (Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* 27).

3. *Nationalism*, which led to two world wars, destroyed Christendom’s political identity and its understanding of a common humanity.

4. *Science* issued challenges to many of the core doctrines of the church such as its traditional understanding of the cosmos, the providence of God, creation and the nature of humankind, interpretations of history and belief, and the experience of God.

5. *The Enlightenment*, with its belief in the intrinsic goodness of human beings and confidence that morality could be based on reason alone, led to “natural religion” and the onset of “modernity.”

6. *Urbanization* shifted the population of Western nations from rural areas to the cities and subtly but profoundly affected the urban population’s “God-consciousness” (Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* 26-29).

If these six cultural events launched the demise of Christianity’s influence upon Western culture, then how the church responded to such shifts crystallized its loss of influence and further distanced people from the church’s witness. The church adopted a reactionary stance in almost every instance, and it appeared to take on an adversarial position against thought, reason, and the search for truth. David J. Bosch notes that, when faced with these kinds of cultural crises, the church “too frequently responds by digging trenches and preparing for a long siege, hoping against hope that, somehow, the threat will go away” (*Believing in the Future* 4). This “survival mentality” has forced the church into a retreat mode rather than seeing the culture as something to engage with the
purpose of winning unbelievers to Christ. The result is that “once survival has become our supreme goal, we have lost our way” (McManus 23).

Erwin McManus offers an interesting twist on understanding the disconnect between the church culture and the secular culture:

The world around us was clearly shifting. What we couldn’t figure out was why it seemed so disconnected from the influence of the Christian faith. Christianity had become a world religion. It carried all the trappings that came with that distinction. What appeared to be America’s giant was in reality more like Dorothy’s Oz. If Christianity was king in this land, then the emperor had no clothes! The church was no longer the shaper of modern culture, but, in fact, modern culture had become the shaper of the church. (28)

The end result is that the church lost potency to engage the culture in any sort of transformational way. America has not rejected Christ as much as it has rejected the church. The nation, as reflected in the growing interest in spiritual matters, is not “moving towards a godless land but to a land with many gods” (29). McManus concludes, “We [the church] were neither relevant nor transcendent. We have become, in the worst of ways, religious. We are the founders of the secular nation” (29).

Toward a Renewed Missional Identity

The call for the church in America is clear: the church must rediscover a self-understanding as an “apostolic” people—a people sent by God into the world to engage the secular culture with the good news of Christ. In other words, the church must rediscover its reason to live. The church must once again make the shift from simply supporting missions to being “on mission” (McManus 30). Guder et al. echo this call: “The current predicament of churches in North America requires more than a mere tinkering with long-assumed notions about the identity and mission of the church… There is a need for reinventing . . . the church in this new kind of world” (77). This
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reinvention must balance the tension of being both faithful and relevant. It must avoid “unwarranted accommodation” as it fits into its social environment so that it does not lose touch with its “biblical warrant.” At the same time the church must not too strictly adhere to “scriptural forms of expressing its faith that were intelligible to the cultures of biblical time, and in the process neglect to translate the biblical warrant into an incarnation relevant to the church’s current time and place” (79).

Guder et al. list “three basic priorities for the church’s recovery of its missionary soul” (108). First, the church must seek to live as an authentic community of Christ’s followers under the reign of God with a self-understanding of being a sent people fulfilling the mission of Jesus. Second, the church must discover how to live out its communal identity in ways that give public witness to the reign of God over all things and God’s justice within society. Third, the church must learn to speak boldly, often, and with a fresh voice as messengers of the reign of God. It must speak such “that the signposts to the reign of God evidenced in the church’s own deeds will not be misunderstood” (108-09).

Reggie McNeal sees hope for a renewed missional identity in the demise of institutional religion in America. He cites Jesus’ own ministry as a model for a new missionary movement. McNeal points out that the spiritual landscape in Jesus’ day was very similar to today’s. While institutional religion produced a sense of exclusivity, Jesus tapped into a rising hunger for spiritual meaning, and the search for God and salvation surged. The crowds flocked to Jesus in response to his emphasis on the grace of God in his dealings with people in contrast to the legalistic behavioral approach of the Judaism of his day. Gnosticism and other “mystery” religions proved to be early challenges to
Christianity though the “emphasis was on personal salvation, not institutional development” (17).

Jesus’ own mission tapped into this spiritual hunger with his teaching on the kingdom of God and how to enter it. His message emphasized God’s favor for people and defined genuine spirituality in terms of relationships with God and neighbor. As a result people experienced the power of God in personal life transformation and then shared the experience with others. McNeal notes the similarities between the dynamics of the current generation with those present in Jesus’ day:

The time is ripe for recapturing this initial appeal of the gospel. People are interested and searching for God and personal salvation through a relationship with him…. The correct response, then, to the collapse of the church culture is not to try to become better at doing church. This only feeds the problem and hastens the church’s decline through its disconnect from the larger culture. The need is not for a methodological fix. The need is for a missional fix. (18)

McNeal sees “the collapse of the church culture” as “God’s gracious invitation [for the church] to rediscover itself” (18).

**The Community of Faith as Witness**

One key in renewing a missional identity for the church today is understanding the full scope of mission. Often a local church will point to its evangelism activities as its mission at home and its support of foreign missionaries as its work abroad. Even though the two are necessarily linked together, mission is “the total task God has set the church for the salvation of the world” (Bosch, *Transforming Mission* 412) while evangelism is an essential element of that mission. In other words, the church needs to embrace a total missional identity in every aspect of its life. Emil Brunner said, “The Church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission there is no church; and
where there is neither church nor mission, there is no faith” (qtd. in Hunter, Radical Outreach 28).

Only when the church sees its entire communal existence as an expression of mission will evangelism be effective. Bosch connects effective evangelism to the whole community of Christ’s followers:

> Evangelism is only possible when the community that evangelizes—the church—is a radiant manifestation of the Christian faith and exhibits an attractive lifestyle. If the church is to impart to the world a message of hope and love, of faith, justice and peace, something of this should become visible, audible, and tangible in the church itself.… The witness of life of the believing community prepares the way for the gospel. (Transforming Mission 414)

McNeal echoes in agreement and proposes “that missiology come into prominence, both as a theological pursuit and as a guiding operational paradigm” (50). He further suggests the church frame every issue and activity that garners its attention within the theme of mission (50-51).

**An Opportunity for Mission**

Jesus describes the people of his time as lost without a shepherd. He then points out that the fields are ripe for harvest, but the workers are few. The number of people flocking to AA and similar meetings for a variety of addictions and dysfunctional behaviors indicate that the fields are still ripe for harvest, but the workers are sitting inside the air-conditioned church buildings. Several factors contribute to this lost mission opportunity.

**A Field Ripe for Harvest**

As the church seeks to reinvent itself and moves down a road of rediscovering a missional identity, it will need to identify the mission fields in which it resides. The
church faces the challenge of determining where to live out its missional identity. Luke reports that Jesus’ instructions to seventy-two followers being sent on a mission of healing and preaching to nearby towns begins with an urgent plea: “The harvest is so great, but the workers are so few. Pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest, and ask him to send out more workers for his fields” (Luke 10:2). In John’s gospel, following a significant (and successful) mission to a Samaritan woman that resulted in many from her village professing faith in Jesus, a group of somewhat perplexed disciples again heard Jesus speak to his sense of mission and the urgency of the hour:

> Then Jesus explained: “My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work. Do you think the work of harvesting will not begin until the summer ends four months from now? Look around you! *Vast fields are ripening all around us and are ready now for the harvest* [emphasis mine]. The harvesters are paid good wages, and the fruit they harvest is people brought to eternal life. What joy awaits both the planter and the harvester alike!” (John 4:34-36)

If, as McNeal suggests, the spiritual landscape of today is similar to that of Jesus’ day, then the challenge for the contemporary church in the West lies in identifying where the ripe fields exist.

A starting point could be a “field” in America consisting literally of millions of persons who by their own admission are in search of a “vital spiritual experience” (Alcoholics Anonymous 27). Further, these persons, for the most part, have humbly admitted they have problems they cannot solve on their own, recognized a need for a power greater than themselves to overcome their problems and are actively seeking a relationship with God (59). Further, they share many common values and concepts with persons already belonging to the church—hospitality to newcomers, spiritual formation, small group accountability, service, fellowship, and even mission (Dick B).
The “field” I have described is made up of the recovery community in America. Each week in the United States, an estimated twenty million persons attend any one of some 500,000—recovery groups (Warren). The recovery movement owes its beginning to the formation of Alcoholics Anonymous and the classic twelve-step recovery program. Interestingly, AA began in the mid-1930s and has grown to approximately one million members in the United States today (Dick B), while the church in America has steadily lost influence over that same period of time. In spite of possible points of connection and overlap among members, the church has, by and large, been unengaged from the recovery community and not embraced it as a potential field of mission to any significant degree. Hunter reflects on the church’s heretofore lost opportunity: “The recovery movement is already the ‘Underground Awakening’ of this generation; more people are discovering the grace of God for the first time in twelve step groups than in evangelism programs!” (Radical Outreach 144).

The disconnect with the recovery community is even more confusing when one considers the fact that recovery groups, at least in the tradition of AA, serve almost as a referral agency for the church. Dick B., an active member of AA for twenty years and self-proclaimed historian of the movement, has written over sixty articles and published twenty-three titles on all aspects of early AA history:

The program still suggests religious affiliation and practices, the reading of religious literature suggested by members of the cloth, and the practice of “spiritual” principles which originally were sifted from the Oxford Group’s “Four Absolutes”—honesty, purity, unselfishness and love; from Jesus’ sermon on the mount, the Book of James, and 1 Corinthians 13, and other portions of the Good Book such as the Ten Commandments.

Although present day AA groups tend to de-emphasize any connections to the church, the movement clearly saw religious affiliation in a positive light in the early years.
Spiritual and Biblical Foundations

In order to understand the disconnect that exists between the recovery community and the church community today, one must first understand where they were at one time connected. Hunter, one of the few evangelical voices who has written about the opportunity for mission present among the recovery community, describes the spiritual/biblical foundations of the twelve steps. First, Bill Wilson (Bill W.) and Dr. Robert Smith (Dr. Bob), credited with the founding of AA, reflected upon their recovery experience with a member of the clergy, the Rev. Samuel Shoemaker of Calvary Episcopal Church in New York. As Rev. Shoemaker facilitated the process, Bill W. and Dr. Bob framed their experiences within selected “passages in the New Testament—especially the book of James, the Sermon on the Mount, and Chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians” (Radical Outreach 134). What eventually emerged from this exercise are the current twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (see Appendix D). Besides the reading of the twelve steps, AA meetings employ certain liturgical components such as praying the Lord’s Prayer at the close of meetings and Reinhold Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer (see Appendix E) at the beginning (Radical Outreach 133-36).

Bill W.’s story attests to the spiritual underpinnings of AA and reads like so many testimonies and conversion stories told at revival services and camp meetings in many evangelical circles. At the point of no return—his “bottom” in AA parlance—of his alcoholism, he was visited by a friend—once drunk, now sober—who claimed to have “found religion.” Bill W., like most Americans of his day, had grown up in the church and “had always believed in a Power greater than myself” (Alcoholics Anonymous 10). This religious experience had never taken on a personal face, and he had developed over
the course of his life a basic distrust “with ministers, and the world’s religious” (10). Still he simply could not explain away the obvious change evidenced by his friend and former drinking partner who now “sat before me, and he made the point-blank declaration that God had done for him what he could not do for himself” (11). Bill W. offered the following reflections on the impact of the living testimony of his friend upon his own understanding of his predicament:

His human will had failed. Doctors had pronounced him incurable. Society was about to lock him up. Like myself, he had admitted complete defeat. Then he had, in effect, been raised from the dead [emphasis mine], suddenly taken from the scrap heap to a level of life better than the best he had ever known!

Had this power originated in him? Obviously it had not. There had been no more power in him than there was in me at that minute; and this was none at all.

That floored me. It began to look as though religious people were right after all. Here was something at work in the human heart, which had done the impossible. My ideas about miracles were drastically revised right then. Never mind the musty past; here sat a miracle directly across the kitchen table. He shouted great tidings. (11)

Bill W. still had difficulty embracing the idea of “a God personal to me” (12) at that point despite the obvious transformation of his friend. He simply did not like the idea. His friend then made a suggestion that led to a foundational principle of AA that has probably stood as the biggest hurdle for the church community to cross in understanding and embracing this movement (a point for further discussion later in the study). His friend simply suggested, “Why don’t you choose your own conception of God?”

This idea found a home in Bill’s mind. Though he would eventually embrace faith in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, Bill W. found a spiritual starting point:

It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a Power greater than myself. Nothing more was required of me to make my beginning [emphasis mine]…. There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly
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under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time that of myself I was nothing; that without Him I was lost. I ruthlessly faced my sins and became willing to have my new-found Friend take them away, root and branch. I have not had a drink since. (12-13)

Bill W.’s faith would find expression in Christianity as he began attending meetings of the Oxford Group at Calvary Episcopal Church, led by the rector, Dr. Sam Shoemaker. The Oxford Group traced its beginnings to the early 1900s when the group’s founder, Dr. Frank Buchman, a Lutheran minister “underwent a remarkable spiritual transformation” (Pass It On 130). By 1928 the Oxford Group was formally established as “a spiritual movement that sought to recapture the power of first-century Christianity in the modern world” (Dr. Bob 53). Several qualities of the movement left an indelible impression upon Bill:

1. A kind of enthusiasm and friendship at meetings Bill described as “manna from heaven,”

2. The group’s successes in helping people change their lives,

3. The fact that social, class, and racial barriers were almost nonexistent in the Oxford Group, and

4. Forgotten religious differences (Pass It On 127).

Bill later described the Oxford Group as he found it in December 1934 as “a nondenominational evangelical movement.… Their aim was world conversion. Everybody, as they put it, needed changing” (127-28).

The spiritual and even biblical foundation upon which the recovery movement began is unmistakable. In the earliest days of AA, “there was no AA literature, and the young groups leaned heavily on Bible reading for inspiration and guidance” (Members of the Clergy 1). Both cultures shared many concepts of the spiritual life and even a
common language. Yet from the earliest days, the presence of a disconnect between the recovery community and the church community emerged.

**Early Warning Signs**

Despite the fact that the roots of recovery were planted in the soil of Christian mission in a movement such as the Oxford Group, the disconnect between church and recovery began taking shape in the earliest days. Hunter comments on the church’s lack of understanding towards people struggling with addictions:

> The church, like most of society, has long assumed that bad character, weak willpower, and/or irresponsible parents are the sole known causes of addiction. Many church people react emotionally toward addicted people the way the ancient Jews did toward lepers. *(Radical Outreach 123)*

The truth is the Oxford Group members and even Samuel Shoemaker, in spite of the success they had with Bill W., had almost as much trouble understanding addiction as the Christians about which Hunter writes. Bill W. describes the negative reactions to his early enthusiasm to help alcoholics:

> I was soon heard to say that I was going to fix up all the drunks in the world, even though the batting average on them had been virtually nil for the last 5000 years. The Oxford Groupers had tried, had mostly failed, and were fed up. Sam Shoemaker in fact had just had a run of bad luck. He had housed a batch of drunks in an apartment near his church, and one of them, still resisting salvation, had peevishly thrown a shoe through a fine stained-glass window in Sam’s church. No wonder my Oxford Group friends felt that I had better forget about alcoholics. *(Pass It On 131)*

Bill himself experienced little success at first. In fact, after six months of preaching passionately and frequently to any and all drunks with whom he came in contact Bill observed that “nobody had sobered up” (132). Helped by advice from his friend and physician, Dr. William Silkworth, Bill realized two mistakes in his approach: he was “preaching” to the drunks, and “he still believed that an alcoholic required a spectacular
spiritual experience, similar to his own, in order to recover” (133). With Dr. Silkworth’s urging, Bill learned to connect first with someone at the point of their common illness—alcoholic to alcoholic—in order to gain trust. Only then, he learned, could he earn the opportunity to teach the spiritual principles learned from the Oxford Group (133). This more relational, less aggressive approach did not set well with leaders in the Oxford Group; thus, the first signs of separation appeared.

Oxford Group members did not oppose Bill necessarily; they simply did not understand him or his addiction. Generally speaking, they fell into the camp of Christians who believed one more prayer or regular church attendance or reading the Bible more often should be sufficient to experience freedom from addiction. Sadly, the misunderstanding of addiction is almost as chronic among the religious community still today as the disease itself. Fifty years ago G. Aiken Taylor observed the problems alcoholics face when looking to the church for understanding and help:

> If an alcoholic got any attention at all, it was of the sort that did him no good. No one believed he deserved sympathy or help. Sure to be condemned, he was seldom cured. Ministers and moralists pointed stern fingers at him. His closest friends had little to offer except the blunt advice that he had better stop drinking. The sick man was universally ridiculed, frequently reviled, and never understood, except by brother alcoholics who knew no more than he how to stop drinking. (4)

So, the first source or primary cause of the disconnect between the recovery community and the church community is found simply in the difficulty of understanding the nature of addiction.

**A Growing Separation**

Alexander DeJong, the first president of Trinity Christian College and former pastor of seven Christian Reformed churches in the United States, is an alcoholic. On a
Sunday over twenty-five years ago, DeJong felt a sense of dread knowing that while he lay in a hospital bed at McNeal Memorial Hospital an elder at the Kedvale Avenue Christian Reformed Church in Oak Lawn, Illinois, would stand before the congregation and read a note, composed by DeJong, publicly admitting his struggle with the disease of alcoholism. The pastor reflected upon his feelings:

In my terror, I would have much preferred to be suffering from appendicitis, a disorder that raises genuine concerns, or even cancer, a disease that elicits sincere sympathy and powerful prayer. To be afflicted with alcoholism somehow seemed unpardonable, especially for a clergyman. (DeJong and Doot 1-2)

Fortunately, DeJong and his family received surprising support and affirmations from church members. Even his denominational colleagues responded to his revelation with love and encouragement (DeJong and Doot 52-53), yet the “dread” and “terror” he felt at the prospect of revealing his disease in the context of a redemptive community of Christ followers underscores the gap that exists between the recovery community and the church.

Besides the inherent difficulty in simply understanding the nature of addiction, the church community does not really know what to do with addiction theologically. Pastor and author Melinda Fish asks the question about addiction that resounds in the halls of churches and the minds of Christians everywhere: “Is it sin, disease or a demon?” (120). The truth is addiction is a complex malady of the human condition with no simple answers or approaches. It presents a certain ambiguity, which causes great difficulty in forming assessments or appropriate responses. Addiction is considered “both a deviant behavior and a biological illness. It is treated as a genetic condition, but also a chosen conduct…. No other pathology elicits such a culturally conflicted response” (Dann 14).
The lack of understanding and the uncertainty about the relationship between sin and addiction often leads to judgmental moralism as the response of churches.

Linda A. Mercadante explores, in depth, the theological issue surrounding sin and addiction. She compares and contrasts the concept of sin and addiction as well as “the theological roots and implications of the addiction-recovery ethos” (xii). She cites the church’s failure to help people to “think theologically” about these issues (9) as a primary cause of the disconnect between the church and recovery community. Mercandante holds that a theological approach to the disconnect will challenge both communities to rethink simplistic opinion and perception and that “a carefully conceived theology can offer alternative views that avoid many of the pitfalls of both the typical moralistic understanding of sin and an unnuanced disease model of addiction” (5).

Hunter identifies people with addictions as “the most obvious, and least understood, New Barbarians” [original emphasis] in the West today” (Celtic Way 100). He points out how society as a whole dismisses addicts as “losers” and how church people in particular “glibly explain addiction as ‘sin’; then, as they assume that the power of sin is greater than ‘the One who is in us,’ they shun, withdraw from, or even excommunicate people hijacked by addiction” (100-01). The fact that a church that has grown increasingly secular alongside a secular society might dismiss addicts as hopeless is predictable. Whereas addicted people and others with dysfunctional/compulsive behaviors seeking recovery should find what they need in the church, often they experience the fellowship of believers to be an unsafe place to share their struggles. Persons seeking spiritual resources for recovery have turned to recovery or self-help

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2 To understand Hunter’s use of the term “New Barbarian” as applied to the mission of the church today see The Celtic Way of Evangelism, pp. 15-19.
groups to find “the support promised but not delivered by the church. There they have discovered a journey of personal, moral and spiritual transformation . . . that should have been the path of Christian salvation and discipleship, and a vision for human relationships that should have been the content of Christian holiness” (Thompson and Eickhoff 8).

David L. Thompson and Gina Thompson Eickhoff then turn to the problem of the church’s perception towards persons in active recovery:

At the same time, “recovery” and “recovery groups” strike many in the church primarily as a place for some people to “celebrate” their plight as victims. Many suspect these persons “in recovery” are simply seeking an excuse to rehearse the tragedies of their childhood, blame others for their own inadequacies, and use pop psychology to evade responsibility. “Recovery” and “self-help” are just aspects of the psychological seduction and the narcissism of our culture, these skeptics would say. (8)

Such attitudes within the church community foster a feeling among addicts that the church is not a safe place to address their struggles. In fact, most addicts readily identify the church as a place to avoid if one is seeking a place to recover.

Dr. Henry Cloud, a Christian psychologist, has written extensively in the area of recovery and is a popular speaker at conferences and in churches where the church’s role in recovery is the topic. He shares a testimony from a patient and recovering alcoholic, Jake, that brings the disconnect between the church and the recovery ministry into sharp focus. What follows are Jake’s own words:

When I was in church with my Christian friends, they would just tell me that drinking was wrong and that I should repent. They did not know how many times I had tried quitting, how many times I had tried to be a good Christian.

When I got into Alcoholics Anonymous, I found that I could be honest about my failures, but more important, I could be honest about my helplessness. When I found out that God and others accepted me in both my drinking and [original emphasis] my helplessness to control it, I began to have hope. I could come forth with who I really was and find help.
As much as the church preached grace, I never really found acceptance there for my real state. They always expected me to change. In my AA group, not only did they not expect me to change, they told me that, by myself, I could not change! They told me that all I could do was confess who I truly was, an alcoholic, and that God could change me along with their daily support. Finally, I could be honest, and I could find friends. That was totally different, and it changed my life. (27)

Jake’s experience with the church community is all too common among addicts and serves as a glaring example of the challenge facing the church if it is to target the recovery community as a field for harvesting.

To an Unknown God

The point of greatest contention between the recovery community and the church community centers around AA’s (and similar twelve-step groups’) use of a concept of God as a “Higher Power.” Among evangelical Christians this designation is often interpreted as “new age” language that smacks of heresy or even idolatry. Embedded in the twelve steps is the reference to “a Power [original emphasis] greater than ourselves” (Step 2) and “God as we understood Him [original emphasis]” (Steps 3 & 11). At other points in the steps, the name “God” is used as well as references to God using the masculine pronoun, “Him” (Steps 5, 6, 7 and 11). My phone call from Cindy mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study illustrates the problem a lot of Christians have at this point. Writers and Christian leaders who openly challenge the validity of AA and the church having any connection usually find the Higher Power emphasis to be a major point of departure. Dr. Cathy Burns is one such voice and has written a scathing critique of AA including its reference to a Higher Power:

The terminology “Higher Power” makes the average person think of God, but as has been illustrated, this “Higher Power” does not necessarily include a supernatural God. Even when God is alluded to it is a “God as YOU understand Him,” not as He is presented in the Bible. The sad part is
that many religious leaders are buying into this idea that the “Higher Power” in AA is the same as the God of the Bible…. It should be unmistakable that AA’s “Higher Power” is definitely not the God of the Bible, but AA literature makes it even plainer that other gods are acceptable. (35-39)

In point of fact Burns is correct; AA never claims that their “Higher Power” is the God of the Bible. Still, the tone and purpose of her writing stands as an illustration of what my friend Cindy articulated: AA is new age because they “pray” to a Higher Power, and a Christian going to an AA meeting is akin to entering “enemy territory.”

To understand the use of the “Higher Power” reference at AA, one must return to the roots of twelve-step thinking. When Bill W. first embraced a faith that would help him overcome his addiction, he did so in a context of distrust toward the church and organized religion in general. His willingness to place faith in a “God of your own conception” (Alcoholics Anonymous 12) only served as a starting point of a long journey toward God. Bill W. acknowledged that fact in telling his story:

\[It\text{ }was\text{ }only\text{ }a\text{ }matter\text{ }of\text{ }being\text{ }willing\text{ }to\text{ }believe\text{ }in\text{ }a\text{ }Power\text{ }greater\text{ }than\text{ }myself.\text{ }Nothing\text{ }more\text{ }was\text{ }required\text{ }of\text{ }me\text{ }to\text{ }make\text{ }my\text{ }beginning\text{ }[\text{original}\text{ }emphasis].\text{I}\text{ }saw\text{ }that\text{ }growth\text{ }could\text{ }start\text{ }from\text{ }that\text{ }point.\text{Upon\text{ }a}\text{ }foundation\text{ }of\text{ }complete\text{ }willingness\text{ }I\text{ }might\text{ }build\text{ }what\text{ }I\text{ }saw\text{ }in\text{ }my\text{ }friend.\text{Would\text{ }I\text{ }have\text{ }it?\text{Of\text{ }course\text{ }I\text{ }would!} (12)\]

The focus in AA is clear; they simply want alcoholics to find a point of beginning for faith to be activated. In other words, looking at it from an evangelism perspective, they meet a person where they are. In the Big Book of AA an entire chapter is devoted to agnostics—appropriately titled “We Agnostics”—that serves as an apologetic to those who have trouble embracing even the slightest degree of faith. In that chapter AA clearly articulates anticipation that choosing “your own conception of God” is not where the faith journey will end:
At the start, this was all we needed to commence spiritual growth, to effect our first conscious relation with God as we understood Him. Afterward, we found ourselves accepting many things which then seemed entirely out of reach. That was growth, but if we wished to grow we had to begin somewhere. So we used our own conception, however limited it was. We needed to ask ourselves but one short question. “Do I now believe, or am I even willing to believe that there is a Power greater than myself?” As soon as a man can say that he does believe, or is willing to believe, we emphatically assure him that he is on his way. It has been repeatedly proven among us that upon this simple cornerstone a wonderfully effective spiritual structure can be built. (47)

I am not implying that Bill W. ever professed an orthodox theology or that he saw himself as a Christian evangelist or apologist in any way. The literature does not allow such a conclusion. Bill W. and AA’s objective is very focused and somewhat narrow. He (and they) simply wanted to help drunks get sober, and toward that end they have proven to be very effective. I am suggesting that, due to the intentional spiritual direction of his life and movement and with the prevalence of spiritual language throughout recovery literature, an open door exists for the ministry of Christian conversation to serve as an effective missional strategy for the church to the recovery community.

For several reasons I would contend that such a philosophy, at least from a missiological perspective, presents an opportunity rather than an obstacle for a church seeking to connect with the recovery community for the purpose of leading persons to faith in Christ. First, it presents a platform for dialogue about who God is. The Apostle Paul encountered a similar situation in the city of Athens in Acts 17. When Paul saw the religious (spiritual) leanings of the Athenians and their altar with the inscription, “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD,” he was able to share with them about the God for whom they were searching. “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17:24b). Likewise, an alcoholic or addict who has willingly opened up to the
possibility of faith in a Higher Power is usually sincerely interested in discovering just who that Higher Power might be.\(^3\)

At a recent Celebrate Recovery meeting at Hope Springs Church, a recovering alcoholic named Bobby introduced himself to me as “an alcoholic with an undefined Higher Power.” I was able at that point to begin a dialogue with him to try and help him define his Higher Power. That kind of interaction and opportunity would regularly present itself to Christians willing to engage with persons in recovery.

Christians, generally speaking, have little problem with someone speaking of God as “my best friend” or “my shelter from the storm” yet tend to bristle at someone’s reference to God as “Higher Power.” A person who says, “God is my best friend,” may have no more of a theological grounding in Scripture than the typical member of AA. The reference to God as “best friend” is certainly not found in Scripture.

Second, the identification of people in recovery with a Higher Power reveals openness to seeking spiritual truth. Hunter makes the case that beginning with a name for the Creator different than the name “God” is basically irrelevant to the search:

The biblical writers employ many names for God, and the World Church refers to God with an astonishing range of indigenous names. The three letter symbol G-O-D is only one of many Germanic names for the deity; the fairly wide diffusion of the name was largely accidental…. There are no compelling reasons to use one name only, and many reasons to use many names! (Radical Outreach 138)

Hunter goes on to defend the idea of beginning with God “as you understand Him.” He asserts that God begins that way with everyone. Sam Shoemaker actually pioneered this approach in his method of evangelism as he invited people “to bring as much of yourself as you understand to as much of God as you understand” (38). Hunter then lists the only

\(^3\) Amazingly Burns interprets the story of Paul in Athens as a reason not to engage the recovery community in the ministry of Christian conversation.
three things, according to Jim MacDougall, a struggling person needs to believe in order to begin with God: “(1) God is not me, (2) God is greater than me, and (3) God is willing to help me” (38).

Third, understanding the spiritual concept of AA and other twelve-step recovery programs helps the disciple of Jesus know what to expect in seeking to evangelize within the context of the recovery community. In other words, the church needs to have realistic expectations. AA and other recovery groups existing outside the church have never claimed to be on a mission to make disciples of Jesus. The call to make disciples seems to be exclusively the call of the church. Understanding why the church community is disturbed that AA does not do what it does not claim to do is quite difficult. I do not hear the same kinds of criticisms and/or suspicions directed, for instance, toward the Young Men’s Christian Organization (YMCA) for basically only offering me a place to exercise or get my children involved in soccer. Most churches and Christians serious about the mission of the church would quickly recognize going to the YMCA as providing a good opportunity to, say, invite someone to church. Certainly, the Christian community should recognize the work of engaging in ministry and witness to a group in search of a spiritual experience and open to God’s power as an even better opportunity.

Of course, the church can expect the same response from the recovery community that Paul received from the people of Athens should it seek to engage those in recovery with the intent of introducing persons in recovery to the true, ultimate Higher Power, Jesus Christ: “[S]ome of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on the subject.’ A few men became followers of Paul and believed” (Acts 17:33-34a).
Resources and Methods

The purpose of this research was to understand the disconnect that exists between the church and recovery communities, to discover whether or not a correlation exists between recovery ministry and a church’s missional understanding, and to determine the effect of a particular ministry, Celebrate Recovery, on church dynamics. To accomplish these goals, certain resources were assessed and certain methods deployed in the collection of pertinent data.

Bridging the Gap

Several pastors, churches, and ministry organizations have contributed to efforts to overcome the disconnect between the recovery community and the church community. As early as 1953, Taylor, pastor and former editor of the Presbyterian Journal, wrote a book examining the spiritual principles of the twelve steps of AA in respect to their religious parallels and how each can benefit from the other. Taylor looks for points of contact in how AA and religion look at human nature, redemption, and spiritual growth. He writes with a great deal of respect for AA and is widely considered to be among the first nonalcoholics to study AA from the religious perspective. He examines the disconnect between the church and AA with keen insight into its causes:

The Church, as a whole, doesn’t have an enviable record in its general attitude toward alcoholism, and alcoholics are only too aware of it. The Church failed them in their hour of need because it apparently did not have the answer, and offered, instead, platitudes and moralizations. Now, that they have found the answer, alcoholics are painfully aware that the church doesn’t speak their language. (91)

Taylor also gives honest treatment to the failings of AA and makes an appeal for the two communities to discover some form of commonality and work together to help alcoholics.
An organization called Friends in Recovery has attempted to bridge the gap by publishing materials using AA’s twelve steps but specifically for persons seeking recovery with Jesus Christ as their Higher Power. All of their materials are based on biblical teaching. Their book, *The Twelve Steps for Christians*, is a valuable aid for someone wanting to understand and work through the twelve steps. It acts as a “how to” manual that walks a person through a four-part process for taking each step: (1) understanding the step (2) working the step (3) preparing for the step, and (4) prayer for the step. While it is very helpful as a tool for recovery, the book’s appeal is primarily to “already Christians” and, therefore, is limited as a tool for evangelism. This book and others like it do not so much build a bridge as they provide an alternative to AA and similar recovery groups for persons in the church who have recovery issues. For example, InterVarsity Press, a division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an organization that primarily focuses on discipling college students, published a study series called Life Recovery Guides. Each of eight study guides contains six lessons dealing with various recovery issues. The guides are written like typical Bible studies for use in small groups or Sunday school classes. The seventh study guide, written by Dale and Juanita Ryan, deals specifically with “Recovery from Addiction.” It, too, seems designed to appeal to “already Christians.”

Celebrate Recovery, a program and curriculum developed by John Baker and Rick Warren of Saddleback Community Church, utilizes the twelve steps of AA as well as their own “Eight Principles Based on the Beatitudes” (Baker, *Celebrate Recovery* 9; see Appendix F). The program’s beginning has its roots planted in the disconnect this study discusses. Baker, now a member of the pastoral staff at Saddleback Church, began
attending the church after six years of sobriety in AA. At the time Baker was working to reconcile with his estranged wife and soon renewed his faith in Christ. As a Christ follower, he grew frustrated over the ridicule he received at AA meetings when he spoke about his Higher Power, Jesus Christ. Similarly, he was frustrated by the fact that the men in his church small group could not relate to his struggle with alcohol. The situation compelled Baker to write a thirteen-page letter to Pastor Rick Warren sharing his life story as well as a vision for a ministry to address the disconnect he experienced (“Twelve Steps”).

While acknowledging the value of AA’s twelve steps and giving due credit to AA for the number of lives they had helped, Warren confesses to being “uncomfortable with that program’s vagueness about the nature of God, the saving power of Jesus Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit” (Baker, Celebrate Recovery 12). After an intense study to see what the Bible had to say about recovery, the “Eight Principles” were born. Frankly, the eight principles are little more than a shorter version of the twelve steps with more of a Christian slant. In fact, Celebrate Recovery material includes use of the twelve steps of AA along with their biblical comparisons (see Appendix G).

Though Celebrate Recovery was somewhat born out of a reaction to AA, the program explicitly seeks to build a bridge to the recovery community. The Celebrate Recovery: Leader’s Guide states the following:

Throughout this material you will notice several references to Christ-centered 12 Steps. Our prayer is that Celebrate Recovery will create a bridge to the millions of people who are familiar with the secular 12 Steps and in so doing, introduce them to the one and only true Higher Power, Jesus Christ. Once they begin that relationship, ask Christ into their hearts as Lord and Savior, true healing and recovery can begin! (Baker 15)
Again, in the Leader’s Guide’s “Seven Keys to Start Your Recovery Ministry and Keep It Growing,” the leaders of each local Celebrate Recovery ministry are instructed to “encourage your members to attend secular recovery meetings and share the one and only true Higher Power, Jesus Christ! We can’t wait for the unsaved to come to us. We need to get out and reach them where they are!” (27). The effectiveness of Celebrate Recovery’s stated objective to build a bridge to the recovery community was examined in this study.

Methods of Research

Studying the recovery communities presented some unique challenges. One primary difficulty was the nature of the issues involved and subjects to be studied, given the core value of anonymity. Persons important to the research were likely to be wary of being researched. Even when surveying recovery literature nameless authors write much of the recovery-generated material. Doing “qualitative research—called ethnography by anthropologists” (Spradley v) will require use of the method of participant observation. James P. Spradley discusses how the student doing fieldwork can gain valuable insight and understanding of the culture of subjects from the participant point of view (v-viii). In implementing this method, the researcher has to determine first the “place, actors and activities” (39) of the social situation to be studied. Determining the cluster of social structures and networks when dealing with a variety of social situations is important. In other words, the observer must define the physical proximity of the places and the connections that exist when “the same group of people share in the activities” (43).

The participant observer must not only engage in the activities of the particular situation but also “observe the people, activities and physical aspects of the situation” (Spradley 54). Further, the participant observer, unlike the ordinary participant, will
“want to watch and record everything . . . that occurs, describe all the actors present, or make note of the physical setting” (54).

The nature of this particular study on the disconnect existing between the recovery community and the church community lent itself to a qualitative method for gathering research and analyzing findings. Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin explain what they believe is the most valid reason for choosing qualitative methods:

> Research that attempts to understand the meaning or nature of experience of persons with problems such as chronic illness, addiction, divorce and the act of “coming out” lends itself to getting out into the field and finding out what people are doing and thinking. (11)

As participant the researcher observes “the activities of people, the physical characteristics of the social situation, and what it feels like to be part of the scene” (Spradley 33). According to Spradley the participant observer engages in three specific types of observations in order to collect data: (1) *descriptive* observations, which involve a broad overview of the situation and the events taking place, (2) *focused* observations once the initial data has been recorded and analyzed, and (3) *selective* observations that involve a narrower focus (33). The researcher must record observations using a variety of means—notes, maps, photographs, audio recordings and others—in order to build “a bridge between observation and analysis. Indeed, most of your analysis will rely heavily on what you have recorded” (33).

Analysis in participant observation involves a process of question-discovery. The researcher does not enter the field with predetermined questions. Instead, the questions are “discovered” after each period of fieldwork “in order to know what to look for during your next period of participant observation” (Spradley 34).
Spradley emphasizes the importance of the participant observer doing “open-ended inquiry; it requires constant feedback to give the study direction” (35). In other words, participant observation is, figuratively speaking, research guided by a compass rather than a tape measure. Analyzing data as observations are recorded is critical in order to avoid getting overwhelmed with the amount of primary data.

In conducting interviews during research, a distinction needs to be drawn between conversation and interview. The researcher must remember in a “field-collecting situation you’re not a conversational participant” (Jackson 81). The researcher’s problem is “to keep the information flowing as freely as possible, to remain deeply enough involved in the discussion to let your informants inform you, but distant enough so they’ll deliver more than what you came there thinking you’d find” (82). The researcher must remember he or she is there to gather information not already collected and not just to have a conversation.

**Conclusion**

The church in America is in trouble. It has gradually lost influence and adherents over the years and continues to see the general population distance itself further and further from its witness. The call for the church to rediscover its missional identity is urgent as a growing hunger for spiritual meaning and purpose in life spreads across the land.

Every week millions of persons in search of help overcoming their addictive and compulsive behaviors attend recovery and self-help groups. Most of these groups employ some form of spiritual therapy, usually some form of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, as a primary source of recovery. Persons who work the steps admit a
spiritual emptiness at the outset, yet the church of Jesus Christ is too often not present to fill the void. The church by its disengagement from the secular culture and its own spiritual atrophy has, by and large, missed out on a tremendous opportunity for mission in its own backyard.

The time has come for the church to seek ways to build bridges of opportunity and understanding to the recovery community. If the church does not respond to the urgent call, then millions of persons stand to miss out on the ultimate hope of recovery found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Worse still, millions may enter eternity with an undefined Higher Power as their only hope.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to describe the relationship that exists between the church community and the recovery community, to discover how the church can recover the dynamic outreach of the recovery movement, and to show that recovering recovery will be good both for the addicted person and for the church. Attention was given to exploring opportunities to build bridges between them for the purpose of opening up the recovery community as a viable missional focus of the church. The study also examined the correlation between church-based recovery ministries and missional understanding in those churches.

This chapter lays out the design of the study. It shows how the study developed and describes the objectives of the research questions. The chapter begins with a summary of both the problem and the purpose of the study.

Summary of the Problem

Literally millions of Americans are seeking spiritual help each week in any one of hundreds of thousands of recovery and self-help groups. A majority of these groups offer some form of spiritual therapy based on the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. In spite of the spiritual emphasis, recognition of the struggles of the human condition, common language, and admitted need for God’s power, the church, for the most part, has distanced itself from the recovery community as a mission opportunity.

The disconnect that exists between the recovery community and the church community has continued to breed suspicion and, at times, contempt of one for the other. The church community tends to see persons struggling with addiction and other forms of
compulsive behaviors as hopeless outsiders. The church tends to see the recovery movement as some counterfeit spirituality that is more “new age” than Christian. On the other side of the coin, the recovery community views the church as an unsafe place to share real struggles. They have not seen the church as a viable option for pursuing help for their addiction and compulsive behavior, having too often received judgment and moralism rather than love and acceptance. Bridging the gap between the two communities is the problem this study sought to address.

**Summary of the Purpose**

As the review of literature showed, the nature of the problem calls for the church to rediscover its missional identity as a people sent by God to the lost persons in society. The church will have to move from a culture of preservation to a culture of engagement with those in the field of mission who need to know Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this study was to describe the relationship that exists between the recovery community and the church community and to explore the impact of church-based recovery ministry upon the missional understanding of the local church. Further, the study analyzed the impact of the Celebrate Recovery program upon the missional understanding of two churches in two different cities and the program’s potential for building bridges to the recovery community.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

**Research Question #1**

What is the nature of the disconnect that exists between the recovery community and the church community?
The primary tool for determining the degree of the perceived disconnect was semi-structured interviews with a protocol. I identified and interviewed six pastors from my area in Lexington and six leaders of recovery programs in my area. The interviews focused on perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors among participants in each community toward the other (see Appendix H).

Research Question #2

What is the relationship between a church’s understanding of its mission and the presence of a recovery ministry in the church?

The study operated with the hypothesis that participation in a recovery ministry had a positive impact upon the missional understanding of the church. The study explored the relationship between the Celebrate Recovery program and the missional understanding of two churches using that model of ministry. The churches identified for study are Grace United Methodist Church in Cape Coral, Florida, and Cokesbury United Methodist in Knoxville, Tennessee. Both churches have used the Celebrate Recovery program for at least three years. A combination of interviews, written records, and findings from participant observation was used to explain the relationship in each church (see Appendix I).

Research Question #3

What is the effect of the Celebrate Recovery program on building bridges between the recovery community and the local church?

Utilizing the tool of semi-structured interviews, the study sought to discover how the Celebrate Recovery program helped bridge the gap between the recovery community
and the church. Further, it sought to describe the degree and nature of interactions between the two communities.

**Participants**

The context of the study involved selected churches and recovery programs inside New Circle Road in Lexington. Using the beltway around the city as a geographical boundary to the study focused the population for research primarily on those churches and programs in the urban center as well as older, established neighborhoods. The subjects may or may not have preexisting connections. The churches in the study consisted of three each from the following sample:

1. Churches specifically engaged in recovery-based ministry as a key element in their self-understanding of mission,
2. Churches that house recovery programs in the church facility but do not engage in specific recovery ministry, and
3. Churches in close proximity to the selected community of need who neither house recovery programs nor engage in recovery ministry.

The recovery programs in the study consisted of three each from the following samples:

1. Recovery programs run by a church,
2. Recovery programs housed by a church but led by persons outside the church, and
3. Recovery programs not connected to a church in any way.

For the purpose of studying the impact of the Celebrate Recovery program upon the missional understanding in a local church, I included two specific churches beyond Lexington in the study:
1. Grace United Methodist Church in Cape Coral, Florida—a church using Celebrate Recovery as a primary ministry for five years, and

2. Cokesbury United Methodist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee—a church using Celebrate Recovery as a primary ministry for a minimum of three years.

**Instrumentation**

The study used the following instruments: participant observation, interviews, and the collection of written records.

For the first group of subjects—churches and recovery programs inside New Circle Road in Lexington—the study used the protocol to discover perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors between the two groups.

The study of Celebrate Recovery churches analyzed findings from interviews, written records, and participant observation. Summary findings were formed and analyzed for each of the two churches to discover the impact of recovery ministry in those churches.

The findings of both components of the study were further analyzed in light of the method of participant observation in which I participated in recovery groups and church-based recovery ministries.

**Data Collection**

During the study I collected data from interviews with church leaders and recovery program leaders by taking notes and/or tape recordings when given permission to record, written observations as a participant observer, and written records from participant churches. I conducted a total of thirty-two interviews during the study (see Appendix J). Twenty of those interviews were conducted in the Lexington component of
the study, and twelve were conducted at the two Celebrate Recovery churches—six at Cokesbury United Methodist and six at Grace United Methodist. The Lexington interviews were conducted in the field either at someone’s office or at the site of a particular recovery meeting with the exception of two interviews conducted by phone. All Celebrate Recovery interviews were conducted at the site of the particular church. Interviews lasted an average of forty-five minutes with the shortest being seventeen minutes and the longest being one hour and thirty-seven minutes.

Data Analysis

I wrote up all collected data on the computer and coded field notes and other written records in order to identify categories for analysis that emerged from the data and/or literature. In order to retrieve data related to the various categories, I utilized the “Find” function in the word processor to group data on specific topics. I analyzed the various groups of data to discover themes emerging from the study such as common perceptions of pastors towards recovery programs, what recovery leaders are saying about churches, what entry points Celebrate Recovery offers for persons moving from recovery to church, and others. As themes emerged I engaged in pattern matching to find similarities and differences existing among the various groups and participants.

Finally, I analyzed all data and evaluated its usefulness for churches seeking to engage in mission to the recovery community. My goal is to use the evaluations to develop applications for local churches to construct a strategy for mission and evangelism to the recovery community.
Research Ethics

I received informed consent for interviews used in the study. Each subject was given a release form to sign indicating that information from the interview would be used in the writing of the project. I informed each person interviewed that he or she would be assigned a fictitious name and all references to institutions and places of employment would be made in generic terms. I made audio tape recordings of each interview and informed subjects that all tapes would be cataloged and would remain in my sole possession. In the cases of Cokesbury United Methodist Church and Grace United Methodist Church, both agreed to be identified by name in the study. Staff members and ministry leaders were also named with permission. Participants in each church’s recovery program remained anonymous.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

For over half a century, millions of persons in America have sought help in dealing with addictions, compulsive behaviors, and emotional distress through spiritual programs of recovery modeled after the twelve-steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. In spite of the core value of the twelve-steps that a spiritual awakening is foundational to the process of recovery, the church has increasingly disengaged from this growing movement. The resulting disconnect between the recovery community and the church community has grown wider and deeper through the decades.

In recent years some churches have sought to engage in mission to persons seeking recovery, often using a biblically based Christianized version of the twelve steps. In some cases recovery ministry has firmly planted itself as a core value of a church’s missional identity. The purpose of this study was to describe the relationship that exists between the recovery community and the church community and to explore the impact of church-based recovery ministry upon the missional understanding of the local church.

Three research questions guided this study. What is the nature of the disconnect that exists between the recovery community and the church community? What is the relationship between a church’s understanding of its mission and the presence of a recovery ministry in the church? What is the effect of the Celebrate Recovery program on building bridges between the recovery community and the local church?

Summary of Procedures

From August 2005 through February 2006, I conducted qualitative research through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with a protocol, and the
collection of written records. The observations were recorded through my involvement in two secular twelve-step groups and two church-based recovery ministries.

**Twelve-Step Groups**

I participated in an Alcoholics Anonymous group and a Narcotics Anonymous group over a period of six weeks. I attended each group six times over that period. I recorded observations and reflections and also identified subjects for interviews based on my participation in the meetings. The AA meetings took place in a hotel bar on a weekday morning. The NA meetings took place in the evenings in two churches in Lexington. Both groups met within New Circle Road, the beltway around the urban center of Lexington and the identified geographical boundary for one component of the study. In addition, one of the interview subjects from the AA group informed me of a meeting of Sexaholics Anonymous he attended that met in a church outside the geographical boundary. I attended and participated in that group on one occasion at his invitation. I attended one other AA group on two occasions that met at a local drug and alcohol treatment center, once to hear one of my interview subjects speak or give her lead and once to give my lead.\(^4\) I recorded observations and reflections from these additional meetings as well.

**Church-Based Recovery Ministries**

I selected two churches using the Celebrate Recovery program for participant observation, interviews, and the collection of written records. I visited Cokesbury United Methodist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, for two days in February 2006. I interviewed six subjects, participated in a recovery-based small group, and attended the Celebrate

\(^4\) In the twelve-step culture a “lead” is the equivalent of what is called a “testimony” in the church culture. It is one person’s story of recovery shared at a speaker meeting of AA or similar meeting.
Recovery program on one evening. I repeated the same procedure for two days the following week at Grace United Methodist Church in Cape Coral, Florida. Both churches have used the Celebrate Recovery (CR) model as their primary recovery ministry for a minimum of three years. My visits to these two churches was intended to help me describe the effect of the CR program on building bridges from the church to the recovery community.

**Profiles of Participants**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of thirty-two persons during this study. Eighteen were selected because of their connections to recovery programs and/or churches within the geographical boundaries of the study, the urban center of Lexington. Four subjects had crossover connections to the recovery community in Lexington and the Celebrate Recovery program at Hope Springs Community Church. The remaining twelve, six from each church, were selected from the Celebrate Recovery programs at Cokesbury United Methodist Church and Grace United Methodist Church. Brief descriptions of each subject grouped by setting follow (see also Appendix J).

**Recovery Programs (Non-Church Related)**

Jane is a white female in her mid-forties. She is the treatment director for a residential treatment center for women in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction.

Ted is a white male in his mid-fifties. He is the executive director of a residential treatment center for men in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction.

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5 The names for participants in the twelve-step groups, recovery programs, and churches in Lexington are pseudonyms used to protect the confidentiality of sources.
Grant is a white male in his late-forties. He graduated from a men’s treatment center five years ago and now serves on the staff as a program coordinator. He has six years of sobriety from alcohol addiction.

Mary is a white female in her mid-twenties. She is a primary therapist at a residential treatment center for men and women in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction.

**Recovery Programs (Church Housed)**

Rev. Don is a white male in his late forties. He is a member of the clergy who entered recovery from alcoholism and sex addiction after an intervention by denominational officials. He is active in both Alcoholics Anonymous and Sexaholics Anonymous. He has over two years of sobriety.

Mark is a white male in his early thirties. He is in recovery from alcoholism through Alcoholics Anonymous. He also serves part-time on the staff of a church. He has over two years of sobriety.

Gary is a white male in his early forties. He has over eleven years of sobriety through Narcotics Anonymous. He currently attends NA meetings four or five times per week. He does not attend any church.

Dana is a white female in her early forties. She has over four years of sobriety and attends both AA and NA meetings. She had visited Hope Springs Community Church one time approximately two years ago when a friend of hers from NA was being baptized.
Recovery Programs (Church Sponsored)

Fred is a white male in his mid-forties. He is an addict who graduated from the program at a men’s residential treatment center in January 2006. He then became an assistant staff member at the facility and continues to live there. He remains active in AA. He is a member of Hope Springs Community Church. He professed his faith in Christ, was baptized, and joined the church in September 2005.

Chris is a white male in his early thirties. He has over five years of sobriety through NA and continues to attend four NA meetings per week. He has attended Hope Springs Community Church for over two years. He was on the original ministry team that launched Celebrate Recovery at Hope Springs and continues to serve in the ministry.

Ron is a white male in his late twenties. He spent six months in a residential treatment center but left before completing the program. He moved into a men’s halfway house and continues to work his recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous and Celebrate Recovery at Hope Springs. Ron is into his third month of sobriety. He professed faith in Christ, was baptized, and became a member of Hope Springs in September 2005.

Laura is a white female in her mid-forties. She is a program coordinator at a residential treatment center for women in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. She has over seven years of sobriety from alcoholism though Alcoholics Anonymous. She professed faith in Christ in August 2005 while attending the leadership conference for Celebrate Recovery at Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California. She is a member of Hope Springs and serves as a ministry leader with Celebrate Recovery at the church.
Mike is a white male in his early thirties. He is the ministry leader for a recovery ministry at a Baptist church in Lexington. Mike does not personally struggle with addiction but helped start his church’s ministry to addicts and their families almost three years ago after serving as the church’s youth pastor for seven years.

**Churches (No Recovery Connection)**

Pastor Tom is a white male in his mid-fifties. He has served as pastor of a local church with no direct connection to any recovery groups. The church is in close geographical proximity to two treatment centers. He is in his seventh year as pastor.

Pastor John is a white male in his late forties. He is in his first year as senior pastor at an established, traditional church with no direct connection to a recovery program.

Pastor Jim is a white male in his fifties. He is in his sixth year as senior pastor of an established church with no direct connection to a recovery program.

**Churches (House Recovery)**

Pastor Connie is a white female in her late fifties. She is in her twelfth year as pastor of an established, traditional church that houses two Narcotics Anonymous meetings and two Sex Addicts Anonymous meetings each week.

Pastor Jerry is a white male in his late fifties. He is senior pastor of a large, downtown church that houses two Alcoholics Anonymous meetings each week. He is a recovering alcoholic with over twenty-six years of sobriety through AA.

Pastor James is an African-American male in his late forties. He pastors a large inner-city church that houses a Narcotics Anonymous meeting each week.
Churches (Sponsor Recovery)

Pastor Darrel is a white male in his mid-forties. He is the founding pastor of a medium-sized independent, fundamentalist church that sponsors a Friday night recovery ministry to addicts and their families.

Those interviewed from Hope Springs Community Church — Fred, Chris, Laura and Ron — were previously profiled under the subheading, Recovery Programs (Church Sponsored).

Celebrate Recovery—Cokesbury

Dr. Steve Sallee is the senior pastor at Cokesbury. He is in his tenth year of pastoral ministry at the church. He served as Gil Smith’s sponsor during Gil’s first year of recovery.

Dr. Gilbert Smith is the full-time staff pastor of the Celebrate Recovery ministry at Cokesbury. He is in his fourth year of service. Gil is a recovering alcoholic with over four years of sobriety.

Randy Carpenter is the lay leader at Cokesbury. He has been a member of the church for over ten years. He also sings in the choir at the traditional Sunday worship services and serves on various committees in the church. He does not struggle personally with addiction but attends Celebrate Recovery every Thursday evening.

Amanda Meyers recently joined the staff at Cokesbury as an assistant youth minister. She was on the planning team that first launched Celebrate Recovery and continues to serve on the leadership team. She is in recovery from eating disorders and addiction.

6 The pastors and other leaders of the churches involved in Celebrate Recovery are not pseudonyms. They are proud of their work and hope that it inspires others. The participants in recovery at those churches remain anonymous.
Rebekah Fetzer is a staff pastor at Cokesbury whose primary duties involve discipleship ministries including oversight of the small group ministry. She described her responsibility as “helping people become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ, whatever it takes.” She has been on staff for over ten years. She volunteers her time at Celebrate Recovery as the leader of the women’s codependency small group.

Vickie is a white female in her thirties. She has six months of sobriety from drug and alcohol addiction and has participated in Celebrate Recovery through that same period. She attends CR at Cokesbury while preparing to join another church in the community.

Celebrate Recovery—Grace

Rev. Jorge Acevedo is in his tenth year as senior pastor at Grace. Jorge introduced the church to Celebrate Recovery in his second year and organized the ministry team to launch the program in 1999.

John Leonard is the ministry leader for Celebrate Recovery at Grace. He has been involved with CR since its inception and joined the church as a full-time staff member late in 2005. He is the third person to hold the position at the church. John is in recovery from alcoholism and has eight years of sobriety.

Nancy Ewing is the Director of Connections Ministries at Grace and is also in charge of missions at the church. She has been on staff for eleven years and, as such, is the senior member of the staff. She has no direct responsibilities with Celebrate Recovery other than serving as the pastor on-call at CR once every six weeks.
Kelly is a part-time staff member at Grace. She came to the church through the Celebrate Recovery ministry due to struggles with depression and food addiction. She first came to CR in August 2003 and then became a member of Grace in March 2004.

Sherry is a participant and a volunteer at Celebrate Recovery at Grace who is a member of another church in the community. She is in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. She has six years of sobriety.

Roy is a white male in his mid-eighties. He has been a member of Grace since the church began in 1978. He is a recovering alcoholic with forty-seven years of sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous. He was on the original ministry team that launched Celebrate Recovery at Grace. Roy continues to participate in CR and stopped attending AA meetings when the ministry started five years ago.

**Findings of the Study**

The interviews and observations clearly revealed that the disconnect between the recovery community and the church community is very real, very pronounced, and owned by both sides of the relationship. I discovered that the presence of a recovery ministry in a church speaks volumes about a church’s understanding of its missional identity, and the very fact that a church engages in such ministry is indicative of an outward focus for ministry. In addition, the churches I studied who use the Celebrate Recovery program successfully demonstrate that bridging the gap between the recovery community and the church community is a realistic objective and can be achieved to a limited degree.
Research Question #1—The Nature of the Disconnect

The recovery community and the church community, for the most part, see each other as separate entities. I did not find a lot of evidence that the two see themselves as partners in the actual work of helping people recover from addictive and compulsive behaviors. Several factors contribute to the reality of this disconnect and help define its nature.

Lack of Understanding

First, the disconnect has grown out of a lack of understanding between the recovery community and the church community toward each other. Involvement in the two communities is generally seen as an either/or proposition, and even those with ties to both communities tend to keep boundaries between the two. Mark, who regularly lives in both worlds as a recovering addict and church staff member, remarked at an AA meeting, “If I had to choose between the church or AA, I would choose AA.” During our interview I asked Mark about that comment. When I began to repeat what he had said, he cut me off and completed it for me halfway through with, “I would choose AA. I would have to because the church can’t keep me sober.” He explained his assertion:

I’ve been churched to death my whole life. Church could not sober me up. I just don’t think church people understand alcoholics. I think if I went into church on Sunday morning all hung over and smelling like puke or pee—like I used to when I drank—and sat down by a little old lady and said, “I’m so hung over from getting so drunk last night….” Well, I don’t think she would want to sit by me. At AA they would just say, “Mark, we love you. Just keep coming back.”

The sentiment that church people do not understand addicts was repeated by those in recovery themselves throughout the study. Grant, whose father was pastor of a mainline Protestant church, was asked if he could have found the help he needed in church or if it
was only possible in AA. He answered, “Given my mental state, I believe I would have
had to sober up before I could reconnect with church.” I followed that question by asking
Grant what would have happened if he had shown up in church and simply said, “I am an
alcoholic, and I need help.” He explained his answer:

The problem is addicts usually ask for the kind of help that will only help
them continue their addiction. For example, the church might try to help
by giving me food or helping me with my rent or some other financial
assistance. The problem is the reason I can’t pay my rent is because I’ve
spent all my money on drugs or alcohol. Therefore, the church, in its
desire to help ends up becoming just another enabler. Churches want to
help, but they probably can’t give the kind of help needed because they
aren’t equipped to give that kind of help.

Many in the church community admit that churches do not really understand addicts.
Pastor Tom serves a church located in a neighborhood notorious for drug activity. His
church is in close proximity to two treatment centers. When asked if his church offered
any type of recovery ministry or if he had any connections to the recovery centers in the
area, he responded, “We would love to have something like that, but for a church that’s
just so expensive and requires so many specialized skills. We’re just not equipped for
that.” Some seemed to be resigned to the lack of understanding contributing to the
disconnect. Pastor Connie spoke about the disconnect almost being necessary even
though her church currently hosts four twelve-step recovery meetings each week. I asked
her if she had witnessed any crossover from the twelve-step meetings to her congregation
or vice versa. She explained the problem, at least from her perspective, with such a
scenario:

No. My sense from talking with several people—and there are a number
of alcoholics in the congregation who have shared their story with me—is
that they would never attend an AA meeting here, because it’s an issue of
privacy and confidentiality. So, I think if anyone from here started
attending meetings here as part of their recovery it would end their
connection to the church outside of those meetings…. I think for a lot of Christian AA people I know, if they could only go to AA or to church, they would probably choose AA. And I would understand that, because AA is a lot closer than the church is to giving them what they need.

From the perspective of the recovery community, anything connected to church is considered an outside issue. One of the values of twelve-step recovery is that within the meetings no opinion is to be expressed about anything that is considered an outside issue. I asked Gary, a member of NA, what would happen if the pastor of the church where the NA meeting was held wanted to invite the group to attend a church picnic, for example. He responded, “Someone would be quick to say, ‘Hey, that’s an outside issue. That doesn’t belong here.’” I told him that some meetings I had attended included a time for “outside announcements” and wondered if I would be free at that time to announce our church-based recovery meetings called Celebrate Recovery. After a long pause, he answered, “I don’t think anything like that’s ever really happened because normally the church people won’t come to the meetings. I don’t guess that would be a problem.”

Laura, a recovering addict active in AA and Celebrate Recovery expressed the common perception of the church among people in AA when she described one AA meeting she attended that was held at a church. She noted that some members of the church attended that particular meeting “but they weren’t allowed to talk about church or promote anything going on at the church.” When I asked why that was the case, she explained that in AA circles the common view is that “church is a religious program; AA is a spiritual program.” I pushed her further by painting a hypothetical scenario in which I, as a pastor, walked into an AA meeting held at my church and at the appropriate time offered the following announcement:
Our church is having a special seminar next Sunday afternoon. We have a nationally known speaker who is an expert on recovery issues. He’s not a member of AA, but he will speak about recovery. Afterward, we will provide dinner free of charge and then enjoy music from our choir. We would love for all of you to attend.

I asked Laura what might happen in such a case. After she stopped laughing, she speculated, “There would be some old timer in the room that would say, ‘This is a fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. We’re a spiritual program, not a religious program and we don’t promote religion.’ They see any church program as a religious program.”

**Suspicion**

The lack of understanding between the two communities tends to breed suspicion of one toward the other, a second characteristic of the disconnect. Ron, a recovering addict who made the step from a men’s treatment center to participation at Celebrate Recovery and then Sunday worship at Hope Springs, explained how someone warned him about crossing the boundary from recovery community to church community. A friend he knew from the treatment center with longer AA experience told him to watch out for “the bait and switch.” When I asked what that meant, he said his friend explained, “They get you there by telling you it’s about recovery, and then they throw religion at you.” I wondered if Ron’s friend had ever attended Celebrate Recovery or the Sunday worship at Hope Springs, and Ron said, “No. He’s never been there. That’s just his suspicion. Maybe he had seen that through another church.”

Maybe Ron’s friend attended the same NA meeting that Gary went to at a downtown church on one occasion:

Some preacher at a church downtown—I can’t remember the name of it; I believe it was on 5th Street—had a couple of addicts in his church, so he decided he wanted to start an NA meeting at the church. They really beef it up and get a big crowd there for the first meeting. Well, this guy...
decides, “Wow! I’ve got me an audience here!” So, he gets up and starts preaching. By the time he’s done there was only about three people still sitting there. I mean everybody else just got up and left. You really have to separate the two [recovery and church].

The kind of experience Gary described and the expectation Ron’s friend had about a church-based recovery ministry illustrates how deep the disconnect can be when it is fueled by suspicion. Laura, who seeks to strike a balance between her job at a treatment center and her leadership role in a church-based recovery ministry, has seen the worst of the suspicion from both sides. She got sober over seven years ago through AA. She eventually became a program coordinator at a local women’s treatment center. Part of her responsibilities included securing a place off site to hold recovery classes during the daytime hours Monday through Friday for a group of approximately twelve women who were in the second stage of the program. She started by visiting churches in the immediate neighborhood because the women were expected to walk to class. I asked how many churches she visited and if she would share her experience:

I’ve had several churches tell me, “Oh, we do not want *those people* [original emphasis] here.” I started feeling resentments toward churches because I was one of *those people* [original emphasis]. Most of the people I talked to just thought I worked there and didn’t realize that I was a recovering alcoholic, too. I asked six churches in the neighborhood. Each time I was told no. Some churches were willing to help the (treatment center) but they didn’t want *those people* [original emphasis] hanging around their church. One even told me they were afraid things would get stolen unless there was someone responsible for supervising them at all times.

One church actually let us meet in their building for a while. The pastor, a lady, came to me to ask how she could help. I told her I needed a place to hold classes. So, she drew up a contract and we started meeting there. We met there for a few months when she came and asked us to leave because she thought the ladies had brought fleas into the church. The church wanted the (treatment center) to pay for an exterminator for the church. Never mind that there were no fleas at the center, and the people living next door to the church had about fifteen cats and three or four dogs that used to crawl up under the church and sleep during the day.
Laura would come to experience the suspicion from the other side. She eventually found a church that allowed her women to use their facilities, Hope Springs Community Church. Through their connection Laura was introduced to Celebrate Recovery. I invited her to attend the Celebrate Recovery Summit in August 2005 with a group of CR leaders from the church. During that week Laura professed faith in Jesus Christ as her Higher Power. She was baptized and became a member at Hope Springs and a coleader of the women’s chemical dependency small group at Celebrate Recovery. Her growing involvement at church has led to suspicions among other staff members at the treatment center that Laura is “mixing recovery with religion.” She commented about the conflict during our interview:

> At work some people have a hard time that I’m involved in a religious program. I’ve even been accused of playing favorites with the ladies from the center that attend CR and Hope Springs. They really just cannot understand why I’m so comfortable here. I tell them if they would just come and see what’s going on they would understand.

Initially, Laura’s suspicions of church almost kept her from visiting the church for a Sunday worship experience. She explained that she had been afraid of Jesus growing up because she never felt like she was as good as the people who went to church. I asked what her expectations were on that first visit for Sunday worship:

> I expected … that I was going to be one of those people [original emphasis] when I came through the door; that I wasn’t going to be dressed like everyone else and I was going to be looked at like the alcoholic – the nasty, dirty alcoholic for the things I’d done; that people were going to be seeing me like that when I walked in the door. But it was very different. I felt completely welcomed. I just felt at home.

Laura was right about one thing; she was not dressed like everyone else. In fact, she wore a nice dress that first Sunday and was probably the most dressed up person there. She
obviously did not believe me when I told her that people on Sunday dressed the same as
the people at CR.

Psuedo-Respect

A third characteristic that describes the nature of the disconnect seems positive on
the surface. I call it psuedo-respect. Due to the value of confidentiality and anonymity,
many in the church make no effort to educate themselves about twelve-step recovery,
even those churches that house AA or similar recovery meetings. As a result the church is
usually oblivious even to the good things that may be happening in their buildings. Pastor
Connie draws very clear boundaries with regard to the Narcotics Anonymous meetings
that take place at her church in an effort to honor their privacy. She told me about an
incident that happened on a Saturday evening as she was in the study late working on her
sermon. NA was holding a meeting in the fellowship hall located directly below her
office. It was a speaker meeting, which means a person with significant recovery time
was telling her story. Pastor Connie could hear a woman’s voice and out of curiosity
stepped out of her office to hear better:

I went into the hall and leaned over the stairs where I could hear but
nobody could see me and I could not see them, so I could listen. It was a
woman speaker, and she was giving her testimonial. It was wonderful! I
mean she really preached! It was good: it was really [original emphasis]
good. After a while I just quietly stepped back to my office. No one ever
even knew I was there.

I wanted to ask her why she did not just walk into the room and sit down to listen, but I
refrained. I wanted to tell her that she would have been welcomed into the room, and no
one would have given her presence at the meeting a second thought. Her unnecessary
respect of their privacy in that way prevented her from the possibility of building
relationships with persons who might need a pastor and a church.
My own experience was different and provides evidence that this pseudo-respect can create an unnecessary boundary and serves to feed a divisive mentality. During this period of research, I was completely welcomed into the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and even Sexaholics Anonymous. No one knew I was a pastor unless they asked, and as long as I was not there to promote religion, my church affiliation was never an issue. One of my visits to an NA meeting in particular stands out as evidence of why pseudo-respect is an unnecessary barrier to engagement with the recovery community. The meeting took place in the basement of a church located in a residential area on the south side of town. Approximately thirty people attended the meeting in the church fellowship hall. This was not my first NA meeting, but it was my first in this particular church with this home group.

The group on that night followed an open discussion format, so, after the opening rituals—reading of the twelve steps and twelve traditions, reading the “Why We Are Here” and “How It Works” literature, and the reciting of the Serenity Prayer—participants were free to discuss any topic. I sat in the outer circle and simply listened and observed.

The sharing seemed particularly heavy. One man shared about the struggle of dealing with an accident at work that left his boss in critical condition in the intensive care unit at the hospital. He learned later that same day that his seventeen year old son had been admitted to a drug treatment facility. In the midst of these and other struggles, which made him “want to get high,” he was trying [original emphasis] to celebrate the seventh anniversary of his sobriety. His “clean time” dated back to 2 February 1999. His sharing was understandably emotional and included long pauses spent fighting back tears,
profanity-laced outbursts of anger and confusion, and multiple expressions of gratitude for being clean. Another member, a woman who appeared to be in her thirties, followed him by sharing her confusion about being recently diagnosed with cancer and her fears of the upcoming chemotherapy. As she shed tears, other members retrieved a box of tissues to give her and sat very close, even patting her shoulders at times. A third member, another female in her thirties, shared about the joy of receiving a Valentine’s Day card from her young elementary-age daughter. She shared that getting a Valentine from her daughter after being clean “only six months” was a “really big deal.” She read the card and what her daughter had written. She then referred to the two who shared before her and told how she could relate to them due to her ongoing battle with lupus.

Gary, whom I would later interview, shared about a conflict with one of his sponsors. Others shared about struggles as well as victories. Three group members talked about how much fun they had on a snow skiing trip several members of “the fellowship” had taken together the previous weekend. A young man who appeared to be in his early twenties shared about how meaningful the weekend had been for him. He has a little over one year of sobriety and talked about the difficulty of going anywhere during early recovery. He shared that when he first started attending meetings he could only think about when the meeting would be over. His addiction was so strong and his depression so deep that he lived each day just to get to bedtime. He told how he would spend all day checking his watch or the clock just longing to be one step closer to going to bed. He attended NA meetings every evening, and his only objective was getting through the meeting and going home. He then shared a moment of clarity he had during the ski trip when he realized he did not want the weekend to end. He stated that it was the first time
he could remember truly enjoying an experience without being high. The room erupted with applause and shouts of encouragement.

As I sat in the meeting, the sharing captivated me. Several times I wanted to share something myself but resisted. I can only attribute my reluctance to speak to the fear of being a newcomer in the midst of people I did not know. I also felt every fiber of my pastoral being coming to attention with a desire to minister to those sharing their struggles. I wanted to pray for each one, which I did silently, and pray with each one. I made it a point after the meeting to approach several who had shared particularly difficult situations to tell them that I would be praying for them. The response to my overture was always positive and included a “thank you” and a hug. On a side note, if you do not like hugging people you would never make it at NA. My experience at every meeting I have attended is that everyone hugs everyone every time.

I felt very disturbed during the meeting at the absence of the body of Christ, even though we were in a building where a church met. Gary would later remark during the interview in response to a question about connections with the church that he did not really know of any connections other than “these Presbyterian churches seem to be pretty accepting of NA by opening their buildings to us.” One problem, we were in an Episcopal Church. I realize the values and structure of NA are equal partners with the church in keeping the lines of separation in place, but I had to wonder how the separation ever developed in the first place. I am perplexed, to say the least, at how the church and what it stands for came to be seen as a barrier to a person’s recovery. I cannot escape the deep burden I feel that the church must find a way to claim a place at the table where drug addicts and alcoholics gather to share their struggles and celebrate their victories.
I must add one qualifier. Some meetings of twelve-step recovery groups are identified as closed meetings, and so I only attended open meetings. The point is that I have been free in any twelve-step meeting I have ever attended, including several in Pastor Connie’s church, to build relationships with anyone in the meetings who desired the same. As a result, I have met several Christ followers who had not connected with a church or pastor and several persons in recovery who have yet to identify their Higher Power but may be open to exploring the basis for mine.

Pastor Connie told another story that further illustrates how this boundary drawn on the basis of pseudo-respect serves to feed the disconnect. She received a letter (see Appendix K) from a man who had been court ordered to the Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) group that meets at her church. He had attended the meeting for twelve years and had experienced a true change in his life and freedom from the power of his addiction. At the time of the letter, he was in the process of relocating and would no longer be able to attend the meeting there, but he just wanted to thank the church for their hospitality. The problem was that no one from the church outside the pastor, staff, and a few lay leaders even knew the group met at the church. No one from the church, including Pastor Connie, knew this man had ever been in the building. Pastor Connie shared the following about the discussion that surrounded the decision of whether or not to share the letter with the congregation:

For a long time we were not sure what to do with the letter. We talked about putting it in the church newsletter or sharing it from the pulpit. We just were not sure how people would react. We finally decided to put it out there, so we made a copy available in every bulletin on Sunday, and I read it from the pulpit.
I asked about the reaction to the letter. She laughed as she explained, “Once people stopped blinking and their eyes returned to normal size, I think they were OK with it. It’s like they sat back and said, ‘OK. So, this is what we’re about.’”

In yet another example of this psuedo-respect, Pastor Connie told about someone in the congregation struggling with addiction and how he finally found the help he needed:

The congregation worked through—kind of to hell and back—with someone years ago who, despite having family here, had reached the point of living on the streets. He had become a hazard to everyone connected to him personally. We did all the rescue things: took calls to go get the person; dropped him off at a treatment center; took him to the hospital more times than I can remember; visited him in the hospital … it was just really bad. None of that did diddly squat for him … you know, I prayed with the person, prayed with the family … all of that. When he finally hit bottom, as it happened providentially, we had someone in the congregation who knew what to do. He took him to a treatment center in another city where he stayed for a full year and got the help he needed. I knew there was a lot of anxiety about him coming back into the church. [She laughed at her next observation] I mean, obviously, people in the congregation were aware that one of the spouses had been missing for a while! But the welcome back turned out to be wonderful, and it has been a marvelous four or five years.

I wondered about the opportunities missed for ministering to the family of the addict during his year away due to the veil of secrecy existing within the congregation concerning a member’s struggle with addiction.

I realize that respect for anonymity and confidentiality is important for dealing with persons in recovery, and that church leaders need to consider how open a congregation can be concerning personal and family struggles, yet too often concern for confidentiality seems to evolve into this psuedo-respect that becomes an excuse for not seeking to understand the nature of addiction and its effects. Too often it prevents a congregation from creating a culture of safety for people in recovery to deal openly with
their struggles and find the acceptance and support they need. Too often it only widens and deepens the disconnect.

**Grateful, Indifferent, Hostile**

The depth of the disconnect has different levels of expression from the perspective of the recovery community. Both Jane and Grant expressed gratitude for the role churches played in support of the respective treatment centers where each work. Jane described the support of the churches in the community for her program as “phenomenal.” She told of how churches provide clothes, personal items, housewares and financial support for ladies in need of sponsors. She reported, “The churches have been great in this community when we’ve needed the help.” Similarly, Grant praised churches in the community for providing transportation to men who want to attend services, cooking meals and doing other volunteer work at the center, and making church facilities available for special programs. He concluded, “The churches are, across the board, notable for their presence here.” Both saw the level of involvement from churches as healthy with regard to their particular program, yet the nature of that involvement was mostly limited to providing benevolent services rather than involvement in actual recovery work. In fact, Jane was quick to point out the limits of church involvement: “Because we get state and federal money, we are nondenominational. Women are allowed to attend services wherever they want to, if they want to, but we cannot allow Bible studies or things like that because we receive federal money.” I knew the women at the center were required to attend a certain number of outside meetings of AA or NA, so I asked if attendance at Celebrate Recovery would be allowed to count in fulfilling that requirement. I explained that we used the twelve-steps at CR. Jane answered, “If it's
something different from an AA or NA meeting, then you would have to bring me
information on it before I could approve it. Anything outside of AA or NA would have to
be approved before it could be listed as an acceptable meeting.”

Both Jane and Grant did report hearing good things about the Celebrate Recovery
ministry and both said positive things about a church getting involved in the work of
recovery. Jane said, “Not everyone is willing to make the extra effort to show these ladies
they care.” Grant expressed his gratitude and added, “I just wish there were more
churches willing to give the kind of help that really helps and does not enable.”

Another level of expression revealing the disconnect between the recovery
community and the church community was indifference. Mary, herself a graduate of a
seminary, had not really considered how churches might be involved at the center where
she works. One reason may be because her program does not have any kind of volunteer
service opportunities and the facility is located on the grounds of a mental health hospital
even though it is run by a private, nonprofit organization. The treatment program at the
center frequently brings in outside speakers on a variety of topics: health issues and
sexually transmitted disease risk assessment, care of infants, nutrition, fitness training,
vocational rehabilitation, rape crisis services, and others. I asked if any outside speakers
addressed spiritual issues. She could not remember any. Even though the treatment
program operates with the twelve-steps of AA, a self-described spiritual program, Mary
had not really considered why connections with churches were nonexistent. Neither was
she aware of any church-based recovery programs and stated the reason, she guessed,
was because “the two [church and recovery] are separate.”
Toxic Christianity

A third attitude defining the nature of the disconnect can be called hostility. One of the AA meetings I attended in the hotel bar highlighted the response toward churches. The meeting itself was a traditions study, which meant the group would read one of the twelve traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous (see Appendix L) and then open the room to discussion around that tradition. On this particular day, the group focused on tradition ten, which reads, “Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy” (Alcoholics Anonymous 562). The discussion that followed proceeded to violate that particular tradition in grand fashion. For approximately thirty minutes several members made disparaging remarks or shared negative experiences about the church with an occasional political plug thrown in for good measure. This meeting was really the first time I felt uncomfortable and, vicariously, the object of ridicule at an AA meeting due to my connection with the church.

While the hostility I felt at the hotel AA meeting made me uncomfortable, the sad truth is that in many cases the hostility is well deserved. Time after time persons in recovery shared stories with me that qualify for what Amanda at Cokesbury Church called “toxic Christianity.” In describing a friend she had invited to Celebrate Recovery, Amanda clarified the problem past church experiences can cause:

Cindy never wanted to set foot in a church again. She had been in recovery literally for most of her life, but she had been a victim of that toxic Christianity [emphasis mine]. She grew up in a place where if you were not perfect you were trash. It soured her whole outlook on God. She tried Buddhism and everything else. She was searching.
Dana echoed Cindy’s experience in her own childhood. When she was very young, her mom moved from a mainline Protestant church to “a small, very conservative fundamentalist church.” Her father did not make the switch and basically stopped going to church. She described the conflict surrounding her split-church home:

My dad drank and smoked, so he was always an outsider. He was very against the teachings of Mom’s church, because his mom had died as a member of the other [mainline Protestant] church and Mom's church said my grandmother was going to hell. He had a lot of bitterness and resentment toward that.

Dana said that she and her three siblings were required to go to church with mom and were not allowed to question “the very strict rules and narrow teaching.” As a teen she started smoking, drinking, and later experimenting with drugs even though she “still attended Mom’s church every time the doors were open.” This double life continued throughout her college years resulting in a constant feeling of shame:

I got arrested [for public intoxication] in college and it came out in the paper. No one said anything about it, but I still felt all the shame. I was running from God and had to keep myself numb in order not to feel. I knew right from wrong—it had been drilled into me—but I did not know grace. I thought the only way to be forgiven for sin was to publicly go before the church during the last song. Anything else and I just couldn't be forgiven. I couldn’t go forward every time I did something wrong, so I thought I was just doomed to hell.

After college Dana moved to another city and started attending a church “where the pastor was a recovering addict. That is where I learned about grace.” Yet even with a new understanding of grace she continues to struggle with connecting to a church in spite of having several years of sobriety and faith in Jesus as her Higher Power:

Still to this day I can’t give myself completely to a church. There’s a feeling I have when I go into a church that I’m less than [original emphasis]. I know intellectually the church is there for me, but there is something that keeps me from embracing a church. I know most there haven’t done the things I’ve done, and that if most people there really
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knew me they would reject me. On one level I know that’s crazy, but on another level that’s what I believe.

Dana has continued to visit churches in the area, but she has, thus far, been unable to overcome the somewhat self-imposed barriers that prevent her from connecting with a church.

Gary, who had stopped attending church at seven years old, first entered recovery from drug addiction through Narcotics Anonymous. He had no real spiritual roots and no framework for which to believe in a Higher Power. When he expressed his difficulty at “believing in a power greater than myself” to a counselor at the hospital where he attended NA meetings the counselor invited Gary to his church. The counselor encouraged him to bring his wife and son, so Gary decided to “check this church thing out.” He described his experience:

I pull in the parking lot, and the guy [the counselor] is waiting for me at the door. “Oh, glad to see you; glad to see you!” I felt real uncomfortable. Then he passed me off to some lady, and she walked us up to the third row where three empty seats looked like they were waiting for us. I thought, “Something's not right.” The lady then came up and handed us three Bibles. She hands one to my wife, one to my son, and then gives me one and says, “Now, you can read, can’t you?” I said, “You are kidding me, right?” I thought to myself, “This guy is a counselor, and I thought all this was supposed to be anonymous.” Then the minister gets up there, and in the middle of his talk, he sort of looks my way and says, “Even a drug addict can come to God.” I thought, “Man, this ain't right.” After it was over and we were leaving the minister hurried over to us and stuck out his hand and said, “I don’t think we’ve met.” I said, “Oh, yeah we have. I was the drug addict in the third row.” I was upset about it; my wife was upset about it. So, I just went back to the [NA] meetings. I just liked the fact that anybody in the room could believe anything they wanted to believe and that was OK. We could discuss it but not put a name on it, and that worked for me.

Gary told me that whole story as if it was a funny story. He laughed throughout, and I sort of chuckled along with him. Inside I felt almost sick and certainly embarrassed. I
hated the story because I thought I knew where it was going, and I dreaded going there. Unfortunately, my fears were correct.

A lack of understanding, suspicion, psuedo-respect, and negative experiences with the church are four characteristics that define the nature of the disconnect that exists between the recovery community and the church community. The disconnect is real; it is broad; and, it is deep. If the church is able to recover recovery as a focus of its mission, the church will have to account for this reality, perhaps even repent of it.

**Research Question #2—Mission and Recovery**

Before the research in this study got underway I expected to focus on the question of how a recovery ministry impacted the growth of a church. I have since reframed my second research question to explore the relationship between a church’s understanding of its mission and the presence of a recovery ministry instead. The reframed question seemed to strike at the heart of what is at stake in a more significant way. Many churches have proven that growth can take place without a particular focus on mission to their community. The more important issue is whether or not a church is willing to live into a culture whereby those on the outside of the community of faith, in this case many members of the recovery community, are intentionally engaged with the good news of the kingdom of God in meaningful ways. The importance of the question became clear as I began identifying churches that fit the criteria for this study.

In Chapter 1 of the study, I identified three groups of churches I wanted to use in exploring the connections between the recovery community and the church community. The participants selected would come from three different groups of churches: churches specifically engaged in recovery ministry as a key element in their self-understanding of
mission; churches that house recovery groups like AA in their facility but have little engagement with them; and, churches with no direct connection to the recovery community. I set the geographical boundary within New Circle Road in Lexington, Kentucky. My intent was to interview pastors from each of the three groups of churches.

The latter group was relatively easy to identify. I simply asked. I would make a phone call to a church office and with a few questions determined potential participants. The three churches that had no direct connection to the recovery community all gave evidence of an inward focus in their understanding of mission.

For example, when asked to tell me about the outreach programs of the church, Pastor Tom spent ten minutes telling me about his “call to preach.” I asked the outreach question a second time, and he told me about revivals, concerts, special dinners, and other events that all took place on the church property. When I came back to the question of outreach to the community for a third time, he told me about a door-to-door canvas of the neighborhood aimed toward the church’s annual vacation Bible school:

Vacation bible school is our biggest outreach. We’ll run 150 children in VBS. Our normal children’s ministry runs about thirty. On family night at VBS we’ll pack the church with parents and children. We challenge ourselves every year that we are not going to let them slip away this time, but I’ve yet to figure out how to do that…. We reach a lot of the children for the Lord. Then we won’t see them ‘til next year, which just breaks your heart.

I was struck that every form of outreach he talked about was tied to a teaching or preaching ministry that took place inside the church building.

Pastor Jim proudly informed me that 20 percent of every dollar given to his church went to missions. When I asked if all of that went to missions outside the United States he told me “half goes to foreign missions and about half stays local.” I asked what
local missions they supported, and he named three local Christian organizations—a church camp, a Christian school, and a Christian retirement home. He also mentioned a group that buys land for new churches in growing areas and “benevolence.” I pressed further about what benevolence referred to, and he responded, “We help people we know. We don’t offer it blindly. They have to jump through some hoops.” When I inquired if the church was involved in any recovery ministry he responded, “Just one-on-one stuff. I do have two members who talked to me recently about starting some recovery ministries. One lady wants to start a divorce recovery group and one man wants to start a group for addiction.” Pastor Jim did not know if the man who talked about a group for addiction had a specific plan or if he had identified any specific curriculum. Further, Pastor Jim was not aware of any recovery programs in the area, including a residential treatment center for women located on the main traffic artery in the church’s immediate neighborhood and less than one mile from the church.

Pastor John had only served his current church for several months. He stated that the church had “attempted several outreach programs in the past but failed to follow through.” Interestingly, he mentioned that his church participated in the Alpha program, a video-based Bible study specifically designed to reach outsiders but, in his congregation, “it’s not seen as an outreach tool.” The church’s only connection to the recovery community is that they used to allow an AA group to meet there, but the group had “recently closed their association with the church.” He was not certain why that relationship had ended or exactly when it ended.

I asked each of the pastors in this group what they did in a typical week, whom they saw on a regular basis, and where they spent their time. The answers were all almost
identical. They basically shared their weekly calendars with me. The vast majority of their time was spent in activities related to congregational maintenance and member care: sermon preparation, attending church meetings, pastoral care visits, etc. Pastor John laid out what he did each morning, afternoon, and evening during a typical week. He hesitated when he got to Thursday afternoon and finally said, “Thursday afternoon is really just doing more church stuff.” Sadly, “just doing more church stuff” seemed to be a fitting description of all three churches in this first group.

The second group, churches that house recovery meetings such as NA, did show more of an inclination toward an outward focus, even if that focus did not include direct ministry to the recovery community. Even though clear boundaries existed between the church and the groups that met in the church, Pastor Connie reported that her church’s “sole image is of a servant church.” She detailed ways her congregation reached out to the community by sponsoring English as a second language classes for a growing Hispanic population. They regularly engaged in clothing and food drives and regularly participated with Habitat for Humanity. Interestingly though, when she listed the programs and ministries of outreach in which her church was involved, she did not mention either of the twelve-step groups, NA or SAA, that meets weekly in the church building.

Both Pastor Jerry and Pastor James lead congregations notable for their desire to do ministry in an urban setting. Pastor James explained that his growing, African-American church of 1,700 members has a strong desire to stay on the inner-city corner that they have occupied for over one hundred years. The neighborhood where the church resides is on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, and according to Pastor James’
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estimate only 25 percent of the adult population has a high school diploma. He described the church’s ministry this way: “We are purposefully trying to attract people from the neighborhood.” He also talked about the high degree of drug activity in the neighborhood and expressed some frustration at not being engaged in ministry to that population beyond housing NA groups. He frankly stated, “We house NA, but we don’t believe they are getting all they need in those meetings.” I had actually anticipated placing Pastor James’ church in my third group of churches. Almost one year ago an associate pastor of the church who is in recovery contacted me because the church wanted to start a Celebrate Recovery program. I met with him for an hour and gave him materials and contact information he would need to get things started. Apparently, that initiative never went beyond our meeting. Pastor James did express interest in beginning that dialogue again as a way for the church to move into intentional recovery ministry.

The third church in the group of churches that house recovery groups is actually pastored by a recovering alcoholic with almost twenty-seven years of sobriety. Pastor Jerry began his recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous. He shared, “I was a very successful businessman, literally at the top of my profession, and I lost everything I owned.” He went to treatment and got involved in AA. After a bout with deep depression that left him suicidal, he professed faith in Jesus Christ nine months after getting sober. According to Pastor Jerry, the idea of an unnamed Higher Power made sense to him in the beginning “because if they had told me this deal was about Jesus I would have run from it, frankly.” Now, two meetings of AA are held in his 136 year old downtown church each week. His congregation that averages six hundred in worship attendance weekly includes a growing group of young families who “either live downtown or come from elsewhere but like to
do downtown ministry.” Examples of that downtown ministry include housing the largest food pantry in the city, set up to provide for the poor and staffed solely by 125 volunteers from the church. Several members also volunteer at a residential treatment center for men in recovery from alcohol and drug addiction. In addition, the church was instrumental in the formation of a local rescue mission, although the church’s only connection currently is through modest financial support.

According to Pastor Jerry, a significant number of people in recovery attend the church. On two occasions during his eight-year tenure as senior pastor, Jerry has shared his story of addiction and recovery from the pulpit. The Friday night AA meeting is his home group even through he does not attend regularly. In fact, Pastor Jerry’s relationship with the AA groups meeting at the church illustrates the difficulty of bridging the gap that exists between the recovery community and the church community. He explained his frustration with his home group:

In all honesty, there are a lot of guys in the program that do not have what I want. Guys I know that are twenty years sober, but I do not see the fruit other than the fact that the plug is in the jug…. There is a burr in my saddle with my AA brethren. A lot of people in recovery will take, take, take, and bleed you emotionally until you cannot give anymore. Then they will go someplace else…. Alcoholics are attracted to churches that preach a lot about grace, which I do, but there are also consequences to sin. A lot of alcoholics do not want to hear that.

Interestingly, Laura had attended one of the AA meetings at Pastor Jerry’s church semi-regularly. It was the one meeting she remembered where members from the church where it was held actually attended the meetings. Laura reported that the church members “weren’t allowed to talk about church at AA or promote anything going on at the church.” I have to admit I found irony in the fact that Pastor Jerry was not allowed to talk about his church at a meeting in his church. He did share with me that he had often
wondered what he could do to be more intentional in being in ministry with persons in recovery. I asked if he was familiar with the Celebrate Recovery program. He said, "Somewhat. Every time I get something in the mail about that I think I want to go to one of their workshops."

The third group of churches includes those churches that see recovery ministry as foundational to their self-understanding of mission. Studying them proved to be an education in itself. The process I went through only magnified the difficulty of bridging the gap between the recovery community and the church community.

I began by contacting two churches I mistakenly thought were doing recovery ministry. My disappointment at learning that plans and intentions to get involved in recovery ministry had been laid aside left me wondering about the difficulty someone in need of recovery must experience trying to find help in church. I decided to role-play a little as I continued my search. I imagined being an addict who decided to call churches seeking help. I randomly selected twelve churches within two zip codes in my defined area. I telephoned each church on a Monday morning and asked the same question of whoever answered the phone at each of the twelve: "What programs do you have for someone who might be struggling with addiction?" While I did not identify myself as an addict, I did attempt to sound like someone who might be seeking help for himself. I was shocked at the results of my calls.

At two of the churches, the person was not sure if they had anything to help me, and the entire staff was in a meeting. They put me through to the staff voice mail where I was asked to leave my name and number. I certainly understood everyone being tied up in a Monday morning staff meeting, but an addict in trouble was not likely to leave a
name and number. A third call yielded an automated answering system that instructed me to “call my party’s extension,” or if I did not know the extension to leave a name and number and someone from the office would contact me. These three responses seemed understandable because I recognize that church staffs have to meet and the phone cannot be staffed around the clock. Certainly all churches, including mine, have times when all a caller may get is a voice mail. The next nine churches were the calls I found so troubling.

One church told me, “The only thing we have is a Gamblers Anonymous meeting on Tuesday evening at 7:30.” At another church the person who answered put me on hold for a little under two minutes. When she came back she simply said, “We don’t have anything here.” I got similar answers at five other churches. They went as follows:

“We don’t have anything in place right now.”
“We don’t have anything dealing with that.”
“We don’t have any of those kinds of programs here.”
“We don’t have those kinds of specialized programs.”
“Actually … I’m sorry, but we do not offer anything. Thanks for calling.”

Another church tried to offer some direction. The person who answered the phone transferred me to a “staff minister.” The staff minister explained, “Right now we do not have any recovery programs. We’ve talked about it in the past, but we just haven’t been able to get anything going.” She then suggested I call a nearby church because she thought they had a recovery ministry. The problem is I had already called the church she referred me to and knew they did not offer anything.

The most troubling experience came in a call to a large downtown church. The volunteer who answered put me on hold as she transferred me to a secretary. When the
secretary answered, I repeated the exact same question. She responded, “You need to speak with one of our counselors. Let me transfer you.” I was on hold for a little over one minute when a male voice answered, “How can I help you?” I repeated the same question for the third time. After a pause of several seconds and a loud sigh, he said, “Boy, I’m sure not the guy you need to talk to.” He then told me the name of the counselor to whom I needed to talk and that he would try to transfer me. He then said, “I’m not great at transferring calls so, if I lose you [emphasis mine], just call back and ask for her.” The thought went through my mind; “If I was lost, when I called, I would feel even more lost after this call.” He was successful with the call transfer, but I once again got a voice mail with instructions to leave my name and number.

The bottom line is that making twelve phone calls, checking newspaper and yellow page ads, and conducting an exhaustive Internet search for almost two hours yielded no help whatsoever for a struggling addict looking for that help in a church. Of course, the typical addict would never have gone through what I went through trying to find help. My best estimate is (and I have a pretty good idea because I have personally been in that kind of shape) the typical addict would have been on his or her way to the bar by about the second dead-end phone call. By contrast it only took seven minutes by way of an Internet search to have in-hand a printout listing the twenty-one Narcotics Anonymous meetings happening weekly in my study area. Ironically, fifteen of those meetings are held in churches, two of which meet in churches I had called during my phone search.

Eventually I stumbled onto one church that fit the criteria for my third group of churches. The executive director of a men’s treatment center, Ted, brought up the name
of a faith-based recovery program that he thought sounded like what we were doing at Celebrate Recovery. He thought a church in the city used the program even though he could not recall the name of the church. I managed to find it on the Internet by going to the national Web site of the particular recovery program and looking in their directory.

I met Pastor Darrell in his office on a Monday morning. The church sits in the midst of a light industrial section of the inner city with only a small residential area adjacent to the property. The church building had been converted from an old train station to house the six hundred-member congregation. The building is located one block off a main artery into downtown Lexington. Businesses on the main road not more than a few blocks from the church include strip clubs, bars, and adult bookstores. The area is notorious for crime, prostitution, and drug trafficking.

The priority of recovery ministry was evident from the moment I pulled into the parking lot. A banner announcing the Friday night recovery ministry stretched across twelve feet of the front of the building. Inside several posters with addiction themes also advertised the ministry. I had hardly sat down in Pastor Darrell’s office before he started telling about the ministry and mission of the church. He had started the church in 1992 with six people as a part-time pastor/full-time truck driver. He went to full-time as a pastor in 1999. He said God had told him that he would “always pastor the poorest of the poor.” His “old-fashioned, independent, fundamentalist church” had an aggressive “door-to-door, soul-winning program every Saturday.” People from the church, primarily members of the youth group, would pass out literature in the neighborhoods to inform people of “our Sunday school for all ages, our choir, and our addiction ministry.” He also reported that the church would begin a weekly jail ministry and nursing home
ministry in the next month. Their Sunday bus ministry transports many children to church from surrounding neighborhoods each week. In Pastor Darrell’s mind, the recovery ministry is as much about reaching the families of addicts as the addict:

Our goal is not just to reach the addict; it’s to reach the addict’s family. I had a girl here Friday night who is twenty-one years old and she’s prostituting herself to buy cocaine. What kind of shape do you think her family is in? Her mom and dad were out of church for a while, but now they’re back in church. There she was Friday night … hugging up to her dad. People in the church see that and they have embraced it wonderfully.

While the specific recovery program had only existed for two years, Pastor Darrell had sought to address the problem of addiction from the very beginning:

I’ve run into someone struggling with addiction or a family grieving because of a family member’s addiction almost weekly since the very beginning. I found myself frustrated to tears when I couldn’t help them. I knew we had to do something, so when we found this program two years ago we jumped on it.

He shared other stories and examples of a church fully engaged in recovery ministry and fully identified by their sense of mission to the community. Our interview stretched beyond an hour as we enthusiastically shared ideas and stories of the ups and downs of recovery ministry. Even though we would probably identify several points of departure between us theologically, we shared a common passion for ministering to people in addiction. I left feeling energized.

The second and only other church I identified in this group is the one I pastor, Hope Springs Community Church. Hope Springs is in its fifth year of existence and is approaching the one-year anniversary of its Celebrate Recovery ministry. We had attempted to launch the ministry two other times in our first four years and failed both times. The third time has proven to be the charm as our CR program currently averages over fifty each Friday night.
The research indicated that a correlation does exist between the presence of a recovery ministry and a church’s missional understanding. Churches with no direct connection to a recovery program of any kind showed very little sense of mission beyond the care of their own faith community. Those that housed recovery programs evidenced increased activity aimed at community outreach. The one church within my study area that sponsored a recovery ministry showed an acute awareness of mission in the sense of transforming lives within the context of its self-understanding of mission.

**Research Question #3—Bridge Builders**

In order to look more closely into how a recovery ministry in a local church might help bridge the gap between the recovery community and the church community, I chose to study the impact of the Celebrate Recovery program in two churches. I chose the particular program for four reasons. First, the CR program has enough history to measure the effectiveness of the program over a significant period of time. The program originated at Saddleback Community Church in 1991. Second, the ministry was designed to be transferable into a variety of contexts. The third reason I chose CR was due to its adoption as a primary recovery ministry by over three thousand churches. Finally, I selected CR because of my personal familiarity with the ministry. I started the program in two pastoral appointments: a rural town church of three hundred members in south central Kentucky and an urban church plant in Lexington. Cokesbury United Methodist was the first church I visited and profiled in the study.

**Cokesbury United Methodist Church**

Cokesbury United Methodist Church sits in West Knoxville, which is an affluent growing area of Knoxville, Tennessee. Driving to the church I passed through a heavily
congested area of businesses, restaurants, and shopping malls. The campus consists of
two sections, one on either side of a heavily traveled main artery. The main campus on
the left looks very much like a traditional large church campus with a beautiful sanctuary
towering above the tree line and adjacent buildings. On the right side of the road,
immediately across from the main campus, sits the extension campus, which was
formerly a Lowe’s building supply store. The sign in front of the main campus,
approximately twenty feet from the roadside, reads, “Cokesbury United Methodist
Church” and contains marquee space for changing announcements. Across the street the
sign beside the road reads “Cokesbury Center” and “Celebrate Recovery.” On a previous
trip through Knoxville approximately two years ago, I noticed a billboard on the
interstate with the slogan “Get Your Life Back!” with the name of the program and
church as well as contact information. I would later discover that an executive from a
major advertising firm in the area had entered recovery several years ago and eventually
came to Celebrate Recovery, professed faith in Christ, and joined the church. Through his
expertise and connections, Cokesbury launched an advertising campaign for Celebrate
Recovery valued in the neighborhood of one hundred thousand dollars for an estimated
actual cost of around six thousand dollars. Currently the ministry is featured on a local
cable television station each Saturday evening with an estimated ten thousand viewers.

On the night I attended CR at Cokesbury, a young man who appeared to be in his
late twenties or early thirties received a token celebrating one year of sobriety. The
advertising executive actually presented the young man his token from the stage. The
young man revealed that he had first come to CR because he watched it on television:

I got clean a year ago through NA. I went to lots of meetings and really
worked the program, but I always wished I had some place to talk about
my faith. I’m a believer in Jesus, but I wasn’t free to talk about my faith in the meetings. One Saturday night I was at home channel surfing when I came across this show about Christian recovery. I didn’t know it was local, so I started saying, “Lord, that is what I need. I need a place like that to go to in Knoxville!” At the end of the program they came on and told me it was in Knoxville! That was three months ago, and I’ve been coming here ever since.

Cokesbury has seen significant growth at Celebrate Recovery as a result of the television broadcast. Three hundred and eighty-six attended the night I was there. While official figures are not available I was told by people at Saddleback Church, which averages between six and seven hundred persons weekly at Celebrate Recovery, that Cokesbury has the largest CR in the nation outside of Saddleback. Recently, the senior pastor at Cokesbury and the church’s Celebrate Recovery pastor were invited by Leadership Network to enter a two-year project featuring the top ten recovery ministries in America to explore what makes recovery ministry successful. Obviously, with the highly visible signs and the advertising strategy, Cokesbury United Methodist wants to be well-known for recovery ministry in Knoxville.

The acquisition of the former Lowe’s is quite a story and gives evidence to the church’s commitment to recovery ministry. The Lowe’s corporation had decided to relocate its West Knoxville store to a larger, newly constructed store, so the current facility went on the market. The church had an immediate interest and initially imagined the building as a potential family life center to serve the needs of the congregation. Senior Pastor Steve Sallee had a much different vision and managed to convince the Cokesbury leadership that the building needed instead to be a center for mission and outreach. Specifically, it would be the primary location for Celebrate Recovery, contemporary worship services on Sundays, a youth ministry, a food pantry, furniture repair ministry,
and other community outreach efforts. The main obstacle to acquiring the property was that two car dealerships bid significantly more money for the property. Pastor Sallee managed to make contact with Lowe’s corporate offices and got an appointment with the CEO who “happened to be a United Methodist.” Pastor Sallee cast his vision for the property to the corporation, and Cokesbury was able to purchase it for approximately $1.5 million less than the highest bid. In addition to the church’s ministries, the building now houses a Cokesbury Bookstore and the offices of the Holston Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church as well as the church’s own Sacred Grounds Café coffee shop.

Evidence that Celebrate Recovery is building bridges between Cokesbury and the recovery community in Knoxville is abundant. First, the very high public visibility of the program has resulted in significant crossover from twelve-step meetings in the Knoxville area to the church as evidenced by the testimony given by the NA member receiving his one-year token. In addition to the television broadcast, plans are underway for a radio show featuring Gil Smith, the CR pastor at Cokesbury, in a call-in format.

Several persons with whom I spoke in interviews and casually during the supper hour indicated they came to CR after being active in other twelve-step groups. Vickie had six months in AA before someone invited her to CR. Amanda, who recently joined the staff at Cokesbury, had extensive recovery experience before coming to CR. Besides participating in NA meetings, she found help for her primary struggle in an eating disorder support group. She has published a book detailing her life story and frequently speaks publicly on behalf of the Knoxville Task Force for Eating Disorders. Even though the ministry receives high public visibility from the advertising campaigns and media
efforts, practically everyone I talked with admitted to personally inviting someone they knew who was in need of recovery or already active in recovery to attend Celebrate Recovery.

The primary efforts to build a bridge between the church and the recovery community are carried out by Dr. Gilbert Smith, the Celebrate Recovery pastor at Cokesbury. Gil was an ordained United Methodist pastor who lost his credentials, his church, and his family several years ago due to his struggles with addiction. Through his relationship with senior pastor Dr. Steve Sallee, Gil got his life back at Cokesbury after a stint at a treatment center in Georgia. Gil is the key leader for CR and his strong personality, authentic witness, and engaging style of communicating clearly drive the ministry. Still, Gil has not forgotten his recovery roots and stays engaged with the larger recovery community. He has achieved a high public profile through print and broadcast media, and Gil regularly speaks and teaches classes at a local drug and alcohol treatment center on the topic of spirituality and recovery. He remains fully committed to the twelve steps as a model for effective recovery while helping persons in recovery identify their Higher Power in Jesus Christ.

Cokesbury staff and leaders work intentionally to build the bridge on the church side as well. Pastor Sallee makes sure persons in the traditional services on the main campus are aware of what happens across the street at CR by featuring testimonies by persons from CR at the traditional services. Regular CR announcements are also included in the weekly bulletins and other printed materials. In addition, Pastor Sallee faithfully attends CR because he wants the church to know that he fully supports the ministry. He spoke about having a “ministry of presence” at Celebrate Recovery:
I’m here most Thursday nights. I circulate around, shake hands, and invite people to come back and worship with us on Sunday … and several do. I’m the second person who speaks at CR if Gilbert doesn’t…. I’m constantly doing announcements and things…. Basically, I try not to get in the way, but I do just enough so people will know who I am and that by my presence I’m 100 percent behind the program.

Randy Carpenter, the lay leader at Cokesbury, also attends CR weekly. He is well positioned to be a bridge builder to the church community as a member of the choir at the traditional services and through his various church committee responsibilities as lay leader. Randy recently wrote an article about CR for the church newsletter (see Appendix M). He clearly encourages everyone from the church to be a part of an exciting ministry opportunity.

Rebekah Fetzer, the Pastor of Discipleship at Cokesbury, is also active as a small group leader at CR. She admits that really tracking who attends the recovery ministry is next to impossible due to the need for confidentiality and anonymity inherent in the program. She is interested in “finding out who we have at CR,” but she is confident that the number of persons who become fully integrated into the life of the church after finding entry at CR is “huge.” Pastor Sallee estimates that “over fifty or sixty who come to CR have started attending on Sundays, and they now volunteer and get involved in other ministries of the church. It’s really brought a wonderful kind of wholeness to our church; one that I am really grateful for.”

**Grace United Methodist Church**

The week following my Knoxville visit, I traveled to Cape Coral, Florida, to visit the Celebrate Recovery ministry at Grace United Methodist Church. I would discover a church that, in my opinion, is the most effective I have witnessed at building bridges between the church and recovery communities.
When I arrived in town, I made contact with John Leonard, the recovery pastor at Grace. He was the one setting up my contacts and interviews. I arrived mid-afternoon on Thursday and hoped to do a couple of interviews in the evening. Instead, John invited me to attend a step study at his home that evening at 8:00 p.m. He gave me directions and told me to come anytime after 7:00 p.m. because at that time people begin arriving.

“They usually come about an hour early for fellowship.” A step study is the recovery community’s equivalent of a church small group Bible study. They occur outside the regular meetings of AA or NA or, in this case, the open share groups of Celebrate Recovery for the purpose of allowing persons in recovery to go deeper in working through the twelve steps. Each meeting usually focuses on one step and includes readings relevant to working that step. Group members then share experiences with working the step.

I arrived a few minutes after seven and was the second person there. John and his wife Cindy greeted me and introduced me to a member of the group, Susan. The house was located in a typical middle-class neighborhood in Southwest Florida. A spacious open living room area allowed for approximately twenty-five chairs set in a circle. John explained to Susan who I was and I shared a little about my project. Susan was eager to talk about her recovery and her experience in church. She was actually a member of another church of a different denomination but had been active in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction for six years through AA and NA and active in Celebrate Recovery for approximately two years. She told me where she went to church, explained she had belonged to that denomination all of her life, and stressed that she “still recognized that as
my religion.” I asked her if that church offered any program geared toward persons in recovery. She explained how here church dealt with her addiction:

When I got sober six years ago I called my church to ask what programs they had that could help me in my recovery and also help me get closer to Jesus Christ. They actually said to me that there’s no such thing as alcoholism or drug addiction; it’s all in the mind and you just had to believe. By that time I had been in AA for a while, so I told them that was just like telling someone who is in depression that there is no depression or telling someone with cancer that there is no such thing as cancer.

I asked, “So, what did you do?” She answered, “I just stayed with AA, NA and Al-Anon until I came here.” Others began arriving, so we agreed to finish our conversation the next day.

The step study was unlike any church small group I had ever experienced. I emphasize church small group because that is exactly what it was. Twenty-one persons attended on the night I was there. Each person in the group shared and introduced themselves: “Hi, I’m [name]. I’m a Christian in recovery from [addiction/compulsion].” One young man in his twenties who is in recovery from drug addiction added, “Hello, family,” as a prefix to his introduction. He used the same introduction during four separate times of sharing at the meeting. The same warmth, acceptance, and shared sense of struggle I have come to expect at AA or NA meetings was present here. The differences were that this group was part of a faith community, shared the same identified Higher Power in Jesus Christ, and saw the Bible as foundational to the twelve steps and their own recovery. In addition to the ritual prayers—the Lord’s Prayer and the Serenity Prayer—the group shared personal prayer requests and heartfelt extemporaneous prayers were offered for those needs and for “the one still out there in addiction who may die without Christ.”
The group was beginning their work on step four, which by all accounts is the most difficult step of recovery. It reads, “We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” Group members shared about the practicalities of working the step as well as the difficulties. They shared experiences of how important this step was/is in their recovery, how they had to fight through fear in doing the work, and how this step had to become a tool used again and again for the sake of long-term recovery. Words of encouragement and affirmation were heard in around the circle after each person shared. A sense of shared struggle, strength, and hope was evident in the room. I could not remember a time I had ever experienced such a depth of community and doing life together in a church setting than I felt at this meeting.

The meeting began promptly at 8:00 p.m. and ended at 9:00 p.m. The sound of a motorcycle revving its engine came from the Harley-Davidson Clock on the wall signaling the time for coffee and cake had arrived. As I spoke to group members informally during the time of fellowship, I thought that night represented the best example I had ever seen of how the principles of twelve-step recovery and the power of the gospel can join hands as a powerful tool for life transformation to those struggling with addiction.

The next night I attended the main Celebrate Recovery program at the church. The presence of a recovery ministry focus in the church was evident from the beginning. I entered through a door marked “WELCOME.” Inside, a television monitor scrolled through announcements about the various ministries of the church and events on the church calendar. That night’s Celebrate Recovery ministry happened to be the program displayed as I entered the building. Just inside the door on the immediate left was a room
marked “Connection Place.” Inside tables with information on all the church’s ministries and how one can get connected to the same lined the walls. I started to look at the material at the table closest to the entrance and proceeded clockwise around the room. The very first table contained all materials related to Celebrate Recovery. The information sheet, welcome brochures, and group descriptions for the ministry took up one entire table six feet long.

I walked into the church at 3:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. Celebrate Recovery would start with supper at 6:00 p.m. I stuck my head in the office and asked the secretary where Celebrate Recovery would be held. She replied, “ Everywhere! On Fridays the entire building belongs to Celebrate Recovery.”

The CR welcome center was set up in the main foyer between the fellowship hall, where supper would be served, and the sanctuary, where the large group worship and meeting would be held. A book table was set up outside the sanctuary with various recovery-related books and materials available for purchase. Over one hundred came for the supper and approximately two hundred attended the large group meeting. The music was contemporary and upbeat, and the response by participants was very enthusiastic in the front half of the auditorium. These were many of the same people I had seen at the step study the night before and many I had seen serving during the preliminary part of the evening. The back half of the crowd was more reserved, leading me to think they might be newer to the program.

The senior pastor of Grace, Jorge Acevedo, delivered the teaching. The lesson came from the Celebrate Recovery lesson guide and was titled “Sanity.” During the lesson Pastor Acevedo shared about his own struggle with alcohol and drug addiction as a
teenager. An altar time followed for prayer. Following the worship and teaching people were dismissed to attend any of twelve open share groups dealing with a variety of recovery issues, including a component for middle school and high school students (see Appendix N). Of significant note, Grace made materials available on its information table listing the area meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. A handout listing other “Christ Centered Recovery Groups” in the county was also available. At least one was listed for every day of the week except Saturday and Sunday. Seven various Christian recovery ministries were listed with only two being Celebrate Recovery.

If Grace is the best example of a bridge-building church, then John Leonard is the supervisor of the construction. John has been involved with CR at Grace since its inception and is now the third full-time recovery pastor to oversee the ministry. He has literally risen through the ranks:

I wasn’t always part of the leadership team, but I was a participant. My first act of service at CR was making the coffee. I made coffee for two years. Finally, I got a sponsee to take it over for me, and I became the small group leader for the men’s chemically dependent group. I still do that in addition to being the overall ministry leader.

John got sober in AA and almost immediately experienced the conflict between his Christian upbringing and the spiritually neutral Higher Power concept in the rooms of AA. He shared about the tension:

I felt like I had to make a choice. On one hand I’m learning how to stay sober over here [AA]; on the other hand, I never learned that over here [church]. I asked God to help me because I was really confused. God started putting people in my life from the rooms of AA who were Christians. People would invite me to a Bible study after an AA meeting and things like that.
The early influence of the bridge builders in John’s life during his early recovery may have influenced his actions now to reach out to the recovery community. He continues to be active in AA. In fact, two AA meetings are still held weekly at Grace. John is very focused and passionate when he talks about his continued presence in the rooms of AA:

That’s my mission field! When people come here [CR] and say that this is all they need, I tell them that they are wrong! The purpose of what you get here is so you can take it back out there. Some poor sap is walking into an AA meeting tonight and he is going to say that the doorknob over there is his Higher Power. He will eventually need somebody to say, “Hey, chief, that doorknob is going to fail you.” He’s going to need someone to help him identify the God of the Big Book through God’s Son, Jesus Christ…. My big thing is service. My big thing is taking it back out to the streets.

John referred back to the step study I had attended at his house the night before:

I would like to have a group like that in my house every night of the week. I want people in the rooms of AA, NA, SA, and whatever is out there sharing their experience, strength, and hope because that’s where our mission field is.

He talked about how valuable a bridge between the recovery community and the church community can be for a successful Celebrate Recovery:

The reason why we have been so successful is because our core leadership came from the rooms of AA. The people who launched this ministry … had five or six years of really good recovery. They knew the twelve-step program; they knew the process; they knew the power of the process. They were able to relate the CR material to the process of twelve-step recovery.

John’s insistence of framing the bridge-building work within the context of mission truly sets the tone for Grace Church’s connection to the recovery community.

Like Pastor Steve, his counterpart at Cokesbury, Pastor Jorge, is very intentional to plant the Celebrate Recovery ministry firmly in the mainstream of life at Grace. Besides frequently speaking at CR, Jorge ensures that each week a pastor on duty is assigned to attend on Thursday. The number of staff pastors at the church means that
each one will serve that role once every six weeks. John sees Pastor Jorge’s efforts as the key reason CR is received so well by the entire church:

It’s received well because of the pastoral support. Jorge makes sure we announce it every Sunday morning, and he informs the church at every opportunity of what we do here on Friday nights. In fact, he considers this the first worship service of the weekend. If someone says that Grace has three worship services Jorge is quick to correct them and say, “No, we’ve got four. One on Friday night and three on Sunday morning.”

As Nancy Ewing, Pastor of Connections Ministries at Grace, points out, the sense of reaching those on the outside extends beyond Celebrate Recovery and defines the basic fabric of Grace Church. She shared that the staff gathers each Sunday prior to the first worship service for prayer. She reported, “We say a prayer as a staff … that goes, ‘God, bring us the people nobody else wants.’” She credits Jorge for creating the kind of culture that uses a prayer like that as a ministry focus.

One observation that came from my visit to both Cokesbury and Grace is how important the role of the senior pastor is in creating an atmosphere where a successful recovery ministry can thrive. In some ways Pastors Steve Sallee and Jorge Acevedo were the most important people in recovery.

**Summary of Findings**

The study revealed that the disconnect existing between the recovery community and the church community runs both deep and wide. The disconnect is fueled by a lack of understanding between the two communities giving rise to postures of suspicion of both towards the other. From the church perspective, a basic misunderstanding about the nature of addiction leads the church to either treat addicts as hopeless outsiders or offer the kind of help that tends to place the church in the role of enabler. The reception addicts have received in most churches has left them with the belief that church is not a safe
place in which to recover. Addicts expect the attitude of the church community to reflect
a sense of not wanting *those people* around.

Another reaction from church leaders who have a desire to embrace the recovery community in meaningful ways yet lack an understanding of how to be in ministry to addicts is to erect unnecessary boundaries for the sake of confidentiality and anonymity that only highlights the stigma often placed upon persons in recovery. This pseudo-respect on the part of the church can act as a barrier to building significant relationships with those in the recovery community. The result is churches often house recovery meetings in the church facility but have no real involvement in the recovery process.

The recovery community’s attitude and actions toward the church range from gratefulness to indifference to hostility, depending upon the nature of their experiences and interactions with the church community. Leaders of recovery programs that had been recipients of churches’ benevolent donations expressed gratitude toward the church community. Most often the interactions between the programs and the churches in question occurred at an institutional level rather than a personal level. When persons in recovery had interpersonal interactions with churches, too often they experienced a kind of *toxic Christianity* that left them jaded and even bitter toward the church community.

The presence of a recovery ministry in a church served as evidence of a missional understanding directed toward the community and those on the margins of society. In the three churches with recovery ministries that participated in this study, the outward focus of mission was already in place when the recovery ministry was launched. In other words, a recovery ministry was the fruit resulting from a church’s commitment to mission rather than the cause of such a missional understanding and direction.
Finally, the study clearly shows that bridging the gap to the recovery community through a church’s commitment to recovery ministry is a realistic objective though it takes intentionality at the leadership level. Beginning with the senior pastor, a church’s leadership must fully embrace recovery ministry as a missional emphasis in order to create an environment where persons in recovery will feel safe seeking help through the church. Churches that make the necessary commitment will position themselves to be an agent of transformational change in the lives of the most marginalized of society.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The origin of the project can be traced directly to a pastor’s desire to engage the recovery community in significant ministry and a church’s understanding that mission to those in need of recovery is foundational to the church’s identity. Hope Springs Community Church was planted with the vision to be a safe place for the hurting and broken to discover the hope of recovery in Jesus Christ. The location of the church in the urban center of Lexington, after spending two years in a suburban high school, has challenged the church to reevaluate its strategy for mission and evangelism. A growing yet sometimes fragile relationship with two nearby residential treatment centers for persons in recovery from alcohol and drug abuse helped raise the questions this study sought to address. My own history of struggles with addictions and the context of my Christian faith and service created both urgency and a passion for pursuing the answer to the study’s question.

Evaluation and Interpretation of Findings

The disconnect that exists between the recovery community and the church community is not easy to bridge. Several obstacles must first be acknowledged and confronted. Preconceived notions and attitudes based on prior experiences, a lack of understanding of addiction and spirituality in recovery, and the existing culture of a church in regard to mission all have to be brought to light and evaluated. Bridging the gap will require a significant commitment and investment of time, energy, and resources on the part of the church. If a church truly desires to engage the surrounding society in mission a ministry of recovery is definitely worth pursuing.
Cultural Transformation

The commitment to pursue recovery ministry in a church will require transforming the culture of a church where a lack of an outward focus exists. This transformation of a church’s culture will need to occur far ahead, possibly years ahead, of actually launching a recovery ministry. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the average churchgoer lacks the basic relational foundation to even consider engaging persons outside the church with the gospel message, so transforming the church’s culture looms as a daunting task.

The resulting transformed church culture must provide safe and easy entry for those in recovery or those needing recovery. Rebekah from Cokesbury Church told me about another church in the community that “started out great guns with Celebrate Recovery, but the leadership of the church decided to only let the group use the back entrance and confined them to a back room.” As a result, the ministry has never grown beyond a handful of people. A successful recovery ministry cannot be a back door operation.

The cultural transformation will require the total support of a church’s leadership with the result of almost 100 percent buy-in by the congregation. The need for a radical commitment to transform how a church sees itself is consistent with Guder et al.’s assertion that the North America Church must reinvent itself if it is to become a missional force in its current setting (Guder et al. 77). The church must also be willing to let people leave who simply cannot coexist with people openly struggling with addictive and compulsive issues. Two families I know left Hope Springs because, in their opinion, we place too much emphasis on recovery ministry. One woman did not think her children
were safe in an environment where drug addicts were welcome, and another man did not like the fact that I openly talk about my own struggles with addiction. Currently, we are aware of others who are considering leaving, yet the church does not believe it can back away from the value placed on a ministry to those in recovery. As one member of our original core team and current leadership team exclaimed five months into our implementing the recovery ministry, “We have finally found our identity!” The pastors at both Cokesbury and Grace had to endure a significant exodus of members during the cultural transformation that would make each church conducive to successful recovery ministry. As this study has revealed, the disconnect between the recovery community and the church community is real, and a church can expect conflict if it seeks to bridge the gap.

**The Key Person In Recovery**

The most important person in a church-based recovery ministry may, in fact, be the senior pastor. For a church to launch and grow a successful recovery ministry the senior pastor must give more to the effort than his or her personal blessing and consent. He or she must be the architect of an emerging recovery culture. The senior pastor must be transparent about personal struggles and, at the least, engage in a ministry of presence with the recovery ministry. At Hope Springs Church, I have introduced myself at times as “the senior pastor or the head addict” of the church. On numerous occasions persons in recovery have introduced me to their friends they have invited to church as “the head addict around here.” The title has almost become a badge of distinction for those in recovery and gives evidence of the need for transparency on the part of the senior pastor.
Pastor Jorge’s admission of his struggles with drug and alcohol addiction as a teen and Gil Smith’s very public profile as a fallen pastor and recovering addict underscore how the transparency of leaders helps create a safe environment for those in need of recovery and encourages their willingness to seek that recovery in the church. I am not suggesting that only those pastors who have themselves been through a recovery program qualify to lead a church into such a ministry. I am suggesting that pastors have to be willing to share their own struggles with pain, family dysfunction, negative emotions, and other hurts, habits, and hang-ups that are a part of their personal spiritual story. Persons in recovery have to feel that they are in a safe place to share their struggles openly, and the senior pastor can set the tone for that kind of environment through their own transparency.

**Addressing the Disconnect**

The pastor and leaders of the church must intentionally address the nature of the disconnect from the church’s perspective. First, church leaders need to educate themselves about addiction and recovery. They simply cannot allow the lack of understanding that is so common to fuel attitudes of suspicion toward the recovery community. An understanding of addiction should include medical implications, social dynamics, the role of family systems, and treatment approaches. Additionally, pastors need to work through a theology of addiction that will enable them to teach the church in a way that places recovery within the salvation story. Mercadante confirms that such theological thinking will help the church address a major cause of the disconnect by avoiding offering simplistic solutions for a complex condition (Mercadante 5).
Pastors have to guard against a posture of pseudo-respect toward the recovery community. They need to practice what Steve Sallee called “the ministry of presence” with those in recovery. That presence should also stretch beyond those in recovery in the church to the greater recovery community. Pastor Jorge Acevedo explained that he knew the timing was right to launch Celebrate Recovery at Grace when he started meeting more and more “friends of Bill W.” in the congregation. Pastors should take the step of visiting the rooms of outside twelve-step recovery groups to expose themselves to the recovery culture and to build relationships with its members. Pastors will then find, as discussed in Chapter 2, a place where they share several common values, a common language, and even some common literature with those in recovery based in the religious roots of the recovery movement.

Additionally, the senior pastor will need to ensure that persons entering the church through the recovery ministry can be fully integrated into the larger church body. The actions of the senior pastor at both Cokesbury and Grace United Methodist Churches to value the Celebrate Recovery worship services publicly as equal with all other principal weekly worship services and the use of recovery testimonies in those services demonstrated the importance of senior pastor support.

Coexistence

The findings reveal that whether a church sponsors a recovery ministry or houses secular twelve-step programs like AA is not an either/or proposition. As Grace Church demonstrated by continuing to house two weekly AA meetings in addition to a large Celebrate Recovery ministry, doing both can be an effective strategy for bridging the disconnect between the recovery community and the church community. John Leonard
reported that Grace sees a repeating pattern of persons from the rooms of those AA meetings taking the step to become weekend attenders at Grace Church. He estimated that one out of every three AA members who makes a first visit to the church, whether at Celebrate Recovery or one of the Sunday worship services, would become regular attenders at the church. Churches who truly desire to bridge the disconnect need seriously to consider both housing recovery groups and sponsoring recovery ministry. In addition, the findings suggest that the leaders and participants of the church’s recovery ministry need to be encouraged to continue participation in outside recovery groups in order to build relationships and maintain connections with those in the recovery community.

Finally, I concluded that Celebrate Recovery is a viable model for churches seeking to implement a recovery ministry. It has a proven history, and it has proven to be transferable to a variety of ministry contexts. Both Cokesbury Church (three years) and Grace Church (five years) show that the program will stand the test of time and remain vital into the future. Both churches also show that Celebrate Recovery can effectively help bridge the disconnect between the recovery community and the church community.

At Hope Springs we see lots of persons from the rooms of AA and NA include Celebrate Recovery as part of their recovery plan. Some declare CR as their home group, and the local men’s treatment center now allows its clients to count attendance at CR as one of the clients’ weekly required outside recovery meetings. In addition, I have been asked to give my lead at both the men and women’s centers during AA meetings. None of these connections would be possible if not for the fact that Hope Springs is viewed as a safe place to deal with recovery issues, and the Celebrate Recovery ministry has enabled us to develop that reputation. Our strategy of building bridges to the recovery community
is confirmed by Baker as one of the stated objectives of a truly Christ-centered recovery ministry (Celebrate Recovery Leader’s Guide 27). While we are a distinctively Christian recovery program, we seek at all times to respect the work of secular recovery groups and, in fact, see them as our partners in helping people recover.

**Theological Reflections**

Jesus intentionally reached out to those considered outsiders in his day. He touched and healed the lepers (Luke 5:13), associated with despised “tax collectors and other notorious sinners” (Luke 15:1), and showed compassion to a woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). When the religious leaders and teachers of religious law grumbled and complained about Jesus’ choices for table fellowship, he responded, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Matt. 9:12). Later Jesus would charge his followers with going into the world in the same way the Father had sent him into the world (John 20:21). Certainly Jesus’ intent was that his church, the body of Christ, would continue his ministry of compassion to those on the fringes of the church and society (Matt. 10:8).

While many people might be considered to be on the margin today, people who are struggling with addiction and compulsive behaviors are no doubt out there, too. That Jesus would make that population a focus of his ministry if he were walking the streets of America today is not hard to imagine. As a friend of mine who is a recovering addict stated, “I think Jesus would spend more time in the rooms of AA than he would in the rooms of most churches.” Unfortunately, the disconnect that exists between the recovery community and the church community seems to betray the call to mission Jesus gave his followers. In Luke 14:16-24 Jesus tells the story of a man who prepared a great feast for
his friends. When those first invited turned down the man’s invitation, he instructed his servants to invite “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (vs. 21). When room at the table was still available, the host sent the servant to “urge anyone you can find to come, so that the house will be full” (vs. 23). The implication of the story is that the blessing of the kingdom of God is not reserved for the religiously elite and that servants of Jesus should be intentional in seeking out those guests on the fringes of society. James warns believers against turning their backs on those considered outsiders:

Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (Jas. 2:2-4)

Rather than build bridges to those searching for hope from the recovery community, the church has, for the most part, turned its backs and left the ministry of their healing in the hands of those who offer only a partial solution. Much like the religious elite of Jesus’ day who kept themselves clean by not touching those they considered unclean, the church in America has treated those in need of recovery as unreachable at best and untouchable at worst.

A ministry of recovery affords the church today a great opportunity to recover an identity as a sent people and to recover the same missional understanding that drove Jesus’ own ministry. Jesus defined his mission in terms that provide a healthy framework for reaching out to those pushed to the margins of society due to the crippling disease of addiction:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the
prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

Framing recovery ministry within Jesus’ self-understanding of his own mission is similar to McNeal’s call for the church today to see Jesus’ ministry as a model for a new missionary movement for the twenty-first century church (McNeal 17). Jesus called his followers into the fields that are ripe for harvest (John 4:35). His commission calls believers to consider a field in which an estimated twenty million Americans are seeking a spiritual solution to their problems each week in twelve-step recovery meetings all over the nation. Providing opportunities to find that spiritual solution can allow the church of the twenty-first century the opportunity to rediscover its identity as a missional people. Churches who are willing to create a culture in which the ministry of recovery becomes foundational to their missional identity stand to experience a renewed passion for pursuing the purpose of Jesus “to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). Churches willing to embark upon what will be a costly, conflicting, consuming and, at times, confusing journey of moving into mission to the recovery community also stand to reap an abundant harvest for the kingdom of God.

Contributions to Research Methodology

One contribution this study makes to research methodology is in the value of a qualitative research model in describing the relationship between the recovery community and the church community. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity inherent to the culture of recovery almost mandate a qualitative approach. My goal from the beginning was to experience life as a participant in the recovery community and, therefore, build the kind of relationship that would gain me access to the dynamics of the community and their unique perspective toward the church. Further study by use of
ethnography, case study, and participant observation hold much promise for informing the church’s efforts at building bridges to the recovery community. In addition, a qualitative approach to understanding the origin of attitudes and behaviors toward the recovery community on the part of the church could prove helpful as church leaders seek ways for the church to reinvent itself to become more recovery friendly for future mission and evangelism.

**Limitations of the Study**

I was not far into my research before I realized this study may have been too broad in its scope. I believe it was two studies in one. The first study looked at the connection, relationships, interactions, attitudes, and behaviors between the recovery community and the church community in a defined geographical area within a large city. Had the scope been narrowed to that one field, greater attention could have been paid to how those dynamics developed over time, the impact of community demographics upon those relationships, and the opportunities present for bridge building between the two. A narrower focus would have presented greater opportunities to interact with more participants affected by those dynamics and the possibility of understanding the full nature of that effect. The same concerns hold true for the second study question concerning the impact of Celebrate Recovery upon a church’s missional understanding. The result is that I think too much was left unreported and unexplored in both components of this study. Conceivably, both components—the recovery/church community in Lexington and Celebrate Recovery—stand alone as worthy of their own study.
Another limitation of the study is the potential for personal bias due to my own history of struggle with recovery issues. I have a personal stake in the church reaching out in mission to the recovery community and was aware throughout the study that my personal feelings could potentially cloud the results. In addition, the use of my own church as a subject in the study had potential for bias. As plant pastor of Hope Springs Church, I have a tremendous personal stake in the success or failure of a church committed to recovery ministry as a core value of its mission. I was aware of the possibility of compromising my reporting of data due to the kind of personal connection I had with the setting of my church and the personal relationships with those participants from my church. As a result I limited, as much as possible, reporting on findings from Hope Springs to actual quotes and observations from interviews with participants with ties to both the recovery community and the church. As a result, I would hope to guard against using the opinion or perception from a member of the church that had actually been shaped by my role as preacher/teacher and vision caster for our missional understanding.

**Unexpected Findings**

I was not prepared for discovering how key the role of the senior pastor was in establishing a successful recovery ministry in a church. The difficult work of totally transforming a church’s culture lies in his or her hands as the primary leader of the church. The investment of time and energy and the potential cost due to conflict with established people was huge in the cases I studied. Taking a church to a place where recovery ministry can thrive requires a senior leader who is transparent about personal
struggles and who is 100 percent committed to creating a culture where recovery is possible.

I also did not expect to discover the degree to which the negative attitudes and perceptions of persons in recovery toward the church were grounded in actual experience rather than false assumptions and preconceived notions. The prevalence of “toxic Christianity” and how it has contributed to the disconnect between the two communities lays the burden of proof for bridging the disconnect squarely on the shoulders of the church in my opinion.

I was surprised at the seeming ease with which the Celebrate Recovery leaders at Grace were able to balance their activity in a church-based recovery ministry with that in their outside twelve-step groups. I did not experience the disconnect as deeply at Grace as I did in similar settings in Lexington. Much more crossover between the two communities seemed to be present.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Several possibilities for additional studies arise out of this project. The literature concerning the effectiveness of church-based recovery ministry is virtually nonexistent. A project tracking the success rate of church-based recovery programs could prove worthwhile. Perhaps a program could be developed similar to the one that Grant discussed, that is sending out one and two-year surveys measuring the quality of life for men who have completed the treatment program where he works. It might prove helpful in comparing results with other recovery programs and helping to find points of contract for possible partnerships between the recovery community and the church community for recovery work in the future.
Another area for future study that could prove helpful for the overall area of study might be to examine the role and profile of the type leader needed for a successful recovery program. The study revealed that successful recovery programs are very leader driven, and knowing the qualities of an effective recovery leader could prove to be a great benefit to churches seeking to enter this field of mission and ministry.

Finally, further studies need to be done on Celebrate Recovery. The program has enough history and enough of a broad base of implementation that studies might be appropriate. A project could ask what makes the program work in some contexts and not in others, expose the key factors for a successful ministry, gauge the impact upon church and community, and reveal other dynamics that would serve to help churches seeking to implement CR as their primary model for recovery ministry.

**Practical Applications**

One application for the findings of this study would be to help churches planning to implement a recovery ministry understand the nature of the disconnect existing between the recovery community and the church community. My hope is that the theological and biblical foundations that informed this work, the design and implementations of the research, and the results produced will help churches move into the work of building bridges from the church community to those in search of recovery.
APPENDIX A

The DNA of an Authentic Celebrate Recovery® Ministry

1. Jesus Christ is the one and only Higher Power. The program is Christ-centered.

2. The Bible and Celebrate Recovery curriculum (the leader’s guide and the four participant’s guides) are used exclusively. The large group lessons are taught from the leader’s guide, keeping at least the acrostic and the Scriptures as the key points in the lessons. This is to keep consistency within groups, while allowing creativity for the teachers.

3. The ministry is “group based.” All groups are gender specific and use the group guidelines and format.

4. The Celebrate Recovery “Five Small Group Guidelines” are implemented and followed.

5. Accountability is to Christ, the local church, and Celebrate Recovery at Saddleback Church.

A church or organization may decide to use the Celebrate Recovery® curriculum and mix it with other materials or other programs, which is certainly up to their discretion. HOWEVER, they are prohibited from using the Celebrate Recovery® name.

Items produced for commercial sale using the Celebrate Recovery® name are strictly prohibited.

APPENDIX B

Celebrate Recovery® Agenda for Large Group Worship and Teaching Time

6:30 p.m. Doors open—greeters in place

7:00 p.m. Opening song

Welcome and opening prayer

7:05 p.m. Song #2

Song #3

Song #4

7:20 p.m. Reading of the eight principles and their corresponding Beatitudes or the 12 Steps and their biblical comparisons.

7:25 p.m. Announcements

7:30 p.m. Special music

7:35 p.m. Teaching or Testimony

7:55 p.m. Serenity Prayer

8:00 p.m. Dismissal to small groups

APPENDIX C

Release of Information Consent Form

RELEASE OF INFORMATION CONSENT FORM

By my signature on this consent form I authorize the researcher, David Calhoun, to use notes and/or recorded information from the interview for a written doctoral dissertation as required in the Doctor of Ministry program at Asbury Theological Seminary. I further understand and agree to the use of this interview under the following conditions:

1. In order to maintain anonymity, I will be assigned a fictitious name that will be used in referencing any quotes and/or any information used from this interview in the written dissertation.

2. All tapes will be cataloged using the assigned pseudonym and will remain the sole property of the researcher.

3. Any reference to the church, institution and/or place of employment with which I am connected will be made only in generic terms.

4. I understand that all or any portion of the dissertation will be submitted for publication.

_____________________________________
Date of Interview

_____________________________________
Interviewer

_____________________________________
Interviewee
APPENDIX D

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Source: Alcoholics Anonymous 59-60
APPENDIX E

Serenity Prayer

Reinhold Niebuhr

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time;

Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace;

Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.

Trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your will;

so that I may be reasonably happy in this life

and supremely happy with You forever in the next.

AMEN

APPENDIX F

Celebrate Recovery® Eight Principles with Beatitudes

Realize I’m not God; I admit I’m powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and my life is unmanageable. Step 1

“Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor.” Matthew 5:3

Earnestly believe that God exists, that I matter to him, and that he has the power to help me recover. Step 2

“Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Matthew 5:4

Consciously choose to commit all my life and will to Christ’s care and control. Step 3

“Happy are the meek.” Matthew 5:5

Openly examine and confess my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust. Steps 4 & 5

“Happy are the pure in heart.” Matthew 5:8

Voluntarily submit to every change God wants to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my character defects. Steps 6 & 7

“Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires.” Matthew 5:6

Evaluate all my relationships. Offer forgiveness to those who’ve hurt me and make amends for harm I’ve done to others except when to do so would harm them or others. Steps 8 & 9

“Happy are the merciful. Happy are the peacemakers.”
Matthew 5:7 Matthew 5:9

Reserve a daily time with God for self-examination, Bible reading, and prayer in order to know God and His will for my life and to gain the power to follow His will. Steps 10 & 11

Yield myself to God to be used to bring this Good News to others, both by my example and by my words. Step 12

“Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires.”
Matthew 5:10

APPENDIX G

Twelve Steps with Biblical Comparisons

1. **We admitted** we were powerless over our addictions and compulsive behaviors. That our lives had become unmanageable. *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* (Romans 7:18)

2. **We came to believe** that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. *For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.* (Philippians 2:13)

3. **We made a decision** to turn our will and our life over to the care of God. *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.* (Romans 12:1)

4. **We made a searching and fearless moral inventory** of ourselves. *Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD.* (Lamentations 3:40)

5. **We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.** *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.* (James 5:16a)

6. **We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.** *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.* (James 4:10)

7. **We humbly asked Him to remove all our short-comings.** *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* (1 John 1:9)

8. **We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.** *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* (Luke 6:31)

9. **We made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.** *Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.* (Matthew 5:23-24)

10. **We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.** *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!* (1 Corinthians 10:12)
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for the knowledge of his will and the power to carry that out. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. (Colossians 3:16)

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we try to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs. Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

APPENDIX H

Protocol for Interviews

Interview with 6 Pastors in Lexington Area:

- Tell me about your church: who attends, where are they from, what programs do you have, what forms of outreach?
- Do you have any kind of recovery ministries here in the church? If so, who runs them?
- If you run into a problem that sounds like addiction, what do you do? Do you refer? If so, where to?
- Do you have any recovery programs in your drawing area? What are they about? Do you have any connection with them?
- Tell me about your normal week: where do you go, whom do you see, how often do you see these people? Why do you see these people and not others?

Interview with 6 Recovery Programs in Lexington Area:

- Tell me about your recovery program: what is it for, when did it begin, how is it organized?
- Where do your groups meet? What is your connection with those who own the meeting place?
- What do you do if you have a person who does not fit into your recovery program? Do you refer? To whom?
- What is your connection with the churches in your area? If it is close, why? If you avoid them, why?
Tell me about your week: where do you go, whom do you see, how often do you see them? Why do you see these people and not others?

Additional Interviews:

Church Members and Other Staff

- What are the main programs of the church?
- Do you have any contact with recovery programs?
- Why or why not?

Recovery Program Participants & Other Staff

- What is your role in the recovery program? Describe your work.
- Who are the people you interact with the most? Within the program? Outside the program?
- Do you have any connection with a church? Why or why not?
APPENDIX I

Protocol for Two Churches Using Celebrate Recovery

Interviews with Staff Related to CR:

- Describe the Celebrate Recovery program for me.
- What is your role in the program?
- How do you think the program is received by the church?
- Do you think that the church should increase or decrease its involvement in CR?
- What has been the effect of CR on the church? Can you tell me some “before and after” stories?

Interviews with Church Members Outside CR

- Describe the Celebrate Recovery program for me.
- What other programs does the church have?
- How do you think these should be ranked? (Or, which should be given priority?)
- Do you think that the church should increase or decrease its involvement with CR?
- What has been the effect of CR on the church? Can you tell me some “before and after” stories?

Interviews with CR Participants

- Describe the CR program for me.
- When did you get involved and why?
- What is your connection with the church as a whole? With this church now?
- Describe your spiritual journey.
- Would this program work outside the church? Why or why not?
## APPENDIX J

### Interview Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recovery Programs (Non-church related)</th>
<th>Churches (No Recovery Connection)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Pastor Tom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>Pastor John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant</td>
<td>Pastor Jim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recovery Programs (Church Housed)</th>
<th>Churches (House Recovery)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rev. Don</td>
<td>Pastor Connie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Pastor Jerry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>Pastor James</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recovery Program (Church Sponsored)</th>
<th>Churches (Sponsor Recovery)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Pastor Darrel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
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<td>Ron</td>
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<td>Laura</td>
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<td>Mike</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Celebrate Recovery - Cokesbury</th>
<th>Celebrate Recovery - Grace</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pastor Steve</td>
<td>Pastor Jorge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Susan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Janice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pastor Gil</td>
<td>Jeff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vickie</td>
<td>Roy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhonda</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX K

Letter from a Recovering Addict

August 30, 2005

Dear Members of [church name],

In 1993 I came to a meeting of Sex Addicts Anonymous that was held at your church. I was on the verge of divorce as a result of my addictive behaviors. I felt that I was about to lose everything that was important to me—home, family, and income. I lived in a community ninety miles away, and that meeting was the nearest island of hope for me.

I continued to make that trip an average of once a week for the next twelve years. In that time I have been blessed by having my marriage and relationships restored. Last month my family moved and I will no longer be able to attend SAA in your area.

I wish to thank you for opening your doors to this sex addict. In all the years that I attended meetings, not once did I meet anyone who showed me anything but kindness and I will always be in your debt.

May God bless all of you.

Sincerely,

[Name]
APPENDIX L

The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

2. For our group purpose, there is but one ultimate authority--a loving God as he may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups of A.A. as a whole.

5. Each group has but one primary purpose--to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

Source: Alcoholics Anonymous 562
APPENDIX M

Article By Randy Carpenter

Have you ever been involved in something that far exceeded your expectations? Something that others were skeptical about in their support and opinion? Imagine sitting and hearing someone stand in front of you and confess they are or once were a drug addict, an alcoholic, an abuser or a combination of many hurts, habits and hang-ups. They do so with openness and honesty. They do so with tears streaming down their cheeks and a smile on their face. At first you wonder why someone would be so honest in front of perfect strangers? Then you hear the one phrase that makes it all mean so much - "God saved my life and to Him I give the glory". People stand and cheer. People openly weep for the person. And you know without a doubt, you have just been part of something very special. Something that has helped change someone forever. You are not in any particular support group or recovery center. You are in church. Not the normal "we don't act that way around here" church. You are at Celebrate Recovery at Cokesbury on a Thursday night along with over 300 people who are suffering, searching, recovering and rejoicing. On August 4, 2005 there were 354 persons in attendance.

I began coming to Celebrate Recovery at Cokesbury about three months ago. I did so not because I had an addiction. I did so because as a Christian I wanted to help others in need who struggle. I wanted to do so by supporting them and their decision to fight back, and be there to hear them tell what God has done for them. After the first few services I attended, I realized this was a place of grace and a place of safety, both physically, emotionally and spiritually. Because of this, I began bringing my 11 year old daughter, Cathryn with me. She feels absolutely safe and secure and really enjoys the Celebration Service. As a father, I hope her exposure to Celebrate Recovery will provide her with an informative experience about the inherent dangers and brokeness of addiction; but, more importantly, about the amazing Grace of God to heal and restore. It has also made her realize how much I love her and how protected she feels. I think the thing I love most about this program is its non-judgmental approach. No one is told the problems they suffer are from the drugs or alcohol. They are told it is them and they are the ones, with God's help, who can overcome anything. Dr. Gil Smith leads this wonderful program. We all know what his struggles have been and how far he has come. He can honestly say to those struggling, "I have been where you are. Let me show you the way back".

In one of Dr. Smith's short 15 minute "life lessons", he stated a phrase that I have carried around and quoted many times since I heard it. He said, "There is nothing you can do to make God love you any more and there is nothing you have done that will make God love you any less. God's love is the same no matter what. He knows you by name and you are His child. You are forgiven".

I strongly encourage you to come one Thursday night and see what God is doing for people who need him most. You will take something away from this visit. The barriers of a reserved worship are removed here. This service allows you to feel something you may never have felt before. We hear every Sunday about God and what He can do for us. At this service you see what God can do for us. Please come. There is a social time beginning at 6:30 p.m. The service begins at 7:00 p.m. You will be glad you came.

In God's Love,
Randy Carpenter
Lay Leader, Lay Pastor and Stephen Minister
APPENDIX N

Small Groups At Celebrate Recovery

The following list contains the various recovery small groups meeting at Grace United Methodist’s Celebrate Recovery ministry on a typical Friday evening:

- Anger Management (12-week registered class)
- Chemically Dependent Men
- Chemically Dependent Women
- Codependent Men & Women
- Eating Disorders
- Family Support Group
- Gambling Addiction
- Newcomers 101
- Life Hurts, God Heals
- Nicotine Addiction
- Sexual Addiction for Men
- Sexual, Physical, Emotional Abuse for Women
- Spouses of Sexually Addicted Men
- Teen/Young Adult Support Group
WORKS CITED


Fish, Melinda. *I Can’t Be an Addict—I’m a Christian*. Grand Rapids: Revell, 1990.


