

**THE SPIRIT GATHERS THE BODY OF CHRIST THROUGH INTENTIONAL HOUSE
CHURCH SMALL GROUPS**

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Dissertation Abstract

To address congregational vitality at Holmen Lutheran Church, a congregation within a growing bedroom community of La Crosse, WI, relationships of care and belonging were studied via intergenerational small group engagement. Extensive survey work over the past eight years uncovered a deep congregational desire to increase caring connections within the body of Christ, grow in faith, and participate in ministries outside of weekly worship. Inspired by house church gatherings during the ministry of Christ and the first two centuries of the church, three house church small groups gathered over a three-month period. Participants read and discussed scripture, communicated where they had experienced God and were sent by the Spirit in their daily lives, shared Christ's holy meal, and concluded with prayer and fellowship.

Participant surveys indicated an increase in sense of belonging within the congregation and an awareness of God's presence in daily life, despite current pandemic realities and limitations. An understanding of being defined as a follower of Christ by loving God and neighbor also increased. Faith was positively impacted by participation in house church small groups. Therefore, small group ministry will be a focal point of the congregation's offerings

moving forward which will entail intentional change management practices of anxiety awareness, coalition building, and lay leader empowerment. This practical theology-based research, which highlighted the Spirit's role in calling, gathering, enlightening, and sending the body of Christ, illuminated the promised reality of Christ meeting us on our faith journey and the essential connections the body of Christ holds across demographic barriers in other facets of life.

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Chapter 1: Context

Section 1: The Church in Pandemic

My intention with this project was to research and host small groups to develop relationships of care and belonging, as an aspect of church vitality, based on the gatherings of early Christians. This study focused on the Presbyterian Mission Agency mark of Caring Relationships, one of several “marks” of vital congregations identified in their extensive research. Caring Relationships is a mark essential to the vitality of my congregation, Holmen Lutheran Church (HLC). Because Lutheran theology emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit as the gatherer and sender of the body of Christ, I concentrated on the way the Holy Spirit connects us together through the avenues in which we meet and care for one another in intentional small groups. I will refer to the specific worship and fellowship centered gatherings at HLC as house church small groups.

In this time of uncertainty, opportunities to create connection in small groups are even more essential for building relationships of care and belonging. With our need for precautions due to the world-wide pandemic, HLC—a traditional church—has been reframed in a variety of ways. Ministry is still very active through virtual connection, in-person, and creative congregational engagement of annual service and outreach done in safer ways. Committees and Bible studies continue to meet online via Zoom or masked if in person. Yet indoor food and fellowship ministries have not resumed, which impacts weekly coffee hour, church suppers, and funeral dinners. The lack of indoor food and fellowship has led members to seek outside of church alternatives to gather. The need for in person connection is great, and the creative solution found in the outdoor house church small groups was important.

Like many congregations, HLC immediately transitioned to online worship using a laptop to stream to our YouTube channel and a cell phone to stream to Facebook Live. The 2019 renovation of the church added sanctuary cameras and a media system that enables streaming with more technological capabilities, but the pandemic challenged us to move online sooner than planned. We offer Sunday and Wednesday worship online and began in Spring 2021 to return to the sanctuary for worship as well. The result of this hybrid approach has been wonderful in that we are connecting with far more households than normally worship with our in-person services alone. The freedom to worship in pajamas, the lack of the hassle getting children out the door early, and friends and guests worshipping from out-of-town are likely contributing to these numbers. However, accessing this kind of technology to worship online is not possible for many of our elderly congregants who returned to the sanctuary as soon as it was available with masks and social distancing required.

While meeting virtually has been a blessing for some, as mentioned above, and is meant to serve in a similar way to seeing one another in person at worship, it will always lack the connection and engagement of another person's physical presence. During this time of pandemic, like many churches, HLC has practiced communion online during worship.¹ Elements which are common in homes such as crackers, bread, water, juice, and wine are used as the pastor presides over elements from his or her home. The body and blood of Christ is then offered with the words of institution that these are "for you." However, before we commune, we proclaim the liturgical pronouncement that we are "Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit" and pray the Lord's Prayer together. Trusting Christ's presence in, with, and under the bread and

¹ Communion will also be referred to as the eucharist and holy supper in this project as an acknowledgement of this paper's ecumenical nature.

wine through the power of the Holy Spirit, and that the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, and sends the body of Christ, the church, then communion is one means by which the Holy Spirit gathers the body of Christ together, even across space and time.

This project explored the fruitful ground in the relationship between the holy supper, Christ's command to his disciples to share this meal together in remembrance of him, Christ's invitation and inclusivity in the many meals he shared with strangers as well as the feeding of the masses, and the gathering together of the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. I focused on the historical early church's gatherings in homes for worship and connection through house church small groups. In addition, I concentrated on the importance of inclusivity at the table and holy friendships that form because of this time spent gathered by the Spirit.

The ecclesial image I used for the church is the body of Christ as one loaf of bread. This metaphor highlights the Spirit's action in calling, binding, and sending the church: each person is an essential ingredient in the loaf. Like the bread at communion, the Spirit sends us out as freed and forgiven servants of God and one another, participating in God's mission to share the bread of life in the here and now. The Holy Spirit was the active agent studied in this research. I also included discussions surrounding the Lutheran theology of communion and a call for expanded inclusivity at the table, the Biblical narrative of worship and meal gatherings in the New Testament, the history and contemporary practice of small group ministry, and change management practices needed to implement small group ministry.

Section 2: The History and Ministries of Holmen Lutheran Church

Holmen Lutheran Church is located within a bedroom community, five miles north of La Crosse, WI. The Village of Holmen is a town with deep Norwegian roots dating back to the church's founding in 1907. Holmen was originally settled as Fredersicstown and Cricken in

1862 and renamed Holmen in 1875, the year the post office became a permanent entity.² The Village of Holmen is nestled in the Driftless, or Coulee, Region of Wisconsin. Hugging the Mississippi River, green rolling hills and flat rocky bluffs provide a beautiful backdrop for agriculture and dairy farming. The original church, the Holmen Scandinavian English Lutheran Church, was renamed Holmen Lutheran Church in 1946. It is located one block from Main Street, within a residential downtown neighborhood.

Before the church was established, a travelling preacher from Norway—Rev. Nils Otteson Brandt—served the sacraments and blessed unions, as happened in many midwestern settlements. Fourteen pastors have served HLC since it was planted as a mission start of rural Halfway Creek Lutheran Church. HLC was one of four rural churches served by its original pastor, Rev. H. A. Stub. When its first service was held in 1907 the city population was 150.³ The church stood until a fire ripped through the structure in 1953, leveling the beloved building in only ninety minutes.⁴ Elderly congregants can remember being in their high school science class and seeing the fire out the window, crying as they watched their church burn to the ground.

Until the church was rebuilt in 1954, the congregation continued to worship at the old village hall and neighboring churches. The rebuilt church had a sanctuary capacity of 400,⁵ and an education wing was added in 1967. These structures remain today, along with two parking

² There are several theories as to the name change. Some say it was to honor one of the men who surveyed the town while others say “holmen” is Norwegian for “island.” The town jugged into Halfway Creek so a name to fit that description would have been appropriate. Like most small towns of the late 1800s, Holmen was home to a blacksmith shop, grocery, meat market, ice harvester, livery barn, and hotel. Cf. Holmen Lutheran Church Faith Legacy Team. *A History of Holmen Lutheran Church: Centennial Edition* (Holmen: Holmen Lutheran Church, 2007), 1.

³ Holmen Lutheran Church Faith Legacy Team. *A History of Holmen Lutheran Church: Centennial*, 5.

⁴ Holmen Lutheran Church Faith Legacy Team, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

lots, on 1.95 acres.⁶ Throughout the years, an elevator was added connecting the sanctuary to the fellowship hall, and a bell tower with carillon was built near the sanctuary entrance. A remodel of the sanctuary in 1998 enlarged the balcony and updated the chancel, moving the altar from the back wall to a raised position in the middle of the chancel.⁷

The fellowship hall at HLC today contains a display of every confirmation group photographed and harkens back to the days where Sunday best was worn, and children were not welcome at the communion table until after confirmation. Within the walls of HLC were many fellowship and ministry groups including the Ladies Aid Society, Young Peoples Society, Dorcas Society for young women, Mens Club, sewing and quilting circles, confirmation, first communion, musical groups, and many more.⁸ Some of these groups remain, albeit with updated names, and new groups have also formed. Fellowship and family ties were held close by these meetings of worship and community, including coffee hour and potluck suppers. Yet in today's pandemic and overscheduled context, where simply breathing the same air as your neighbor risks illness and being pulled in too many directions causes exhaustion, relationship-building has been hampered.

The original Anderson, Hanson, Lee, Ustby, Wall, Bratberg, and Olson families of Holmen have grown to include a growing and diverse population of 10,000 residents.⁹ Nearly one third of those in the workforce commute twenty-five minutes to work or more.¹⁰ According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the once homogenous Scandinavian population is now 91.6% White,

⁶ Thompson, Nicole. *Overview Presentation* (Minneapolis: Station 19 Architects, Inc., 2016), 8.

⁷ Holmen Lutheran Church Faith Legacy Team, 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ Interview with 2014 Holmen Lioness' Citizen of the Year Lu Pertzsch, July 21, 2019.

¹⁰ The three top occupations are education and health care, manufacturing, and retail. Cf. Community Indicators Appendix B, Village of Holmen, accessed July 23, 2019, B-10, https://www.holmenwi.com/vertical/sites/%7BD4E55C32-2E5F-4FF9-8788-A1933CE34B1B%7D/uploads/07197041_Holmen_Comprehensive_Plan_Appendix_B_Adopted_03102016.pdf.

6.1% Asian, 1.7% Hispanic, .7% African American, and .2% Native American.¹¹ Holmen was a place of relocation for Hmong refugees following the Vietnam War. The Caucasian ethnicity of the congregation is not yet representative of this growing diversity which is a challenge HLC shares with many mainline Protestant churches. The sanctuary and education wings of the church show little evidence of the ethnic heritage of this church and community. There had been a rosemaling border in the fellowship hall, but it was removed during the 2019 renovation.¹² Now, artwork from the YMCA before and after school care programs adorn the walls. HLC is the largest of three Holmen ELCA Lutheran Churches and serves as a host sight for Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, 4-H functions, and YMCA music lessons as well.

Prior to the pandemic, HLC had 1,500 baptized members and worshiped 320 weekly across three services during the school year, two Sunday morning and one Wednesday evening, and two services in the summer. Average Sunday School attendance was forty students and confirmation class size averaged fifty. Two pastors, a full-time director of youth and family ministry, a part-time director of faith formation, and two part-time office assistants comprise the staff. The office of Pastor is shared by the Senior and Associate Pastors. The Senior Pastor manages personnel, finance, property, stewardship, technology, confirmation, and our Trust Foundation. As the Associate Pastor, the ministry areas I oversee are our adult education, weekly Bible studies, fellowship small groups, senior adult ministry, Care Callers phone outreach to shut-ins, book studies, homebound communion, baking communion bread, service ministry, and Stephen Ministry. Worship, funerals, weddings, pastoral care, and teaching confirmation are shared.

¹¹ "Holmen village, Wisconsin," QuickFacts, Census, accessed July 23, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/holmenvillagewisconsin>.

¹² Viking boats still emerge from the storage room to contain the salt and pepper shakers for special meals and lefse is always present on holidays.

Our congregation is led by our elected Council¹³ who oversees the direction of the church, is a voice for the congregation, reviews finances, receives reports from the pastors and ministry teams, and shares in a time of intentional study, prayer, and fellowship. In addition to paid staff and dedicated Council members, HLC is blessed by lay leaders and members of our ministry teams. God's mission for HLC would not be possible without their dedication and passion for sharing God's love for the community, within and outside of the church's doors. Teams meet monthly and welcome new participants at any time.

Both council and ministry teams contribute to the overarching mission of HLC crafted in 2019: *Following Jesus by loving God and serving all.* The related vision statement is: *As Disciples of Christ, Holmen Lutheran Church faithfully and prayerfully seeks to know, understand, address, advocate for and accompany those in our community and world.* HLC welcomes people to participate in this mission and vision through five pillars of ministry: Worship, Hospitality, Congregational Life, Faith Formation and Fellowship, and Service. Worship and Fellowship are the pillars house church small groups align with most directly.

Worship is central to how God calls and shapes us as disciples. Through Scripture, song, prayer, and communion, we experience the presence of God and one another and practice the values of the kingdom of God. Choirs, praise band, readers, altar guild, communion bread bakers, and baptismal chest carpenters share their gifts in worship. We trust that God meets us in the Word, water, wine, and bread and equips us to be sent as servants of our neighbor wherever our daily life leads us.

¹³ Council consists of ten adult members elected for a three-year term and two high school members elected for a one-year term. We meet monthly, except for July and December, and our annual meeting typically is in January.

We also trust that the Holy Spirit gathers in fellowship the stranger and the friend, those with questions and those sure in their faith, and nurtures us with love and grace. Fellowship allows engagement and sharing of ourselves with others.¹⁴ Relationships are built, and the body of Christ knit together as people are welcomed just as they are. One of the many avenues to growth is participation outside of worship, getting to know people within the faith community of HLC, by engaging in more education and fellowship opportunities.

Section 3: Congregational Surveys

2014 Vital Signs Survey

Since its 100-year anniversary, HLC has embarked on several congregational surveys which have assessed the current climate and ministries of the congregation and sought direction for future ministries. One of these major surveys was conducted in 2014 at the retirement of the associate pastor. During this time of transition, the senior pastor and council were interested in where God was leading HLC and what gifts for ministry would be required to help fulfill the church's mission going forward. These skills and passions for ministry would become part of the job description and hiring process for the new associate pastor.

Holy Cow! Consulting was hired by HLC to conduct a large congregation-wide Vital Signs survey.¹⁵ 83% of worshippers, 274 respondents, took this survey.¹⁶ 73% were satisfied with the church which was deemed “high” in relationship to church averages. 39% felt the

¹⁴ Fellowship occurs in our coffee hour after worship but also in the many ministries of committees, choirs, Stephen Ministry, quilters, property care teams, counters, faith and life discussion groups, book clubs, fellowship interest small groups, Bible studies, confirmation, youth groups, and so much more.

¹⁵ Holy Cow! Consulting, *Vital Signs Survey* (Westerville: Holy Cow! Consulting, 2014), 4.

¹⁶ Of those surveyed, nearly half had been a member for twenty years or more and one third for ten years or less. Most lived within ten miles of the church, 71% were female, all were Caucasian, and 88% had some college. Household size was nearly evenly split between two person and three or more persons per household. 59% worshipped three or more times per month. Cf. Holy Cow! Consulting, *Vital Signs Survey*, 26.

church had good energy and excitement which was “average” to the comparison set while only 58% of those surveyed viewed participation outside of worship as meaningful. This was viewed as “low” compared to church averages.

From this research, Council determined three top priorities for HLC: develop a strategy to reach and attract new members and incorporate them into the faith community, establish ministries of healing and care, and create a congregation attractive to young families.¹⁷ House church small groups were designed as intergenerational groups to attract all households, including young families, to help them get to know others in their faith community. Groups also prayed and communed together after answering getting-to-know-you questions and sharing in a discussion to build relationships of care and belonging. Survey results indicated that the objective of building relationships was met in addition to faith formation and experiencing God’s presence in daily life.

Driving satisfaction for HLC as reported in the Vital Signs survey was having leaders that represent the congregation and adapting worship to the changing needs and wants of the greater Holmen community.¹⁸ Moderate drivers of satisfaction were excellent worship, as well as pastoral leadership that encouraged the use of each person’s gifts, and good communication to share information and connect the faith community. From these top drivers of satisfaction emerged ten areas where leadership energies should be focused.¹⁹ In order of preference, they

¹⁷ Holy Cow! Consulting, 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

¹⁹ 10% of those surveyed were under the age of thirty-five. Their top priority was small groups and fellowship. Healing and caring ministries were also in their top six. In addition, building expansion and improvement, faith formation, and attracting new members was important. For those between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-four, which represented 54% of those surveyed, attracting new members was their top priority and second was ministries of healing and care. Expanding lay leadership, attracting families, community engagement, and expanding outreach were also important. For the remaining 35% surveyed, those sixty-five and older, attracting new members and families, stewardship, healing and care, outreach, and lay leadership were seen as areas to spend congregational resources. Cf. Ibid., 8.

were: having a strategy to attract and engage new members, healing and caring ministries, attracting families, expanding outreach, expanding lay leadership, stewardship, faith formation, community engagement, advocacy, and small group and fellowship ministry. However, these foci differed slightly by age group and frequency of attendance.

Healing and care were seen in all age segments, as well as frequent attenders who worshipped once or more a month. Only for infrequent attendees did healing and care appear not to be essential.²⁰ Of the top drivers, healing and care, coupled with the desire of wanting small groups and fellowship for those under thirty-five years of age, was fruitful ground to explore for HLC. House church small groups, which included fellowship in an intergenerational setting, provided a place for healing and care that all could partake in.

The culture of HLC, from theology to hospitality, impacts the experience of guests and members alike. The Vital Signs Survey showed that HLC is more conservative in comparison to church averages in that two-thirds felt converting people to Christianity makes society better and 60% believe both that God's Word is inerrant and Christian education's goal is to teach Bible proficiency.²¹ Across those surveyed, there was little diversity in these views. However, 88% of those surveyed were willing to adapt worship to the needs of the community and 64% welcomed worship changes. This adaptability bodes well for the congregation's outreach and community engagement it deeply desires.

Compared with other congregations, HLC was near the ninetieth percentile in "readiness for ministry."²² However, HLC ranked in the thirtieth percentile for "spiritual vitality." Spiritual

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹ Ibid., 14.

²² Ibid., 16.

vitality was a measure which assessed how central faith was to daily life and had an impact on both hospitality and giving. As part of HLC's vitality, the Vital Signs Survey also considered hospitality, morale, conflict management, and governance. These results illustrated a disconnect between the practical matters of ministry and the internalization, comfort, and life application of one's faith.

Specifically, for hospitality, 94% of respondents agreed that diversity was welcomed, and 93% felt prepared to welcome guests in worship.²³ Nearly all felt that HLC had a friendly culture and that people cared for one another in a time of challenge. However, only 88% felt that participating in the HLC faith community gave their life new meaning. Compared with other churches, HLC only ranked in the thirtieth percentile for this attribute. It is unclear from the results of this survey what respondents considered elements of a faith community that does give life meaning. Only 70% felt that the spirit of the congregation makes people earnest to engage and participate in its ministry and mission.

While morale and confidence in leadership were high, HLC ranked in the twentieth to thirtieth percentile for three key marks of spiritual vitality: how they looked at their life, how they based their life, and how they connected faith and life together in regards to the interaction of personal faith and life.²⁴ Additionally, HLC ranked in the tenth percentile for being involved in the congregation outside of worship.²⁵ A connection needed to be established between the hour of weekly worship and faith life engagement in the rest of the week so that the fullness of the body of Christ at HLC could be experienced.

²³ Ibid., 17.

²⁴ Ibid., 21.

²⁵ Ibid., 27.

2019 Kairos & Associates Congregational Survey

The Long-Range Planning Team of the congregation conducted a second survey in 2019 by church consultants Kairos & Associates. The goal was to ascertain the top drivers supporting the ministry and mission of HLC. Three components were discovered that comprise the DNA of our congregation: welcome and hospitality, outreach and care, and faith discovery. These drivers became the focus of energy and resources moving forward for HLC²⁶ and supported the Vital Signs Survey results: the importance of healing and care ministries as part of a plan to welcome families and provide educational and fellowship opportunities to engage in the congregation.

Over 150 of our 300 weekly worshippers completed this survey.²⁷ Respondents reported a strong conviction that the more you participate, the more you belong and feel a part of something bigger than yourself.²⁸ It was also clear that a hunger existed to grow deeper connections within the congregation and be church together in today's context.²⁹ However, an overall sense of belonging could be improved upon with each person feeling connected to the congregation.³⁰ There was also an opportunity to grow educational opportunities for faith discovery and recognize God in everyday life.³¹

Being a part of a group in this congregation was important to 64% of respondents when thinking about their faith development. Nearly one-third neither agreed nor disagreed that small

²⁶ Kairos & Associates, *Mission Assessment Profile Results Presentation* (Minneapolis: Kairos & Associates, 2019), 2.

²⁷ One third of those surveyed have been members of HLC for less than ten years, over 60% worship weekly, the majority live within ten miles of the church, 65% have a college or graduate degree, and one third of the households have children under 18. Kairos & Associates, *Mission Assessment Profile Results Presentation*, 3-4.

²⁸ Kairos & Associates, 13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

group or ministry team involvement impacted their faith positively.³² The majority felt that worship nurtured their faith while half neither agreed nor disagreed that faith education had any influence. Overall, 88% agreed that opportunities existed to build relationships within the HLC faith community.³³ These results clearly supported house church small groups as a means to grow in faith while building relationships of care within the body of Christ.

Section 4: Presbyterian Mission Agency Congregational Vitality Survey

In addition to insights gained from congregation feedback in the 2014 and 2019 surveys, twenty-two people participated in the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the PCUSA (PMA) Congregational Vitality Survey³⁴ conducted on 4/3/19. This survey was initiated as part of my doctoral coursework at University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. The survey assessed seven marks of congregational vitality and illustrated areas of success and opportunities for improvement. Because the congregation had recently taken two extensive surveys, it was decided by Council that only a small group within the congregation would take the survey. This included nine Council members and thirteen members of the congregation. Holmen Lutheran received an 81% vitality score, with the majority, 85%, of respondents agreeing that HLC is “spiritually vital and alive.” Additionally, worshippers and leadership exhibited transparency in that worshippers are aware of what the church is engaged in, and leaders were aware of major church issues.

³² Ibid., 28.

³³ Ibid., 30.

³⁴ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services, *Congregational Vitality Survey: Discover Your Strengths - Holmen Lutheran Church Congregation Report* (Louisville: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services, 2019), 1.

Of the seven marks of congregational vitality, as studied by the PMA, HLC was found to be strongest in *Ecclesial Health* and weakest in *Outward Incarnational Focus*³⁵ and *Intentional Authentic Evangelism*.³⁶ *Caring Relationships*,³⁷ *Spirit-inspired Worship*,³⁸ *Ecclesial Health*,³⁹ and *Empowering Servant Leadership*⁴⁰ scored very well. Areas which could be strengthened were *Lifelong Discipleship Formation*,⁴¹ *Outward Incarnational Focus*, and *Intentional Authentic Evangelism*.

Looking into each of the seven marks of vitality individually, it was interesting to find that in questions concerning *Lifelong Discipleship Formation*, the survey showed that among worshippers, 74% see themselves as disciples but barely half look to the teachings of Jesus when they have a problem.⁴² The PMA defines *Lifelong Discipleship Formation* as “from the cradle to the grave seeking to be formed for right living with God and with all people.”⁴³ It is striking that the twenty-two people who took the PMA survey are highly engaged in worship and other ministries of the congregation yet 52% do not apply the witness of Jesus in scripture to their own lives. Reasons for this could have included a lack of Bible knowledge, scripture was felt to be

³⁵ Definition of Incarnational Focus: “Outward exploration and awareness, as well as a focus on neighbors, neighborhoods, and those who may never step foot in church.” Cf. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services, 5.

³⁶ Definition of Intentional Authentic Evangelism: “Intentionally sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, not just acts of kindness.” Cf. Ibid., 6.

³⁷ Definition of Caring Relationships: “Instead of a closed, judgmental community, people find freedom to share stories, encounter the Savior, and ask for help.” Ibid., 9.

³⁸ Definition of Spirit-inspired Worship: “Worship is about God. We get to come on holy ground, encounter the presence of the living God, and are sent to live lives of wonder, love, and praise.” Cf. Ibid., 8.

³⁹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services, 10. Definition of Ecclesial Health: “Clarity in mission, core values to ministry, passion and joy in being the church, and a true valuing of the connectional church.” 10.

⁴⁰ Definition of Empowering Servant Leadership: “Identify, nurture, and support the use of spiritual gifts of all people to serve.” Cf. Ibid., 7.

⁴¹ Definition of Lifelong Discipleship Formation: “From the cradle to the grave seeking to be formed for right living with God and with all people.” Cf. Ibid., 4.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

inaccessible, Bible stories were not being told often or well enough in studies and worship, or there were more comfortable areas in which to seek help such as loved ones and friends.

Impacting the low marks in *Outward Incarnational Focus* were Holmen Lutheran's limited efforts to foster diversity and promote "mission over self-preservation."⁴⁴ Taking care of the HLC faith community's needs first over God's mission was at odds with the values of members of the congregation. Individual worshippers valued time spent promoting justice, building diverse relationships, becoming culturally knowledgeable, learning about other faiths, and volunteering in the community. A growing edge for HLC is engaging in discussions centered on seeing Jesus in those different from us as well as focusing on God's mission and our part in it. In house church small groups, a focus of being sent by the Spirit for God's mission was a facet of each discussion time.

The other significant growth area, *Intentional Authentic Evangelism*, emphasized our call as disciples to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.⁴⁵ However, barely half of worshippers surveyed, 52%, felt to some extent that the church "encourages and equips me to share my faith" and even less, 43%, felt HLC "encourages and equips me to share God's love when engaging in mission work or community service." Additionally, only 38% of worshippers invite non-churchgoers to attend worship at HLC. Only half of worshippers build relationships with those of another faith and even less, 23%, discuss their faith with people of other religions. Instead, 90% share God's Word through action such as service and mission work.⁴⁶ This would support the results that HLC empowers servant leadership by providing ways to contribute and get involved

⁴⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

in the congregation, opportunities to lead, engaging in stewardship discussions, and fostering gifts and skills.⁴⁷

Overall, HLC is a congregation that was viewed as healthy and caring.⁴⁸ Respondents felt that they are loved and cared for by the church and that there is not on-going conflict. 95% of those surveyed felt a strong belonging here with close bonds of friendship where viewpoints are heard and there is support through prayer. However, over a third felt it is at least somewhat true that members at one time or another have been hurt by HLC. Additionally, over half, 57%, felt it is somewhat true that there are cliques that are difficult to break into.

An important concluding note to reiterate is that the PMA survey was not conducted on the entire congregation. It was taken by nine council members and thirteen highly involved lay members. This is not a representative sample of the congregation. However, it does provide interesting and thought-provoking directional information for further consideration and exploration which build on the strong foundation of worship, mission, caring relationships, and servant leadership. Moreover, there exists an opportunity to apply the Word of God to practical faith in everyday life and nurture faith in Jesus and his teachings as a life-long guide while growing relationship within the body of Christ.

House church small groups embarked on this work of connecting participants to the congregation and one another while intentionally acknowledging the Living Word in daily life. As the community of Holmen continues to grow, the steep decline that has been experienced in many mainline Protestant denominations has not been seen at HLC. Congregation growth

⁴⁷ Our food pantry, massive community-wide Trick or Treat So Others Can Eat food drive, Caring Tree gifts at Christmas, quilting for Lutheran World Relief, our Hungry Jar for ELCA World Hunger, meal ministries, and many others provide opportunities to serve.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

remained relatively flat prior to the pandemic. This can be attributed to new households joining the congregation that have off-set those who have died or relocated. However, with new members spread across multiple services, including online worship, there is a great need to know one another because the person sitting with you in your pew might be new to the community or simply attend worship at a different service time.

As the pastor who oversees many of our outreach activities and ministries of care, including our hospitality and fellowship teams, I have begun the work of small group ministry. As a direct result of the extensive survey work HLC underwent as part of our capital appeal process, I started summer book clubs and fellowship groups centered on a common leisure activity: golf, board games, meals, movies, and more. The groups which focused on shared meals and books met regularly and continued for two years while intergenerational groups rarely succeeded as calendars were difficult to reconcile for a meeting time with families. Other groups, who did not have a lay leader volunteer to oversee the organization and communication in the group, disbanded quickly. A leisure activity that did not have a significant discussion or relationship building component was unsustainable such as movies, games, or golf.

House church small groups addressed these small group challenges and the growing edges of our congregation—relationships of care and belonging, growth in faith discovery and the ability to recognize God in daily life—through a variety of components in worship together. These included the following: 1) reading of scripture, 2) a time of sharing where God has been experienced in the world and where we, as disciples, have been sent by the Spirit, 3) sharing communion, and 4) intentional fellowship. After participating in these components of worship during the six small group meetings, I surveyed each participant to measure engagement in the

congregation, an understanding of closeness and belonging, and seeing God in daily life. Results will be discussed in Chapter 7.

Chapter 2: Marks of Vitality for Holmen Lutheran Church

Four overarching marks of vitality encompass congregational life at HLC: Inclusive Worship, Relationships of Care and Belonging, Faith Community Engagement, and Living Our Faith in Word and Deed. These marks encapsulate the research of the PMA, Robert Schnase, and Christian Schwarz⁴⁹ while also celebrating the role of the Holy Spirit in calling, gathering, enlightening, and sending Christ's church. In Martin Luther's explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed, the Holy Spirit is the active agent in making the church the alive body of Christ. Therefore, church vitality must focus on the power of God's Spirit to take a collection of individuals and transform them into an expression of the church within their context. Luther wrote,

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.⁵⁰

The Apostle Paul describes this work of the Holy Spirit in a metaphor which would have been well understood by his listeners: bread. He shares with the early church in Corinth,

⁴⁹ The Presbyterian Mission Agency, Robert Schnase, and Christian Schwarz identify several marks of congregational vitality with significant overlap. These marks can be summarized as discipleship and faith formation, outreach and evangelism, lay leadership and healthy systems, worship infused with the Spirit, stewardship of personal and congregational resources, and relationships of care and concern. Cf. Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Revised and Updated*. Nashville, (Abingdon Press, 2018) and Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Church*, (Carol Stream: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998).

⁵⁰ Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism [of Dr. Martin Luther] for Ordinary Pastors and Preachers," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 355-356.

“because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). Like the variety of ingredients that are added together, stirred, kneaded, baked, cooled, cut, and given away, everyone is an essential and distinct ingredient in the body of Christ. Paul Minear explains that the image of bread has several meaningful connotations.⁵¹ The interactions of the ingredients, heat, movement, and environment which bind the ingredients together make each loaf unique. Additionally, bread draws people to the table for community and fellowship, where all receive an equal share, and no one is turned away. The invitation to everyone is representative of what the church aspires to be and live into where resources are shared, all are invited and fed, and then people are sent nourished to continue as participants in God’s mission.

Incorporated into this one loaf ecclesiology is the image of the church as the body of Christ. Minear speaks to the people of God being a group who is diverse yet united,⁵² originating from Paul’s letters detailing there is no distinction of race, class, or gender in those who follow Jesus (Gal. 3:23-29). Yet together, we gather around the holy meal as one. The incorporation of the gathered body with Christ’s body, the bread, is life changing as grace is tasted and forgiveness received. For this reason, house church small groups included communion just as the early church did in their gatherings. All shared the same consecrated bread and juice that had been blessed at Sunday morning worship for the purpose of nourishing those who received this holy meal as an extension of His table.

⁵¹ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 36.

⁵² Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, 192.

In a similar way, the body of Christ at HLC is unique and ever changing as the people and context change. New households from outside of Holmen bring backgrounds and voices which differ and compliment those born in Holmen and most of our elders. We trust that it is God's Spirit who is transforming the ingredients into the body of Christ. For most, this transformation begins in worship and with one another in times of fellowship. This project explored how the Spirit builds connections within house church small groups, imitating the house churches which were the building blocks of the early church.

The ministry of house church small groups explored my hypothesis that by strengthening relationships based on love and acceptance, participation in ministries outside of worship will grow. This includes stewardship, life-long discipleship, servant leadership, service, and even evangelism as faith is lived out in the vocations of daily life. Faith is also lived out alongside others with whom Jesus is also present. Christ is known through knowing one another and faithful discipleship grows.

My hope and prayer were that our world would be in recovery after the global pandemic by the time this research was conducted. However, given the need for safety, groups met on the church lawn instead of inside of homes. This allowed for the safety of air flow with social distancing. An additional precaution was sharing prepackaged and store-bought snacks instead of a meal. Participants also passed a basket of communion kits as they offered communion to their neighbor instead of passing a loaf of bread and common cup. These modifications allowed groups to meet while following county covid guidelines. As we move out of this pandemic, rejoining intentional community will be vitally important. Reconnecting and inviting back our siblings in the faith who are missing in our ministries will also be essential because Christ meets us when we gather.

Section 1: *Inclusive Worship* as the Spirit Calls the Church

Inclusive Worship is the first mark of vitality needing to be considered for HLC. This mark combines the “Spirit-inspired worship” of the PMA,⁵³ “passionate worship” of Schnase,⁵⁴ and “inspiring worship” from Schwarz.⁵⁵ Additionally, inclusive worship must consider barriers or perceived barriers to elements of the worship experience. Specific examples of inclusion would consider things like the age of those welcome at the table, language that is accessible to both seekers and elders of the faith, gluten free communion elements and both wine and juice, traditional and modern liturgy and hymns, visual and hearing assists, clearly explained invitations to facets of the worship service and space, and both a welcome and sending by the pastors to greet worshippers personally.

Jesus embodied inclusivity in his ministry by reaching out to heal people whom others saw as unclean or unworthy, including the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years (Matt. 9:20-22), strangers in towns he travelled to (Matt. 9:35), people who could not walk (Mark 2:9-12a) or see (John 9:6-7), and children who had no hope (John 4:43-53 and Mark 5:21-43). Jesus taught parables where the hero was a Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), someone from an outside culture which would have been looked down upon by the listener (Luke 17:11-19).

Luke’s story of Jesus meeting two travelers on the road to Emmaus is especially significant, as these two early followers of Jesus exercise the same inclusivity that he taught them with the stranger who was later revealed as Jesus (Luke 24:13-25). In this story, as the disciples were on the road discussing the loss of their teacher and friend, they welcomed Jesus

⁵³ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services, 8.

⁵⁴ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Revised and Updated*, 47.

⁵⁵ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, 30.

into their discussion as they travelled with him to their home. They included him in their grief and struggle as they discussed their faith and the death of their rabbi. Jesus shared, explored, and explained the scriptures to them along the way, and these disciples welcomed this exegesis from a stranger as they did not recognize it was Jesus. The travelers went to welcome him into their home and Jesus was invited as a guest to their table fellowship and presided over the meal, also as a guest. In the breaking of the bread, Jesus became known to them, and they knew Christ was with them. Given new life through this encounter, the disciples ran back to Jerusalem to share the good news with others. They were gathered, nourished by the word and encounter with the risen Lord, and sent to share the good news. This same movement of gathering, being nourished, and sending was also experienced in house church small groups.

The PMA describes worship as a place to come and encounter the holy mystery of God in Word and Sacrament,⁵⁶ where people are welcomed in their brokenness and humanity to be challenged by God's law and soothed by God's grace. Worshippers are then sent with a reminder of their identity as loved children of God, songs and prayers ringing in their ears, to enter the mission field. Worship reframes one's worldview to be outside of oneself to God and God's mission for the world which is much larger than a single individual. Worship acknowledges the presence of God and gives hope that God is up to something new in bringing the kingdom of God to reign here on earth as it is in heaven.⁵⁷

Worship that is Spirit-inspired is filled with preaching that is enlightened by the Holy Spirit and Word of God. It provides space to bring one's true self, is open to all people, engages

⁵⁶ Presbyterian Mission Agency, *Vital Congregations Revitalization Initiative: Developing the 7 Marks of Congregational Vitality* (Louisville: PCUSA, 2019), 9, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/vital-congregations-revitalization-initiative/>.

⁵⁷ Presbyterian Mission Agency, *Vital Congregations Revitalization Initiative: Developing the 7 Marks of Congregational Vitality*, 9.

and is active in participation, connects us to one another, is full of new and traditional ritual, and discerned and planned by a thoughtful and prayerful team. Relationship with God, faith, and one another are strengthened through worship, communities are brought together as walls are lowered between people, and people are given space to dream and wonder about God in life today. Worship provides the opportunity to confess what weighs us down and separates us from God and our neighbor. In worship, we are spiritually nurtured with forgiveness and new life, set free from our bondage to sin, in order to love God and our neighbor with freedom, boldness, and an invitation to experience this again the following week.⁵⁸ Schnase concludes that “worshipping God is the heartbeat of life in faith communities.”⁵⁹

For HLC, adapting worship to the changing needs and wants of the greater Holmen community is one of the top two drivers for overall satisfaction.⁶⁰ Worship times have been 8:00 AM and 10:30 AM on Sunday morning with a 5:00 PM Saturday service for many years. In 2018, seeing the decreased attendance and traveling weekend activities for many households, Saturday worship was moved to Wednesday evening. Our attendance tripled as many confirmation families attended and then stayed for studies, choirs, and other activities. From young families to seniors, many worshippers who were out of town, camping up north, with youth traveling teams, or on vacation did not have to miss worship at their home church. Online worship has provided even greater access to worship as one live Sunday morning service is streamed and remains posted online, turning our local worship into a global opportunity for connection.

⁵⁸ Presbyterian Mission Agency, 9.

⁵⁹ Schnase, 63.

⁶⁰ Holy Cow! Consulting, 17.

Worship is the primary place that most disciples of Christ at HLC hear God's Word and meet Jesus in the Word proclaimed and sacraments administered. They also meet Jesus in one another.⁶¹ The Holy Spirit gathers this ever-changing community, not as friends or those with identical world views, but as those who were once strangers and now siblings in Christ.⁶² Jesus said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt. 25:35b) which gives us a shared similarity as the stranger in whom Christ resides.⁶³ It is Christ who is within each person that makes us all equal, from the long-time member to the guest. The Apostle Paul echoes this important inclusivity in the book of Romans where he pleads with the early church to remember the importance for both Jews and Gentiles to hear the Word of God for them. He writes,

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved but how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? (Rom. 10:12-14)

Luther writes that we are called by God's Spirit who "leads us into his holy community, placing us in the church's lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ."⁶⁴ Without the Spirit, we would not be able to believe in Jesus or the salvation he offers. During worship, the gospel is preached to us by God's Spirit through the scriptures read and proclaimed.

It is in this place of worship that relationships are formed between human beings in the present physical time and place which is counter to many of our social interactions through

⁶¹ *The Sunday Assembly: Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 104.

⁶² Martin Luther emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in calling, gathering, enlightening, and sending God's holy Christian church. It is through the Spirit that we are brought together and formed into the body of Christ. He explains, "I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding...I was brought into it by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into it through the fact that I have heard and still hear God's Word." Cf. *The Sunday Assembly: Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 104."

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶⁴ Martin Luther, "*The Large Catechism*": *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 435-436.

technology and social media. There is engagement with real people who are within arm's length, who have chosen to give up a myriad of other opportunities for their time, in exchange for communion with Christ and one another.⁶⁵ Weekly communion is also an essential element of worship where all are welcome to the table, fed and forgiven, and sent by the Spirit into the mission field of life. In preparation for this holy meal, we regularly confess our sin, hear words of absolution teeming with God's grace, pray for all who are in need here and around the world, pass the peace with one another, and share our beliefs by reciting the Apostles' or Nicene Creed together.

During the pandemic, while worshipping virtually, the emphasis on being the body of Christ across time and space as the communion of saints has been illuminated as we were unable for many months to meet in person. Still today, over half of the worshipping body at HLC is online and not in the pews. House church small groups engaged forty members in the body of Christ in a safe way while being in person to connect and share in faith and life together.

It is through the Spirit that we are called to worship and experience God's Word together. *Inclusive Worship* removes barriers which prohibit diversity of people, theology, and practice. This inclusivity supports the vast survey work of HLC which showed that there is an opportunity to create relationships of care as well as expand engagement within the faith community outside of worship. How the body of Christ exercises faith and life outside the walls of the sanctuary was explored in house church small groups as the work of the Spirit, gathering the body together, made this possible.

⁶⁵ *The Sunday Assembly: Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 107.

Section 2: *Relationships of Care and Belonging as the Spirit Gathers the Church*

The second overarching mark of vitality for HLC is *Relationships of Care and Belonging*. People are gathered by the Spirit, through the liturgy and means of grace experienced in worship, with familiarity and association with other worshippers. As an element of caring relationships Schnase professed the need for radical hospitality,⁶⁶ and Schwarz reported the benefits of small groups to know and be known.⁶⁷ By including connection and belonging to the faith community, this mark expands upon the PMA mark of *Caring Relationships* which is defined as “Instead of a closed, judgmental community, people find freedom to share stories, encounter the Savior, and ask for help.”⁶⁸

Within the congregation, there is a long history of relationship-based ministries stretching back to its inception. From Ladies Aid Society, Men’s Club, Luther League, and Sewing Circle generations ago to fellowship small groups, weekly Bible study groups, ministry teams, youth groups, and activities for all ages today, HLC has continued to be gathered by the Spirit to live out a life of faith in community. Though most of these groups may not call themselves a small group, from the property team to funeral luncheon servers, all gather to put their faith in action as part of the body of Christ. The more involved they become, the more they know one another and are known. It follows, then, that an overall sense of belonging increases with increased participation.⁶⁹

The challenge is understanding the catalyst or removing perceived barriers for additional engagement. While the majority feel there exist opportunities to build relationships,⁷⁰ only 64%

⁶⁶ Schnase, 17.

⁶⁷ Schwarz, 32.

⁶⁸ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services, 9.

⁶⁹ Kairos & Associates, 13.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

feel that being a part of a small group is important to their faith development.⁷¹ My conjecture was that if relationship connections increase and align with an interest, participation in the faith community will increase. Worshippers would be encouraged to expand their participation to small group ministries where relationships of care and belonging could be formed. It is more comfortable to attend as someone known than as someone new.

In my time as pastor at HLC, two challenges continue to surface when considering the mark of *Relationships of Care and Belonging*. First is the reality of busy lives for reasons such as family, medical needs, multiple jobs outside of the home, etc. Today's culture of busy lives has cancelled the historical Sunday and Wednesday faith community days. A second reality is a societal culture of social media public lives, yet personal and often secluded home lives. Home has become the place where messy is acceptable, and while liberating for some families, stopping by unannounced is designated for only the closest family and friends. Private home life has made it increasingly difficult for the church to know how to care for those who are unable or choose not to participate in person with the faith community.

For many, overscheduling crowds out free time and households are left choosing between faith activities or secular activities on Sundays and Wednesdays. School districts no longer hold these days as family time. Traveling teams, busy and involved grandparents, working multiple jobs, travel, and many other realities make finding ideal times for faith community engagement difficult. How is the church to respond, as Paul writes, to be all things to all people (1 Cor. 9:22), yet still have quality and theological depth to programs? How do we care for those who have stepped away from worship or left ministries for personal reasons, often out of necessity

⁷¹ Ibid., 28.

and not preference? How do we re-engage the faith community after two years of new pandemic habits have become the norm?

Relationships of Care and Belonging are essential to rekindling the connections that have eroded due to life's busyness, the sanctuary of cocooning in private lives as to not expend another ounce of energy outside of the home, and two frightening pandemic years of being separated from brothers and sisters in Christ who share a common faith and hope. We learn from the early church in the book of Acts, a time of great stress and fear, that Christians experienced relationships of care and belonging as they gathered in homes to worship and break bread together (Acts 2:46). House churches were places where followers of Jesus met, shared hospitality, and encouraged one another on their faith journey.

Lydia (Acts 16:40), Prisca and Aquila (Rom.16:3-5), Nympha (Col. 4:15), Philemon and Apphia (Phil. 1:1-2), and Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) opened their homes in the spirit of gathering in Jesus' name. (Matt. 18:20) They trusted that when they met, Jesus would be there with them. These small groups were encouraged by Paul to meet with regularity and to strengthen one another in the faith (Heb. 10:24-25). They understood their call to be the church together and not an individualized and solitary discipline.⁷² Following the ways of Jesus, the early church was to practice radical hospitality where everyone was welcome. There was to be no division by gender, station in life, or cultural or religious heritage as a follower of Jesus (Gal. 3:28). And Paul was clear that when welcoming a stranger, you may be welcoming a heavenly guest without even knowing it (Heb. 13:2).

⁷² Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, eds., *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 17.

Lutheran theology professes the role of the Holy Spirit in birthing and uniting a diverse collection of people into Christ's body, the church. Luther writes,

Until the last day the Holy Spirit remains with the holy community or Christian people. Through it he gathers us, using it to teach and preach the Word. By it he creates and increases sanctification, causing it daily to grow and become strong in the faith and in the fruits of the Spirit."⁷³

Paul explains that the fruits of the Spirit are peace, kindness, joy, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness, self-control, and most importantly love (Gal. 5:22-23). To direct our actions toward the neighbor and stranger with these qualities fulfills Jesus' command to love the neighbor. Though not easy, this is the radical hospitality that we aspire to practice at HLC as the Spirit's gathered people and was a motivation of house church small groups.

Section 3: *Faith Community Engagement* as the Spirit Enlightens the Church

Faith Community Engagement is comprised of external elements of empowering servant leadership as outlined by the PMA⁷⁴ and extravagant generosity as illustrated by Schnase.⁷⁵ It also includes more personal and internal elements of lifelong discipleship as described by the PMA⁷⁶ and intentional faith development which Schnase explains should be open to disciples of all ages.⁷⁷ Kathleen Cahalan describes Luther's understanding of vocation as a "calling [which] requires a readiness and willingness to be a conduit for God's grace to work through me for others."⁷⁸ It is a calling which spans a lifetime⁷⁹ with the purpose of witnessing to the love of God for the world.⁸⁰

⁷³ Luther, *The Large [German] Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther*, 438.

⁷⁴ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services, 8.

⁷⁵ Schnase, 133.

⁷⁶ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services, 6.

⁷⁷ Schnase, 77.

⁷⁸ Cahalan and Miller-McLemore, eds., *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons*, 26.

⁷⁹ Cahalan and Miller-McLemore, eds., 178.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

In addition to understanding God's love through the witness of others practicing their vocation, we also understand God's love through God's Word read and proclaimed, as we are enlightened by God's Spirit. This greatly influences how we engage as Christians in the world around us. Time and money, who one cares for, how resources are shared, and the allocation of personal and professional hours are influenced by an understanding of faith in Jesus Christ. In Luther's *Treatise on Christian Liberty*, he writes, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."⁸¹ Being free from the bonds of sin through faith in Jesus, one is free to focus not on securing salvation through our works, but on loving God and neighbor.

As connections grow and comfort in engaging in the faith community increases, engagement outside of worship begins. This is analogous to the enlightening of the Holy Spirit as described by Luther: "The Holy Spirit reveals and preaches that Word, and by it he illumines and kindles hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and persevere it."⁸² To engage and persist in God's Word means internalizing God's grace for oneself and living life from this perspective. This often involves a reordering of time and priorities, a recognition of gifts to share within the faith community, and a desire to learn and grow in discipleship.

At HLC, we strive to empower faith community engagement through a variety of ministry teams and start-up projects. Where there is a passion that meets a need, we encourage use of one's gifts. Making quilts for children in the hospital and feminine hygiene kits for girls in impoverished parts of the world are two of several start-up initiatives. Our 2014

⁸¹ George Forell, "Luther and Christian Liberty." *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 2, no. 1 (2002): 1, <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/990>.

⁸² Luther, *The Large [German] Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther*, 436.

congregational survey results showed that 96% felt that HLC reminds the congregation that they make a difference through their participation.⁸³

The Vital Signs Survey results also illustrated that the church does equip people for ministry through help discerning their gifts, opportunities to participate, and welcoming new ideas.⁸⁴ Ministry teams encompass a variety of interests, from finance to sewing. These small groups provide opportunities to share time and talents while creating connections and relationships by focusing on a common project together. Youth to adults have opportunities to share in worship roles from acolyting, reading, singing, and greeting as well as service, education, and fellowship activities.⁸⁵

Yet there are aspects of generosity in which HLC can improve, especially in the practices of stewardship of money. Within the past four years, a stewardship team has been formed and is working to create a culture of giving as opposed to more traditional stewardship drives. The congregation gives generously to our new building project loan and requests for goods such as non-perishable food items, socks and underwear for local shelters, and diapers for our ELCA ministry on the Pine Ridge, SD reservation. However, our 2014 study suggests that on average, only 1.49% of annual income is tithed.⁸⁶ In our more recent 2019 congregational study, only half of those surveyed saw HLC as a place which encourages stewardship.⁸⁷

⁸³ Holy Cow! Consulting, 22.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁵ Paul writes to the early church in Rome that the Spirit equips the church with different gifts. These gifts contribute to the body of Christ and to its ministry in the world; prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, generosity, and leadership, the one who bestows blessings, mercy, and love, as well as hospitality. Each gift is unique, important, and essential to the wholeness and wellness of the body of Christ. They are an expression of God's grace to be shared.

⁸⁶ Holy Cow! Consulting, 25.

⁸⁷ Kairos & Associates, 41.

From the story of the widow's mite (Luke 21:1-4) to the widow and her son giving Elijah their last meal before they themselves would starve to death (1 Kings 17:7-16), biblical generosity often comes with sacrifice. In this middle to upper middle-class congregation, ministry and outreach has the potential to be more life-giving to those in need if there was an intentionality in the giving. God's Word has the potential to be heard for the first time, or someone could experience God's love in a very practical way if our giving was tied to our discipleship. The congregation's annual budget would have ministry line items that are fully funded which would mean staff could focus less on fundraising and more on faith formation. There would not be a need to further reduce staff and the narthex would return to a gathering place instead of a weekly bazaar of chili and BBQ dinner tickets, gas cards, shares in mission trips, Thrivent Action Team Grant Requests, and Butterbraids sales sheets.

Internally, as the Holy Spirit enlightens one to put faith into action, there becomes a desire to learn and grow in one's faith. Luther explains that "neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit."⁸⁸ This enlightenment opens avenues of questions, quest for meaning, and desire for connection within the body of Christ. Jesus called his own disciples as second career adults (Luke 5: 1-11), asking them to leave their professions and calling them to expand upon the faith education of their youth. They were called with various backgrounds to follow Jesus, and then commanded to call other diverse individuals into the fellowship of Christ along with them. Perhaps the catalyst for this type of faith formation is a combination of content and ease of participation that can rank small group ministry within the list of life's more pressing priorities.

⁸⁸ Luther, *The Large [German] Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther*, 439-440.

Our 2019 congregational study revealed that there is an opportunity to grow educational opportunities for faith discovery and recognize God in everyday life.⁸⁹ Discipleship is an initiative that does not stop when confirmation is completed on Reformation Sunday in one's 9th grade year. A scriptural guide for lifelong discipleship is the faithful witness of Simeon and Anna in the temple as the infant Jesus is brought for dedication (Luke 2:25-35). Simeon and Anna had followed God and patiently waited their entire life for the savior of the world to come. They maintained hope and lived out their faith in expectation and devotion to God. In a similar way, Jesus in his ministry said to let the littlest of children come to him (Matthew 19:14). Both young and old are encouraged to engage with Jesus, the Word, and continue journeying in the faith.

The mark of *Faith Community Engagement* must encompass how we give of our whole selves to a life of faith. Jesus, as a child growing up in a Jewish household, would have known that God's people are to love God with everything they are and have. This was to be an imprint on their hearts (Deut. 6:4-9). Today in common church parlance, we summarize what the rabbi Jesus said was the greatest commandment as "love God and love neighbor" (Matt. 22:36-40). This description of what it means to be a disciple directs us to choose God and the other as our priority over self-preservation. We focus on God as the source of life and truth. Luther writes, "Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us because we are in the Christian church, where there is full forgiveness of sin. God forgives us, and we forgive, bear with, and aid one another."⁹⁰ Our death from sin has been swallowed up in Christ's death and

⁸⁹ Kairos & Associates, 25.

⁹⁰ Luther, *The Large [German] Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther*, 438.

we are raised with him to new life for the sake of our neighbor. In essence, this illumines the fourth and final mark of vitality for HLC: *Living Our Faith in Word and Deed*.

Section 4: *Living Our Faith in Word and Deed as the Spirit Sends the Church*

The Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, and enlightens now sends God’s people out into the mission field.⁹¹ Components of this final mark of vitality for HLC include intentional authentic evangelism as described in the PMA,⁹² risk-taking mission and service as described by Schnase,⁹³ and true authenticity as one lives an integrated life of faith after leaving worship. The body of Christ is shaped by its worship and discipleship experiences. We are sent into daily life with the baptismal call to bear the image of Jesus in the world. Luther expressed that we are to be Christ to one another as God’s love flows through our good works of serving our neighbor. He even used the term “little Christs” as our hands are used to reach out in God’s love toward the other.⁹⁴

The *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* baptismal liturgy concludes with a charge and a statement of mission within its welcome. Quoting Jesus, the pastor exclaims, “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16), to which the congregation responds, “We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and

⁹¹ We are sent to live out our lives of faith—in word and deed—in the vocation in which we currently serve, with none being a higher or more worthy vocation than others. Vocation can change throughout the course of a lifetime as roles change in personal and professional life. Our calling “comes from Christ, but it locates one in a calling in the creation doing works for one's neighbor...’vocation’ refers not only to one's occupation but to all one's relationships, situations, contexts, and involvements.” Cf. Marc Kolden, “Luther on Vocation.” *Word & World*, 3, no. 4 (2001): 14, <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1015>.

⁹² Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Research Services, 7.

⁹³ Schnase, 106.

⁹⁴ Mark Ellingsen, “Reformation 500: 50 Things Luther Taught That You May Not Know,” *Living Lutheran* (August 2017), <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2017/08/reformation-500-50-things-luther-taught-that-you-may-not-know/>.

redeeming word to all the world.”⁹⁵ We are sent by the Spirit into the mission of daily life where we bring light into dark places, and participate in God’s life-giving love.

Participation in God’s mission by acts of love is often an easier way to participate in putting faith into action than by using words. Sharing the love of Christ through traditional evangelism tactics has fallen out of vogue as images of men shouting hellfire and damnation crowd the mental landscape. With “evangelical” as the first word in our ELCA denomination, this poses a significant problem to sharing God’s love as the good news it is intended to be.

Evangelism is a work in progress at HLC. We have a long history of excellent and faith-filled service work that invites people into the building: meatball dinners, food pantry, coat drives, food baskets, and many more. However, we do not have a consistent or traditional experience in moving out of our doors to share the good news in structured ways that meet people where they are. House church small groups reframed evangelism as being sent by the Spirit into God’s mission field of daily life as opposed to a programmed evangelism event or project. This aligns with Jesus sharing God’s love in his interactions with ordinary people in his ministry.

In the gospel of John, Jesus leaves the comfort of societal norms and engages with a woman at the town well (John 4:1-41). He visits with her, a woman alone, in a culture that would have frowned upon this. They visit about her life, her hopes and expectations, all while carrying out a necessary and daily part of her existence. The disciples return to the scene and are shocked to discover that their teacher has not only engaged with this woman, but they hear him proclaim the good news to her. The savior of the world has come to bring life and she is now a

⁹⁵ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship Leaders Desk Edition*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 231.

recipient of it. In jubilation, the woman leaves to tell the town and becomes a disciple and evangelist herself. She extends hospitality to Jesus and his friends and invites them to stay.

Receiving faith and new life leaves one a changed person. Freedom from sin and death relieves one from their self-reliance on working for salvation. As George Forell writes, “They are liberated from obsession with the self, from being turned into the self (*incurvatus in se*), and instead having become totally dependent on God.”⁹⁶ This frees one to live a life looking outward in service to the neighbor.

This outreach may look like acts of kindness in formalized service projects but more often, it will be an attention to being Christ to the neighbor at work, home, school, and play. How we live out our faith will determine the authenticity to which we witness the gospel in everyday life. Jesus commissioned his disciples to go and make more disciples and baptize them into the body of Christ (Matt. 28:19-20). But as soon as Jesus died, they went back to their lives as fisherman, back to the vocation they knew best. That is where Jesus finds them after he leaves the tomb empty and makes one last meal for them by the sea (John 21:1-14). The disciples could not have helped but share their experience as followers of Jesus as they were hauling in their catch at the end of the day. They must have mentioned to their family and friends, and even the local fish monger, who this Jesus was that they followed for three years. The impact that Jesus had on these men must have been too much to contain so much so that his influence spilled over into their normal life conversations. In this way, they lived out their faith in an authentic way.

Today, we have that same opportunity in the hours of our day to share where the divine intersects our secular reality. This becomes modern day testimony as the Spirit leads us into the

⁹⁶ Forell, “Luther and Christian Liberty,” 11.

wilderness of everyday life (Matt. 4:1). The Spirit appears at surprising times and gives direction such as Peter's new understanding of all food being clean (Acts 10:19-20). The Spirit opens doors to conversations of faith with those we least expect as in the story of the queen's servant who Phillip baptizes as his chariot pulls up to a watering hole off to the side of the road (Acts 8:29). And like Ezekiel, we will be led to places where death and darkness seem to have won the day, but God's Spirit will breathe life into dry bones and those who felt life drain out of them will be restored (Ezek. 37:1-14).

This is what we are called to witness to in our own life as bearers of the gospel. Living our faith authentically in word and deed means sharing our story of where the Holy has been encountered in the mundane. There is a trust that our faith does not make us a self-sufficient island but a member of a body much bigger than ourselves; a body who has been called, gathered, enlightened, and sent by the Spirit in love. Luther writes that "the Holy Spirit carries on his work unceasingly until the last day"⁹⁷ while also sanctifying us and forgiving our sins along the way. With this confidence, we can live as our authentic selves, as people of faith, in word and deed.

Section 5: Project Research Focus on *Relationships of Care and Belonging*

Considering these growing edges for Holmen Lutheran Church, all involve engaging together as the body of Christ outside of worship. All involve giving of our time, talent, and treasure together with others in our faith community. And in our 2019 congregational survey, 88% agree that opportunities exist to build relationships within the HLC faith community.⁹⁸ After sharing the PMA study results with the church Council and senior pastor, in conjunction

⁹⁷ Luther, *The Large [German] Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther*, 439.

⁹⁸ Kairos & Associates, 30.

with our prior congregational studies results, focusing my project on a ministry area I currently supervise was most acceptable. The mark of *Relationships of Care and Belonging*, how we can grow together as a faith community, aligned with the small groups, adult learning, hospitality, fellowship, and Stephen Ministry that I directly oversee. Building relationships is also an important growth area for the congregation. Additionally, as more households engage within the congregation, through virtual and in-person opportunities, making connections to know and be known is highly important.

My experience is that interest is not enough to make small groups successful. Having a dedicated lay person in each group is needed for leadership and to encourage participation. Therefore, this project explored leadership, small group content, seeing God in daily life, and the role of the Holy Spirit in sending the body of Christ. I wanted to know how to create welcome and engagement with those new to the faith community or those who reengage after a time away, when creating groups that share elements of the first century house churches. At the same time, I was interested in how to engage with life-long participants in the congregation who may not engage in any ministries outside of worship. In short, I wanted to know how small groups could be used to best care for this diverse body of Christ in our growing bedroom community.

In *Beyond Church Walls: Cultivating a Culture of Care*, Rick Rouse writes that “a missional perspective of pastoral care embraces the notion that all of God’s people – not just trained professionals – are called to partner in God’s healing and redemption of the world.”⁹⁹ I am confident that members and friends care for one another in our congregation in ways that I do not see. Yet I am also aware that there is a hesitation to reach out for fear of how they will be

⁹⁹ Rick Rouse, *Beyond Church Walls: Cultivating a Culture of Care*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), xxiv.

received or worries of being an intrusion. Therefore, house church small groups included a time of sharing joys and concerns before a time of prayer. Participants were asked to lift up those prayers, and our brothers and sisters in the faith who voiced them, during the time between gatherings.

Of the four marks, *Relationships of Care and Belonging* support a reason to belong and engage in the community beyond “I should do more.” Engagement out of a desire to live out faith within a community of other believers feels very different than an obligation. This practice is reminiscent of the early church who saw themselves as both a follower of Jesus and a servant to anyone and everyone.¹⁰⁰ This outward focus was an identifying factor in being the church together.

Chapter 3: Biblical and Theological Foundations

Section 1: The Doctrine of the Trinity

The person and work of the Holy Spirit was the theological focus of house church small group research at Holmen Lutheran Church. The Spirit is the personal presence and power of God in the lives of disciples throughout history. The Spirit is found in both testaments of Holy Scripture. In Hebrew, *ruach* refers to “breath, wind...and God’s very self.”¹⁰¹ *Pneuma*, in the Greek of the New Testament, is similarly defined as “wind, human dispositions, a distinctive feature of God’s identity and life.”¹⁰² How the Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sends today’s disciples into God’s mission field of everyday life was studied in house church small groups. To begin, however, it is important to understand the relationship between the three persons of the Godhead, as their unity yet uniqueness is the model for the Christian community. As

¹⁰⁰ Rouse, *Beyond Church Walls: Cultivating a Culture of Care*, xx.

¹⁰¹ Daniel Castelo, *Pneumatology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 6.

¹⁰² Castelo, *Pneumatology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 3.

Relationships of Care and Belonging is the focal mark of vitality, to illumine God's relational nature is key.

Clark Pinnock describes the mystery of the Trinity as humanity's best description of the historical activity of God.¹⁰³ From this history, we witness "the essence of God's nature to be relational. This is primordial in God and defines who God is. God is a triadic community, not a single, undifferentiated unity."¹⁰⁴ The persons of the Godhead are in communion as they share life with joy and yet meet humanity in their sometimes complicated and painful reality.¹⁰⁵

As such, pneumatological discourse requires a discussion of the Holy Spirit as one of three persons in the Godhead, namely the love which creates holy community within the Trinity as well as the church. Chapter 3 will explore ecclesiology in the early church, as well as how both Johnathan Edwards and Martin Luther understood this holy community.¹⁰⁶ The person of the Holy Spirit will be shown to be the catalyst for faith, community, and participation in God's mission. Chapter 5 will discuss the importance of inclusivity in the sacrament of communion, as an essential element of Christian community, for all persons which expands the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America's (ELCA) openness at the table. In short, I explored the hypothesized impact of the work of the Spirit in house church small groups that center on worship, communion, and the lived Word as experienced by the Spirit's sending. The doctrine of the Trinity holds both promise and challenge as a "model" for the Christian community's character and life. To illustrate this complexity, I will compare the Trinitarian theology of

¹⁰³ Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 26.

¹⁰⁴ Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 35.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰⁶ I chose Martin Luther and Jonathan Edwards as conversation partners for this research. Luther provides the theological foundation of the denomination I serve while Edwards is an early American theologian whose passion for the Trinity as it relates to the lived theology of his congregation was fascinating and enlightening as I studied lived theology within my congregational context.

Johnathan Edwards to Martin Luther's understanding of the body of Christ, emphasize the realities of congregational life Edwards observed, and the incongruence of his beliefs and actual practice in his context.

Within the Lutheran confessions, very little is stated directly about the Trinity. Philip Melancthon states in the Formula of Concord, 1577, that, "the entire Holy Trinity, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, directs all people to Christ as the Book of Life, in whom they should seek the Father's eternal election."¹⁰⁷ In the 1875 *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Heinrich Schmid summarizes Trinitarian scriptural references as a revealed mystery.¹⁰⁸ But Amy Plantinga Pauw notes how Paul's greeting to the church at Corinth—"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14)—is an early church's scriptural witness to the persons of the Trinity¹⁰⁹ Additionally, in 1 John 5:7 we read: "For there are three who bear witness in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one." For the Reformers in the 1500s, the doctrine of the Trinity was not being contested to the degree it was for Johnathan Edwards in the 1700s¹¹⁰ when doctrinal simplification began to permeate Western churches.¹¹¹ The Puritan theology of Edwards emphasized God's overflowing love between persons of the Trinity, their interrelatedness, and how this love and unity should be a "model" for the church.

¹⁰⁷ Philip Melancthon, "The Formula of Concord – Article XI: Election": *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 651.

¹⁰⁸ Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1875), 129.

¹⁰⁹ Amy Platinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Johnathan Edwards* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 19.

¹¹⁰ Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Johnathan Edwards* 17.

¹¹¹ Amy Platinga Pauw writes, "The Reformed doctrine of divine simplicity held that God, as the supreme being or ultimate substance, must be also the most unified and thus the most invulnerable to dependence and disintegration." Cf. Pauw, 61.

Johnathan Edward's Trinitarian Theology and the Work of the Spirit

Edwards focused on two Trinitarian “models,” psychological and social, and how they were used in contextually appropriate ways. The psychological “model” emphasized how God’s happiness, knowledge, and glory are communicated and then returned to God by those who have received it.¹¹² In this “model,” the Holy Spirit is the divine love which is the communion between the Father and the Son.¹¹³ In the social “model,” God unites with Christ’s bride, the church, who was created by God to share God’s love.¹¹⁴

Edwards possessed a “high tolerance for theological tension” as he did not choose one “model” over the other. Instead, “he appealed to the two models not as conflicting blue-prints of the inner life of the Godhead, but as complimentary linguistic idioms for narrating a basic soteriological story line.”¹¹⁵ The link between the “models” was God’s overflowing love which redeems humanity through salvation in Christ by the power of the Spirit.¹¹⁶

The writings of Edwards described the Trinity as a family with an intimate love between one another.¹¹⁷ This coincided with the Puritan and Reformed scholastics understanding of the covenant theology whereby the persons of the Trinity were in mutual agreement of salvation from eternity.¹¹⁸ The Puritan values of family and community lent itself to this familial imagery as did a metaphor for marriage where the Church is the bride of Christ.¹¹⁹ These images mirrored the relationships of love that Edwards experienced in his own life. For Edwards, daily

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 128.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

life and God's creation provided images in addition to scripture which could be used to describe God.¹²⁰ The metaphor of family/ familial love was one of them, with an emphasis on the Father and Son in the covenant of redemption.¹²¹ The Spirit, who is equal, was understood as the divine love which binds Father and Son eternally in communion.¹²²

Edwards was forthcoming in his lack of certainty in any single understanding of the Trinity. He felt that human reason lacks the ability to understand God's mysteries, such as the Trinity, without the Spirit's intervention.¹²³ He writes that the Trinity is "an incomprehensible mystery, the greatest and glorious of all mysteries."¹²⁴ Edwards forged ahead with his Puritan values of community at a time when Reformed theologians utilized a more individualistic Western mindset. He saw God's excellence defined as consent within the Trinity and communion with each person therein.¹²⁵

For Edwards, the Trinity was the "model" which the church not only participated in but possessed the same qualities. Catherine Mowry LaCugna further explains this "model" as perichoresis. "Perichoresis is thus the intradivine model for persons in the human community. Perichoresis takes place within God and the human community is supposed to mirror or imitate this perichoresis in its own configuration."¹²⁶ Perichoresis defends the doctrine of the Trinity against subordinationism and tritheism in that Godself is by the unique persons in equal and

¹²⁰ Ibid., 38.

¹²¹ Ibid., 43.

¹²² Ibid., 44.

¹²³ Ibid., 54.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 55.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 59.

¹²⁶ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity & Christian Life*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 276.

loving relationship to the others. “The three divine persons mutually inhere in one another, draw life from one another, ‘are’ what they are by relation to one another.”¹²⁷

Edwards was challenged by the realities of congregational life. He often did not see unity and spiritual gifts which he would associate with the elect. This drew into question his understanding of the Spirit’s work in conversion and sanctification whereas the elect should be glorifying God through loving God and one another.¹²⁸ While Edwards believed that the Spirit is the bond of love which is the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, and salvation is our participation in this love with the Triune God and one another, he wrestled with salvation being a gift or a choice. On the one hand, salvation was a condition given to the elect through faith while on the other, the church needed to accept the gifts of Christ’s grace.¹²⁹ The behavior of congregants within his church swayed his understanding at any given time. When he did not see the communion of the elect, the church, reflecting the divine communion of the Trinity, Edwards emphasized the congregation’s effort to accept salvation.¹³⁰

Edwards looked to revivals as a way to participate with God in redemption by drawing attention to the Spirit’s work and showing where churches and individuals were falling short.¹³¹ Unfortunately, revivals made conversion a personal issue which brought judgment and pride over community unity. He fell into this judgment trap and changed communion practices at his Northampton congregation to be a meal of saints only, as opposed to a means of grace for all the baptized, sinful though they may be. Those invited to the table and who could have their

¹²⁷ LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity & Christian Life*, 270.

¹²⁸ Pauw, 152.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

children baptized were ones he deemed sincere in their profession of faith.¹³² Communion no longer existed as a means of grace to strengthen the faith of broken believers.¹³³ In addition, Edwards emphasized in his writings that hell was a place where one was separated from God but not God's hatred.¹³⁴ This was contrary to his writings about the all-loving Triune God.

There is a struggle to live in today's reality of sin, and love with the fullness and perfection as God loves, while not focusing solely on our own individual needs. We see this reality in the theology of Martin Luther which focuses on the nature of humanity to be both saint and sinner. Though saved by God's grace through Christ in faith and by the Spirit's power, the community of faith participates imperfectly in loving God and one another as it continues to wrestle with the reality of sin. LaCugna writes, "It is experientially obvious that the church is only imperfectly a communion of persons. The church is a partial historical realization as well as an eschatological sign of the destiny of all persons for communion with God and each other."¹³⁵ Unlike Edwards' Trinitarian theology which did not allow for this imperfection in the saints, Luther understood that sin is a daily battle and a sign of our continued need for new life in Christ.

Martin Luther's Trinitarian Theology and the Work of the Spirit

Martin Luther was masterful at using the media of his time to communicate and teach God's holy Word. He was an avid writer of his theology in both discipleship instruction and

¹³² Ibid., 171.

¹³³ This was a change from the practice that he had followed as he ministered for twenty years with his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, who "viewed the Supper as a source of the Spirit's life-giving nurture, a means of grace for sinners, and not a vehicle for exclusion and judgement." Cf. Ibid., 171.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 176.

¹³⁵ LaCugna, 264.

hymns. “We All Believe in One Triune God” was written by Martin Luther in 1525.¹³⁶ The three verses of the hymn begin with either “I believe” or “I confess” as a universal declaration by the assembly in song, a confession set to music for the dual purpose of instruction and praise. Verse one, below, begins with the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit participating together in the creation of heaven and earth. The Father gives humanity the right to be children of God out of love for us. He provides for our physical and spiritual sustenance and in any other need we may have. This includes guidance through difficult times and circumstances. Through his oversight, care, power, and governance over all creation, the Father sees that we are not subject to harm.

1. We all believe in one true God, who created earth and heaven, The Father, who to us in love has the right of children given. He both soul and body feeds us; all we need his hand provides us; through all snares and perils leads us, watching that no harm betide us. He cares for us day and night; all things are governed by His might.

The second verse teaches that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Father who is equally Lord with the Father in power, dominion, originator and bestower of “grace and blessing.”¹³⁷ Christ is incarnate, being born to Mary through the Spirit’s power. We are related in our humanity to Christ as our brother, a second familial image, in addition to the Triune God as family. By Christ’s death and resurrection, lost humanity which is dead in their sin and trespasses, inherits new life and relationship with the Triune God.

2. We all believe in Jesus Christ, his own Son, our Lord, possessing an equal Godhead, throne, and might, source of ev’ry grace and blessing; born of Mary, virgin mother, by the power of the Spirit, Word made flesh, our elder brother; that the lost might life inherit; was put to death on the cross, and raised by God victorious.

¹³⁶ This hymn, therefore, represents a Lutheran teaching on the trinity that is even earlier than Melancthon’s statement in the Formula of Concord. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 411.

¹³⁷ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 411.

The third verse affirms that the Holy Spirit abides with the Father and the Son in heaven and is the creator, unifier, and comforter of the Church.¹³⁸ On account of Christ, we have been justified by grace and are daily granted forgiveness and salvation. We live in eschatological hope that all will be raised from the dead to dwell with the Triune God forever.

3. We all confess the Holy Ghost who, in highest heaven dwelling with God the Father and the Son, comforts us beyond all telling; who the church, his own creation, keeps in unity of spirit. Here forgiveness and salvation daily come through Jesus' merit. All flesh shall rise, and we shall be in bliss with God eternally. Amen.

For Luther, this hymn was analogous to the Apostles' Creed put to music and confesses that each person of the Triune God is inseparable from the reconciling work of God for all creation. The love and relationship which defined God is the same love and unity which incorporates, by grace, humanity into relationship with God. The nature of God and the action of God in salvation are inseparable, i.e., the economic Trinity¹³⁹ and the immanent Trinity¹⁴⁰ are one in the same. "The doctrine of the Trinity is... a teaching about God's life with us and our life with each other."¹⁴¹ Yet Luther's hymn suggests that our life is a pale picture that becomes more vibrant with time as the Spirit's work of unity and reconciliation continues.¹⁴² Lutherans understand this to be the human condition of being both saint and sinner simultaneously.

Section 2: The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit, the Bond of Love

Luther saw that even while in faithful relationship with God in Christ through the Spirit, the struggle with sin is real. In this life, there will be trials and difficulties as sin persists despite every good intention. Therefore, the perfect love and union that defines the Triune God and is experienced therein cannot be an accurate "model" for the body of Christ, the church. At best, it

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 151.

¹⁴⁰ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 151.

¹⁴¹ LaCugna, 403.

¹⁴² Ibid.

is aspirational. Humanity's story of salvation is punctuated by God's entry into humanity through Christ by the power of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the unifying power which has claimed us as children of God, forgiven our sins, and made us one in Christ.

This is why Edwards did not see saintly love at all times toward God and neighbor in his Northampton congregation. This also explains the judgementalism he witnessed at revivals when individuals became more concerned with their own salvation than the salvation of their neighbor. And it is likely why Edwards, in frustration, turned the sacrament of communion into a meal of the saints, as a carrot to entice or incentivize better behavior and unity.¹⁴³

As a contemporary reader, I find Edwards' response to the frustrations of his congregation appalling, though I am judging through the eyes of a female pastor in 2022, a dramatically different time. However, by withholding the means of grace, not only communion but also baptism of the children of parents Edwards viewed as sinners, members missed hearing the essential words of promise that forgiveness and new life through Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit were indeed for them. These words of grace and mercy are more powerful and impactful today than any incentive or prodding.

The gifts of the Spirit that Edwards expected to see were likely present but perhaps not in the quantities, consistency, or duration that he expected if the church was to be modelled after the love and unity of the Triune God. What Luther witnesses to in his theology is that our dependence and need for God's grace is continuous in our lifetime until our faith will be turned to sight in God's presence at the end of time. Jürgen Moltmann writes,

¹⁴³ Pauw writes, "The eucharist as a medium of God's grace was turned into an instrument of pastoral judgement and control." Cf. Pauw, 172.

With the Spirit the End-time begins. The *messianic era* commences where the forces and energies of the divine Spirit descend on all flesh, making it alive forevermore. In the activity of the Spirit, consequently, the renewal of life, the new obedience and the new fellowship of men and women is experienced.¹⁴⁴

However, this is only the beginning. The Spirit perfects the individual and the community into the dwelling place of the Triune God, as Paul writes to the church in Ephesus.¹⁴⁵ It is in this community where theology is expressed in “thanks, praise, and adoration...only doxology releases the experience of salvation for a full experience of that salvation.”¹⁴⁶ The Divine life is participated in within community, which LaCugna refers to as being “equal partners in the divine dance.”¹⁴⁷

The church is the embodiment and sign of the Spirit’s work which incorporates our life in the life of the Triune God and one another. We live in the complexity of stewarding the message of God’s grace, serving our neighbor, and welcoming all. This is the “ecclesial life,”¹⁴⁸ a life of reliance on God and in relationship with God and one another; and in faith, hoping for the life to come, where all will be reconciled to God. “Living Trinitarian faith means living God’s life: living from and for God, from and for others.”¹⁴⁹

The person of the Holy Spirit is the agency which shapes communities of diversity and belonging as the body of Christ, the church, and enables us to see the fingerprints of God as we are met by the holy in the ordinary. The Spirit calls the body together to participate in God’s work. The gathered are strengthened in Word and sacrament to be sent into the mission field of life. Thus, inclusivity in all aspects of the church, including Holy Communion, is paramount so

¹⁴⁴ Moltmann, 124.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 152.

¹⁴⁷ LaCugna, 299.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 401.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 400.

that each person can experience reconciliation with God and one another. In addition, the Spirit gives people the discernment to see God in their everyday lives. I share Daniel Castello's insistence that "The Spirit can work in the mundane and everyday features of our lives so as to kindle a desire for God who has no end."¹⁵⁰ The Spirit reorients our lives to God's mysteries so we can share the friendship we have with God with those in our life.¹⁵¹ Pinnock explains,

Community is important because God does not want faith to be expressed only in an interior way within the hearts of individual disciples. Human experience itself is social, and faith needs to assume corporate form. It needs to be ecclesial and have public attestation. The Spirit has a vested interest in the church, where men and women confess Jesus Christ and are open to participation in the divine life.¹⁵²

For this research, house church small groups were intentionally constructed, with diversity of households in mind, based on the context of Holmen Lutheran Church. These included single persons, couples, families with and without children in the home, those native to Holmen and those who have recently transferred to the area, as well as a variety of ages, genders, and length of time attending HLC. Worship was the focus of these gatherings which were intended to mirror the gatherings of the early church, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Worship has a comfortableness associated with it that is familiar and has a rhythm easily joinable. Within the house church small groups, communion was shared, scripture read, participants spoke of God sightings and the Holy Spirit sending them into the mission field of their lives, and then they were sent after a time of fellowship. Our time together was modelled after the pattern Jesus set with his disciples of experiencing challenging and joyful life situations of loss and laughter, grief and grace, illness and healing, conflict and reconciliation, and then

¹⁵⁰ Costello, 116.

¹⁵¹ Pinnock, 83.

¹⁵² Ibid., 116.

debriefing what they experienced together.¹⁵³ Listening, discussion, conversation, and a willingness to be vulnerable were essential components of the house church experience which grew the faith of the community through witness. According to John H. Wright, “The church is most profoundly: a mysterious work of God, who unites separate, selfish, and sinful individuals into a community of the Holy Spirit, a community of faith, worship, and love.”¹⁵⁴ The work of the Spirit to call, gather, enlighten, and send the body of Christ was honored in these gatherings.

Chapter 4: The House Church and Small Group Ministry Today

Section 1: The Church in Its Infancy: Hospitality, Inclusivity, Worship, and Fellowship

Throughout the New Testament, as described in Chapter 2, disciples of Jesus met in homes for a meal, prayer, study, fellowship, and to celebrate the sacraments.¹⁵⁵ Homes became the center of Christian religious life as well as a monetary and base camp for mission and evangelism.¹⁵⁶ Christianity began and flourished as an essentially urban phenomenon. The social world of early Christianity was that of the Greco-Roman city, an urban landscape characterized by overcrowding, narrow streets, and a density of housing and population that was astounding. The vast majority of the population lived in overcrowded slums which shared common areas while just 3% of the Roman population resided in one-third of the city’s residential space.¹⁵⁷ The conditions of the day contributed to low life expectancy and high infant mortality in a time of an expanding empire and influx of cultures and people.¹⁵⁸ Only the truly

¹⁵³ Brad A. Binau, “Pastoral Theology for the Missional Church: From Pastoral Care to the Care of Souls,” *Trinity Seminary Review* 34, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2014): 21.

¹⁵⁴ John H. Wright, “The Church: Community of the Holy Spirit,” *Theological Studies* 48 (1987): 32.

¹⁵⁵ Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 27.

¹⁵⁶ Vincent Branick. *The House Church in the Writings of Paul*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 9.

¹⁵⁷ Branick, *The House Church in the Writings of Paul*, 42.

¹⁵⁸ Bradley S. Billings, “From House Church to Tenement Church: Domestic Space and the Development of Early Urban Christianity-The Example of Ephesus,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* NS, 62, pt. 2 (October 2011): 558.

wealthy would have space to host gatherings; thus, Paul's evangelism frequently targeted wealthy heads of households who could then share the gospel with their dependents.¹⁵⁹

This early distinction of head of household allowed for the leadership of women in these gatherings when their financial circumstances dictated patron status. Women, therefore, were allowed to preside at the table and lead worship; a counter cultural phenomenon then as well as today in many churches.¹⁶⁰ As Roger Gehring notes, "approximately one-fourth of the coworkers mentioned in the undisputed Pauline Epistles are women...Euodia, Julia, Jonia, Lydia, Mary, Nympha, Persis, Phoebe, Prisca, Synthche, Tryphaena, and Tryphosa."¹⁶¹ The lives and leadership of these twelve women became an incredible witness to the inclusivity of the gospel. In the Greco-Roman world, "the family was primarily defined by a relationship of dependence and encompassed all who depended on the husband (dominus) and wife (domina), whether biologically related or not."¹⁶² Bradley Billings asserts the important security found in this family structure.

For those who found in the Christian community a primary social anchor around which to adhere, the consequences were often large. Participation in the Christian community through baptism produced (theologically) a communal distinctiveness that marked the Christian as Christ's own and a citizen of heaven, but at the same time (sociologically) incorporated him or her into a highly bonded visible community that is alienated and ethically distinct, and which results in the isolation of the convert from his ethnic, familial, and religious roots.¹⁶³

While under religious persecution, house churches provided Christians with a meeting place in plain sight that welcomed all members of the house, from servant and child to patron and elders,

¹⁵⁹ Branick, 43.

¹⁶⁰ Billings, "From House Church to Tenement Church: Domestic Space and the Development of Early Urban Christianity-The Example of Ephesus," 21.

¹⁶¹ Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity*, 11.

¹⁶² Billings, 551.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 557.

representing the vast array of social class.¹⁶⁴ All were included in the proclamation of the gospel, and entire households were regularly baptized at one time.

The architecture of the early Christian home often had a dining room capable of hosting one to three households, likely ten to fifteen people.¹⁶⁵ This space “provided an environment that corresponded remarkably with the Christians’ earliest self-identification, reflecting Jesus’ own choice of an “upper room” for his last supper, his own choice of “non-sacred space” as the environment of his work, and his insistence on familial ties among believers.”¹⁶⁶ Roman and Greek culture venerated gods in the home and therefore, early Christians may have been viewed as one of many cults during more favorable times.¹⁶⁷

House churches were sources of news from missionaries traveling and sharing the gospel. Their hospitality was essential to the growth of the church.¹⁶⁸ Birkey extrapolates,

Hospitality was regarded as a virtue since classical times by pagans as well as Jews. Its high priority in the New Testament house churches serves to show how the first Christians believed they should excel in this virtue to the degree of transforming it into a Christian principal of ministry.¹⁶⁹

Over several decades, multiple house churches arose in a given city and constituted “the church” with which Paul corresponded.¹⁷⁰ The roles of apostle, prophet, and teacher¹⁷¹ as well as bishop and deacon were established as the Spirit gifted individuals with skills to edify the body

¹⁶⁴ Billings, 557.

¹⁶⁵ In 1932, a third century house church was discovered on the eastern Syrian border, once home to a Roman garrison. This is the most intact dwelling found to be used by the early church to date and provides architectural detail as to the size of house church gatherings. Cf. Branick, 9.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁶⁸ Harley T. Atkinson, “Lessons from the Early House Church for Today’s Cell Groups.” *Christian Education Journal Series* 3, 11, no. 1 (2014): 81.

¹⁶⁹ Del Birkey, “The House Church: A Missiological Model,” *Missiology: An International Review* XXI, no. 1 (January 1991): 74.

¹⁷⁰ Branick. 23.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 84.

of Christ.¹⁷² Since all believers were given essential gifts, all were considered ministers. Therefore, Paul addressed his letters to everyone who attended the house church, as siblings in Christ, and a family who served one another as Jesus had served.¹⁷³ Through their support and encouragement of all believers to share in God's mission for the world, the early church began to build basilicas as Constantine authorized Christianity as an official religion in 314 AD.¹⁷⁴

The witness of the faithful contributed to a four-phase growth of the early Christian community from house church to basilica. From 50-150 CE, house churches hosted small gatherings of Jesus followers in the homes of wealthy members. As gatherings expanded, homes were modified to be used primarily for worship from 150-250 CE. Following the continued upswing of the Christian movement, 250-313 saw the rise of church halls and buildings dedicated to the church until Constantine's construction of basilicas.¹⁷⁵ As Christianity flourished and freedom to practice the faith publicly became more acceptable, Christians moved to larger spaces to gather together as one assembly.¹⁷⁶ At this point, leadership roles became formalized and the patriarchal culture subverted the role of women, despite their significance and leadership only a few centuries prior. Additionally, "The movement away from the house church will entail a loss of the particularly familial tone of the earlier Christian assemblies."¹⁷⁷

This "familial tone" began at the table, explains Vincent Branick, who illuminates the content of house church gatherings as garnered through the writings of Paul. However, much detail is lacking.

¹⁷² Ibid., 88.

¹⁷³ Atkinson, "Lessons from the Early House Church for Today's Cell Groups," 81.

¹⁷⁴ Gehring, 12.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷⁶ Branick, 27.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 117.

The Corinthian correspondence is our main source for understanding what went on at a Christian gathering. The data, however, is fragmentary mostly because Paul did not need to describe the details of the assembly to his readers. Rather, he had to deal with problems.¹⁷⁸

As in all families, Paul addressed conflicts, specifically those surrounding the practices of the holy supper, speaking in tongues and its interpretation, and the inclusivity of diverse people in the body of Christ.¹⁷⁹

The Lord's Supper in the house church was a complete meal that later became ritualized. This meal was akin to a Jewish family dinner where bread was broken and shared, followed by the passing of a common cup of wine at the meal's conclusion, accompanied by blessings. Ninety years after Christ's death, the *Didache* includes reference to "a weekly eucharistic gathering, a blessing and a sharing of bread and wine without any accompanying meal 'on the Day of the Sun.'"¹⁸⁰ Other manuscripts, including the book of Acts, reference sharing communion on the first day of the week. J. Barrington Bates explains, "The celebration of the Holy Eucharist on the Lord's Day was the normative practice of the Christian church from the apostles' time – as it remained well into the Reformation times."¹⁸¹

In addition to sharing the communal meal, Paul writes to the church in Corinth, "when you gather, let each one have a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, and an interpretation. Let it all take place for edification" (1 Cor. 14:26). All in attendance were invited to share their gifts of the Spirit with the gathered body of Christ, bringing with them their lived experience of

¹⁷⁸ Branick, 97.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 98.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 99.

¹⁸¹ J. Barrington Bates, "The Holy Eucharist in the Early Church: Material for a Small-Group Discussion, an Adult Forum, or a Reading Course." *Anglican Theological Review* 84, no.2 (2002): 393.

God meeting them in daily life. This contributed to a collective time of prayer, praise, confession, teaching, and the practice of forgiveness within this early faith community.¹⁸²

The early church exemplified unity with a diverse group by educating all participants equally. The predominant instruction given in the house churches were the Ten Commandments, Christ's command to love God, neighbor, and enemies, as well as his teachings. Gehring explains, "Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free alike came together in the house churches and sat at one table."¹⁸³ This significant unity of the table overcame societal concepts of inequality and distinctions made of human judgement.¹⁸⁴ Del Birkey explains in *The House Church: A Missiological Model*, "the house churches provided a fertile seedbed for the most revolutionary equalization of racial, class, and sexual distinction brought about by the Christ event."¹⁸⁵ Further supporting this counter-cultural phenomenon, the early church also practiced alms giving, caring for widows and orphans, and oversaw the welfare of humanity both within and outside of their faith community. This way of life stood in stark contrast to the prevailing customs of the day and drew many to Christ.¹⁸⁶

As the disciples continued to listen to God's Word, engage in fellowship with other believers, and share both communion and prayer, their connection grew, new members were welcomed, and faith, hope, and love abounded through the experience of God's grace.¹⁸⁷ The impetus behind this community generation was the Holy Spirit "who not only draws people into

¹⁸² Branick., 103.

¹⁸³ Gehring, 190.

¹⁸⁴ Bradley B. Blue, "The House Church at Corinth and the Lord's Supper: Famine, Food Supply, and the Present Distress." *Criswell Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (1991): 239.

¹⁸⁵ Birkey, "The House Church: A Missiological Model," 71.

¹⁸⁶ Gehring, 94.

¹⁸⁷ Lora Angeline B. Embudo, "A Lukan Paradigm of Witness: Community as a Form of Witness Part II," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 30.

God's covenant community but also empowers them to witness to the founder and head of their community, Jesus Christ."¹⁸⁸

Yet, what began as a simple and customary household familial structure, *oikos*, resulted in a patriarchal institution.¹⁸⁹ The defined roles within the household that provided equality and a valued voice for all within the home were reduced to the authority of a few overseeing the many. I concur with Birkey's argument that "fulfilling the Great Commission today is limited until women, and all others disregarded as less than in the church, are given full equality in ministry."¹⁹⁰ The exclusivity of leadership, the formality of the institutional church, and its doctrine overtook the priority of the *koinonia* that the body of Christ shared. This "*koinonia* signifies ... the close connection and relationship among community members, their mutual support of one another, and the empathy and participation in each other's lives."¹⁹¹

The small group movement was developed centuries later to rekindle and recapture that spiritual connection within the body of Christ. Within the sacred community of the imperfectly gathered body, Margaret Jenkins further illuminates the Spirit's role as gathering the church for the purpose of experiencing God's grace, forgiveness, hope, and new life.¹⁹² The foundation of the church is found in the Trinity where unity as well as diversity is witnessed. She explains, "An ecclesiology based on an understanding of church as *koinonia* within the whole mystery of God's loving plan for the whole creation provides the appropriate context for the sharing of sacramental life."¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ Embudo, "A Lukan Paradigm of Witness: Community as a Form of Witness Part II," 31.

¹⁸⁹ Gehring, 17.

¹⁹⁰ Birkey, 71.

¹⁹¹ Gehring, 80.

¹⁹² Margaret Jenkins, "Towards *Koinonia* in Life," *The Ecumenical Review* 45, no. 1 (January 1993): 94.

¹⁹³ Jenkins, "Towards *Koinonia* in Life," 95.

Section 2: The Reformation Resurgence of the House Church and Its Impact on House Churches Today

The Reformation saw a resurgence of small group ministry. John Wilson attributes the reappearance of small groups to the Methodist movement, with John and Charles Wesley emphasizing the importance of home gatherings in the form of societies which met for study, worship, prayer, and mutual accountability.¹⁹⁴ But David Zersen asserts that a century earlier, today's "small group movement has its roots in the Lutheran Pietism of the seventeenth century."¹⁹⁵ In fact, Martin Luther proposed, in his 1526 German Mass, a liturgical order for house church worship. In it, he writes, "those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament and to do other Christian works."¹⁹⁶ Zersen encourages the church today to commit to this same understanding of the saints ministering to one another by creating settings which foster this intimacy and connection.¹⁹⁷

Scripture has been a centerpiece of house church worship from the beginning. Jagessar shares from the writings of Justin Martyr (ca. 150) "that 'the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits.'"¹⁹⁸ In the sixteenth century, the Reformers placed scripture at the center of the faith life of the church, believing that "when the

¹⁹⁴ John P. Wilson, "From House Church to Home Groups," *The Reformed Theological Review* 63, no. 1 (April 2004): 8.

¹⁹⁵ David John Zersen, "Lutheran Roots for Small Group Ministry." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 8 no. 4 (1981): 234.

<http://ezproxy.dbq.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000785554&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁹⁶ Zersen, "Lutheran Roots for Small Group Ministry." 237.

¹⁹⁷ Zersen, 238.

¹⁹⁸ Michael N. Jagessar, "'Two ears, one mouth': beyond words in our life together," *Liturgy* 34, no. 2 (2019): 52.

Word was read, God was again speaking to the gathered community.”¹⁹⁹ It is in the familial setting, where the Catechism was taught and prayers and devotions practiced, so much so that “Luther took seriously the responsibility of the Christian to communicate the faith in informal settings...when the Gospel was rightly heard in that house-church setting, then the message became as valid as any delivered by the pastor.”²⁰⁰

A key component in sharing this life together is the congregational care found in small group ministry. Small groups provide stability, closeness, connection, and belonging at a time when society is moving away from traditional community groups and organizations.²⁰¹ Emotional support and relationships assist participants in regaining connection in our highly mobile culture. This is seen particularly in the growing bedroom community which is the HLC context. Loneliness and isolation, especially in this time of pandemic, is also addressed through small groups, as sure footing and roots can be established to anchor life amid chaos.

An element of small group ministry that Teresa Latini stresses is confession. Groups generate accountability where grace can soothe the loss and trials of life with prayer and support. Wholeness can be restored in this casual setting of confession and forgiveness where participants then “become ambassadors of healing, caring for those who are suffering in the larger church and world.”²⁰² She stresses that the act of confession itself creates community as we acknowledge our shared sinfulness, God’s forgiveness which covers us, and the community that surrounds us with compassion when we have hurt or been hurt.²⁰³ Confession acknowledges our need for

¹⁹⁹ Jagessar, “‘Two ears, one mouth’: beyond words in our life together,” 52.

²⁰⁰ Zersen, 236.

²⁰¹ Theresa F. Latini, “Confession and Healing in Small-Group Community,” *Word & World* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 35.

²⁰² Latini, “Confession and Healing in Small-Group Community,” 36.

²⁰³ Latini, 39.

Jesus and gives us the opportunity to meet Jesus in one another, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Luther also believed in the priesthood of all believers and our role as both confessor and proclaimer of absolution. House church small groups included a simple confession at each gathering to allow participants to release the burdens they carried and share in the reality of both human sinfulness and God's grace together. It was entitled *Preparing Our Hearts for Communion* and prayed in unison.

Loving God, we know that we come to this meal just as we are, imperfect and in need of your love and forgiveness. Give us your grace and mercy found in the body and blood of Jesus our Savior, and provide strength for the journey ahead, until we are united with you and all of the saints. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The Spirit gives us the audacity to be vulnerable which is required when lowering our walls when we share the reality of our lives with one another. This includes seeing the neighbor as equal, from the doorway to the communion table. Radical inclusivity in all aspects of the faith life is essential to welcoming as Jesus welcomed because

God loves all people precisely in their uniqueness and vulnerability. The embrace of God knows no predictable limitation. It overflows all conventions and human standards. God's affirmation of humanity is a Yes that welcomes and accepts all.²⁰⁴

This work of the Spirit, who gathers the imperfect follower of Jesus into Christ's body is referenced in over seventy passages in the book of Acts. Individuals were converted into the church that was birthed for God's mission in the world.²⁰⁵ The community, the body of Christ, is in constant relationship with the holy Trinity, living and moving together, as we navigate the

²⁰⁴ Thomas E. Reynolds, "Welcoming without Reserve? A Case in Christian Hospitality," *Theology Today* 63 (2006): 202.

²⁰⁵ C. Vanessa White, "The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles: a Pentecost spirituality," *The Bible Today* 52, no. 3 (May 2014): 141.

realities of life within our Christian calling.²⁰⁶ We are to be in relationship with God and one another as the persons of the Trinity share in their mutual affection and connection.

Through the Spirit, we are invited to participate in reconciling and healing the world, the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God. “Just as Jesus Christ, the son of God, was sent by the Father (John 20:21-23), and the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father through the Son (John 14:26), the church is sent by the Triune God.”²⁰⁷ Mission defines who God is, and not what the church does as one of its many ministry programs. The church exists to participate where God is already at work in the world.²⁰⁸

This interconnectedness and relationship between God, humanity, and the church is referred to by Brad Binau as the “Social Trinity.” In contrast to the focus of relationality between the persons of the Godhead that defines the Economic Trinity, and the shared divinity that defines the Immanent Trinity, the Social Trinity emphasizes our communion with the Triune God and God’s mission of reconciling the world to God.²⁰⁹ Binau emphasizes, “the church does not have a mission. God’s mission is the church.”²¹⁰ Reconciliation is ongoing and will carry into the future as we are invited in sharing with God in this outreach. Kallistos Ware explains,

First there was the Eucharistic meal, where Christ blessed bread and gave it to the disciples, ‘This is my body,’ and he blessed the cup, ‘This is my blood.’ Then after the Eucharistic meal, Christ kneels and washes the feet of his disciples. The Eucharistic meal and the foot washing are a single mystery. We have to apply that to ourselves, going out from the Liturgy to wash the feet of our fellow humans, literally and symbolically.²¹¹

²⁰⁶ Marcel Sarot, “Trinity and Church: Trinitarian Perspectives on the Identity of the Christian Community,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 1 (January 2010): 38.

²⁰⁷ George Mathew Nalunnakkal, “Come Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile: Called in Christ to be Reconciling and Healing Communities,” *International Review of Mission* 94, no. 372 (January 2005): 10.

²⁰⁸ Binau, “Pastoral Theology for the Missional Church: From Pastoral Care to the Care of Souls,” 14.

²⁰⁹ Binau, 16.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

²¹¹ Razvan Porumb, “An Orthodox Model of Practical Theology,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 21, no. 1 (June 2017): 145.

In our house church small groups, we were fed, freed, and sent after being met by God in the sacrament of communion and in our communion with one another. Through this time of spiritual development, we were given the opportunity to see others as Jesus does and together, share His love of welcome and inclusivity.

We left our time in house church small groups as the sent church with a call to let love be our visible and defining mark. Rachael Crabb shares that this “requires more, far more than the surface congeniality of ten-second introductions during a church service, where strangers shake hands, exchange names and greetings, and remain strangers.”²¹² Small groups allowed participants to move beyond surface level acknowledgment to the openness of whole beings that God created and loves. This provided space to encounter the stranger, understand that they too are loved by God, and that we may be called upon to meet them in their time of need, just as they may meet us in ours.²¹³

Section 3: Modern House Churches Creating Communities of Faith in Peace and Chaos

House churches, both historical and modern, welcome the stranger as a defining act of loving God through hospitality.²¹⁴ During biblical times, “hospitality emerged as a way of tending to the sojourners, travelers requiring shelter, nourishment, and protection.” Outsiders were from a different tribe or clan and needed similar protection and place as the vulnerable orphans and widows within the community. In a nomadic society, the traveler and established

²¹² Rachael Crabb, “Hospitality: A Spiritual Discipline, A Spiritual Mission,” *Conversations* 10, no. 1 (April 2012): 77.

²¹³ “Hospitality,” Crabb summarizes, “is an opportunity we must seize. It reflects our theology. It reveals our formation. It reproduces our community.” Cf. Crabb, “Hospitality: A Spiritual Discipline, A Spiritual Mission,” 78.

²¹⁴ Reynolds, “Welcoming without Reserve? A Case in Christian Hospitality,” 202.

person could switch roles multiple times in life. Thus, tending to those on the margins established how one would like to be treated with respect and dignity.²¹⁵

This reciprocity acknowledged the vulnerability and fragility of life, the call to be humble and observant, and our need for each other. We see this today in persecuted areas of the world where Christians must rely on one another for their safety as well as faith formation. To be hospitable means to be courageous, expectant, and open to new people and the whole selves they bring.²¹⁶ Life will forever be changed when we share time and space with the stranger, and thus God in our midst. “God blesses through the stranger”²¹⁷ is how Thomas Reynolds explains hospitality’s theological root. Life is enhanced through our exchange as we meet Jesus in the traveler, the poor, the needy, and those requiring a place of welcome and respite to call home, even for a moment.²¹⁸

Around the world, house churches have provided a means of evangelism and community, especially in persecuted areas. China’s often violent approach to Christian gatherings and treatment of their leaders have forced Christian communities into hiding. Their small groups resemble the thriving churches found in the New Testament that also faced persecution. Lay leaders, including women, risk their lives to host and lead worship in their homes.²¹⁹

In Latin America, 80% of the population lives in poverty. Base churches have formed around the understanding of the priesthood of all believers. Grass-roots ministries that focus on mission and evangelism are flourishing.²²⁰ In some areas of Asia and Africa, Christian faith

²¹⁵ Reynolds, 196.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 197.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 198.

²¹⁹ Birkey, 75.

²²⁰ Ibid., 75.

draws criticism, discrimination, torture, and death. Nicanor Tamang, a Christian from Nepal, explains, “to be a church you don’t need much – just a Bible and a Christian friend or two to worship God together.”²²¹ From simple table fellowship to bathtub baptisms, global house churches provide a place to be the body of Christ when the culture around them demands living differently and faithfulness to another.

Section 4: Contemporary American Small Group Ministry

In the context of the American church, small groups have been prevalent in a variety of modern settings, from prayer meetings of the Baptist church to class meetings of the Methodists.²²² Lawson defines a “Christian small group [as] an intentional face-to-face gathering of 3-12 people on a regular time schedule with the common purpose of discovery and growing in the possibilities of an abundant life in Christ.”²²³ In some form, the culture of small group ministry has infiltrated most congregations, whether specifically named as small groups or not. The presupposition is that faith development requires support, encouragement, community, and a personal drive to take ownership in cultivating one’s faith.²²⁴ Yet if faith development becomes overly self-focused, the outward role of discipleship as sent followers of Jesus can be lost. The effectiveness of small groups increases when they are one of many worship, service, fellowship, and outreach ministries that a congregation provides, and not the sole point of congregational participation.²²⁵

²²¹ Ibid., 76.

²²² Robert Wuthnow, ed., “The Small-Group Movement in the Context of American Religion,” in *“I Come Away Stronger”*: *How Small Groups are Shaping American Religion*, 344. Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source, Grand Rapids. 2001.

²²³ Kevin E. Lawson, “A Band of Sisters: The Impact of Long-Term Small Group Participation: Forty Years in a Women’s Prayer and Bible Study Group,” *Religious Education* 101, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 182.

²²⁴ Wuthnow, “The Small-Group Movement in the Context of American Religion,” 347.

²²⁵ Wuthnow, 366.

Four models of small groups are outlined in Scott Boren and Jim Egli's article *Small Group Models: Navigating the Commonalities and Differences*: the cell church model, meta-church model, geographical model, and semester model. Many of the Western church's small groups are rooted in the cell church model. This was established by Pastor Yonggi Cho during the 1960s in Seoul, Korea. Based on examples of small group home meetings in the book of Acts, Cho sought to establish lay leaders to provide care of the flock, evangelism, faith formation through Bible study, and established connections through meaningful relationships.²²⁶ In the 1990s, Ralph Neighbour Jr. reframed this for the Western church with the title of Program Based Design. This had a similar emphasis including the training and elevating of small group members to leadership positions to oversee new small groups.²²⁷

At the same time, Carl George endorsed the meta-church model which promoted community within the existing small group ministries of a congregation. "The saying, 'becoming a church of small groups instead of a church with small groups' popularized the model."²²⁸ Willow Creek Community Church followed this model. Groups were categorized by involvement of time and faith formation in the form of discipleship, administration, new member, service, outreach, and support focuses. Leaders were also raised up from within the groups to facilitate new groups.

The third model formed groups based on proximity to its members as outlined by Randy Frazee. In this geographical model from the early 2000s, proximity allows for members to care for one another, encourages gatherings due to limited travel time, and shared school and

²²⁶ Scott Boren and Jim Egli, "Small Group Models: Navigating the Commonalities and Differences," *Christian Education Journal* Series 3, 11, no. 1 (2014): 153.

²²⁷ Boren and Egli, "Small Group Models: Navigating the Commonalities and Differences," 154.

²²⁸ Boren and Egli, 154.

neighborhood happenings start participants on common ground. Unique to this expression of small group is that they meet at church during the Sunday school hour which gives room for expansion and facilitates both raising up new leaders and starting new groups as needed.²²⁹

A fourth contemporary model is the semester model which encompasses multiple small group opportunities, with set start and end dates, that allow members to choose their topic and time commitment. This model allows a natural life cycle for ministries. Groups that meet a current spiritual need will thrive while those that do not cease to exist until the context would dictate their need.²³⁰ Other churches use the semester model with the exception that each group studies the same curriculum matching the current sermon series. The focus on faith formation promotes engagement in the larger congregation's initiative determined by the sermon theme.²³¹ Heather Zempel expounds on her use of the semester model in her Washington, D.C. congregation. However, her groups were based on a journey of congregational involvement and spiritual formation. Seekers moved from the Alpha curriculum to other Christian education and ministry groups as their interest and commitment to the faith community grew.²³² Rick Warren also modifies this semester approach and views this as a ministry of mission and evangelism for the entire congregation. He encourages participation with his "H.O.S.T." acronym: "Have a heart for people, Open their home to a group, Serve a snack, and Turn on a video." The simplicity for the host, and turnkey materials for the group based on age and life stage, make these groups sustainable.²³³

²²⁹ Ibid., 157.

²³⁰ Ibid., 159.

²³¹ Ibid., 160.

²³² Ibid., 160.

²³³ Ibid., 161.

The variety of small group models and their flexibility emphasize the need to modify small group ministry for each church's context. Just as each house church in Biblical times was different, and was uniquely and individually addressed by Paul's letters, today's church also demands that fluidity. Success is a result of devotion to prayer, an invitation and welcome to new participants, and involvement in the overall mission of the congregation. This contributes to increased engagement with the faith community and worship attendance.²³⁴ Christine Pohl explains, "Our lives are knit together not so much by intense feelings as by shared history, tasks, commitments, stories, and sacrifices."²³⁵

When God's grace is exercised and experienced, the values of the kingdom of God are lived out in today's context. Communities that are vital and growing are established by the committed faithful who share in both the ordinary and extraordinary times in life. Yet, one of the challenges to small group ministry is our desire to seek out community that is convenient. We want "community on our terms, with easy entrances and exits, lots of choices and support and minimal responsibilities. Mixed together, this is not a promising recipe for strong or lasting communities."²³⁶ In addition, without trained leadership, small groups can veer from the main body, serve only as a social network, and not a tool of faith development.²³⁷ Roger Walton cautions that small groups

will continue to challenge us in defaulting to an inward looking, mutual support model. They will need to be reminded of our missional calling, and located in churches,

²³⁴ Paul Senz, "Small but Mighty: How Small Group Ministry Can Transform Your Parish," *The Priest* (February 2019): 26.

²³⁵ Christine Pohl, "Our Life Together: Four Practices of Healthy Congregations," *Christian Century* (March 7, 2012): 22.

²³⁶ Pohl, "Our Life Together: Four Practices of Healthy Congregations," 22.

²³⁷ Roger Walton, "Disciples Together: The Small Group as a Vehicle for Discipleship Formation," *The Journal of Adult Theological Education* 8, no. 2 (2011): 105.

structures, and values which help people to address the outward orientation of Christian living.²³⁸

Knowing these challenges, a small array of scholarly work has been published studying small groups in the American church context. Kevin Lawson examined a Bible study and prayer group that has continued for forty years. This ecumenical group in New York is not church sponsored and meets independently of their congregations. This long-term group is in distinct contrast to semester or short-term small groups which have an intentional change of subject matter and participants. The concern with long term groups is the risk of groups losing their prayer and faith formation focus in lieu of being a social gathering.²³⁹ Solid and sustained groups may also be impenetrable to new members and lack the innovation required to challenge and grow. However, longevity does have its advantages when the following four things occur: the needs of the group adapt to the life stages of its members, it maintains the stated purpose of prayer and discipleship, lay leaders are raised up and leadership is shared, and new members are invited and welcomed.

While not named specifically as a small group, ministries such as HLC's quilting circle, chancel choir, and bell choir have a longevity of membership that has gathered around gifts of creativity in making quilts for missions and music leadership in worship. Lawson notes that one of the most impactful elements of long-term groups is the care for one another. "Common experiences and suffering leading to openness and commitment to each other" bonds the members into a community of faith where judgement has been replaced with grace.²⁴⁰ Small group involvement becomes an essential piece of one's identity as the individual is defined in

²³⁸ Walton, "Disciples Together: The Small Group as a Vehicle for Discipleship Formation," 113.

²³⁹ Kevin E. Lawson, "A Band of Sisters: The Impact of Long-Term Small Group Participation: Forty Years in a Women's Prayer and Bible Study Group," *Religious Education* 101, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 181.

²⁴⁰ Lawson, "A Band of Sisters: The Impact of Long-Term Small Group Participation: Forty Years in a Women's Prayer and Bible Study Group," 181.

part by this deep acceptance and love which prioritized the small group above many other life demands. The dedicated quilters and choir members who have participated for decades would readily agree with this assessment.

This sense of belonging was also studied by Kevin Dougherty and Andrew Whitehead, who discovered that small groups provide an avenue for participation and acceptance where their involvement is significant²⁴¹ and community is formed through relationships of substance and common ground.²⁴² Based on survey research of a large Central Texas megachurch and the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey, small group involvement was seen to be an impactful element of overall congregational vitality, regardless of congregation size. “Interpersonal bonds forged in small group connect individuals to the bigger organization and motivate their contribution to the collective good.”²⁴³ This positively impacts attendance in worship, a feeling of connection to the larger congregation, stronger faith, and increased giving.²⁴⁴ Their research concluded with an unanswered question which also applies to this research project on house church small groups. “Do small groups push people to greater commitment and participation or are they a product of committed, active people finding each other?”²⁴⁵ The Lutheran response to this would be “yes.”

A more recent study was conducted by Jim Egli and Wei Wang in 2014 which surveyed 1,140 small group leaders in forty-seven churches to determine the contributing factors to small group growth. Groups and churches studied varied by size, type of small group, denomination,

²⁴¹ Kevin D. Dougherty and Andrew L. Whitehead, “A Place to Belong: Small Group Involvement in Religious Congregations,” *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 1 (2011): 92.

²⁴² Dougherty and Whitehead, “A Place to Belong: Small Group Involvement in Religious Congregations,” 93.

²⁴³ Dougherty and Whitehead, 94.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

and geographical context.²⁴⁶ Their analysis indicates that the small group leader's prayer life, focus on outreach, relationship of care within the group, and empowered lay leaders led to such growth. Within the greater church community, equipping lay leaders and praying for one another supported these small group initiatives.²⁴⁷ Not impactful in growing small groups, or their success, was the role of church emphasis on small group involvement.²⁴⁸ Egli and Wang explain, "Too often, churches have tried to create vibrant small group ministries by talking about them a lot without doing the hard work of putting the culture and system in place for on-going growth."²⁴⁹ Prayer, planning, and equipping lay leaders prepares the foundation to build successful small groups. This contributes to my future initiative at HLC of an adult education steering committee which will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Chapter 5: Lutheran Theology of the Table—A Call to Inclusivity

Section 1: Inclusivity at the Table

To this point, we have explored the history of house churches and small groups, the intentionality of acknowledging God's presence in daily life and an awareness of the Spirit's sending, the overarching Christian expectation of hospitality, and Holy Communion as an intentional element of worship included in house church small groups. This section will focus on inclusivity at the communion table, as inspired by Jesus and worked out in the ELCA denomination. Jesus gathered his disciples around a table to share his love and grace and called the masses to feast. To Jesus, each person has worth and value and reflects God's image that he participated in creating. Therefore, he puts no barrier between himself and them.

²⁴⁶ Jim Egli and Wei Wang, actors that Fuel Small Group Growth," *Christian Education Journal* Series 3, 11, no. 1 (2014): 135.

²⁴⁷ Egli and Wang, "Factors that Fuel Small Group Growth," 134.

²⁴⁸ Egli and Wang, 136.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

Inclusivity at the table is becoming a more regularly discussed issue at ELCA conferences and other denominational gatherings as unbaptized persons are not welcome at the communion table per the Evangelical Lutheran Church's *The Use of the Means of Grace*. Principle 37 states, "Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized."²⁵⁰ And while this invitation is ecumenical, it presupposes that a pastor or church may worry they will be disciplined or judged by communing someone who has not been baptized:

When an unbaptized person comes to the table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministers of Communion need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is praised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the Church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion.²⁵¹

In actual church practice in many congregations, including my own, we have removed the baptismal requirement from both our written bulletin invitation to the table as well as our verbal invitation. Instead, I proclaim, "this is Christ's table and Christ welcomes you here. Everyone is welcome."

I have heard it said that welcoming unbaptized persons to communion will be the next potentially divisive issue for the ELCA. Living in the post-Christendom reality within the United States, some worshippers may be two or more generations removed from the tradition of weekly church attendance, Sunday school, or confirmation, and may not know or understand the sacraments. However, they may respond to the pastoral invitation that welcomes all to the table as a response to the Word read and proclaimed and sins corporately confessed in Jesus' name. The denomination's current rubric is most un-Lutheran as it unintentionally turns baptism into a

²⁵⁰*Table and Font: Who is Welcome?* Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. 9-7-20.
http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/ELCA_Table_And_Font.pdf

²⁵¹ *Table and Font: Who is Welcome?*

work, a human requirement, to receive grace at Christ's table instead of baptism being an invitation and welcome to the body of Christ. The Reverend Gary Henderson of the United Methodist Church describes this inclusivity of welcome as "a table where there are no barriers to community. It is a place where we experience the love of God."²⁵²

Therefore, it is important to understand the person and work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the sacrament of the Eucharist as it is God who calls us to the table. Through analysis of contemporary Catholic theologians, *The Book of Concord*, and setting one of the communion liturgy in the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, it is clear that the Spirit effects faith in the listener through the hearing of the Word of promise in Jesus Christ. Responding to Christ through participation in Holy Communion is an act of faith that is not dependent on baptismal status.

It is a practical reality that I have served the sacrament to someone who has yet to be baptized but has felt called to the table. This does not minimize the call to baptism but with time, and relationship building, a pastor can learn a person's baptismal status and welcome them to the font as well. Like communion being shared virtually during online worship in this covid pandemic, the focus on a truly open table honors the Holy Spirit moving when and where the Holy Spirit will, and meeting people in their current context.

Section 2: The Work of the Holy Spirit Outside of Baptism

In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the Gentiles after hearing Peter proclaim the Word of God. They respond in praise to God, and in faith, are directed by Peter to be baptized (Acts 10:44-48). In explaining their reception of the Holy Spirit to Jewish believers, Peter said, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord

²⁵² Rev. Gary Henderson. *United Methodist Beliefs: Open Table*. 2017. <http://ee.umc.org/what-we-believe/united-methodist-beliefs-open-table>. 9/24/20.

Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:17). Therefore, the Spirit can be at work in the lives of individuals, enabling faith in the promises of God before baptism has occurred. Pinnock writes, “The Spirit meets people not only in religious spheres but everywhere in the natural world, in the give and take of relationships, in the systems that structure human life. No nook or cranny is untouched by the finger of God.”²⁵³ Communing those who are not baptized in no way diminishes the significance of baptism or Christ’s command of baptism but respects the work of God.

The practice of baptism before communion is a historical construct of the church. The implication of this practice is that the table is for those included in Christ’s body, the church, only through the sacrament of baptism and therefore are not included based on faith alone in Jesus Christ. Johann Gerhard, the early seventeenth century German theologian and premier Lutheran scholar of his day, explained that “by baptism we are regenerated; by the Lord’s supper we are fed and nourished to eternal life.”²⁵⁴ Gerhard’s rationale for excluding those who have not come to the waters of baptism is equivocating the Eucharist to the paschal feast. Only those who were able to eat of that feast were circumcised. Gerhard equates the rite of baptism then as the mark of entry for communion. He also argues that because baptism precedes communion in scripture, the initiation at baptism into God’s grace must precede admittance to the table.²⁵⁵

The justification that Gerhard provides for the sequential order of the sacraments can be countered with the variety of occasions in scripture where the Spirit comes upon people before they are baptized. By analogy, the early church debates about circumcision are illustrative. In Romans, Paul asserts that circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, was all that was required

²⁵³ Pinnock, 187.

²⁵⁴ Schmid, 538.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

(Romans 2:25), and as he explains to the church in Galatia, “for neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!” (Galatians 6:15). The issue of inclusion based on circumcision was such a divisive issue for the early church that Paul and Peter speak to the church council in Jerusalem. They explain that Christ, through the Spirit, reconciles believers to God and therefore, circumcision is not required. Peter concludes,

God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us... we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (Acts 15:8-11).

Just as circumcision should not be considered a requirement to participate in the Christian community for Gentile believers, baptism should not be a requirement to participate in such an important aspect of Christian community, the Lord’s Supper. It is by God’s grace alone that we are invited to the table and given faith to believe in the sacramental promise of forgiveness and new life. Consequently, the Spirit can call one to the font after being called to the table.

Like Peter directing those with faith to baptism, the church should be directing those moved by the Spirit as a response to the Word to join in communion at the Table. The Spirit works in the lives of individuals as sanctifier and mediator through the Word, sacraments, and gifts given for unity and mission in the world.²⁵⁶ There are no barriers to the Spirit in revealing God’s Word and salvation to all people by making Jesus present.²⁵⁷ The Spirit emboldens believers to live in freedom and hope while waiting for God’s kingdom to fully come. Sacraments make the mystery of God tangible and grace visible which strengthens faith,²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ *The Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life*. Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 11.

²⁵⁷ *The Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life*, 11.

²⁵⁸ Luther, “*The Large Catechism*”: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, 469.

reassures us of Christ's presence,²⁵⁹ and offers God's forgiveness and love. It is a work of the Spirit that we are called to the table.

The Triune God is present in this holy supper and collectively brings about the salvation of humanity and thus the restoration of communion with God.²⁶⁰ The Holy Spirit is the One who renders effective and accomplishes the actions of the Father and the Son through the history of salvation. This is expressed by the early church Fathers with the classic formula: "all goodness descends from the Father, through the Son, [and it reaches us] in the Holy Spirit' (St. Athanasius, *Letter to Sevapion*, I.24)."²⁶¹

God is revealed to us in scripture and sacraments as the Spirit "renders visible the invisible and palpable the impalpable."²⁶² This occurs after the Spirit has transformed our hearts and minds for faithful receptivity of Christ.²⁶³ We know God through the Word as illuminated by the Spirit and in dialogue with God through prayer as mediated by the Spirit, our intercessor.²⁶⁴ God, the Spirit, is also known "wherever we see traces of Jesus in the world and people opening us to his ideals."²⁶⁵

Heinrich Schmid writes in the introduction of the *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* that "the Holy Spirit is perpetually and inseparably united with the Holy Scriptures."²⁶⁶ It is the Spirit who supernaturally calls us to faith through the Word which unveils the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Christ's promises are realized and bestowed

²⁵⁹ Pinnock, 120.

²⁶⁰ *The Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life*, 20.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁶⁵ Pinnock, 209.

²⁶⁶ Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1875), 20.

upon believers by the Spirit.²⁶⁷ Thus through the Spirit, the grace of the gospel is made effective in the lives of believers so that we live in the reality of salvation through faith.²⁶⁸

The church confesses that the Spirit is “the Lord, the giver of life,”²⁶⁹ the person of the Trinity who, with the Word of the Father, gives breath and life to all living things.²⁷⁰ The Spirit is the power of creation to bring order from chaos, creating new life and freedom in believers today. Only through relationship with the Triune God, by the Spirit’s power, do we participate in relationship with God which is eternal life. Through the cross and resurrection, Christ gives the Spirit to the world to bring God’s grace of forgiveness, sanctification, and reconciliation with God and one another.

The Spirit reveals God, imparts the image of God in each person, and makes us adopted children of God through the reconciling work of Christ by the power of the Spirit. Being created in God’s image, and made aware of God’s expectations through the Word, we see how we fall short from our sin and need God’s grace.²⁷¹ Through faith in Christ, by the power of the Spirit, we are restored and redeemed.²⁷² Therefore, all are worthy to receive Christ’s body and blood at the table.

Thus, through the Spirit, Christ crucified and risen is made known and acknowledged as our only true source of life. The apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth that, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). The Spirit calls individuals to

²⁶⁷ Gerhard’s summary provided by Schmid, *Ibid.*, 505.

²⁶⁸ Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. 451.

²⁶⁹Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. *The Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life*. 30.

²⁷⁰ *The Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of Life*, 31.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

claim the mercies of God which are indeed for them and that they are included in the “all” which God’s grace covers.²⁷³

Section 3: The Eucharist is the Word Made Visible

The sacraments are a means of God’s grace in which all are invited by Christ to participate and “awaken and strengthen our faith.”²⁷⁴ Schmid explains that these “sacred rite(s)...become the vehicle for the Holy Ghost.”²⁷⁵ The Spirit “exercise(s) His efficacy for the salvation of everyone that believeth.”²⁷⁶ Yet we know from scripture that faith can quiver, as expressed in the honest words of a man asking Jesus for a miracle to save his son, “I believe. Help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). We desperately need the tangible yet common elements of bread, wine, and water as physical witness to the Word which has been read and proclaimed. Therefore, we must not rely on our own strength to believe but by God’s grace alone.

Augustine emphasized this reassurance when he called the sacraments a “visible word,” giving a perceptible representation of what the Word of God proclaims.²⁷⁷ The spiritual blessings and salvation are thus applied to our lives as a result of God’s mercy and Christ’s redeeming work.²⁷⁸ The Spirit works to preserve and strengthen believers against temptation and reinforce our faith.²⁷⁹ While the sacraments “require faith and are rightly used when received in

²⁷³ Gerhard’s summary provided by Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 421.

²⁷⁴ Philip Melancthon, “*The Augsburg Confession – Article XIII: Concerning the Use of the Sacraments*”: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 46.

²⁷⁵ Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 520.

²⁷⁶ Schmid, 534.

²⁷⁷ Philip Melancthon, “*Apology of the Augsburg Confession – XIII: The Number and Use of the Sacraments*”: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 220.

²⁷⁸ Quenstedt’s summary provided by Schmid. Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 409.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 409.

faith for the strengthening of faith,”²⁸⁰ one cannot assume that an unbaptized person receiving communion does not come to the table with some amount of faith.

Section 4: The Spirit Created Community as the Church

Through the Spirit, we participate in communion with God and each other as the church, Christ’s body on earth, signifying the love of the Triune God. It is through these means of grace that the Spirit transforms our lives into new creations in Christ. We come to the table despite our brokenness, as we come in unity with Christ through the Spirit. Seventeenth century German theologian David Hollazius writes,

Being united through the Holy Supper with Christ, the Head, they (believers) are also united with one another as members of the mystical body, and thus the Eucharist is the basis of love between us and our neighbor, 1 Corinthians 10:17. Whence, also, it is a mark of ecclesiastical fellowship and a token of the Church with which we communicate faith.²⁸¹

In worship, the Holy Spirit works through the liturgy to unite the Word with the Sacraments, interpreting the gift of new life they bring within the hearts of believers, making Christ present through the signs of the church, and helping us to live in the reality of life in communion with the Triune God. The Spirit prepares our hearts so that through faith we experience this new life today and points to the future when the kingdom will be fully realized. The gathering of the faithful, their faith strengthened by the Spirit through the Word, and the coming of the Spirit to individuals in the sacraments are signs of the kingdom which we experience in worship.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ Melancthon, “*The Augsburg Confession – Article III: Concerning the Use of the Sacraments*”, 46.

²⁸¹ Schmid, 581.

²⁸² Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, 95.

The Spirit, in unity with Christ and the believer, guides the believer's life so that they may live in communion with God, here and into eternity. The Spirit is God's "sanctifying grace" which transforms them into witnesses for Christ.²⁸³ No longer living life in fear of sin and death, we are free to build relationships with one another and be in communion with God.²⁸⁴ This is the grace that is freely given and should be given freely to all at the table.

In this way, as we share in the Eucharist together, we are united as one body in Christ, sharing the one loaf (1 Corinthians 10:17). As we look upon this holy meal together, we are confronted with the reality of the kingdom of God, that though we are uniquely different, we are all called to be followers of Jesus. At the table, we are shown the unity and diversity of our Triune God, in whom we join in today and in the promised life to come.²⁸⁵

In the Orthodox tradition, it is understood that "through the sacraments and particularly the Eucharist, through our own spiritual life and prayer, a connection with the Trinity is always maintained."²⁸⁶ Razvan Porumb explains,

The invitation to the banquet of heavenly bread is constantly voiced and addressed not only to the members of the church, but also to the non-Christians and strangers. This banquet is meant to transport the liturgical community beyond this reality into the life of the Trine God. It is a foretaste of the kingdom of Heaven. It is a journey from our world into the reality of God and back."²⁸⁷

In this reality, there are no differences of any kind as we are given an "ecclesial identity" of oneness where we can see Christ in our neighbor and them see Christ in us.²⁸⁸

²⁸³ Ibid., 142.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Melancthon, "Apology of the Augsburg Confession – XXIV: The Mass", 271.

²⁸⁶ Razvan Porumb, "An Orthodox Model of Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 21, no. 1 (June 2017): 141.

²⁸⁷ Porumb. "An Orthodox Model of Practical Theology," 141.

²⁸⁸ Porumb. 143.

The Holy Spirit calls us to the table where we receive this gift of grace and unity. Through the Word and means of grace, we can embrace our identity as children of God and participate in the transforming work of sanctification that the Spirit enacts.²⁸⁹ These actions are possible because the Spirit makes faith personal through the Word²⁹⁰ and intercedes for us, uniting us with God in prayer.²⁹¹

Knowing we are loved by God despite our sins, we are free, by the power of the Spirit, to love and build relationships instead of fearing sin and death. It is in our relationships that Christ's body, the church, participates in the kingdom already begun today. In liturgy and in prayer, the Spirit unites the Triune God with the body of Christ.

Section 5: Pastoral Realities of Worship in 2022

The diversity of the body of Christ found in the catholic church, both globally and locally, continually grows and changes. More specifically, to look around the communion table today in mainline American Protestant churches, one may not see the nuclear families of the 1950s with a mother, father, 2.5 children, and grandparents. Diversity of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation are a few of the additional characteristics which might not have been as prominent in mainline denominations of the past.

The work of the Spirit reminds us that the Spirit is the One who calls and gathers everyone to the table. Still, a practical reality which exists in the church is often a discrepancy of the words of welcome given at the table, saying all are welcome, as compared to the communion instructions printed in the bulletin. When the printed instructions express that communion is for

²⁸⁹ Theological-Historical Commission for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, 118.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

those who have been baptized, yet a different verbal instruction is given, those sitting in the pews can easily wonder who is truly invited. Some worshippers may not know if they have been baptized for a myriad of reasons or come from a faith tradition that does not baptize infants.

Participation in communion builds a relationship with the pastor and members of the body and opens the dialogue for instruction and background on the sacrament of baptism. The Spirit can lead one to the font after inclusion in the Eucharist just as the sacrament of baptism can be a precursor to the table. No longer can the mainline American Protestant church assume that those in the pew have been baptized nor should we underestimate the power of the Spirit to work in the lives of those who have not been baptized.

Scripture is clear that many have been called to faith outside of baptism and thus to prescribe an order of the sacraments is a traditional practice of the church and not a scripturally mandated practice. As we are not privy to the mind of God and where the Spirit may sweep through with change, it is important to honor the Spirit's work in our liturgical practices. Specifically, in the Eucharist, the Spirit in unity with the Word strengthens our faith and helps us to believe that God's promises are truly for us. In this newly embraced reality of God's kingdom in the here and now, we can go forward as free and changed people, reconciled to God and one another. Therefore, it is necessary to embrace a truly open table where the non-baptized are welcomed in faith.

To continue with the current *Use of the Means of Grace* is to dishonor Luther's emphasis that the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sends God's people. It is similar to Johnathan Edward's exclusive use of the sacraments for a special select group of Christians who visually characterize his understanding of one who has been sanctified. This practice denies the reality of

the inclusivity and fellowship that Jesus shared with both Jews and Gentiles, believers, and seekers, as he ministered to both spiritual and physical hunger, illness, and injustice.

Just as Jesus welcomed children to come to him (Mark 10: 13-16), we must welcome all of God's children to the table where they will meet Jesus in the bread, wine, and one another. As the Lutheran practice of welcoming children to the table has changed from confirmed to after a grade school first communion course, practices continue to evolve. At HLC, we allow children to commune at any age the parent wishes their child to commune. Our first communion instruction is written for a broad grade school audience and children may take that course at any time to learn the specifics of what they may have been practicing in worship since birth. This is a major shift in historical practice for a Lutheran congregation. And while worship practices of mainline protestant denominations are very similar with our full communion partners, not all partners see baptism as a pre-requisite to partake. A truly open table would emphasize our Christian unity and reduce confusion for those in the pews by eliminating the baptism requirement.

It was my prayer that house church small groups would model the diverse community found in the Trinity. United by the Spirit and welcomed to the table as unique individuals, new and seasoned ministry participants did meet. Some may not have been baptized and children communed for the first time. True grace was freely given at the table as Christ was wholly present and met us there.

Section 6: Holy Friendship

In the early church, Christians assembled to worship, share where faith and life met, communed together, and had a time of fellowship. After multiple house church small group

gatherings, my hope was that community would form as participants shared time, prayer, a holy meal, and life's joys and sorrows. I trust that Christ was present in our gatherings (Matt 18:20) through the Spirit who then sent these disciples out into the mission field of life. They returned to their next get-together more aware of God's presence in their lives and the ways the Spirit called them to be Christ's disciples in the world.

Rick Rouse explains that this act of sending by the Spirit in service of neighbor was the mark by which the early church was set apart and that attracted new believers.²⁹² In small groups, the purpose of the intentional focus on God's activity in the world and the Spirit's sending was to solidify the call of discipleship in everyday life, and not just in the hour of worship on Sunday morning. The church's call is to "empower all of God's people to use their gifts and passions for everyday ministry."²⁹³

We do this shared ministry together as the body of Christ models the relationship of care and belonging found in God's nature within the Holy Trinity.²⁹⁴ Karl Barth wrote,

In himself, [God] does not will to exist for Himself, to exist alone. On the contrary, He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and therefore alive in His unique being with and for and in another...He does not exist in solitude but in fellowship.²⁹⁵

The Holy Spirit creates *koinonia*, the community of Jesus and the body of Christ, the church.²⁹⁶ Liz Carmichael speaks of holy friendship with God and one another as the gift of love shared in Jesus and meant to be practiced²⁹⁷ as we participate in God's mission for the world.²⁹⁸

House church small groups met the deep need for belonging and connection, relationships of

²⁹² Rouse, xix.

²⁹³ Ibid., 28.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 7.

²⁹⁵ Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small-Group Ministry*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 78.

²⁹⁶ Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small-Group Ministry*. 81.

²⁹⁷ Liz Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (New York: T&T Publishing International, 2004), 6.

²⁹⁸ Latini., 88.

care, and participation outside of corporate worship. The Spirit did gather these groups, focused our gaze on God in the everyday and our role as sent disciples, and united believers together in bonds of friendship with God and one another. To be shared in Chapter 7, results indicate that expanding small groups in the future will foster new connections as the Word, sacrament, and fellowship are shared.

Small groups of this nature have the flexibility to be applied to ecumenical settings, in-person gatherings when safe to do so, or via an online platform if needed. In all ways, God is worshipped, grace abounds, and relationships grow. Just as the Spirit enlivens faith in an individual, the Spirit will bring new life through relationships of belonging to the community. Engagement in the overall congregation will grow as the focus on God in daily life orients disciples outward in love of God and neighbor. In this way, God is honored as our lives become a testimony to God's grace through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 6: Practical Theology–Theology of the Everyday

Section 1: Lived and Pastoral Theology

Practical theology is the overarching discipline which governed the creation and execution of this house church small group research. A subset of practical theology is lived theology, defined in *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Methods, Style, and Pedagogy* as the study of practices, objects, and beliefs in order to understand God's presence in human experience.²⁹⁹ The authors of that book, in a compilation of essays, seek to answer this overarching question: "How might theological writing, research, and teaching be expanded to engage lived experience with the same care and precision given by scholars to books and articles?"³⁰⁰ Asked differently, how

²⁹⁹ Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky, eds. *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

³⁰⁰ Marsh, Slade, and Azaransky, eds. *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, 6.

does our lived experience provide examples of God's activity on earth? The work of lived theology is vocationally challenging as both pastor and theologian, whose text is the lives of those ministered to and with, and personally a part of that body of Christ as well.

Daily life is both sacred and secular with practices, specific to time and place, that provide an intersection of humanity and God.³⁰¹ Moltmann wrote, "in order to explain who 'God the Lord is,' we will have to be willing to tell the stories of what people have actually experienced, and to do so with unflinching honesty."³⁰² Lived experiences within church, home, and work are viewed through a Christological lens.³⁰³ These contexts are interpreted to witness to faith in daily life of a particular community impacted by its lived theology.

Two essential questions were asked in house church small groups to focus on the Spirit's work in our lives: "where have you seen God in your daily life?" and "where has God sent you in God's mission for the world?" Included in the small group gathering time was the critical task of providing space for storytelling. In being open to, seeking out, and listening to the stories of others, our lives bear witness to the presence of God.

Storytelling is an activity built on trust and acceptance and can take time to generate. "[Lived theology] can produce discomfort. Academics in the theological fields seem to have developed a certain tolerance for abstract talk about God."³⁰⁴ Yet most people, pastoral theologians included, do not have the vocabulary to fully describe our human experiences of God.³⁰⁵ When we talk of God as a personal active agent in our lives, we become tongue-tied in

³⁰¹ Marsh, Slade, and Azaransky, eds., 7.

³⁰² Ibid., 5.

³⁰³ Ibid., 10.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 26.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 25.

mainline Protestant circles.³⁰⁶ Therefore, lived theology is more than a method or way of describing God. It is an awareness that God is up to something.³⁰⁷

In the role of pastor, there are challenges to conducting research within the congregation. As Peter Slade stated, “Doing lived theology from our bodies in the Body can get awkward.”³⁰⁸ Our learning and how we disseminate such finding can be difficult to hear.³⁰⁹ As a researcher, reporting stories is different than the gentleness and conviviality of pastoral care. Acknowledging this challenge, the work of learning about how God meets us in everyday life is essential to understanding the faith life of the community at HLC. Christ is embodied in our beliefs, proclamations, and practices³¹⁰ as scripture is interpreted communally.³¹¹ Practices change, as cultural circumstances change and the individual and community respond to God’s call to action³¹² and participation in the mission of God.³¹³

Lived Theology affirms that God meets us in our lives in small and profound ways which encourages our faith. Marsh writes, “Lived theology emerges from the movements, transactions, and exchanges from the Spirit of God in lived experience.”³¹⁴ These significant experiences, while present in the beauty of stained glass, burning candles, and organ music, can also be felt at the grocery store, tucking children in at night, and washing the dishes.

Frederick Buechner speaks to being mindful about lived experiences. By intentionally looking for God, we are

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 26.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 34.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 45.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 48.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

³¹¹ Ibid., 56.

³¹² Ibid., 61.

³¹³ Ibid., 64.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

...putting a frame around something and makes us see it in a way we would never have seen it under the normal circumstances of living, as so many of us do, on sort of automatic pilot, going through the world without seeing much of anything.³¹⁵

House church small groups were an intentional slowing down, refocusing on seeing God in daily life, connecting with others, and paying attention to where the Holy Spirit was sending us into the mission field of life. For some, the pandemic has been a time to slow down, often in our household bubble, and for others, pure chaos with online work and learning. There is a need to re-engage with others in a community. There is a necessity to reawaken our awareness of God's presence and the body of Christ that encircles us. Yet, we are often too busy, distracted, or our focus is somewhere else, so this holy community becomes elusive.

Buechner explains that it is vital to "See what's there, not what you expect to see. See what is really present in your life. See yourself, see each other."³¹⁶ When we do, we may just behold the holy in the midst of many unholy realities. From this vantage point, we become witness to the holy as our life story testifies to our faith born from lived experience. Our collective experiences, humanity's story, are intertwined with God's story of love for the world. In hearing each other's stories, we see God, and grace, in ways both different and similar to our own relationship with God. Buechner encourages us to listen for God in stillness, the miracle of coincidence, the right person on our path, anything to cause us to wonder if this is God's presence in the ordinary and extraordinary. Buechner concludes, "Joy is knowing, even for a moment, that underneath everything are the everlasting arms."³¹⁷

³¹⁵ Frederick Buechner, *The Remarkable Ordinary: How to Stop, Look, and Listen to Life*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 23.

³¹⁶ Buechner, *The Remarkable Ordinary: How to Stop, Look, and Listen to Life*, 26.

³¹⁷ Buechner, 120.

Henri Nouwen also speaks to joy, resulting in an awareness of God's presence, which brings fulfillment and peace. Without this focus, the busyness and worry of daily life contributes to a malaise of discontent, longing, and loneliness.³¹⁸ Lack of fulfillment and even depression contribute to a life where one is present in body but not in mind. Nouwen explains that the Spirit, who gathers the Christian community, is always present in God's mission, breathing new life and focus to accomplish the real-life challenges that are a reality in much of our day.³¹⁹

In a complementary way, Richard Rohr emphasizes spiritual practices which bring awareness to God's expansive and all-inclusive grace which enable individuals to accept this new life for themselves. The commonplace realities of sin, hell, and retributive justice are reframed in restoration, renewal, change, love, and reconciliation as followers of Jesus participate in the Trinity's divine dance of relationship³²⁰. Through the ingestion of the body and blood of Christ at communion, individual disciples are transformed together into the body of Christ, present with and for one another. This transformation breaks down the barriers which divide us, even if momentarily, allowing for acknowledgement of God in the other. This brings a peace, closeness, and sense of belonging.³²¹

Unfortunately, many congregations lack the gift of diversity of culture, socioeconomic status, race, and sexual orientation which illuminates the beauty of all of God's creation, from

³¹⁸ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1981), 32.

³¹⁹ Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life*, 58.

³²⁰ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How A Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 142.

³²¹ One way God communicates is through the unique and varied customs, cultures, and backgrounds of all people, long before the stories of our faith were inscribed. Rohr writes, "God did not just start talking to us with the Bible or the church or the prophets. Do we really think God had nothing to say for 13.7 billion years, and started speaking only in the latest nanosecond of geological time? Did all history prior to our sacred texts provide no basis for truth or authority? Of course not. The Divine Presence has been glowing and expanding since the beginning of time, before there were any human eyes to see or know about it." Cf. Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How A Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*, 58.

the dawn of time. There is a history of creating insiders and outsiders which prohibits welcoming the neighbor as Jesus would. Stephanie Spellers describes the very human tendency to recoil when we fear losing the tradition and customs of the past which have formed our identity and power.³²² She shares the challenge and blessing of welcoming as Jesus welcomed told through stories of congregations who have gone through great change. Christ-like welcome entails trusting the Spirit's guidance in this process and our role as participants in the mission of God.³²³

This openness to create new opportunities to engage both the congregation and those in the greater community is also shared in the study of dinner churches by Kendall Vanderslice. She showcases the diversity and inclusivity of table fellowship with Jesus: fellowship halls, alleys, gardens, and other everyday common settings which may be less intimidating spaces to enter than the sanctuary. The good news of God's creation and generosity is experienced in the fellowship and sharing of food and time with neighbors outside of the sanctuary. The sacred and secular meet at the table as loneliness is replaced with connection and physical hunger is satiated as Christ's body and blood are shared within the context of a full meal.³²⁴ Christ is made known in the breaking of the bread and the connection with others which then grows our awareness of the presence of God in daily life. Vanderslice writes, "When we seek God in the mundane tasks

³²² Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Other, and the Spirit of Transformation*. (New York: Church Publishing, Incorporated, 2006), 41.

³²³ Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Other, and the Spirit of Transformation*, 162.

³²⁴ The good news of God's creation and generosity is experienced in the fellowship and sharing of food and time with neighbors outside of the sanctuary. The sacred and secular meet at the table as loneliness is replaced with connection and physical hunger is satiated as Christ's body and blood are shared within the context of a full meal. Cf. Kendall Vanderslice, *We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship, and the Community of God*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019), 148.

of every day, anxiety over the larger trajectory of life is less all-consuming...our job is simply to be caught by God's goodness."³²⁵

This dramatic change of location for the sacrament of the eucharist may feel strange in contemporary worship practice. Yet, it may well be more in line with the quotidian task of table fellowship shared by Jesus and his disciples.³²⁶ Vanderslice continues, "When Jesus commanded followers to eat together in remembrance of him, he meant it. He knew that eating together would re-member and heal the divisions of the broken body made one in Christ."³²⁷ The hypothesis for this research was that house church small groups would in fact knit together participants in the body of Christ at HLC, growing their connection to the church and one another, as we communed together in lawn chairs on the front yard of the church. As the data will reveal in Chapter 7, this was found to be so.

Section 2: Change Management

Even though God continues to speak to us in the realities of our day to day, life as we know it continues to flex and change with little control over the ability to be the church as it has been practiced for the last century. The changes triggered by the pandemic have brought forth great anxiety within the church and its people, in addition to latent fears of change and church decline, as we seek to discern where and how the Holy Spirit is calling us to be the body of Christ. Yet, beginning a new change initiative like intentional small group ministry, in a pandemic, is both advantageous and energizing. The faith community at HLC is mandated by the pandemic reality to confront the status quo and must move with changes as they are presented.

³²⁵ Vanderslice, *We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship, and the Community of God*, 148.

³²⁶ Vanderslice, x.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

Otherwise, the church will be left behind as society adapts to a new normal. Jack Shitama's work *Anxious Church. Anxious People* is a significant conversation partner in establishing the change practices required to make this house church small group project sustainable for the future.

Change in the Pre-Pandemic Context

The old adage “we’ve never done it that way before” has been the hallmark of many pre-pandemic conversations about change in the church. Sole adherence to current church traditions and practices are the first roadblock to beginning any new change initiative. To ensure any major and congregation-wide change is given its due discernment, several checks and balances at HLC are in place and are ultimately approved by Council. Changes on a smaller level can be discerned and made by individual committees, the pastors, and staff. These decisions involve specific program ministries, communion practices and music in worship, building use and staffed hours, and fellowship and education initiatives. If you were to ask a parishioner if much change has been made to any of these initiatives in the years I have pastored here, there would be some thoughtful conclusions drawn regarding a few new ministry initiatives. However, no initiative has felt like a significant change.

Momentous changes, outside of the new building addition and staff changes, are relatively rare. Most change is subtle and comfortable, like involuntary breathing. New program ministries come and go for a season while the traditional in-person worship gathering, the main engagement point for most of the congregation, has changed little. Yet change is afoot constantly, even in unremarkable times.

In the six years since I began serving at HLC, we have had three different administrative assistants, three accountants, and two youth directors. A choir director and head organist have retired. Families have moved away, and others have joined. Two Sunday worship services and one Saturday night service a week has changed to two Sunday services and a Wednesday evening service. Communion has moved from small individual cups and wafers to in-house baked gluten free bread and a common cup for intinction. A weekly e-news is sent in addition to the monthly newsletter to bring awareness to the ministries of the congregation. Additionally, a new mission, vision, and welcome statement have been developed. The following new adult offerings have also been started; Monday prayer meeting and Bible study, book clubs, Care Callers shut-in and elder calling ministry, fellowship small groups, blessing of the animals worship, and communion bread baking, to name a few. At the same time, other tried and true ministries such as the annual meatball dinner and ice cream social have ceased as our Women of the ELCA ministry dissolved due to many of the matriarchs aging out of this type of laborious service work.

Change is always occurring even though there is a deep belief that we are a traditional church that changes little. Because of this sense of stability, before the pandemic, HLC appeared to be a low anxiety church: there was little triangulation³²⁸ or sabotage.³²⁹ With the changing landscape of the community being one of rapid growth, fresh faces were coming in and pledges to our new addition were materializing as planned. Finances were solvent, and the congregation

³²⁸ Shitama describes triangulation as two parties who are at odds that focus on a third person or issue to relieve their anxiety instead of resolving their original issue with one another. Cf. Jack Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in the Age of Anxiety*, (Earlville, MD: Charis Works Inc., 2018), 25.

³²⁹ Sabotage is consciously or unconsciously destroying a change initiative to relieve the fear and anxiety created by said change, explains Shitama. Cf. Shitama, *Anxious Church, Anxious People: How to Lead Change in the Age of Anxiety*, 74.

was frugal in its spending. The trajectory for HLC seemed to be steady when many other mainline Protestant churches were in decline.

Change is the Current Pandemic Reality

In March 2020, HLC was excited to dedicate the new addition and welcome in the community for a festive day of worship, tours, and even cake! Our Evangelism Team had organized 120 loaves of quick bread to be made lovingly by home bakers in our congregation, wrapped with ribbon, and with an attached invitation to the open house. These were delivered to the church's neighbors. One week later, following the guidance of the CDC and Wisconsin Council of Churches, the Council voted to cancel our open house. Worship leadership moved to the living room of the pastor in charge each Sunday. The pandemic forced a change in the church that no one could have predicted.³³⁰

Worshipping at home, parishioners were unable to commune with their neighbor or fellowship after service. There was a significant sense of isolation and questions surfaced of what it meant to be the body of Christ not meeting together in the same space. Despite the guidance of the presiding bishop, my colleague and I offered communion virtually as we strongly believe in the comfort the sacrament brings as the body of Christ gathers undeterred by location and time. We asked those worshipping online to use whatever bread, crackers, juice, or wine they had as common elements in their home, and we shared this holy meal together. The continuation of the shared sacrament felt like the one solid anchor in a storm of changes.

³³⁰ The church building itself closed as staff worked from home. Ministries that could move to Zoom did so such as ministry meetings, adult studies, confirmation, and Sunday school. Our major outreach ministries became drive-ups for collections and distribution of food and Christmas gifts. Safety was the priority while ensuring that the ministries of the church continued.

Council approved our building to be used for essential community ministries and pandemic needs. The fellowship hall was open to the YMCA for day care and after school care as needed by families of essential workers. Alcoholics Anonymous and blood drives continued to use the space, and frustration began to bubble up as non-members were getting to use the new space before members could even receive a tour. As personal anxiety escalated with the urgency to remember to mask, social distance, and stay within one's bubble of close contacts, loneliness and frustration continued to abound. Families with children continue to fear their safety without a vaccine for those younger than five, and elders worry about the waning efficacy of their vaccine. Exhaustion, frustration, selfishness, and lack of care for the least of these have all been expressed as people desire to return to "normal" or remark that they are simply "over it!"

A safe place to apply this anxiety became the congregation's leadership. The Council and pastors fielded many concerns of not being able to be in the building, the fear of people not returning to worship with online worship as a continued option, quilters not being able to gather to quilt for missions because a community group was using the fellowship hall, and the requirement to mask and distance even when vaccinated when in the building. The result has become a few vocal families threatening to leave, some leaving loudly, and a handful of unhappy parishioners restricting their giving. This has increased anxiety as finances have become less solid and there is no end in sight to when worship will return to pre-pandemic times. The negative spiral of anxiety continues, as change persists, which is outside of anyone's control.

The Change Management Principles of Anxious Church, Anxious People

Anxious Church, Anxious People speaks to the reality of anxiety feeding on itself and creating even bigger opposition to change. How to interrupt this cycle as a non-anxious presence in the church is the focus of Shitama's understanding of leading change. Many of the principles explored as a summary of family systems theory are currently at work in the HLC faith community. For any change initiative moving forward to be fruitful and sustainable, the anxiety must be recognized and honored while still discerning and growing into the vision God has set forth for the congregation.

Shitama defines anxiety as “the inability to deal with uncertainty and the desire to control inputs and outcomes that is driven by fear of failure.”³³¹ Three fears are frequently voiced, or can be inferred from conversations with members, as this uncontrollable pandemic time continues. There is a concern that church will never return to “normal” which is a euphemism for the way in which the church has operated prior to the pandemic: in-person connections are vital! If church does not return to “normal,” and a lack of in-person connection persists, then the church will lose members and thus giving. When finances suffer, the church may have to reduce staff from two to one pastor or eliminate our youth director position, limit ministry opportunities, and possibly even default on the loan for the new addition. Each fear contributes to the next which heightens overall anxiety.

Writing before the pandemic, Shitama remarks that “we Christians have allowed the age of anxiety to overtake the church.”³³² Our fear causes us to freeze in the face of problems and accept failure instead taking risks to try something new to address the cause. Change is

³³¹ Shitama, 1.

³³² Ibid., 1.

happening that is out of our control, but we play it safe by trying desperately to hold onto tradition or place blame on others instead of taking responsibility to ameliorate what we can.³³³

To be an effective leader in this type of environment means channeling our best chaplain skills and consciously working to be a non-anxious presence. To do this, it is important that as a pastor, I self-differentiate by vocalizing and shepherding our vision and values amidst the current surrounding pressure. At the same time, I must stay in communication with those who see the vision differently and are even vehemently opposed to it.

Leadership through self-differentiation is not about convincing others to agree with you. It is about who you are and what you believe. It is spending time in prayer and discernment to have a sense for where God wants you to lead. It's not even about being right; it's about what is best for the system.³³⁴

Much of the pastoral vision, which has been expressed by my colleague and me, is that the ministry of the congregation has never ceased during this pandemic time. Instead, the church has been doing the old in a new way. House church small groups were one way to be the church together, in-person, while following all the necessary pandemic precautions. The groups met outside instead of in someone's home, and we shared pre-packaged communion and snacks instead of a meal. In this way, the church met for worship and fellowship in a non-traditional way while still very much being the body of Christ together. These groups were one response to the anxiety caused by our need for in-person social connection. While some in the congregation have voiced their discontent at Council's decision to follow our local county safety guidelines in worship services when some churches in the area do not, house church small groups provided a way to be in person for worship and fellowship. All were welcome to participate as the groups included all ages, genders, time attending HLC, and life stages.

³³³ Ibid., 2.

³³⁴ Ibid., 9.

As one of their pastors, I have maintained my emotional connection with those who are discontent and given them space to express their point of view.³³⁵ Through engagement, I listen for the source of their anxiety and determine if that also resonates with my own feelings and life experiences. This assists in my own differentiation, as well as honoring and valuing each person, even if I do not agree with them.³³⁶ Shitama shares that “healthy emotional connection is caring without over-functioning. It’s connecting to others with care without being defined by them.”³³⁷

Triangulation and reactivity are two possible reactions to anxiety in a family system such as the church. And while the anxiety has prompted a few attempts at triangulation, my colleague and I continue to direct voiced concerns to the person targeted in the anxious confrontation. Shitama explains that “you can’t change relationships to which you don’t belong” and trying to fix the challenge which does not belong to you only intensifies your own stress.³³⁸ This works against the goal of being a non-anxious leader.

Thankfully, there have not been any attempts at triangulation regarding house church small groups. These groups have received wonderful verbal feedback which has been corroborated in the participant surveys. Those who participated in the groups have voiced their gratitude for having an option to meet safely and in-person with others to worship, to meet new people, and grow in faith together. Additionally, there was no evidence of reactivity as Shitama describes in rejecting change to maintain the status quo and place blame on others.³³⁹ Within the congregation, the vision of the house church small groups was never modified to encourage

³³⁵ Ibid., 11.

³³⁶ Ibid., 16.

³³⁷ Ibid., 11.

³³⁸ Ibid., 28.

³³⁹ Ibid., 41.

agreement and appease the person with the most anxiety in regards to change.³⁴⁰ Herding, blame-displacement, and sabotage were thankfully absent but an awareness of these reactions is important for rolling out a broader small group initiative in the future.

Setting the course and communicating the vision of house church small groups, in a time of challenge and change, came after much prayer and discernment. Most members and friends of HLC continue to worship online, some attend worship and education in person, and with vaccines available for those over four, families are starting to return. Yet the need for in-person community was dire as interpersonal connection is crucial to mental health. With the safety guidelines to which we must adhere, in person connection could happen by meeting outside, and several ministries did so in warmer months. As modern-day disciples, being strengthened in the Word and communion of fellow believers, especially during a time of uncertainty and death, had similarities to the early church context. These early believers were strengthened in their time together to be sent to love God and neighbor. It was the hope that house church small groups participants would be strengthened as well.

To lead in this challenging environment entails envisioning a future that aligns with the mission and purpose of the church and providing a path forward to achieve it.³⁴¹ Small group ministry contributes to the congregation's mission of *Following Jesus, by loving God and serving All*. In a similar way, small group ministry supports the church's vision statement: *As Disciples of Christ, Holmen Lutheran Church faithfully and prayerfully seeks to know, understand, address, advocate for and accompany those in our community and world*. House church small groups provided a safe space to get to know one another, hear our joys and sorrows,

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 45.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 65.

unite around Christ's table, be emboldened by the gospel call, and be sent by God's Spirit into the world as servants. The vision to gather in such a way honored the mission and vision of HLC as well.

Shitama explores the role of the Holy Spirit in casting a vision and explains that "If it is truly God's vision, then the Holy Spirit will be moving others as well."³⁴² Forty small group participants far exceeded any expectation I had for this new ministry initiative. With only sixty to eighty people worshipping in-person weekly, I expected half this number.

The vision for the future of these groups is to expand them beyond three trial groups in the summer of 2022. Based on survey feedback, groups will be formed to continue to draw on the need to gather, even if the threat of the pandemic has subsided. A need to connect after nearly two years of social distancing will be an essential component to the faith life of this congregation. Trusting that God will reveal the next necessary part of the path to achieve this vision is an element of leadership that Shitama emphasizes:

Faith is asking God to reveal the next step. It's about moving step-by-step, without knowing the entire path. It's about trusting in the process and focusing on the progress. That is what it means to be a leader.³⁴³

One area that is critical in casting a vision and making change is giving permission to fail.³⁴⁴ In my first career as a marketing manager, product development illuminated the clear distinction between what you design and real-world actualization. Over 90% of new ideas fail. Yet with clear expectations, measurement of the project outcomes against objectives, and using

³⁴² Ibid., 66.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 94.

this critical information to adjust for future endeavors, this provides better odds of meeting a need in the future.

A key component of house church small group research was intentionally assessing the group at the beginning, end, and three months following the groups. The information gained from this feedback will influence groups to come. Moving forward, post change feedback will continue to drive new initiatives as the congregation progresses toward its overall mission and vision with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is a distinct possibility that these changes may cause friction with some, and house church small groups may encounter roadblocks along the path. I can foresee a question of necessity after the immediate pandemic crisis subsides. Communicating the deeper vision of worship and fellowship in both serene and challenging times will be important. Staying emotionally connected to the congregation while assessing my own anxiety will be essential. Listening, being flexible, and abiding in the discomfort of others will contribute to being a non-anxious presence. Intentionally resisting over-functioning and acknowledging what is not in my control will assist in managing relationships and situations which are out of my control. Focusing on “doing my own work,”³⁴⁵ maintaining healthy ways to deal with stress through life-giving activities outside of church and nurturing my own spiritual well-being will be critically important to making these small groups, and all other future ministries, fruitful and sustainable.

Chapter 7: House Church Small Groups at Holmen Lutheran Church

Section 1: Methodology

This section will cover two different aspects of the project’s methodology. It will begin with the form and function of the house church small groups. This includes the project

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 119.

objectives, small group content, lay leadership development, ministry skills, recruitment, and communion. The second section will detail the analysis of the data gathered through three surveys conducted before, after, and three months following the conclusion of the small groups.

Small Group Form and Function Methodology

Project Objectives: The objective of this research was to use the model of the house church from our earliest brothers and sisters in the faith as a way to construct small groups today. In my experience, small groups based solely on common interests and hobbies are not sustainable. Yet house churches were the primary vehicle for early followers of Jesus to stay connected, in God's word, and be nurtured in their faith for daily living. Components of those house church gatherings, which include prayer, worship, a meal, and fellowship, were practiced in house church small groups.

To meet project objectives, I underwent careful study and application of house church elements including how these groups formed, met, and were then sent into vocations of daily living. Additionally, translating this into simple and actionable worship in a casual setting was important. Clear instructions and readily available materials were required to facilitate prayer, worship, communion, and fellowship. Finally, connecting this time in small groups back to participation and belonging in the larger HLC faith community was significant.

Each week, the liturgy—which can be seen in the appendix—remained consistent in format, prayers, and length for ease of use and the comfort brought about by familiarity and repetition. However, a different Bible story was shared each time which clearly illustrated Christ meeting someone in their daily life. From an outsider such as Zacchaeus being noticed by Jesus who invites himself to share a meal together, also a familiar children's story, to Jesus calling adult fisherman to a second career as ministers of the gospel, each lesson acted as a springboard

for discussion. I intentionally chose the Bible story to be accessible to all ages in the group, and everyone was invited to participate. After sharing where we saw God meeting people in their daily lives in the text, we discussed God meeting us in our daily lives.

Small Group Content: The time in small groups mimicked the activities in which house churches in the New Testament participated. This included gathering, worship, and fellowship. If pandemic restrictions had been lifted, sharing a meal would also have been included in this fellowship time. Worship comprised most of the sixty to seventy-five minutes together following ten minutes of get to know you gathering questions. Worship included confession, prayer, scripture reading, each participant sharing where they had seen God in their everyday lives in the past week and where they had been sent in God's mission, holy communion was shared, and a prayer closed our worship time together. Fellowship concluded the evening. Bread and grape juice packets were consecrated in the prior week's worship service and placed in a basket for each house church small group. The basket also contained a worship guide for each participant with all elements of worship pre-printed.

Lay Leadership Development: Over the course of six meetings, my role as the pastoral leader became less prominent. The goal was to allow group participants to self-direct their time together using the worship guide in their house church baskets. I attended and facilitated the first meeting, was present but asked for participants to lead at the second meeting, not present in meetings three and four, and was present during the two final meetings. The purpose of my participation at the beginning and end of the groups was to share in the leadership as well as strengthen connections with the participants. Part of the final survey sought to understand how the lay leadership weeks were perceived, if it is a sustainable model moving forward as a pastor

cannot attend every small group meeting, and if leadership can bubble up from those in the group or needs to be pre-determined.

Ministry Skills: The ministry skills of communication, pastoral care, worship planning, small group facilitation, and hospitality were essential for this project. As this was a new ministry for HLC, I clearly explained the purpose and details of house church small groups through a variety of in person and one-on-one conversation, as well as broad church media communication. As a pastor for six years here at HLC, I have grown relationships of trust within the congregation that hopefully allowed for curiosity and the excitement of trying something new to outweigh anxiety and risk of the unknown. Pastoral care also played a role as I engaged with parishioners to hear their concerns, and care for any trepidations.

Planning a simple yet impactful time of worship required creativity in translating a formal liturgy to a casual and relaxed setting. The objective was to provide a multi-generational time of gathering around God's Word and Table for those who had varied exposure to worship. Intentional use of common language was important and without a reliance on unfamiliar words of worship such as liturgy, Eucharist, and absolution as examples.

Common language and approachability were one of several intentional aspects of hospitality that was important in group facilitation. I was purposeful in providing direct communication through email which provided written instructions on date, time, and location. In addition, printed worship handouts, found in Appendix-B, enabled smooth leadership for lay leaders as groups evolved and became more routine. Including worship elements which all ages and abilities could share in was also important. The accessibility of the location was critical so all could easily access groups without worries of stairs, uneven ground, or other hindrances. Finally, I ensured that all participants have both communion elements and fellowship food that

followed dietary restrictions. These intentional acts of care witnessed to the inclusivity and hospitality that Christ embodied.

Small group facilitation contributed to participant's feelings of welcome and inclusion. It was critical for each person to get to know the names of other participants, so nametags were part of the small group worship basket each week (Picture in Appendix-A). An ice breaker, fellowship activity, and prayer prompts in worship encouraged engagement and participation. And finally, a watchful eye to whom was the least vocal or participatory, and ensuring their comfort with the activities, was helpful for small group cohesion.

Recruitment: I recruited participants for three small groups using personal invitation and as well as church announcements, weekly e-newsletter, and monthly newsletter communication. Each group was composed of three to six households comprised of a variety of ages, household composition, life stages, time attending HLC, and years of residency in the Holmen area. Groups consisted of six to twelve participants with a minimum of six adults. All ages of the household were invited to attend and participate. Groups met twice monthly for three months from July through September. Given the need for social distancing, and wanting to meet in person, groups met outside and capitalized on warm summer temperatures.

Communication: Information for small groups was communicated via email. I emailed all groups detailing the small group logistics for the following week; location, time, date, and anything needed for the gathering. A reminder email was also sent the day before.

Analysis Methodology

Assessment: The effectiveness of house church small groups in growing awareness of God in daily living, participation in God's mission, and connections with one another was

measured through a series of surveys that I administered via email. The data I collected and analyzed was both qualitative and quantitative. Key recommendations and areas of further research were identified. Sample survey questions can be found in Appendix-C.

Pre-Group Survey: Participants were surveyed quantitatively and qualitatively before the first meeting to record demographic information. A baseline understanding of current participation in HLC, sense of belonging to our faith community, seeing God in daily life, participation in mission as one's vocation, and small group logistics of frequency and leadership was also assessed. Recommendations were drawn from this information on how to move forward with small group ministry in the future.

Post Group Survey: This survey was conducted following session six. Participants were asked to fill out the survey within one week of their final meeting. The questions from the pre-survey were repeated and new questions added that were specific to their small group experience. Additionally, I thanked all participants for their participation in the groups and asked them to complete a follow-up survey in three months. They were invited to keep meeting as a group for as long as they wish.

Three Month Follow-Up Survey: Participants were surveyed to determine lasting impact on the studied variables. Questions addressed if small group participation strengthened their connection to God, one another, and their role as disciples in everyday life. In addition, their feedback was important to make improvements to craft small groups going forward. This third survey completed the survey work of the groups.

Analysis and Recommendations: Pre, post, and three-month follow-up surveys were analyzed to determine the impact house church small groups had on both the individual

participant and their connection to God and HLC. Data illuminated the effectiveness of worship as the primary medium for small group participation, the location of meeting in one another's homes, the importance of communion and fellowship, lay leadership of the groups, and communication moving forward. The impact of the sermon as testimony and witness of God in everyday life and one's vocation as mission was assessed to determine their impact on connection with the group and sense of belonging to HLC, as well as an awareness of God all around us. The results have informed recommendations on house church small groups moving forward and further areas to be explored in future study. Sample survey questions can be found in Appendix-C.

Section 2: Participant Feedback and Implications

Section 2 will detail the results of the three participant surveys. I will include implications drawn from this research as well as outline the biases discovered in the analysis. Beginning with the initial survey, thirty responses were received prior to the small groups beginning. This represents all but three of the adult or high school aged youth who participated in the study. Parents provided feedback on their child's experience in an open-ended question in the second survey. Eight total youth participated with ages ranging from two years old to high school. Data and verbatim responses can be found in Appendix-D.

Unlike ethnographers and anthropologists, I, as the pastoral theologian, remained present in the body of Christ while conducting this research. Slade explains,

The lived theologian is located in the Church, but she or he is also located in the academy. There are fundamental differences between the academy and the Church—but moving in and between these institutions means that the lived theologian has to develop a

theological double consciousness ... the distance between the academic study of theology (particularly systematic theology) and the lived experience of people in the pews.³⁴⁶

With this dual role comes the possibility of inherent and unplanned biases in congregational research.

Two primary biases became apparent in reviewing the survey data in this study. The first is non-response bias which occurs when survey responses decline with subsequent surveys.³⁴⁷ This results in a different set of people answering the questions and impacting the one-to-one comparison of the data between surveys. Often, the more impassioned or engaged individuals respond either in more extreme positive or negative positions while more neutral or ambivalent individuals may choose not to complete the survey. Responses in this research declined from thirty initial survey respondents, to twenty-four in the second survey, then nineteen in the final survey. Despite sending reminders of the survey deadlines and reiterating the value of participant feedback, attrition occurred. Jovancic explains, “even though there’s no easy or foolproof way to avoid non-response bias, the safest and most effective tool is to get overall response rates as high as possible.”³⁴⁸ Therefore, after witnessing the reduction in responses from the first to the second survey, I moved the final survey from six months post group to three months.

A second area of bias which may have occurred is acquiescence bias where “a respondent shows a tendency to agree with whatever it is that you are asking or stating.”³⁴⁹ Some

³⁴⁶ Slade, 49.

³⁴⁷ Nemanja Jovancic, *5 Types of Bias in Research and How to Make Your Surveys Bias-Free*, Accessed February 24, 2022. <https://www.leadquizzes.com/blog/types-of-bias-in-research/#:~:text=4%20Main%20Types%20of%20Bias%20in%20Research%20and,attention%20to%20or%20realize%20it%20could%20cause%20bias.>

³⁴⁸ Jovancic, *5 Types of Bias in Research and How to Make Your Surveys Bias-Free*.

³⁴⁹ Jovancic, *5 Types of Bias in Research and How to Make Your Surveys Bias-Free*.

respondents may focus on more positive responses if that is their nature, or they may do so in an effort to support my research as their pastor. Others may want to move through the survey quickly and not take time to discern other responses. There is little that could have been done to prevent this as participants were made aware of the anonymity of their responses to promote unfiltered reactions to their small group experience. Yet the fact remains that the data has likely been influenced more heavily by those who valued the house church small group experience, thus making the results more directional than exact.

Taking these biases into consideration, I have analyzed the data between the three surveys to provide directional information with which to draw conclusions about the impact these small groups had on the faith of the participants and their sense of engagement with the broader HLC community. A summary of key metrics is found in Table A. In this chapter, I will report the data, extrapolate the implications, and then briefly share the limitations of this study as a springboard for future ministry as discussed in Chapter 8.

To begin, the demographics reported in the initial survey were varied in terms of age, gender, employment status, and years of membership at Holmen Lutheran Church. Three-fourths of participants were female, 83% were adults ranging in age from forty to seventy-nine years old, 43% had attended HLC for ten years or more while 47% have attended for five years or less. Most of the group has post-secondary education with 60% receiving a bachelor's or graduate degree. One third of the group had children in the home, one third do not, and 13% of the group was a single person household. Retirees comprised 43% of the groups while 40% were working full time. An intergenerational and diverse mix of participants was achieved. The faith background was comprised mostly of Lutheran faith, with one third of the group raised in

another faith tradition.³⁵⁰ Demographics of the small groups were similar to the overall congregation as a mix of young families, empty nesters, singles, and retirees. Therefore, I anticipate a similar impact on the overall congregation when these groups are offered more expansively moving forward.

Table A. Key Metrics	<i>Pre-Survey</i>	<i>Post Survey</i>	<i>3 Month Follow-Up Survey</i>
<i># of Respondents</i>	30	24	19
Often or always feeling like they belong and are valued	70%	75%	79%
Often or always would miss participating in the faith community	70%	79%	84%
Describes following Jesus as loving God and neighbor	60%	71%	74%
Often or always intentionally looking for God in daily life	60%	71%	79%
Faith positively impacted (moderately, very, or extremely) by looking for God in daily life			100%
Faith positively impacted (moderately, very, or extremely) by participation in house church small groups			95%

Measuring the feeling of connection to the HLC faith community was a priority as I hypothesized that increased participation would create an increased sense of belonging. Initially, 70% reported often or always feeling like they belong and are valued participants in the congregation. After their twelve-week involvement in house church small groups, this number increased to 75% and 79% in the three-month follow-up survey. Despite the potential bias,

³⁵⁰ With the growing Holmen population, and ELCA Lutheran comprising the only mainline Protestant denomination in the community, I would anticipate a continued growth in the ecumenical and denominational mixing of traditions moving forward. This also indicates a continued necessity for inclusive and not insider Lutheran language and vocabulary as many participants are new to attending HLC and may not share a Lutheran background.

these results would seem to indicate that participants felt a greater sense of belonging after their time in house church small groups.

Similarly, 70% reported that they often or always would miss participating in their faith community and this increased to 79% following small groups, increasing after three months to 84%. Only 21% reported they would only sometimes or seldom miss HLC if they stopped participating, which decreased to 11% at the follow-up survey. This was a decrease from nearly one of third of participants in the initial survey. Likewise, reaching out to the faith community for help in a time of crisis or challenge increased from 47% to 67%. After three months, nearly all respondents reported they would at least sometimes reach out if experiencing a crisis; 63% being very or extremely likely to do so.

Table B. Sense of Belonging Factors as Reported in Verbatim Responses	
<i>Positive Contributors</i>	<i>Inhibitors</i>
Participation outside of worship	Busy life priorities
Friendliness of the congregation	Pandemic realities
Inclusive and welcoming worship	
Invitation to participate in other ministries	

A sense of belonging and connection, while taking bias into account, appeared to increase significantly because of small group participation. From the verbatim responses, as summarized in Table B, participation outside of worship was the most shared contributing factor to feeling like one belonged to the faith community. In addition, the friendliness of the congregation, inclusive and welcoming worship, and an invitation to participate in the ministries of the congregation encouraged participation, faith formation, and feeling a part of something

bigger than oneself. Detracting from a sense of belonging was busy life priorities and pandemic realities, but most respondents shared that nothing was detracting from their connection to HLC.

For one third of the participants in small group, initial survey results illustrated that worship is the element of the faith community that they valued the most. Nearly a quarter expressed that it was fellowship. The remainder shared it was either their participation in outreach ministries or faith formation. This order of predominance was seen in all three surveys.

When asked what it means to be a follower of Jesus, 60% responded that it means that you love God and your neighbor. This increased to 71% following small groups and 74% after three months. The intentionality of looking for the presence of God in daily life also increased from 60% to 71% often or always having an awareness of God in the everyday at the time of small groups ending. Three months later, 79% report often or always deliberately considering God's presence.

Table C. Where God is Experienced in Daily Life Per Verbatim Responses
In loved ones
Daily activities
The way life unfolds
Nature
Community

As summarized in Table C, participants in the first survey described the location of God's presence to be most often experienced in loved ones, daily activities, how life events unfold, nature, and in the community God brings together. This changed little in the corresponding surveys. And while the Holy Spirit was referenced in the liturgy of small groups as the one who gathers and sends the body of Christ, only half of participants shared that they had a good understanding of the Spirit's role in sending disciples into God's mission in daily life. This is an

indication of the underrepresentation of the Holy Spirit in both adult education and liturgy in corporate worship as well as an opportunity for future study together.

<i>Elements of Future Groups</i>	<i>% Of Respondents with No Preference or Preferring Specific Element</i>
Intergenerational	75%
Lay and pastoral leadership acceptable	75%
Meet on the church lawn or other public space	68%
Monthly or twice monthly gatherings	83%
Sunday, Monday, or Thursday as preferred days of the week for groups	90%
Meet during the summer months	74%

The final element of participant feedback concerned the demographic makeup and logistics of small groups. 71% reported that diversity within small groups was very or extremely important. Specifically, regarding age of participants, 75% preferred groups to be intergenerational and 25% had no preference. This was similarly reported in the final survey. All those who had children attend found it to be enjoyable. The younger children were encouraged to bring toys and books and participate in the discussion as they felt comfortable. This seemed to balance boredom and engagement with such a large participant age range. Older children enjoyed their conversation with adults and inclusion in the discussion.

A very positive finding was high acceptance of having a lay leader facilitate discussion with only 25% preferring pastoral leadership at every gathering, as reported in the final survey. This greatly frees up the flexibility of future groups and the ability to empower lay leaders to share their gifts in leading. These elements of the small group were also found to be valuable

with little change in content needed, if any. Table D illustrates several key small group preferences for upcoming small group gatherings.

Communion was a component that was included as a way the Spirit gathers the body of Christ. Keeping in mind the potential for bias, data directionally shows that communion was an important element of small groups. For 46% of respondents at the conclusion of the groups, sharing this holy meal in small groups changed their understanding of the sacrament. This number increased to 63% reporting at least some impact on their understanding of the sacrament after three months. Per the verbatim responses, communion outside of a traditional worship setting provided an intimacy and fellowship with those sharing communion together. There was a translation of this holy meal also being a shared common meal together, in a similar way to communing around the altar rail which was a practiced discontinued several years ago.

Taking communion in our humble circle on the lawn also created a sense of unity with one another and Jesus at the table. The result of communion participation within the small groups, and the other elements of the original house churches in biblical times, resulted in 58% reporting that their faith was very or extremely impacted in a positive way. With regard to intentionally seeking God's presence in daily life, 84% reported a very or extremely positive impact on their faith. This intentional awareness prompt in small group discussion time was incredibly simple and easy to include and had a significant influence on confidence in God's activity in our day to day lives.

For future groups, either monthly or bi-monthly groups are preferred, in the evening and not on Friday or Saturday. The majority of respondents preferred to meet at the church or had no preference of location while one fourth preferred to meet in people's homes. While this may be an indication of the pandemic, general hosting and hospitality in homes has declined over the

years with a preference of meeting at coffee shops and restaurants instead. The church is also a neutral location and less intimidating to approach than a home when attending an activity for the first time.

While this early data indicates that house church small groups were impactful in building community and faith formation, it is important to note that each survey had a different mix of respondents. Overall participation in the surveys did recede over time. While thirty participated in the first survey, only twenty-four participated in the second, and nineteen in the three-month follow-up survey. I initially intended to send the follow-up survey at six months but moved this to three months as participation in the second survey dropped by 20% and the context due to the pandemic had not changed.

Per the follow-up survey, participation in other ministries of the congregation have remained the same following three months after the completion of small groups. Feedback from the surveys clearly showed, despite the unavoidable non-response and acquiescence biases, that house church small groups were well received and met the goals of this research: increased a sense of belonging and connection, positively impacted the faith development of participants, and increased awareness of God in their daily life. Yet without these groups being facilitated by a pastor or lay leader, and busy school and fall programming beginning, all groups disbanded following our twelve-week study. For 37% of those responding to the final survey, their only congregation participation point outside of these small groups is worship. Therefore, offering this small group opportunity in the future will be very important as another faith formation opportunity for those uninterested or uncomfortable engaging in other traditional non-worship activities of the congregation.

Areas for further exploration include how to encourage engagement outside of worship and understanding what the catalyst is to say “yes” to attending a small group, study, fellowship event, or being on a ministry team. Is it a personal invitation by the pastor or a friend, is it simply a matter of awareness of the ministry itself, or is it having a mentor to come alongside one’s first event? I also have questions around well-established ministries that would not consider themselves a small group: the chancel choir, property committee, and Council to name a few. How do these groups function to welcome new partners in this shared ministry, and how do they care for a member who is facing difficult times? Understanding best practices for creating a culture of care in ministry groups will be important work moving forward as more groups are rolled out.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Moving forward at HLC, it is important to acknowledge how fatigue from the pandemic and a frustration from the congregation’s pandemic policies are creating a challenging dynamic. Many are frustrated at a lack of normality with continued masking, no fellowship hour, and people not returning to worship; some see the lack of people in worship as a result of offering worship online. In this ever-changing time of pandemic improvements such as vaccines, yet not a return to pre-pandemic life due to the ever-changing viral variants, dissatisfaction and exhaustion are being felt and shared in some of the open-ended responses to these surveys. My hope is that offering outdoor small groups again in the summer of 2022 will provide a safe place for gathering as a community of faith, to commune and pray together, and continue to be the body of Christ in this time of flexing and adjusting.

Section 1: Implementation of Future Small Groups

Non-anxious leadership is critically important in this time of pandemic, but also in more tranquil norms. Shitama communicates words of encouragement which provide motivation for the joyful and challenging road ahead as a pastoral leader: “In any system, if there is someone who can maintain principled, non-anxious stands, while staying connected emotionally, they are leading through self-differentiation. And one non-anxious leader can make a difference.”³⁵¹

Authors Tim Conder and Dan Rhodes state the Rule of Christ as a unique foundation for decision making in a congregation that can bring a community together.³⁵² Through discernment, the congregation or ministry group works and discerns together, trusting the work of the Spirit to lead, guide, heal, and prepare hearts for conversation, repentance, forgiveness, mission, and service.³⁵³ By making decisions in this way, God’s mission is intentionally lifted as the focal point of all change work, and the mission of the congregation maintains alignment with God’s mission as well.³⁵⁴

As a guide in decision making, conducting a power analysis “ascertain[s] how power flows within the congregation currently” to understand how the system functions.³⁵⁵ Yet this

³⁵¹ Shitama, 59.

³⁵² Conder and Rhodes define the Rule of Christ as follows: “a unique style of community formation (reformation and reconstitution) wherein the community is harmonized to make authoritative judgements (Mt. 18:19-20). As such it is rule-bound without succumbing to legalism; it is creative and flexible without devolving into chaos or relativism. Incorporating fraternal community to address wrongs, attend to new circumstances, learning new information and modify hurtful and divisive structures. Thus, this process for decision-making provides a way for the community to remain true to its tradition without becoming stuck in immutable prescriptions—for example, allowing it to come to honor previously suppressed giftings (for instance, as with the ordination of women), and to reassess and realign its own practices (as when the practice the table goes awry, as it did in Corinth).” Cf. Tim Conder and Daniel Rhodes. *Organizing Church: Grassroots Practices for Embodying Change in Your Congregation, Your Community, and Our World*, (Danvers, MW: Chalice Press, 2017), 24.

³⁵³ Conder and Rhodes. *Organizing Church: Grassroots Practices for Embodying Change in Your Congregation, Your Community, and Our World*, 24.

³⁵⁴ Pastoral leadership is significantly different than my prior experience in corporate management. In a corporation, there is a clear chain of command and distinction between levels of power and decision making. Churches are opaque in that each congregation assesses the pastor’s role in decision making differently.

³⁵⁵ Conder and Rhodes, 36.

analysis is complicated, imbedded in rich layers of history and entangled relationships, and unique to each congregational context. As Conder and Rhodes explain, my role as pastor is not a “power over” relationship but “power with.”³⁵⁶ Relationship building is an on-going leadership initiative which includes “trust, dialogue, and mutual interest.”³⁵⁷ Finding those who value discernment, embrace the mission and vision of the congregation, and work well with others will be important for decision making and new changes in the future.

Founding an Adult Education and Fellowship Coalition

A leadership area where I am autonomous is ministry programming of adult education and fellowship. This has enabled me to try the new initiative of house church small groups as my doctoral project. However, to truly lead using the Rule of Christ, it is important that it is not only my discernment, but the discernment of others, that hear where the Spirit is leading. Throughout Paul’s letters to the early church, he encouraged meeting together to discern where God was calling the congregation, especially in times of change and disagreement.³⁵⁸

As the congregation meets, it is beneficial for the pastor to read the system before them as an ethnographer, learning the church’s history, how decisions are made, and who wields power and influence regardless of official title. This contributes valuable understanding to future discussions as the past and system are better understood, and parishioners feel heard before change is introduced. Conder and Rhodes recommend intentional continual community conversation and listening sessions to gain input on matters of importance. To make the house

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 38.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 48.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 67.

church small group initiative a broader and more sustainable ministry offering, collaborative idea generation will be required.³⁵⁹

To reach this goal, a coalition of discerners and doers will need to be established.³⁶⁰ This group will be motivated by making improvements and change, even when that change can be uncomfortable in the growing and flexing context that we are in.³⁶¹ This team will be comprised of other self-differentiated individuals that can withstand the anxiety of others. They are willing to lead with the presupposition that “true power does not come from position,” and be enthusiastic in confidently moving forward as a collective process toward a shared vision.³⁶² As Shitama writes, “to be a leader implies that you are going somewhere. This, by definition, involves change”³⁶³ and change can be frightening.

These individuals will form a coalition of adult faith formation and fellowship.³⁶⁴ This group of lay leaders will meet regularly to discuss current education and fellowship opportunities for adults, where opportunities for new programs exist as the context changes and collaborate on how to meet these new faith formation and fellowship needs. Conder and Rhodes explain that “one curates a community that is perpetually organizing and reorganizing as a response to the movements of God’s Spirit.”³⁶⁵ Sunday morning adult education, prayer team, weekly Bible study, book clubs, small groups, fellowship, and new faith and community life activities will be discerned through prayer, listening, and conversation.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 71.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 110.

³⁶¹ Shitama, 115.

³⁶² Ibid., 110.

³⁶³ Ibid., 94.

³⁶⁴ In *Leading Change*, John Kotter describes establishing a guiding coalition that has a variety of gifts, leadership skills, and credibility who work toward a common goal. Cf. John P. Kotter. *Leading Change*, (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 59.

³⁶⁵ Conder and Rhodes, 110.

Identifying and Empowering Lay Leadership

In deciding who would work well on such a committee of visioning, asking questions about why a person likes to be involved in adult faith formation, in what activities are they involved, and why they attend the congregation is important. Asking their vision for the ministry of adult education and fellowship will also bring to light their dreams and whether they are willing to pray and discern, individually and collectively. This will be critical information to gather in creating this leadership team. Asking these questions requires relationship building, time, and faith which are essential for working well as a trusted group who can pray and live into God's future together.³⁶⁶ Yet not all members of the body of Christ are equipped for the work of discernment where the established vision is followed by energy and a sense of urgency.³⁶⁷

In the context of HLC, the need for connection during this time of pandemic upheaval is most necessary. And as the pandemic subsides, re-connecting and returning to in-person activities will be important. This will require new and intentional habits to be formed. Encouragement from trusted leaders in the congregation is required to communicate the vision of small group fellowship and generate buy-in from the congregation. This coalition of adult learners and leaders will be encouraged to communicate the vision of the adult faith formation and fellowship team, modeling the vision by their participation, and empowering others to give new small groups and other initiatives of education and connection a try.³⁶⁸

These lay leaders will be given the opportunity to lead and facilitate newly developed small groups, anchoring them into this new changed culture, where members trust in their

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 114.

³⁶⁷ Kotter, 23.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 23.

guidance and dedication to the congregation, learning, and connection. Those that accept this call to serve as small group facilitators will receive training on the logistics and expectations for the groups. We will identify and celebrate their gifts of welcome, inclusion, hospitality, and management.³⁶⁹

Building Momentum and Communicating Success

As the groups evolve and feedback from participants is received, this adult education coalition will be encouraged to share the small successes along the way, re-shaping the next steps as needed, and acknowledging that changes to the plan are tweaks and not unwelcomed failure.³⁷⁰ This coalition will work together on the common vision of faith formation and fellowship initiatives while dividing this work into short term goals.³⁷¹ Each small behavior change and new habit will build upon one another to create new behaviors, norms, and lasting change.³⁷² The coalition will be the public relations for the change, along with me, and will be equipped to easily share a brief elevator speech of the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the current fellowship goal as it fits into the larger vision: improving the congregation's vitality by building the mark of *Relationships of Care and Belonging*.³⁷³

The members of the coalition, like the pastor, will function as both managers and leaders as they manage the current adult offerings while charging ahead to future programs.³⁷⁴ These new endeavors will require day to day engagement and management while also visioning, dreaming, and discerning where the Holy Spirit is leading. This group will be a sounding board

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 11.

³⁷² Ibid., 14.

³⁷³ Ibid., 9.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 30.

for new ideas and create next steps toward a vision of adult faith formation and fellowship that aligns with the church's mission and vision. To be effective, the coalition's vision must be one that is desired, realistic, clear, can flex as the environment changes, and can be communicated with ease.³⁷⁵ As John Kotter explains,

The real power of a vision is unleashed only when most of those involved in an enterprise or activity have a common understanding of its goals and direction. That shared sense of a desirable future can help motivate and coordinate the kinds of actions that create transformations.³⁷⁶

Change does not come, however, without anxiety and pain as Shitama describes at length. Having a coalition to celebrate the small victories will help to emphasize that the discomfort is worth the gains: faith formation, connection, and renewed engagement with the congregation, a heightened sense of belonging and feeling part of something bigger than oneself.³⁷⁷ Again, these are the overarching needs expressed in Holmen Lutheran's extensive survey work of the congregation. Keeping the congregation apprised of the impact of house church small groups and other initiatives as steps toward meeting these deep needs will illuminate the "why" behind the changes.

Creating a Culture of Change

It is my hope that over time, change becomes a recognized and celebrated component of the DNA of HLC and an acknowledgement of the deep reliance on the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us into the future. How the church has "always done it" will not bring about the discipleship needed to follow Jesus in our changed context and reality of today. Kotter explains,

A strategy for embracing the past will probably become increasingly ineffective the next few decades. Better for most of us to start learning how to cope with change, to develop

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 74.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 87.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 127.

whatever leadership potential we have, and to help our organizations in the transformation process.³⁷⁸

And while Kotter intended his book for secular readership, the church must grasp his passion for embracing change. The Holy Spirit blew over the waters of creation, through the house gathering on Pentecost, and continues in our church today. We are called to follow wherever the Spirit is leading which inevitably means change is always on the horizon.

Unfortunately, the psychology of change resistance is complex and even when one is inclined to make change happen in their head or heart, the opposite faction is often unwilling.³⁷⁹ Chip Heath and Dan Heath speak plainly to this conundrum: “for anything to change, someone has to start acting differently.”³⁸⁰ Addressing what causes anxiety and apprehension to change will enhance the change opportunity and increase its feasibility. In the context of Holmen Lutheran, our survey work clearly conveys a deep desire for connection and the value of small group ministry. However, less than one quarter of the congregation surveyed attend any adult education or fellowship offering. Their head sees a need, and yet they are not motivated to participate beyond worship.

What is necessary is a clear path and course of action shaped to appeal to both the head and the heart.³⁸¹ Providing engagement opportunities that are as simple, clear, and as turnkey as possible reduces the confusion and uncertainty that fuels resistance.³⁸² Especially in this pandemic time, when each normal daily activity has an additional layer of complication (safety, masks, distancing, indoors or outdoors), fatigue for the head has set in. The heart may be

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 194.

³⁷⁹ The head, referred to as “the rider,” and the heart, “the elephant,” do not always agree. Cf. Chip Heath and Dan Heath. *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), 5.

³⁸⁰ Chip Heath and Dan Heath. *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, 4.

³⁸¹ Heath and Heath, 19.

³⁸² Ibid., 17.

willing, but the head is exhausted from decision making.³⁸³ A clear vision for the change activity, house church small groups for example, must be communicated.

Heath and Heath refer to this clarity as creating a “destination post card” which describes the short-term goal and its impact. With house church small groups, clearly providing the picture of what a gathering would entail, its elements of worship and fellowship, location, time commitment, and purpose, the congregation will be more comfortable knowing what they are signing up for. The lay leaders of the coalition, who are trusted and respected members of the congregation, can share this “postcard” with others in their conversation before worship, at other ministries, and in their friendships and social gatherings.

As the pastoral leader overseeing this coalition and vision, I would “script the critical moves” to provide clear next steps to achieve each short goal, project, or program as part of the bigger vision.³⁸⁴ This will limit analysis paralysis and encourage a necessary urgency to move forward. This motivates the heart by connecting this change to the crisis at hand with a hope for a better future. It recreates the change into manageable and realistic steps on the way to the larger vision.³⁸⁵ As house church small groups from this project are analyzed and new learning is gained from the survey research, the hope is to build momentum and trigger a positive spiral of behavior as part of a cultural change where roadblocks to trying a new ministry have been reduced.³⁸⁶

Appealing to both the head and the heart is challenging, and small goals will fail on the way to reaching the overall desired vision.³⁸⁷ The Spirit leads us through these dips and provides

³⁸³ Ibid., 12.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 56.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 129.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 141.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 162.

learning where we grow into a next step more refined and direct than before. Over time, each change makes the next into a habit where change is an expectation of being a disciple at HLC.³⁸⁸ Change becomes a matter of identity where discipleship has, at its source, following Christ and therefore not being the same person and community today as you were yesterday. Our identity rests in this following and growth. Therefore, our change is a choice and not simply a consequential need from the effects of the pandemic or any other contextual variation.³⁸⁹

The pandemic has brought new habits such as limited in-person participation in the faith community. Yet, even before this global reality, HLC was seeking to grow in discipleship and connection within the body of Christ. By expanding house church small groups as a wider congregational offering, new habits can be formed to build the caring relationships HLC deeply desires.

Supporting and Sustaining the Change

Breathing new life into this coalition that discerns and supports new adult faith formation and fellowship initiatives will be necessary through constant identification of new leadership. Intentionally elevating the gifts of participants in our faith community for vision work, and training new lay leadership to facilitate ministries, will energize the coalition with fresh voices and ideas. And, as each new program is introduced, post-ministry feedback will continue to be important to reinforce positive outcomes and communicate the overall mission, long after this doctoral research is completed.

Just as the Holy Spirit will lead and guide HLC into new ministries, I trust the Spirit's guidance on my call here as pastor. Establishing the adult ministry coalition will ensure that

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 215.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 154.

vision work and discernment continue as pastoral changes arise. Lay leaders will be trained to sustain ministries and create new ones as ministry life cycles run their natural course or contexts change.

Empowered leaders will continue to root change as part of the identity of being a disciple of Jesus at HLC. Additionally, the community of faith will witness participation beyond worship by trusted friends of the faith. The risk and barrier to try new ministries will become easier to navigate as new connections are made, engagement in adult ministries grow, and the mark of *Relationships of Care and Belonging* is supported now and into the future.

Section 2: Limitations of the Study and Further Research

The global pandemic is impacting all aspects of life, including the church, and the extent of the ramifications may not be known until much further into the future. Yet in the context of my faith community, small groups on the church lawn provided a respite from the fear of gathering in other public places by meeting outside, in the warmer months where viral spread was lower, and allowing for physical distancing. What these precautions did not allow, however, was meeting in one another's homes and sharing of a meal akin to the historical Biblical house church. Communion also was served in individual juice and wafer kits instead of passing a loaf of bread and common cup for intinction. Store-bought snacks were individually packaged for fellowship time instead of sharing homemade treats. This research was also unable to address the entirety of questions regarding the catalyst to engaging in an activity outside of worship and the culture of care created with group longevity.

Based on the findings of this study, and the importance of creating a lay leadership team for future success, 2022 will be a building year for the adult ministry program at Holmen

Lutheran Church. Results from the project clearly support expanding small group ministry that include God's Word, communion, discussion, prayer, and fellowship. Intergenerational casual gatherings will be a critical ministry component at HLC moving forward. Therefore, house church small groups will be reimagined as Faith and Fire Small Groups in summer 2022.³⁹⁰ Intergenerational groups will all meet on the same night, on the church lawn, and be led by me, our youth minister, and a lay leader from each group. Groups will meet monthly from May to October and utilize the safety of outdoor gatherings with leadership rotating between groups each month. This allows participants to be led both by staff and trained lay volunteers. After forty-five minutes of welcome, scripture, discussion, communion, and prayer, participants from all groups will gather around the fire pit for s'mores and fellowship.

The format of the groups will follow the house church small group guides with updated get-to-know-you questions and Bible stories for this year. A simple follow-up survey will be given to participants to determine if this intergenerational monthly format, with a combination of lay and staff leadership, meets their needs as expressed in this project's research. Additionally, an adult education committee will be established to train new small group leaders, recruit leadership, and generate ideas for future adult ministries.

³⁹⁰ I have renamed house church small groups *Faith and Fire Small Groups* moving forward as groups will not meet inside the home, and the element of fire represents both the Holy Spirit and a gathering place.

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The biggest blessing in my life is my family and my closest friends who have become family. Their prayers, support, and listening ear have provided the encouragement that has fueled this doctoral journey. I thank them for their faithfulness in their love of God, call to witness to the Spirit's leading, and their laughter and love. I also am grateful for the people of Holmen Lutheran Church, their willingness to try new adventures in ministry, and the doctorate team who held me in prayer as well as the new ministries these years of study have fostered. I cannot imagine doing my doctoral work anywhere else!

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruiting Material

Letter to the Congregation:

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

I am excited to share with you that my educational journey continues! I am now in my third year of doctoral work at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. It is now time to embark on my capstone project research which I am fortunate to conduct right here at Holmen Lutheran Church! The focus of my Doctor of Ministry program is Congregational Vitality.

With that theme in mind, I delved into our extensive congregational surveys conducted as part of our long range planning process. That research showed there is a longing in our congregation to make more significant personal connections and grow participation in church activities in addition to Sunday or Wednesday worship. There is a deep desire for feeling the care of our faith community on a personal level and experience a greater sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself. And with the pandemic restrictions prohibiting gathering indoors and in person for worship, I believe there is a significant longing and need to meet together to increase our engagement with one another.

The early church, at the dawn of Christianity, made connections by meeting together regularly. In the book of Hebrews we read, “let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. ²⁵ Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.” The way the early church met was through house churches. A few households would gather together, from infants to the elderly, and worship, fellowship, share God’s holy meal together, and share where faith and real life meet. It is my goal to learn from these early church gatherings and apply them to a modern day small group setting.

Therefore, my project will be constructing house church small groups where three to four households will gather, outside using social distancing, in the warm months of the summer. These groups will meet to share in a time of informal worship with communion, and instead of a sermon, share with each other two things. 1) Where have you seen God in your daily life in the past week? And, 2) where has the Holy Spirit sent you as a disciple? After this time of sharing, we will have prayer and fellowship as we share our lives together and get to know one another. Groups will be intentionally a mix of old and young, single and multi-person households, and those attending our church for short and long periods of time.

Groups will meet a total of six times, every other week over three months, and will take a before, after, and six month follow-up survey. After the summer, these groups may choose to continue or disband. Participant feedback will be used to launch groups in the future which help to grow connections to both God and one another. More information will be coming out about these groups and space is limited to sixteen households.

If you are interested in getting to know others in your faith community on a deeper level, and grow your awareness of God in your everyday life, please consider being a part of these summer small groups. My prayer is that they will help provide much needed connection, as we grow in our faith together, during this long time of physical distancing and worshipping in our homes. To sign-up, or for questions, please email me at pastorallison@holmenluth.org. I am excited to see how the Holy Spirit moves through these house church small groups and knits us together as the body of Christ!

Your sister in Christ,

Pastor Allison

E-Blast/Facebook Post/Newsletter Post

Have you ever wondered how the early church got started and formed lasting communities of faith? They gathered in each other's homes for casual worship and fellowship. All ages participated as they shared faith and life together.

Pastor Allison is researching small group ministry for her doctoral work and is inviting sixteen households to participate this summer. Small groups will meet six times, twice a month, outside and distanced. If you are interested in growing connections within your faith community and practicing looking for God in your everyday life, these groups are for you! Please email Pastor Allison for more info: pastorallison@holmenluth.org.

Slides for Online Worship Announcements and Facebook

House Church Small Groups: Casual Worship, Fellowship, and Fun!

- Join an outdoor small group that meets six times over the course of the summer.
- Please see Pastor Allison for more info at pastorallison@holmenluth.org 😊



House Church Small Groups: Casual Worship, Fellowship, and Fun!

- Join an outdoor small group that meets six times over the course of the summer.
- Sundays at 4PM
- Mondays at 6:30PM
- Thursdays at 6:30PM
- All ages in the household welcome 😊



Prayer of Blessing

P: Loving God,

C: We ask you to bless our summer small groups as we come back together after months apart. The distance between us was necessary but hard as we longed to see your face in the face of others. Help us to learn to see you in our everyday lives as we share stories of faith and life together. Unite us around the humble table on the lawn as we share communion. Bring us joy in our laughter and fun as we eat treats and fellowship together. Thank you for promising to be there with us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Appendix B: Small Group Guides

House Church Small Groups

Week 1



- ✦ Gathered Together: welcome and fellowship
 - What is your perfect day? OR
 - What is your best road trip snack?

- ✦ Christ Meets Us in the Word

Jesus Calls the Disciples- Luke 5: 1-11

One day Jesus was standing beside Lake Gennesaret when the crowd pressed in around him to hear God's word. 2 Jesus saw two boats sitting by the lake. The fishermen had gone ashore and were washing their nets. 3 Jesus boarded one of the boats, the one that belonged to Simon,

then asked him to row out a little distance from the shore. Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. 4 When he finished speaking to the crowds, he said to Simon, "Row out farther, into the deep water, and drop your nets for a catch." 5 Simon replied, "Master, we've worked hard all night and caught nothing. But because you say so, I'll drop the nets." 6 So they dropped the nets and their catch was so huge that their nets were splitting. 7 They signaled for their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They filled both boats so full that they were about to sink. 8 When Simon Peter saw the catch, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Leave me, Lord, for I'm a sinner!" 9 Peter and those with him were overcome with amazement because of the number of fish they caught. 10 James and John, Zebedee's sons, were Simon's partners and they were amazed too. Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid. From now on, you will be fishing for people." 11 As soon as they brought the boats to the shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

✦ God Meets Us on the Journey

- Where has God recently met you in your daily life?
- Where has the Holy Spirit sent you to participate in God's mission of love for the world?

✦ Preparing our Hearts for Communion: **Loving God, we know that we come to this meal just as we are, imperfect and in need of your love and forgiveness. Give us your grace and mercy found in the body and blood of Jesus our Savior, and provide strength for the journey ahead, until we are united with you and all of the saints. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

✦ Gathered at the Table

- The table at Holmen Lutheran Church is Christ's table and all are welcome there. Tonight's bread and wine have been blessed at that table to be shared. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." May we be nurtured through this holy meal of forgiveness that we will share together and be strengthened as the body of Christ. Jesus loves you yesterday, today, and always!
- Share the meal together: This is the body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ shed for you. Amen.
- The Holy Spirit has gathered us together today and united our lives as Christ's body in the world. Let us pray the words of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught his disciples and still is a guide for our prayer lives today:

- *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

✦ United in Prayer

- Joys and Concerns, Highs and Lows

✦ Sent to Love God and Neighbor

- Thank you, God, for our time together today. Bless each and every one in this house church small group, continue to make yourself known to us in our daily lives, and nudge us through your Spirit who sustains us on the way. Give us courage to go where you lead and to share the grace you have given us with those you place on our path. Amen.

✦ Food and Fellowship

Notes:

- Thank you for being a part of HLC's House Church Small Groups!
- Small Group Dates and Times
 - Group 1: Meets Sundays at 4pm on 7/11, 7/25, 8/8, 8/22, 9/12, and 9/26
 - Group 2: Meets Mondays at 6:30PM on 7/12, 7/26, 8/9, 8/23, 9/13, and 9/27
 - Group 3: Meets Thursdays at 6:30PM on 7/15, 7/29, 8/12, 8/26, 9/16, 9/30
- Please let Pastor Allison know if you are unable to attend any of the group meetings: pastorallison@holmenluth.org.

House Church Small Groups

Week 2



- ✦ Gathered Together: welcome and fellowship
 - Would you rather be a mouse or an elephant? OR
 - What flavor of ice cream would you want to make?

- ✦ Christ Meets Us in the Word

Zacchaeus Was A Wee Little Man- Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. 2 A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your

home today.” 6 So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. 7 Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” 8 Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.” 9 Jesus said to him, “Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 The Human One came to seek and save the lost.”

Jesus Welcomes Children- Luke 18: 15-17

People were bringing babies to Jesus so that he would bless them. When the disciples saw this, they scolded them. 16 Then Jesus called them to him and said, “Allow the children to come to me. Don’t forbid them, because God’s kingdom belongs to people like these children. 17 I assure you that whoever doesn’t welcome God’s kingdom like a child will never enter it.”

✦ God Meets Us on the Journey

- Where has God recently met you in your daily life?
- Where has the Holy Spirit sent you to participate in God’s mission of love for the world?

✦ Preparing our Hearts for Communion: **Loving God, we know that we come to this meal just as we are, imperfect and in need of your love and forgiveness. Give us your grace and mercy found in the body and blood of Jesus our Savior, and provide strength for the journey ahead, until we are united with you and all of the saints. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

✦ Gathered at the Table

- The table at Holmen Lutheran Church is Christ’s table and all are welcome there. Tonight’s bread and wine have been blessed at that table to be shared. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” May we be nurtured through this holy meal of forgiveness that we will share together and be strengthened as the body of Christ. Jesus loves you yesterday, today, and always!
- Share the meal together: This is the body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ shed for you. Amen.

- The Holy Spirit has gathered us together today and united our lives as Christ's body in the world. Let us pray the words of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught his disciples and still is a guide for our prayer lives today:

- *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

✦ United in Prayer

- Joys and Concerns, Highs and Lows

✦ Sent to Love God and Neighbor

- Thank you, God, for our time together today. Bless each and every one in this house church small group, continue to make yourself known to us in our daily lives, and nudge us through your Spirit who sustains us on the way. Give us courage to go where you lead and to share the grace you have given us with those you place on our path. Amen.

✦ Food and Fellowship

Notes:

- Thank you for being a part of HLC's House Church Small Groups!
- Small Group Dates and Times
 - Group 1: Meets Sundays at 4pm on 7/11, 7/25, 8/8, 8/22, 9/12, and 9/26
 - Group 2: Meets Mondays at 6:30PM on 7/12, 7/26, 8/9, 8/23, 9/13, and 9/27
 - Group 3: Meets Thursdays at 6:30PM on 7/15, 7/29, 8/12, 8/26, 9/16, 9/30
- Please let Pastor Allison know if you are unable to attend any of the group meetings: pastorallison@holmenluth.org.

House Church Small Groups

Week 3



- ✦ Gathered Together: welcome and fellowship
 - If you could have one super hero power, what would you choose and why? OR
 - If you could live anywhere, where would it be?

- ✦ Christ Meets Us in the Word

Lost Sheep and Lost Coin- Luke 15:1-10

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. ² The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn't he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places

it on his shoulders. 6 When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost sheep.' 7 In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives. 8 "Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won't light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? 9 When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost coin.' 10 In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life."

✦ God Meets Us on the Journey

- Where has God recently met you in your daily life?
- Where has the Holy Spirit sent you to participate in God's mission of love for the world?

✦ Preparing our Hearts for Communion: **Loving God, we know that we come to this meal just as we are, imperfect and in need of your love and forgiveness. Give us your grace and mercy found in the body and blood of Jesus our Savior, and provide strength for the journey ahead, until we are united with you and all of the saints. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

✦ Gathered at the Table

- The table at Holmen Lutheran Church is Christ's table and all are welcome there. Tonight's bread and wine have been blessed at that table to be shared. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." May we be nurtured through this holy meal of forgiveness that we will share together and be strengthened as the body of Christ. Jesus loves you yesterday, today, and always!
- Share the meal together: This is the body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ shed for you. Amen.
- The Holy Spirit has gathered us together today and united our lives as Christ's body in the world. Let us pray the words of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught his disciples and still is a guide for our prayer lives today:
- *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

- ✦ United in Prayer
 - Joys and Concerns, Highs and Lows

- ✦ Sent to Love God and Neighbor
 - Thank you, God, for our time together today. Bless each and every one in this house church small group, continue to make yourself known to us in our daily lives, and nudge us through your Spirit who sustains us on the way. Give us courage to go where you lead and to share the grace you have given us with those you place on our path. Amen.

- ✦ Food and Fellowship

Notes:

- Thank you for being a part of HLC's House Church Small Groups!
- Small Group Dates and Times
 - Group 1: Meets Sundays at 4pm on 7/11, 7/25, 8/8, 8/22, 9/12, and 9/26
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House Church Small Groups

Week 4



- ✦ Gathered Together: welcome and fellowship
 - If you won the lotto and had to give half away to a good cause, where would you donate it? OR
 - If you could have any pet, what would you have?

- ✦ Christ Meets Us in the Word

Feeding of the 5000- Matthew 14: 13-21

When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities. 14 When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick. 15

That evening his disciples came and said to him, "This is an isolated place and it's getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 But Jesus said to them, "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat." 17 They replied, "We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish." 18 He said, "Bring them here to me." 19 He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples. Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. 21 About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.

✦ God Meets Us on the Journey

- Where has God recently met you in your daily life?
- Where has the Holy Spirit sent you to participate in God's mission of love for the world?

✦ Preparing our Hearts for Communion: **Loving God, we know that we come to this meal just as we are, imperfect and in need of your love and forgiveness. Give us your grace and mercy found in the body and blood of Jesus our Savior, and provide strength for the journey ahead, until we are united with you and all of the saints. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

✦ Gathered at the Table

- The table at Holmen Lutheran Church is Christ's table and all are welcome there. Tonight's bread and wine have been blessed at that table to be shared. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." May we be nurtured through this holy meal of forgiveness that we will share together and be strengthened as the body of Christ. Jesus loves you yesterday, today, and always!
- Share the meal together: This is the body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ shed for you. Amen.
- The Holy Spirit has gathered us together today and united our lives as Christ's body in the world. Let us pray the words of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught his disciples and still is a guide for our prayer lives today:
- *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into*

temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

- ✦ United in Prayer
 - Joys and Concerns, Highs and Lows

- ✦ Sent to Love God and Neighbor
 - Thank you, God, for our time together today. Bless each and every one in this house church small group, continue to make yourself known to us in our daily lives, and nudge us through your Spirit who sustains us on the way. Give us courage to go where you lead and to share the grace you have given us with those you place on our path. Amen.

- ✦ Food and Fellowship

Notes:

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House Church Small Groups

Week 5



- ✦ Gathered Together: welcome and fellowship
 - If you were president, what would you do first? OR
 - What is your favorite holiday?

- ✦ Christ Meets Us in the Word

The Greatest Commandment- Matthew 22: 34-40

34 When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had left the Sadducees speechless, they met together. 35 One of them, a legal expert, tested him. 36 "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 He replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. 38 This is the first and greatest

commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. 40 All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

The Great Commission- Matthew 28:16-20

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. 18 Jesus came near and spoke to them, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. 19 Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”

✦ God Meets Us on the Journey

- Where has God recently met you in your daily life?
- Where has the Holy Spirit sent you to participate in God’s mission of love for the world?

✦ Preparing our Hearts for Communion: **Loving God, we know that we come to this meal just as we are, imperfect and in need of your love and forgiveness. Give us your grace and mercy found in the body and blood of Jesus our Savior, and provide strength for the journey ahead, until we are united with you and all of the saints. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

✦ Gathered at the Table

- The table at Holmen Lutheran Church is Christ’s table and all are welcome there. Tonight’s bread and wine have been blessed at that table to be shared. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” May we be nurtured through this holy meal of forgiveness that we will share together and be strengthened as the body of Christ. Jesus loves you yesterday, today, and always!
- Share the meal together: This is the body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ shed for you. Amen.
- The Holy Spirit has gathered us together today and united our lives as Christ’s body in the world. Let us pray the words of the Lord’s Prayer that Jesus taught his disciples and still is a guide for our prayer lives today:
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trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

- ✦ United in Prayer
 - Joys and Concerns, Highs and Lows

- ✦ Sent to Love God and Neighbor
 - Thank you, God, for our time together today. Bless each and every one in this house church small group, continue to make yourself known to us in our daily lives, and nudge us through your Spirit who sustains us on the way. Give us courage to go where you lead and to share the grace you have given us with those you place on our path. Amen.

- ✦ Food and Fellowship

Notes:

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House Church Small Groups

Week 6



- ✦ Gathered Together: welcome and fellowship
 - If you could choose any job and got paid all you needed, what would you choose?
OR
 - Who or what makes you laugh?

- ✦ Christ Meets Us in the Word

Breakfast with Jesus- John 21:1-14

Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how it happened: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two other disciples were together. 3 Simon Peter told them, "I'm going

fishing.” They said, “We’ll go with you.” They set out in a boat, but throughout the night they caught nothing. 4 Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn’t realize it was Jesus. 5 Jesus called to them, “Children, have you caught anything to eat?” They answered him, “No.” 6 He said, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn’t haul in the net. 7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!”

When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they weren’t far from shore, only about one hundred yards. 9 When they landed, they saw a fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. 10 Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you’ve just caught.” 11 Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net hadn’t torn, even with so many fish. 12 Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

✦ God Meets Us on the Journey

- Where has God recently met you in your daily life?
- Where has the Holy Spirit sent you to participate in God’s mission of love for the world?

✦ Preparing our Hearts for Communion: **Loving God, we know that we come to this meal just as we are, imperfect and in need of your love and forgiveness. Give us your grace and mercy found in the body and blood of Jesus our Savior, and provide strength for the journey ahead, until we are united with you and all of the saints. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

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✦ United in Prayer

- Joys and Concerns, Highs and Lows

✦ Sent to Love God and Neighbor

- Thank you, God, for our time together today. Bless each and every one in this house church small group, continue to make yourself known to us in our daily lives, and nudge us through your Spirit who sustains us on the way. Give us courage to go where you lead and to share the grace you have given us with those you place on our path. Amen.

✦ Food and Fellowship

Notes:

- Thank you for being a part of HLC's House Church Small Groups!
- You will receive a survey via email to complete for each adult who participated in your household.
- In March, you will receive a six month follow up survey.
- I appreciate your participation and growing in faith together!

House Church Worship Basket and Small Group Picture:



Appendix C: Pre, Post, and Follow-up Surveys

Pre-Group Survey

This survey is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for DM 835-01 taught by Rev. Dr. Sara Koenig and Rev. Dr. Chip Hardwick, at the University of Dubuque. This course is in compliance with the course certification requirements of UD's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects.

1. What gender do you identify as?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Prefer to self-describe:
 - d. Prefer not to answer.

2. What is your age?
 - a. 0-5 years old
 - b. 6-12 years old
 - c. 13-18 years old
 - d. 19-25 years old
 - e. 26-29 years old
 - f. 30-39 years old
 - g. 40-49 years old
 - h. 50-59 years old
 - i. 60-69 years old
 - j. 70-79 years old
 - k. 80-89 years old
 - l. 90-99 years old

3. Please specify your ethnicity.
 - a. Caucasian
 - b. Black or African-American
 - c. Latino or Hispanic
 - d. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - e. American Indian or Native Alaskan
 - f. Two or More
 - g. Other/Unknown
 - h. Prefer not to say

4. How many years have you attended Holmen Lutheran Church?
 - a. 0-2 years
 - b. 3-5 years
 - c. 6-10 years
 - d. 11-19 years
 - e. 20 or more years

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - a. Preschool or elementary school
 - b. Middle school
 - c. High School
 - d. Some college
 - e. Trade School
 - f. Associate's Degree
 - g. Bachelor's Degree
 - h. Graduate Degree
 - i. Prefer not to say

6. What is your household composition?
 - a. Single
 - b. Single with children in the home
 - c. Married or partnered
 - d. Married or partnered with children in the home
 - e. Divorced
 - f. Divorced with children in the home
 - g. Widowed
 - h. Widowed with children in the home
 - i. Other

7. What is your current employment status?

- a. Full-time
- b. Part-time
- c. Seeking opportunities
- d. Retired
- e. A Homemaker
- f. Self-employed
- g. A Student
- h. Military
- i. Unable to work
- j. Prefer not to say

8. Did you grow up Lutheran?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. If no, which denomination:

Please answer the following questions using this five point scale.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all/ Never Slightly/ Seldom Moderately/Sometimes Very/Often Extremely/ Always

9. Do you feel that you belong or are a valued participant in the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

10. Where do you see God in everyday life?

11. Would you miss the HLC faith community if you stopped participating?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

12. How well do you feel known at HLC?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

13. How well do you feel that you know others at HLC?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

14. If you left the HLC faith community, do you feel that you would be missed?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

15. Do you feel connected to the people and ministries at HLC?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

16. What do you hope to feel as part of the HLC faith community?

17. If you had a challenge or crisis, would you reach out to the HLC faith community for prayers, support, or help?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe

Why or why not?

18. What activities at Holmen Lutheran Church do you participate in? Check all that apply.
- a. Worship
 - b. Committees or Council
 - c. Music Ministry
 - d. Youth Ministry
 - e. Facilities Assistance
 - f. Office Help
 - g. Stephen Ministry
 - h. Bible Studies
 - i. Sunday School
 - j. Book Club
 - k. UFFDA
 - l. Technology and Social Media
 - m. Weekly Offering Counting
 - n. Quilting/Sewing/Knitting
 - o. Faith Chest Builder
 - p. Sunday School Teacher
 - q. Homebound Communion Minister
 - r. Fellowship Small Groups
19. How would you describe what it means to be a disciple of Jesus?
20. What do you feel is your role as a disciple in everyday life?
21. What element of worship is most meaningful to you?
- a. Prayer
 - b. Silence
 - c. Scripture Reading
 - d. Sermon
 - e. Fellowship
 - f. Holy Communion
 - g. Singing
 - h. Offering
 - i. Reciting the Apostle's Creed
 - j. Confession and Forgiveness
- Why is this most meaningful?
22. What element of the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community do you value most?
- a. Worship
 - b. Fellowship
 - c. Pastoral Care
 - d. Service/Community Outreach
 - e. Faith Formation and Bible study
 - f. Ministry teams and committees

23. What would you say is God's mission and how do you participate in it?
24. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in your life?
25. How has your faith been impacted by intentionally looking for the presence of God in everyday life?
26. How has your understanding of the Holy Spirit sending you into God's mission within daily life been impacted?

Post Group Survey

This survey is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for DM 835-01 taught by Rev. Dr. Sara Koenig and Rev. Dr. Chip Hardwick, at the University of Dubuque. This course is in compliance with the course certification requirements of UD's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects.

1. Have you ever participated in a small group before house church small groups?
 - a. Yes (Please continue with question 2.)
 - b. No (Please now skip to question 4.)
2. If you have participated in a small group before, how are Holmen Lutheran's house church small groups different?
3. Are these differences
 - a. Positive
 - b. Negative
 Please explain.
4. Where do you see God in everyday life?
5. How would you describe what it means to be a disciple of Jesus?

Please answer the following questions using this five point scale.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all/ Never Slightly/ Seldom Moderately/Sometimes Very/Often Extremely/ Always

6. House church small groups were formed to be inclusive of the diversity found at HLC: age, household composition, years attending HLC, denominational background, education, gender, and household composition. How important is this diversity in your small group experience?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5

7. Has your faith been positively impacted by participating in house church small groups?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
8. Has your faith been positively impacted by intentionally looking for the presence of God in everyday life?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
9. Has sharing Holy Communion in house church small groups changed your understanding of this holy meal?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
- If so, how?
10. Do you feel that you belong or are a valued participant in the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
- Why or why not?
11. Would you miss the HLC faith community if you stopped participating?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5

Why or why not?

12. How well do you feel known at HLC?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

13. How well do you feel that you know others at HLC?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

14. If you left the HLC faith community, do you feel that you would be missed?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

15. Do you feel connected to the people and ministries at HLC?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

16. Has being a disciple of Jesus changed for you after participating in house church small groups?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

17. Has your awareness of God in everyday life increased since participating in house church small groups?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
18. Has your faith in God grown by participating in house church small groups?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
19. Has your feeling of connection to the HLC faith community increased after participating in house church small groups?
- 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
20. What do you hope to feel as part of the HLC faith community?
21. If you had a challenge or crisis, would you reach out to the HLC faith community for prayers, support, or help?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
- Why or why not?
22. What would you say is God's mission and how do you participate in it?
23. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in your life?
24. Would you prefer your small group to be based on similarities such as age, gender, or household composition?
- Yes
 - No
 - No preference
25. Would you prefer small groups to be for adults only?
- Yes
 - No
 - No preference

26. What element of house church small groups was most meaningful to you?
- Welcome
 - Confession and forgiveness
 - Scripture reading
 - Sharing God sightings and the Holy Spirit's sending by each participant
 - Holy Communion
 - Prayer
 - Fellowship

Why?

27. Do you prefer a pastor or group member leading your house church small groups?
- Pastor
 - Group member that is the same each meeting
 - A different group member each meeting
 - No Preference

Why?

28. Do you feel that house church small groups are a welcoming ministry to invite others to?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe

Why?

29. Would you invite a friend to a house church small group?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe

Why?

30. Would you recommend house church small groups to a friend?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe

Why?

31. Would you prefer another activity, other than worship and fellowship, to be the focus of small groups?
- Yes
 - No
 - No Preference

If yes, what focus would you prefer?

32. What do you hope to feel as part of the HLC faith community?

33. If you had a challenge or crisis, would you reach out to the HLC faith community for prayers, support, or help?
- Yes
 - No
 - Maybe
- Why?
34. Has your participation in other HLC ministries and activities changed since participating in house church small groups?
- Reduced
 - Stayed the same
 - Increased
35. House church small groups should meet
- Weekly
 - Twice a month
 - Monthly
36. House church small groups should meet
- At people's homes or backyards
 - At the church lounge or lawn
 - At a community building or park
 - Online via Zoom
37. The best day of the week for me to attend a house church small group in the future is
- Sunday
 - Monday
 - Tuesday
 - Wednesday
 - Thursday
 - Friday
 - Saturday
 - Sunday
38. The best time of day for a small group is
- Morning
 - Afternoon
 - Evening
39. How has your faith been impacted by intentionally looking for the presence of God in everyday life?
40. How has your understanding of the Holy Spirit sending you into God's mission within daily life been impacted?

Three Month Follow-up Survey

This survey is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for DM 835-01 taught by Rev. Dr. Sara Koenig and Rev. Dr. Chip Hardwick, at the University of Dubuque. This course is in compliance with the course certification requirements of UD's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Please answer the following questions using this five point scale.

1	2	3	4	5
<i>Not at all/ Never</i>	<i>Slightly/ Seldom</i>	<i>Moderately/Sometimes</i>	<i>Very/Often</i>	<i>Extremely/ Always</i>

1. House church small groups were formed to be inclusive of the diversity found at Holmen Lutheran Church: age, household composition, years attending Holmen Lutheran, denominational background, education, gender, and household composition. How important is this diversity for your small group experience?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5

2. How has your faith been impacted by participating in house church small groups?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5

3. How has your faith been impacted by intentionally looking for the presence of God in everyday life?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5

4. How has sharing Holy Communion in house church small groups changed your understanding of this holy meal?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5

5. Do you feel that you belong or are a valued participant in the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

6. Would you miss the HLC faith community if you stopped participating?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

7. How well do you feel known at HLC?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

8. How well do you feel that you know others at HLC?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

9. If you left the HLC faith community, do you feel that you would be missed?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

10. Do you feel connected to the people and ministries at HLC?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

Why or why not?

11. How has being a disciple of Jesus changed for you after participating in house church small groups?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

12. Has your awareness of God in everyday life increased since participating in house church small groups?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

13. Has your faith in God grown by participating in house church small groups?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

14. Has your feeling of connection to the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community increased after participating in house church small groups?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

15. What do you hope to feel as part of the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community?

16. If you had a challenge or crisis, would you reach out to the HLC faith community for prayers, support, or help?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe

Why or why not?

17. How would you describe what it means to be a disciple of Jesus?

18. What would you say is God's mission and how do you participate in it?

19. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in your life?

20. Where do you see God in everyday life?

21. Has your participation in other HLC ministries and activities changed since participating in house church small groups?

- a. Reduced
- b. Stayed the same
- c. Increased

22. How has your faith been impacted by intentionally looking for the presence of God in everyday life?

23. How has your understanding of the Holy Spirit sending you into God's mission within daily life been impacted?

Added Question: Which is your preferred time of year to attend small groups?

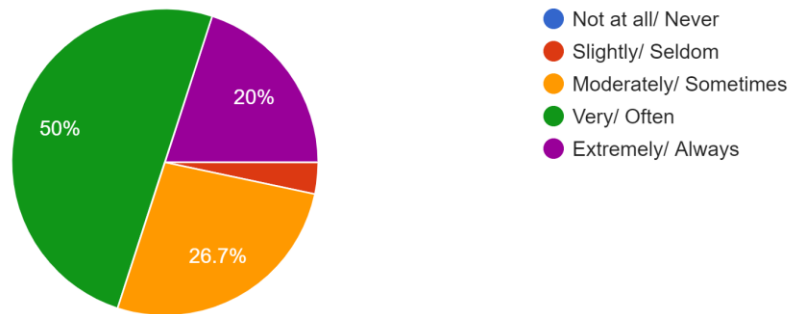
- a. Summer (June-August)
- b. Fall/Winter (September-December)
- c. Winter/Spring (January-May)
- d. Would only attending during summer
- e. No preference

Appendix D: Survey Data³⁹¹

Survey 1: Pre-Group

Do you feel that you belong or are a valued participant in the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community?

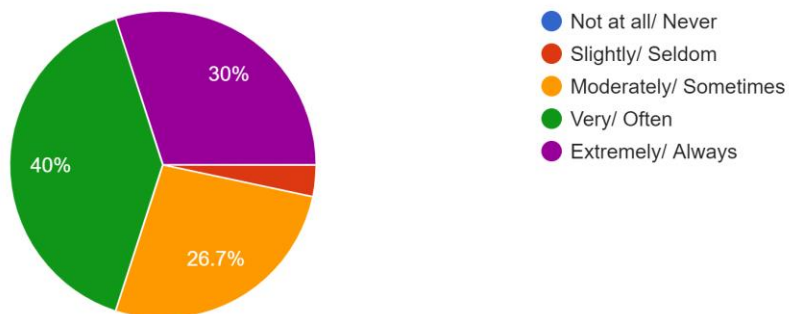
30 responses



³⁹¹ Verbatim responses have been provided for all open-ended survey questions and are unedited.

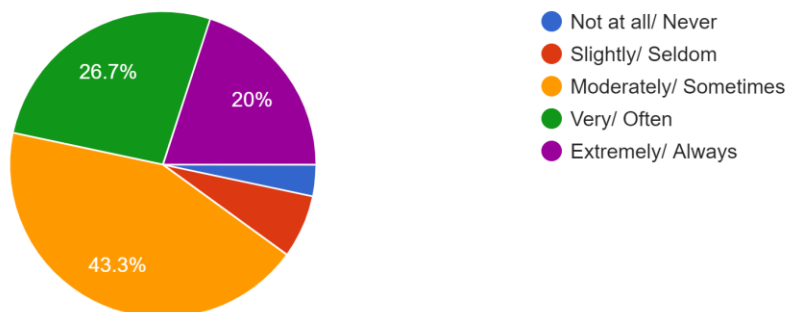
Would you miss the HLC faith community if you stopped participating?

30 responses



If you had a challenge or crisis, how likely would you be to reach out to the HLC faith community for prayers, support, or help?

30 responses



What contributes to your feeling of belonging at HLC? (30 Responses)

- Participating in worship and groups
- Welcoming attitudes of all. Opportunities to participate in events.
- Friendliness and acceptance
- The faith tradition at HLC is much more open to differences of belief than the tradition in which I was raised. The sermons feel more open, invite questioning, don't provide concrete answers. Even having gluten-free bread for communion feels inclusive.
- Members do care, about members!
- Most people are approachable and well meaning.
- Sense of community
- feeling included in a family way
- Being a part of it for our 62 years of marriage.

- Attending regular worship and being part of several ministry offerings
- our kids are very accepted!
- Knowing others in the congregation, invitations to join activities/opportunities,
- Joining the quilters
- Active with groups and the people of those groups have become like family. Also, the pastors share messages of how everyone at the church is important and valued.
- I belonged to a ELCA church for 75 years and it closed in August of 2019. I was in search of a new home and Holmen Lutheran welcomed me and felt like I was valued. It has been a good fit.
- Attending live worship, having friends at church
- The people and Pastors are friendly and always seem to be interested in the community.
- Everyone that we have met at church is welcoming. Very kind and seem to genuinely care about the church family.
- lutheran upbringing, children of similar ages
- acceptance as a member of groups, friends, participating in Stephen Ministry
- Friends, participating in Service Ministry, worshipping with others, working together
- Attending a service, talking with friendly attendees, greetings by pastors.
- Pastors know us. Singing in choir. Joy senior citizens group. All the friends and fellowship. Involved in service projects.
- Fellow congregation members
- Working with the quilting ladies. Attending worship.
- Time spent with members of small groups.(Bible Study, choirs, etc.)

What detracts from your feeling of belonging at HLC? (30 Responses)

- Being single
- Just time as a busy young family.
- Nothing
- Pandemic
- That our family are not technically members, so we don't participate in everything.
- Lack of commitment by members, who belong, but don't commit to helping,with any project etc.
- My age. I'm used to being the youngest person, but it's hard when I am aware that I have a clear different view or lifestyle than most people in the congregation.
- None

- feeling detached
- nothing that I can think of!!!
- I am having a hard time accepting that the entire building is not available to me due to locked doors yet I realize there is need for security. Hope we can find a compromise so I don't feel like I need to make an appointment to have access to some areas.
- n/a
- Unintentional comments denigrating/judging other faith traditions (not by pastoral staff, but by other members).
- Since I am so new to Holmen, it was hard to meet new people when COVID-10 hit closing everything down. That is slowly changing and am looking forward to meeting new people and being involved again.
- Not knowing if others care. Not being at church or with a small group
- Sometimes the sermons are a bit to political.
- We do not attend as frequently as we should. No negative feelings.
- together but sometimes feels apart within the walls
- When personal schedule takes me away from worship, functions.
- knowing that many people in the congregation who I have come to love and respect supported and still support an evil and incompetent man for president and wondering how they can reconcile that support with their purported Christianity
- Nothing I have experienced
- Nothing I can think of.
- Having converted from Catholicism
- ???
- Period of time that I have belonged to the church.

What do you hope to feel as part of the HLC faith community? (30 Responses)

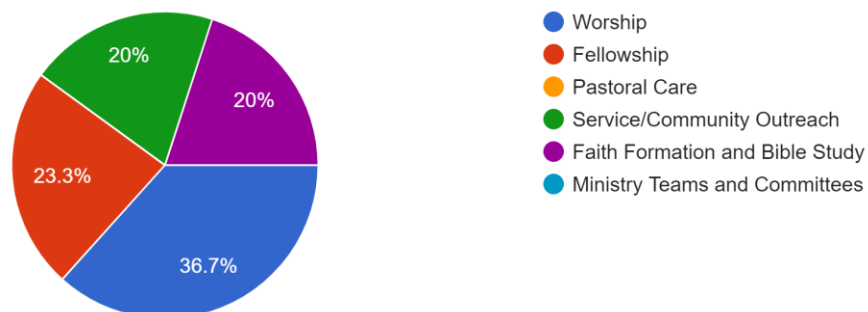
- ? Opportunities to carry out Gods wishes together
- Belonging, support, useful
- Belonging
- Acceptance and the Love of Christ
- I hope to always feel welcome, which I do.
- My hope is that I do commit and help with projects, education ,etc
- I wish to be seen as a definite and articulate person. Who can be talked to and asked to do things.

- Family environment
- included
- More conscious of the Holy Spirits part in my life.
- Welcomed, respected, needed, and a contributing member
- community
- Belonging, safety, growth
- What I already feel - important, valued, and loved
- Being involved like i was in my former church and a valued member.
- Fellowship at church and at non worship gatherings
- More inclusive.
- Having more people to connect with that are in the same life journey that we are in now.
- more togetherness and participation by others
- Continued belonging and participation and get to know more congregants
- Warm fuzzies knowing that I belong to a community of believers that love and are willing to help one another
- Inspired and edified by sermons and friendly interactions with other attendees
- Involved. Care and concern by all.
- Sense of an extended support system, a place to renew faith and understanding
- Deep relationships with members. I would like to know members well enough to share personal and faith based issues.

What element of the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community do you value most? Please choose

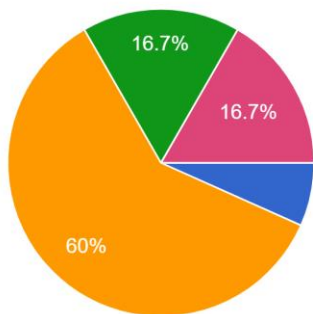
1.

30 responses



How would you describe what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

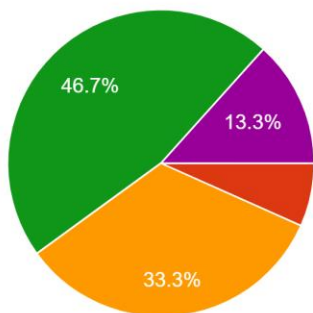
30 responses



- You are a good person.
- You recite the Apostle's Creed and Lord's Prayer.
- You love God and your neighbor.
- You feel freed and forgiven.
- You attend worship.
- You know you are going to heaven.
- You believe in God.

How often do you intentionally look for the presence of God in everyday life?

30 responses



- Not at all/ Never
- Slightly/ Seldom
- Moderately/ Sometimes
- Very/ Often
- Extremely/ Always

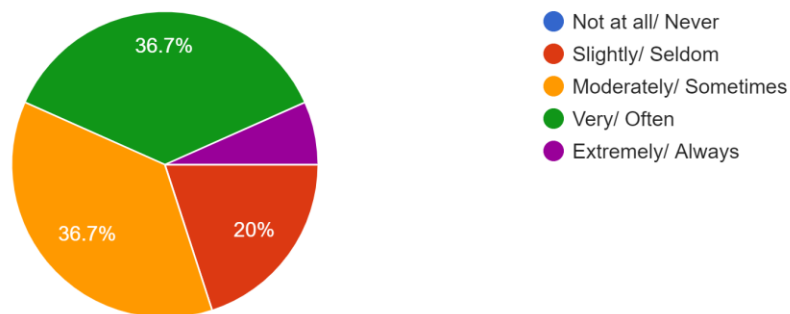
Where do you see God in everyday life? (30 Responses)

- Family
- In how things work out. The good or bad, it is by the grace of God. Reflecting on situations.
- Everywhere
- In his creation
- In my children, the way things happen on a daily basis, in the unknown, through the heartaches of my own life and others' lives.
- Through my Family, thru my environment, thru members ,thru what has been given to me etc.
- On particularly hard or pressing days, I think about how I got there and why I was put into that situation.

- everywhere
- In relationships
- In the wonders of nature and science.
- campfire/worship songs
- Literally everywhere (my kids, my spouse, work, extended family)
- Nature, people, church, work, His word - everywhere
- Through friends, volunteering, talking, helping/reaching out to others.
- With my patients at work. Helping community .members when i can
- Everywhere.
- Nature is a beautiful gift from God. My family.
- my work
- in the beauty of nature; a special clergy friend; the gifts of family & friends; food, shelter; the miracles of medicines, health
- Nature, children, especially babies, synchronicity in my own life, friends who are seekers,
- Nature; and people's kindness, love and overcoming challenges
- Nature and people.
- Where don't I see him? I see his presence in those around me, in beauty in any plant/animal I come across, in the sun rise/set. Basically anything I can see through the lens of my camera. :)
- I see God at work in the lives of people of faith. Also, in the support He gives me daily.

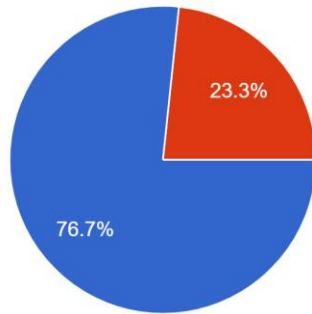
How well do you understand the role of the Holy Spirit sending you into God's mission within daily life?

30 responses



12. What gender do you identify as?

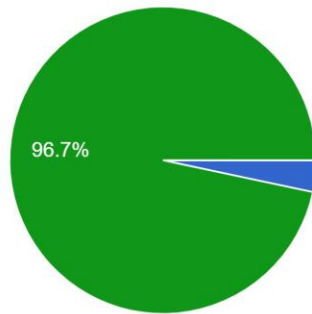
30 responses



- Female
- Male
- Prefer to self-describe.
- Prefer not to say.

Please specify your ethnicity.

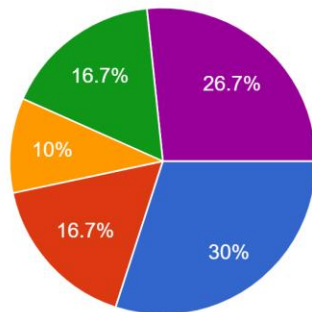
30 responses



- American Indian or Native Alaskan
- African-American or Black
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Caucasian
- Latino or Hispanic
- Two or More
- Other/ Unknown
- Prefer not to say.

How many years have you attended Holmen Lutheran Church?

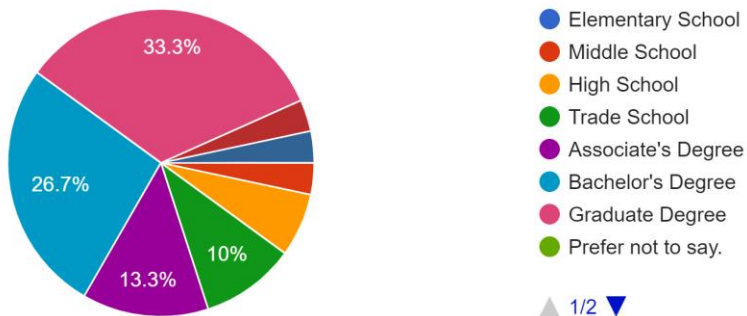
30 responses



- 0-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-19 years
- 20 or more years

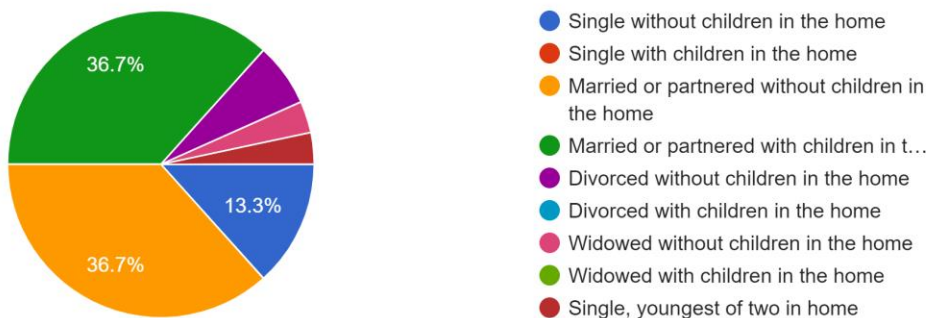
16. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

30 responses



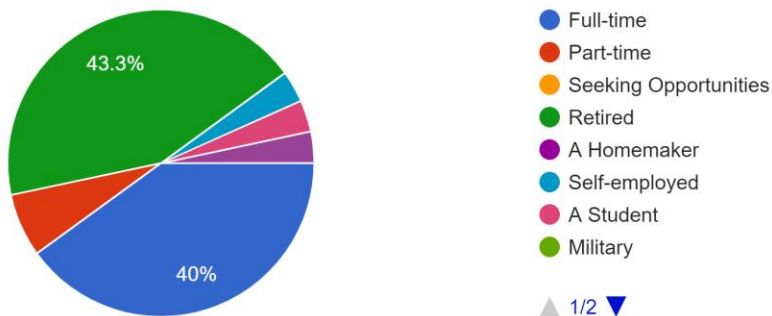
What is your household composition (child = 18 years or younger)?

30 responses



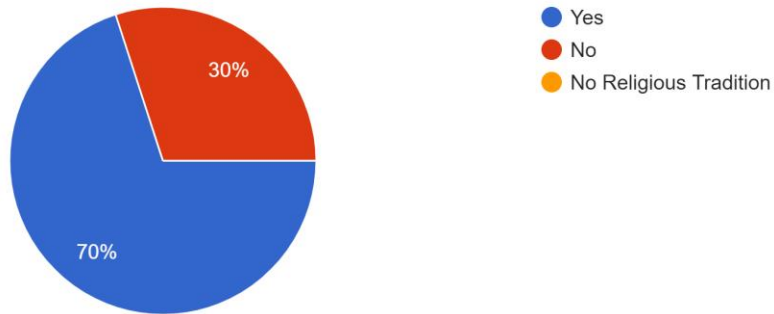
What is your current employment status?

30 responses



Did you grow up ELCA Lutheran?

30 responses



What activities at Holmen Lutheran Church do you participate in the most?

30 responses

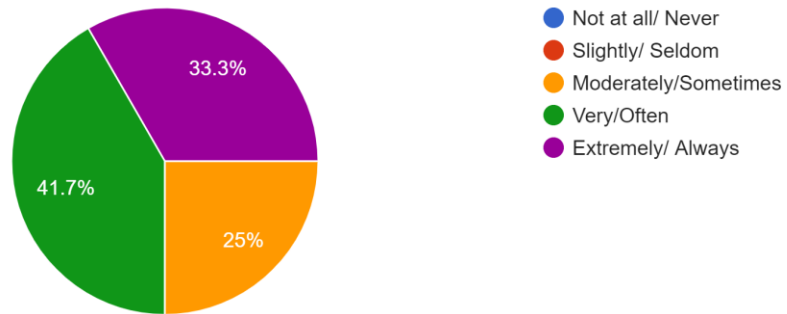


▲ 1/2 ▼

Survey 2: Post Group

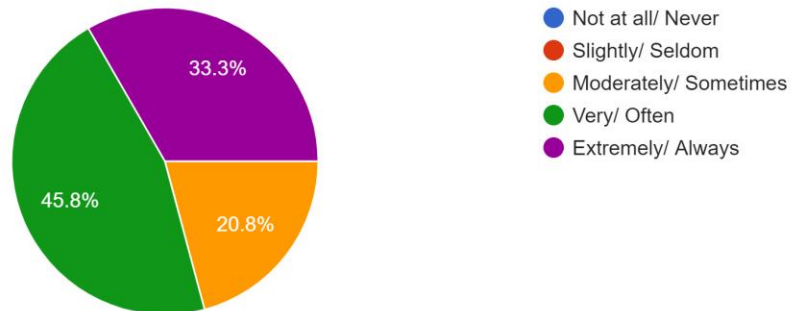
Do you feel that you belong or are a valued participant in the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community?

24 responses



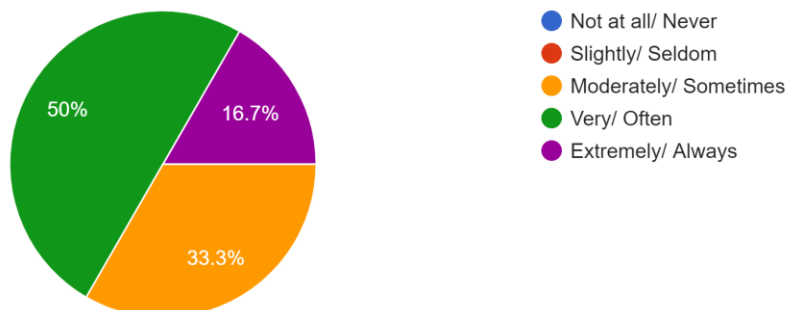
Would you miss the HLC faith community if you stopped participating?

24 responses



If you had a challenge or crisis, how likely would you be to reach out to the HLC faith community for prayers, support, or help?

24 responses



What contributes to your feeling of belonging at HLC? (24 Responses)

- Joining the quilters, attending church services
- Knowing the people, friendly greetings, understanding the worship service pieces, having a sermon that resonates.
- Social network/relationships
- The services, and especially participation in groups and activities.%
- Small groups, knowing individuals who attend church
- Knowing that I am/was welcomed and even though I did not know everyone - I was accepted from the first time I attended worship.
- Sense of welcome and acceptance.
- relationships, attendance, participation, spiritual growth.
- When I am recognized by fellow HLC members outside of church activities, when I am asked to help or participate in church projects/programs, when the Pastors take time to talk to me on a personal level.
- Good friends and being a part of committees, bible studies
- fellowship
- Participation in studies, church friends, Stephen Ministry.
- The Pastors and people.
- how friendly everyone is.
- The congregation and pastors
- The welcoming environment, the leadership
- Programs are offered to include my age group, I am welcome to join in these programs.
- Choir, service groups

- Being welcomed - considering I was an outsider. I had been a member of my past church for 75 years and when it closed I had to find a new church home/family and was accepted from day one.
- Getting to know people in the congregation, watching their children grow up, participating in church events
- Ushering
- Sense of community and all willing to meet new people
- Members and clergy always welcoming and willing to listen.
- Other members

What detracts from your feeling of belonging at HLC? (24 Responses)

- nothing
- Nothing
- My own feelings of being different or being unfamiliar with different parts of worship.
- Presence cliques/not living "up to expectations"
- I really can't think of a distraction. I have not encountered any conflicts.
- Not sure
- No real or pressing distractions at this time - too new to HLC to have formed any.
- my sinfulness
- When church related decisions are made that are not openly shared with the entire congregation.
- I find it ironic that the AA group (which may or may not be HLC members) has a key to the new addition area and can leave the doors to the outside braced open for access to anyone while members of HLC sit outside the front door at the same time with those doors locked . Each time I have to call to be allowed into the office side or the new addition side of the church I fight back the feelings of unwelcome and not belonging. I understand the need for security but think at least the office side of the church could be unlocked when staff is present especially the secretary. I feel like I am bothering all of them when I have to interrupt their work to come out of their offices to open the door. I will add I make exception to Jodi when she is alone in the building. But do wonder how many people drop by and find the doors locked and simply leave.
- frequency
- Covid! Now that attendance is sparse at each of the services, I feel a disconnect with others worshipping. Much preferred the one 9 am Sunday services
- Lately politics has become a distraction.

- pandemic restrictions
- The current pandemic
- Many members don't join in the programs offered.
- Nothing
- I am too new to have a feeling of distraction.
- knowing that so many congregation members who I thought had shared my Christian values and beliefs voted for an amoral, cruel man like Donald Trump
- Covid
- None
- Nothing detracts from HLC as an entity. My feelings of disconnect had more to do from not attending services in person.
- I wish people in my age group were more visible.

What do you hope to feel as part of the HLC faith community? (24 Responses)

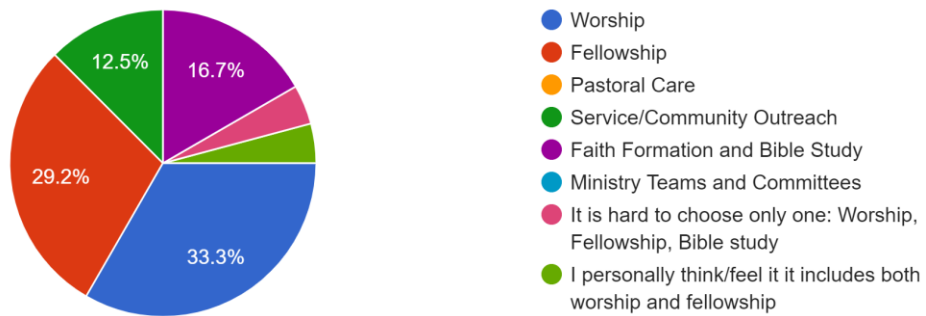
- a belonging
- Love and friendship.
- Connection, spiritual support and growth
- A sense of belonging, support, and shared Faith.
- People know me
- I will in time like to join in more organizations at least some of the ones that I had at my other parish. But I need to establish better relationships first before I would feel comfortable at just joining in on some of the groups..
- Acceptance
- More spiritual
- Welcome, acceptance, inclusion, needed, belonging, respected.
- Important as a lay person, accepted, loved and supported
- included
- More connection with others attending services..
- A belonging.
- valued, respected
- Belonging, support
- Peace, love, without judgement
- More effort from Board Members to create a need to participate in Programs
- A sense of belonging; that I could ask for help and support if needed

- Belonging to have and being a part of the faith community
- I hope to feel part of something ancient and true-something bigger than myself
- Feel needed and friendly
- Not sure
- Sense of community and support when needed.
- ?

What element of the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community do you value most? Please choose

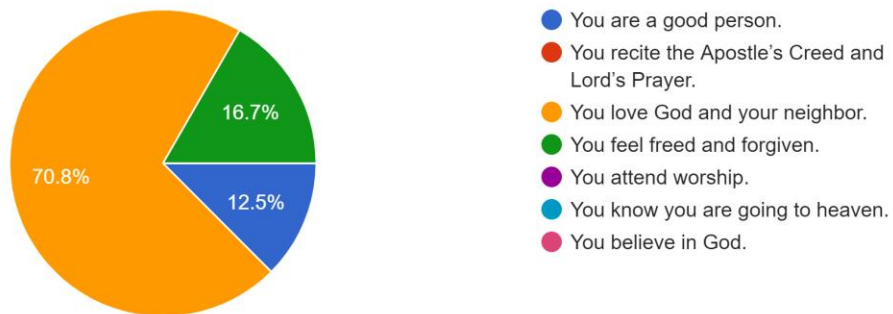
1.

24 responses



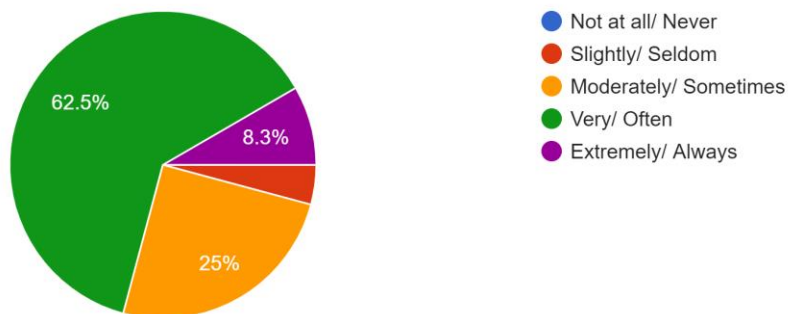
How would you describe what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

24 responses



How often do you intentionally look for the presence of God in everyday life?

24 responses



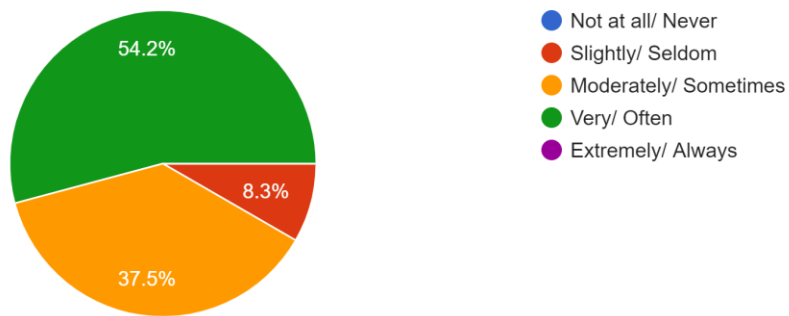
Where do you see God in everyday life? (24 Responses)

- every morning when I read my devotions, when I go on my daily walk, off and on all day long
- In the bringing together of people, often from different paths of life. In the understanding of others, personal growth in love for neighbor, even when this learning comes from a life challenge. I see God in the acceptance of others and different views. God is a gatherer, so anything that brings together.
- In my children, my job, moments throughout the day
- Actions of others, guidance, and nature.
- At my job, with my children's activities.
- Working at things in my life - helping neighbors, friends and contributing to the needs of others through service.
- Interaction with other people
- Interactions of people, community,
- In this amazing place called Earth that He created just for us, in the stories of people reaching out to help others, in coincidences that simply could not be just coincidences - the hand of God is apparent.
- Nature, people, other Christians
- everywhere
- In beauty of nature, my grandchildren, a special clergy friend, at food shelter, miracles of vaccines and other medical breakthroughs
- In the love of family and friends. Everyday we see Gods awesome creation in nature.
- My family, at work, in nature
- Various places, in nature in kindness of others, etc
- In challenges faced

- From Family and Friends
- People and nature
- Helping, listening and talking and taking care of others.
- other people, nature
- Safety at work and family health
- Helping with mental aspects of this pandemic
- Kind acts my children show.
- Family, nature

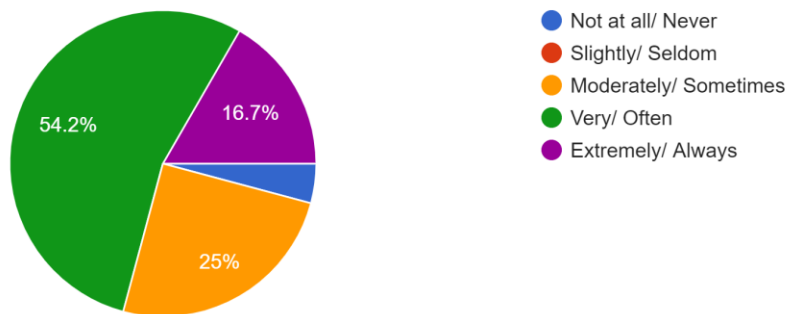
How well do you understand the role of the Holy Spirit sending you into God’s mission within daily life?

24 responses



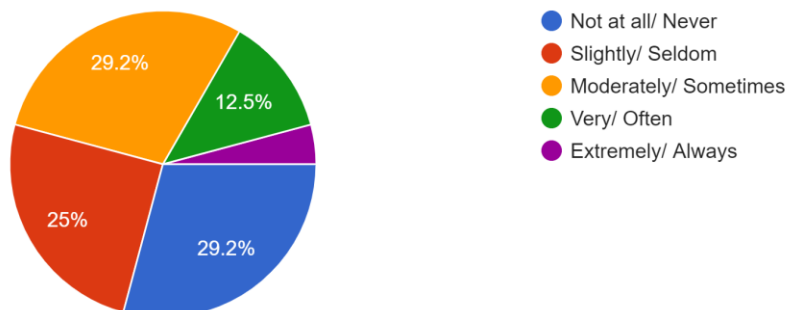
House church small groups were formed to be inclusive of the diversity found at HLC: age, household composition, years attending HLC, denom...s this diversity in your small group experience?

24 responses



14. Has sharing Holy Communion in house church small groups changed your understanding of this holy meal?

24 responses



If your understanding of communion has changed, how has it changed? (13 Responses)

- The simplicity, intention, and community felt in the act of communion. It is a little real and fulfilling.
- Not really changed.
- That it's ok to have communion on Mondays.
- It has become very casual. In church I concentrated more on receiving forgiveness.
- I don't think it has changed so much as added depth to it, it is more than sharing a meal with God/Jesus to ask forgiveness of sins, it is food shared with others for fellowship, to convey acceptance, love, and recognizing our shared beliefs.
- Recognize it's for everyone more easily, more intimate.
- It has not changed.
- That it is a time of gathering and sharing.
- My understanding remains the same
- It has just brought more focus to it.
- The Lord's table is offered to each person, through this we are Family
- Hasn't
- No change.

Were there other elements of worship that you wish were included in house church small groups? (24 Responses)

- No

- no
- No, I thought it was really great. I appreciated being able to share and discuss and felt it became easier as the weeks went on.
- None.
- Psalms
- Nothing
- not necessarily
- I am going to say singing, but I also know that there are many who would be uncomfortable with this especially without a piano, guitar or other instrument to accompany.
- None at this time.
- Can't think of anything.
- not that I can think of
- None
- More discussion, less talking by leader
- The one part I liked and it broke the ice for me were the questions asked before the start of each meeting. Everyone had a chance to participate and express/interpret the lesson without being judged. And being able to have a different leader of the group beside the Pastor.
- music
- No I very much appreciated it
- Nothing
- More attention to individual prayer requests.
- No- I don't think elements of worship needed to be the focus of the group.

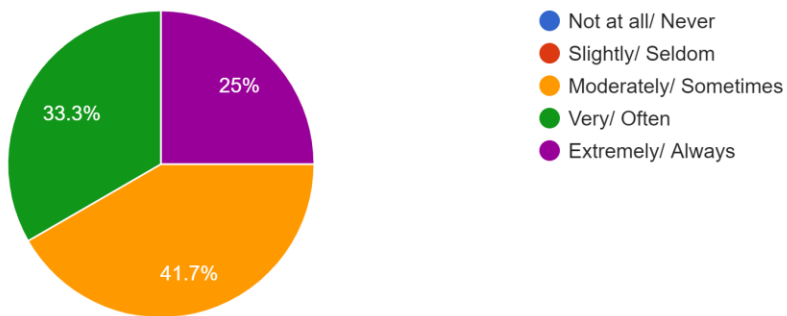
Which elements of worship in house church small groups were not impactful for you?
(24 Responses)

- none
- Nothing
- None
- Honestly, probably communion. I still think it is an important part of the house church and worship service. I never really felt "moved" by it, or at least not as much as the scripture reading and discussion.
- No
- I found each element had its effect.
- None. All were good

- Wasn't any.
- nothing--I really thought we covered the basics.
- My only concern was the my inability to hear everyone as they spoke due to social distancing and outdoor sounds.
- Was all meaningful, informative. Questions at beginning of meetings were fun and interesting in getting to know myself better as well as others.
- All were helpful
- All were. It was a great blend of service and relationship building
- Communion - just had at church on the morning. Little kids couldn't take.
- Nothing stands out, for I liked sharing scripture lessons, communion and just being with others in a smaller setting. I so enjoyed, talking and getting to know others within the small group setting and getting their thoughts/ideas on the same issues that were being discussed. If we continued with small group church, I would like to meet with some of the people from the other small group sessions.
- N/A
- It was nice
- Thought all aspects were impactful.
- I don't understand this question.

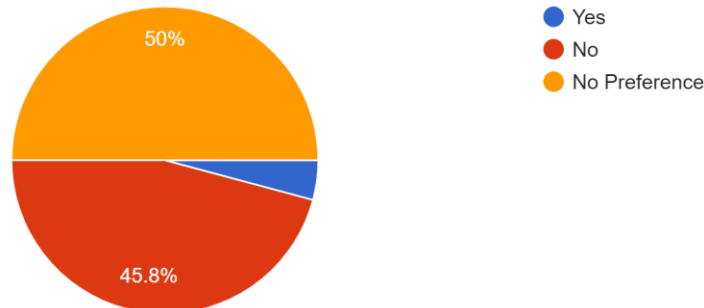
Has your faith been positively impacted by participating in house church small groups?

24 responses



Would you prefer your small group to be based on similarities such as age, gender, or household composition?

24 responses

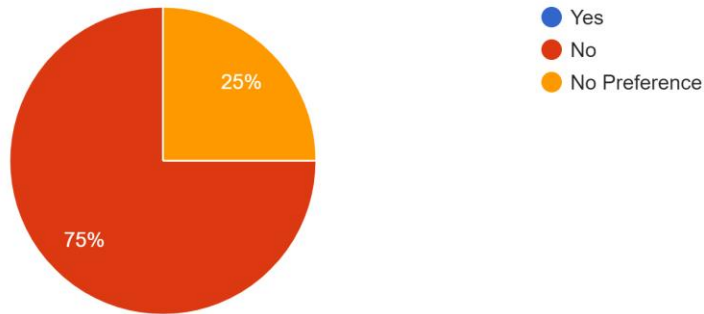


19. If you had a child participate with you in house church small groups, please describe their experience: (9 Responses)

- My daughter attended 2 sessions. She enjoyed the conversation, in particular a more adult approach to faith building and community.
- NA
- Teenager - high school student and refreshing to hear their perspective on the issues discussed for that particular session.
- We had a teenager, she brought a perspective other than adults. She only attended a couple of times but I was impressed that she felt comfortable enough in the group to share her thoughts.
- He is two, so unsure of what he experienced. He seemed to enjoy it, especially the snacks.
- They loved feeling directly included. They were engaged and felt a sense of belonging
- They felt a part of Family.
- Enjoyed but got restless
- Both our children looked forward to each small group. I was pleasantly surprised how engaged they were.

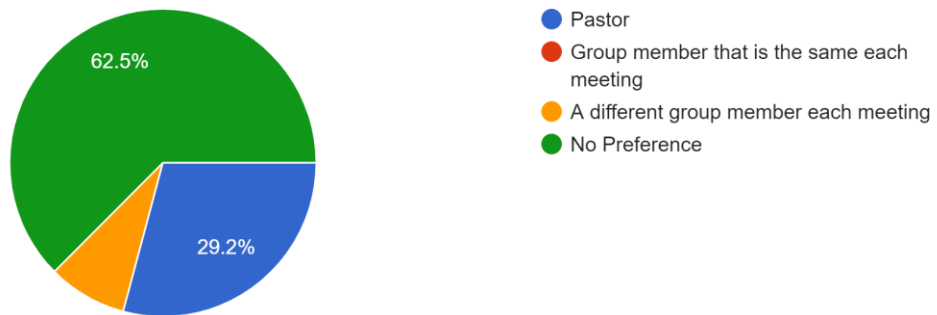
Would you prefer small groups to be for adults only?

24 responses



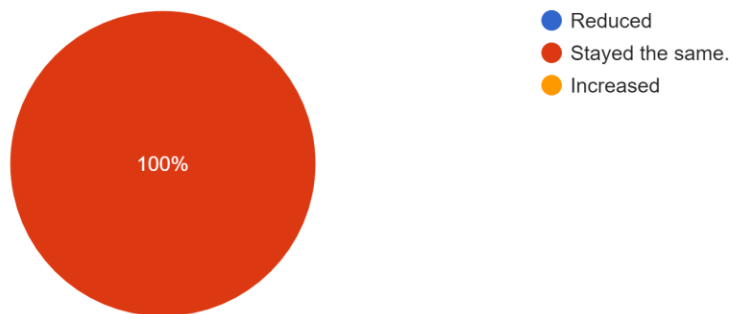
Do you prefer a pastor or group member leading your house church small groups?

24 responses



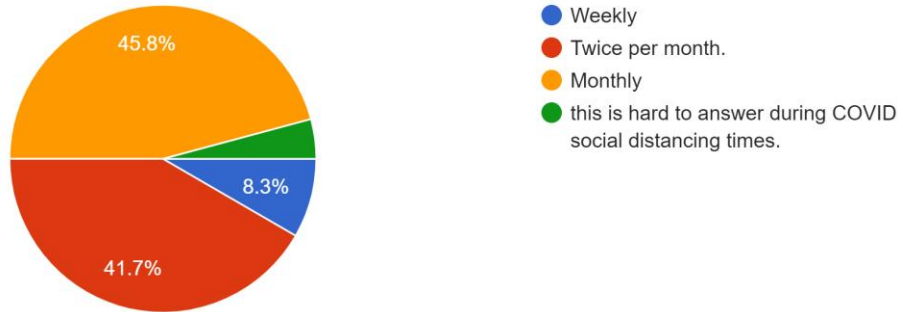
Has your participation in other HLC ministries and activities changed since participating in house church small groups?

24 responses



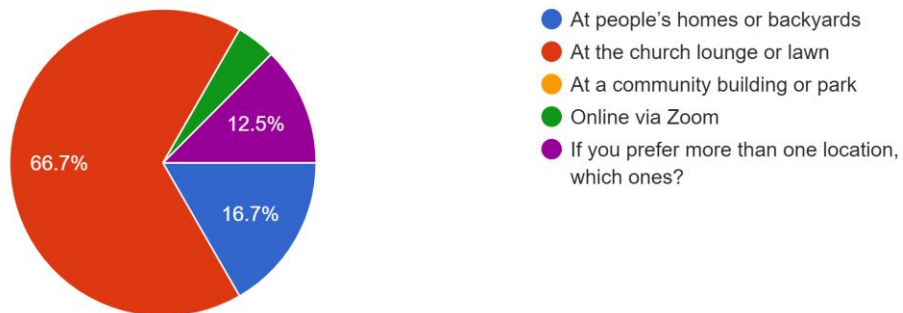
House church small groups should meet

24 responses



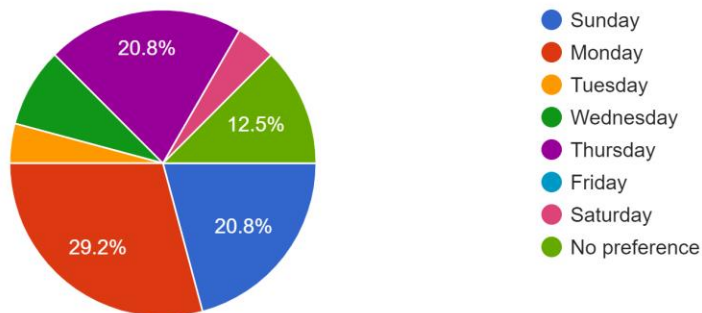
Where do you prefer house church small groups to meet?

24 responses



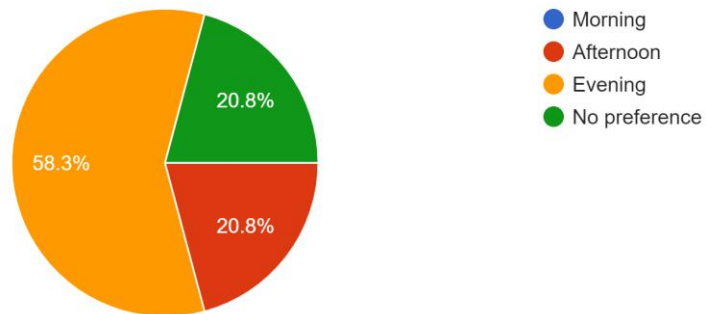
Which day of the week that would work for you to meet in a small group in the future.

24 responses



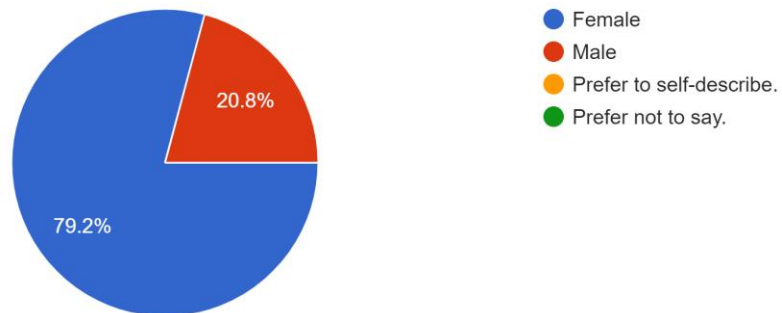
Which time of the day would work best for you to meet in a small group?

24 responses



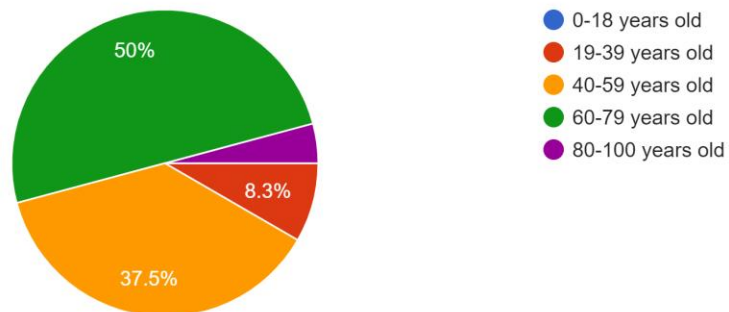
12. What gender do you identify as?

24 responses



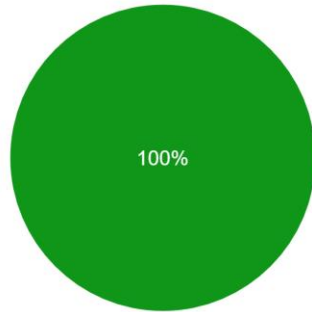
What is your age?

24 responses



Please specify your ethnicity.

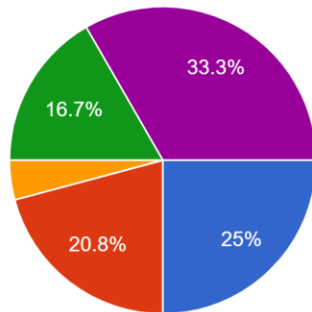
24 responses



- American Indian or Native Alaskan
- African-American or Black
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Caucasian
- Latino or Hispanic
- Two or More
- Other/ Unknown
- Prefer not to say.

How many years have you attended Holmen Lutheran Church?

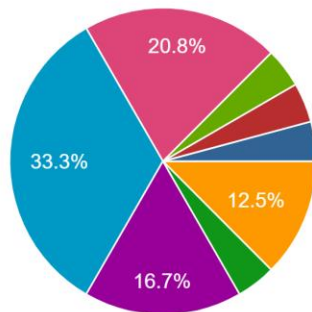
24 responses



- 0-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-19 years
- 20 or more years

16. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

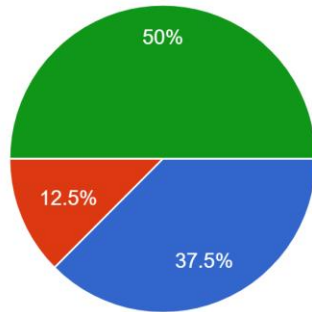
24 responses



- Elementary School
- Middle School
- High School
- Trade School
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Graduate Degree
- Prefer not to say.

What is your current employment status?

24 responses

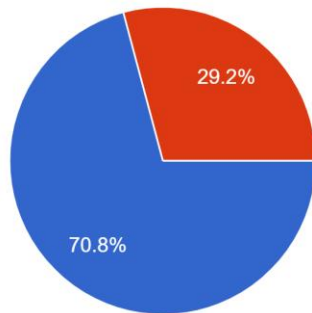


- Full-time
- Part-time
- Seeking Opportunities
- Retired
- A Homemaker
- Self-employed
- A Student
- Military

▲ 1/2 ▼

Did you grow up ELCA Lutheran?

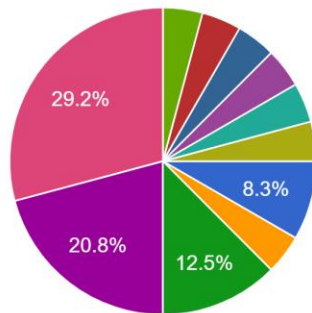
24 responses



- Yes
- No
- No Religious Tradition

In addition to worship, which activity do you participate in at Holmen Lutheran Church?

24 responses



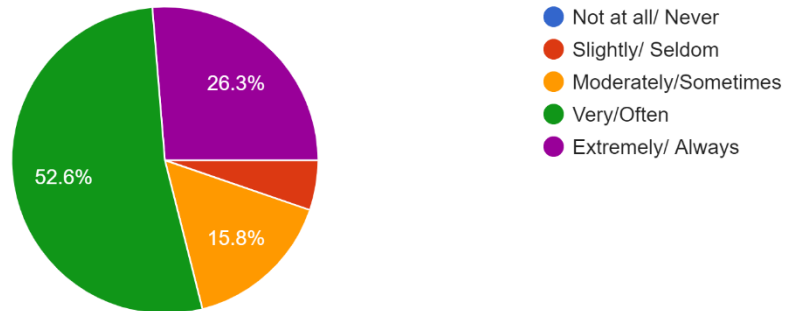
- Lay Leadership: Council, Committees
- Youth Ministry: Sunday School teachers, youth group
- Music Ministry: bells, choir, praise band
- Faith Formation: book club, adult education, etc.
- Caring Ministries: Stephen Ministry, home visits, etc.
- Office/Tech Support: social media, newsletters, etc.
- I do not participate in any other activities
- At times our kids will participate in some activities

▲ 1/2 ▼

Survey 3: Three Month Follow-Up

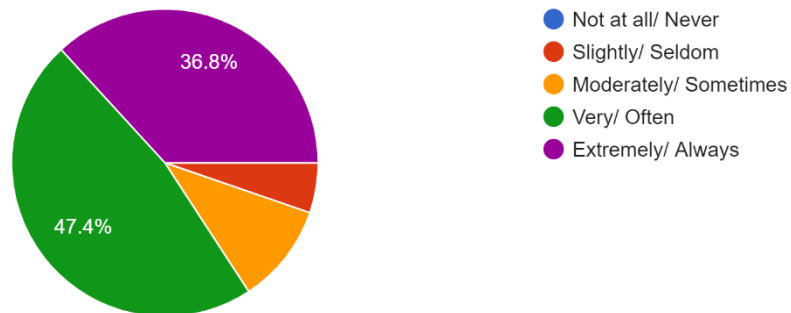
Do you feel that you belong or are a valued participant in the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community?

19 responses



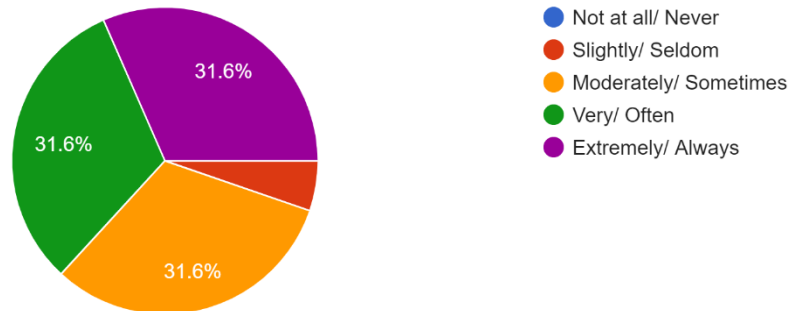
Would you miss the HLC faith community if you stopped participating?

19 responses



If you had a challenge or crisis, how likely would you be to reach out to the HLC faith community for prayers, support, or help?

19 responses



What contributes to your feeling of belonging at HLC?

- When I am asked to help with a project, serve in a committee and greeted by name.
- service, worship, getting to know people
- Compassion
- Participating in small groups allows me to get to know other members better and the conversations become more connected to each other and to our faith.
- The Members support each other.
- The church service in general, the added activities, decorating the church for Christmas, being asked to help or donate.
- How I was welcomed and felt I belonged - not a stranger
- We have been a part of the HLC for the 62 years we have been married. We have many friends and relationships there. We have both had leadership and participation roles. Now during Covid going to quilting on tuesday mornings has been a life saver. My social experiences are so limited!! We listen to the service on our computer every sunday and enjoy seeing who all comes.
- Being involved in service and being on committees
- Pastor Allison always is so upbeat and understanding.
- The congregation and the pastors
- the other members of the church
- Knowing members of Congregation.
- Members, choir, pastors and staff
- Friendly and familiar faces when coming to worship
- Acceptance
- The greeters at the door before worship. They are always so friendly. Also seeing women represented in clergy and the administration of communion.

- In the three years of membership, I have chosen to join the Adult Choir, Handbells, Bible Study, and been trained as a Stephen Ministry Leader. Through membership in these groups, the congregation has gotten to know me better, and thus, they make me feel as though I belong.
- Being involved in some kind of group, having friends, interacting with other church members, seeing my kids involved with church

What detracts from your feeling of belonging at HLC?

- Attending church online only.
- knowing that many members hold cruel political views
- Nothing
- Short answer, COVID 19! it has forced congregation members to distance and even worship via computer thus resulting in less connections with other congregants, especially those who we don't encounter during the week.
- Some members want to be in charge of all things, very little involvement from youth in the services.
- Current situation of the pandemic
- Just a feeling of not knowing a lot of people - I wish I knew more.
- Right now during covid its distance!!!T
- Sometimes cliques make a person feel like an outsider or feeling like I'm not doing enough
- When politics and racism seem to be forced on the congregation.
- pandemic restrictions/necessary safety protocols
- myself not reaching out. forgetting to reach out.
- Never seeing anyone.
- Nothing
- It is not the church of my spiritual formation as a child, so some parts of the service are foreign. I enjoy it very much although I feel different. This is an internal feeling and have never felt it from other members towards me.
- Nothing
- I have not fully embraced it as my faith home. I am on a pilgrimage of faith after leaving the faith of my childhood.
- My short period of membership at Holmen Lutheran Church, plus the restrictions created by the pandemic, has limited my involvement, and my sense of belonging.
- Not having those social circles, friendships, etc...much enhanced in this still pandemic era

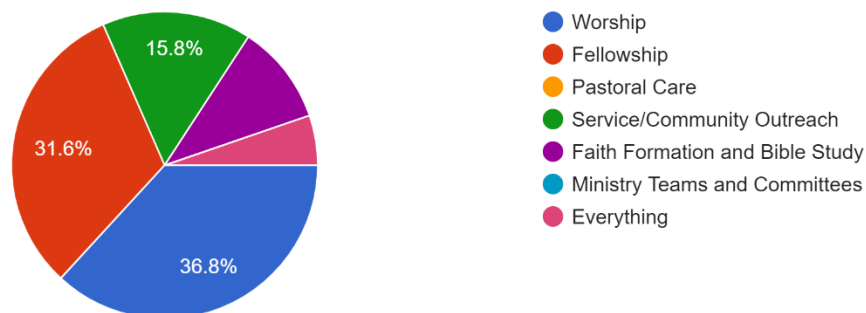
What do you hope to feel as part of the HLC faith community?

- Welcomed, wanted, respected.
- I want to feel like I am a part of the body of Christ. Through service, I want to feel like I am doing a small part to help others. I want to feel loved and accepted.
- Strength in faith
- My hope is that soon church life resumes to some of "normal" patterns and can feel more connected to the church as a whole. The small groups of which I am a part of, have been active throughout the pandemic and have taken on even more efforts to personally connect with the elders especially. I hope to feel that I am contributing to the HLC community.
- That all would be more proud of the Church and its outreach.
- Peace and happiness. I love knowing I have a community to rely on if ever needed.
- Sense of belonging which will grow in time.
- The social coming together when this is over. Seeing people and having coffee and cookies.
- Accepted, even when I make mistakes or don't live up to what others think I should be
- Welcomed.
- belonging and renewed faith/hope
- respected, valued
- Shared interests and like minded thinking of people i know at church.
- That I belong, am a valued member, am needed
- A place to come and feel God's presence.
- Acceptance
- Loved and accepted.
- I greater sense of belonging, and the growth of my personal faith.
- Belonging, acceptable, sense of growth/faith formation

What element of the Holmen Lutheran Church faith community do you value most? Please choose

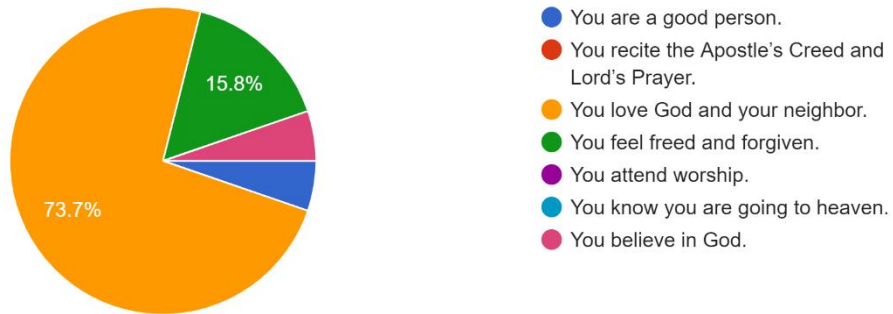
1.

19 responses



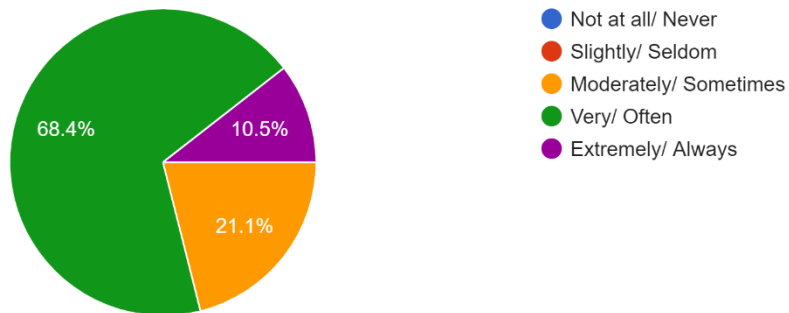
How would you describe what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

19 responses



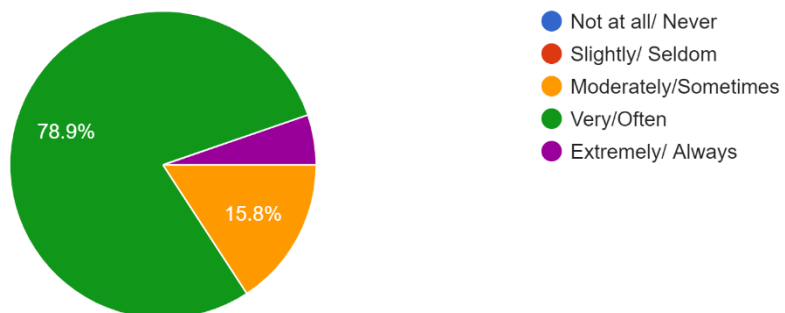
How often do you intentionally look for the presence of God in everyday life?

19 responses



Has your faith been positively impacted by intentionally looking for the presence of God in everyday life?

19 responses

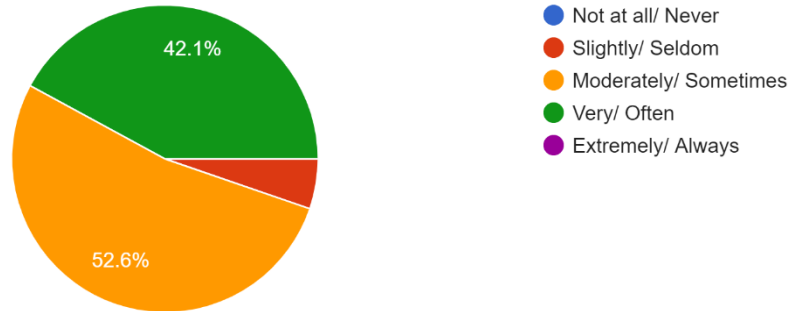


Where do you see God in everyday life?

- I see God in everything, he is the creator of all things. I marvel at the symmetry of this place we call Earth.
- in other people, in nature
- Everywhere all day
- I see God working through members of Stephen Ministry, calling ministry, friends, professions of family members in serving vocations, medicine and treatments, a pastor, God is everywhere in the outdoors.
- Through my Family and wife.
- In my choices and the results of that
- All day from the time I wake up until the time I close my eyes at night.
- In my family especially my great grandchildren and my daughter. Its really little things but so meaningful. Last night was New Years Eve. [Family] came over and fried shrimp in butter mmmmmgood. We had a happy hour supper & good visit until 7. The G kids were here for 2 days this week as they didn't have school. They are maturing and don't need so much special attention. I only had to hollar at them once for fighting.
- Nature, people
- In the beauty of nature.
- in family/friends and nature
- my job, nature, my family
- In nature, in interactions with people, in situations that work out without much effort on my part.
- Everywhere, where all of my basic and extended needs are met
- My family, my work, nature
- Everywhere
- Family, nature, the unconditional love and kindness of others, grace and mercy and understanding given from one person to another.
- When given the strength to journey through the positive and negative challenges in my daily life.
- I see God in large and small moments of the day.

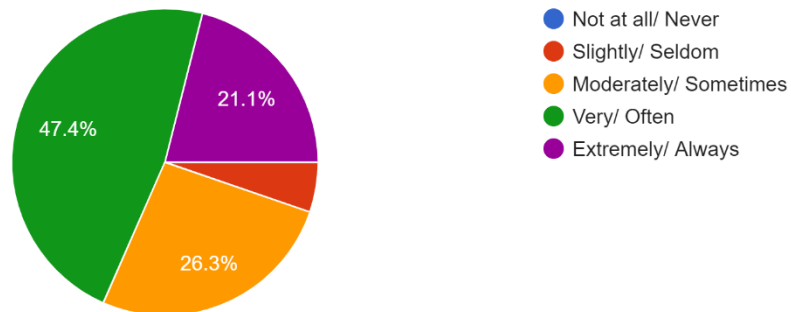
How well do you understand the role of the Holy Spirit sending you into God's mission within daily life?

19 responses



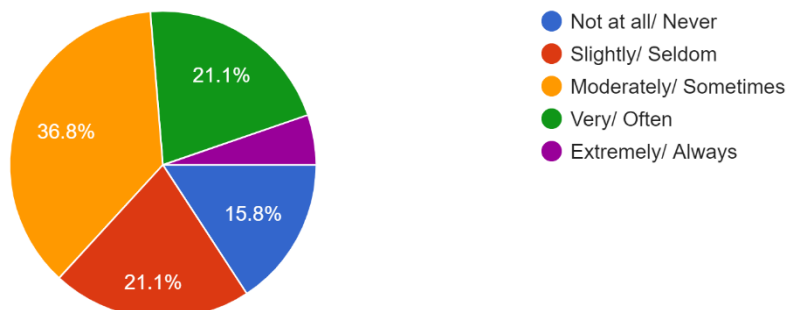
House church small groups were formed to be inclusive of the diversity found at HLC: age, household composition, years attending HLC, denom...s this diversity in your small group experience?

19 responses



Has sharing Holy Communion in house church small groups changed your understanding of this holy meal?

19 responses



If your understanding of communion has changed, how has it change?

- It is not just a meal shared with God but also a sharing of time with community.
- Holiness is where you commune with God as in the living room on zoom during a pandemic with juice and crackers. Something I would never have anticipated in my life.
- I think it brings a closer union with me and with the ones who were in my small group. We are all walking with Jesus together. Feeling apart of the group.
- It really hasn't changed. Its a great reminder of God's love and real presence
- that you can do the act at anytime.
- It does not have to be a formal thing at the altar only. It can be at small groups.
- No change
- Part of its importance is sharing the "meal" with the group.
- Has not changed.
- Just the idea of breaking bread with others in a common place, opens my eyes to this opportunity in other parts of life

Were there other elements of worship that you wish were included in house church small groups?

- No
- Perhaps music
- music
- It did include all elements ,for the time allowed.
- No, I thought it was great. Nice balance of fellowship and service
- Reading of the scripture lesson and having conversations what it meant to me and others in the group.
- Not in the short while we met.
- Not that I can think of.

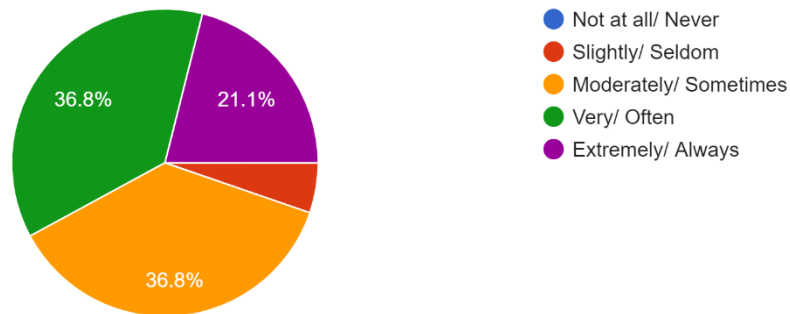
- N/A
- nope they were great!
- Singing.
- More discussion, less being "told or talked to " by the leader
- Singing?
- More time to discuss scripture.
- Yes. As in our worship service, I would like to have had some type of "Gathering Music" to center us for the study for the day. (As we say during worship, preparing our minds for worship.) Probably would need a C.D. etc.This would follow our gathering conversation.
- Maybe more time for reflection

Which elements of worship in house church small groups were not impactful for you?

- Snacks
- None
- I didn't enjoy the setting as much as I would have a house setting, although I understand why it was necessary.
- Nothing
- I feel the entire experience was impactful and particularly enjoyed the childrens' perspective and enthusiasm for Jesus.
- The first subject, the "ice breaker" subject, interesting.
- All were impactful
- Nothing that comes to mind
- I can't think of anything.
- Can't think of anything
- N/A
- nothing, I got something out of each session
- Not sure.
- Nothing. I thought all of it was meaningful
- None of it.
- I was fine with the elements of worship we practiced.
- No answer

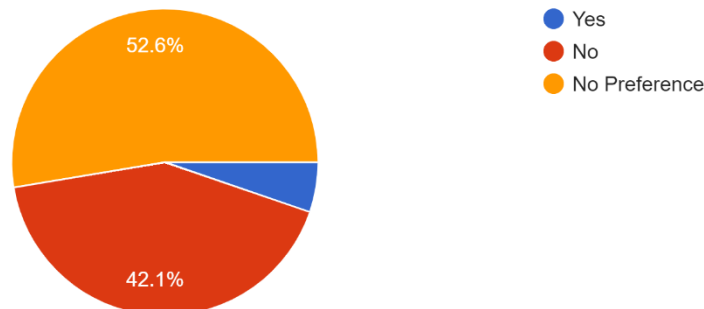
Has your faith been positively impacted by participating in house church small groups?

19 responses



Would you prefer your small group to be based on similarities such as age, gender, or household composition?

19 responses



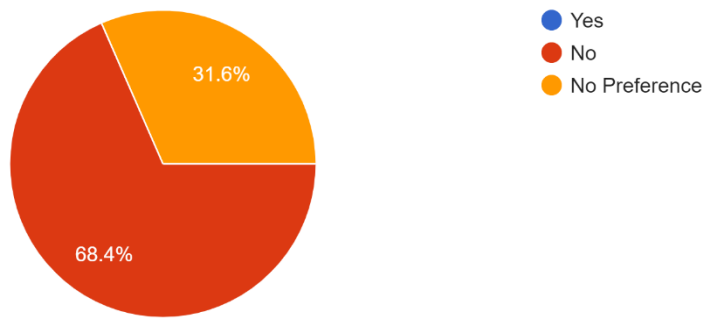
If you had a child participate with you in house church small groups, please describe their experience:

- The children who participated in the group were exceptionally bright and social. They enjoyed participating and were eager to share their feelings and ideas. I believe their experience was very positive.
- It was great to have youth included. They offer "peace" and getting along with each member.
- They loved feeling connected with others within the church that were not necessarily their own age. It helped them feel a better sense of belonging.
- The children really added another reaction.
- Wonderful, love the faith of a child
- he is 2, he loved the snacks :)

- Na.
- Their favorite part was the snack. They enjoyed being included in discussions.
- N/A
- They felt the group was more to their liking than what they experienced in confirmation. They felt the conversations talked about actual faith development vs just talking about stories that they have heard over and over again. It was more tangible, adult conversation they enjoyed.
-

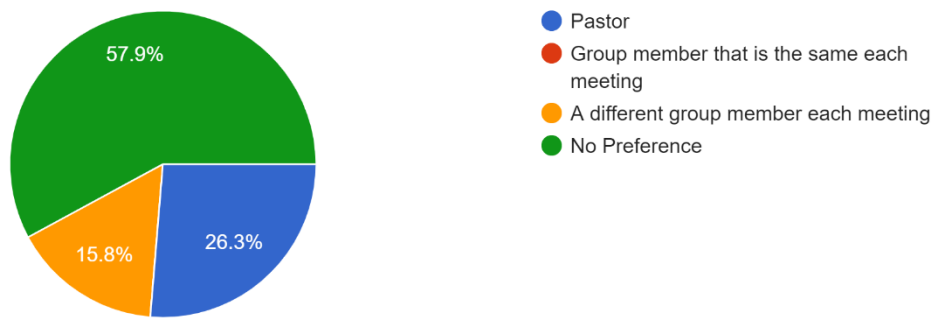
Would you prefer small groups to be for adults only?

19 responses



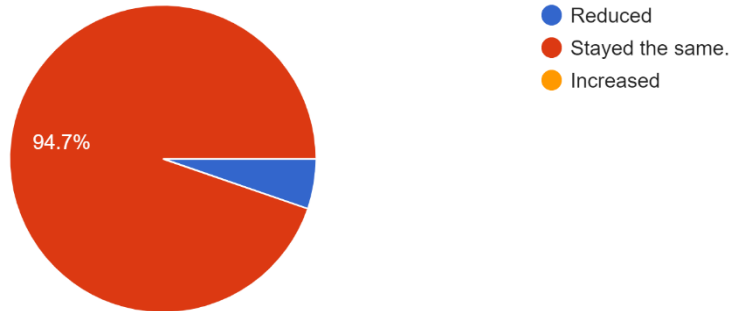
Do you prefer a pastor or group member leading your house church small groups?

19 responses



Has your participation in other HLC ministries and activities changed since participating in house church small groups?

19 responses



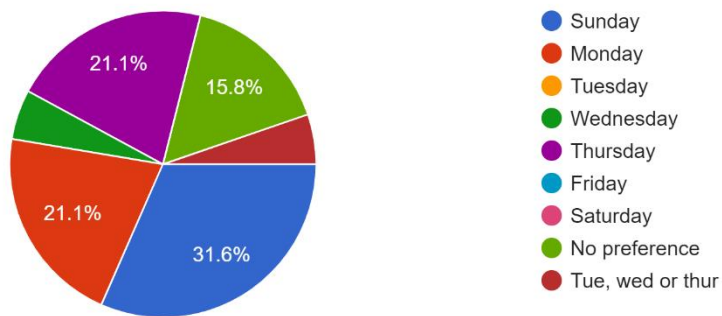
House church small groups should meet

19 responses



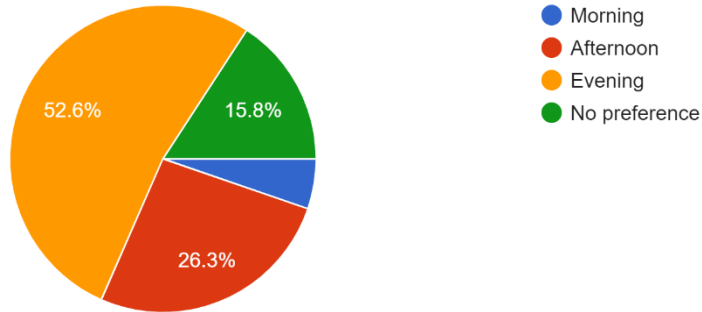
Which day of the week would work for you to meet in a small group in the future.

19 responses



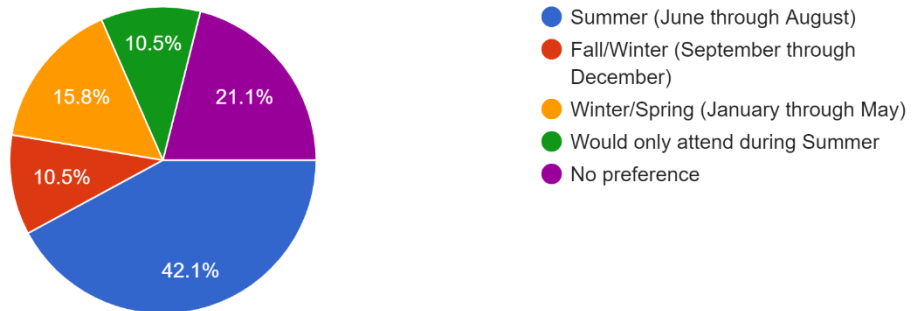
What is your preferred time of the day for you to meet in a small group?

19 responses



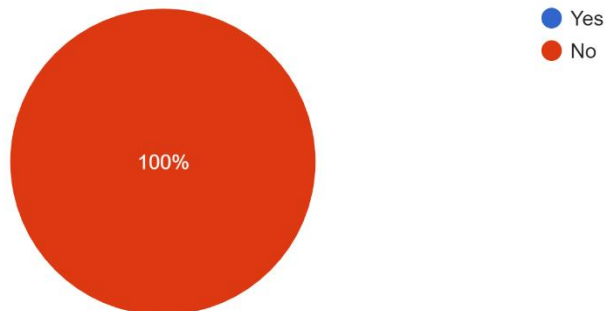
Which is your preferred time of year to attend small groups?

19 responses



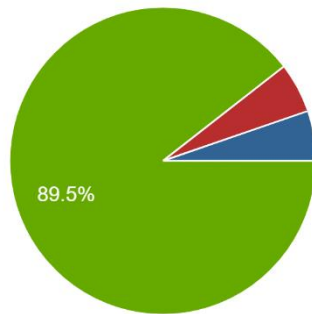
Is your house church small group continuing to meet?

19 responses



If you are continuing to meet, what has changed in your house church small group?

19 responses

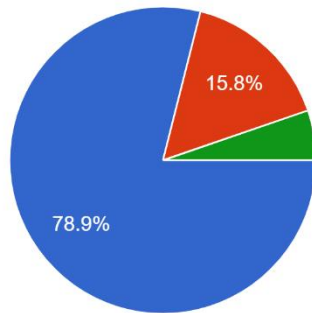


- Ages of participants.
- New participants.
- Frequency of meeting.
- Content or focus of the group.
- Group leadership.
- Location of meeting.
- No changes.
- No longer meeting.

▲ 1/2 ▼

12. What gender do you identify as?

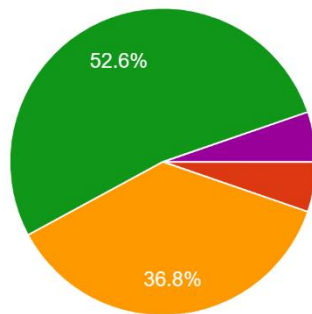
19 responses



- Female
- Male
- Prefer to self-describe.
- Prefer not to say.

What is your age?

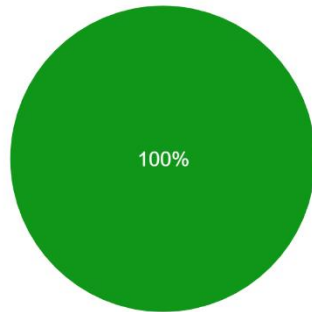
19 responses



- 0-18 years old
- 19-39 years old
- 40-59 years old
- 60-79 years old
- 80-100 years old

Please specify your ethnicity.

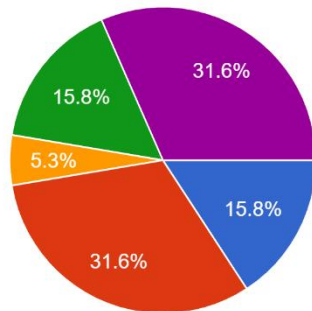
19 responses



- American Indian or Native Alaskan
- African-American or Black
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Caucasian
- Latino or Hispanic
- Two or More
- Other/ Unknown
- Prefer not to say.

How many years have you attended Holmen Lutheran Church?

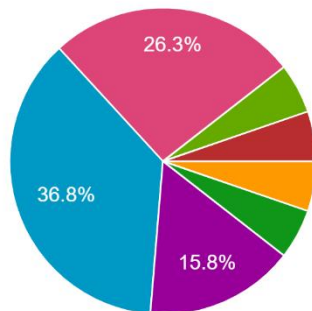
19 responses



- 0-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-19 years
- 20 or more years

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

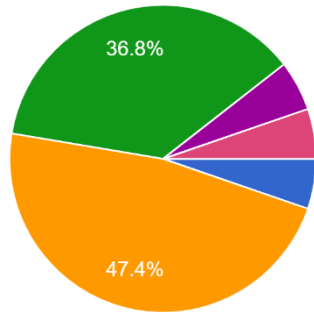
19 responses



- Elementary School
- Middle School
- High School
- Trade School
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Graduate Degree
- Prefer not to say.
- University and a Technical school

What is your household composition (child = 18 years or younger)?

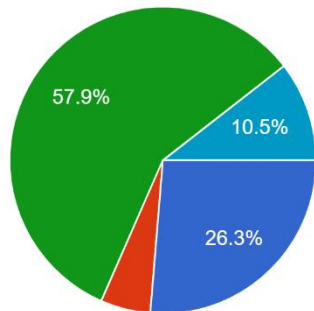
19 responses



- Single without children in the home
- Single with children in the home
- Married or partnered without children in the home
- Married or partnered with children in the home
- Divorced without children in the home
- Divorced with children in the home
- Widowed without children in the home
- Widowed with children in the home

What is your current employment status?

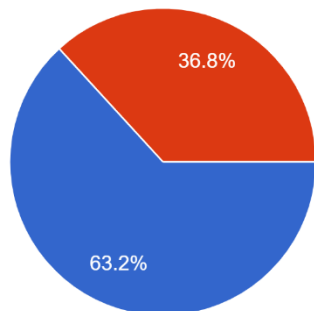
19 responses



- Full-time
 - Part-time
 - Seeking Opportunities
 - Retired
 - A Homemaker
 - Self-employed
 - A Student
 - Military
- ▲ 1/2 ▼

Did you grow up ELCA Lutheran?

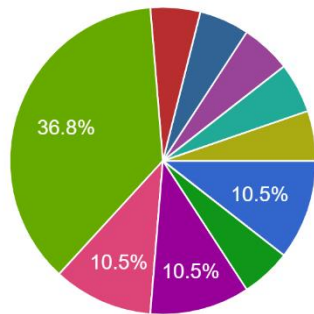
19 responses



- Yes
- No
- No Religious Tradition

In addition to worship, which activity do you participate in at Holmen Lutheran Church?

19 responses



- Lay Leadership: Council, Committees
- Youth Ministry: Sunday School teache...
- Music Ministry: bells, choir, praise band
- Faith Formation: book club, adult educ...
- Caring Ministries: Stephen Ministry, ho...
- Office/Tech Support: social media, ne...
- If you participate in more than one acti...
- I do not participate in any other activity...

▲ 1/2 ▼