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God's Mission for Empowerment in Communities

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Abstract:

Traditionally, congregations provide continuous help to all individuals seeking aid. However, interpretations of Jesus' acts of charity often vary amongst congregation members. These diverse interpretations motivate individuals to help in ways they comprehend as most correlating with Jesus' character. This study seeks to reveal and interpret the revelations that drive these communities to assist others in various manners. In addition, this research aims to uncover the Church's beliefs in Jesus and what he would accomplish now, specifically through the lens of metaphorical language and its relationship to liberation theology.

I will organize interviews with four congregations within the Licking County area to understand their approach to spiritual teaching and community guidance. Speaking with each pastor, I seek each position from different congregations regarding the character of Jesus and liberation theology. To maintain the confidentiality of each congregation, alphabetical letters (A, B, C, D) will be utilized.

Introduction:

Throughout history, faith has influenced the motivation of communities in varying ways. To further understand the mission of varying churches, one must explore God and Jesus' metaphorical depictions within communities. These revelations that pertain to the nature of God and Jesus are powerful in upholding core beliefs that affect other communities. Now, the Bible remains a sacred text explaining the qualities of God and Jesus. Yet, different variations explain his presence accordingly. This raises the question: Is Jesus an omnipotent figure, closed away from all and remaining in heaven? Or is the genuine Jesus a figure still present among us, actively combating oppression around communities? These two depictions are crucial as they affect how congregations respond to societal issues that affect their congregations and others. However, through the perspectives of different theologians who utilize liberation theology, conflicts will be addressed. Accomplishing this, the lens congregations possess may shift toward an alternative that seeks to follow the mission of God in this contemporary age.

In the 17th century, individuals fled from Europe to seek religious freedom. Multiple conflicts, such as religious persecution and the European Wars of Religion prompted people to move to unknown lands. This early migration created by varying denominations, including the Quakers, Anglicans, and Protestants, has established a foundation for religious freedom; it continues to prompt modern congregations to uphold different principles. These beliefs impact social issues relating to homelessness, poverty, abortion, and LGBTIQ+.

Within my paper, I will examine distinct congregations within the village of Granville, Ohio, in light of my personal experiences as a religion major. Interpretations of biblical traditions from each congregation will further aid in this research project. By investigating distinguishable metaphorical depictions of God and Jesus, I aim to gain insights into the influence these

perspectives have on local congregations. I also aspire to reveal their mission to support all members of their communities.

Defining Congregation:

Congregations are formed in response to biblical revelation, establishing a sacred space that gathers people to worship. While the definition above may appear simple, its meaning is more profound. According to the bible, a congregation is the battle-ax of God and Christ.¹ A battle-ax is a worthy weapon against opponents. Recognizing this, a congregation is a tool in maintaining the mission of God across the world. It is God's Kingdom that brings transformation within their communities. Acknowledging that the number of individuals needed to make a congregation is of relative importance, the impact members have within a community is of greater significance.

Beyond community impact, congregations are essential in providing support and a sense of community. It's the very foundation of solidarity that binds individuals through any moment of life. These specific bonds transcend religious affiliation, reflecting how tight-knit these communities are. One of the most vital aspects of a congregation is community. Religion is regarded as solely upholding and maintaining religious beliefs, yet it is much more than that. Religious congregations provide individuals with a community that offers support to themselves and to others within the community.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the most common type of organizations that volunteers spent most time at were religious organizations (33.1% of all volunteers).² These

¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, Jeremiah 51:20.
www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

² Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Volunteering in the United States, 2017*. U.S. Department of Labor, 2018.
www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/volun.pdf.

results indicate that the following components of helping occur internally within churches: bible study groups, cleaning, worship teams, handing out meals, and more.

The Church as the Body of Christ

Christ is both the individual who chooses and is chosen by a fellowship to embody the community. A community is chosen in order to reflect and extend the faith in Jesus Christ. This election is not to determine the future of a government, but is formed to mediate the spiritual connection between all individual members within the church. So the question arises, "how does this spiritual election impact the wider world?"

The church is the embodiment of the body of Christ, therefore revealing his immanent presence among us. It plays a pivotal role in impacting our world through its sacred election. The election is not about determining the future of governments but mediating the spiritual connection among individual members within the community. The church, guided by teachings, reflects the commitment to upholding God's values. While a pastor can articulate the mission that God has set about, members in a congregation can disagree about the mission articulated and leave for another community.

As revealed, the church, as the body of Christ, is a community that challenges the dominant status quo and uplifts others under authoritarian dominance. Christ is called for justice and love across our world. Christ liberates those silenced, making their most within those oppressed. Jesus is the model for involving ourselves. Jesus is where we are. Therefore, would God be present in a church that is not promoting his mission? Would he be disconnected from the impoverished? Most likely not. Thus, working for social change and justice is what a church represents. God is for the ordinary people. Hence, if the church is the body of Christ, it is meant

to be an institution supporting his mission. God's eminence is for social change. Without this, is a church really following God's calls for change?

As members of the body of Christ, Christians are called upon to carry the mission of justice and liberation within our world. As mentioned, God's presence in the person of Christ is revealed within the marginalized. A church that truly reflects its values cannot become detached from social issues that are ongoing across the world. Christianity is not merely spiritual but is embodied in the needs of others. It is being selfless. An example that illuminates God's qualities of selflessness appears in the Bible.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”³

The above passage makes clear the purpose of Jesus' task on Earth. Jesus is sent by God to deliver a message to society, to challenge those who oppress. Jesus constantly sided with the marginalized, healing them and calling out any wrongdoing cast upon them. God's sacrificial love for humanity demonstrates how much he was willing to give up for the sake of the salvation of others. Similarly, congregations acting as the body of Christ are called upon to do the same through their actions within our world. To fulfill its role, the church cannot use words but must also demonstrate it through actions of solidarity with the oppressed.

The teachings of Jesus were revolutionary, emphasizing helping those impoverished. In the Bible, Jesus said:

³ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, John 3:16.
www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”⁴

This clear evidence illuminates the commitment Jesus had to uplift the marginalized. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus returned to Nazareth after enduring forty days of temptation by Satan. After Jesus refused every temptation, Satan departed. Therefore, Jesus returned and declared himself the Messiah. This action is radically different. Challenging existing social structures was incredibly dangerous for Jesus. Nonetheless, Jesus remained addressing the social injustices of his time. The early Christian community understood that the mission of Jesus was merged with social transformation.

The relationship between religious mission and social justice is illuminated in the modern context, specifically the Israel-Palestine conflict. Israel is the new Roman Empire. This comparison alludes to the Roman Empire's crucifixion of Jesus, reflecting the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. During the era of Jesus, the dominant empire exercised their authority through military power and government. They heavily taxed Israelites and occupied Israel, which was then a part of Judea. Their implementation of the law conflicted with the religious and cultural customs of the Israelites.

Although Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he would now condemn Israel’s actions throughout this political conflict. Jesus would not stand for this. How would he support the innocent slaughtering of children or the many civilian deaths surrounding the Mediterranean region? This writing is not to criticize Palestine but Israel’s government. It’s fair to condemn

⁴ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, Luke 4:18-19.
www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

Hamas, but to condemn Palestinian resistance against Israel is to endorse a death sentence. Jesus would not stand for brutality; therefore, the power imbalance between both cannot be disregarded. The atrocious crimes committed by the Israel state that Jesus once resided in opposed his actual values.

Jesus' critique of the Roman Empire serves as a reminder of how Christians should engage with the systems of injustice across societies. The call to embody Jesus is to uphold justice when there is oppression. It means stopping violence and providing humanitarian aid to those who suffer. The Church, as the body of Christ, must work towards social transformation. Words or prayers will not solve this issue, but direct action will. This issue is political and theological, as every human being is formed in the image of God.

Pastoral and Prophetic Ministry

Prophetic ministry is a particular style of preaching that involves an individual communicating God's messages. These messages guide congregations to fulfill what God has set about to accomplish. In Christianity, there have been a series of prophets who have achieved this. Most notably, prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah have illuminated the divine relationship between humans and God.

Well-known author Walter Brueggemann, in his writing, "Prophetic Imagination, examines how prophetic ministry creates the result of an alternative community that will challenge the existing status quo and inspire transformative change. A community that can foster alternative approaches to creating social change. Within his writing, he said: "prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God's freedom and his will for justice."⁵ Brueggemann argues that the purpose of prophetic ministry is to evoke a sense of awareness and sympathy within their communities. It's

⁵ Brueggemann, Walter. *Prophetic Imagination*. Fortress Press, 1978, p. 116.

a feeling that awakes those who have been desensitized and have been complacent in a society where people are exploited.

Prophetic ministry isn't just about communicating significant messages to others but shedding light on oppression. By presenting an "alternative view" of our world, individuals can challenge societal norms by looking at a lens of justice for all.

Meanwhile, Pastoral Ministry is an aspect of ministry when a Pastor within the church provides emotional and spiritual support for an individual within the church. This specific preaching often highlights the pastor as being the "guardian" of the congregation. The book of John says: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."⁶ Jesus' declaration as the shepherd illuminates the role of a pastor. This metaphor of a shepherd is significant in the understanding of pastoral ministry. A shepherd is a person who tends to sheep, protecting them from predators. Likewise, to a shepherd, a pastor's responsibility is to protect their congregation against numerous challenges. The pastor's behavior navigates the congregation's social impact and action. Pastors are for the people.

Within these types of ministries, both are necessary for building an influential congregation. Prophetic ministry inspires churches to fight for transformative change within a dominant culture that oppresses others. Meanwhile, pastoral ministry grants guidance and support for those within a congregation to thrive. Together, these ministries form a balanced approach towards achieving God's calling. It includes acts of service and bringing justice to areas where people need it. To effectively integrate this, the collaboration of pastors with different strengths in either pastoral or prophetic ministry will work. For instance, in the context of systemic racism within America, this collaboration is required. A pastor skillful in prophetic

⁶ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, John 10:11.
www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

preaching will encourage congregations to look at social issues through a unique lens. It will prompt the community to confront these racial inequalities and advocate for those oppressed. Meanwhile, pastoral care helps the congregation navigate their emotions on this issue. Its role is to deliver support to those also affected by the inequality confronted in America.

Who is Jesus?

Christianity is in response to the Christ Event, which centers around the life of Jesus and his representation of marginalized communities. For this very reason, James Cone's, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, is key to understanding Jesus. As stated by Cone, God plays a part in liberation of marginalized communities and sides with those oppressed.⁷ The Gospel of Luke depicts Jesus' upbringing with nothing:

“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”⁸

Being conceived by Mary, Jesus did not have a lavish lifestyle. He was born in a manger, solely for the purpose of feeding farm animals. This occurrence resonates with those in poverty who are struggling to make ends meet. In our world, where economic inequality still persists, we must reconsider our roles of privilege. In comprehending our power dynamics within society, we all can shift our energy in creating a society that enables those without power to have their voices heard. While some may claim I am oversimplifying the significance of Jesus, it's important to

⁷ Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Orbis Books, 1970, p. 36.

⁸ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, Luke 2:6-7.
www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

acknowledge that his humble upbringing is essential for understanding those who are oppressed and the type of individual Jesus was.

Who did Jesus associate with? With whom would Jesus spend time with currently? Although he was with disciples, this was not the only demographic he socialized with. Jesus consistently interacted with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners - all considered “outcasts” within this respective time.

An example is a parable from the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus passed through Jericho and met Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector. Due to his profession and work with the Roman government, Zacchaeus was often viewed as a “traitor” among many. Despite this, Jesus still chose to reside in his home, which provoked responses of resentment. This is demonstrated when the Gospel says: “All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.’”⁹ This moment depicts the sort of figure Jesus was. He was a social activist who stood up for those marginalized.

Acknowledging this, we must also interpret the part Pharisees possessed within society. Pharisees were a Jewish religious group that possessed a hope that relied on eschatological beliefs, reaffirming their beliefs of the end time and a judgment day that God would reward the righteous. They generally believed that adherence to Jewish law and righteousness would lead to salvation. Their rigid and stern attitudes toward the law often clashed with individuals who did not comply with these demands. Those who broke these rules were harshly punished and treated as outsiders.

This description of individuals has a distinct parallel to our present times. The Pharisees were not just a phase, but it has been an ongoing issue persistent over time. Internationally,

⁹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, Luke 19:7.
www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

government officials or members of the police force have had instances where they enforce strict laws to silence others. Pressing matters such as the Black Lives Matter movement or abortion rights are supposed to be platforms amplifying the voices of all. In today's context, the police or government forces are the Pharisees. They are complicit in upholding laws that Jesus cannot stand for. Jesus would challenge the oppressive barriers set for minorities across the world, therefore refusing to be silent in today's world.

Sallie McFague's Theology

To further understand Jesus' contemporary role in addressing social issues, theologians such as Sallie McFague become relevant towards understanding social and ecological issues through a revitalized theological lens. Sallie McFague is a prominent theologian who has significantly shaped contemporary theology through her interpretations of new metaphorical language to revitalize theology. Within her work, she has reworked metaphors to address social concerns within our world. In her writing, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, McFague challenges the traditional depiction of God, arguing that the interaction of God is not limited to individuals but open to all communities. She asserts that God's presence is not solely found in personal spirituality but in the relationships of a whole community. She proposes metaphors that emphasize how interconnected everything is. Her support for ecological conservation raises questions about God's image within all of this and how theology must adapt to this pressing matter. By accomplishing this, she has become a significant figure in the theological community. Her insights have become a foundation for revisiting scripture to be more inclusive of these issues. McFague also reconsiders the location of God and how Christians can relate to God. She criticizes the depiction of God being distant from the world, affirming that it creates a meaningful and empty relationship for all. With her idea that God is a mother, lover,

and friend, McFague allows individuals to shift their perspective of God's role in our world, prompting individuals to reciprocate his actions. McFague keeps God central within the picture, encouraging the idea that by prompting action within society, individuals will maintain a closer connection to God.

Within the umbrella of Christianity, multiple perspectives relay what Jesus and Christianity represent. In Sallie McFague's novel, "Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age," she challenges the problems current Christianity has come across. To resolve this, McFague suggests an alternative lens that Christians should apply toward their relationship with God. Furthermore, McFague criticizes contemporary conceptions of God's interaction with society, claiming they often hierarchically depict God. When a kingdom structure is incorporated, into a model of God, his presence is wordless and empty. It promotes a depiction of a transcendent God who is uninvolved with the issues we encounter. She opposes this "monarchical system," asserting it is very distant from the world. To address this, McFague seeks to fabricate a model inclusive towards all communities, including women, people of color, non-Christian individuals, etc.

Proposing a solution, McFague emphasizes the pressing need for new metaphors. The author insists that metaphors are imaginative leaps that evoke a shock of recognition.¹⁰ Previously used metaphors were dominant, lacking any specific insights into the loving relationship we are purposefully meant to possess with God. In her writing, McFague claims that the idea that "God as ruler" is over-possessive. Despite claims of metaphorical theology possessing risks, its purpose is to energize theology and generate a more verbal image. In addition, it allows us to confront modern-day issues presently. McFague's strategy to implement

¹⁰ McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Fortress Press, 1987, p. 35.

new metaphors ultimately does not aim to reject other theological projects; instead, it revitalizes our understanding of God.

Within her creation of a new theological interpretation, McFague offers to provide an analysis of Jesus that responds to modern ecological issues. She sets a detailed agenda by critiquing a variety of outdated metaphors, suggesting that a need for newer metaphors is necessary. Therefore, communities can maintain a more intimate connection with Jesus. To address this issue, McFague reexamines significant biblical events such as the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. In accomplishing this, she explains that these events signify a promise from God to be permanently present within our world forever.¹¹ This shifting of God being an omnipotent force to a more realistic depiction emphasizes how deeply intertwined religion is within our world. God is more than a “spiritual force”; genuinely, a present being in our lives.

McFague critiques the established metaphors of God that depict him as a powerful distant ruler, challenging the common notion that God is metaphorically “upstairs.” She hopes that an understanding of the bible can include a non-hierarchical concept that overthrows any traces left of dominance. By promoting the idea that God is metaphorically “downstairs” with society, McFague can maintain God as intimately connected within all communities. Additionally, a non-hierarchical God advocated by McFague due to a dominant version of God reinforcing fear within believers. About this, the author said: “It creates feelings of awe in the hearts of loyal subjects and thus supports the “godness” of God, but these feelings are balanced by others of abject fear and humiliation: in this picture, God can be God only if we are nothing”¹² When God is dominant, McFague points out that it emotionally impacts communities. It creates a sense of

¹¹ McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Fortress Press, 1987, p. 60.

¹² McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Fortress Press, 1987, p. 64.

fright and terror, highlighting the need for a recreation of metaphors that make God more relational to human beings and communities.

Furthermore, McFague increases awareness that, as a greater whole, we have become accustomed to fearing God's dominant existence. Ultimately, it prompts us as a community to overlook his characteristics. Those qualities include the compassionate and kind aspects of his divine power. Within congregations, both figures, God and Jesus, are depicted as dominant all knowing figures judging the actions of others. Focusing on a model of salvation is problematic as it is against God's sympathetic, forgiving nature. McFague states: "God's action is on the world, not in it, and it is a kind of action that inhibits human growth and responsibility"¹³ God must not be solely portrayed for powerful abilities in our existence but rather be a figure still active within it. Without this perspective, we risk becoming reliant on God's actions and presence. McFague urges to revolutionize the portrayal of God, making it a more mutualistic relationship.

McFague's reinvention of these symbolic interpretations includes God as a parent, God as a lover, and God as a friend. McFague points out that "all three metaphors of God as parent, lover, and friend form a 'trinity' expressing God's impartial, reuniting, and reciprocal love to the world."¹⁴ This unique approach surpasses the image of the traditional trinity which often represents the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This interpretation illuminates that God is with us where he is. Would God be with the elite? No. He is present where love is most needed.

Her reinterpretation challenges the standard patriarchal image God bears, thus encouraging a more intimate connection between society and God. It removes the sense that there is a patriarchal structure in Christianity, dismantling the frameworks that men have created amongst religion. This reinvention encourages participation from all, regardless of gender,

¹³ McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Fortress Press, 1987, p. 68.

¹⁴ McFague, Sallie. *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Fortress Press, 1987, p. 91.

allowing all to participate within congregations. McFague's efforts are immense, changing the manner God is perceived. God as an ultimate figure is detrimental. God is considered an omnipotent power, ultimately placing fear amongst people. Applying McFague's metaphors, people will feel more comfortable and find it easier to connect with God.

Although McFague's work is monumental, it is not as functional now. The omnipotent figure that McFague deconstructs allows for an intimacy between God and their followers. One cannot interpret that McFague is wrong; however, there are more refined models now. Some models are more contemporary, including all those oppressed.

In conclusion, McFague's contributions to changing a depiction from a neglected issue are critical. Her advocacy for different models of God reflects the present importance of theology and how it must adapt to societal tension. Without an evolving theology, how can we ensure people feel included? An adaptable approach to religion is essential as it may address the injustices and oppression present within society. By addressing the issues above as a unified whole, it is up to us to resolve this. McFague's innovative thoughts reimagine our relationship with God and the urgent need for change.

Mark Lewis Taylor's Theology

Mark Lewis Taylor examines the political implications of the crucifixion of Jesus in his work *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*, displaying overlapping and distinct standpoints relating to Sallie McFague's theological analysis. He revitalizes theology differently by reinterpreting the crucifixion of Jesus to a contemporary socio-political dynamic. Mark Lewis Taylor uses the phrase: executed God, to examine the context of God during the state-authorized murder of Jesus. This exploration of the expression allows readers to rethink the impact of divine power amidst oppression and injustice within America.

In his writing, he asserts that acceptance of Jesus' crucifixion glorifies suffering and represents a sacralized worship.¹⁵ This traditional depiction of the crucifixion of Jesus is wrong as it promotes his death as holy. What reason would Jesus want his death to become sacralized when the Roman Empire brutally murdered him? Like other theologians, Taylor aspires to change the depiction of Jesus and God within congregations. He suggests a solution to reinventing the image of suffering by stating: "What is sacralized or made holy is not suffering but the facing, endurance of suffering, the resisting it with hope and life."¹⁶ Taylor's viewpoint shifts the general stance that accepts sufferance to a model that engages in completing justice. His statement stresses that whatever is holy cannot represent suffering as it encourages those marginalized to do nothing against it.

Furthermore, Taylor critiques Christian theology, which depicts a non-realistic death that Jesus had to suffer and endure from the Roman Empire. Christian theology has removed focus from the political implications that arose from his execution, which is detrimental because it does not illuminate the liberative power of the crucifixion narrative. Taylor argues that the point of the crucifixion is supposed to illuminate an act of resistance against oppressive powers. It's supposed to stand with the marginalized and give them hope. Glorifying Jesus in relation to suffering is in alignment to oppression that occurs within America.

Taylor points out the widespread Christian beliefs reinforcing a strict government. Taylor asserts this to reveal Christianity being a threat to our nation. Oftentimes, it is too intertwined within politics, allowing politicians to punish the marginalized community in America. In addition to this, Taylor points out that Christians often depoliticize the death of Jesus, shifting away from his experience, which was a brutal execution. Referring to the title of his novel, "*The*

¹⁵ Taylor, Mark Lewis. *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*. Fortress Press, 2020, p. 4.

¹⁶ Taylor, Mark Lewis. *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*. Fortress Press, 2020, p. 4.

Executed God,” corresponds to the historical and political realities Jesus partook in. It’s meant to illuminate the truth behind his execution and reveal that it was not a “planned” death. He did not just “die for our sins” because he had planned it, but because he was brutally murdered by the Roman Empire. Taylor’s theology is meant to oppose those who seek to ignore issues in society, which further oppress marginalized communities. As human beings, we must do something about these injustices. Would Jesus have allowed America to oppress minorities? Definitely not. Would he have allowed the death penalty to continue? Most likely not. Just like the author argues, the death penalty is the state’s manner of having an unjust rule of terror over others.¹⁷

These issues are still occurring as I write this. It is unfair. Unjust. Within Taylor's theology, three groups are identified: state power, the oppressed, and the resistant oppressed. In his writing, he stresses that we must unite and combat oppression. As a community, one cannot continue to suffer. We must ask ourselves, what would Jesus have done in this situation? As Taylor mentions, the cross is like a creative theatrical action. As it remains a prominent symbol within society, movements are still occurring to dismantle the systemic oppression found in America. As a unit, we must join together and fight these powers.

Taylor also addresses the socio-political context of “Lockdown America,” often known for mass incarceration, the death penalty, and police violence. His metaphor to depict the structures as “jaws” highlights how destructive they are within marginalized communities. Once again, by connecting Jesus’s horrific execution to modern injustices within America, he calls for a remodeling of Christian theology to aid in social justice.

Comparison of Theologies

Taylor’s writing adapts to reexamine the historical and political implications of the crucifixion of Jesus. Unlike Cone, who recognizes parallels between the crucifixion and lynching

¹⁷ Taylor, Mark Lewis. *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*. Fortress Press, 2020, p. 124.

of Black individuals in America, the perspective of Taylor cannot fully comprehend James Cone's understanding. Cone's book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, uses metaphorical language to reinterpret Christian theology and shift it towards a specific stance that advocates only for those needing liberation. Within his writings, Cone has described the cross as a symbol of solidarity with the oppressed. His theology emphasizes the black community and highlights the injustices they encounter.

While Cone's approach is exact, Taylor's usage of the metaphor of the executed God encompasses a broader array of social justice issues. Taylor's perspective is not to critique Cone, but rather an expansion of liberation theology. By utilizing the crucifixion to state violence, Taylor is able to provide critiques of the current societal injustices listed above.

Taylor's broad approach allows him to critique current societal injustices through his lens of Christian theology. By accomplishing this, Taylor addresses specific issues that Cone emphasizes, making it a more all-around spectrum perspective of social justice issues. This makes Taylor's theology vital for advocating for those oppressed, regardless of how they are oppressed. It encourages others to see the crucifixion as a universal symbol that is not to be glorified for its suffering. Instead, it is to be a symbol of suffering and resistance against injustice, including all marginalized communities.

Sallie McFague's work, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*, utilizes metaphorical language comparing God's body to the earth to promote environmentalism. Her unique metaphors of God as sister, mother, and lover create a sense of care for our planet. McFague accomplishes this to create a further intimate relationship between God and individuals. Although this is useful, McFague's metaphors do not address pressing social justice issues as effectively as Taylor's metaphors do. Taylor's metaphors of the executed God engage

with state violence, providing a broad framework that can include ecological concerns and more. Taylor's use of metaphorical language examines the power dynamics between the government and the marginalized communities.

To conclude, it is necessary to acknowledge that across time, our world is changing, requiring a need for new metaphors. Of course, we cannot use the metaphorical language baby boomers once implemented for their needs. That generation experienced wars and violence amidst their nation. Presently going into a new era, we must advocate for those who remain oppressed. These include issues that may be related to abortion or Palestine, which has endured oppression for years. It is necessary to establish metaphors that bear a wide array of flexibility. Taylor's use of metaphors allows his works to support McFague and Cone's works by highlighting issues that Taylor has pointed out. Taylor's use of metaphors is not flawless, yet it represents a significant step in forming a more inclusive framework for liberation theology. His approach honors the specific struggles highlighted by McFague and Cone but also extends their issues to reveal them to newer generations.

Jesus and the Resurrection

Liberation theology approaches Christianity with a lens that emphasizes the liberation of all oppressed individuals worldwide. Accomplishing this lens is political and seeks social justice for marginalized and oppressed communities. Authors such as James H. Cone and Mark Lewis Taylor have constructed their writings, making it clear that what they hope to accomplish is to place focus on marginalized communities. By centering the attention on marginalized communities, liberation theology seeks to challenge traditional ideas of Christianity that have been dominant in maintaining power over others. Liberation theology calls for a reevaluation of Christian principles, highlighting the realities of discrimination against oppressed communities.

This significant approach to freedom demands that Christians use their privilege to contribute towards the liberation of all.

The resurrection of Jesus, known by all Christians, represents how present he is in our world. This event is critical as it supports the claim of liberation theology that God is committed to helping the poor. His resurrection reminds us that he has reappeared to be in our lives. This occurrence within the gospel of Luke illuminates the resurrection of Jesus and the role of those marginalized, such as women.¹⁸ Interestingly, women were the first to discover the tomb of Jesus after the resurrection transpired. Their proclamation of Jesus is meaningful as they met Jesus before his disciples, who were essential in spreading the gospel. This passage is crucial as it recognizes the importance of those marginalized. Selecting a group of women, including Mary Magdalene, a witness of his crucifixion and resurrection, indicated the crucial role these women possessed. Jesus placed immense trust in women. It destroys the societal norms that were present during Jesus' time. During his time, society considered women inferior to men. It is why his resurrection is essential to understanding liberation theology and Jesus. Jesus appearing first to a crowd of women reveals who he sided with and challenged the status quo. As we see all around us, political events globally are still occurring. Within America, for example, why are women losing their reproductive rights?

The struggle seen now for women's rights illuminates the similar marginalization to women encountered during Jesus' time. This dilemma is presented in the Gospel of Luke:

“In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he

¹⁸ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, Luke 24:1-12.
www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”¹⁹

The passage illuminates the lack of trust individuals had for women during Jesus’ time. Despite their testimony, the disciples remained skeptical. Liberation theology aims to challenge these patterns that have occurred in the past and right now. By applying this theology, all injustices will be addressed, therefore restoring equity.

Who is Jesus?

Who is Jesus, who would he hang out with? Although often known for his time with his disciples, he socialized with a diverse range of people, including those marginalized, like sinners. An example is within the passage from, where Jesus challenges religious norms of his becoming a radical.²⁰ By socializing with tax collectors, many Pharisees questioned him. Although judged, he did not budge. It is significant as it reveals Jesus' mission to help others considered outcasts. This passage is important because it illustrates the liberator Jesus was, often challenging traditional norms and standing in solidarity with the oppressed. In a modern society, Jesus would represent all these values. He would be actively involved in the liberation and social justice of those vulnerable to systemic injustices.

Jesus’ dining experience with sinners and tax collectors challenged social hierarchies implemented throughout his times. He is committed to being inclusive of all, regardless of background. His refusal to be compliant in upholding the elites is meaningful because it shows

¹⁹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, Luke 24:22-24. www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

²⁰ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, Mark 2:15-17. www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

that he will stand with those who need the most help. Currently, those oppressed by discrimination, violence, and economic inequality are to be supported.

Another thing we must acknowledge is that Jesus is dispersed within marginalized communities. Jesus is with those needing support the most. The explanations of Jesus being far away and a spiritual figure are incorrect. To dismiss Jesus as distant is to be complicit in the inequalities the oppressed face. A passage that illuminates his presence is in Matthew, which Jesus said: For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.²¹ The assurance Jesus makes in this passage assures that he will not be distant, actively joining to aid all oppressed.

Churches within America have played roles in interpreting who Jesus was. However, some churches have created his image to be more distant, focusing on spiritual matters instead, such as prayers, worship, or salvation. Although helpful, calls to social justice are required. It's also essential that Jesus is not a one-on-one individual, but a figure with those who are with him where he is. Jesus is for societies, in which he is doing his work to help others. Churches need to have less of a narrow interpretation and make it more broad to reflect Jesus. Without these values, his presence is not among those churches.

The Role of Women Within Christianity

Within modern times, women still encounter exclusion from leadership roles. An example is the Catholic Church, which has upheld its beliefs for over two thousand years. The Catholic Church continues to support the belief that women cannot be ordained under their Church, for "motherhood is a sacred vocation." This common justification supports the idea that women are supposed to be mothers. In doing so, women are acknowledged as being inferior due

²¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, Matthew 18:20.
www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

to “the abilities” men have in becoming a “Priest.” Even naming a priest “father” reinforces the patriarchal hierarchy within the Church, reaffirming that men receive a superior title given by God. Another manner in which individuals defend it is through the use of scripture. In the bible, the qualifications for an overseer or deacon are to be faithful to their wife, respectable, and hospitable, and more.²² This prominent bible verse supports the oppression of women within various churches across America.

However, what is not admitted is that patriarchal forces created the Bible eons ago. Patriarchy is a result of sin, which men have long ago taken advantage of. Therefore, why must we believe something assembled by only men? As mentioned before, there’s a reason why Jesus allowed women to preach about his arrival during his resurrection event. As new creations of God, in today’s society, we must acknowledge our role within society. Prominent issues such as this keep reinforcing the idea that men are “superior” to women. Without an alternative view, women will continue to be oppressed within churches.

The role of women in the Bible, within the life of Jesus has been a particularly significant issue within feminist theology. In Mary Daly’s novel, “*Beyond God the Father*,” she critiques the patriarchy founded within traditional Christianity. Furthermore, she argues that the portrayal of God as a male figure reinforces the oppression of women who meet continuous oppression by men. To resolve this issue, she said: “The method of liberation, then, involves a castrating of language and images that reflect and perpetuate the structures of a sexist world.”²³ Utilizing this powerful method to remove power from the patriarchal force allows women to strip the power of a sexist and dominant society. It permits the implementation of a new language meant for women

²² *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Bible Gateway, 1 Timothy 3:1-5.
www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/.

²³ Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father*. Beacon Press, 1985, p. 9.

that reflects freedom. By breaking stereotypes that purposefully keep women oppressed, women will achieve true liberation.

Although the concept of “castrating” seems provocative, its purpose is to remove the power created by the patriarchal structure directly. Within Daly’s writing, she believes that women are not “re-thinking” theology but participating in creating something much newer.²⁴ In addition, the beginning of her novel emphasizes the significance of rejecting tokenism. She describes tokenism as a false identity brought upon women by a patriarchal society. According to Daly, tokenism is a means of attempting to include women with minimal effort, therefore not challenging the structures of sexism implemented within our society.²⁵ A modern-day example that reveals this is within the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields (STEM). According to the US Department of Labor, only 26% of the workforce incorporates women.²⁶ This statistic highlights how underrepresented women still are, as the systemic barriers preventing them from entering have not yet changed. For real change to occur, a shared effort to dismantle these structures is necessary for all women to have representation in all fields.

To further address this conflict, Daly’s writing emphasizes the need for women to refuse to accept roles to participate in the status quo. Why comply with a patriarchal society? Instead, they must reveal the sexism within our society while pointing towards newer opportunities for transcendence.

Similarly to other liberation theologians, Daly aspires to situate the viewing of faith from women. Women are a central view of Christianity. The author hopes to develop a spirituality that illuminates women’s experiences and strengths within our society. It’s a hope in which women

²⁴ Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father*. Beacon Press, 1985, p. 11.

²⁵ Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father*. Beacon Press, 1985, p. 10.

²⁶ “Occupations in STEM.” *U.S. Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau*, n.d. www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/occupations-stem.

see themselves reflected within the divine spirit and have representation in the issues they encounter. Within the bible, there have frequently been instances in which writing is neutral. To illustrate, the author says: "God-language appears to be nonsexist, and when language is somewhat purified of fixation upon maleness, it is damaging and implicitly compatible with sexism if it encourages detachment from the reality of human struggle against oppression."²⁷ This claim illuminates how negative neutral language is towards the liberation of women. Daly's critique addresses this issue by reconstructing language and proposing new frameworks that empower women's experience, making it more inclusive for all.

Interestingly, Daly considers that male being the embodiment of God is problematic due to the male privilege that arises from this. Not advocating for Jesus to be female, Daly does advocate for the male description of Jesus to be "castrated." She explains that a gendered depiction of Jesus supports a patriarchal structure in which women have no relation. This emphasizes a greater need to move past a male-centric image within Christianity, supporting the idea of a new being that is gender-free.

Mary Daly demands the castration of male-dominant language and symbols, as they are significant for the rebuilding of Christianity. Promoting a theology that liberates others is her objective, as re-constructing one is passive work as it only achieves so much. To support this, Daly communicates: "I propose that Christianity itself should be castrated by cutting away the products of supermale arrogance: the myths of sin and salvation that are simply two diverse symptoms of the same disease."²⁸ The proposal presented dismantles the narrative that males have upheld for far too long to enforce male dominance within Christian ideology. By

²⁷ Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father*. Beacon Press, 1985, p. 19.

²⁸ Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father*. Beacon Press, 1985, p. 71.

"castrating" Christianity, Daly aspires to strip away all that is sexist and to be more inclusive for women.

Additionally, examining the quote above, Daly's wording, explicitly, "supermale arrogance," illuminates how the myths of sin and salvation have been utilized within society to control women. In Christianity, the concept of sin dates back to the actions of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Due to Eve eating the apple, it was asserted by various people that women were more likely to sin and were the root of evil. This narrative is harmful as it oppresses women, creating an unrealistic depiction that women are inherently more sinful than men. Patriarchy is the result of sin, which Christ freed us from.

This concept does not advocate for a depiction of Jesus that embodies a woman, but rather to have an understanding of Jesus that transcends gender. Daly visualizes to move beyond a male dominant image from Christianity, instead being inclusive for all including women. This perspective permits individuals to appreciate Jesus for unique abilities. This type of perspective allows individuals to see Jesus' unique qualities that are not bound to any gender such as justice, action, love, and much more. Patriarchy is the result of sin, which Christ freed us from.

Additionally, the image of Jesus as a male savior illuminates the idea that men are powerful and the reason for salvation. It reinforces a hierarchical structure by portraying men as close to divine beings, which reduces the role women have within the church. Furthermore, Daly exclaims that this kind of Jesus means that men are Jesus for sharing the same gender as him. This is demonstrated through the traditions of the Christian church. An example is the all-male priesthood, which creates the idea that only men can hold positions of religious authority.

By pointing this out and "castrating" these oppressive ideas, Daley believes that women will no longer be a marginalized group that is condemned for actions that are deemed "sinful."

Additionally, her feminist theology seeks to dismantle all structures implemented by patriarchal effects, instead making it more equitable for women to have a role within the church. Daley envisions a Christianity where women can see their experiences within their faith. This transformation means changing the religious language and imagery of Jesus so that it can empower women.

Challenging Patriarchal Interpretations and Advocating for Inclusivity

While the world is changing, political issues still arise. This significant issue has frequently occurred due to varying interpretations of Jesus. Several churches within America have interpreted the role Jesus has played within their respective communities. For instance, some churches will assert Jesus is a distant figure, convinced he will return for the Second Coming. However, others consider Jesus as a present and available figure within our world. Several churches have to alter their narrow interpretations to reflect broadly the presence of Jesus and their values.

In Mary Daley's writing, "*Beyond God The Father*," she argues that Jesus is often misunderstood. For ages, communities have used Jesus to validate their agendas. This misunderstanding is prominent. As I have previously mentioned, it has affected women's rights and abortion. It divides us as a society, which raises the question, would Jesus allow this divide to occur? Mary Daley's objective is to separate Jesus from the unfair interpretations the patriarchal kingdom has imposed upon him. Various aspects of Jesus' identity have yet to be taken advantage of, but for a particular reason, women have received the short end of the stick. The author points this out and says: "The universalization process is characterized by refusal to recognize the evident fact that the "particularity" of Jesus' maleness has not functioned in the same way as the "particularity" of his Semitic identity or of his youth."²⁹ What is clear is that

²⁹ Daley, Mary. *Beyond God the Father*. Beacon Press, 1985, p. 19.

men have been privileged enough to avoid oppression from churches. This is what Daly is concerned about. She effectively raises the question, how can we change this?

Daly's specific lens is not just a concern relating to theology but has implications for women within America. Despite progress, Daly is raising hell to correct it. Around society, women have long suffered in political and religious spheres. Continually, their opinions are overlooked, which is an issue. This system of oppression serves to underscore the importance of women and devalue their significance. Additionally, the male-influenced version of Jesus has disturbingly infiltrated political conflicts. A prime example illuminating this is abortion. Would Jesus have restricted women from performing abortions? Nobody knows. What is known is that Jesus broke down social conventions, ultimately leading to his crucifixion. He was with the oppressed and with the people who were low class in his times. The oppression of women who lack the freedom to choose an abortion would not align with the values of Jesus.

Additionally, Daly further challenges the traditional Christian values by proposing an “Antichrist” which all patriarchal Christians fear. In Christian culture, the Antichrist refers to a figure that supported what Jesus was against. It is an evil figure that opposes Christ. However, Daly’s proposal of a figure symbolizes a surge of spiritual awakening. Daly’s “Antichrist” represents resistance towards all patriarchal structures within Christianity. She claims that supporting this concept: “would liberate the memory of Jesus from being mankind’s most illustrious scapegoat” and reframe him as a free man, no longer confirmed to the role of savior.”³⁰ This reinterpretation of Jesus’ actions shifts his role from being a passive figure to an active agent of change.

³⁰ Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father*. Beacon Press, 1985, p. 96.

In Daly's view, the traditional portrayal of Jesus as a sacrificial savior has been co-opted by patriarchal systems to maintain control and reinforce male dominance. By freeing Jesus from this role, Daly believes we can rediscover his true essence as a revolutionary figure who fought against oppression and championed justice, love, and equality. This reinterpretation aims to reclaim the radical and transformative aspects of Jesus' teachings, which have often been overshadowed by patriarchal interpretations.

This idea is crucial as it is a means of dismantling the suffering women have long experienced. Reimagining Jesus' role is not just about being inclusive, but more importantly to reimagine a community where the divine is not solely defined through gender norms. Daly's vision of a Second Coming, symbolizes the rise of female power. It's not meant to be taken as an attack towards men, but to eliminate the stereotypes that women have far been attached to such as housewives. In America, women still continue to fight around various settings to dismantle these hurtful stereotypes.

Another idea introduced that challenges traditional ideas of divinity is through the reimagining of God as a verb rather than a noun. Daly introduces this innovative concept to reshape our comprehension of the divine figure within the bible. It is significant as it changes the stagnant symbol of God to a more dynamic individual present within our world.

For many, God is an omnipotent and omniscient figure distant from our world. Churches have created an image that God is in a holy location while we are in a world of nothing. This problematic depiction must change. The impression of God as a noun characterizes God as having a fixed identity. It connects Gender to God. It associates God's dominance and power with being more patriarchal-like. For years, men have created a God that is more relatable to males and one that cannot relate to women. Men have formed an unambiguously patriarchal

figure. However, Daly argues that this view limits the complete understanding of God's nature and creates a hierarchical structure within Christianity.

Overall, Daly's reimagining of God as a dynamic figure forces us to reconsider our role in shaping our world. There is no place where God is not; anything that does not align with his values will be altered. As active members of society, we must embody the liberating work of Christ and challenge the systems set by institutions such as the patriarchal ones highlighted above. This act is central to Daly's vision and hopes that women will be able to be valued fairly.

Part II: Introduction & Questions

My religious upbringing has piqued my curiosity in revealing where Churches stand within Granville, Ohio. The goal is to unmask a map-like series of questions that can illuminate the status of these Churches. This array of questions seeks to reveal political stands, theological thinking, etc. The following questions are:

- What distinguishes Jesus? Is he a spiritual guru far off our planet? Is he one possessing a personal relationship with followers? Is there a connection between the love and justice of Jesus?
- Where do we encounter God? Is he in the presence of Jesus? Is he here with us?
- Should the Church take a political stance on contemporary issues? If not, why must it be avoided within a congregation?
- How does the perception of Jesus as a spiritual figure versus an embodiment of God impact the form we understand his presence among oppressed communities today, considering the story of the empty tomb in Galilee where he is not physically present yet believed to be everywhere among us?

- What are the primary issues these churches currently encounter within their congregation? Examples include a decline in membership, social changes, and the rising polarization of politics. How has the Church adapted its teachings and practices to remain relevant and inclusive in today's world?

As I proceed, I affirm that I am moving beyond my previous attempt to be a neutral observer. In this analysis, I will identify areas of improvement within each Church and project a plan that solidifies the Church's effectiveness. The first few pages will document the Church's responses and depictions of Jesus in a modern society. Afterward, I will provide analyses of each Church, illuminating their stance and issues. This writing should not be received as harsh criticism but rather a lens that asks: how can we revive these Churches?

Part II: The Interview of Church A

Going into my first interviews, I had no specific expectations whatsoever. However, my conversation with Pastor A from Church A clearly indicated that Jesus is the central figure within the church. Asking the first question about their understanding of Jesus within their congregation, Pastor A swiftly responded: "Jesus is everything and he is the embodiment of Yahweh, being the savior of the world." To further prove this, the Pastor utilized the bible passage, 1 John to explain further.

Firstly, the Jesus of Pastor A emphasizes that Jesus is the savior of this world. According to Pastor A, Jesus is a figure who died for our sins. This depiction places heavy emphasis on the aspect of sin and salvation, which Pastor A asserted saying: "You have no salvation on your own, but Christ came and died for you." According to his perspective, Jesus died for the salvation of his followers. When asking the Pastor how his congregation has mobilized to address issues such as poverty, racism, or environmental justice in light of Jesus' teachings, they responded:

“Salvation. The main mission is to bring Jesus to people. So you can open a hospital if you're a church, but if you're not reaching these people and telling them that they need salvation, the truth, all you're doing is making people who are on their way to hell more comfortable.”

This statement by Pastor A defies the Jesus other congregations had in mind. Contrastingly, Pastor A's congregation supported a Jesus strictly focused on salvation, while other denominations supported a Jesus that was friendly and compassionate. Additionally, Pastor A's mission in social justice is grounded in salvation, seeking for those who receive help to seek “salvation.” This is illuminated when I asked about his work within the community which Pastor A said:

“We do a school supply giveaway every year. We provide 250 kids every year. And so what we do down there is we bring Jesus to people that may not have heard of him. Okay, because that, see, that's the most important thing now we do provide coats, hats, socks, shoes, gloves, that kind of stuff, water, whatever. Yeah, but that is just a minor thing because their real problem is not that they need a coat. The real problem is they're a sinner, and without Christ, they're going to hell. So our main focus is to bring them Jesus”

As the interview continued, it was evident that Pastor A's congregation heavily utilized scripture. As mentioned above, acts of good deeds have a greater meaning than just the act itself. When asked about our relationship with God, Pastor A used the book of John and said:

“Okay, so Jesus, in the book of John, told the disciples, I chose you. You didn't choose me. Okay, so we're all disciples, right? He chose us. We didn't choose him. So we don't, we kind of shy away from that relationship language. We would just say our identity is that we're forgiven sinners in Christ, Okay, so as far as what do we encourage our people to do good works? Absolutely, now our good works don't gain us salvation.”

This passage from Pastor A reflects the role that followers of Christ have as disciples. Frequently, he touches upon the fact that all followers are sinners in Christ, but one must continue forth. Throughout our interview, Pastor A often mentioned the topic of repentance: highlighting it as an important aspect of Christianity. Again, Pastor A mentioned the story of Jesus with tax collectors and prostitutes ultimately coming to the conclusion that Jesus was with them to ask them for repentance. Another eye-opening part of our interview was when I asked Pastor A how the perception of Jesus as a spiritual figure versus an embodiment of God impacts our understanding of his presence among oppressed communities today. To their response, the pastor responded:

“Because Jesus died for all people, there are no Greeks or Jews, yeah, male or female, right for all saying, um, so, since we have a right kingdom, left Kingdom understanding, we keep the left Kingdom out of our church. Okay, I will not tell you how to vote. I will not tell you which proposal you should vote on. So we had proposal one last year, which, personally I think should have passed, yeah, but it didn't. And we had groups saying, hey, you need to put up church signs to your church. It's like, no, it's, I'm not political. Now, will I put crosses out there? And think, you know, when we talk about doing this for all the abortions, yeah, because then is

that political? Some people interpret it anyway. But to me, it's theological, that we're killing people. That'd be a difference. I'm not against this law or for that, this particular law. I don't care how you do it. Just stop it”

Mentioning the oppressed in my question, Pastor A asked what I considered an oppressed community. I answered: a group of individuals who are still fighting for their right against systematic oppression or for the liberation of an issue. With my answer, the pastor responded with the above response. Regarding political engagement though, Pastor A seems to adopt a cautious approach. He states that he refrains from telling his congregation how to vote or support political proposals. What was particularly fascinating was when I repeatedly said the term, community, during my interview. Pastor A mentioned the following:

“You keep using these communities, that's not the way we look at the world. That's not the way this Church and I look at the world. Yeah, it's human beings who are broken, needing salvation.” Through the Pastor’s explanation, they also said: “ I've worked with people from all different ethnicities and backgrounds, and you know what? They all have the same problems. And I'm not any better, and then I ain't worse than I am, or vice versa. We're all broken sinners.”

This approach promotes personal transformation and is very individualistic when it comes to God’s relationship with the congregation.

Part II: Analysis of Church A

Throughout the interview, I noticed that Pastor A was very blunt. At the very beginning, the Pastor pointed out that their beliefs were deemed offensive by others. However, Pastor A

claimed they were speaking the truth. This statement was a tell-tale sign that the congregation's views were controversial in other communities yet were significant to their congregation.

Regarding Pastor A's heavy emphasis on salvation within his congregation, I noticed that it is harmful to language that refers to God. I am pointing out that I have issues with the manner in which Pastor A reveals Jesus as a leader, asking for all to repent from their sins. This type of ideology contradicts the claims that Jesus was compassionate towards all. It was particularly surprising that he mentioned the story of Jesus with tax collectors and prostitutes as a story of repentance. When he asked what I believed, I said it was a story that revealed God's presence with the oppressed. However, Pastor A disagreed and said it was a story of repentance. These claims within congregations are harmful as they water down the power of those oppressed.

Furthermore, Pastor A's theological stance aligns with a traditional Christian perspective on sin and salvation. This stance has been critiqued by scholars like Mary Daly. Daly argues that Christianity's emphasis on sin and salvation perpetuates a narrative of moral judgment and hierarchical power dynamics, which can be oppressive and alienating for marginalized groups. Daly's critique resonates with concerns about Pastor A's theological emphasis, suggesting that an overemphasis on individual sin and repentance can overshadow Jesus' message of liberation and justice for the oppressed.

Additionally, theologians such as Mary Daly have critiqued Pastor A's theological stance that aligns with sin and salvation. As mentioned in my research, Daly said: "I propose that Christianity itself should be castrated by cutting away the products of supermale arrogance: the myths of sin and salvation that are simply two diverse symptoms of the same disease."³¹ Salvation is necessary within specific congregations, but it is critical to acknowledge that these claims are harmful. Yes, I admit Pastor A's remark about making everyone aware that salvation is

³¹ Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father*. Beacon Press, 1985, p. 71.

a significant aspect of everyone, but it is detrimental to communities. It removes the meaning of oppressed and instead subjects us all to byproducts of God's death. It reinforces the idea that we are all the same and our sinners.

By referring to all individuals as broken sinners it waters down the meaning of what it means to be oppressed. Referring back to my research, Jesus is for communities. Although Pastor A disagrees with the wording I selected for my questions, I stand by it. Without the utilization of the word community, who is Jesus present with? Does that mean he is with every individual? Is he with individuals who are out of touch with his mission? Those who abuse the vulnerability of others? The word community is to refer to those who need Jesus. Jesus isn't a figure who hangs out with those who do not aid in his mission to help all. Jesus is where he is needed and where individuals support his mission to liberate others.

Additionally, it appears to me that they still make an effort to engage with politics but deem them as theological instead. This sort of stance allows the Church to maintain a distance from these political issues instead of making it a religious one. This framing is detrimental as it allows the Church to support specific issues, instead of supporting all oppressed communities. Within my research, I have studied the need for new metaphors that promote inclusivity for all. Without this, Churches will selectively argue for certain issues that are deemed more significant than others. I acknowledge that Pastor A is passionate about this issue and claims it is not "political," however it is political. If Pastor A aims to stop the politicization of issues within their Church, it's necessary to also stop this. Understandingly, Pastor A mentioned that politics and the Church do not mix well due to it prompting conflict. Yet if abortion is opposed, then they must also have a say in other issues.

Overall, this interview reflected a contrast to what I have researched. It appears Pastor A is passionate about his role, leading his congregation to what is deemed right. Pastor A's traditional beliefs are strict, believing the scripture cannot possess multiple interpretations in a contemporary context. These beliefs are against liberation theology, which looks at the bible in a distinct manner that promotes liberation amongst all oppressed communities. Nonetheless, Pastor A was passionate about their role as Pastor and was helpful in my research. Although we possess differences, it was noticeable that Pastor A was passionate about his community and aspired to comfort those who really needed it.

Part II: The Interview of Church B

Approaching my second interview, I started contemplating how different Church B's depiction of Jesus would be. When asked about Jesus within their congregation, Pastor B said:

"I believe that if you ask anyone here, they would say that my preaching and teaching acknowledge Jesus as a loving, fiercely just healer who stands against the establishment. At the same time, He is complex—not a warm and fuzzy Kumbaya figure. He demands a certain amount of sacrifice to follow and does not allow us to sweep that part aside."

This statement by Pastor B was a distinct aspect of Jesus highlighted versus Pastor A's view of a Jesus who required salvation and repentance. Pastor B revealed a Jesus who is more compassionate and loving. However, Pastor B also mentioned that his presence is one more complex: a figure depicted throughout all gospels differently. It is revealed when Pastor B said:

“You know, Jesus for me is a challenging figure, a loving figure, but a challenging and if you. Well, when I read the text, if I read the gospels, depending on which gospel I'm reading, there's a very different Jesus depicted throughout you know how each of the parables are written. John's gospel, not being a synoptic gospel, is like completely out in left field. And so you know it. It's contextual.”

Pastor B makes it evident that there is no clear associated character with Jesus. Although it is hard to define Jesus in each gospel, Pastor B claims it is all very contextual, considering we are in a contemporary era. Contrastingly to Pastor A, Pastor B is more receptive towards the thoughts that Jesus is with oppressed communities such as Queer people. Furthermore, Pastor went into deeper detail saying:

“During the month of June, Pride Month, we spent the five Sundays focusing on what are called the clobber verses in the Bible, otherwise known as the six whole verses in the Bible that people pull from to say that homosexuality is sinful. So, I took those verses on and I paired them with a beatitude ‘Blessed those who mourn for you for you shall laugh.’ Anyway, it was cool, and I pulled from a number of queer authors, but something that I preached, not this past but the Sunday before, is that if, if we don't think that God is at work or Jesus is at work in the world through the bodies of queer people, then we're missing it.”

From this interview, it was clearly apparent that Pastor B supported Jesus and his work with the marginalized. When Pastor B mentioned God at work through the bodies of queer people, I asked: who else is God with? She said:

“If we're looking for God right now, God is in Gaza, God is in Sudan, God is in, pardon my language, all the shithole countries that good Christians don't want to go to. If you're looking for God, look for the places where there's the most suffering. That is what you will find. I mean, I think that Jesus is closest to the brokenhearted. I think Jesus is closest to the oppressed, the suffering as he suffered, as he demonstrated throughout his mystery, the people who were sick, the people nobody would go near, the people who were considered unclean, those are the people that he hung around with. He was anti-establishment.”

As the interview continued, I asked Pastor B how their congregation mobilized to address issues like poverty, racism, or environmental justice in light of Jesus' teachings. Pastor B excitedly responded and said:

“So, as I said we have folks who faithfully volunteer at the Newark Homeless Outreach. We have others who are very politically engaged and will set up a table on our lawn to invite people to sign petitions for reproductive justice, anti-gerrymandering, and other justice initiatives. We also have people who participate in community gardens. In fact, we own the building next door, and if you look there, you'll see a completely wild wildflower garden that was created as a justice initiative. We wanted to have native plants growing there to support the propagation of monarch butterflies. People show up at city council meetings. I mean, it's just we're kind of everywhere people know people know us and know our people for our vast involvement in civic and social justice initiatives. I mean, we will go to protests”

This response from Pastor B highlights how political their congregation is within the Licking County region. Unlike Pastor A, congregation B appears to be politically involved within their communities. It inspired me to ask if the scripture was open to interpretation, which Pastor B said:

"The Bible was written in a very specific time, by people, multiple people. Again, preach this yesterday. Have you ever tried to sit down and read a 2000-year-old unpunctuated creed? On shreds of papyrus? Because we only have the capacity to look at the Bible through our postmodern current historical lens. I was not there two thousand years ago, you weren't either. None of us were. We don't know the author's solution. We don't know the people that the authors were going with. I mean, we've got some historical scholarship to suggest. But the point is, like, language changes, more has changed, culture changed, there was a very specific society that these folks were living in again, and some of the language is ambiguous. I do not believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. Do I believe that it was inspired by God? Yeah, because I believe everything but it just means it is often captured. And to pretend like it's not is irresponsible."

Noticing how progressive Pastor B was of these concepts I asked, how has your church adapted its teachings and practices to remain relevant and inclusive in today's world? Pastor B said:

"We still have a long way to go with that. I mean, it's not like y'all are coming down here on Sundays. Y'all are sleeping. We have not cracked that code. I don't know if anyone's really

cracked that code. And honestly, for me, if, if we're not drawing the younger generation, which, like everyone, is so preoccupied with, whatever. I'm not preoccupied with them. What I'm preoccupied with is saying something worth a damn and doing something worth a damn that people are like, okay, that's where I want to be, because these people are not just talking about stuff.”

This particular response was fascinating considering how Pastor B is receptive to different interpretations of scripture. Additionally, Pastor B’s interview was a unique one as Pastor B highlighted that Jesus was for the oppressed and represented every identity.

Part II: Analysis of Church B

During this interview, Pastor B was enthusiastic and excited to reveal their insights about Jesus and their congregation. Pastor B did mention that individuals from other communities have labeled them as the liberal church, the gay church, the progressive church, etc. It is to say that there are conservatives within the Granville area who disagree with their actions. When asked about their openness to understanding God and Jesus in various identities, Pastor B said:

“So when I talk about God, I usually refer to God as God. But God, I will use pronouns she, I will use pronouns he, I will use pronouns they, which I think may be the most important. Look, all bets are off. I'll use all the pronouns. And when it comes to the intro, Jesus, Jesus was brown, he did not have blue eyes.”

Pastor B’s usage of multiple pronouns demonstrates an openness to reflect every identity. Pastor B strives for inclusivity, reflecting a more progressive approach to Christianity. This

inclusive language is significant as it is more inclusive and challenges the patriarchal structure men have implemented for ages. This ideology is controversial among other churches, who often produce claims that scripture is not to be adjusted. Unlike Pastor A, Pastor B is more responsive to these unique ideas. Pastor B also acknowledges that the Bible was written in a different context before then, which calls for the church to examine it differently now.

During the interview, Pastor B asked what authors I have read for my liberation theology research. When I mentioned that I have read various authors like Cone and McFague, Pastor B demonstrated a familiarity with these writings. Within this interview, Pastor B reminded me of McFague, who emphasizes Jesus as a mother, lover, and friend. Pastor B emphasized that Jesus could be introduced as any social identity.

Similarly to McFague, there is an emphasis on relational metaphors amongst all congregation members. Pastor B's inclusive approach to Christianity illuminates how they have fought for social justice and gender inclusivity for a while now.

However, there was one comment from Pastor B that I felt was not beneficial to the long-term sustainability of the church. It is significant to acknowledge that this observation is meant to be constructive feedback, not criticism.

Pastor B's comments about their congregation not being preoccupied with younger adolescents were concerning. Pastor B's comment refers to college students such as those within the confines of Denison University. I acknowledge that the statement is unintentionally harmful however, it is of value to admit that congregation communities are suffering in attendance. There may be more efficient manners to address it instead of putting it aside. According to Gallup polls, Church membership within the US in 2020 was forty-seven percent.³² These staggering

³² "Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time." *Gallup*, 29 Mar. 2021, www.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx#:~:text=In%202020%2C%2047%25%20of%20Americans,2010%20and%2047%25%20in%202020.

results represent the decline present among millennials and Gen Z'ers. This perspective can be detrimental to the growth of Churches considering these trends. It appears that Church B can benefit its future growth by attempting to support younger adolescents.

Furthermore, when discussing the younger generation, Pastor B said: "What I'm preoccupied with is saying something worth a damn and doing something worth a damn that people are like, okay, that's where I want to be." While praiseworthy, it may be helpful to broaden the focus towards attracting younger individuals to form a larger community. Without the persistent persistence of attracting younger adolescents, how will it be known that their voices are amplified? It raises the question: would Jesus include all within his mission to fight oppression? Looking at scripture from the above research, it is noticeable that Jesus was with everyone. If Pastor B were to alter this lens, the church could strengthen its community.

Overall, Pastor B's theological stance possesses progressive views that reflect Church B. Pastor B's interpretations within the scripture prompt them to support controversial issues such as LGBTQ+ and abortion. Unlike Church A, C, or D, the only Church to be most upfront about its mission within societal issues was Church B. However, it still needs to address the problems of its declining population. Without a population, conflict will arise. This suggestion will aid in the long-term success of the church.

Part II: The Interview of Church C

Within my third interview, I was acquiring a more complete lens of each church's Jesus and the future they envision. The moment I met Pastor C, they were excited to have our interview. When asked about Jesus and his character, Pastor C responded:

“I would characterize overall art or general teaching that, of course, Jesus is God's Son, and embodies God's presence in the world. And that, through Him, we know the heart, and the will of God. And so I would say that the way that we've that I focus on is that he promoted justice and love, and peace and healing and life. He was a life-giving present and so representing the life-giving God and so I think that's the way I would characterize the teaching here in terms of life and hope and those qualities and characteristics, rather than, for example, a person of judgment or condemnation or anything like that.”

This view differs from Pastor A, who heavily emphasized Jesus with judgment and salvation. When asked whether congregation C emphasized personal relationships with God or active participation within society as a form of relationship with God, Pastor C said:

“There is a dual focus on personal holiness or personal piety and social holiness. And so we understand them to kind of run like railroad tracks together, they're both important. And, one without the other is lacking. So, you know, your personal relationship is very important. But if it's not lived out in the world in a meaningful way, then it's lacking, you know, or if you're working for justice, that's important”

Pastor C combines personal and social holiness to support the thought of a well-balanced life with God. Further into our interview, I asked in what manner he mobilized his church to address issues in light of Jesus' teachings. Pastor C said:

“Poverty is probably the one that we focus on the most. So you know, working with organizations, especially at Newark, the Housing Coalition, and feeding ministry in the lookup center place in Salvation Army. So there are those partnerships that help us to address poverty. We do short-term mission projects and feed people in food pantries, sorting food, and then distributing out the population that lived there.”

However, Pastor C revealed that politics was a topic that they attempted to stay away from. Furthermore, Pastor C revealed:

“And so, you know, those types of things. We, honestly, I try to stay away from political issues, because they are so divisive, especially these days. However, you know, at least in print in terms of preaching, like, you know, in conversation or more personal settings that's different. But in terms of preaching, I try to kind of stay away from that as much as possible.”

This fascinating response raised the question, if there is any conflict pertaining to politics, how do you address it? Pastor C responded in a detailed manner communicating:

“So I realized that I'm the pastor to every person in this church, you know. So. So whether I agree with them or not, I'm still their pastor. And so I have to be able to maintain that kind of relationship with them. And so for example, when we were the past couple of years going through some stuff with a denomination, you know, I have my opinions. Of course, I think that is right. But I was always very careful to honor and, and show respect to people that I had disagreed with, you know, for that reason, I feel like I'm still your pastor. We still need to have a

relationship together. And that actually was very effective because even though people ended up leaving our church because of what they believed was to be true, it was done in a way that was upfront.”

This statement provides insights into Pastor C’s caution when it comes to politics. Additionally, it is clear that Pastor C cares for his congregation and acknowledges that their role is to lead. Although Pastor C is progressive, they are trying to maintain peace throughout his congregation. This is highlighted when they said:

“But yes, so, yeah, so I try to keep my own personal political views, especially kind of on a personal level, but I’m happy to share them with you if you want to know. You know, but in terms of like publicly declaring, you know”

This hesitant reaction is understandable, as Pastor C illuminated how much the church has undergone changes. After noticing his caution, I asked, can there be multiple interpretations within the Bible? To my surprise, Pastor C said:

“I think I believe that the scripture is inspired. I don't believe that God dictated every word of it. I don't believe that it's meant to be taken literally word for word. And so, you know, we have to interpret it, not only from a spiritual sense, but also from a literary sense and historical sense, you know, and take all of that as much as we can, as much as we can know, because it's been so long into perspective, or into consideration as we interpret it. And yes, I do share that with the congregation. And, not everyone agrees with me. Yeah, you know, and like

that, I'm willing to take a stand on that one. Let's talk about this a little more. Yeah, just talking about it. Okay. And so, just for an example in preaching, so oftentimes, what I'll say is, you know, here's one way to interpret it. Here's another way to interpret it. This is where I land on it, you know, so that I can recognize and acknowledge there, there are different ways of looking at things, but then this is where I think the truth is, you know.”

Pastor C's conservative approach to expressing his views is unique. Interestingly, Pastor C is willing to defend that scripture can be reinterpreted, yet will not preach about political issues. Understandingly so, it seems that Pastor C's congregation has a mix of people, which prompts Pastor C to avoid controversy within their church.

Part II: Analysis of Church C

In this interview, Pastor C appeared cautious in selecting his words. During the interview, he frequently mentioned that there cannot be a divide when leading a congregation. It revealed that Pastor C cared more for their congregation than preaching their personal beliefs.

Regarding the opinions of Pastor C about scripture, he is very open-minded to these thoughts. When I mentioned liberation theology, Pastor C immediately had to show me their liberation theology collection of books. Excitingly, Pastor C mentioned that they had read these novels in ministry school. Their openness to these ideas revealed Pastor C's very progressive views.

Pastor C's decision to omit political issues from his congregation is detrimental. It is not to attack Pastor C but to reveal my insights into their role as Pastor. Furthermore, Pastor C said they would share their beliefs if asked. Though my opinion differs, I applaud him for being

transparent with his congregation if asked. However, claiming that political issues are divisive automatically devalues the mission of liberating the oppressed.

Additionally, it ignores the problems of those oppressed, creating a cycle of infinite injustices within the world. As stated by Cone, God plays a part in the liberation of marginalized communities and sides with those oppressed.³³ It raises the question: would God be in a congregation that does not mention the oppressed? Would he be in a congregation out of touch with those marginalized? To answer this, God is where he is most needed. The reason why I am highlighting this is because Pastor C is genuinely passionate about their congregation. If they aspire to do the greater common good, all congregation members must work towards the same mission. Without understanding this, transformational change will not yet occur.

When asked about Jesus as a spiritual figure versus an embodiment of God within oppressed communities, Pastor C acknowledged that he was not a part of an oppressed community. He stated that he was speaking from a different perspective but said: “The difference is significant when God comes in person, as in Jesus, compared to sending a prophet or teacher. God's presence in Jesus is more powerful and personal, providing hope, courage, and the power to liberate us from personal and societal issues.”

As I interviewed Pastor C, I noticed that they were well aware of their position in America. Often, they pointed out that although they were not a part of that community, they could attempt to speak on it. Highlighted above, it is clear that God's presence is central to this church and it is more of a personal relationship with God. Unlike Pastor A, God is an individual full of life and hope. To Pastor C, God cannot solely represent judgment or condemnation.

³³ Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Orbis Books, 1990, p. 36.

Throughout this interview, I had difficulty analyzing if he was on the right track. Unlike other analyses, I sense Pastor C's training in seminary school does not entirely match the congregation he is with now. It is hard to grasp the stress Pastor C faces due to his congregation's position on various topics. However, Pastor C could have left a while ago if they had wanted, thus it is hard to analyze them within their role as Pastor.

Overall, this interview reflects Pastor C, who surprisingly is open to interpretation of the scripture and liberation theology. Yet, what is fascinating is that they decide not to talk about political topics within their mass. It appears that Pastor C has a lens that does not represent Jesus and his mission for liberation. Pastor C has unfulfilled goals that have not been fulfilled. Nevertheless, Pastor C is committed to seeking the liberation of others. If Pastor C can mobilize their entire congregation to fight for what is right, transformative change will be achieved.

Part II: The Interview of Church D

For the last interview to conclude this project, I anticipated insight that would be valuable to my project. As earlier mentioned, I asked Church D how Jesus is comprehended within their congregation. Pastor D accordingly said: "We talk about Jesus being fully human, fully God. Not 50/50, but 100% of each. And I think the embodiment of God's compassion and mercy would be exactly consistent with how we teach."

Pastor D's emphasis on Jesus being God and human reflects the church's understanding of the character of Jesus. Afterward, I asked if this view prevails within their community, to which Pastor D said: "I don't 100% know, because this is a church where people feel pretty comfortable having their interpretation and their own belief. But I think in general, that would be pretty prevalent."

This response reflects the congregation's inclusive environment where all members possess their own beliefs. However, this was an ambiguous answer due to my lapses throughout the interview.

To follow up this response I would have asked: "Could you describe some of the different beliefs of Jesus within your congregation?" I acknowledge that due to my lack of sharpness, there are moments in which I could have posed better questions. Proceeding through the interview, I asked: "How has your church adapted its teachings and practices to remain relevant and inclusive in today's world?" Pastor D answered:

"So we are part of the reformed branch of Christianity reformed part of Protestantism that's reformed with a capital R, comes out of the second generation of the Protestant Reformation Europe. And the reason I tell you is that we use the phrase reformed and always reforming. And we understand that God is never done with us or done with the church. And we always have to be not changing everything all the time, but I'm always open to where the Spirit is calling and leading us in the times in which we live."

According to Pastor D, Jesus' presence is amongst us. The Pastor explained further stating Jesus died to share God's love for all people, which led to Jesus getting in trouble. Pastor D further exclaims that Jesus was murdered due to challenging the powers of this world. It is apparent that within this church the actions of Jesus were revolutionary. They went against regular norms. To gain a greater understanding of Pastor D, I asked: "Are you interested in any particular theologies, such as liberation theology?" Pastor D responded:

“So I was trained pretty long ago. Yeah, the old but liberation theology was at the core of my training. I went to the same seminary that Dr. Wooyard went to, and in the 1980s liberation theology was at the forefront. So part of what I take from that and what was a big part of my training is that all of us experience the divine and speak about the divine and interpret the scriptures, through our own experience and our own shoes that we walk in. And, and so it's important, two things are important: one is for me to acknowledge that there are limitations to the shoes I walk in. And then the other is for me to make sure that I hear from other points of view, right.”

During this, Pastor D did mention prominent theologians she learned during her training, such as James H. Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez, etc. She did mention a story about this subject stating:

“So I was having lunch with a woman in the church who's in her 80s. And she's a serious Bible student, she still does Bible study every single week. And she's, she's a smart woman. She's just like, “How have I never heard of this, like, I'm a good. How have I never heard of this?” And I was like, Well, I ended up using the example in the church to talk about it. I was like, Well, isn't it interesting that even if you went to Sunday school every week, if you're my age, you learned about the Exodus story, starting with the baby Moses and the bulrushes, and not starting three paragraphs earlier with the Hebrew midwives who were told to kill the babies and didn't do it. And part of how I take that is, up until, like the 1970s, and 1980s. All of this scholarship was done by white European and North American men. And they only noticed what they noticed. And when women started doing biblical scholarship, when women of color midwives tend to be

women of color, Indigenous women, when women and people of color start doing biblical scholarship, they all of a sudden look at this story and go, “Whoa, look at this”, right, because they notice it more. Yeah. So we, I think we benefit from having a diverse diversity of people to scholarship and preach and share your experience.”

Pastor D’s knowledge of theologians and openness to liberation theology surprised me, as it seems she shares these thoughts with the congregation. Additionally, I asked Pastor D in what ways their church strived to make everyone from all sorts of backgrounds welcome within your congregation. Responding, Pastor D said:

“I think we talked about it or talked about openness. We talked about innate prejudice. You didn't mention, welcoming an openness to LGBTQ+ people. But that's an important thing here. I think the harder thing, and this is a very educated, critical thinking kind of carnation, I think the harder thing is to say, Well, yeah, everyone's welcome here. But the way we do things is culturally bound by the people that shaped it, right? So we can say that people of color are welcome here. And we mean it. Yeah. But they may not feel welcome. Because culturally, it's a so we can say that people of a lower socio-economic level are welcome here. And we mean it. But they may not feel welcome. This is a tradition that comes from very educated people. And so it comes up. We kind of tend to speak up here.”

What was particularly interesting was that when I alluded to all identities, I referred to those economically disadvantaged, people of color and women. I forgot to mention LGBTQ+. Although this happened, Pastor D reminded me that the LGBTQ+ community was also

welcomed. It was fascinating as it seemed she cared for all minorities within the church.

However, as previously mentioned, I could have questioned more of the Pastor's response when they said: " But the way we do things is culturally bound by the people that shaped it, right." In this scenario, I would have asked what the Pastor meant by this. To gain clarification, I would have asked what type of individuals shape this community.

Part II: Analysis of Church D

The last interview represents the conclusion of my interviewing sessions. I admit this interview was not up to par, but I still learned from Church D. This is not to aim at Pastor D but to highlight that I slipped up. In the beginning, when asked questions, the Pastor gave concise answers. I did not follow up with more questions to know more about the church. I immediately recognized there were moments in which I could have done better. Examples are highlighted above.

Given a temporary role, the Pastor may be cautious about answering questions that may impact the future of the Church. Therefore, when answering my questions, their response may be ambiguous. It ensures that the new Pastor is offered a stable position when replacing the interim minister. Nonetheless, it's also significant to illuminate the role Pastor D possesses in Church D. Within their church, Pastor D is an interim minister, meaning they are a clergy member who will be there for a brief moment. This unique situation may inflict upon the Pastor's willingness to answer my question. This is because the interim minister's role is to provide stability for the congregation.

Similarly to Pastor C, Pastor D possessed a profound amount of knowledge when asked about liberation theology. It is because seminary schools educated them through the usage of liberation theology. Additionally, it is interesting to note that Pastor D also pointed out that

salvation was a topic constantly mentioned within Christianity. It is illustrated by the pastor saying: “I feel like we try to have both like, personally, I feel like in cultural Christianity in this country, there's been an overemphasis on personal salvation and not enough emphasis on living our faith in the world.” Three out of four churches I have interviewed have pointed this out (B, C, D).

Additionally, within the interview, I mentioned the conflict churches have encountered lately, which is attracting younger audiences. Pastor D’s response to this situation was a bit similar to Church B. In explaining the issue, Pastor D relayed the message of being authentic as a church. Pastor D mentioned that younger generations noticed authenticity, which their church strives to accomplish. It was a great response, but as I have mentioned before, something must be changed. It is not to criticize, but one cannot sit and watch the issue unfold. To be relevant within our era, churches need to relate to the younger audiences and connect it to their daily lives. My explanation is not enough, but an attempt must be made.

Overall, this interview provided more insight into Church D. It provided how Jesus is understood and taught within this congregation. The pastor emphasized a deep commitment to community engagement, pointing out the projects they have successfully implemented. Additionally, Pastor D’s emphasis on Jesus as human and divine differed from all the other churches, making it an interesting point. Although Pastor D was cautious in answering questions, I still had the opportunity to gain a glimpse of the church overall.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the culmination of this research project, I would like to point out my experiences of the Church. Beforehand, I possessed knowledge of Christ through the Catholic Church. I grew up with a Catholic mother who encouraged me to partake in a range of activities

within my Church community. In a Spanish-speaking church, I partook in a variety of sacraments such as Baptism, Confirmation, etc. I was often comfortable within my church. However, I noticed an array of discrepancies in the manner I viewed God within social issues versus other congregation members. This observation inspired me to come up with the simple question: Who is Jesus? Although broad, I aspired to investigate further where Churches stand with Jesus and how they view social issues across America. Fortunately, within Granville, there were a variety of church denominations to learn more from.

Using the churches near me to my advantage, I developed a plan to learn more about these denominations. By analyzing various texts, I began developing a sense of who Jesus is. Through the guidance of liberation theology, I have garnered an understanding of God's character and how congregations are to take initiative.

Again, the entirety of my project is not to condemn churches, but to give an outcome of my experiences out of this research. The churches as a whole seem to be healthy in the meantime. Individuals within all four churches attend because they are still content. The pastor's preaching and the mission of the church continue to motivate congregation members to attend. Nevertheless, a widespread issue is that churches are facing difficulties in attracting the younger generation. It is prominent as it raises an immense conflict. Who will aid the church after the older generation is no longer present? From my previous interviews, it is clear that my generation, particularly Generation Z, is not content with these churches. A noticeable issue is that churches are perceived to be outdated when confronting modern societal conflicts.

Additionally, another point highlighted within these interviews was authenticity. Generation Z notices when a church is acting hypocritical. What must be acknowledged is that these churches can still change. They need to embody the qualities demonstrated by Jesus and be

more inclusive of others. They also have to make an effort in attempting to attract younger audiences. If effort is not made, this issue will persist. Biblical literature has to be reassessed to fit contemporary times. If churches still possess an outdated lens, one can only accomplish much.

Alongside this, all four churches need to continue their mission of aiding others within the Licking County area. I noticed that some churches didn't dive into the actual problems of their community. While their assistance to communities is meaningful, churches must directly impact those struggling the most. Within Licking County, particularly hunger and drug abuse are prominent challenges. While some churches did make attempts, others did not. As mentioned in my research, Jesus is among those oppressed. A church must help those needing it the most to aid in the mission of Jesus.

Overall, coming out of this experience, I have discovered a newfound appreciation for this research. Coming out of this research, I realize that there is work needed among all churches. In the beginning, I possessed the ideal model of a congregation. Yet, through this research, I have realized that no model can be perfect. Our times continue to change, illuminating a pressing need for churches to adapt. We must ask ourselves continuously, what can we do to improve? All the churches presented have their respective flaws, however, they can be improved. No church is attempting to promote the wrong Jesus; therefore, these churches must continue to emulate the mission Jesus set out to accomplish. By discovering new perspectives and theologies, Pastors can continue to adapt.

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