THE MANIFESTATION OF BIBLICAL COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING IN A FACEBOOK COMMUNITY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AMONG CHRISTIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

Paul W. Perkins

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

Liberty University

June 2012
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ABSTRACT

Applying theoretical studies of social capital, social presence, cognitive presence, and community helps researchers understand more fully the phenomenon of online social networks. The debate has moved from the positive and negative effects of online social networks to understanding how they fit into daily life. However, do biblical community beliefs transfer to Facebook? If Facebook is considered a community, does it exhibit the characteristics of a biblical community? Through a qualitative case study design, this research explored eight Christian college students, four men and four women, from two Midwest Christian colleges, investigating their understanding of biblical community and its application in a Facebook community. The research found that these students’ family, church, and college experiences impacted their understanding of biblical community. It also showed that their understanding of biblical community impacted how they interacted on Facebook. Like in real-world relationships, Facebook, as a public forum, is an appropriate place to display positive biblical characteristics, whereas, negative comments and status updates are to be expressed in private settings.

Descriptors: Community, biblical, social presence, online social networks, social capital, virtual community
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Nancy sat staring at her computer, much like she did every day. It was a safe place for her to hide. Behind the flickering lights of her virtual community, she became whomever she wanted. Deep down, however, she desired only to be herself. Since coming to college, she had tried becoming a part of the crowd, joining the right clubs and being active in small groups. Nancy even attempted to have an accountability partner. Nevertheless, she never really belonged. She talked to people, but never felt as if they really listened. The online community promised a place where anonymity masked the flaws that seemed to keep people away. She felt satisfied and confident as people requested to be her friend and her community began to grow. She participated slowly, testing the trustworthiness of her new friends. The community seemed genuine. Nancy was invited to join groups, and with each new membership there came invitations to events. There was no pressure to attend, and she never did, but the invitation itself meant everything. These people were her true friends, and they cared.

Nancy spent more and more of her time lurking on friends’ sites, watching as they posted, viewed their pictures, and learned a lot about them. She would even stop on occasion to pray for those in her community. Classes filled her day, but homework was being neglected. When Nancy received her academic probation letter, her world began to unravel. She did not know what to do or to whom to turn. Maybe her new friends would help. She saw them posting back and forth, and had even prayed for them. Certainly they would pray for her and offer her help. She frantically pecked away at the keyboard,
requesting prayer and even asking for a tutor. No one responded. She tried again and someone posted, “praying.” Nancy felt a little better, but it did not last. Depression paralyzed her ability to study, and eventually Nancy dropped out and went home. When she turned the light on her monitor off for the last time, the silence was deafening.

**Background of the Problem**

God created man to exist and thrive within the context of community (Genesis 2:24,25; 1 Corinthians 12:13). From the beginning of Genesis to the coming of the Kingdom of Christ in Revelation, God has worked in and through groups of people who live and relate to one another. Adam and Eve formed the first community as they propagated the earth (Genesis 2:24, 25). It was through their ancestral line that God blessed the world through His Son, Jesus. Eventually, God called Abram to go to the Promised Land (Genesis 17:8-10). In this new land, God worked through Abraham (formerly known as Abram) to establish a community that would reflect his character and priorities, and to testify of God to the rest of the world. This community consisted of his sons and the generations that followed. The nation of Israel was defined by the land God gave them, the laws Moses received on Mount Sinai, and the small groups of people who formed villages, towns, and cities (Deuteronomy 30:1-20). In these enclaves, people lived together for the mutual welfare of their town and nation, bound by their common location and needs, but in particular, their common faith. The birth of Jesus, and the subsequent establishment of the church, is the continuation of God’s plan to work through communities as witnesses to the message of salvation (Matthew 16:18; 28:16-20).
All communities (biblical and non-biblical) exhibit specific characteristics that define their identity (Smith, 2010). Characteristics of place, ethnicity, function, and purpose segregate people into regions distinct from other communities. Beliefs, boundaries, ownership, accountability, and cost keep people within the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The Puritans exemplified this in their movement from Europe to America. Their community consisted of people with a common belief in God. As they moved to the New World, they established their communities around rivers, bays, and along coasts. These natural boundaries afforded them water for drinking and irrigation (Burton, 2011). Historically, though some traveled away from their communities, most people stayed in close proximity of the community (Smith, 2010). They were tied to the land either by geographical boundaries that provided sustenance and protection from enemies, or by family connections that provided familiar cultural and religious beliefs.

Physical boundaries continued to be the primary focus for developing communities up to and after the Industrial Revolution. After the Industrial Revolution, the world became smaller as people traveled farther, and though community characteristics stayed the same, an increasing number of people could leave existing communities with more fluidity. Travel became faster and cheaper with the development of the steam engine. Travel up rivers on steamboats or across the land on trains made the world more accessible (Smith, 2010).

The introduction of personal computers in the late 1970’s unleashed a phenomenon that revolutionized how community was viewed. With the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1991 and the rapid growth of computer technology, people
increasingly share information and formed communities across greater distances. The World Wide Web gave rise to questions about the nature of place, presence, and social capital within the context of community. Where these characteristics were space specific prior to the World Wide Web, the Internet created a place and presence in a virtual environment. When friends video conference on the Internet, they are not in the same place, yet they interact as if they are; they feel as though they are together, and they relate to one another in mutually beneficial ways. This raises the following question: Can virtual environments truly be considered communities?

In 2004, a young man named Mark Zuckerberg developed a way for students at Harvard to engage one another through a social network application called Facebook (Rice, 2009). The network became so popular that Zuckerberg eventually expanded it beyond Harvard and made it public. Facebook is the fastest growing Online Social Network (OSN) to date, boasting a “Facebook family” of over 800 million active users (Facebook, 2012, p. 1). The average Facebook user spends 15 to 20 hours per week on his or her social network connecting to friends and family (Rice, 2009).

**Statement of the Problem**

As OSNs have become more prevalent, their benefit to the social and academic health of students has been questioned. Researchers have focused on the effect of social networks on real-world activities (Campbell, 2004; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Donath & MIT Media Lab, 2010). The research has looked at how time spent on the Internet affects academic performance, how associations affect social capital, and how the dangers of displaying personal information to a broader, unseen audience can harm users (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Kraut, Patterson,
Lundmakr, Kiesler, Mukophadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998; Lin, 1999; McCabe, 2009; McPherson, Popielarz, & Drobnic, 2006; Shiue, Chiu, & Chang, 2010).

Previous studies (Silverman, 2001; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001) raised many positive and negative perspectives on OSNs that drive the current debate about their value. OSNs are not a passing fad, and the Christian college and church need to understand their effect on the spiritual and communal health of those they serve. Christian colleges are interested in more than just academics. They seek to educate within an environment that reflects a healthy and authentic biblical community (Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, 2004).

As college students, especially at Christian colleges, enter the virtual world, there are concerns expressed by the religious community. Where old boundaries maintained a closed belief system, the virtual community exposes students to a wider expression of religious belief that can challenge the commonly held concepts of the religious community (Campbell, 2004). The traditional boundaries are now broken down and users are able to form community ties that spread around the globe. An earlier study showed a fear that spreading out would weaken community ties with real-world religious communities (Campbell, 2004). However, in Zhagn, Jian, & Carroll’s (2011) study, they showed that weak ties are often strengthened within certain contexts.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to describe how Christian college students manifested their understanding of biblical community on Facebook. Through a qualitative multi-case study (Yin, 2009), this study described how eight college students’
understanding of biblical community was influenced by family, church, and college, and how that understanding manifested itself in the Facebook community.

**Definition of Terms**

**Presence:** Presence is the feeling that the student is actually present when communicating with others on the Internet (Aragon, 2003).

**Place:** Place is where people gather for relational interaction in a social environment (Putnam, 2000).

**Community:** A community is a group of people identified by a common place, common beliefs/values, and a common purpose.

**Sense of community:** Sense of community is determined by the feelings members have about being a part of a community (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986).

**Biblical community:** Biblical community is a group of people who utilize their gifts (talents and abilities) for the encouragement, exhortation, and social welfare of one another around the common belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and for His honor and glory (Bonhoeffer, 1954).

**Biblical sense of community:** Biblical sense of community is the feeling members have about being part of a community that bases its beliefs on the Bible.

**Biblical worldview:** A worldview is a set of presuppositions and biases that affect the way a person looks at the world. A Biblical worldview bases the presuppositions and biases on the Bible (Wayne, 2011).

**Belonging:** “To belong is to be related to and a part of something…to belong is to know, even in the middle of the night, that I am among friends” (Blok, 2008, g. xii).
**Gifts:** Gifts are equal to an individual’s capacity to contribute to the community (Blok, 2008, p. 140).

**Conversation:** The interaction that community members have to create restoration in the community (Blok, 2008, p. 47).

**Decision-making:** Authority to act (Blok, 2008, p. 119).

**Accountability:** The willingness to acknowledge that we have participated in creating the conditions that we wish to see changed (Blok, 2008, p. 127).

**Small groups:** Small groups are units of 3 to 12 people and are transformational in nature (Blok, 2008, pp. 31, 95).

**Common purpose:** How citizens choose to build connections – associational life (Blok, 2008, p. 30).

**Ownership:** Ownership is when participants decide and act on a plan (Blok, 2008, p. 108).

**Delimitations**

Delimitations are the boundaries or parameters set for the research, they limit what the reader might expect, but are those that the researcher has decided not to include (Krefting, 1991). A research study about communities in an online social network could include a wide variety of individuals, backgrounds, and sites. This research is limited in nature by the community the author has chosen to study. Therefore, the following limitations are acknowledged.

1. This study focuses on Christian students attending Christian colleges and may not apply to Christian college students who attend technical or trade schools, or other non-Christian liberal arts schools.
2. The study is limited to Facebook and may not reflect how other OSNs enhance social networking.

3. The number of hours spent on Facebook was self-reported by the participants.

4. Participants were selected using criteria that were matched to the Adapted Questions from the Pew Research Project survey (see Appendix A).

5. Participants were professing Christians who believe that Jesus died for their sins and will return one day.

6. Colleges were selected that held to the view that Jesus died for the sins of mankind and will one day return.

**Significance of the Study**

The online world has become an integral part of the American landscape (Wellman & Hawthornwaite, 2002). According to the United States Census Bureau (2001), 65% of households in the United States have computers and access to the Internet. Virtual worlds can have the tendency to isolate people from developing deep and meaningful relationships (Campbell, 2004). A 2009 study, conducted by Auday and Coleman, professors of psychology at Gordon College, found that one in every three evangelical college students spent between one to two hours a day of Facebook (Aday & Coleman, 2009). Christian colleges, as an extension of the church’s mission, attempt to create biblical communities that will assist in the life transformation of students and contribute to their academic success. An example of how Christian colleges affirm community as a focus of their schools is found in *US News and World Report Online* (2010) edition of Education; the article states, “Taylor University is a vibrant community of scholarship and Christian faith characterized by ‘relentless discovery, intentional
community, and global engagement” (para. 2). It is incumbent for colleges to understand how their students’ understanding of the college’s community concepts impacts the students’ virtual world. This study is designed to bridge the gap between understanding and practice. How does a student’s understanding of biblical community play out in the virtual world? Do college students have expectations of their real-world communities that are unmet offline and met in the online world?

The church teaches, but indoctrination does not always correlate with reality. College students’ practice and understanding of biblical community are not formulated through doctrine alone. The question as to their understanding of biblical community is important to help understand how their activity in the online world satisfies what may be lacking in the offline world. The findings of a study of this nature can inform college leaders how to meet the needs of community belonging among college students. It is possible that Facebook is a passing fad, but the idea of online communities is going to be around for a long time. Christian colleges and churches will better serve the cause of Christ by keeping abreast of how the virtual world interacts with the real world.

**Research Questions**

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How have institutions such as family, church, and college contributed to the participants’ understanding of community?
2. How do students manifest their sense of community on Facebook?
3. What connections are there between students’ OSN community and their real-world community?
4. How do Christian students treat their friendships within the OSN differently than their friendships in the real-world community?

5. How does a participant’s involvement in their OSN move him/her to real-world interaction?

**Research Plan**

This study was a qualitative multi-case study design. A multi-case study design was used in order to better understand how the participants’ history shaped their understanding of community, as well as how their church involvement and college experience contributed to their biblical community formation. A triangulation of data included an initial interview, observations of Facebook, and a follow-up interview. Eight students were interviewed from two Evangelical Christian colleges in the Midwest. Premier Music College (pseudonym) had a student enrollment of 110 students, and Smallville Christian College (pseudonym) had an enrollment of 1200 students. The student body was surveyed utilizing the Sense of Community Survey (see Appendices J & K). Four students were selected at each college to participate in the research. Each of the participants allowed the researcher to observe his or her Facebook interaction over a period of six months. The following is a synopsis of the analysis procedures. A theoretical framework was identified, each transcript was read several times to identify reoccurring themes, and Facebook pages were observed and categories identified. A coding system was developed and adjusted as necessary, and then information was tabulated and placed in tables and lists. I then conducted cross-case analysis, an analysis was against the research questions, and finally, I made an analysis was against the theoretical framework.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The college landscape is filled with students who have extended their social connections into the world of virtual communities. There is a debate over the value of online social networks. Some assert that online social networks take away from real-world social interaction and educational pursuits. Still others feel that publishing too much information on public forums diminishes personal privacy and increases victimization by predators. Attitudes and opinions run the gamut from fan to foe (McCabe, 2009; Shiue, et al., 2010; Walhter, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). However, an online social network’s value is dependent on the perception of the user. It is clear that OSNs are here to stay in one form or another. The following review revealed how early research focused on OSN use in everyday life, and how that use effects community through differing theoretical frameworks. What has not been studied is how Christian college students’ understanding of biblical community impacts how they express themselves on their OSNs. Christian colleges are extensions of the church, which help students develop biblical worldviews and apply them to real-world situations (Henderson, 2006). In order to set the groundwork for this study, the following literature review examined the nature of biblical community, how biblical community is supported by current research on community, and the intersection and melding of community along the virtual highway in OSNs.

Theoretical Framework

Social connectedness theory is the theoretical framework for this study (Blok, 2008). As Blok (2008) said, “community is about the experience of belonging . . . to
belong is to be related to and a part of something” (p. 13). Blok identified nine characteristics (belonging, common purpose, ownership, conversation, small groups, accountability, decision-making, involvement, and gifts) that are common to thriving communities. These same characteristics are articulated within the Scriptures as part of healthy biblical communities (see Table 1). Utilizing these characteristics, the researcher examined whether Christian college students manifested these characteristics within the context of their online social network, Facebook.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Characteristics</th>
<th>Bible Passages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
<td>Gal. 3:29; 1 Cor. 12:20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifts</td>
<td>1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4 &amp; 5; Romans 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td>Acts 6:2-6; 15:22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Matt. 18:15-18; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Tim 4:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small groups</td>
<td>Acts 2:46; 5:42; 20:20; Romans 16:5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Titus 2:15; 3:8; Eph. 4:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common purpose</td>
<td>Eph. 4:5; Phil. 2:2; John 17:22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>1 Tim. 1:5; Eph. 4:7-13; Gal. 5:13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>Phil. 1:27; Rom. 15:30; Eph. 4:3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fact that people live in close proximity to one another necessitates a need to understand the dynamics involved in the formation of communities. This, however, is not an easy task. To say that community will be discussed is like a blind man saying he
will talk about color. People experience it all of the time, but defining community is elusive. Research guides one in a specific direction, but one’s lens of experience will often shape the conclusion. Community is multifaceted and the point of view from which one begins will dictate how he or she will view the issues of community (Smith, 2001). Therefore, this author looked at the different facets of community and how the literature tried to make sense of what humans observe.

Community is best approached when described by its varied characteristics (Frazer, 1999). Traditionally, it is defined by one of three aspects: place, interest, or relationship. Place or territory defines community by its geographic boundaries. This included mountain ranges, rivers, oceans, and deserts. People usually gathered where there was plenty of water or rich soil. However, locality in some communities was secondary to interests. Interests of the members dictated the community. Interests were elective and they could have included religious beliefs (Hassidic community in New York), sexual orientation (Palms of Manasota in Sarasota, Florida), and occupation (coal miners in Virginia). It will be seen later how communities of interest meld well in today’s cyber culture and become conceptual places (Hoggett, 1997). However, there is a deeper part of community that can stand alone and undergird the others.

**Biblical Community: Scriptural Perspective**

It must be stated upfront that there is no research focused specifically on biblical community. Other than polls and surveys conducted by organizations like Gallup, Inc., who found the importance of religion in American daily life decreased from 58% in 1992 to 54% in 2010, little is known about the complexity of relationships within a biblical community (Gallup, 2011). Biblical community, then, is determined through an
exegetical study of the Christian Scriptures (a critical explanation and interpretation of a given text), and the experience of churches that are deemed successful for their ability to increase in numbers and assimilate people into their communities. This research draws on these two categories to give an understanding of biblical community.

Looking at the Scriptures, there is not a specific definition of biblical community. Instead, there is an explanation and description. The explanation concerns itself with the actions of those who are members of the community, and the description centers on how the community interacts. Matthew 22:37-39 says, “Jesus said, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment.’” The second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (NASB). These commands establish the foundation for biblical community. Christians are called to love God and to love others in a mutually beneficial way that glorifies God.

**Old Testament**

Biblical community began with the creation of Adam and Eve, and the first chapters of Genesis provide the foundational unit of community life: husband and wife. It is from this foundation that the Jewish people established their roots and understanding of communal living, which they believed was comprised of care, growth, and multiplication. Professor Lord Wilson (2011) writes:

The home has a central position in Jewish society and plays a crucial part in Jewish survival. A Jew can physically endure without a home but Jewish culture cannot: it is defined, organized and perpetuated by the family in its home (p. 1).
From the first family (Adam and Eve) through the patriarchs, the family was the focal point of the Jewish community. After the exodus of the Jews from Egyptian captivity, God led His people to a new land, where He established a broader sense of community by extending it from the nuclear family to the nation. He gave the people laws to govern themselves, separate themselves from other nations, and worship Him as the only true God (Duet. 33:10).

For the Jewish people, what they believed about their family extended to how they felt about their nation, for they were intricately connected. Alfred Edersheim (1994) explains it this way:

Inference [about the family], on the other hand, ultimately resolved itself into theology, as they understood it; and service, which again consisted of the proper observance of all that was prescribed by God, and of works of charity towards men-the latter, indeed, going beyond the bound of what was strictly due into special merit or righteousness (p. 61).

The family was such a strong element in the communal life of Israel that it was considered a living tabernacle by the rabbis. Lord Wilson (2011) explains, “The home was seen by the rabbis as a true sanctuary—a mikdash m'at, a little temple—in which parents are priests and the table is an altar: its flexibility and openness are demonstrated especially on Shabbat and festivals” (p. 3). The family is where the law was taught and passed down.

During the Babylonian captivity, the focus of transferring biblical knowledge shifted from the family to the synagogue. The rabbis (teachers) became the interpreters of the law and had the power to shape Jewish community culture. On their return from
Babylonian captivity, synagogues were established in every town. It was in this atmosphere that Jewish piety began to flourish. Edersheim (1994) stated the following:

To the pious Jew, on the contrary, the knowledge of God was everything; and to prepare for or impart that knowledge was the sum total, the sole object of his education. This was the life of his soul—the better, and only true life, to which all else as well as the life of the body were merely subservient, as means toward an end (p. 65).

Jesus told one Pharisee that the greatest commands were to love God and to love others (Matt. 22:34). True religion consisted of devotion toward the Heavenly Father and applied to the just treatment of other people (James 1:26). This love for family was unusual in comparison to the pagan nations. Edersheim (1994) noted that even the Roman historian, Tacitus, remarked that the Jewish family was something special, and that it was odd that Jews saw it a crime to kill one of their children.

New Testament

Jesus did not eliminate the law or the idea of Jewish community. He directed people back to its core. While teaching in a crowded home, His family arrived and sent a message that His mother was outside and expected Him to come and meet them. Instead of leaving to meet His family, Jesus directed the crowd to the nature of true family. True family consisted of those who believed and obeyed the commandments of God. Jesus’ family was those who believed in Him and followed His teaching (Mark 3:32-34). The expectations of community life were to include a broader range of people.

After Jesus ascended to heaven and the disciples received the gift of the Holy Spirit, community life began to take shape for those who followed Jesus. They broke
bread together, had home meetings for teaching, met in the temple, and shared their beliefs with other people. As a result, the followers of The Way began to grow, and with growth came the problems of community life. There was friction when one group felt slighted in the daily division of provisions. Leadership was established to make decisions and serve the community. In essence, the early church was a people within a people.

Most of the converts to Christianity were Jews, who had come to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. Many stayed, which brought challenges to the Christians who already lived in Jerusalem. However, because of their love for Christ and their love for one another, those who had homes and property began to sell them in order to provide for the needs of those who did not have financial resources (Acts 4:37).

As the community of believers came together to love God, they did so with a common set of core beliefs. These core beliefs included the nature of Jesus, love for one another, faith and forgiveness, compassion for the weak, justice for the oppressed, sacraments, and community life. It is these core beliefs that set this community of believers apart from other communities (Bohnoeffer, 1954). Core beliefs were important in order for a community of Christians to be considered biblically sound. What distinguishes Christians from other communities and brings denominations together is the person of Jesus. The Apostle Paul made it clear that if Jesus did not die for the sins of the world and rise from the dead, then the Christian faith is of no value, and the community that arises from it is without power and purpose (1 Cor. 15:13-19).

Jesus was the head of the community of New Testament believers (Eph. 5:23). He gave the church direction and instruction on how to live as a community. Each person who believes in the sacrificial death of Jesus and his resurrection is said to be a
part of His household, a member in good standing, and an integral part of the mission of the community (Eph. 2:19). The biblical community is brought together for the primary purpose of glorifying God, around which traditions and rituals have been established to enact and enhance the practice of worship. Worship, or ascribing worth, to God for who He is and what He has done through Jesus becomes the focal point for the community gathered. This common focus helps the community in defining direction and action on a day-to-day basis.

Each member of the biblical community is given gifts, bestowed by the Spirit of God, for the building up of the community (1 Cor. 7:7; Eph. 4:7). Though gifts can give a sense of self-worth, the purpose is not for self-gratification, but to contribute to the community’s well being. Each member of the community has value, no matter what gift or contribution he or she is able to make.

The gifts and their use have the underlying assumption of investment and increase. Jesus told the parable of a master who gave his servants some money to invest while he was away. All but one invested. The one who did not invest was cast out of the community (Matt. 25:15). Even though the gifts that are given to community members originate in God, the receiver is obligated to invest time and energy in order for the community to bear fruit. This is commonly referred to as stewardship. God does not expect each member to produce the same amount, but He does expect that each member be a productive member of the community. Paul exhorts those who do not work with the warning that if they do not contribute, they will not receive help from the community (2 Thess. 3:10). Personal responsibility is part of being in a biblical community. The Scriptures say that believers should bear one another’s burdens, but that each one should
bear his or her own load. Individuals in the community have responsibilities that only they can bear, and during difficult times the community walks with them even though responsibility still rests on individuals (Getz, 1992).

Indeed, there is a greater cost in the Christian community that sets it apart. Being part of a Christian community is to think of others before thinking of yourself (Phil. 2: 3), forgiving others as Christ forgave you (Col. 3:13), and forsaking personal gain and prestige for the sake of the community (James 5:1-6). These values are personal and require an intimate relationship with people within the community. This raises the question of how these values find expression in online communities. In examining this question, the limitations of OSNs may be revealed.

Biblical community thrives because each member of the community is accountable to one another (Eph. 5:21). Members have a vested interest in the spiritual growth of the whole. This mutual subjection is for the benefit of the community and is based on love. Speaking truth is not to be avoided, but is encouraged as long as it is with the right attitude: love (Eph. 4:15). Confrontation within the community is not for condemnation, but for restoration (Gal. 6:1). Restoring community members does not weaken the community, but rather makes it stronger, building on the foundation that its head, Jesus, has established. However, because of the virtual distance in OSNs, accountability becomes difficult.

Applied Biblical Community

For churches in the United States of America, the challenge is applying biblical principles of community in a culture where community is ever changing. Gated neighborhoods, tall fences, and even garages have isolated people from one another.
People can leave home in the morning, go to work, and return in the evening, never interacting with others in a way that builds deep relational connections. Because Americans value independence and privacy, they fight against community. According to Donahue (2005), most churches fall within three basic structures, all revolving around small groups of people. These structures are meta-churches, cell churches, and small group churches (Donahue, 2005; Frazee, 2003).

All of these structures revolve around the fundamental concept that transformation and community find their best expression in a small group (6 to 12) of people. The meta-church philosophy structures its small groups around compatibility, interests, and life stage. Community, though the goal, is secondary to the individual’s interest or life stage. When changes occur, so does the individual’s involvement in that particular community or small group (Donahue, 2005; George, 1994).

Cell churches are small groups whose emphasis is on evangelism (communicating the Gospel and having people respond in faith). Community is important, but is often sacrificed as the cell group grows larger and needs to divide to form new groups. Different approaches to cells abound, but the basic strategy for growth is the same (Comiskey, 2009; Neighbor, 2000).

The small group movement centers on small groups of people. The true small group can grow and multiply, but it is more concerned about being balanced between caring, instruction, and reaching out. The danger for them is that they tend to sacrifice outreach. They enjoy their fellowship with one another and do not want to disrupt that closeness by introducing new people. It takes time for people to form bonds of trust so
that they can share personal experiences and feelings. Adding additional people disrupts that group cohesiveness (Arnold, 1992; Gladen & Howerton, 2009).

The challenge for churches is to maintain the mission without sacrificing community. One way of doing this is to acknowledge the different size groups within a healthy church. Seeing the importance of large groups, as well as small, intimate groups in building relationships, helps churches create a nurturing environment. This gives a place for each person in church to belong without forcing him or her into any one context. Every healthy community can be divided into four relational spaces (Frazee, 2003). Each space has a different commitment and intimacy level. The largest community space is a group above 75 people. There is no intimacy at this level, but people are recognized as being part of the community. The next level is the community space between 25 and 75 people. At these levels, people know each other’s names and occupations and interact socially together. Conversations at this level typically revolve around mundane topics such as the weather. The level of intimacy increases when the community space decreases to between 3 and 25 people (Frazee, 2001; Larson, 1997). This group size falls in the range of small groups. Here, the community shares needs and prayer requests and knows family members and birthdays. The smallest community space is 2 or 3 people. At this level of community, people share information that is often secret and confidential (Cole, 1999; Zigarelli, 2004).

Social togetherness does not equal community. In fact, biblical community is one of the most difficult communities to form. As believers come together, they bring with them different backgrounds, cultures, socioeconomic status, and languages. However, the common bond of faith in Jesus breaks down these walls to form a group of people
who not only come together, but also live together for a greater purpose in Christ. Marty (2005) remarked, “A resurrection-minded community will not merge so long as individuals are busy surrounding themselves with only those people with whom they wish to live” (p. 1). Marty (2005) suggests that the manifestation of biblical community occurs when its members replicate the love of God through authentic hospitality and love for each other.

**Community & Boundaries**

As it has been noted, communities can be determined by topographical boundaries. Geographic proximity, however, does not necessitate community relationships (Blok, 2008). As cities have grown larger, common geographical boundaries have become less important, and other forms of boundaries have taken their place. For example, gated communities with walls establish territorial boundaries. However, there are known, though unofficial, boundaries that have labels, such as ‘the other side of the tracks’ or ‘the south side of town.’ Boundaries are not always obvious. They can often be in the mind of individuals within the community or could be symbols that hold communities together (Chavis et al., 1986; Cohen, 1985; Frazer, 1999). Some researchers suggest throwing out the idea of boundaries as a descriptor and concentrating on connections that are made through relationships (Bott, 1957; Stacey, 1969). Within the virtual community, there are boundaries as well. They are called network “sites.” Sites such as Facebook, Myspace, Friendster, and Second Life are bounded network communities. These types of boundaries are less about the physicality of place, but the kind of connection made. This fits with Bott’s (1957) and Stacey’s (1969) expression of network communities as being about “connectedness.”
If boundaries become less defined as people enter the online world, how does a person regulate his or her community as to size, or does size matter at all? As cities grew, the context of community changed in order to reduce community size in a manageable way. Dunbar (1992), in his groundbreaking study of primates, identified a correlation between the neo-cortex (among certain primates) and the number of members in the primates’ network. He identified different social groups within the community as a whole, which allowed the primates to function in larger community structures. Small clique sizes within the larger community offered primates a more intimate relationship where grooming and care took place. From here, Dunbar predicted that the typical network size for humans should be around 150 individuals (Hill & Dunbar, 2002).

Testing this theory through a questionnaire that measured the number of Christmas cards sent by 43 participants, Hill and Dunbar (2002) concluded that the average network size for humans is approximately 153 people. However, there are some problems with Hill’s study in terms of the participant sample population and whether Christmas cards are good indicators of relational importance. Tilburg (1998), in his study of the elderly, found that the network average was around 13.4. Of course, his study centered on elderly residents whose network relationships were limited. He also defined network members as those who were important. This does not negate his findings, in terms of community size, but rather supports the understanding that within larger communities, there are sub-categories or cliques, which have more intimate relationships. Relationships, networks, and communities are layered (Dunbar, 1992). One possible reason for the limitations to the size of network relationships is man’s cognitive limitations. Dunbar suggests that
humans are limited to the number of connections that can be maintained because of their inability to remember details about community members.

**Community of Interest**

Boundaries are natural structures that give shape to communities, but they do not limit communities. However, there is a tendency, known as homophily, to associate and bond with people who are the same. McPherson, Smith-Loving, and Cook (2001) define homophily as “the principle that contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people” (p. 416). Though homophily includes boundaries and communion (as shown later), homophily in regard to interest (things people have in common) is most pronounced. There are a plethora of interests around which people establish connections, but they are too numerous to include in this review. The most notable, however, are race/ethnicity, sex/gender, age, religion, and behavior. Though today’s culture is one that values diversity and inclusion, people’s desire to be with others of likeness is a stronger pull when making connections. An example can be seen in Christian churches. Echoing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week (Putnam, 2000). This incongruity in the church is magnified when set against the biblical injunction to break down walls of separation between races (Gal. 3:28). The strength of the community is determined by how members of the community create strong or weak ties. Ties are the interactions participants have with one another. The stronger the tie (or bonding), the deeper the connection and the longer the community will last. The weaker the relational tie, the less stable the community connection (McPherson et al., 1992).
Sub-groups of communities can form around other types of interests such as vocation, sports, entertainment, and hobbies. These communities of interest can form strong ties that cause the relational connection to last even beyond that specific interest. Often the relational ties are weak and, therefore, tend to be transient and only last as long as the common interest lasts. These types of community connections are linked by other commonly bonded relationships (Smith, 2010). In the mid-1990’s, OSNs were mainly communities of interest. The typical bulletin board focused on a specific area that people had in common. Participation in a bulletin board was elective and usually revolved around a number of people who were active participants and others who lurked or only occasionally participated (Leiner, Cerf, Clark, Kahn, Kleinrock, Lynch, & Wolff, 2010). Today, bulletin boards are more sophisticated, but they still have a specific focus. OSNs such as MySpace and Facebook branch beyond the specifics of interest and allow people to form connections that are more communal in nature.

**Community of Communion**

Communities that form around interests have meaning for the members, but they do not have the depth of commitment that surrounds communities who share core beliefs. Communion is a deep sense of belonging or attachment to an idea, place, or a group of people (Myers, 2003). When a person experiences this kind of community, it is about an encounter. This kind of encounter is seen in religious communities where the individual or group has an encounter with God or has deep fellowship with one another. There is a spiritual awareness of this kind of community that bonds them together (Smith, 2010).

Communion as part of community is difficult to quantify and is expressed better in stories than in charts. Understanding community and connections this way moves
people beyond activities and meetings to a sense, or spirit, of togetherness. In order for people to obtain this sense of connection, they have to stop, slow down, and focus on the connection and not the activity (Myers, 2003). This aspect of community runs deep and through the other facets of community, but is often overlooked and even pushed aside. People become distracted and too encumbered by boundaries. However, being with people helps to form strong bonds that hold community connections together (Chavis et al., 1986; Crabb, 1997; Myers, 2003).

Having a strong sense of belonging through communion with social connection is important because it leads members to deeper conversations. Meaningful conversations that forge purpose for individuals, and ultimately the community, can only occur when members feel safe. Most people are willing to take risks in relationships if they believe that the members of their community care for them, that they have a strong sense of connection, and will not harm them if they fail to meet the community values (Blok, 2008; Chavis et al., 1986). How do communities foster this type of connection? How are strong bonds formed and how do weak bonds affect the community as a whole? Communities of this type form more readily when they invest in and promote social capital.

**Community of Practice**

Most communities exist around common interests, communion, or geography. However, there are a growing number of communities that connect through tasks or practices. Communities of practice often cross the lines that exist in other communities in order to accomplish specific assignments. Professional communities where people join to engage in brainstorming and advice are communities of practice. It is a community
where knowledge is the key source of interaction. People who exist in a specific community, such as a school, office, or organization may seek outside help in order to gain additional insight and knowledge from people that they respect or with whom they find affinity. Teachers who want to know more about handling discipline problems in their classrooms may join an educational community dedicated to giving support and sharing ideas. The existence of this kind of community is limited to the task and lasts only as long as there is a specific need that the community can provide (Wenger, 1998). According to Wenger & Snyder (2000), communities of practice are defined by their joint enterprise, mutual engagements, and shared repertoire. Institutions do not drive these communities, but form as needs arise in order to accomplish a task. The length of time that the community lasts is determined by the individuals in the group and is driven by their need to exist. Communities of practice are informal and self-organizing, and as such often have more energy, self-determination, and passion for the project which brought the community into existence (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Communities of practice play an important role in the larger community. They help to exchange and interpret information because members have a common understanding. They retain knowledge within their members as opposed to a data basis. They sharpen one another and, therefore, steward competencies and keep each other on the cutting edge, and they become homes for the identity of the members since they are not institutionalized (Wenger, 1998).

**Church of Facebook**

Inherent in any new technology is the potential for misuse and abuse. However, that does not mean the technology itself is inherently evil. Sometimes technology,
intentionally or not, fills a gap that has been created by other sociological phenomena. Jesse Rice (2009) in his book, *Church of Facebook*, reflects on the sociological phenomenon of syncing. The Second Law of Thermodynamics proves that objects typically move toward disorder. However, in nature, there are occurrences where large groups, which are randomly moving, will naturally begin to move in harmony out of necessity. When two metronomes are placed together and set into motion, with different meters, they eventually will begin to tick at the same rate. Rice (2009) applies this to the technological phenomena of the Internet in general, and Facebook in particular. Rice’s (2009) point is that people have a need for authentic connection, and in a growing culture where connections are broken as a result of tumultuous homes, transient lifestyles, and social isolation, there has been an increasing need for people to connect. Facebook, as well as other OSNs, have been able to fill that gap and, as a result, a natural sync has occurred that reflects the 500 million people who log on each day to Facebook. Henri Nouwen (1986) wrote, “Human suffering was the experience of not having a place where we can feel loved, safe, cared for, and protected” (p. 12). The need for connection drives people to Twitter, blogs, instant messaging, and Facebook.

People are looking for communities where they can connect, in a place where they can feel a sense of belonging (Acar, 2008; Frazee, 2001; Rice, 2009). It has already been shown that community size is important to social connections. Communities can grow to be very large, but sociological studies have found that the optimum size is around 150 participants (Acar, 2008; Hill & Dunbar, 2002; Tilburg, 1998). Acar (2008) notes that people who interact on Facebook are not looking for new connections, but use it to maintain or re-establish existing ties. In his study, Acar (2008) tried to establish whether
Facebook’s relational network was different than real-world social networks. He concluded that there was a difference in OSN network size (124.9 people for real-life networks and 217 people for OSNs), that there is a lower risk in being a member of an OSN, and that extroversion and gender (women having larger connections) were major determinants for network size (Acar, 2008). What is not established, however, is the depth of these connections. Because there is lower risk in OSNs, it would be natural for users to have larger community connections. However, those connections are not necessarily strong. It is easy to become a friend on Facebook, but what is the true nature of that friendship? Friendships on Facebook can range from generic connection to intimacy. In other words, the term “friend” has taken on a whole new meaning. One study found that how users responded to friends was dependent on what they saw on their Facebook pages (Walther et al., 2008). The more complimentary the status updates on another user’s wall, the greater credibility that user had as a friend. The only exception to this was negative descriptions of behavior on the walls of male users. Sexual innuendos and drinking tended to raise their status, where it was lessened for women (Walther et al., 2008).

As people make connections through Facebook, they are “friending” people with varying degrees of strong, weak, and latent ties. Latent ties refer to those relational connections that are possible, but are not active; weak ties are active, but not consistent; strong ties are active and consistent. Facebook serves more as a source for creating weaker and latent ties than it does for creating strong ties. Strong ties result in the improvement of social capital and the exchanging of favors in the real world. Since Facebook as a community crosses larger distances, real-world interaction is limited, and,
therefore, ties are not as strong (Ellison et al., 2007). This does not mean that Facebook does not create authentic community, but it does mean that the strength of the community is limited.

**Social Capital**

Social Capital is the network connections between people for the purpose of specific and general reciprocity (Wellman, Haase, Witt, & Hampton, 2001). As people work together through network connections, they bring to the community what is called civic virtue. Civic virtue is action not merely for one’s own benefit, but also for the benefit of others (Putnam, 2000). Stacey (1969) argued that instead of creating new communities or strengthening existing communities, the emphasis should be placed on the quality of social networks. By reinforcing the social networks, the whole community benefits because the ties between individuals are stronger. Whatever focus is taken, social capital depends on developing strong social ties.

Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone* (2000), popularized the idea of social capital and showed how it impacts areas of child development, public spaces, economic prosperity, and even health. When people stop investing in one another, the fabric of institutions become worn and will eventually crumble (Putnam, 1995). Sobel (2002), however, warns that Putnam’s argument often confuses cause and effect. Putnam looked at the overall decline in civic involvement and attributed it to issues of destabilizing democratic institutions, the growing ineffectiveness of schools, and even the decline in the health and well being of society (Putnam, 1995). Though these can contribute to a downturn in social capital, they do not make distinction between social capital that is fixed and social capital that comes as a cost (Sobel, 2002). The impact of social capital
can be debated, but the reality is that growing communities depend on people investing in other people who return the favor by investing in other people as well.

Wellman and Hampton (2001) challenged Putnam’s thought that civic involvement was reduced because individuals stopped engaging with one another and thus stopped building social capital. In their research the following year, Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002) proposed that as culture changed, so did the means by which a person builds and maintains social capital. In his study, Wellman, et al. (2001) asked if the new technology of the Internet would increase, decrease, or supplement social capital. The study showed that people used the Internet as a supplement to their already established social networks. As a result, individuals who had created social capital were able to maintain its status even when time and distance were a factor. Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002) believe that participation in real-world networks actually increase as a result of their online activity. They do give a warning that Internet use augments only what is already in existence. If an individual does not have an already existing social network, Internet use can actually decrease commitment to community (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002).

Social Presence

In real-world communities, relationships are developed as a result of people being together; they are physically present. When entering the world of OSNs, the question is raised as to the nature of presence in connection to the development of communities (Shen & Khalifa, 2008). Social presence refers to “the subjective qualities of the medium and is conceptualized as a uni-dimensional construct” (Shen & Khalifa, 2008, p. 723). Social presence can be equated with an individual’s degree of awareness of another
person in non face-to-face communication and can be scaled on a continuum that measures social presence in text-based, voice, and (now) Internet communications (Shen & Khalifa, 2008; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Social presence is measured by awareness (the degree that people believe those online actually exists), affective presence (the emotional connection), and cognitive presence (the ability to construct meaning) (Biocca, Harms, & Gregg, 2001; Shen & Khalifa, 2008). In their study on social presence, Shen & Khalifa (2008) concluded that people are more apt to participate in OSNs when there is a strong sense of presence and that online forums need to provide multiple avenues of conceptualization. In the development of OSNs, there is a greater sense of social presence when more information is given through profiles, when people are able to hear others, and when interaction can be visual (Aragon, 2003).

In “Manifestations of personality in online social networks” (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011), the researchers found that offline personalities were consistent with online personalities. Extroverts had as many relational connections online as they did offline. The opposite held true for introverts. OSNs are a place for the former to make connections, and the latter to procrastinate. Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis’ (2011) research corroborated previous studies, underlining the OSN’s propensity to mirror offline behavior.

**Internet Use**

The Internet, for most Americans, has become a common place to interact with others and engage in commerce. On any given day, 55% of American adults log in online (Howard et al., 2001). The reasons for their activity are varied, but their primary use is email. Second to email, people go online to seek information and then complete
transactions. In the United States, the Internet is used daily more by men than women and by those who have a higher socio-economic status. The ethnic makeup for Americans who go online is 56% percent for Caucasians, 36% for African-Americans, and 49% for Hispanics (Howard et al., 2001). Of those with Internet access, 46% with high school diplomas or less are online during the day, while 62% of all college graduates are daily online. A greater percentage (61%) earns more than $75,000 per year (Howard et al., 2001). Females are more likely to use email than males, but men are more likely to access 15 different kinds of Internet activity than women (Howard et al., 2001).

Howard et al. (2001) identified four broad categories based on the length of experience and the frequency that users log on at home. “Netizens” comprise 16% of Internet users who go online every day spending money, managing finances, using email, and engaging in social interactions (Howard et al., 2001). “Utilitarians” make up 28% and are less intense, have less appreciation for the Internet, and are less likely to spend money online (Howard et al., 2001). “Experimenters” comprise 26% of users and are those who have just begun to go beyond the fun activities that the Internet provides (Howard et al., 2001). “Newcomers” consist of about 30% of the Internet population (Howard et al., 2001). They are just learning to navigate their way along the Internet highway; they focus on games, browse for fun, and participate in chat rooms. On the average, United States citizens are online 13 hours per week (Howard et al., 2001).

**Dangers of Social Networks**

With the amount of time spent on the Internet, it must be remembered that not everything that makes its way down the information highway is positive. Since the beginning of the Internet, people have cautioned concerning the dangers that the new
technology might have on users. One of these dangers is the devaluation of friendships (Boyd, 2006). Facebook allows users to befriend individuals to share information with and interact with in a social environment. Users can have as many as 7,000 friends (Facebook Statistics, 2011). The definition of friendship becomes ambiguous. Non-participants have the expectation that friends are only close buddies, but in OSNs friends include people who are merely social acquaintances (Boyd, 2006).

Boyd (2006) argues that the term friend evolved out of a need to deal with the tension that was inherent to technological limitations. It would be cumbersome on an OSN if each type of relationship needed to be distinguished and categorized. Boyd (2006) defines a friend as “a relationship that involves some degree of mutual love or admiration . . . an informal category without clear boundaries or mutual responsibilities and is voluntary” (p. 3). However, this broad description of a real-world friend is not sufficient, and, therefore, is often qualified by terms such as “best friend” or “bestest friend.” The term friend becomes a utility that has a performance quality that designates a relationship with the user, but not its depth. This changed in 2011. Google introduced “Circle of Friends” to help participants delineate between friendship groups. Facebook followed suit by allowing its users to define relationship groups and select options for viewing. Security options allow the user to define the level of access to any given friend.

Facebook users designate as “friends” people they communicate with on a regular basis, as well as people they went to high school with, but to whom they rarely speak. In the beginning of Facebook, it was thought that people would invite friends who they interacted with on a regular basis to be a part of their social network. However, it became evident that there were those who saw the number of friends as a status symbol.
and sought to enlarge their “friends” list to gain notoriety. In doing so, the idea of social connection was diluted, and the meaning of the term friend diminished. Part of the problem is the difficulty that people have in saying “no” to a friendship request. Even though there are not any repercussions for denying a friend request, some people feel guilty and accept every request. This can be a danger since these new friends have access to the user’s personal information. Facebook has addressed this issue by allowing users to adjust their privacy settings to make visible specific information only to selected individuals. In this way, certain friends are excluded and only “true friends” are invited into the inner circle.

Boyd (2006) points out the social costs in rejecting someone. There is the internal anxiety of the person doing the rejecting and the external drama of the rejected. If a person is not “friended” or is “defriended,” he or she may post negative remarks on a common user’s page and make known the hurt. Instead of dealing with the hurt feelings privately, through email or a phone call, it is now made public, enlisting support or derision from other friends. There is also a disconnect between what friends say to each other privately on what is a public forum. Heated discussions between individuals can result in embarrassment and hurt feelings, not only between those engaged in the conversation, but also those who are watching from the sidelines. The balancing act between real-life relationships and online social relationships can be difficult. What once might have been private between two friends is now open for the whole community to experience (Boyd, 2006).

Donath and Boyd (2004), in their paper Public Displays of Connection, began trying to understand not just friendships, but why there is such a need to display personal
information in the public forum of social networks. They defined any appearance of information in OSN’s a display of public connection. These displays are tantamount to walking up to a stranger in the mall and striking up a personal conversation. What is worse is that in the virtual world the person on the screen may be different than the person behind the screen, and there is a danger of people engaging others in a social network who make themselves out to be someone altogether different. However, closed social network systems such as Facebook have helped hold people accountable for their true identity. Because a broader group of people has access to the same information, it is less likely that a person will be able to establish a false identity. The greater danger is when someone is “friended” who is a stranger to both the user and the user’s established friends.

Donath and Boyd (2004) point out that people may continually add friends to bolster their standing in the community by having more friends, to create an intriguing profile, or because they just want to make new friends. Once there is a social network established, the community becomes a place where morals and norms are established. The community is a place where these norms can be maintained and cooperation ensured. The cost of not conforming to the community’s mores is a reduction in privacy, in other words, relational isolation. What is not clear is the necessary strength of relational ties in order for isolation to change behavior. The social network is not limited by the boundaries of real place, and, therefore, if a user is “defriended,” he or she can friend others who are of like mind. The stronger the relational ties, the greater the influence the community has over an individual user. The greater the number of friends, the weaker the ties, and weaker ties are less influenced by the community.
Students face another danger from potential employers. Employers are using Facebook more and more to screen employees. This becomes a danger as students, who live for the moment, fail to realize that what they post can be the one thing that keeps them from obtaining a job later on (Schiffman, 2007). Like it or not, social networks are places where people can obtain or lose social status in the real world. Status attainment can be characterized by the standing one gets in relation to valued goods in society, position, and social resources (Lin, 1999). In the virtual world of Facebook, employers judge potential employees according to the content of status updates, as well as pictures and videos that are posted.

“Network individualism” is an expressed concern for religious organizations. It refers to the type of connectivity that the social networks provide. Instead of the household, neighborhood, or church controlling how connections are made, the social networks place control in the hands of the individual. Individuals are able to cross traditional boundaries and form connections they may never have imagined in a conventional setting. The religious community is concerned about network individualism because of the possibility of people subverting established teachings and values. As OSNs like Facebook build broad connections with people of different cultures and faiths, there is the possibility of users being manipulated. Though connections with people of other faiths may give rise to questions, those questions cannot thwart the truth and plan of God. The religious community needs to understand and utilize the OSNs to help students grow in their relationship with Christ and build a stronger faith (Campbell, 2004).
Summary of Research

Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman (1986), Blok (2008), Putnam (2000), and Smith (2010) have laid out an understanding of community that provides a wide range of possibilities, ranging from location to communion. Through the research, it is evident that within the context of community boundaries, there are specific qualities that define healthy and vibrant communities. This chapter also details the assertions of Bohnoffer (1954), Frazee (2003), Crabb (1997), and Myers (2003) that undergirding the sociological and behavioral aspects of community is the knowledge that God has created man to engage others in community life. This community engagement is both God-honoring and beneficial. Finally, Rice (2009), Wellman (2002), Silverman (2001), and Lin (1999) discussed both the strengths and weaknesses of virtual community.

As these findings are synthesized together, a full picture of what community life is and how it is beginning to integrate the Internet with the community is painted. With the growing use of the Internet, the research has focused on how the Internet affects a person’s social status, proportions itself in size, affects real-world relationships, and builds social capital and cognitive presence in the virtual world. However, there seems to be a disconnect between the understanding of the user, his understanding of biblical community, and how the virtual community is used in the process.

The purpose of this case study was to describe how Christian college students manifested their understanding of biblical community on Facebook. Christian colleges that desire to build a meaningful biblical community need to know whether their efforts affect behavior in the ever-growing online world.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study described college students’ interaction on Facebook in light of their understanding of biblical community. A qualitative, descriptive multi-case study design was conducted to investigate Christian college student’s understanding of biblical community. The perceptions, feelings, and opinions are difficult to quantify. The qualitative approach gives the reader a glimpse into this phenomenon within the specific context of Facebook. In addition, quantitative data from the Sense of Community Survey was reported to enrich the qualitative data on community.

Theoretical Framework

Communities are people who come together for mutually beneficial purposes. Online social networks are described as communities, and healthy communities have built in mechanisms of accountability that ward off negative influences (Blok, 2008). For the Christian, community is of the utmost importance (Bonhoffer, 1954). As they enter the virtual world, how did the participants’ understanding of biblical community impact and influence engagement within Facebook?

The theory of social connectedness is the theoretical framework for this research, and was based on work conducted by Peter Blok (2008). In his research, he identified nine characteristics that are common to thriving communities: belonging, gifts, involvement, decision-making, accountability, small groups, conversation, common purpose, and ownership (Blok, 2008). These same characteristics are articulated within the Scriptures as part of healthy biblical communities. Utilizing these characteristics, the
researcher examined whether eight Christian college students manifested these characteristics within the context of their online social network, Facebook.

Research Design

Case studies take an in-depth look at individual groups or events and are explanatory and descriptive. Research using case studies can bring an understanding of complicated issues and can expand on experience to what is already known through prior research (Stake, 1995). Yin (2009) said this about case studies:

The case study is preferred in examining contemporary events, but when the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated. The case study relies on many of the same techniques as a history, but it adds two sources of evidence not usually included in the historian’s repertoire: direct observation of the events being studied and interviews of the person involved in the events (p. 494).

Bromley (1990) said a case study is a “systematic inquiry into an event or set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest” (p. 302). For Stake (1995), understanding the case is the primary task, it is about “teasing out relationships, to probe issues, and aggregate categorical data” (p. 77). A descriptive, multiple case study design was used in order to describe the interaction of Christian college students’ understanding of biblical community with their Facebook communities. The contemporary issue at hand is the social phenomena of Facebook. The set of related events is the participants’ interaction on Facebook. The phenomenon is the manifestation of biblical understanding in the participants’ Facebook community. Facebook has been described as a community and, as such, it should reflect characteristics consistent with real-world communities (Blok, 2008). Eight Christian college students were selected as
the unit of study for this research. Through two interviews and observations of Facebook interaction, the researcher described how these students integrated their understanding of biblical community with their Facebook community.

The descriptive multiple case study design included the following:

1. The units of study, or cases, for this research were eight Christian college students, from two Midwest colleges. The case study consisted of two women and two men from each college. This is not an embedded study of college students at two different colleges.

2. Participants were selected from two Christian colleges with similar community goals to lend to the trustworthiness and credibility to the study.

3. The researcher used convenience sampling to select students who expressed interest in participating in the study, had a Facebook account, and spent at least 20 hours a week on the Internet.

4. By reviewing the students’ status updates and responses to status updates, the researcher observed how participants engaged others on Facebook. Content of status updates included positive/negative emotional responses, information about events or activities, requests for information or help, and entertainment activities such as games, movies, or musicians.

5. The researcher asked focused, open-ended questions that explored how participants developed an understanding of biblical community, and why the participants interacted in certain ways during the interviews.

6. There were two interviews with each student. The first interview was conducted in person, on campus, and in a private room provided by the college.
The second interview was done through an online VoIP protocol (i.e., Skype) and lasted a half-hour.

7. The Sense of Community (Chavis & Lee, 2011) survey was administered at two colleges in the Midwest and was used to measure the students’ sense of belonging within the college and understand the context of the participants.

**Research Questions**

Research questions helped guide the course of the research. By establishing questions ahead of time, the researcher was able to maintain focus on the study’s original intent. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How have institutions such as family, church, and college contributed to the participants’ understanding of community?
2. How do students express their sense of community on Facebook?
3. What connections are there between students’ OSN community and their real-world community?
4. How do Christian students treat their friendships within the OSN differently than their friendships in the real-world community?
5. How does a participant’s involvement in their OSN move him/her to real-world interaction?

**Research Site**

The research site is the OSN Facebook. Facebook is an asynchronous, non-immersive, bounded system designed to focus on information sharing, communication, and socialization (Shen & Khalifa, 2008), and has approximately 800 million active users, of which roughly 200 million sign on every day (Facebook, 2012). Facebook is the
fastest growing OSN to date with users ranging from ages 18 through 24, who comprise
25% percent of online activity (Facebook, 2012). Online communities are digital
environments where people form mediated social spaces through communication that is
ongoing (Shen & Khalifa, 2008). Participants allowed the researcher to access as a
“friend” areas of their Facebook account. The included areas were the wall, boxes,
multimedia, and notes.

**Wall**

Each Facebook account consisted of a wall where participants posted status,
which were remarks about themselves, others, and events. The wall included a profile
page that described the participant’s history, with boxes for posting likes and dislikes in a
variety of areas such as movies, books, videos, hobbies, and quotes. On the wall, users
were able to have ongoing discussions with friends who posted comments on the user’s
status updates. To the left of the main section of the wall, users could display
relationship statuses, friendship lists, and family lists. From the wall, the user and friends
could access additional information such as photos, notes, and personal information.

**Boxes**

A tab labeled “boxes” allowed participants to subscribe to any number of the
thousands of applications (apps) available. Some of the apps were solo apps used only by
the participant, and others were participatory apps where the participant could interact
with friends. Apps were ways in which users could interact in a fun way with those in
their community.

**Multimedia**

Photo and video pages provided participants a place to display favorite pictures
and video clips. Uploading media was a thoughtful act and gave insight as to what the participants believed to be important. These included family videos, pictures of friends or pets, and the types of social activities that the participant attended.

Notes

There was a “notes” tab where participants could express thoughts and feelings for others to read, and was equivalent to a blog page. An email page and a chat application allowed instant messaging while a participant was viewing and navigating through Facebook friends’ pages. Notes were public documents and were easily obtained. Chat and email applications were available for observation. Questions during the interviews gave insight to how chats and emails were used by participants. To safeguard the privacy of participants, friend names and details of correspondence were not used.

Institutional Demographics

As Christian colleges endeavor to build communities reflective of biblical morals, they face the difficult challenge to bring balance between the normal narcissism that reflects positive mental health and the self-sacrifice that embodies biblical community. This research sought to understand how Christian college students manifest their understanding of biblical community within their Facebook communities. The institutions selected for this project were under the pseudonyms Premier Music College and Smallville Christian College. Although, Hill and Dunbar (2002) concluded that the optimal size of community is 150 people, Frazee (2003) believed that larger groups of people could build a healthy community if they broke into smaller units. Premier Music College was chosen because its stated purpose was to build a visible community within
the Memphis area, enrolling a student body of no more than 120 students. Therefore, in contrast to Premier Music College, Smallville Christian College was selected for its more traditional liberal arts environment, yet still being intentional in developing Christian community in the context of a larger enrollment. Furthermore, although other colleges intentionally create environments for healthy community, Premier was selected for its unique community mission, and Smallville was selected for its convenient proximity to both Premier and the researcher. Facebook was chosen because it was the most popular OSN at the time (Facebook statistics, 2012).

Premier Music College’s (2011) website states:

Community is essential to the health of Premier Music College students, faculty, and staff. Christian community creates opportunity for practical application of the Word, worship of the Creator in all of life, discourse that promotes greater understanding, and challenging interactions that promotes growth of the individual believer. Interdependence, mutual respect, and honest, non-threatening communication permeate successful communities, creating a catalyst for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Smallville College’s (2011) website states:

Living in daily fellowship with others is a privilege and an expression of God’s grace. In recognition of this privilege, we place great value on the quality of relationships in our community. We acknowledge that we live in a fellowship where we depend on and are accountable to one another. The New Testament word for fellowship is KOINONIA. It is translated as
PARTAKER, COMMUNION, COMMUNICATION, CONTRIBUTION, DISTRIBUTION. Members, therefore, are encouraged to seek as many opportunities as possible to demonstrate KOINONIA. Within our community the greatest expression of fellowship and the highest principle for relationships is love.

Premier Music College, Tennessee

Premier Music College was a Christian college with an enrollment of 110 students. Enrollment for Premier College was 115 students. The demographics for Premier Music College were as shown in Table 2 (Campus Corner, 2011):

Table 2

Premier Music College Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage of college population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic, Black, other</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students on financial aid</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students using loans</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition</td>
<td>$14,975 per year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Smallville Christian College, Illinois

Smallville was a liberal arts college and enrolled 2,436 (U.S. News & World Report, 2011). The enrollment at Smallville Christian college was 1,200 students. Smallville’s demographics were as shown in Table 3 (CollegeStats, 2011):
Table 3

*Smallville College Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage of college population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian, Indian, Hispanic, and Black</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation rate</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students on financial aid</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuition</td>
<td>$18,672.00 per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average student loan aid received</td>
<td>$6,060.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants

Males represent 42% and females 54% of Facebook’s active users (Corbett, 2010). Yin (2009) states,

The main point at this juncture (sample size) is that you should try to aim toward analytic generalization in doing case studies, and you should avoid thinking in such confusing terms as ‘the sample of cases’ or the ‘small samples size of cases,’ as if a single-case study were like a single respondent in a survey or single subject in an experiment (p. 1032).

The appropriate sample size for qualitative case studies is often debated. Yin (2009) said that the rationale for a multiple-case study design is replication. The simplest would be the selection of two cases that have literal replications. Bauer and Gaskell (2000) state, “Statistical sampling provides a rationale for
studying a small number of texts and still drawing conclusions about the whole collection of texts” (p. 136). They go on to say that “Sample size does not matter in corpus construction as long as there is some evidence of saturation” (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000, p. 346). The question of numbers becomes one of saturation when the researcher is no longer receiving any new information. In qualitative studies utilizing interviews, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) determined that a sufficient sample size to obtain saturation was between 6 and 12 interviews. After IRB approval (APPENDIX K), the researcher elected to study eight participants from two colleges, equally divided into groups, two women and two men from each college. The selection protocol was as follows:

1. During a chapel service, students who had been enrolled for at least one year, spent 20+ hours on the Internet, and were interested in participating in the research project were asked to meet in a room designated by the college.

2. From the students who expressed interest, a convenience sample of participants was selected. Two additional students from each college were selected as standbys in the event that a participant dropped out of the study.

3. Participants were selected who professed the belief that Jesus died for their sins and that He would one day return.

4. Participants scheduled an interview for the following day that was convenient for them. To control for participant dropout, the first and last interviews were scheduled within four weeks of each other.

5. The pseudonyms given to the participants were Bridgett, Ann, Rachel, Ester, John, Trent, Eric, and Austin.
After IRB approval, a survey (Appendices A, B, and C) was made available to the student body. Survey participants included the student body, which were solicited through chapel and email to go online and participate in the Sense of Community Survey. Students received three emails from the administration encouraging them to participate in the Sense of Community Survey. They were given a link to Zoomerang Online Surveys & Polls, where instructions on taking the survey were given.

**Researcher’s Biography and Role**

In qualitative studies, the background of the researcher has been criticized as influencing the results, but humans are the only sufficiently complex instruments to comprehend human experience (Fink, 2000). The following is how the researcher’s background has influenced his interest in the present topic. The researcher’s outlook on life changed when he became a Christian during his senior year in high school. After giving his life to Jesus, his worldview changed from self-serving to Christ-serving. No longer did the researcher view people as objects of self-promotion, they were either brothers or sisters in Christ or a potential brother or sister in Christ. This new framework of thinking, however, was challenged when the researcher entered college. Non-believing friends questioned the validity of his faith, and he was ill-equipped to respond to their challenges. Pursuant to this intellectual confusion, the researcher left the University of South Florida to attend Columbia Bible College in South Carolina. It was there that God opened his eyes to the importance of the church in His redemptive plan and the necessity of helping people live in authentic biblical communities.

As a pastor, the researcher is ever cognizant of how man’s knowledge and beliefs impact daily decisions. With his own children attending college, the researcher has
become interested in how their understanding of biblical community has been influenced by their college, and with the explosion of OSNs, how these new forms of community interact. This growing interest in community within the college environment and virtual environment, coupled with the fact that his degree has taken place within a virtual community, has given rise to this particular research.

The researcher’s own experience in the virtual world of OSNs contributed to his interest in this topic, and in some ways shapes his bias. As a Pastor, who has befriended people (on Facebook) within and outside of the church, the researcher is aware of how cautious he must be when publishing public dialogue. However, his restraint is not necessarily the same as the present college generation. There seems to be a relative disconnect to the public nature of OSNs and the private nature of conversations between individuals. When a friend posts on someone’s wall, he or she may think that it is a private conversation, but, in reality, all his or her friends can see it. Though this generation has a definite social presence within the virtual world, their cognitive awareness of the greater environment is not as fully developed.

The researcher’s understanding of community is derived from the Christian Scriptures and is summarized by the following verses:

- “A new command I give you; Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:33-35, NIV).

- “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ…Each one should test his own actions…. for each one should carry his own load” (Galatians 6:1-5).

- “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above
yourselves…Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (Romans 12:10,16).

The researcher’s understanding of biblical community had the potential to formulate questions for the interviews that were leading. It was important for him to develop questions that were not leading, yet still focused on the research topic.

The researcher’s role within this study was to set himself apart from his own preconceived ideas and understanding and let the voices of the participants speak out. He wanted to hear what the participants understood to be a biblical community, how it was shaped by their history and environment, and then, finally, see how it was expressed in this new and virtual community called Facebook. It was a challenge not to guide their perspectives with leading questions or personal statements, but the more they were allowed to talk as he remained only a sounding board, a true picture of how college students express their beliefs on Facebook and transition between real and virtual communities became evident.

**Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of two interviews conducted by the researcher, and observations of participants’ online involvement in their social network. In addition, the researcher administered the Sense of Community Survey that included 35 questions and was made available to the entire student body, from the freshman through the senior class.
First Interview

During chapel at each college, the researcher informed the students about the research project. Students who were interested in participating in the project met at a predetermined site on campus. The first two men and two women from each college who were interested and met the basic criteria were selected. Appointments were set up between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m., and students were notified by email where the interviews would take place. Two interviews were conducted in order to comprehend how family, church, college, and friendships had impacted the participants’ understanding of community. Interviews were conducted in a private room provided by the college. The participant and the researcher were the only people present during the interview. Two digital audio recording devices were used: an Apple IPad and a MacBook Pro personal computer. The recording devices continued until the interview was completed.

The first interview took place at the beginning of the data collection process. This interview helped establish how family, church and college influenced the student’s understanding of biblical community. It also was a time for the researcher to see how the participants’ upbringing contributed to their understanding of community and how people lived, loved, and cared for one another. Family context has an impact on how people form relational connections (Crabb, 1997). The interview strategy was a focused open-ended inquiry (Yin, 2011). Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions, as established in the study protocol (see Appendix L). The questions selected were matched against the research questions. By matching the interview questions with the research questions, the researcher was able to maintain continuity throughout the research project and ensure that the questions in the interviews were gathering the desired information.
Trustworthiness is subjective and measures whether the questions, on the surface, measure what is being sought through the research (Trochim, 2006).

Credibility seeks to determine if the questions accurately measure the content of the information sought (Trochim, 2006). To assure credibility, the researcher designed questions that eliminated bias, assumptions, and were not doubled-barreled. Biased questions lead participants to a specific response (i.e., Do you agree that healthy communities are loving?). Assumption questions lead participants to agree with the question in a certain way (i.e., A lot of people believe communities should be loving. What do you think?). Double-barreled questions ask multiple questions at one time (i.e., Do you think loving communities are the best, and how do you think it is best expressed?) (Driscoll & Brizee, 2010). Finally, to ensure credibility, the interview questions were pilot tested on four college students, in Houston, Texas, to see if they produced the desired information. Students expressed difficulty in answering open-ended questions that were too broad. Therefore, the researcher adjusted the questions to address more specific issues, i.e. roles and core beliefs. Each participant was asked the same questions and in the same order.

**Conducting the interview.** In order to maintain consistency, the following protocol was used for each interview:

1. Interviews were scheduled between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. Two days were allotted for interviews.
2. When the participant arrived, he or she was greeted, giving the researcher’s name and thanking him or her for participating in the study.
3. The researcher offered the participant a seat. If the room had a window, the participant was positioned so as not to be distracted.

4. The researcher explained the interview process.
   a. The interview lasted one hour.
   b. The interview included questions about family, church, and college.
   c. If the participant felt uncomfortable answering a question, he or she was informed that he or she did not need to answer.
   d. If the participant was unsure about a question, he or she could ask for clarification.
   e. If at any time the participant wanted to withdraw from the study, he or she could. Each participant received an incentive for participating and completing the study. Early withdrawal from the study meant forfeiting the incentive.
   f. The researcher explained that a transcript of the interview would be typed and sent to him or her for clarification.
   g. The researcher assured the participant that only he had access to the information.
   h. The researcher advised the participant that a pseudonym would be used in place of his or her name.

5. Once the interview was finished, the researcher stood and thanked the participant for his or her participation, and that they would be contacted within two weeks with the transcription.
First participant interview. The interview strategy was a focused, open-ended inquiry. The general questions were:

- Explain what you believe are crucial elements to biblical community.
- Describe for me the dynamics of your family growing up.
- What do you think your father felt was his role in the family?
- What do you think your mom’s role in the family was?
- How did family roles change as a consequence of family changes?
- Tell me how you became a Christian.
- What do you believe are the core beliefs necessary for biblical community?
- What do you think is the primary function of the church?
- Describe how you have seen community work in a church. How have you seen it work at college?
- Can you describe an experience where biblical community worked for you?
- How do you become a part of a community?

Second Interview

After the observations had taken place on the participants’ Facebook pages, a second interview was conducted. The second interview allowed the researcher to ask for clarification concerning the participants’ Facebook interactions, and to gain a better understanding of the participants’ views of community characteristics in a Facebook community. The following protocol was used for each participant.

1. One month after the first interview, an email was sent to the participants’ and a date scheduled for the interview.
2. For the convenience of both the participant and the researcher, a second
The interview was set up using a VoIP account with Skype.

3. The researcher made sure that equipment was working well on the day of the interview.

4. When the researcher connected with the participant, he greeted him or her, and thanked him or her again for participating in the study.

5. The researcher asked the following two questions:
   a. What part do you see Facebook playing in your community life, both real and virtual?
   b. How does each of the following characteristics fit into a Facebook community?
      • Humor
      • Information
      • Empathy
      • Chastisement
      • Encouragement
      • Conversation
      • Positive emotional responses ("I think life is great" statements).
      • Negative emotional responses ("Life sucks and I feel down" statements).

6. Once the interview was over, the researcher confirmed the participant’s contact information for sending their incentive.

7. The researcher thanked them once more for participating.
Electronic data was stored in LG backup system until the interviews were transcribed. Once transcription was finalized, the data was deleted. Facebook pages were printed. Along with the transcription, Facebook pages were bound and kept in a locked filing cabinet. The survey results were stored in the same locked filing cabinet.

**Transcription**

Both in-person and online interviews were recorded using Apple computer software. The in-person and online interviews were transcribed by an outside source. The person who was selected to do the transcriptions was a professional transcriptionist who understood the necessity of transcribing word-for-word and not to clarify what was said. The transcriptionist signed a confidentiality agreement. Transcriptions were transcribed from the digital recording at the transcriptionist’s office. The recording was hand delivered to the transcriptionist within two days of the interview. Transcripts were sent to each participant for review and final clarification. Once the researcher received final approval of the transcripts, data analysis began.

**Observation**

The OSN that was observed for this study was Facebook. Participants allowed the researcher access to their Facebook wall, photos, video, and notes for a six-month period of time. The researcher printed out six months of archived status updates and status comments on friends’ sites. The researcher conducted observations out of the sight of other people to maintain confidentiality. Descriptive notes were written on the printed pages. Reflective notes were written in a separate journal, categorized by participant name, and coded (i.e., Facebook p. 6, edification – researcher’s reflections), to correspond to specific Facebook pages. The following protocol was utilized for each
participant:

1. Participants ranged from 18 to 26 years of age.

2. Participants stated they averaged 20 or more hours a week on the Internet, and had been a Facebook participant for over one year.

3. Participants allowed research access to their Facebook as a “friend.”

4. The Facebook pages observed ran from December 1, 2009 through May 31, 2010.

5. The expanded wall of each participant was observed.

6. Observation protocol:
   a. Observations were limited to status updates on the participant’s wall.
   b. The same structural content analysis was used for each participant.
   c. Observations were made of archived data that was made prior to the participant’s interview.
   d. Results of observation were tabulated and put into chart form within five days of the observations.

7. Facebook pages were printed out and bound.

Surveys

A survey was made available to the student body of each institution, to determine their use of the Internet and their basic understanding of biblical community. The survey consisted of three parts. The first part was made up of seven selected multiple-choice questions from the Pew Internet & American Life Project titled *The Internet Goes to College* (Pew Research Center, 2002). These questions were used to determine the participant’s Internet use. The survey measured how often students were online, the
Internet’s most common use, its impact on the students’ college life, how they used email, how the Internet was used as a communication tool, and which communication tool was most often used. The Pew Internet & American Life Project utilizes pretests, pilot tests, and focus groups to account for content validity (Jones, 2002). The second part of the survey consisted of 24 questions adapted from the Sense of Community Index 2 (SCI-2), which was developed by Dr. David M. Chavis & Kien Lee (Chavis & Lee, 2011). The SCI-2 measures how a participant feels about his or her community, shared faith, needs, and commitment. The reliability of the SCI-2 is alpha = .940, with a validity of .320 for correlation with life satisfaction, .315 for correlation with civic and political participation, and a correlation with cultural and social participation of .381. The third part of the survey was adapted from the SCI-2 to reflect a biblical understanding of community and measured a student’s sense of community from a biblical worldview. The surveys were placed on Zoomerang. Students were sent three emails, during a one-week period, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, encouraging them to follow the link and complete the survey. Smallville Christian College’s population was 1,200 students with 255 students responding. Premier Music College’s population was 110 and 44 students responded. To control for issues of face and content validity, the questions on the survey were selected questions from the Pew Internet & American Life Project: The Internet goes to college (2002), Dr. Chavi’s (2011) SCI-2 questionnaire.

**Survey protocols.** In order for the survey to run smoothly, the following protocol was used:

1. Prior to arriving on campus, the researcher scheduled chapel time to explain the research and encourage students to participate in the study. The researcher
also arranged with the administration to email the student body to encourage participation in the online survey.

2. Handouts were printed for chapel distribution (Appendix L). Handouts contained information referring students to the survey site and to the room for participant information.

3. The emails were to encourage students to participate in the Sense of Community Survey. The email was as follows:

   Dear Student,

   (___________) College is participating in a social networking research project and would like you to participate in an online survey. The survey consists of 25 questions and will take approximately ten minutes to complete. Your participation is very important to the accurate assessment of our college community.

   Take the survey **ONLY ONCE**. Click on the link below and follow the instructions carefully. Thank you for supporting us in this endeavor.

4. Prior to arriving on campus, the researcher set up an account with an online survey company.

   a. The following instructions were included in the online survey:

      The survey has 25 questions and takes about 15 minutes to complete. There are two pages and each page is important. After question 25 on the first page, push the *submit* button. You will be taken to the second page. Chose one answer per question. Your
first initial impression about a question is the best answer. Don't think too long on any one question. Once you have completed the survey, select the submit button. Wait for an automated reply stating that the survey has been completed. Thank you for taking part in this research project.

b. The questions that were asked in the online survey are as follows, and the term “community” refers to the students’ college:

- In this community, I feel as if I am as important as other people.
- I share the same values as this community.
- I am concerned about other people’s needs in my community.
- When I am struggling, people in this community encourage me.
- I feel that other people listen to my concerns.
- This community can meet the needs of its members.
- I can trust the people in this community.
- I know most of the people in this community.
- When I walk down the hall, people in this community recognize me.
- This community has symbols and rituals that set it apart.
- I am an active participant in this community.
- My identity as a believer is connected to my community.
- This community makes me feel like they need me to participate.
- This community has an impact on the people in other communities.
- I hold myself accountable to other members in this community.
- I feel like I have a voice in this community.
• This community is able to work out its own problems.
• The leaders in this community are people of integrity.
• Everyone should be an active participant in this community.
• Being in a small group is important to me.
• I plan to be a part of this community for at least three years.
• I enjoy being a part of the special programs of this community.
• I feel hopeful about the future of this community.
• People in this community forgive one another.

5. Information concerning the survey, the URL link, and an introductory paragraph for the student emails needed to be given to the contact person.

**Data Analysis**

The principal method of analysis was explanation building. Yin (2009) explains that, “in a multiple-case study, one goal is to build a general explanation that fits each individual case” (p. 2883). The primary data sources were from the first participant interview, the observations of Facebook, and the follow-up interview. Secondary data sources were from the student body survey.

In analyzing the data, the following iterations were used:

• A theoretical framework was identified to guide the course of the investigation.
• Compared the finding of each case against the theoretical framework.
• Compared each case in light of the research questions.
• Compared the other cases with one another.
• Compared the survey against the theoretical framework.
• Repeated the process as needed.

Memoing

During each interview, the researcher took notes on aspects that participants thought were important to clarify, as well as the environment and attitudes of the participant that may not be reflected in a recording. After the transcriptions, the researcher made memo notations in the margins for later reference. Transcriptions of the interviews speak for themselves, and memos added nuance to the process and helped in the coding.

Coding

Coding was used to analyze the Facebook observations. Codes are descriptive tags that assigned meaning to compiled data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) state, “conventional content analysis is generally used with a study design whose aim is to describe a phenomenon” (p. 1279). Content analysis is a methodology used for providing information, discernments, and representations of facts and a guide to action. It helps in reproduction and validating inferences from the data (Krippendorff, 1980). Elo and Kyngas (2008) outline an inductive approach to content analysis for qualitative studies.

The process includes open coding, creating categories, and abstraction. Case studies also use data that require an analytic coding system. This study used open coding within the inductive approach as outlined by Elo and Kyngas (2008); “Open coding means that notes and headings are written in the text while reading it” (p. 109). In the open coding process, the status updates, responses, postings, and other relevant material
were marked during the initial reading of the Facebook pages. “After this open coding, the lists of categories are grouped under higher order heading” (Elo & Kyngas, 2008, p. 111). The headings were humor, informational, spiritual, encouraging, chastising, negative emotion, positive emotion, question, empathy, quote, answer, video, music, applications, and conversation. Next, each category was compared against the characteristics of community (Blok, 2008) and categorized under applicable headings. Finally, the coding scheme was established after several sequences of iterative development. The following coding was utilized during observations of the participants’ Facebook community accompanied by an example of each:

- **Humorous:** Humorous comments are anything that is made to elicit a laugh or is a laugh statement itself -- “Hahahahahah I’m guessing you read the paper! 😄” – Ester

- **Informational:** These updates are to give information to others -- “Mat attack is a really intense game. Much more than it looks like in the video. Great floor event though! Very sore today…” – John

- **Spiritual:** Spiritual comments either quote scripture and/or talk about God -- “It’s amazing when your entire worship team feels the Holy Spirit and is acting like complete crazies, jumping and stomping, because the spirit is SO evident!! I am VERY thankful…” – Rachel

- **Encouraging:** An encouraging status either encourages the recipient emotionally or to continue in the conversation -- “Merry Christmas Bridget! Hope you have a great one this year!” – Friend of Bridget
• Chastising: Remarks made to correct unacceptable comments or behavior --
  “Trent, watch yourself” – Friend of Trent
• Negative Emotion: “I’ am [sic] hacked…!” – Eric
• Positive Emotion: “I’m excited to hang out tonight with the future resident chaplains of Timmy and Karl tonight!!!!!!” – Ester
• Question: “Hey I’m just curious…Do you know what personality type you are?” – Friend of Rachel’s
• Empathy: “I’m sorry Moi’ Moi.. I got so caught up in leaving. I’ll see you soon enough! 😊 Miss you…” – Austin
• Quote: “Fear me, I’ve killed hundreds of Time Lords,’ unknown voice, ‘Fear me, I’ve killed all of them.” The Doctor – Eric
• Answer: Answers are a direct response to a status update. In response to a friend-- “Both! I’m excited, but I have a lot to do to get ready for these shows.” – Ann
• Video: Posted a video called “We show you in the bible” – Austin
• Pictures: Post of a picture from “AgapeFest 2011” – John
• Music: Vintage: “Break of Reality – Just a song I like” – Bridget
• Application: Posted an application game - “Luke just beat his friends in snake with a score of 790” – Austin
• Response Opinion: A response where the writer is offering his/her opinion about a given topic - “I dunno Mr. Nable, what I did this evening was definitely worth doing. Maybe you should hang out with me sometime.” – Friend of Ann
• Conversation: Conversations are any series of responses and could be divided into two different types: a series of responses around a topic where the flow and exchange of information led to a conclusion, and a series of responses where the interaction was meaningless and eventually just ended (known as bantering).

The above codes were refined and placed into four categories: felt needs, emotional connections, membership, and influence. The coding system was used during Facebook observations with simultaneous comparison of the interviews to extract a clearer understanding of how family, church, and college influenced the participants in their understanding of biblical community, and how that understanding manifested itself on Facebook. The following three steps were conducted with each participant:

1. Each participant’s printed activity was bound and placed in a folder.
2. The researcher went through each folder and identified status updates and responses and coded them.
3. The researcher identified status updates and responses, additional categories were added to the coding.

The results of the coding process, and the data collected, were then compared to the other data sources. The code developed identified patterns of behavior within the relationships formed through Facebook. Facebook pages were printed going back six months prior to the research project. Six months of observations added to the trustworthiness of the data, giving sufficient data to determine patterns of behavior. A detailed analysis was then made, establishing coding and categories that were used to compare with interviews.
Field Notes

During the observation process of the Facebook accounts and the analysis of the interviews, the researcher compiled and generated notes that broke down the observations and contained his comments. General notes were made on the printed Facebook pages. Reflective comments were written in a separate journal. Observations and interview transcriptions were then compared. Although data analysis took place all along, after the second interview, all the data was coded carefully, clarified, and refined to see what was revealed about the participants’ understanding of biblical community and how it manifested itself on their OSNs.

Member Checks

After the transcription of the interviews, participants were emailed the transcription to review for clarification and correction. A file was established for each participant with sub-categories for interviews and online observations. A single master category was created where summaries, thoughts, observer comments, and personal biases were noted and kept. In the final analysis, a master folder was created where the compilation of all findings and summaries were stored and refined for the writing process. During that process, the researcher used rich data to express the complexity of the participants understanding of community, of biblical community, and its expression on Facebook.

Within Case Analysis

Each participant was a case for analysis. Within case analysis focused on the participants’ Facebook observations and interviews. Each interview was analyzed separately, looking at the influences of family, church, and college on the participants’
understanding of biblical community. Comparing that understanding to the participants’ Facebook interaction, the researcher drew conclusions on the participants’ activity in regard to their understanding of biblical community. The second interview clarified for the researcher the participants’ thoughts specifically on the characteristics found on Facebook. That data was compared to the theoretical framework.

**Cross Case Analysis**

Cross case analysis compares each case with the other cases in the study. Starting with the initial theoretical framework, the researcher compared the findings to see if the data bore similarities or significant differences in how the background of students influenced their understanding of biblical community, and how their understanding manifested itself on Facebook.

**Sense of Community Survey**

The adapted SCI-2 (Appendices B and C) was made available to the student body. The Sense of Community Survey was used to understand general feelings of community at each college. The results of the survey where tabulated and put into a chart (Table 5). The information added to the researcher’s understanding of the context’s influence on the participants. The survey was compared, as well, to the participants’ self-expressed feelings of community.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness involves establishing the credibility of the research. Krefting (1991) suggested truth value, consistency, neutrality, and applicability as criteria for establishing credibility. In order to assure credibility, the following was implemented:
1. Conducted an hour-long interview with each participant.

2. Maintained the integrity of the study by hiring a professional transcriptionist.

3. Allowed participants to review their transcripts for clarification.

4. In addition, the researcher meticulously made observational notes of each participant’s Facebook pages and interviews (as described above).

5. Participants did not know who the other participants were until after the interview.

6. Participants were all asked the same general questions.

7. Facebook pages observed were prior to the participants’ involvement in the study.

8. There were an equal number of participants per gender.

9. To address the issue of maturation, the participants’ second interview was scheduled within one month of their first interview.

10. All participants were interviewed for one hour and received the same incentive for participating in the study.

11. The researcher conducted all interviews and observations.

12. Students were scheduled for interviews between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the outcomes of the data can be corroborated by another researcher wanting to duplicate the study (Trochim, 2006). The following elements were employed to strengthen the study’s outcome.
Participants

This study focused on eight Christian college students and their understanding of biblical community. Therefore, the researcher selected professing Christians who believed that Jesus Christ died for their sins, rose from the dead, and will return in the future. Participants were selected from colleges who also profess the same beliefs in Jesus Christ. Participants were selected who had been enrolled for at least one year.

Triangulation

Sydenstricker-Neto (1997) stated, “Triangulation tests the consistency of findings obtained through different instruments” (para. 4). To ensure that the findings were not biased by a certain method of collection and to maintain internal validity, the researcher used a triangulation of data collection utilizing an hour-long interview, observations of Facebook, and the second follow-up interview. The Sense of Community Survey of each college added to the rich data.

Bracketing

Bracketing is the isolation of a phenomenon for observation, in which the observer suspends opinion concerning the phenomenon, based in his or her own bias (Fischer, 2009). Bias can creep into an interview when the researcher gives the participant information that may influence the answer. Personal annotations can make their way into the documentation if the interviewer transcribes the interview his or herself. To control for personal bias, the following was implemented:

1. Open-ended questions were asked. Yes or no questions can be leading and do not allow participants to expound on their answer. Open-ended questions garner additional information that discourages biased interpretation.
2. Interview questions were non-gender specific.

3. A professional transcriptionist transcribed the interviews word for word. The transcriptionist was instructed not to correct grammar, punctuation, or “translate” the interview in any way. Researchers who transcribe their own interview run the temptation of explaining and interpreting as they transcribe.

4. Transcribed interviews were read by participants and approved for accuracy.

5. Supporting statements by participants were placed in quotations marks.

6. Participants were given ample time to answer questions.

Notes

In order to compensate for possible divergence, the researcher kept copious notes from observations and interviews in a separate journal from his reflective notes. A third party transcribed interviews in order to control for researcher bias. This way, the data pushed the researcher during the research process, whether toward or away from his initial thinking.

Outline of Case Study Report

On completion of the findings, the following questions guided the reporting sections. Outlining the questions ahead of time helped to maintain focus on the purpose of the study, and not allow informative, but spurious information sidetrack the study.

1. How does the Family influence biblical community beliefs?

2. How does the Church influence biblical community beliefs?

3. How does the College influence biblical community beliefs?

4. How are students’ biblical community beliefs manifested on Facebook?
5. What are some similarities between the case studies?

**Ethical Considerations**

Privacy questions in regard to Internet usage and material is a hotly debated topic. When information is posted online, some believe that there is an expectation of privacy. Facebook is both an open and closed environment. It is open in that those who belong to the community have ready access to a user’s interface. It is closed because the user dictates who can view information and what information is made available (Mitrano, 2006). Even though the issues of privacy could be argued, the researcher determined the following ethical framework (Strike, Anderson, Curren, Geel, Pritchard & Roberston, 2002):

- Only posts that are made public to participants’ friends and friends’ public response were used for the study.
- Informed consent was sought for the participants who volunteered for interviews.
- Pseudonyms were used in publication for each of the eight individuals interviewed.
- Participants gave final consent to the accuracy of quotes by them that were used in the dissertation.
- Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
In the course of interviews, participants were asked questions about their families and friends, and had the right to pass on any question that made them uncomfortable.

In the following chapter, the researcher described each participant through the interview process. The reader will get a glimpse into the influences that shaped each participant’s understanding of biblical community. Through individual and cross analysis of the participants, the complexity of biblical understanding and its application to Facebook will unfold.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Christian college students’ understanding of biblical community and its manifestation on Facebook was a multi-case study design using triangulation of data. The data consisted of observational data, two interviews with students, and a self-administered survey (Chavis & Lee, 2011). This chapter focuses on the influences that shaped the participants’ understanding of biblical community, and how that understanding was manifested on Facebook. Beginning with the Sense of Community Survey, the researcher presents how the students of each college felt about the college community in which they lived, followed by the findings in light of their Facebook interactions as coded within the context of the theoretical framework, then presents the interviews of each of the participants, and lastly a discussion of the findings.

Sense of Community Survey

Measuring the colleges’ sense of community helped to provide a context for how each of the participants felt about community life within the respective colleges. The researcher was then able to compare the overall feelings of community against the participants’ statements of community life on campus. The instrument used was the Sense of Community Survey developed by Dr. D.M. Chavis (see Appendix B).

At Premier Music College, 110 surveys were sent out and 44 returned, giving a 40% response rate. With only 44 people responding, with a desired confidence rate of 95%, the survey results have a standard deviation of +/- of 9.6%. Though the response percentage was high, compared to the population size, the confidence rate is much lower
than desired within social science expectations. The demographics of those participating in the survey consisted of the following:

Table 4

*Premier Music College Student Make-Up*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Percentage of Student Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-19</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-23</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-27</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-up</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage of Student Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage of Student Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At Smallville Christian College, 1,200 surveys were sent out with 255 returned, yielding a 21% response rate. With only 255 people responding, with a desired confidence rate of 95%, the survey results have a standard deviation of +/- of 4.6%. The demographics of those participating in the survey consisted of the following:
Table 5

*Smallville Christian College Student Make-Up*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Percentage of Student Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16-19</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-23</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-27</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-up</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage of Student Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage of Student Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following table compares the results of Premier Music College with Smallville Christian College. There are four subsets and the scores for each column are noted at the columns head with “P” for Premier and “S” for Smallville. The numbers represent the raw score for each question. The total possible score on each question for Premier Music College was 44, and the total possible score of Smallville Christian College was 255.
### Table 6

**Sense of Community Survey Comparison**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reinforcement of Needs</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Mostly</th>
<th>Completely</th>
<th>Mean SD</th>
<th>Mean/ SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>P = Premier Music College standard deviation +/- 9.6%</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5: I share the same values as my college.</td>
<td>1 9 0 58 18 150</td>
<td>26 38</td>
<td>M=11 SD=12</td>
<td>M=64 SD=60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6: I am concerned about other people's needs at my college.</td>
<td>1 10 2 53 11 120</td>
<td>31 71</td>
<td>M=11 SD=14</td>
<td>M=64 SD=46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7: When I am struggling, people at my college encourage me.</td>
<td>1 18 7 66 16 108</td>
<td>21 61</td>
<td>M=11 SD=9</td>
<td>M=63 SD=37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8: I feel that other people at my college listen to my concerns.</td>
<td>1 23 7 80 23 102</td>
<td>14 50</td>
<td>M=11 SD=9</td>
<td>M=64 SD=35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9: My college can meet the needs of its members.</td>
<td>1 14 7 106 20 114</td>
<td>15 21</td>
<td>M=16 SD=6</td>
<td>M=64 SD=54</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtotal Score</strong></td>
<td>6 92 33 433 105 704</td>
<td>123 298</td>
<td>M=67 SD=56</td>
<td>M=382 SD=257</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Mostly</th>
<th>Completely</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>S = Smallville Christian College standard deviation +/- 4.6%</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q10: I can trust the people at my college.</strong></td>
<td>0 16 9 73 18 127</td>
<td>17 37</td>
<td>M=11 SD=8</td>
<td>M=63 SD=49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q11: I know most of the people at my college.</strong></td>
<td>2 34 1 90 20 105</td>
<td>21 23</td>
<td>M=11 SD=14</td>
<td>M=64 SD=48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q12: When I walk down the hall, people at my college recognize me.</strong></td>
<td>2 9 2 79 7 121</td>
<td>32 45</td>
<td>M=11 SD=13</td>
<td>M=64 SD=42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q13: My college has symbols and rituals that set it apart from other colleges.</strong></td>
<td>0 8 3 79 13 108</td>
<td>28 60</td>
<td>M=11 SD=13</td>
<td>M=64 SD=40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q14: I am an active participant at my college.</strong></td>
<td>0 13 4 77 13 108</td>
<td>27 57</td>
<td>M=11 SD=12</td>
<td>M=64 SD=40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q15: My identity as a</strong></td>
<td>4 50 6 78 13 84</td>
<td>21 43</td>
<td>M=11</td>
<td>M=64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Premier Music College scored 527 points for “completely” out a total of 1,234 points. For the subscales students scored “completely” in the area of reinforcement of
needs, 123 times out of 269; membership 146 out of 263; influence 102 times out of 263; shared emotional connection 156 times out of 264.

Smallville Christian College scored 2,357 points for “mostly” out a total of 5,880 total points. Each subset reflected the total score as students marked “mostly” under reinforcement of needs 704 times out of 1,527; membership 653 times out of 1,524; shared emotional connection 445 out of 1,722. Influence was the only subset to fall under the subset “mostly” column, scoring “somewhat” 600 times out of 1,524.

At both colleges, a majority of students felt “mostly/completely” in their sense of community. At Premier, 85% of the students answered “mostly/completely,” and at Smallville 58% of the students answered ”mostly/completely.”

**Reinforcement of Needs**

Everyone has needs, and to feel a part of a community a person wants to feel that his or her needs are being met. The survey addressed both sides of the issue, the students’ need and their involvement in meeting the needs of others. Overall, students at both colleges felt that their needs were met most of the time. This was true whether it was about how they felt or how they reached out and helped others. Premier, as a smaller school, did not score any different than Smallville. Smallville’s attention to smaller community groups may have contributed to fostering a safe environment where students could have their needs met. The idea of reciprocity in the Christian community would likely contribute to the students scoring “mostly” in feeling that there was someone who would encourage them when struggling.
Membership

The survey measured feelings of membership by asking questions about trust, familiarity, and identity. For both Smallville and Premiere, the students mostly trusted the people at their college. This may be the result of Christian teaching and the attention to integrity and godly living. It also may be a result of the students’ familiarity with one another. The students at both colleges felt they knew most of the people at their college. This is more likely true at Premiere, with a much smaller student body. For the students at Smallville, with a larger student body, the feeling may be more perceptual than real. In the end, it does not make a difference since the feeling of community is about a sense of belonging. If one knows most of the people in his or her class, he or she may feel that he or she knows most of the people in the school, and, thus, have a strong sense of membership. However, at both colleges, students felt that their identity as believers was connected to the college; they scored higher in the “somewhat” column instead of “mostly.” If students feel good about the people around them, they will identify stronger with the institution. Colleges also helped students flesh out their faith, and if they walk away stronger they will attach their identity to the school.

Influence

Influence has to do with the students’ need to have impact on the people around them, as well as being impacted themselves. It is the reciprocity of community. Smallville differed from Premier in this area. The students at the smaller school felt they were needed, heard, and impacted others more than at the larger school. Also, while students from both colleges felt their leaders had integrity, they did not feel as strongly that their voices were heard. The larger the institution, the greater need for structure and
consolidated decision-making. While both schools desired to give students a voice, that voice was limited by the institutions’ needs. Students did not make policy. The degree to which the students felt their voices heard on their floors, in classes, or in the student government may be the degree to which they felt their voices and opinions heard. As will be seen later, the participants differed as to their feeling of influence. Much of it depended on whether they were involved in student leadership.

**Shared Emotional Connections**

Shared emotional connection is deeper than proximity, it is about shared purpose. The students at both schools scored highest in the “completely” column when it came to staying at least three years at the college. This can be misleading given the limited time that is built into the college experience. If the question was asked, “Do you plan to participate as an alumni for a long time,” one might have seen a different result. In respect to the immediate feelings, students at both colleges marked much higher in respect to their present activities. Most of the students were active participants. At Premiere, where everyone is associated with music and the majors are highly integrated, participation in the school activities yielded greater results. However, Smallville scored about the same. Most likely, as students engaged in smaller units (i.e. floor activities, sports, or in the respective majors), emotional connections formed just as strongly as did at Premier. A telling score was the one concerning forgiveness. As Christian colleges, forgiveness, mercy, and love were given special attention in living Christ-like lives. This is a good indication that the schools’ intentions of teaching Christian love are being instilled in the students.
Facebook

The charts below provide a comparative glimpse into the participants’ Facebook involvement. As a whole, participants tended to write status updates that were either informational or encouraging. When their friends responded to their status updates, they tended to write humorous and encouraging statements. The same held true when friends posted status updates directly on the participants’ wall. The posts were encouraging and informational. When the participants responded back to their friends, the responses were answers and encouraging. Friends’ responses to participants’ status updates were balanced between humorous, encouraging answers, questions, and response opinions. In the following figures, the y-axis is the number of responses and the x-axis is the category of responses. The colors represent the participants:

Figure 1. Participants’ Status Posts.
Figure 2. Participants’ Responses.

Figure 3. Friend Posts on Participants’ Wall.
The median number of friends was 707.5; of this 707.5, there was an average of 242.5 people who were interacted with over a period of six months. Over the six-month period in which the participants were observed, friends wrote an average of 3.8 responses. Participants had an average of 15 friends who responded more than ten times. A smaller list of friends did not mean a greater number of interactions between close friends (defined as anyone responding more than ten times). In fact, the participant with the fewest number of friends (112) did not have anyone who responded more than ten times. Having more friends did not yield a greater rate of participation. The participant with the most friends (1,339) only had 19, or 1.4%, of friends who responded more than ten times. The participant who was just below the median number of friends with 605 friends had the greatest number of close friends at 36, or 6%, see figures five and six below.
How people engage in personal relationships is shaped by a variety of sociological factors. In the following sections, the researcher focused specifically on the life of eight participants and how their families, church, and college shaped their understanding of biblical community. Listening to their voices as they answered questions relating to...
decision-making, discipline, community, and friendship helped to understand what was important to them in regard to community. Of the total school population, participants were selected, using convenience sampling, from those who expressed interest in participating in the research project and fit the criteria as outlined in Chapter 3.

**Bridget**

I sat outside the room the Librarian had set aside for me to conduct my interviews. I had not met Bridget previously; we had only communicated via email. As students walked by, I tried to identify her; mostly, they looked away or kept their heads down. Finally, Bridget approached. She immediately knew who I was, and she engaged me with a smile. I extended my hand, and she warmly accepted my handshake. I guided her into the room, which was small with a glass window, but would work well for recording. I briefly explained the process to her. Bridget was eager to be a part of this study and was very open and honest with her answers.

Bridget is 21 years old and a junior at Smallville Christian College. Since the study involved Christian college students’ understanding of biblical community, the first question I asked concerned her becoming a Christian. Bridget said she grew up in a Christian home,

My grandpa was a preacher. I kind of had that influence on that side. My family was one of those things that when the church doors were open we were there, so I really don’t ever remember my life without Christ. However, growing up in a Christian home does not guarantee that a person is a Christian. Bridget made this observation about herself at a 2010 Campus Crusade for Christ rally:
That [the rally] was the turning point with my faith because it really just for some reason just clicked, and I was like, ‘I’m talking the talk, but I’m not really walking the walk. I’m just kind of pretending like I’m walking the walkish type deal,’ so I guess that was kind of my turning point of becoming a Christian.

Family

Bridget is one of two daughters. Her sister is older, and she describes her as “crazy.” Bridget said, “She was definitely the rebellious child who pushed her limits.” She laughed a little and stated, “She was the typical older sister who liked to torture me.” It was evident that she was not concerned about being hurt when she recalled, “I was bigger than her growing up, so I could definitely give it back.”

The two sisters were certainly different. “In high school,” Bridget remembers her sister, “she was definitely the party type. She would go out after work on weekends. She would get drunk, and that was definitely looked down upon in our family.” These are not firsthand memories, as Bridget explains, “I never knew about it until later years, but she was in the party scene. I don’t know if she ever did drugs, but I know there was sex and alcohol.”

“Mom,” Bridget closes her eyes as if trying to picture how her mother looks, “is short and sassy. She’s the youngest of eight children, so she grew up kind of, you know, always having to fight for things.” It was from those background memories that she used words like “ball of energy,” “hard working,” and “used to hard labor” to describe her mom. When asked about her mom’s role in the family, Bridget was quick to reply, “bread winner,” and though, as we will see later, her dad worked hard, it was her mom’s
job as an RN with the Veteran’s Administration Hospital that bolstered the family finances.

If mom was spunky, dad was “a tall, goofy redhead.” Bridget does not say this with disrespect, but playfully. Bridget stated, “I love my father. I’m really close with my dad . . . I go to him for everything.” She describes their relationship as close, “I’m definitely very much a daddy’s girl.” When describing him, she used words like, “cutup,” “ham,” “down to earth,” “relaxed,” “genuine,” and “willing to help anyone who needs it.”

However, “hysterical” (another affectionate description) and “goofy” were not the only descriptors. Bridget knows that her father was hardworking. She said, “He actually works two jobs right now.” Her father does booking for the Wesley Foundation as well as working for a local, home-based credit union. If mom is the breadwinner, what was dad’s role in the family? Bridget responded, “I guess kind of more protector.” Bridget says her father is a “little macho,” and as the only male in the family, the role of protector falls to him. His ability, however, to be intimidating towards the boys her sister would bring home was short-lived, “he can’t be intimidating for a very long kind of deal because he just likes smiles, and he can’t keep a straight face.”

Conflict

A common characteristic of all communities is their ability to deal with conflict, decision-making processes, and the allowance of dissent. I put the question of these three characteristics to each of the participants. Bridget said, “I’ve actually never really seen them [parents] in conflict. . . I’ve never seen them fight.” Families have different ways of
displaying conflict. Some are more open and others either hide it or suppress it. She describes it this way,

Sometimes they may raise their voice slightly, but in the way that they deal [with it] is they kind of take a deep breath, step back for a minute, and then they’re fine for the deal [situation]. Kind of like a process.

When asked about conflict between her and her parents, Bridget said, “I don’t think me and my parents have ever really been in conflict.” Bridget explained that she “always did what they said.” Bridget explained that her sister’s example set the course of how she would relate to her parents, “I left that up to my older sister to do [parental conflict], and I think because seeing her do things, I was like, I don’t want to do that.”

Decision-Making

Bridget used three words when describing her family’s decision-making process, “talking,” “inclusion,” and “collaborative.” However, the whole family was not involved in every decision. Bridget stated,

They would talk things through, depending on, like, how big the decision was. If it were in regard to maybe a move, they would include the entire family. If it was just a small, like, appliance decision or a care decision the two of them talked it through.

In the end, her parents made the decisions together.

Dissent

Though her parents had the final say, they also allowed their girls to speak their mind. Bridget explained, “They would lay it out there, let me think about it for a second, and then I would tell them [what I think].” Bridget’s parents would “just sit and listen,
because they genuinely cared how it would affect me, and they would definitely take, like, deep consideration into that.”

How the family dealt with conflict was seen in Bridget’s example of her sister. Though her parents were unaware of her sister’s misbehavior in high school, they became very cognizant of them when she was in college. Bridget recalls, “The way that they handled it, like, when she kind of got into college years was more ‘we don’t condone what you do, but we’re not going to condemn you. We still love you because you’re our daughter.’” Bridget says that her parents were not inactive, “They’re definitely big on praying for everyone, and so we’re just gonna continue to pray for you and help you in any way we can.”

Family is where we first begin to understand community (Bengston, Biblarz, & Roberts, 2002). For Bridget, her relationship with her father and seeing his compassion and willingness to help anyone in need began to shape how she would deal with others. Also, seeing how her parents dealt with her sister’s rebellion laid the groundwork for conflict resolution, acceptance, and prayer.

Church

Bridget, like many children growing up in Christian families, went to church as a child and into her teens. When I asked her about her church experience, she was quick to say, “I was the only girl in my age group for the longest time growing up in church.” The youth group was not small, numbering around 50; she commented that there were “boys galore.” The church averaged 600 attendees.

Though she was the only girl, her experience was positive. She recalls, “I definitely looked forward to going to youth group because I had a wonderful Youth
Pastor.” Leadership was the key to her positive experience. Her youth pastor “truly cared about your relationship with Christ and really wanted to help you and, like, he was always asking ‘how’s your walk with God today? Where have you seen God this week?’”

The Youth Pastor’s questions seemed odd. Bridget said that, “at the time you’re like, oh, why are you asking me these questions,” but the questions only meant that he was interested in her spiritual well-being. As she recalls later, “looking back on it, it definitely really helped me, kind of pushed me.”

The atmosphere of her youth group was “open,” “fun,” and “very welcoming.” Bridget talked about the “townies” that did not grow up in church, but because of the youth pastor, loved coming. His welcoming personality did not deter his zeal for God’s Word. According to Bridget, “He preached straight out of the gospel. Um, he didn’t sugar coat anything kind of deal ‘cause I think that’s one thing that I really enjoyed.”

Within the youth group, Bridget was a floater. “I wouldn’t say I had many close friends,” she remembered, “I kind of floated from group to group. I liked everybody.” Though she acknowledged, “There may have been two or three people that I was actually really close to.”

Church has changed for her since she has enrolled in college. Bridget explained, “Because I’m away at school nine months of the year, when I go home there’s really not a college age group for me to connect with, so I’ve tried connecting with the youth group.” She says that environment has changed and the connections are different with the change in Youth Pastors. She says that she finds connections elsewhere, “I play in the praise band, and that’s kind of the only real connection I have there.”
Asking her what she believes the role of the church is, she responded, 

The church is the people, not the building. Accountability, I think, in a sense to help push you in your faith and help you in your faith, and if you are having troubles and when you’re down, like, truly helping you and trying to get you back on the right path.

This mirrored how Bridget experienced youth group and how her parents prayed and encouraged her and her sister.

Trying to go a little deeper, I asked her to give me four characteristics of biblical community. She found this to be a difficult question. After thinking a moment, she said, “I guess, always, Acts 2, like everyone puts all their money together and like everyone kind of takes from it and helps.” The rest of her characteristics revolved around words like, “helping,” “building each other up,” “listening,” “encouragement,” “quality time together,” and “words of affirmation.” Among those characteristics, the one that was most emphasized was “quality time.” Bridget describes “quality time” by stating, “I just think, just spending quality time with a person, like, you don’t even have to say anything. Just being with the person and genuinely being with a person.”

When asked how she has seen biblical community work, she responded generally, “When there was a death in the family or a birth in the family.” She described how churches generally help with meals, but when she thought of a personal example, she remembered back to her sister and said,

When my sister had my niece, there were a couple of women in the church who threw my sister a baby shower. Because being a single mom and having a child out of wedlock, we weren’t sure, you know, it was kind of,
how’s the church gonna look on this? And they were very much, oh, we love her, and we’re still gonna, you know, we’re gonna throw her a baby shower, and it was the most beautiful thing. And like, the gifts, and just food, even after my niece was born. Like, just helping out. Whether it was, hey, we’ll babysit for a little bit or we’ll, you know, let you have some time off.

She thought a moment longer and added, “Another characteristic is accepting.”

This characteristic played out as Bridget described a time when biblical community did not work. She recalled, “There was a lady, probably mid-40s. She was very charismatic, she was so on fire for God, and she just wanted to worship with every aspect [of her being].” She described how the woman would dance in the pews and “a couple of instances where she got up during like the songs, and she would like run up and down the aisles.” Some of the older people in the church approached the lady and told her she either had to stop her behavior or leave. Bridget said, “They didn’t embrace her for who she was and basically pushed her out of the church because they didn’t accept her. I felt like they could have handled that in a better way.” I asked her how she would have handled it. She said,

I think they could have been like, you know, if you’re going to do this maybe go to the back of the sanctuary so you can still do this or they could have just toughened up. She wasn’t harming anyone. So, I think they could have handled it in a more kind, gentle manner than they did.

Smallville
I asked Bridget why she came to Smallville: “Both my parents actually went to Smallville. Well, my dad graduated. My mom only went here for a year and then she went to nursing school.” At this point, Bridget was fairly matter-of-fact as she recalls, “Growing up it was one of those ‘I don’t want to go to their alma mater.’” Her expression changed, “but as soon as I set foot on the campus, I fell in love with it. I was like, this is where I’m supposed to be, so that’s why I chose it.”

“Love” is such an overused word that I asked her to explain what she meant by “I fell in love.” Her response was, “When I got here, I just felt overwhelmed with, like, happy. [It was a feeling] of being welcomed, feeling, like, important, feeling, like, I was wanted here, and they were going to accept me.” Bridget gave an example of what she meant:

You know, like, I remember my first visit when, like, five minutes, and it wasn’t even an administrator. It was just a random student walking by, like, stopped, introduced themselves, welcomed me, and I was like, what? Like, if I went to a big university, they wouldn’t have even given me a glance for two seconds, and you know, and like I have this random person I’ve never met just walk up to me and like introduce themselves and like, I was like whoa, whoa! This is great! Just the small, intimate atmosphere I guess was also very much a drawing factor in why I fell in love with it.

Smallville averages around 1,200 students. Bridget said that her largest class had approximately 35 students and her smallest had approximately 10 students. I asked her what it was like to live in community at Smallville? Her answer was unique.
I love sharing a bathroom with everyone. That’s gonna sound really weird, but I love sharing a bathroom because I think that’s where some of the best conversation, like, ‘cause, that’s where you are always with someone you know. You may be coming and going, and people are in their room, but you are always gonna see someone in the bathroom, and I think that’s wonderful.

Bathrooms were not the only place that Bridget saw community. She said that there were smaller community units on the campus. She describes these communities by saying, “You have your sports community and music community and then your smaller percentage of everyone who doesn’t fit into those two categories of community.” She reflected that she is in the minority because she is not in a sports or music program. Her major is Psychology and Religion. As she pondered this, she admits, “there’s like division within the community, and that kind of bothers me in a sense because they push community and push community, but they don’t do anything to blend [the different groups].” In light of this, I asked Bridget to list four community characteristics she believes the school is trying to foster. She said, “I would say trying to bring people together, as a unified body with Christ. Is that what I’m trying to say? Yeah, we’ll go with that.” She asked if my question was how the school is trying to build community. I answered yes and she continued, “They kind of emphasize meals together… they are always talking about, like, biblically like conversations like Jesus around the table with his disciples. Community building around feasts and things like that.”

This was a very difficult question for Bridget, and she was not sure if she could come up with four characteristics of community that the school was trying to foster
among the students, even though, she says, they push community all the time. In fact, she stated,

They push, like, community, like they talk about community, but they never give a clear definition of what they’re looking for. They talk about it, but personally like in my three years, I’ve never seen them really act upon it, so it’s really hard for me to think of two more, like I was pulling those two out of nowhere.

Bridget had something on her mind that did not coincide with what she thought community should be and how the college did not accomplish her ideal. When I pressed her on this, she said,

There’s nothing available where they’re not trying to blend the lines of the division. But I think it’s also because the administration, they don’t see, they don’t live on this campus, so they don’t see the division…because you know you have the sports people that sit all the way in the back (chapel), and everyone else, you know, just kind of, everything’s divided. It’s kind of very much kind of high school clicks as I would say, and there’s nothing that they’re trying to do, or I personally see that they’re trying to do to integrate that, so as a whole we may technically be a Smallville community by definition, but we have broken ourselves up into little villages within the community.

Bridget felt that community is best served when there are no dividing lines, even though earlier she acknowledged that smaller groups are necessary for good community. She
indicated that she wished that in the small groups there was a crossover of these little “villages.”

Similar to her church and family, healthy communities have a venue where members can express their dissent and influence the decisions of the community. With that in mind, I asked Bridget how students are involved in the decision-making process at Smallville. She responded,

It depends on what decision they’re making. We decided to change our school colors, and what they did is they sent out a survey through our Discipleship student email…They send out surveys about things like that, but as far as like money or things like that, I, it’s not like they’re going to go ask the students.

She said that there is a student government at Smallville, but that she is not involved in it. She knows they have meetings, but has never seen them in action. She does not discount the student government but says,

I think some were, like, gonna try to bridge the gap between administration and the students, and there’s some people that talk about bridging the gap, but as far as the extent of what they’re bridging or how, you know, how they’re going about it, I have no idea.

Though Bridget did not see too many real opportunities for decision-making, she did talk about the students’ ability to express concerns or dissent.

We have what we call fireside chats, and it’s usually with, um, the president or someone like the cabinet, and those are usually held monthly, and basically there’s usually a topic, whether it’s money matters or things
like what’s going on campus . . . you can express your opinion, and they will kind of try to walk you through their thought process of why they did what they did . . . as a student you can go to, like our student senate and like, if you have a complaint go to them and then they will try to do something about it.

When I asked where she saw community really work, Bridget’s answer fit well into her concerns about the school’s community division. She said,

They recently had a fundraiser for Japan, and I think that kind of, in itself, showed some real community in helping those in need…we all came together, whether it was the athletes who were participating, I, um, like the entertainment or, um, the students that were just there to support and be there for each other.

However, communities are not perfect, and Bridget pointed that out by stating,

I feel like personally there may be a hierarchy in the students, and I don’t think that’s how it should be like. I feel like the student athletes are kind of more held on a pedestal, and I think that you’ll find that everywhere. Everyone else is kind of like, eh, okay. You’re here, you’re filling up space, and so I think that’s kind of where we got it wrong, kind of favoritism.

I asked Bridget how many close friends she had and she responded, “I would say maybe like 15 close friends. I can tell them anything…I know I can count on them to be there for me to help me push through this problem.” I pushed her a little and asked out of those 15 how many were in sports or music, “I don’t think I have any, well, two sports,
um, one music, no, two music, and the rest are ‘other’ I would guess.” However, even in this description, Bridget was not speaking of her close friends, but rather about acquaintances. She later clarified, “I mean I would say I have acquaintances in like all categories that are, like, but as far as close friends I would say they’re probably really isn’t a blending of the line very well.”

For Bridget, biblical community is about sharing, caring, accountability, and acceptance. She has seen and experienced these characteristics at home, at church, and at college. Though none of the environments were perfect, they each had an impact on how she views biblical community.

**Facebook**

Facebook is not only a place to interact with friends, but also a place to share details of your life. According to Bridget’s profile page, the United Methodist Church employed her as a Children’s Minister. She attends Smallville Christian College and graduated from Marion High School. Her favorite quotes are from Robert Frost, Vince Lombardi, and the Apostle Paul. Bridget has a varied taste in music, ranging from Anberlin to the David Crowder Band. Her three favorite books are the Bible, *Crazy Love,* and anything by C.S. Lewis. She enjoys many different movie genres. For example, she enjoys both *She’s the Man* and *The Number 23.* She also likes to watch television shows such as *Psych, Criminal Minds,* and *Raising Hope.* Finally, from Bridget’s Facebook page, it can be learned what types of activities she enjoys. She likes the Blackroom Café, Smallville Women’s Basketball, BalloonShop, Smallville World Outreach and Missions, soccer, Agapefest, Starbucks, Adam Brothers Music, and Coffee House.
Bridget is also a poet, and in the notes section of Facebook she reveals a little of herself with a poem she wrote for her friends:

Lost in a sea of people
With no sound to be heard.
I cry these tears of doubt
Wondering if I will ever get out.
This heart is broken,
These tears fall down,
Dreaming of the day that I might be found.
So I'll sit here in this place
Trying to turn my face
But I will stay content
With my face down on the ground.
Fighting to stay alive,
For just one breath of life
But all I am is LOST.

Not all of her information is personal, which is consistent with how Bridget uses information in her Facebook community. Even in her profile section, she has limited the information to general categories. Over a six-month period, Bridget had a total of 501 status types (180 total posts, 264 responses to posts, and 57 people who checked the like toggle). Of her 273 friends, 84 interacted with her on her wall for a total of 219 times. The most any single person posted either status or response was 15 times, with only four who posted 10 times or more (average response was 2.6 times).
In the following figures, the y-axis is the number of responses, and the x-axis is the category of responses.

**Figure 7.** Bridget’s Participants’ Status Posts.

**Figure 8.** Bridget’s Friends’ Responses.
Within Case Analysis

For Bridget, the Facebook wall was a place to interact with her friends on a less personal level. Most of her responses were for information, answering questions, and for...
engaging in conversations. Bridget was more apt to express positive emotions than negative ones. In her responses to friends, she had a mix of humor and encouragement. She did chastise one of her friends with a light rebuke about the tone of a discussion. Of the 85 encouraging posts of friends, 61 of them were to wish her a happy birthday, and of Bridget’s 81 answers, 56 were in response to the birthday wishes. Her response to individual birthday wishes was significant. Instead of posting one response thanking everyone for their posts, she thanked most of them personally. This indicated that Bridget saw relationships as a priority and was willing to put time and effort in maintaining those relationships. She only expressed her faith through spiritual responses three times (e.g. “On this day, God wants you to know that pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional. Pain is the reaction of the body, and as long as you have the body, some pain is inevitable.”), and those responses were on friends’ walls.

Bridget’s understanding of biblical community centered on concepts of acceptance, inclusion, and sharing. Her view on community acceptance comes from her family’s interaction with her sister, “She was definitely the party type…the way they handled it was more ‘we don’t condone what you do, but we’re no going to condemn you. We still love you.’” Bridget’s church experience influenced her feelings of inclusion and sharing. Talking about her pastor, “he truly cared about your relationship with Christ…he was always asking how’s your walk with God today?”

When compared to her Facebook interactions, we see that she was a little above average when it came to her number of friends. The average Facebook user has 130 friends (Facebook Statistics, 2012), and Bridget had 271. She had a 30% interaction rate with her friends, but when it came to consistent interaction (more than ten times) this
interaction rate dropped to 1.5%. The interaction rate dropped because friendships are best expressed in small groups (Blok, 2008). The Sense of Community Survey (SCS) showed that at Smallville small groups are important (157 respondents scored mostly or completely that small group were important).

For Bridget, chastising was not an integral part of her Facebook Community. Only .5% of the time was someone held accountable for his or her behavior on her site. However, she said in the first interview, “Accountability, I think, in a sense to help push you in your faith and help you in your faith, and if you are having troubles and when you’re down, truly helping you back on the right path.” This corresponded to the SCS where 123 respondents allowed themselves to be held accountable.

In the second interview, I asked participants to describe how they saw Facebook in the context of their understanding of biblical community. Bridget said, “I guess I see Facebook playing a large role in my community life, both real and virtual.” Mainly Facebook has to do with connections, which Bridget mentions by stating, “Facebook has allowed me to stay connected with friends who have moved away and those who I rarely see while I am away at school.” Consistent with Bridget’s idea of inclusion, she said, “It [Facebook] has given me the opportunity to expand my community.”

When describing what role humor, empathy, encouragement, conversation, and positive emotions played in her Facebook community, she explained, “All of the characteristics are positive and uplifting, yet not too personal; because you don’t want to get too personal because you don’t know who can see your profile.” Facebook was the appropriate place for positive expressions. However, Bridget was very clear about negative expression. She warned,
But information [personal], chastisement, and negative emotional responses should not be on Facebook. If someone needs your personal information, they should ask you in person or privately in a message, not so everyone can see. Chastisement and negative emotional responses just seem to be attention-grabbers for people to feel sorry for you or for you to stir up trouble.

Not to be too harsh, she continued, “Some emotional responses are legit, but not everyone should know; some things should be kept private.” Bridget is firm that private and personal conversations should be conducted through different venues, which include “messaging, chat, and real-world involvement.”

For Bridget, Facebook had a limited relationship to her biblical community. It was used more for light interaction and encouragement, but was not a platform that involved deep conversation, sharing, and emotional support for negative emotional states. Even though she shared information with her Friends, the information was not focused on causes or to help others in need. The information that she shared was more about movies, television, travel arrangements, and recitals. This did not mean that Bridget was not involved with a biblical community that was deeply concerned about others, shared resources, and built each other up. Bridget utilized Facebook for that part of community that engaged in light conversation and play.

**Ester**

Waiting for my next interview, I finished some paperwork and set the sound equipment at an angle that would make the room a little more comfortable and minimize distractions from the outside. I was just about ready when Ester walked through the door.
She had a warm smile and was easy going. I went through the process of how the interview would work. She was very agreeable to being a part of the study. I reminded her that everything would be confidential and asked that she be herself and answer the questions openly and honestly.

Ester is 20 years old and a senior at Smallville Christian College. Her major is music with an emphasis in Viola performance. She enjoys the lower tones of the viola over the violin. I asked Ester to describe her faith and how she became a Christian. She said, “I was raised in a Christian family, and I think I might have been around ten when I understood what it was about.” Her earlier years of education were homeschooling as she explained, “I always had Christian education as a part of my life. My family has gone to the same church as long as I’ve been born.” As a result, she emphasized, “so I’ve just kind of constantly been under the care of Christians, and so I was just kind of raised into that.”

However, like all children who have been raised in Christian homes, there is a time when faith becomes their own. Though she gave her life to Christ at ten, she remembers that it was in high school that her faith became real. She told me, “I think it would have probably been my junior year of high school. I started attending the youth group at my church, and they really encourage us to be reading our Bibles and stuff like that, and I had done that, you know, but I think it was junior year that I was like, okay, I’m actually gonna own it. I was just like, Oh my gosh, this is so real to me!”
Family

Ester is the youngest of four girls, and she chuckles when I call her the baby of the family. Ester’s father has just turned 60 and is a security guard at a hospital. This has not always been his occupation. She recalled, “He’s been a security guard for eight years I want to say. He was a farmer before that.” She describes her father as “soft spoken and really witty.” She continued, “His humor is definitely like super dry, but really funny.” However, there is more to him. She says, “He’s, like, super patient. I think it’s, like, one of his outstanding qualities. He doesn’t get irritated easily.”

Farming was what she remembered most about her father’s work, and it took on different shapes as the years went by. “I loved it,” she said,

But he had livestock before I was born. It was generally a dairy farm and then they stopped doing that and they did pigs, and then they stopped doing that, and then I was born, and then it was just crops.

She lived in the same house most of her life and said, “I loved living in the country.”

When I asked Ester what she saw as her father’s role in the family, she sheepishly replied, “I feel kind of bad saying this, but I feel like my mom kind of wears the pants in the family.” She is quick to say, “My dad definitely is, like, the one that just adores us all so much, and he just works so hard to provide that he just, that’s so important to him, he would do anything for any of us.” She nodded when I asked if he was the provider for the family.

Ester said, “Mom’s a talker.” You could tell Ester loved her family. She continued, “She’s spunky…I think their personalities are really different. She’s really funny but not in a dry sense.” That was her father. “I don’t really know how to explain
it, she just has a like a stronger personality than my dad.” Ester’s mom definitely ran the home, as she was wife, mother, and the educator who homeschooled her children.

Growing up on a farm and being homeschooled did not afford many opportunities to develop close relationships. Though, Ester says that she had “five really close friends that I would hang out with regularly. My best friend was our neighbor. They had four kids as well, and so one of the middle daughters was the one that I hung out with all the time.” When asked what close friend meant to her she described it as, “sleepovers, we could talk about anything, and we would hang out with each other’s families, and like our parents were close.” It was sad when their neighbors moved away, but they “still get together.”

**Conflict**

When there was a conflict in the family, “my dad usually would just say, okay, just, you know, we can handle it together, but you can have your way usually.” However, the idea of conflict in the family was almost foreign to Ester. She stated, “Honestly, I don’t really remember my parents fighting a lot, and they’ve, what, I think they had their 40th anniversary last year, so it’s gonna be 41 years, and they’re just like, ‘we’re too old to fight anymore.’” She stopped and thought for a moment then said, “I think I’m really blessed to grow up in that environment where, like, my parents weren’t bickering all the time.”

Ester’s two oldest sisters are twins and are 12 years her senior. Both are married and have moved out of the area. The family is musical and all the girls were music majors in college. The house was always filled with music. She recounts, “The oldest two play the harp, and then the middle one plays cello, and I play viola, so we would like,
we made an ensemble and we’d like play at weddings and parties and Christmas things.”

Most of the music was classical, Ester recalled,

My mom always wanted to play the harp when she was growing up, but her family couldn’t afford it . . . when my parents had children, then, she was, like, I kind of want them to be involved in music, then I can live vicariously through them.

This, however, did create conflict between mom and daughters. Ester remembered the conflict and stated, ”The twins started violin when they were three, but they hated it, and so they played until they were twelve.” They were allowed to express themselves and their mother was open to their complaints, “They still didn’t like it, and so she’s, like, ‘what about switching to harp?’ They were, like, ‘let’s try it,’ so they did and then they loved it.”

When asked about conflict between siblings Ester said,

Usually I would never fight with the twins because they were like my second mothers, but my other sister, we would fight a lot and nothing ever damaged our relationship I don’t think, but it was just like, “no you can’t borrow my clothes or you know, just like stupid stuff.

When conflict did arise, mom was Ester’s first choice to call, but both parents were not afraid to stand in the gap.

**Decision-Making**

The process of making decisions was something that never came up in the family. Ester recalled, “I don’t know. Like they would never really, like, explain how they did [make decisions].” She does remember one example,
I know when the twins were younger, they went to public school until the third grade, I think, and my mom thought that she heard from the Lord to homeschool her kids, and she had never even heard of that before, and she’s like, ‘I don’t think you can educate children at home. I don’t think that’s possible.’ But then she researched it and found out that people actually do that, and so she told my dad and he thought it was just ridiculous at first. Then she kind of had to just talk him through it and explain how important it was to her, and then he was on board with it.

Ester was clear that they talked about things and made decisions mutually. As a family, there was never really any major decision that Ester could think of where the children would have been included. Even the little things she said, “I never got to decide any of that. Like, when we would ever go on vacations, it would only be camping, just to save money, and my family really likes camping.”

**Dissent**

The family allowed dissent. Ester recalled,

I would just bring it up and talk to them about it. Like, I’m really close to my parents, so it was never like a, ‘I’m afraid of you, so I can’t bring anything up,’ so I, I mean, I really felt comfortable just talking to them about anything that I didn’t like.

**Church**

Ester and her family attended a church of around 1,200 people. There are different campuses; one in Denver, Colorado; one in Wisconsin, and five in Illinois. The
youth group was between 50 and 70 students. When I asked her about the role of the church, there was the ideal and the real. She said,

I would love it to be like a super tight community that could, you know, do things in the larger community like helping out people in need in the area, because I think a lot of churches are like world-focused and like, let’s go help people in China, when, you know, there are people that don’t have houses in the very neighborhood that the church is in, so like I would, I love like the sense of the church, that can be helping out people in the local area.

Local ministry is very important to Ester.

Other characteristics of Ester’s church included education, love, selflessness, like-mindedness, and growing. Growth, for Ester, meant movement as opposed to stagnation. She stated that,

[Growth is] depth of involvement of what’s going on and not like we’ve done the same thing forever and ever, and we’re just gonna keep doing it, but explore new areas and how can we grow closer together and how can we reach out further.

Ester described an instance where community took place by saying,

I started playing on worship teams at my church when I was 12, and I think a lot of people took me under their wing there, and I got to know a lot of people through that, and I grew as a musician in that area of the church, and it was like we were a support system outside of church as well.
Fellowship and mentoring were important aspects of Ester’s church community, but that does not happen automatically in a church of 1,200 people. She described how the church fostered community by stating the following:

We have four different services, so I think that helps so that it doesn’t feel so huge that you’re always with the same, like, 400 people. Another thing is they do small groups, so they have a big sign-up thing like once a year to sign up with a small group in your area.

Attending small groups is how Ester developed friendships at her church. The youth group would have a large group time and then break up into smaller groups where boys and girls were separate. They would “have discussion questions and pray for each other and stuff.” Not everything was ideal. Ester stated,

Honestly, it was really clique. I kind of came late in the game since I started going when I was a junior, so there was already groups of people that were already established…so I think when new people would come it was kind of awkward for them.”

Ester started attending church in her later high school years (as opposed to her childhood years) because her sister had a bad experience; “My parents were like, I don’t know, you can decide if you want to go, but you might not like it because [your sister] didn’t like it, and so I was like, okay.”

It was at this point in Ester’s life where she experienced community the most egregious way. Ester stated,

I went to youth group one time in junior high before I started, like, regularly attending. We were divided into small groups there, too, so my
small group leader, who was in high school, she called me and said, ‘on
Wednesday night when you come, we’re having cowboy night, so dress up
like a cowgirl, and we’re giving out prizes for the best costume,’ and I was
like, this is so exciting. So, I got cowgirl boots and the hat and this kind of
stuff, and I showed up and I was one of two people, who dressed up, and
then the sermon was on lying, and she said, “Do you see how you feel
tonight? This is why you should never lie to people.”

She paused, remembering the pain of the moment,

I was just crushed, and I, like, my parents picked me up and I was just
crying. I didn’t lie to anybody. They lied to me, and now they’re telling
me that, you know, this is why I shouldn’t lie to people because I feel so
bad.

**Smallville**

Having resided in one place all of her life and having a close relationship with
family made going away to college a big step for Ester. She said picking a school was
the first order of her new adventure. Recalling her school search, she said,

I looked at three different schools that I had heard of and people said good
things about. One was Smallville, another was Southeastern University in
Florida, and one was Evangel University in Missouri. I narrowed it down
to those three and applied, and got accepted.

For a musician, acceptance was not just a matter of turning in applications and
grades. Ester continued, “then I went for auditions into the music program at all of them,
and I had a lesson, like a viola lesson, with all the teachers at those schools.” The teacher
at the Southeastern University was impressed with Ester’s musical ability and recommended her to the program, but “it was so far away and I didn’t really like that. I got really sick of the weather . . . it was the same temperature every day.” Evangel was different. Though it was closer to home, Ester said that what she “didn’t like was the viola teacher.” At Smallville, the teacher was more to her liking. Even though the lesson would be a 45-minute drive, Ester said, “It was totally worth it ‘cause, I really liked her, so that’s why I decided to come here [Smallville].”

Another factor revolved around family. Ester stated,

My grandma was really ill, and so I was like if she would pass away and then I’d have to come home on short notice, like if I go here I can drive home in 4 ½ hours and make it, but trying to find a plane ticket from Florida would be another story.

Ester’s grandmother passed away before she went to Smallville.

Going away to school began with a little trepidation; when first coming to Smallville, there was a slight concern about being alone. “When I first came, I didn’t know anybody. It wasn’t like I came here with a friend or anything. I was like, people are not gonna like me, and it’s gonna be miserable.” She was quick to state, “that lasted for maybe three days, and then I figured out that I could easily make friends with girls on my floor at the beginning.”

At Smallville, community “is called the ‘C’ word. We’re like; oh the ‘C’ word is community. It’s, I think people kind of make fun of it sometimes.” That raised my curiosity, so I asked her why. Her response was, “Just because it’s like thrown around so much because, like, I remember at new student orientation my freshman year they’re like,
‘you’ll build community on your floor and community with your classmates and community this, community that.’” She thought a moment than laughed, “there’s not really another word for it, so you know, and you might as well use that word”

According to Ester, the school is trying to instill in students characteristics such as “empowering, like empowering each other to do the right thing,” “accountability,” “Spiritual growth,” and “friendship.” She was trying hard not to use the word “community” to describe what the school wanted for the students. Instead, she said, “like involvement in the surrounding areas, like, together.” Ester was trying to put a word to her thoughts, “like Smallville itself and like, there are outreaches to Saint Louis and like there are missions trips offered, like in spring break and that sort of thing, so…service.” Her emphasis on local service relates back to what she believed to be important for her local community as well.

Talking about community is one thing, but to implement it means to purposefully foster its environment. As a Resident Assistant (RA), she is now involved in this process. She said, “One of them [planned activities] would be like on the floor. I’m in charge of a Bible study every week with the girls on my floor, and planning events and that sort of thing.” Events, however, are not the only things that are important. Ester stated the importance of this by saying:

Being available if they want to meet with me on-on-one. It used to be a requirement that RA’s had to, like, plan one-on-one with all of their residents, like, ideally once a week. I have 28 girls on my floor, that’s a lot.
I asked her if she thought the students made themselves available to the planned programs. She remembered back to her experience and said,

Freshman year I don’t really remember going to a ton of activities because my floor was so tight that like, oh, is there an event tonight? Let’s just bum around in the hallway and play a game or something like that.

She emphasized her next words, “which I think is really important with college growth.” Then she continues, “I started going to events more, and now that I, like, plan them. I definitely see the importance of them.” This was consistent with the strength test the school has freshman complete, “Everyone does [the test] when they first come, and one of my top strengths was WOO, which means winning others over, so it’s like befriending everyone.”

**Decision-Making**

Community is not just about going to events, it is about belonging and participation. When asked about students’ involvement in decision making, she had to think for a moment. After the pause, she stated,

An example would be the athletic colors. They were black and orange [the school colors were green and gold], which it didn’t really make sense to me, but, I’m not into athletics, so it’s okay, but then last year they were like, “okay, there’s too much confusion. We’re just gonna have two colors, so everybody vote,” and they sent out a survey, and we all would vote on what we wanted, and black and orange won, so no more green and gold.

She said that Smallville does a lot of surveys.
Another avenue for community influence, according to Ester, is in “the dining commons, they, like, have comment cards and they actually listen to them. Like, somebody asked for tortillas one day, and they had tortillas forever and ever after that,” she giggled. Ester made a point to highlight, “they really do listen to those types of things, which is cool.” Tortillas seemed to be of little significance, but the school also engages students on more important issues. Ester said, “They’re like abolishing the bookstore as far as, like, school books are concerned. They had a meeting about that and they invited students to go. I was one of three students that went.” She expressed her desire to have seen more students attend because meetings like those are important to students.

Ester described more personal opportunities as well when she said, They have “fireside chats,” is what they’re called, and they’ll have like some faculty members come and have a dialog about a specific issue. I think they had one last week about renovations or something like that. They’ll just like banter back and forth about different ideas.

**Dissent**

Dissent is another area in which healthy communities create engagement. Ester says that she has never had to stand against anything at the school, but she did have a friend who expressed himself. She mentioned one example by stating, “There was a painting that someone painted in the dining commons and it was a picture of Lil’ Wayne, and he’s like a rapper.” She laughed because she was not sure I knew who Lil’ Wayne was or what rap was. She continued,
He was really terrible, terrible music, and awful lyrics and it’s just the worst, so this friend of mine was like, ‘why do we have a picture of Lil Wayne in our dining commons. In a Christian school this makes no sense.’ And he definitely had a point, and he was serious about that, so he sent a letter.

She was not sure who the letter was to, but it read something like this, “We have this painting in our dining hall, and it’s semi-offensive, and so we shouldn’t have it anymore.” Ester smiles, “and then it was taken down like a week later.” She was quick to add that the administration does not always take down posters, but at least they listen.

Smallville choir is an organization that Ester has been actively involved in, so when I asked for an example of how she has experienced community working, she naturally related it to this smaller community within the larger school community. She stated,

Every year they do a spring break tour, and it’s definitely like a ministry type thing . . . this year we went to Florida and Georgia. Just being on the bus with 50 people, you know, you sort of get close to those people, whether you like it or not, and something that’s really cool as far as like building each other up is that probably midway through the tour we start limericks. We’ll pick a name out of a hat of someone else in the choir, and, so let’s say I get ‘Joe,’ and so I have to either write a poem or write a song or write a story or you know, do something for ‘Joe’ and then perform it or read it in front of the whole choir. So, that’s really a cool way because sometimes you get people that you don’t know, and you have
to like find out about them. So, everybody ends up being really
encouraged by that.

Ester underscored the extended period of time that they had to spend together as
an environment where loving one another was important.

There are the downsides to community, as well. The one that I would
think of [examples of community gone wrong] would be prejudices on our
campus. I know that we had a pretty big heist recently, I think five iMac
computers in our student union, and they got stolen. Everybody was like,
‘oh, who did it, dah-dah-dah [she sings].’ It turns out that it was people on
the track team. So after that everybody was like, ‘oh, the track runners.
They’re the criminals or whatever.’

However, the track team was not the only object of prejudice. Ester said,

And like soccer players get a really bad rap for being like, partiers, and I
think there’s just a lot of these ideas that people have about certain groups
of people, so I don’t think that’s how community should be.

Unity is a characteristic of community that is important to Ester. She says,
If we’re, like, it’s supposed to be united as a school instead of as different
departments, but I think that’s kind of how it is. Like, the music people
are together, and the athletic people are together, and the science people
[are together].

I asked her if she saw these small communities within the larger context as a
negative thing. She replied,
To a certain extent, there can be good things about it because you are, um, surrounded by people who understand you, but at the same time, like, someone from the science department shouldn’t look down on a person who is in athletics just because of their group.

Ester said that she has two really close friends at Smallville, but 15 that she would “willingly talk about anything with.” She says that “close” means, Someone who would take my side if the problems would arise. Like, I’m confident that my really close friends would be like, ‘no, like, you’re doing the right thing.’ In the same way that they would call me out if I was doing something wrong.

I asked her if out of the 15 close friends, how many were from different sub-groups at the school. She said, “It’s mixed up pretty well. My two best friends, [Meg] is a Math Ed major, so she’s in like the math department and the education department, and my other best friend [Em], she’s an art major.” Highlighting the mixed quality of her friends, Ester throws out more names, “[Tim] is a history and religion, and [Mike] is digital media and plays tennis. So, like all those people, would be willing to talk.” She does not have any friends from the athletic department, but attributes that to her lack of athleticism.

**Facebook**

According to Ester’s profile page, she was born August 8, 1990. She lists friends from school as siblings and children, though they are really her friends. She is a Christian whose activities include singing, hanging out with friends, writing music, playing guitar, viola, and the piano. Her interests include chocolate, old jewelry, scarves, photography, writing letters, God, music, and laughing. Music is a big part of Ester’s life.
and includes Keane, Brother Leather, Brian Lee & Orchestra, Wind and Sail, Coldplay, Sufjan Stevens, and more. She lists *Arthur* as the only television show she watches and enjoys movies like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Little Women*, *The Newsies*, *Nacho Libre*, *School of Rock*, and *Elf*. Favorite books are *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* and *Blue like Jazz*. She says about herself in the Bio section, “If you hang out with me for just a little while, you will get to know me. I don’t like having secrets.” She has written only one note (blog), and it is a list of 25 things about herself. It is in response to other friends who had done the same. The list is as follows:

1. I play music: the radio, the viola, the piano, the guitar, the vocal mic. I can play violin and bass but I just don't very often. Also, I can tear up a standard beat on the drums! Look out world!

2. I love Hello Kitty. Did you know she has a twin named Mimi? They were born in November a little over 30 years ago.

3. I have amazing parents! And 3 older sisters...they are awesome. The oldest 2 are twins.

4. I was really scared to go to college...just ask some of my closest buddies....but now that I'm here, I LOVE it!

5. Lots of people think that since I play viola and piano, I'm a classical pansy. But I'm really not. I know how to rock hard!

6. Yellow is my favorite color...and always has been....and always will be.

7. I stuttered and lisped as a child. It was cute.
8. 8 is my favorite number. this is why: my first name has 8 letters:

   BLAKELEY. my middle name has 8 letters: VICTORIA. my last
   name has 8 letters: WOESSNER. combine the three names, and it's
   8 syllables. crazy eh? or should i say crazy 8's. oh yeah, and my
   birthday is 8-8-90...so on 08-08-08 i turned 18. mmm hmm.

9. i have won a couple competitions with my viola playing...and
   some of my photographs have made it into an art magazine in
   Northern IL.

10. i'm really good at impersonations and accents. well, pretty much
    only Dave Barnes and a British accent.

11. i love my name. it is not a family name...i get that question alot.
    but it's a boy's name that means "out of the dark meadow"

12. my hair used to be super long....like past my waist! and it was pink
    for a while too...

13. i was homeschooled and LOVED it. my mom is awesome. and
    she's an awesome teacher.

14. i love jesus so much. he's my one and only.

15. i have been called into ministry....not sure what that means at the
    moment...but i'm excited to find out

16. i can crack every joint in my body....i know...gross, right?

17. i love making people laugh and smile. and i love laughing and
    smiling.
18. I would love to be a worship leader someday...and maybe be a photographer on the side.

19. I have always hated mac and cheese. Until a month or so ago...when I tried it for the first time in years...it was actually good!

20. I love road trips

21. I love the family unit. I love babies, I love kids, I love teens, I love adults, I love it when a family is healthy and loving. I just love families!

22. I love making lists

23. I am really bad at reading and I dislike it very much. But I love to write.

24. I adore math. I tested into a Calc I class in college without even taking pre-calc or anything in high school. I just love math!!!! Math math math math math math!!!

25. I love my grandparents. My grandparents on my mom's side both died in the past few years. That was really hard. But I wear my grandma's hats, scarves, jewelry, and shoes, and I honor her and remember her that way.

Under basic information, Ester writes, “but I need no money, I need no one to understand, but I need your love.” She posts 2,698 pictures of herself, family, and friends, and has 906 friends on Facebook.
Over the past six-month period, Ester had a total of 818 status posts, 1,155 responses, and 905 times people toggled the “like” button, for a total of 2,878 posts. Of her 906 friends, 226 individuals posted either on her wall or in response to a post. The most anyone posted was 131 times, with the least being one. Twenty-six friends posted more than 10 times, with an average of 5.2 posts per active friend. When broken down, the types of status updates that Ester posted are as follows:

*Figure 11. Ester’s Participants’ Status Posts.*

*Figure 12. Ester’s Friends’ Responses.*
Within Case Analysis

For Ester, Facebook was a place to encourage one another; both she and her friends ranked high in the area of encouragement. The encouraging statements often revolved around performances, recitals, and tests. Ester’s friends often said, “I heard that and I loved it,” after one of her performances. Her birthday was outside of the
observation range and did not have an impact on the number of encouraging statements. Humor was the second in the list of posts, “hahahahaha? I LOVVVVVEEEE it! I love how the boy recording it is dancing just a little bit,” indicating that Ester’s Facebook interaction was more on the light side, yet highly relational, with 51 conversations.

Biblical community for Ester revolved around unity, serving, and caring for others. The high rate of encouraging statements (e.g. “Hey. You’re awesome. Daily. The end”) and the large number of friendships lend themselves to that analysis. Ester was highly relational, but when growing up her friendship base was small and intimate, “I had five really close friends that I would hang out with regularly.” Her close family and close friends created a safe environment that has been extended in her Facebook community.

There was accountability on her site. Though the numbers seemed low (a total of 26 times) in comparison to the number of posts (2,878), there is a .5% rate in which people would chastise (i.e. “Steven. Inappropriate”) on her site. Ester had an interaction rate of 25%, and when it came to consistent interaction (more than ten times), it dropped to a 12% interaction rate. Communities hold its members accountable. On the SCS, 191 students scored mostly or completely that people at the Smallville were concerned about them. Accountability was an expression of concern, and though Ester did not feel that chastisement was appropriate for Facebook, she was willing to hold people accountable when language or negative comments were hurtful.

In Ester’s second interview, she said that Facebook played a huge part in her community life. However, she clarified, “I don’t mean to say that I am close friends with every Facebook friend I have. There are different friendship levels represented.” She identified those levels as “classmates,” “people from church,” “people I hang out with,”
and “best friends.” It was about connecting with people. It also served as a means to share YouTube links and pictures. There were about 15 people with whom Ester stayed in almost constant contact. Though Facebook was about connections, it was not the only way in which she communicated with her friends. She said, “These are the people that I call, visit, email, text, tweet, and write letters to.”

“I firmly believe that Facebook is a great place for humor. I love hilarious things, and when I see a funny picture or comment or link on Facebook, it brightens my day. I don’t think humor should be private.” According to Ester, there were things that did not belong on Facebook. She said that one example is chastisement:

I firmly believe that if you have an issue with someone, it should be done in private and face-to-face. I also find myself very annoyed when I see “life sucks” statuses on Facebook. Life does suck sometimes, but that’s when you should turn to your best friends and ask them to pray with/for you.

Facebook, though, was definitely a place for encouragement. Ester said, “It fits everywhere. We should be encouraging at all times, even on the internet.” This reflected her home, “I think I’m really blessed to grow up in that environment where my parents weren’t bickering all the time.” She grew up in an encouraging family.

As far as information went, there needed to be discernment, “Facebook is a good place for CERTAIN information,” she said, “I have my Facebook page set to private, but some people I know have all of their information out in the open. I personally don’t feel comfortable keeping my phone number or address on Facebook.” This was understandable considering her experience in her church experience. She felt lied to
during an event where she was the only who came dressed in a costume, “I was just crushed, and my parents; I was just crying.” Information was powerful and she was very careful whom she shared. Ester felt the same way about empathy. She stated,

Some is fitting for Facebook, and some is not. If a friend is going through a hard time and I’m the only one who knows, I will not use Facebook wall posts to comfort them, that would betray their trust and make the situation shallow. On the other hand, if a friend makes their status ‘my grandma died, please pray for me and my family,’ I think it is fitting to comment or wall post and say, ‘I’m praying for you. Sorry for your loss. Call me if you need me.’

The SCS indicated that students felt encouraged when they struggled (169 scoring mostly or completely). Even though Ester was careful about displaying empathy on Facebook, her encouraging statements paralleled how the school felt about their community when they were struggling. She described Facebook as a great place for conservation. “It’s a great way to talk with people when maybe you don’t have their phone number or something.”

Trent

Between interviews, I walked the campus of Smallville Christian College. It is not very large, but is pretty. Older buildings surrounded a central common area, giving it an Ivy League feel. Students meandered or hurried in accordance with some unseen hand leading them to unknown destinations. By the time I made my way back to the library room that was reserved for my interviews, my next participant was there early and eager.
Trent is a slender young man with a pleasant disposition. He introduced himself using the middle name of “Danger.” It is a nickname meant to describe his personality.

Trent is 19 years old and going into his sophomore year at Smallville Christian College. He is the youngest of my participants. He says, “I was born and raised in the United Methodist Church. Both my parents have gone there my whole life, and um, so I’ve just always been a Christian.” When I pressed him a little further, there was more to the story. “At one point in time, we moved to a Nazarene church and then went back to the Methodist Church, and then we moved and went to another Methodist Church.” It would not be his family’s last foray into another denomination. He continued, “And then a Baptist Church, and now we’re back to the Methodist.”

It was during his time at the Nazarene Church that Trent began to take his faith as his own. He recalled,

At the time I was finally old enough to start going to church camps and stuff. I mean, I didn’t have, like, a saving moment or anything. I just was always that way and then, but that would have been around the time when I like started to really understand what was happening and what I believed in and stuff.

For Trent, becoming a Christian was a process of family and church involvement until he became an age where he understood.

**Family**

Family is important to Trent, and he personifies what has become the typical blended family in the United States. He said, “Well, my mom, they were both married before they married each other, and my mom had two kids, and then she divorced and my
dad was divorced, and so they got married.” Each parent had a daughter from a previous marriage. “They’re both my parents,” Trent says. Besides the two older sisters, he has a younger sister and a younger brother. However, he does not see himself as the middle child. He stated, “I’m also kind of the oldest child because the older two half-sisters, and the youngest one is five years older than me, so my whole high school I was the oldest one at home.”

He is three years older than his younger sister. Trent said they were the closest because,

We have similar friends, and we’re both into music and we play [music] together a lot. I play guitar, bass, banjo, and ukulele. She is a really good singer and a drummer, and she can also play guitar, so we’ve had, you know, our little band or whatever. Me and her bonded the most.

His younger brother was the opposite. Trent said of his brother, “He’s the athlete of the family, so I mean, I’m not at all a sports person. I feel like he doesn’t want to live in the shadow of me and my sister, so he tries not to be like us at all.”

His father has changed over the years. Trent stated, “He is weird. He didn’t used to be weird, like when I was little I remember him being kind of strict, a meaner dad. I guess he’s gone soft as he’s gotten older.” I asked Trent what he meant by “mean.” He replied, “Not mean, like mean, but like he’s the one that did all the discipline . . . not violently mean, but the disciplinarian in the family.” The difference in his father came when they moved from Peoria to Taylorville. He had changed his profession. “He used to work designing buildings for a construction company, and now he went to work with his dad actually selling insurance,” said Trent. Trent sees his father’s role in the family
as “kind of the classic head of the family.” His definition of classic head is “disciplinarian” and “provider.”

When he was young, his mother did not work outside the home, though now with the children older, she works as a librarian. He describes his mother as a “total goofball, always has been. She tries to be, you know, the cool mom that everybody likes,” and he quickly adds, “and they do.”

For advice, Trent sought out the parent who could best meet the need at the time. He said, “Usually with my dad it would be more like, you know, guy problems, personal things like with my body or whatever or girls, and then my mom was pretty much just whatever.”

**Conflict**

When it came to conflict with his dad, Trent surmised,

I guess he was more reserved with what he’s thinking and feeling, so a lot of times when he’s upset about something he just, he won’t say anything. That just causes my mom to get mad, and that’s more why they argue.

More than whatever the initial thing was.

Though Trent’s father would retreat from conflict, his mother was the opposite. Trent stated, “Mom’s a very vocal person, so, if there’s something wrong she’ll say it.” Nevertheless, he would consider himself cautious around new people. Trent says he takes after his mother. “I’m a little shy, but then once I get to know you I’m not shy anymore,” said Trent.
**Decision-Making**

“It’s a team kind of thing,” said Trent as he chuckled, “you know, they talk and argue if they have to or whatever.” I asked him if arguing was how they commonly went through the decision-making process. “I mean, they argue, but not like excessively I would say, but, I would say there was a couple of times where they almost got divorced, so, there was more there, but other times not too bad.” However, even amidst the tension in his parents’ relationship, he said they collaborated on decision-making, but not with the children. Trent gives this example:

When we moved, I was like in the seventh or eighth grade, so I was kind of just getting to know everybody and, you know, then you get to a spot where you have your group and you start actually like getting close and everything, and that’s right where I was and they wanted to move and we had no say. It was finalized by the time they told us. But it was like the best thing that ever happened to me, but at the time it was horrible.

Growing up, his friendships were very close. He stated, We went to a very small school. My total class was like 60 people. Two of my friends are still close, even though I’ve been away from there six years now, we still like, they came and visited here before, and I’ve gone up there.

After he moved, it was a little harder to develop friends since he was shy. The town they moved to was much smaller, and there was “nobody my age. I got involved with this youth group, and so then I started having friends.” When he thinks about what it means to have close friends, he says, “It’s kind of different for different people, but my
friend [Ralph], who is from up north, would probably be my closest friend. He’s, like, just the guy I can talk to about anything. He’s like my accountability partner.” For Trent, distance is not a deterrent to true friendship.

**Church**

As Trent had said before, his experience with churches had been varied, though his family always gravitated back to the Methodist Church. It is from this broad perspective that Trent forms his thinking concerning Biblical Community. He said, “The church is the hands and feet of God, I think. I think it’s supposed to be God’s witness.” This is Trent’s understanding of the role of the church. “I hate when there’s anything negative . . . it should be as much positive as possible,” he stated.

When I asked him to give me four characteristics of biblical community, he laughed, “I don’t even know.” He had never really thought about it before, so this was new territory for him, but as he thought, he remembered one of the church’s logos, “Reaching up and out and around.” With that memory in mind, he said, “I think that’s kind of what you’re asking about because that’s four things, too.” We explored what he thought the elements of the logo meant.

“Reaching up” meant to Trent “communication between you and God.” As he thought, there was another element to “reaching up” that came to mind. It was not just communication with God, but

People to people who are attending that church. The second two are “out” and “around,” which I guess are pretty similar, but “out” is, you know, outreach, and then I think “around” is more like, farther. Like, “out”
would be the local things and then “around” would be, like, missions and farther away.

It was from this context that Trent related an experience where he had seen community in action. However, it was not in the usual church setting, but rather at camp. Trent recalled,

The camp that I usually go to all through high school and junior high, because I feel like we have a community there because it’s kind of the same people every single year. Those are also some of my closest friends. Most of the time that I have gone to camp, I’ve been on staff. It’s fun, but it’s also basically a full-time job, and we’re not getting paid, so like I really feel like that’s community because we’re there working for those kids, and you know we’re working together even though there are definitely some that don’t like each other.

Seeing community in a place where “some don’t like each other” intrigued me. I asked Trent to explain how this contributed to community. He replied,

Like, basically one of the rules is if you have an issue, you get it taken care of right away because it’s not about us. So you sit down with the other person and you talk it out. You have, like, someone else there, not just the two of you, in case things go sour.

Relating community back to the church proper, Trent remembered a time when he believed community really happened. Trent stated,

We [the church] hosted a week of missions, and it was all local things.

We invited the whole town, and I mean not a ton of people showed up, but
it was a pretty good turnout, I thought. We did all sorts of odd end jobs we could find, food pantry, we helped with people’s yard work and just all sorts of stuff. It was primarily [my] youth group, but there were other people there, too, so that was definitely community.

He thought for a moment and then continued,

Selflessness is really important. I think that applies even to a community, so like, as a group of people you should be a selfless group and worry about others. I just feel like that’s when your most like community-when you’re helping others.

Those were good memories and have bearing on how Trent saw the church and its failure to achieve community. Trent said,

The youth group was not at the church that I attended. It was a different youth group, and I went there because I had friends that went there and then I also was attending the youth group at the Baptist Church, so I was going to two different youth groups. There was an entire change in staff [at the Baptist Church]. The new youth pastor, like, he didn’t get to know me quite as well because I went off to college right when he was coming in and everything. But he was trying to get to know me, and then in the course of that he was realizing that I wasn’t doctrinally with the church, that would be because I wasn’t raised Baptist, I was raised Methodist. I mean for the most part I was, but there was just a few things that he didn’t think was right, and so he didn’t feel comfortable with me in a leadership position. He didn’t feel comfortable with me because I was attending the
other youth group. He was basically willing to, if I quit helping with the
other youth group, and like I educated [taught himself about the churches
doctrine] myself to that church, then it was okay. I really didn’t feel
comfortable with that because I felt like he was saying our church is so
much better. I always loved it because I went to two different youth
groups, I loved it when they did things together, like collaborated, like
that’s the best, and then this guy, I love him, but I didn’t agree with him at
all, and that’s actually why we don’t go to that church anymore. We went
back to the Methodist again.

For Trent, the broader church community is important, and seeing them work
together as collaborators mirrors how he saw his parents work together even when there
was discord. It will be seen that his wider view of community plays out even in the
context of his college community.

**Smallville**

When I asked Trent why he came to Smallville Christian College, he paused. “It
is a Methodist School,” I reminded him. He smiled,

Yeah, it is, and actually I didn’t know it was Methodist at first when I first
got interested in the school. I found that out because I was interested in
the school and then I did more research. I was actually at a music festival,
Cornerstone Music Festival, and I saw their booth. They were giving
away free stuff, so I went up there and just talked to them. That was
actually between eighth grade and freshman year of high school.
Trent said, “I love music, but it’s not what I am studying.” His major is Digital Media. About how he would use a major in digital media, he said, “I’m hoping to like, you know, make movies or graphic design. Smallville has an excellent CCM, contemporary Christian music program. They also have an excellent Digital Media program, so that really works out for me.” The convenience of being close to home was another positive aspect of the digital media program.

When talking about four characteristics of community at Smallville, Trent explains, “They really want people to live on campus. They want us to be together because it’s the best way I think to get to know each other. Missions stuff,” he continues, “That’s a big part of being community is doing stuff, and there’s tons of opportunities here to do stuff. The first weekend you’re here as a freshman or transfer student, you do the new student rotation and then there’s a missions day. We all go and we built this walking path out on a park here in town. So that’s supposed to get us working as a team to benefit Smallville [the town].

Being together and local missions were two of the characteristics of community at Smallville. Trent resumed, “Chapel is a big thing here. That’s another community thing because we’re coming together to worship. I said before with the ‘up,’ ‘in,’ ‘out,’ and ‘around,’ that’s sort of the ‘up’ aspect of Smallville, I think.” He was not able to think of a fourth characteristic of community, so we decided to move on.

**Decision-Making**

When talking about how the school makes decisions, Trent admitted, “I guess a lot of the stuff I don’t really know because I really have no idea.” He contemplated a
moment, “I know we have like fireside chats where they have someone, the president or somebody else, come and anyone can go and just ask questions and give input.” He cautiously continues, “I don’t know how much it really influences them, but at least they’re trying to let, allow us a chance to influence, so I guess it’s giving the student input in what decisions are made.”

Trent said that if you want to communicate with the administration, “email somebody at any point in time.” That is another way of being a part of the process. Meals are another way the administration connects with students, “I ate lunch with the president one day. He just came and sat down at our table, and so they at least try to be involved with us, and, you know we can just talk to them.”

**Dissent**

When asked about dissent, he referred back to the fireside chats, “I mean, you can go there and complain about stuff if you want.” However, Trent felt that there are other ways to get your opinion across,

At chapel, they have these cards where you sign in, but there’s also one for comment/prayer request. People usually either just leave it blank or they put a prayer request, but I know, like one friend, he was unhappy with so many speakers in a row that were kind of not even talking about God, and it was more like a political thing, and he was not okay with that, and so he wrote this big long letter on his little chapel card. They read it and he got an email back, and they, I don’t know what exactly they did, but they told him that they knew what he was talking about and they would try to get better.
Trent was not really sure if the administration did anything in regard to the student’s suggestion, but was confident that they had. “Why else respond that they would (do something)?”

However, community to Trent is not in word, but in deed. Trent gives an example of how he had seen community happen at Smallville. He recounted a community service event during orientation week that was required for first-year students by stating, “Like, a lot of people didn’t want to be doing it, but [they had] no choice. We were there and even when there were people complaining and stuff, it was kind of cool that there’s the entire class, like, working towards one goal. That’s definitely community.”

For Trent, events where participants work together to reach a common goal, willing or unwilling, is community in action. He continued,

If anything else, it was a way to get to know and meet people. You can complain together and become friends, sometimes you’re just like, well, if we just hurry up we’ll get it done, so if we work together it gets done faster.

When I asked about community gone bad, he was reminded that,

There’re some people who, they just don’t wanna be a community. They don’t want to participate. I’m with a lot of the athletes, and I’m pretty sure they’re only here for the sports and stuff, so they’re not as concerned with some of the stuff [community events]. Like, we have floor events and I rarely go to them just because it’s gonna be a bunch of those guys, and doing sports, and I just don’t care.
I asked Trent if it were possible for the athletes to find community in another place. “I guess it depends. It depends how you’re talking about community because, like I say with community [is] working towards a goal.” He thought for a moment and continued, “I guess on their teams they’re working towards a goal, but outside of their teams, their sports teams and stuff, just like hanging out with friends, they don’t have anything like that.”

I reflected back to Trent that his youth group experience and his experience with the athletes are similar. Both reveal an understanding of community in the big picture, whether it is the big picture of the church or the big picture of Smallville. With a knowing look he said, “Yeah. Obviously you’re gonna have like, your group of friends and stuff, but I think big groups of community are [important].”

There is a group of about six students who Trent feels close to at Smallville, but he said, “I don’t think I have anyone as close as some of my friends from home.” I asked for an example of what he meant by close, “[Ralph] and [Paul] are both basically accountability partners, I feel I can tell them anything and not have to worry about how they’re going to react to that, so the people here, not that there’s anything negative, I just haven’t reached that point with them yet.”

**Facebook**

According to Trent’s profile page, over a six-month period he had 683 status posts, 1,527 responses, and 830 times the “like” toggle was pressed, for a total of 3,040 status types. Of his 624 friends, 251 interacted with him on his wall for a total of 1,470 times. The most any one person posted was 118, and the least was one time, for an average response per friend of 5.8 posts in six months.
In the following figures, the y-axis is the number of responses, and the x-axis is the category of responses.

**Figure 15.** Trent’s Participants’ Status Posts.

**Figure 16.** Trent’s Friends’ Responses.
Within Case Analysis

For Trent, Facebook was a place to interact with his friends on a lighter level. Most of his responses were for information, humor, “Trent is attending video shoot
involving a gorilla suit,” and for engaging in conversations, “Maybe I’m out of line with the way I love my life, but here’s the truth…” Trent was more apt to express positive emotions than negative ones, “Just woke up. What a spectacular day yesterday was!” In his response to friends’ responses, he had a high degree of encouragement, very little revolved around spiritual content, though he tended to be very empathetic, “me too man, me too.” Chastising was fairly even between his posts, “That’s horrible, you shouldn’t do it,” and the posts of his friends, “Apology and point accepted.” Of the 194 encouraging posts of friends, 148 of them were to wish him a happy birthday, and of Trent’s 140 answers, 45 were in response to the birthday wishes. His response to individual birthday wishes was significant. Instead of posting one response thanking everyone for their posts, he personally thanked most of them. This was somewhat skewed since Trent changed his birthdate in his status to see if people would wish him a happy birthday again, because Facebook told them it was his birthday. Twenty-six people responded with a birthday wish before his friends caught on. This raised the question of how well Facebook friends truly knew one another, or did they just trust information delivered through Facebook and respond accordingly? This indicated a strong personal, relational characteristic in Trent. He expressed his faith through spiritual responses 145 times (e.g. “And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace”).

Trent’s understanding of biblical community was centered on the concepts of inclusion and local community outreach. This also reflected the over all feelings of the school. The Sense of Community Survey (SCS), at Smallville, showed that students generally felt they had an impact on their community. So, when he spoke of inclusion, it
was in the broader sense of the church universal, “I always loved it because I went to two different youth groups, I loved it when they did things together, like collaborated.” Though he thought that small group communities were helpful to personal growth, the best community was seen when the broader Christian community worked together towards a common goal. Perhaps this was reflected in his number of Facebook friends. We saw that Trent is a little above average when it came to the number of his friends. The average Facebook user has 130 (Facebook Statistics, 2012) friends, and Trent has 624. He had a 50% interaction rate with his friends, but when it came to consistent interaction (more than 10 times), this interaction rate dropped to 5.8%. According to the SCS, the school as a whole felt that people felt they were recognized by others most of the time. In a larger school, this was significant and had an impact on Trent as he included others in his Facebook community. For Trent, chastising was not an integral part of his Facebook Community. Only .2% of the time someone held another person accountable for his or her behavior on his site (e.g. “NOT GOOD”).

Trent responded in the second interview about the role of Facebook in his community by saying, “I think Facebook plays a large role in my community life. Whenever someone is holding an event, such as a concert, cookout or even more important meetings and such, they often send me a Facebook event invite.” This was consistent with the number of informational posts that appeared on his wall (253). He continued,

I also feel that Facebook has allowed my community to grow. A lot of friends that I know from places that I used to live are only still relatively close to me because I use Facebook to keep in touch.
Trent had a high volume of conversations (128), which showed that he was more apt to carry on relationally in the Facebook environment. However, his interaction did not end there. Facebook became a springboard to other interaction. Trent said, “Now Facebook’s chat has video chatting capabilities, and already I have used it to see some friends that I wouldn’t normally get to see.”

The two major characteristics that Trent found appropriate for Facebook were humor and information. He stated, “I definitely use Facebook for humor. I share things that I find funny, and I look at things my friends post that are funny. Sometimes Facebook is my main source of comedy when I’m feeling bored or something.” He adds about information,

I wouldn’t look on Facebook for answers to my homework or anything, but when I want to know something about someone, like say, do they have a boyfriend or where are they from, Facebook is the first place I look.

There are things about Facebook interaction that annoyed Trent, like when people sought empathy in overly obvious ways. On this subject, he stated, “People definitely post things on Facebook looking for empathy. I either feel empathy or I feel annoyed that this person is seeking out empathy in such an obvious way.” He described how he was also annoyed when people were too positive or too negative,

I feel that these two (positive and negative emotions) go hand in hand.

Any time you have conversation, these emotional responses will come up. A lot of times when people’s status updates are entirely positive or negative, I find it rather annoying. But regardless, it is a big part of the Facebook community.
Though Trent is not opposed to chastising people on Facebook, he did not believe that it was meant for that purpose. He said,

I don’t think Facebook was intended to be that [a vehicle for chastising friends] at all. But when parents or bosses have Facebook, I have seen that they often will punish their children or employees based off of things they see on Facebook. This hasn’t happened to me personally, but I’ve seen it happen to my friends. I don’t think this is a bad thing because I think you should be chastised if you are doing something wrong.

This may be a reflection of his home growing up. Trent, talking about his father, said, “I guess he was more reserved with what he’s thinking and feeling.” Like his father, Trent would rather avoid conflict, and chastising creates conflict in a relationship.

For Trent, Facebook was an integral part of his biblical community. He used it to encourage and communicate both spiritually and in humorous ways. Facebook was a springboard that allowed him to remain connected to friends back home. Facebook was also a place where information was central, and activities both serious and fun could be quickly communicated. Trent used Facebook in a very conversational way with his friends, bantering with them on occasion and talking them seriously at other times.

**John**

It had been a long day for both my next participant and me, which was not a combination that would normally result in a thorough interview. Determined to give my fullest attention to John, I waited for him to arrive. When John entered the room, I welcomed him to the study and told him how much I appreciated his participation. John
was a last-minute substitute for another student who called with a conflict. John was unassuming and quiet. I was a little concerned that I was going to have to drag answers out of him. We chatted a little to make him feel at ease prior to my first question.

John is 20 years old and a sophomore at Smallville Christian College. His declared major is Business Management, and though he does not like school in general, he said he does well academically. As always, my first question was in regard to faith. John began, “It’s one of those, I’ve always been a Christian kind of deals. I grew up, you know, in a Christian family, and I became a Christian when I was very young.” He had been watching a movie that had triggered his interest in the gospel. The exact age is uncertain, and John gave a broad time frame of “somewhere between ages three and eight.” Other than when he believed the Gospel, there was not a time where a crisis of faith or moment of clarification came. He recalled, “I mean, it’s, I mean, it is my faith and I know it, but there was never an instant moment where it was a change.”

Because he was homeschooled, there was not an opportunity to build many close relationships. He explained, “There have been times where I’ve had close friends, but not a ton. I homeschooled for most of my life.” John said about his school experience, “I always hated school. I’m happy that I was homeschooled. I never wanted to go to public school during that time at all.”

Family

Family is an important part of John’s life. He is the older of two boys. His brother is 21 months younger. He and his brother have never been great friends, but they did not hate each other. John described their relationship by saying, “We never hated each other, but we’ve never been great friends. We always get along better when we’re
not around our parents.” I explored that last statement a little further and he said as he
chuckled, “If just, if they’re gone and not around or we are out on our own doing
something or whatever, we always get along better. Well, not always, he said, but . . .”
and he trailed off, “a lot of the time.”

He was quick to describe his father, “He’s very much a perfectionist, strict. He’s,
‘if you want it done right, do it yourself,’ type of guy.” John points out that his dad’s
perfectionism was, “expected of everybody else.” Asking him how that affected him, he
responded,

He’s always got to go back and redo what you did. He’s that kind of
person. He’ll have you, I mean, we always had to help with stuff in the
year. His idea of a day off is yard work, you know. I mean, he never, he
hardly, not never, but he hardly ever just takes time off.

It often frustrated him and he reflected, “But I’m a lot like him, I think.”

However, there was a difference between how he saw his and his father’s
perfectionism. He said, “I’m very much a perfectionist, but he’s a better perfectionist
because he actually gets stuff done.” He noticed my quizzical expression, “I mean, I get
stuff done, but a lot of times I don’t get stuff done because I want to make sure it’s
perfect.” It is the perfectionism of his father that causes John to describe him as a “hard
worker. We lived at camp, and he was always working. I mean,” and laughs and
modifies his voice, “if there’s work to be done, you’re doing it.”

“He is a camp director,” John continued. When I asked him what kind, he
laughed and said, “All kinds of camps.” Mostly they were Christian camps, but over the
20 years he has worked in camps, he has moved around to several different ones. John
stated, “Although usually it hasn’t been forced. It’s been more his decision. Not necessarily because he wanted to, I mean, I don’t know.” John pauses, “He’s also very private. He doesn’t like to share a lot of stuff. He might not even like if I tell, you know, tell you a bunch of stuff about him or my family.” In response to his father’s role, John comments, “He’s the guy in charge, I mean, he’s the final say in everything.”

When it comes to his mom, John said, “I don’t know how to describe my mom. She’s not quiet. She likes to do crafts. I don’t know. She stays at home. Well, usually.” Being home did not mean absent from her husband’s ministry. John went on, “They, I mean, everything’s a team.” This included the family as well. “They’re very much a team and one. We always had the rule; if you get an answer from one parent, you don’t go ask the other,” recalled John. In response to my nod he said, “You’re in serious trouble if you get one answer from another parent, or if you get an answer from one parent and then try to get a different answer from the other one.”

If there were a problem, John would more likely go to his mom. He said this is “partly because my dad’s not around that much. He’s always at camp and busy, you know, doing stuff.” When I asked if his dad’s job was 9 to 5, he laughed and said, “No, it’s like a 7 to 12, not the noon 12. “It’s like something is always going wrong. Something’s always breaking. Somebody always needs him for something. You got kids at camp and college students running, and there’s always stuff to be done.” He never felt slighted by his dad, though he was frustrated at times. “It’s like dad’s never around [but] it’s not like we never saw him. He would usually come home for lunch. That was my mom’s thing. We usually try to have meals together, as much as possible.”
Decision-Making

Their working together played out in the decision-making process. John said, 
They make decisions together. Obviously, it’s not, I mean, my dad has the 
ultimate say in everything because he’s the leader and the head, but they 
work together on decisions and stuff, which makes it hard to get answers 
sometimes because, you know, like one of them is like, go ask the other. 
You know, it’s like, go ask the other one, or they have to, we have to talk 
about it.

He said, “I need an answer.”

Conflict

John said that he does remember conflicts, but, “they like to have discussions. 
That’s how they deal with conflict.” Thinking of the idea of conflict, he adds, “It’s a 
discussion. I mean, that’s a good way to describe it. It’s heated; they never actually, like 
really fight.” Those discussions seldom included the boys. John remembered, “I don’t 
know that they really included us in many decisions. It was usually, ‘this is how it is.’
We usually just did it.” John did not seem to recall any specific way where the boys were 
either included or allowed to give dissent. “I am trying to think of a specific time where 
we were involved in decision making, but it wasn’t usually. Usually all the decisions 
were made without us, John recalled.”

Church

Having moved around because of his dad’s job, John had to think much in regard 
to his church experience. Contemplating the role of the church, John stated,
I don’t know if I can answer that really well. I mean, it’s a group of people for a lot of things. It’s a good environment to just hang out with people. You get support if you need to talk to somebody, I mean, it’s encouragement.

The question about biblical community characteristics was not any easier, but John thought hard and said, “Accountability. [I’m] trying to think of what would be good.” He smiles, “This is a perfectionist, and deliberate, analytical.” After a little more thought he adds, “Support. I’m not really sure I have words. It’s not really that easy, learning, probably evangelism or something like that.”

John was involved in youth programs in the different churches he attended, but “some places we went didn’t have as good a youth program as others, but they usually tried to find places with good youth stuff.” The youth program that he attended in high school consisted of around 90 students. He described it as “really good” and that they loved it.

I asked him what it was about the youth group that he loved. He responded by saying,

The youth pastor was great. Like, he did a great job. He connected really well with the kids. It was interesting and he was fun. It was, and I meant it was all around good. The church cared and put work into it. They had their own youth building. It was nice. He was really good making messages that were good and interesting.

He continued, “The kids were friendly. They had their own coffee bar. The youth pastor took us over and got something from there and he introduced us to some people, taking
[us] around, showing [us] around.” Even with 90 students, the youth group worked to maintain a small group environment. John stated,

The youth group was divided up, so there was junior high and senior high age groups that met at different times. I think it’s good to have the different ages because it allows the older ones to mentor the younger ones a little. At the end of every night, we always had what they called ‘D’ teams.

“D” teams were discussion groups where students and staff engaged in the topic of the night.

When I asked John to give me an example how he saw community work, his answer was interesting. He said, “Well, actually, I had never really run into the word ‘community’ before much before coming to Smallville.” He thought for a moment and then relayed this story,

I’d say one time would, specifically when my family moved from Michigan, and well, actually, my family, we were out of a job. My dad ended up being out of a job. We ended up going and living in the basement of some people at the church. Some of our friends there, and like, people were just really supportive and stuff, and we were moved, you now, everybody.

It was not, however, just the physical care that made an impression. John stated, “You know, they sent us off in prayer.” John could not think of an instance where he thought the church had fallen short in practicing community, so we moved on to his experience at Smallville Christian College.
**Smallville**

When I asked John why he came to Smallville, he laughed and said, “Good question.” Then he continued, “My mom found Smallville online and searching for business stuff.” When I reflected back his interest in a career in business, he shook his head and said,

I don’t really know what I want to do, which is kind of frustrating, sometimes. But I really don’t, and that’s why I partly picked business. If I have a degree in business, that’s good anywhere, in any job. I can see stuff from the perspective of business. I think in that way, and so that’s why I picked that, and I came to Smallville, partly, I mean, it was not super far away at the time. It was kind of a last-minute thing because I didn’t start looking for colleges until after I graduated high school.

We continued our discussion about community at Smallville. John continued, “I guess churches have used the, I’ve heard the word ‘church community’ a lot, but it’s kind of just been something that’s thrown in places and not really emphasized or talked about.” John laughed when I ask him to list four characteristics of community at Smallville and said, “Not again.” He wanted to use the previous four, but I pushed him to really think about Smallville, specifically. Then he said, “They’re trying to emphasize thinking for ourselves, developing lifelong friendships stuff. And they talk all the time about finding your future spouse.” I laughed and he sighed,

All the time. It comes up all the time about finding, whatever percentage they say of people marry somebody they met at Smallville. They, like,
talk about people who are working here that went here, and a lot of stuff like that.

There were other characteristics that John was able to articulate, such as “commitment to Smallville College, talking about things that are important issues [relevant] reaching people where they are. [They also are] encouraging people to talk about stuff, but they’re kind of into forgiveness or grace.”

I was ready to move on to the next question when John interrupted, And diversity. They’ve been pushing that a lot recently. I feel like, I mean, there’s been a lot of events of like intercultural type of stuff. A lot, like probably half the events that we have, seem to be like that.

I asked him for examples, and he said,

Latin dance night. They [also] have the thing in the DC where they set up tables around and students set up for different countries. I just had Chinese food last night, and there’s stuff going on with the African-American student union, and they had this Japan thing they did. I’m not exactly sure what it was.

According to John, the school tries to engage students through, “a thing called fireside chat, which I think, I’ve only been able to make it to one. They always seem to have it on Monday night, and I usually have stuff I have to do.” I asked him what occurs during the fireside chats. He stated, “I think it’s kind of a time for students to voice their concerns or ask questions or like, find out what’s going on with stuff.” He was not really sure if they actually listen. Fireside chats are not the only avenue for student interaction. According to John, “They have student body stuff, but I’m not sure exactly how much
they get to say. We have the senate, like the class leadership, which I think has some say in some decisions that are made.” Again, he was not sure exactly how much influence they had with the administration.

When talking about his experience with community at Smallville, John focused on his dorm, Joy. He said, “Well, we have some pretty good community in Joy.” After explaining to me that Joy was a dormitory, he continued, “We just share a lot of just everything together. We have some deeper discussions, and a lot of it, a lot of it’s just like good friendship.”

I asked him to describe good friendship. “The way it is in second Joy [the second floor] is running around naked,” he laughs, “just saying nudity builds community.” I asked how, and he said,

We have community showers. There are no walls. Truthfully, I mean, I’m not a super big fan of that, but I feel like it’s a good thing because I feel like we have a lot better relationship than we would if we didn’t have that, but they’re taking that away when they redo Joy next year. When I inquired how other people would feel about that, he responded, “When everybody looks at Joy from the outside they go, ‘ewww, community showers,’ but most of us who live in Joy don’t mind it after you get used to it.” There was some laughter, and he continued, “But you get used to it, and I feel like it’s a good thing because it does actually help build community. It’s kind of weird.” He paused and said, “I guess it’s because you’re vulnerable.”

When it comes to community that does not work, John said, “When people get stuff stolen. People who don’t care about others. You know even in a Christian
community, people still do that stuff.” He continued, “When people can’t get along together as roommates or respect because they play their music super loud all the time, or are always hogging the TV in the lounge, that kind of stuff.”

John said that when he is alone, it is by choice. He mentioned, “I choose to be alone or just don’t choose to not be alone, I’m okay with it.” I asked him about close friends. He replied,

I’m hesitant to call somebody a really close friend. In fact, for the longest time I was hesitant to even call somebody a friend. It’s like there’s people you know, but are they really your friend? But that does not mean that there is not someone to hang out with. So, there are a couple of people that I hang out with, and I mean, the longer we know each other, the better friends I become with my roommate.

Facebook

According to John’s profile page, he attends Smallville Christian College and is in the class of 2013. He identifies himself as a Christian. John’s music interests included Newsboys, Philmont, Casting Crowns, Classic Petra, and Peter Furler. Interests included windows, AgapeFest, The Bible, The Hopeline, Swag Bucks, Starfleet Commander, Smallville College Financial Aid, Ken Davis, and Last.fm. He joined Facebook on 10/01/09. John’s Facebook information page is like himself – simple. It gives little information and is succinct. If he shares anything, it is his photos. He has 20 different photo albums with a total of 112 pictures. He also has a video, which interestingly enough, is filmed in the floor’s common shower.
Over a six-month period, John had a total of 99 posts (40 status posts, 33 responses to posts, and 26 people who checked the “like” toggle). Of his 112 friends, 20 interacted with him on his wall a total of 34 times. The most any person posted either status or response was four times (average response was 1.7 times).

In the following figures, the y-axis is the number of responses and the x-axis is the category of responses.

*Figure 19.* John’s Participants’ Status Posts.
Figure 20. John’s Friends’ Responses.

Figure 21. John’s Friends’ Posts on Participants’ Wall.
Figure 22. John’s Participants’ Responses.

Within Case Analysis

For John, Facebook had a very limited place in his biblical community,

“Facebook, I have found, is not playing a huge part in my community life.” He did use it, but in a very sparse way. Most of his posts were informational, “Mat Attack is a really intense game. Much more than it looks like in the video,” and most of his friends’ posts were encouraging, “congrats, you won a Deloy in ITP on final project.” Therefore, even though John does not see Facebook as a place to practice deeper levels of community, his friends do. Out of the nine encouraging posts of his friends, four of them were for his birthday. John did not respond to the birthday wishes.

Biblical community, in John’s view, was about hanging out together. Though there was a sense in which community has deep conversation and accountability, engagement in community life was not as much a necessity as an obligation. He was careful about who he calls a friend, “In fact, for the longest time I was hesitant to even
call somebody a friend. It’s like there’s people you know, but are they really your friend?” This was reflected in the number of friends he had on Facebook (112), compared to the average Facebook user (130 friends), and John was below average. He had a 17% interaction rate with his friends, with no consistent interaction (more than ten times). In John’s Facebook community, 1% of the posts were chastisements, but with such low involvement with his Facebook community, that number was most likely inflated by the one chastising post (e.g. “Unfortunately… I could see what you were doing”).

In his second interview, John is as concise as in the first. He says,

Facebook, I have found, is not playing a huge part in my community life. This is mostly because I am not as captivated by it as many people are. I find many Facebook updates to be uninteresting or frustrating due to the vague nature or repetitiveness.

However, John does not think that Facebook is without value. He continued,

It does have its benefits, though. It allows you to see what is going on with people in your life who you would not normally see or talk to. It also acts as a master address book. Most people have contact information such as email, phone, and physical address, as well as just being able to send a private message to them or post to their wall.

His interest in Facebook revolved mostly about himself. He stated, “I enjoy using Facebook mostly to share things I am excited about.”

When he spoke about the characteristics of humor, information, and encouragement on Facebook, he spoke to what he believed Facebook’s original intent
was. He said, “I think that Facebook themselves would say that Facebook is meant to be a place for almost all of those characteristics.” However, he believed that people are different and will express these characteristics differently. Though he stated, “I think they probably aren’t so into the chastisement characteristic, because when people can hide behind a computer screen, they are willing to say things that they would not say to someone face to face.” Even though John did not see Facebook as important to his community, he did have an opinion about its potential in other people’s lives. He stated, I think Facebook should be a place where people can post the ups and downs of life, share their joy and excitement with others as well as their pain and sadness. Everyone just needs to remember that what they post should not be different from how they would act with other people in real life. Sometimes, some things are better left unsaid.

It was interesting that John depersonalized the question, “How do you think these characteristics play into your Facebook community?” Instead of answering the question directly, he broadened it out to what he believed was the intent of Facebook itself. John was consistent in that he did not use Facebook as an integral part of his community. His community in real life was small and specific, the people he called “friends” were carefully included in his inner circle, and he communicated with people when necessary. Overall, the SCS showed that students had connections through small groups (145 indicating shared emotional connection through small groups as mostly or completely satisfying). This fit John well, since he tended to avoid large groups and group activities, “I’ve only been able to make it to one.” They were not that important to him.
John was able to articulate what he thought community was, both in the church and at college, but only with difficulty. It was not surprising that his utilization of Facebook for community did not have more depth. It was curious that he saw Facebook as a place for other people to share intimate feelings of pain and sadness, as well as joy and excitement. These are not behaviors that he would exhibit himself.

**Ann**

Premier Music College has moved its campus since this interview took place. Previously, it was located in a church in midtown Memphis, Tennessee. The church was an older building with a large educational wing, which housed the school. Subsequently, Premier has relocated to its own facility in an old bank in downtown Memphis. The room that was given for the interview is a classroom with windows to the outside. This potentially posed a problem with the audio since there was a great deal of ambient noise filtering in from outdoors.

Ann walked in as I was setting up. She was of medium height with distinctively blond hair. I was greeted with a smile and enthusiasm. After going through the paperwork and information regarding the study, I began the interview by inquiring about her faith in Christ. She said, “I think it kind of happened [in] stages. It wasn’t necessarily immediate conversion.” She stops to collect her thoughts, “I grew up in a Christian home, I knew the Lord, but I didn’t necessarily know how to follow Him.” This seems to be a typical answer for college students who grew up in homes where their families attended church. Ann did not center on her family experience, though. She went on, “I left for college and started attending Viterbo University to study music. I started
feeling it wasn’t where I was supposed to be or what I wanted to do. I got really frustrated with God.”

Ann did not feel that she had the emotional ability to change her relationship with God, which was not where it should have been, and she was uncertain how to improve the relationship. At a school-sponsored recital, Ann experienced a rather dismal music performance. Ann felt like a failure. She stated, “I completely failed. I went home and I sat in my lounge [in the dorm] and I just kind of sulked.” Ann was used to doing whatever she wanted, and at this moment she wanted to sulk. However, she said,

It wasn’t often when I really paid attention to the Holy Spirit and what He was saying. I think I kind of knew He protected me, but in the lounge [was] the first time I heard Him say very clearly, ‘Go to Erica’s room,’ and I was, like, okay; I don’t want to do that. I’m not going and I’m just going to sit here, and He said, ‘No, you need to go to Erica’s room.’

She explained that Erica was one of her friends who lived down the hall. They were not close friends and had few conversations, which made the request more confusing. Listening to the voice, she went down the hall. She found Erica and said, “Erica, I need to talk to you. I’m really upset about this.” After explaining the situation, Erica responded, “It doesn’t really sound to me like you want to do music theatre. It sounds like you want to do song writing.” Neither Ann nor Erica knew of a college that allowed students to major in song writing, and trying to transfer with a 1.5 GPA seemed impossible. Erica remembered, “I know this place that my friend goes to. It’s like in Nashville or something, and he’s on Facebook right now.” Ann continued,
And so she talked to him. I immediately, like, the first minute looking at the website I just heard the Lord say, ‘That’s where you’re going,’ and so, even though I wasn’t following God, He was moving in me, and so I came to Premier Music College. I really finally started to feel like, oh, this is peace and this is joy and freedom and change; like real change. Changing me and moving in me and me willing for the first time to do that, so I think that’s really when I started to know Him intimately.

Ann’s understanding and subsequent yielding to God’s will became a reality at that moment, but did not begin at college; rather, it was shaped many years previously.

**Family**

Ann has three siblings. She has a 32-year-old married brother, a 17-year-old younger sister, and a little 13-year-old brother. When I asked her to describe her family, she let out a sigh, “Well, my immediate family is pretty interesting.” As an overall description she said,

- I get along really well with my dad, and we have a really good relationship.
- I get along with my sister and brother [younger one], but it’s kind of a gap. I don’t really see my older brother a whole lot. He lives about 20 minutes away.

She paused a moment, then stated, “I don’t get along well with my mom. She’s not been diagnosed, but she’s like bipolar, schizophrenic, and something else.” Thinking for a moment, she adds, “Schizophrenic, bipolar and obsessive-compulsive, so she’s got a combination of things. That kind of prevents you from knowing her really at all.”
Ann’s perspective on her family has changed over the past couple of years. Her growing faith has helped her to see it differently. However, she said,

At the time, it was awful. My dad would go to work and my mom would be the overseer of everything. I didn’t understand how to obey her because she said a lot of really ridiculous things. So, I would just kind of mother myself a lot of times or seek out people in the church that would help me understand what it was to grow up as a girl and a woman. It was really confusing because my dad was always the solid person and my mom was not. He married her, was still married to her, and it wasn’t happy [at] all.

It seemed hard for Ann as she remembered what it was like growing up. She recalled,

There was a lot of fighting. There was a lot of, not just bickering, but I had a lot of moments where I just said, ‘I’m out of here.’ Thirteen years old, packing my suitcase and saying, “she’s nutso and I’m out!”

Her dad was the backbone of the family. I asked her what she thought his role in the family was. She responded,

He was the head of the household, definitely. I started to recognize that in high school. What I thought [would have been] backbone was to put my mom somewhere to be taken care of [so], he didn’t have to deal with it. But I recognize that he loves her and cares for her and honors God in not just putting her someplace, because he’s the only one that can take care of her and promises to. I really admire that [in him].
I was curious if there were times when he avoided being home. Ann said,

I think he had the temptation to do that, and sometimes he still does, but he admits it. He’s off work at about 5 p.m. and he comes home, and he plays with Legos or watches TV because when he gets home, he’s just tired.

Her father is 60 and still works as a carpenter. She mentioned that he is not as healthy as he once was, so, “He tries to avoid it [conflict with her mom] when it’s necessary because that just wears on you.”

When it came to problems that Ann faced, she would occasionally go to her father, but most of the time she sought outside help. She explained, “I would have to, like, leave, so I would go and seek out a friend to stay with, especially the last two years of high school.” I asked if she had many friends and she replied, “I think I was burned by a lot of friends just because they didn’t understand what the situation was, and I wasn’t able to really explain it without putting that burden on them.” However, she did not want to discount having any friends at all and continued,

I had a good friend at all parts of my life. They kind of shifted [from one friend to another] and they shifted in smaller and smaller increments as I got older [and was able to explain the situation better].

Her oldest brother was her mom’s son from a previous marriage and had left home due to some trouble when she was younger. He is 13 years older than Ann. “My sister and I,” she explained,

We are getting along a lot better now, but I used to be a really mean older sister. I didn’t know what family was. My dad kept trying to teach me,
but he didn’t really have anybody to help him. I didn’t get it [being a family] until I went to college and there was a group of friends who taught me what family could be like.

Looking back on her life, Ann really believes that God’s protections rested on her. She stated,

The Lord has always had a protection over my life. People ask me if I had to take my mother’s role in the family, but I didn’t. A lot of things had gone on in my life that could have caused me to go another way. Like, I think I really did maintain my innocence. Sometimes [I] maintained my stupidity.

She contemplated, “Maybe I should have taken on that role more. I think I do now that I am out [of the house], asking my brother how he’s doing and my sister how she’s doing.”

Thinking about her dad, she said,

My dad had always kind of taken on his role, not really taken on my mother’s role, because you can’t really do that as a man, but doing as best he could, and I just did my own thing. He wanted it that way; he wanted me to have my own life.

Ann laughed, “My name means “determined.” You could say I have always been independent.” There was always conflict in the home. Ann recalled,

When I had my graduation party, and all of my friends and family were together, and she [mom] had it put together for about three days, and after that we had a fist fight because she couldn’t handle it anymore, and as soon as everybody left she flipped a switch and completely changed.
I asked how the family responds to her mom’s episodes. She answered,

My sister goes up in her room. She’s very introverted and quiet, and my brother is usually out of the house anyway. If he were home, he would try to speak something to my mom. My dad will come in and break it up and attempt to tell my mom, you know, something or to get her to stop what she’s doing, which is distorting things or just being very angry for no reason. So then it turns on me to comfort my dad.

I could sense heaviness in her heart.

Ann’s father loves her mom, but she is very honest about how he feels. She said, “I think, honestly, he would be very relieved if she walked out. I think it would be really relieving, and that’s a hard thing to say. I’m sure that he really does love her, but she doesn’t exist anymore.” I inquired as to what that meant. She responded,

The person she had been when my dad married her [is gone]. He’s told me even within the first couple of weeks after [they were] married, she started to change. She got postpartum depression, she tried to commit suicide, and she doesn’t connect logical dots anymore.

Ann’s parents have been married for 23 years, and Ann’s father is still faithfully standing by his wife. I asked her why she thought that was so. She stated,

Because he loves her and because he ultimately loves the Lord. I think he was converted when he was 33. He won’t tell me anything really before that about his life. Nothing beyond who God is, is important to my dad.

I could tell that Ann admires her father when she said,
I think he really knows Him, and knows His heart for my mom, and even though it’s very angry to be in that place all the time, and really tiring, he knows that God is faithful, and He’s always been faithful to us.

**Church**

Ann described her church life by stating,

My dad and mom were married at the Assemblies of God [church] in my home town. I was dedicated there as a baby. He left [the church] around that time. He said that one day he was just sitting in church, and the people stopped praying for each other. They used to do a time where they would gather and pray for each other. He said that, “I just saw the Holy Spirit roll out of that place, like a wave, just out of there.” And he left. My mom continued to go until I was about 16.

Growing up with a mentally ill mother inevitably affected her relationship with the church. Ann remembered,

I don’t remember exactly when it was, but we had a continuation of new pastors coming in, and everybody kind of knew that my mom was a little different. This isn’t just once, she had done this plenty of times. She got really angry one day at church and started yelling, stood up and started yelling at my pastor, that he was sending them all to hell, and called the police on my pastor, and that was not the first time that had happened. My pastor said, “I’m sorry but you cannot come here if you’re just going to be a disturbance like that,” and so then my mom started going to other
churches in the area that would pretty much put up with her and try their best to love her.

None of this deterred Ann from attending church. There was something that kept pulling her back. She said,

Even when I was, you know, 5, 6, 7 years old, I would walk myself to church. It was right down the road. I would get up every [Sunday] morning at 9 A.M. and walk myself to Sunday school. I don’t know why I did it, because I had friends and I could have done whatever I wanted to do. I loved it and I grew up knowing the people in the church and always having a place there. I got really involved in my youth group and started playing on the worship team.

“[The church’s role] is to love people as Christ loves us,” said Ann. “I think individually that’s our responsibility, but I think a lot of emphasis is placed on churches to be church and to be love.” There was silence between us as I let her gather her thoughts. She continued, “It has to be an organization and it has to function to facilitate love instead of just simply being it. Emerson said, ‘be and not seen.’ The role of the church is to be unseen.” Ann was trying to make a distinction between the church as an organization that facilitates how people can love one another and the church as people who naturally and organically love one another. The church needs to be love.

Beyond the role of the church, the four characteristics that Ann used to describe healthy community in the church were “prayer, praying for each other,” “worship, not just worship music but telling God how good He is,” and “acceptance.” Thinking out loud, she said, “I’m trying to think of things that if they were absent from the church,
even one, would mean that it wouldn’t be a church anymore.” She settles on her fourth characteristic, “Love, beyond that love would probably be the fourth because love is above all things and can heal all things, and a church really without love, even with acceptance, would not be a church.”

When thinking of an example of how community has worked in the church, she told this story:

[This] one is funny because I haven’t thought about it in a while. I went to a small church at my old college. I needed a place to stay when I was in transition. I was moving out of my dorm and I had a two-week period where I didn’t have anywhere to live before I came to Memphis. I mentioned that to somebody at this small church, and there was a man and his wife who were going to be out of town. They said that I could use their house. I was, like, what? They weren’t going to just let me stay with them, but were going to trust me with their home. That is church to me.

I explored with Ann another way she might have experienced community. I asked her to explain what she had said previously about women in her earlier church that taught her how to be a woman. She said,

Watching other women just be themselves, you know, and I can’t because I didn’t get that from my mom. She was very blunt. She has zero filters on her mouth. I learned how to be gentle from a lot of those women, and how to be a servant and what that meant. I had a lot of women correct me if I was wrong, which was something I wasn’t used to, being corrected gently.
Ann’s experience in church where community did not happen revolved around her involvement in youth ministry. She recalled,

My pastor’s son was put in a position of youth leader during his senior year of high school, like, an internship. But because his dad was the pastor he, seemed to me, to be arrogant. He did not have very much respect for people. The most frustrating part about that was not so much him being put in leadership, but he had a very messy relationship with one of my friends who was four years older than him. Her brother had committed suicide and she was in a very sensitive place and lonely. The church became divided as to whether he should be dating my friend. So, his dad, the pastor, decided, in order to keep them apart, made a policy that if you weren’t in high school anymore you couldn’t be in the youth group. I grew up with college students. I wasn’t even allowed to help anymore. That’s not how we deal with things in community. If you have a problem, you don’t cut everybody out. There’s got to be forgiveness there, and there wasn’t.

**College**

“I love Premier!” Ann could not be any more enthusiastic about her college. She laughed when she remembered,

I refused to go to a Christian school my first year because every person that I knew that went to a Christian school came out angry and bitter and didn’t follow the Lord. They didn’t grow the way I wanted to grow being
in college, and I just decided if I was going to be Christian, I was going to be a Christian anywhere and it didn’t matter.

She continued with a knowing smile, “After being in that world for a long time, I realized that I wasn’t getting anything that I wanted, number one, and what I need spiritually, and I wasn’t getting what I wanted musically.”

She described her feelings about Premier with love statements such as, “I love that we have the ability here to exercise discernment, and the staff exercises discernment and really asks the Lord for wisdom.” “I love that we have an emphasis on community. I’ve made the best friends of my life here, and it’s difficult, and its taxing to have to build relationships with people that you don’t necessarily want to have a relationship with, but it doesn’t matter because that’s not who Christ was and that’s not what the church was.” “I love that it’s small.” “I love that I know my teachers as friends as well as staff members.” “I love the opportunity and the structure of this school.” “I love that we have part in Memphis and that things within this school can change the outside community.” For Ann, it was important to be involved in the community of her town and have an impact on the Memphis area.

There was a lot about Premier in her love statements, but I asked Ann to boil them down to four characteristics of community at Premier. She replied,

I think Christ-centeredness, Christ as the mold to which our actions should fit. Having scriptural knowledge and using it with each other and using it as our weapon. I think prayer for each other and a clear vision for each other. Seeing what God sees in the other person. I think if you are looking at them from your perspective, you’re always going to get it
wrong, but if you follow the Spirit and what He’s telling you about that person, then you won’t have problems.

Premier is a unique college in that it only registers 120 full-time students each year. I asked Ann why this low number? She said,

It’s difficult to get to know people outside of that number, I think. I think 120 is just enough to not make it so small that you really are suffocated, but there’s not so much room that you can avoid being seen, and I think even the people on the outskirts are very welcome.

When she reflected on a positive community experience at Premier, she recalled last year’s retreat. She stated,

Our speaker was from California and it was about the image of God. One night we just had a night full of prayer. All of a sudden, just like, we were just breaking chains [of bondage], and we were learning how we saw God and how he sees us. In the midst of that there was a spontaneous prayer session. I saw all my friends getting healed, and I was like, how the heck is this possible? I’m not turned off by miracles, but it’s one thing to say it happened in Jesus’ time and people were a little more used to supernatural things. I had just read C.S. Lew’s book, *Miracles*. I couldn’t deny what was happening because I knew what my friends had been through. I knew that she had a problem with insecurity, or I knew that he had a broken ankle just then. Like, I just saw it happen yesterday, and all of a sudden he can walk on it. It wasn’t just the speaker praying for us, it was us praying for each other and stuff happened.
As extraordinary as her experience was at the retreat, she recalled how day-to-day occurrences could create negative community. She said, “When communication between artists breaks down.” She laughed and said,

When any artist communicates with another artist, I think there’s bound to be trouble. My best friend and I have gone through a lot of fights just because of little teeny things, like, you said it this way, but I felt this way, and I felt like you felt like, this way. It creates feelings, intentions, and emotions that break people apart really easily here. That’s something that I see as not being an example of the church, when Satan comes in between any of us, and it happens a lot, especially with boys.

She thought about that last statement for a minute and said, “People get their hearts broken here, too, you know, relationships. They get unsettling, and you can’t really quite fix it yourself.”

**Decision-Making**

When talking about Premier and how they make decisions, Ann talked about the change in the school’s name. She said,

At least on my end, there wasn’t really any input, but I kind of knew just by going to fundraising events that Ken [Premier’s President] did that. If I would have gone to Ken and said, “Hey Ken, I caught wind of you thinking about changing the logo or the name, and I’d like to put my input in,” I’m sure that he would have listened, but I personally was not asked. I think a few people had gotten interviewed. I think a lot of decision-
making that goes on in the staff has been filtered through the SGA [student government]. So SGA gets to sit in on certain staff meetings and things like that, and anything that the students feel need to be brought to the staff can be filtered in that way.

Ann is not one to wait for the SGA. She stated, “I personally am very outspoken, and I will talk to my teachers if I have a problem about anything.”

Dissent

Ann laughed at my question about dissent and said, “You could vent in your room or to your roommate if you wanted to.” She believed that Premier does not set up formal lines of communication on purpose. Ann described the process for dealing with dissent by stating,

If anybody has a problem with anyone, including the staff, including, you know, that over-encompassing everything, we are encouraged to go to that person and say this is a problem. It needs to be fixed. I’m angry. I think that this should be done or could be done a different way. So I think that’s how it happens. I think that they do that on purpose because that is a value of ours to be forthcoming and forthright about the stuff that we are upset about.

For Ann, biblical community is about being Christ-like. Christ-likeness to Ann is about loving people like Jesus did, accepting people like Jesus did, and encouraging and serving people like Jesus did. In part, these were important to her growing up, and she experienced them from the women in her church. She learned from them informally what it means to be a woman within the community. Premier provided an environment
that built on these characteristics where open and honest communication bonded through love forms the center of the community itself. In the next section, we will look at Ann’s Facebook community to see if these same values transfer to her virtual community.

Facebook

According to Ann’s profile page, she has been employed by Next Step Ministries as a music assistant in Nassau, Bahamas. She also helped build homes at the All Saints’ AIDS Camp. She attends Premier Music College, and under philosophy lists her religious views as Christian. Her wide range of musical tastes is evident as she lists 47 of her favorite artists ranging from Ray Charles to Frank Sinatra. She enjoys television shows like Chuck, The Office, and Gilmore Girls. Other activities and interests that she is involved include Malcolm Gladwell, Thoreau, Speak OUT LOUD, Free People, Rumba Room, and Bluff City Coffee (she lists 81 different Facebook activities). In her network, she lists Premier Music School and Tawas Area High School.

She has 924 photos, of which 172 are profile pictures from over the years. They portray her at different ages, with different people, and different hair colors (brunette, red, and blonde). The rest are a hodgepodge of friends and events. She uses the Notes section as a personal blog. The following is a sample:

A year from today, my life began to change. Anyways, I want to expand on so many things, but here’s a couple of things I’ve been dealing with. I’m worried that I won’t be able to come back next year for many different reasons- scholarship shortage, housing chaos. Not only that but I think God is leading me in another direction that is not at all what I had in mind when I came here. I’m thinking about transferring to Premier School for
Music and Worship Arts College in Memphis. This is a HUGE jump and I have literally no money. I have no job as of right now lined up for summer, and we get out in a month. I have no idea what is going on but somehow I’m ok with the scheme of things. It’s the day-by-day right now that I’m concerning myself with. I’ve been pushed in so many different ways, and I haven’t always handled it in the best way. My grades suffered, my sleep schedule suffered, and pretty much everything in my life was chaotic. I’ve started to sort things out, and I’m having trouble now finding a motivation. It’s hard to decide when to be motivated or when to let a lack of motivation pull me in another direction. Is it really just a matter of laziness or desire? I don’t really know.

Over a six-month period, Ann had a total of 1,003 status types (228 total posts, 443 responses to posts, and 332 people who checked the “like” toggle). Of her 821 friends, 133 interacted with her on her wall for a total of 291 times. The most any one person posted either status or response was 12 times, with only two who posted 10 times or more (average response was 2.1 times).

In the following figures, the y-axis is the number of responses and the x-axis is the category of responses.
Figure 23. Ann’s Participants’ Status Posts.

Figure 24. Ann’s Friends’ Responses.
Figure 25. Ann’s Friends’ Posts on Participants’ Wall.

Figure 26. Ann’s Participants’ Response.
Within Case Analysis

For Ann, Facebook is a place to disseminate information, encourage her friends, and to make humorous comments. Though she engaged ‘friends’ 25 times in conversations, she did not respond back to the posts on her “wall” with any frequency. She is more likely to comment on a friend’s wall than she is to respond to posts on her own wall. Of the 50 encouraging posts by friends, none were related to her birthday.

Ann’s understanding of biblical community focuses on acceptance, forgiveness, personal engagement between believers, and personal engagement between believers and God. She grew into this perspective. Growing up, she describes her family, “There was a lot of fighting. Thirteen years old, packing my suitcase and say, ‘I’m out!” It would be through the ladies in her church that she found refuge, “I loved it, and I grew up knowing the people in the church hand always having a place there.” Community became focused as she went to Premier Music College, “I love that we have an emphasis on community…I love that it is small…I love the opportunity and the structure of this school.” Ann brings her knew perspective on community to her Facebook community.

She engages her Facebook community mostly as a means to encourage (e.g. “You inspired me with your servant’s heart today”) and direct people to events (e.g. “snowflake flashmob party at 7 tonight in room 203”). Ann has 821 friends, compared to the average Facebook user who has 130 (Facebook Statistics, 2011). She has a 16% interaction rate that drops to .2% for those she interacts with on a consistent basis (more than ten times). This would seem to indicate that Ann includes a broad spectrum of people in her virtual community, but focuses on just a few of her friends. The SCS showed that students felt that being in small groups was important (33 responding mostly or completely).
Focusing on a few people within Facebook is a way to narrow a large group of friends into a virtual small group.

In her second interview, Ann was very clear about the value that she places on her Facebook community. She said, “I see Facebook as more of a place for connectivity than for intimacy. I try my hardest to make a clear distinction between the way I conduct myself on Facebook and the things I would say face-to-face.” She spoke directly to the issue of personal information by stating, “Posting a status that is too personal reveals that a person is either insecure or prideful, and would dissuade me from getting close to him/her.” Regarding personal posts, she says, “I attempt not to parade my heart all over Facebook as though it belonged to the acquaintances reading my posts.” This is understandable considering her home environment where her mom’s personality could change at the flip of a switch, “She (mom) had it together for about three days, and after that we had a fist fight because she couldn’t handle it anymore.” Ann learned to guard her heart. It is interesting that Ann uses the word “acquaintance” to describe the people who would read her posts. On Facebook, only those who are “friends” have access to status updates. Keeping with her value for personal engagement, she commented, “Facebook is a great resource for keeping up with people, but there are many, many conversations and interactions that should still be reserved for face-to-face interactions.”

Relationships are about trust, and the SCS showed that the students at Premier felt that they could trust one another (35 responded mostly or completely). Face-to-face interaction is a reflection of that trust. Ann made a connection between her Facebook community and her real community by saying,
Facebook is a great resource for sharing intriguing and funny videos, comments, or links in order to generate interest or to encourage one another. By doing this, Facebook becomes a venue for reinforcing the distinct culture of our small community, but it is ultimately just a snapshot of the surface of our closely woven family.

Ann would say that humor, information, empathy, encouragement, positive emotions (as long as people are not being “portentous”), and conversations (avoiding negative emotions) are appropriate for the Facebook community. However, negative emotional posts and chastising people are not appropriate, in her opinion. In regard to negative responses she said, “I find it more important to run to scripture and post that to my status as encouragement to myself and to others, instead of begging for attention (e.g. “Lord, you are good and your mercy endures forever.”).”

However, not all of the school’s feelings about community transferred to Ann’s Facebook. The SCS showed that 30 respondents held themselves accountable to others in the community. However, among Ann’s friends’ responses, only 1% of the time will someone chastise because of behavior (e.g. “Sorry, the above was trixxie. She got ahold of my computer. Stupid”). When it came to chastisement, she stated,

This is too personal for Facebook. I strongly dislike reading posts of chastisement, mostly because it can become a gang of people from all different backgrounds who each want their opinions to be heard regarding the issue. To chastise someone in a loving way, no one should ever post it for the world to see.
This coincides with Ann’s previous statements and her stated values, which were learned from her college in dealing with dissent, “If anybody has a problem with anyone, including the staff, we are encouraged to go to that person and say this is a problem.” Going to the person privately is the key to Ann’s view of accountability and chastisement.

Facebook, for Ann, is an extension of her real-life community for the purpose of connecting, encouraging, and sharing non-personal information. She is careful not to list or post personal information or try to bring undue attention to herself. Ann is also very careful not to usurp biblical principles of conflict resolution by posting negative responses, but rather attempts to utilize face-to-face interactions.

**Eric**

When Eric walked into the room, I was just setting things in order from the previous interview. He was medium height. What set him apart from the other students was his hat. Not that the hat was unusual, a cross between a baseball cap and captain’s hat, but that he wore it all the time. I had seen Eric around campus the previous day, and he could always be easily identified. I thanked him for coming and being a part of the study, and after a few minutes of instruction, we began.

Eric is a senior and one of the oldest students at Premier. Though he is a senior, it is only his third year. Premier Music College designs its degree programs so that a bachelor’s degree can be completed in three years. Eric is very comfortable at Premier. He has been an RA the past year and plans on staying on staff as the housing coordinator after graduation. He speaks easily as we talk about how he became a Christian. He said,
I received the Lord Jesus as my savior when I was about four years old. I don’t exactly know the age, but I do remember kneeling on my grandfather’s bed and him leading me in the sinner’s prayer and repenting and asking the Lord to come and forgive me of my sins and come into my heart.

However, faith has its challenges. Eric described those by saying, “After that, there were definitely some times growing up where I kind of doubted and questioned.” People would help him with his doubt with this advice, “Just cry out to the Lord and call upon the name of the Lord, and you shall be saved, and ask Him back in your heart and ask Him to cleanse your sins. For the longest time, there was this doubt. The kind that comes with a lot of fire and brimstone.”

“It was the type [of preaching] that makes you feel guilty,” stated Eric. When it came to owning his faith, Eric remembers back to the age of 20. He had left for college and was attending Middle Tennessee State University. He recalled,

I was involved with an organization called the Baptist Student Union. I really started to, like, dive into the things of the Lord and realize that there was more to this than just going to church and putting in your time and putting in your tithe, that there was actually a relationship. I started really doubting [whether I was a Christian] at this point, where I just really felt like if I was to die at that moment I’d go straight to hell.

It was a friend in college who reminded him, “Dude, of all the people that I know in this world, I can honestly believe that you are right with the Lord, that you are saved. But if
you have any doubts, then clear them up now.” That is what he did and says that he has not had those doubts again.

**Family**

As he had said previously, Eric’s grandfather had a great impact on his life. He grew up attending church while living in the mountains of West Virginia. His grandfather’s faith was real, and Eric speaks of being surprised when he remembered, He didn’t come to the Lord until he was, I think like 30, and not until after he’d been married and had kids. But I don’t really quite understand how he went so long, growing up so long in church and being around it and hearing it.

Eric has a younger sister. He at first said that he grew up in a strong Christian family, but he modified his statement slightly when he said, “My dad more so than my mom.” It was when they moved back closer to his grandparents that they finally started going back to church. He was in kindergarten when they moved down the street from his grandparents. Eric stated,

[That’s] when we started going to church, and we’d go Sundays and Wednesdays; my mom not so much. My mom a little bit, but she didn’t like the way the church treated women and how they looked down on women. My dad came from a very strong Christian background. His brothers both went to Liberty University. My dad didn’t go to college. His mother was a different story. Eric said,

My mom’s side, not so much. They were the partiers, they were the drinkers, smoked, you know, just lived it up, and so having those two
worlds come together wasn’t the best thing in the world because when my
dad started getting into church, my mom didn’t really want to, but my dad
didn’t want to budge in regard to looking for something that she would
feel a little bit more comfortable in, and so that caused some issues. My
sister, me, and my dad would go to church, and my mom wouldn’t.

Even though there was tension between his parents, neither he nor his sister used it as an
excuse to miss church. “No, I never did,” recalled Eric, “which is really interesting; my
sister either.”

His dad’s role in the family was the provider. “He made sure the bills got paid,”
said Eric, which was not always easy. His dad was a self-employed handyman. Eric
recalled, “He would do just odd jobs, paint, roofing, laying carpet, mowing yards. Then
he was working on his bachelor’s degree in accounting on the side.” He had said earlier
that his father had not gone to college, but he meant that he did not go to college when he
was younger. Financially, things changed. Eric said, “He finally got his degree and then
when he did he went to work for the FBI, and so now he’s got a really nice job.” He
laughed, “You know, financially.”

If his dad was the provider, his mom was the nurturer. Eric stated,

My mom was probably more there for me. You know, my mom’s the one
that I would cry to a lot because the kids would pick on me, and no one
liked me, and always made fun of me, and the girls didn’t want anything
to do with me, and so my mom was kind of the one that handled the
emotional stuff, whereas my dad would just take me hunting and fishing
and to church.
However, she still helped with making ends meet financially. According to Eric, “She was also a provider because she had to work, too, and her hours really wore her down, and she’s dealt with a lot of depression.”

As the nurturer, his mother was there to comfort Eric when the kids at school bullied and teased him. He said,

Well, one, I was overweight, and two, sometimes like the clothes I would wear, what my dad did, uh, they would make fun of my dad, you know, because of his job. I got picked on a little bit for being into science fiction and fantasy and really just loving that stuff.

I asked him if he had many friends. He replied,

No, most of my friends were probably more acquaintances. There were kids in the neighborhood, but it was one of those things where [I] was the third man out. You were kind of the odd man, and so that’s when they, you know, you get kind of ganged up on. But I did the same thing.

Though Eric tried to get into the “cool” crowd and get invited to “stuff,” he was always the outsider and his weekends were rather lonely, but he is able to laugh about it now.

His sister and he grew closer after his parents’ divorce. He laughed, “We had to team up against the stepmother.” The divorce changed the dynamics of the family and how he came to understand his mother. Eric recalled,

I think we started to see things that we didn’t see before. We always saw mom as the bad person because we, you know, when she fell into depression she had a lot of health problems. She was always in bed. She would hardly come out of her room except to go to work, and always
moody. She didn’t really cook anymore, and we always saw a lot of fights break out and always thought that dad was the good person. When the divorce happened, my mom about went off the deep end. She tried to kill herself; tried to actually kill herself in front of us one night where she was trying to hunt us down.

There was obvious pain in Eric’s voice as he remembered these events. He continued, “It was really weird. She was drunk, and she, because the reason she filed for divorce was to call my dad’s bluff.” His dad, not wanting to look bad in front of the people at church, would taunt his mother into filing for divorce. Eric believes that his father convinced his mother to file the divorce papers. He remembered,

He basically convinced my mom to do it, and then not long after that, my mom was like, my mom couldn’t understand why they couldn’t make things work. I’m not sure what effort she put in there, but I remember one day I was going to the movies, and her saying, ‘Well, maybe your dad would like to go with us.’ That’s a weird thing to say when you two are divorced.

During his mom’s depression, she still tried to be the nurturer for Eric. He stated, “I kind of became numb. I think I looked at it more that she was just lazy.” It was during this time that he became really involved with his youth group.

Church

Transitioning from his family experience, I asked Eric what he thought were four core responsibilities of the church. He laughed, “Can you repeat the question again? It’s
tough because obviously you want to think about what you have been taught. What I know now is different.” He paused then added

A place where people come to hang out, and put on their best, sing some songs, listen to somebody preach, and then go home. It was a social gathering. At youth group, we had some fun times and went to camps and that kind of stuff, and listened to a lot of sermons, listened to a lot of messages, but that was about it. It was just kind of a place to go hang out.

Church became the social context in which Eric felt safe and comfortable. In this environment, he was no longer bullied, but the bully. He said, “I would pick on more people. There were a couple individuals I remember picking on; it was just wrong.”

Feeling some regret, he related this story:

Who knows where those people are in regard to their relationship with God now because I don’t think they ever came back. You know, I think I actually remember one of the girls that never came back. She ended up getting pregnant and having a baby out of wedlock, and I think I remember the new youth minister. He met with her and she’s like, “I’ll never go back to that place.” And I go, “Wow, was I responsible for that?” A lot of people would say they were white trash. They didn’t have the best home. They didn’t have the best clothes. Kind of like me. I was just a little bit elevated white trash.

Reminiscent of Jesus’s statement about the “least of these my brethren (Matthew 25:40, KJV), Eric says, “It’s funny how we pick on the least of these.”
When he was 20, Eric moved to the Murfreesboro area of Tennessee. It was there that he gave his life totally to Christ and began going to a different kind of Baptist Church. He again laughed and said,

I downgraded from legalism to a little less legalism. But that’s when I started to see a different side of Christianity. God brought people into my life that cared about the things I cared about. They built a relationship with me. They cared about me because of me and not because of what I was like or what I liked, or how I dressed. They loved me for who I am and for what I am, and that completely changed my perspective on Christ.

From this context, I asked Eric again about the four characteristics of community in the church. “Love unconditionally. Love within and love out,” he said, “I want to say something about worship, but I don’t want to, it’s like necessarily a style, a band thing or a choir thing, but that they are willing to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth.” Eric struggled to convey these four characteristics, but he continued,

You know if we’re loving people, if we’re doing everything to love one another, that means we’re being there for each other. We’re healing the wounds. We are binding up the broken within and outside, there has to be inreach and outreach. The church has to be a hospital. There a lot of messy people; a lot of broken people.

Though, it is not just about social ministries. He is quick to add, “We have to be sound theologically. We can’t be wishy-washy.” Not realizing that he has named more than four, he says, “It’s gonna be hard to find a fourth one because I think you could sum up everything in ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and mind, soul and strength,
and love your neighbor as yourself.” Eric laughed when I pointed out that Jesus made the same summary. “Yeah, he kinda did, so that’s just it.”

When I asked him to relate an experience where community has worked, he struggled and said,

I’m really not sure. I mean, I can, there are a couple of areas, a couple of places where I have been that I go, okay, this maybe, but then I go, oh, but I don’t know. I look at it, and I can still see the, um, yeah, I don’t know. That’s a hard one. I would lean on the edge of saying I don’t think I’ve ever truly, truly seen it work.

Expressing how he has seen the negative aspects of community came much easier. Eric said,

That people are there just being spectators. Meet and greet thing on Sunday mornings is one of the most ridiculous, shallow things in the world. It’s just not really living life together. That doesn’t necessarily mean everybody living in a commune. I think that would be amazing, like the Premier dorm thing.

He said, “Just people living life together, and knowing the old and the young. Having this wide diversity of people where everybody knows you. I think that some of that also involves being completely plugged into church, too.” It was at this point that Eric remembered back and said, “I think one of the better examples I can say that I think I saw good community work was when I attended Crosspoint Church. Everyone knew me. I knew everybody, and when we live, we somewhat live life together.” The church had a membership of around 100 people.
Colleague

I asked Eric to list for me four major aspects of community that the college tries to instill in the lives of the students. His big one, he said, is “Living life together. I mean, that’s a big one.” I asked him what it means to live life together. He replied, I think it is holding each other accountable, speaking into people’s lives, being there when people are hurting, calling people out when they need to be called out, putting up with people’s crap, and realizing people are a mess. It’s about helping people get over their stuff, whether it’s a sin issue or getting annoyed just because I moved your stuff.

I pointed out that it sounded like he was speaking from experience. He laughed and said, “Yes, I’m sharing it out of experience. I’m hoping that God has been using all this stuff to prepare me to get married one of these days, hopefully. Oh,” he adds, “accepting people is kind of one of those things.” Reflecting on how he struggled with identifying on community characteristics, he says,

You think as an RA I would know the community handbook, but I don’t, and I really need to get it, I’m gonna have to stress that with my RAs next year. I think we are to spur one another onto good deeds. Like speaking into someone’s life, but I think encouraging people to live out their dreams and to fan the flame.

“I know this should be easier to pin point,” Eric said when I asked him to give me an example of how community worked at his school,

But just trying to figure out one. It’s about somebody counseling somebody or somebody knocking on someone’s door at 2:30 in the
morning saying, ‘I need to talk to you, dude. My girlfriend’s just broken up with me.’ Sitting down and planning a worship service for the upcoming week, and then hearing their life, and then you sharing their life.

When I asked Eric if he could give me a specific example of when he saw community work, he recounted this story,

We do this candlelight service once a year. You take a candle and you take it to someone who has been a light to you; who has touched your life and who has blessed you. Then you just go up to them and you just basically weep and cry and be like, oh, you know, you changed my life. That is a great place where I see community work.

Getting even more specific, he stated,

[Cherry] got up in front of everyone for one of the worship services and is like, ‘We’re under attack. You know I’ve been having migraines all week and I know other people are dealing with stuff, so we’re gonna take a group downstairs to pray over you all. Whoever needs prayer, come on and the rest of you all stay up here and pray for us and worship.’ I think that’s an aspect of where we see it.

Eric said that the negative side of community, as seen at Premier, is gossip, immaturity, hearing about roommates having a meeting with so-and-so because they’re having issues together. Not working with one another. They’re not working together. They’re not working through each other’s mess. “People are also breaking curfew and breaking Premier values. As a college,” Eric said, “they try to help us build community with jam-packed dorms. The way the dorms are set up.” Talking about the school’s
previous location, he recalled, “You saw people all the time. We were living together; working together (cooking meals, cleaning the dorms, etc.), and we saw each other every day. There was more of a communal feel.” Eric feels that has changed with the new dorm situation. He stated, “A lot of people hold up in their rooms. At the new dorms, you never have to come out.” The new dorms have their own kitchen and bathrooms, and people are responsible for their rooms only.

The school also builds community through its student government. Eric described it this way:

SGA is the student government. I don’t know what the ‘A’ stands for, wow, and I’m going on staff here [next year]. They set up activities every once in a while for people to come and hang out. They plan the winter retreat and form book clubs, one club for the girls and one club for the guys.

According to Eric, the school limits its enrollment to 120 students, Because they want to keep a small community, and they want to keep a smaller student-to-teacher ratio, which I think is like six or eight to one. Staff actually are able to speak into your life and be able to care for you. We’re not just a paycheck, we care about where they’re going and what they’re doing for the kingdom.

Eric described how much input students have when it comes to input into the school. “From my understanding, none. If they have, I’ve never been on that panel,” Eric laughed. When it comes to dissent, he refers to the ICE forms. He stated, “The ICE forms that we’re supposed to fill out after the semester’s over. We kind of say this is
what we liked about the class and this is what we didn’t like about the class. But how seriously the students take those, I don’t know.”

Though Eric did not articulate how students influence decisions at the school, he had spoken of how the school wants open communication between students and teachers. The small teacher-student ratio allows for a greater degree of communication, both positive and negative. How much these close relationships affect the decision-making process of the Premier community is uncertain and is open for further study.

**Facebook**

According to Eric’s profile page, he is studying Modern Music Ministry, he is worship leading at Premier Music College; lives in Memphis, Tennessee, and was born on April 19, 1979. Prior to Premier, he had attended Middle Tennessee State University and Bridgeport High School (Class of 1997). Under the philosophy section of his info page, Eric says that he is a follower of Christ. Under favorite quotations, he lists 15 of his favorites. The following is an example:

> When James Calvert went out as a missionary to the cannibals of the Fiji Islands, the ship captain tried to turn him back, saying, ‘You will lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go among such savages.’ To that, Calvert replied, ‘We died before we came here.’

Eric lists 15 of his favorite musicians, seven of his favorite books, eight favorite movies, four television shows, and seven favorite games. Under activities and interests, he includes: New Missions, Lifelink Memphis, Brent Gambrel Ministries, Cappex.com, Big prize Giveaways, and Roll a D6. His favorite scripture verse is 1 Corinthians 2:2, which says, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1
Cor. 2:2). For contact information, he gives his AIM screen name and phone number.

He has posted 176 pictures and 10 videos of himself and friends.

In the following figures, the y-axis is the number of responses and the x-axis is the category of responses.

*Figure 27. Eric’s Participants’ Status Posts.*

*Figure 28. Eric’s Friends’ Responses.*
Within Case Analysis

For Eric, Facebook is a place to encourage people, share information, and engage in humorous conversation (e.g. “The villain for the reboot of Spiderman is… drum roll.. The lizard!!!!). Though there are some negative emotions shared, “seriously…I can’t hold back the tears,” they are minimal. Over the six months of the study, Eric has
engaged in 12 conversations on Facebook, indicating that his virtual community is less about conversational engagement than it is about information and responses to specific events, “Eric attended Pancake Breakfast.”

His understanding of biblical community revolves around acceptance, love, and living life together. These concepts evolved over a period of time and are not reflected in his home growing up, “They were the partiers, the drinkers, and smokers, you know, they just lived it up.” Though they began to attend church, it was strict, legalistic, obligatory, and social, it was “a place where people come to hang out, and put on their best, sing some songs, listen to somebody preach, and then go home. It was a social gathering.” He learned at Premier that community was deeper, “I think it is holding each other accountable, speaking into people’s lives, being there when people are hurting, calling people out when they need to be called out.” Eric also stresses community as presence, specifically, physical presence, living life together. The SCS at Premier showed that students felt that most people knew one another (41 respondents scoring “mostly” or “completely”). Knowing one another and living life together are strong components to community.

This is reflected in his Facebook interactions. Information is more about events to be attended and times when people gather (e.g. “Eric attended Nick’s Senior Recital”). Being at events is part of being active in the community. The SCS showed that a large percentage of Premier students felt it was important to be active in the community’s events (40 respondents scored “mostly” or “completely”).

Compared to the average of 130 friends (Facebook Statistics, 2012), Eric’s had and above number of friends with 518 friends. He has an 18.5% interaction rate with his
friends, and when it comes to consistent interaction (more than ten times), the rate drops to 1%.

When it came to chastising people in his Facebook community, it occurred in 2% of the posts (e.g. “You did the uncommitable sin now, bro!”). However, in the broader community of Premier, Eric believed accountability and chastisement were necessary, “People are also breaking curfew and breaking Premier values.” This was interesting compared to the SCS, which indicated a high percentage of students shared the school’s values (44 respondents scored mostly or completely).

In his second interview, Eric described what he believed was the initial intent and then the evolving intent of Facebook:

I see Facebook as a way to keep in touch with friends and family, encourage individuals and let people know what is going on in my life. I think the reason Facebook was created was for the purpose of information. It was a way to keep up with individuals and make sure you did not miss out on what was going on in the lives of others. As it grew and became more popular, it began to evolve. It started to take on characteristics that are inherent in relationships. So, at first these characteristics were not essential or the prime focus for its creation. Now that it has become a prime tool for communication and relationships, I believe that these characteristics are naturally going to occur.

Under the categories of humor, information, conversation, positive comments, chastisement, and negative comments, Eric related the following:
• Humor: “We all need a good laugh now and then. There have been many times that I burst out laughing just by reading someone's post.”

• Information: “Knowing what is going on in someone's life and letting them know what is going on in my life.”

• Conversation: “Once again, it is good to just check in on people and touch base with them, I have had many great conversations with individuals on Facebook, face-to-face or on the phone is still better.”

• Positive Comments/encouragement: “I have used Facebook to encourage and speak truth into people’s lives; individuals have done the same for me.”

• Chastisement: “Should only be done face-to-face.”

• Negative Comments: “Not the place for Facebook, it drives me crazy to see people complain, whine, or moan on Facebook, I prefer not to see these types of comments, I also try not to respond to them.”

Eric is consistent with what he sees as real community and what part Facebook plays within the broader community context, “Accepting people is kind of one of those things.” He emphasizes face-to-face communication as the better place for both conversations and for chastising his friends. Facebook is a place for positive emotions, and Eric feels that negative comments are annoying and inappropriate for Facebook.

Austin

Walking in, Austin towered over me at 6’5”. He was thin, but not lanky, and had an easy confidence. I introduced myself, and he warmly greeted me with a handshake and a smile. We sat down at the table and I went over the procedures before we started. He was finishing his second year at Premier and is 20 years old. I mentioned to him that
if at any time he did not feel comfortable answering any questions, he could merely pass on them. He laughed, “You mean if I start crying?” I could tell that this would be a fun interview.

Setting the foundation, I asked him to explain how he became a Christian. He replied,

I was about eight or nine years old. My dad was a youth pastor for 18 years, and now he’s a pastor of a small, non-denominational church in Wichita, Kansas. The age is kind of fuzzy. I don’t really remember, but I do remember the day. I kind of, like, felt convicted of a few things and just not really understanding, and my dad just kind of spelling it out for me. It’s not huge or epic rags-to-riches salvation story. I was skipping out of church service because he had video games in his office, I was trying to act sick so I could play them, and the next thing I know, I’m accepting Christ into my life.

Like many who have given their lives to Christ at an early age, Austin saw his faith as a roller coaster. He recalled,

There was never a point where I completely dismissed it and went on the far end of the spectrum. I think the walk has been kind of frustrating. It is kind of vexing at times, being brought up in the church and not really having a spectacular salvation story.

Austin had heard about people who had come to Christ out of drugs, gangs, and sex, and he said,
I really struggled with finding my relationship with God. It wasn’t until I got here at Premier where I learned that God needs to just meet me, where I’m at now. A really simple message I think I could have picked up on much earlier, but didn’t realize it until here.

**Family**

Austin has two little brothers and one little sister. He stressed, “I have a mom and dad and they’re still together.” He could not remember how long they had been married. The sibling that he is closest to is the brother who is closest to his age; only 13 months separate them. He described him as his best friend. He stated, “We were always there for one another, and we shared a room or were across the hallway. He is the most outgoing of us all, and he’s the craziest, most quirky, and is just loopy.” Austin considered himself to a bit tamer. His youngest brother had just turned 17. He described their relationship as close, but they are different. He explained,

[Nick] is very quiet and reserved. He takes in everything. I think that has to do with me and [Jim]. We were so outgoing and took a lot of the light.

I feel like we rained on their [Nick’s and his sister’s] parade. That has changed somewhat with the two oldest off to college. Now [Nick] and [Iris] have to figure things out for themselves. Austin stated, “[Iris], who is the only girl and the youngest, is very outgoing and very touchy-feely. She’s had to be strong having three older brothers. She can be very opinionated at times.” He describes his dad as “being obsessed with wanting to be on a reality TV show.” He said,

We were so close to getting on *Wife Swap*. We got to the semi-finals and we winded up not getting on. We think it was because we weren’t crazy
Christians. They wanted a very, very conservative Christian family, and we were too normal.

Describing his father’s role in the family, Austin’s first word was “organized.” He described his father by stating,

He’s all about organization. He is definitely the leader of the household. The guy who kind of keeps it all together. He’s not so much emotionally driven as my mom. He very much will enforce the rules. He is very strong-willed.

However, Austin makes sure to point this out, “He’s very funny. He is extremely personable. However, I kind of butt heads with him.” When I asked him how they butt heads he said, “We see things differently. Last year we were talking about whether I would get a job [we were pretty well off financially] or just me focusing on academic stuff.” Austin deepened his voice, mimicking his father, “Oh yeah, you could get a job doing radio broadcasting.” Reverting back to his own voice, he says, “I really don’t want to get into that, but when he gets something in his head, he gets so set on it. It’s tough to convince him otherwise.”

He sees his dad not as controlling, but as being ordered and structured. He wanted to fill in the gaps. He explained,

Like if I need to get more money, and to be more financially stable, he will suggest me getting a job. If I haven’t already thought of a job, he will throw at me all of his suggestions and ideas. I feel very much pressured into those ideas.
I asked Austin how he would typically respond. He replied, “I try to be as respectful as I can, as much as it drives me crazy inside. Each situation calls for a different sort of reaction, but I just try and hear him out, and I try to tell him where I am.”

I questioned how supportive his dad is. He said, “He is totally supportive.” As an example, he continued,

It became a requirement as a child in my family, sort of, to play at least a sport because it kept us active and what it taught us. There came a point when I didn’t want to do that anymore. It was very difficult to tell him, ‘Hey, I want to not do this, I want to do hip hop music and perform.’ It was tough. At first he was, ‘No, you’re playing basketball,’ and then finally a few days passed and he sat down and we talked.

Austin paused a moment. He became emotional at the point when he said, “I’ll never forget it, and he apologized. He was like, ‘I’ll make you a deal. Finish out this semester and you can do whatever you want.’” Austin went on to explain how God opened doors for him by winning a contest with Breakaway Magazine to record a demo with KJ52. In fact, his parents let him withdraw from school during his senior year to be homeschooled in order to be free to perform.

When it came to his mother, Austin’s demeanor changed. He said, “My mom is the dreamer with me. My mom gets my dream, and she’s super passionate. She’s become the biggest encouragement in my life.” Being at Premier has been hard on Austin because it is more academic than creative, and though he does well academically, he misses writing, traveling, and performing. In this context, he says,
I would express to my mom that I feel empty inside and that I’m not able to do that anymore. She would just push me through it, and she’d keep reminding me of my dream. Without her, I don’t know where I’d be.

He teared up as he extolled this virtue in his mom, “She’s the only person [who understands], and no one here will get it. No one here has been through the journey with me.”

When it came to making decisions in the family, it was, “Mom and dad. Sometimes dad doesn’t care so much, and so mom just makes the decision or vice versa.”

When he thought about how decisions are made in his home, what drives him crazy is lack of communication. He gave this example:

My mom wanted all of us to go to Nick’s game, and no one would know that until the last minute, and we were like, ‘we have to go?’ And she’s like, ‘I told you that.’ We didn’t know, and then the kids would go off to the side and like, ‘Did she ever tell you anything?’ It’s been this recurring frustration.

When it came to disagreeing with his parents, Austin explained,

I guess as calm as you can, and not too intense. Try to do it as less emotional as possible and reasonable, you know, I guess, professional.

I’ve learned that being on the emotional side of things is never the way to go with my parents.

On the other hand, he explained that [Jim] was the super emotional one. He would go on and on, and that never worked well. He went on to give this insight: “My parents knew
their children. I’d like to think they did. They knew how to handle us, and so they were able to treat each situation with fairness and the precision that it needed.”

Before moving on to talk about his church experience, Austin wanted to make this point, “It’s not like I have this dad who is just overbearing and so controlling that doesn’t let me do anything. You know, we had boundaries, but we had a lot of freedom. They gave us a lot of freedom.”

**Church**

Austin stated,

My dad was a youth pastor, and we have moved around a lot. There was a period of time where he didn’t have a job, and we lived in Alabama. Then the Kansas position opened up, and we moved from the South to the middle of the United States.

During this time when his dad was not on a church staff, things were different. For the first time, they were going to church as a family and not as a pastor and his kids.

Austin’s description of the church’s role is from the perspective of a pastor, I see the role of the church to equip and to guide growing Christians. It is to encourage them and build them to develop something that’s deeper. It is to have core beliefs; I think that’s really important. They are to help one another and to grow together; to just do life with one another.

When it came to describing four characteristics of community in the church, he became more personal. He said,

I would say real, real or genuine. Not like when during the first five minutes of some services you have everyone greet somebody new, and
then, whatever, and then you probably never see that person again.

There’s no sort of relationship built there.

For Austin, real and genuine is about open and honest relationships. He continued with his list, “Love is definitely a big one. Serving or cohesion, like a togetherness, like a real togetherness.” I asked him what it meant to do life together. He responded,

It has to go beyond church. Everyone’s gotta eat, you know. You go out to eat all the time, whether it be alone or with some of your friends. You just bring somebody else along. Just doing regular things that you do every day. Getting to know them and building relationships, and just growing and just encouraging one another, and being there and just having that extra support.

When I asked him to give me an example of how he has seen community work within the church, I was surprised by his answer. He said, “It would have to be, it would have to be an experience here [Premier]. I don’t think I really experienced a true community.” I pressed him a little on this matter, and he said,

I don’t think community was big. I don’t think there was a big emphasis on community growing up. I guess the community that I had within the youth group. It really did shine within an event. We would really bond, and we would really just, grow close, but I think that was the extent of it.

I never really saw community, vital, like as a vital element within a functioning church.

He later referred back to the issue of community and events and said, “An event is just an event. You can go to a basketball game and not feel connected to anyone else. You
know what I’m saying? You can go to the movies and not care about who sits next to you.”

The negative side of community was much easier to remember for Austin. He stated, “I know I’ve had plenty of those times. Cliqueiness. There is so little togetherness. People were in their own groups. People were bringing their own friends. We never really bonded as one.” After pondering a few seconds, Austin continued,

If I had a choice to, like my dad wasn’t the youth pastor, I wonder if I would have gone. Probably not, because I wasn’t really close with any of those guys. I had to bring my own friends in order to feel like close within that community. There was no intimacy; there was no real bonding or supporting one another. Everyone was just so standoffish.

College

Austin had earlier remarked that he had not experienced true community until he came to Premier Music College, so I asked him what made Premier so different? He responded,

There’s so much accountability. There is so much accountability that when I first got here, I couldn’t ever bear it. People cared too much. Perhaps this is because of my previous community experience, and no one really cared at all; then going to the extreme.

He paused and continued with caution,

I gotta be careful to say this, but I’ve even heard some of the teachers express in this way that it’s almost cultish, because of how closely knit we
are together and how we’re in this ‘visibubble’ community, and we do everything together.

With a community this tight, it was easy for Austin to come up with four characteristics of community at Premier. He said,

Accountability. It’s every type of accountability-spiritual and academic. This is the first college that I can think of that teachers will get onto you for not doing your assignments. Secondly, serving one another, serving the community. It’s tough being with the same people and serving and, just, people get on your nerves, and some days you’re just fed up with people, and you just gotta do it. You gotta love these people either way. That’s the third one, love.

There is no hesitation in his description,

We are called to love one another, no matter who they are. I think it’s a big thing in this community, and it’s tough to love some of these people here, but I have to do it, there’s no question.

Premier only enrolls 120 students, and I asked him why the low enrollment rate. He replied,

I guess they, from what I’ve been told, I guess they feel like if they exceed 120 students that it’s not much of a tightly knit community. I don’t know why not 115 or 130, but 120 seems to be the magic number.

It was hard for him to give an example of positive community at first, not because it does not happen but because, “community happens like every day here.” He then recalled a specific instance going back to when he first arrived at Premier:
When I first came, I really struggled about not performing and finding my place here as an artist. I was doing musical stuff, but I really wasn’t being creative as an artist. I went to my Old and New Testament teacher and asked him if I could meet with him. I didn’t have a previous relationship with him. I went to his office and explained how I was struggling and wondered if he could, kind of, meet with me and help me deal with this. It’s just been eating me up inside. He was like, “I would be honored.” So I met with him for the remainder of the semester, and that was such a huge therapeutic thing that I needed. Just being able to go to him.

There are always instances where community does not happen, even at Premier. Austin explained,

I guess being so tightly knit has its disadvantages, of course, like living in a small town. Everyone knows your business. You know, everyone knows one another, and you can’t escape. You can’t escape your reputation, sometimes. When everyone talks about your business, that’s gossiping.

For Austin, influence is in relationships. Though the school provides a student government and some feedback forms, its main emphasis is the student/teacher relationship. If he thinks there is a problem with a teacher, policy, or another student, he knows he can approach either a teacher or the administration. Major decisions in the school are beyond his involvement or input. However, even if an issue arose, he feels that he could approach the staff with concerns.
Facebook

According to Austin’s profile page, he is studying at Premier School, lives in Memphis, Tennessee, and was born August 31, 1990. His lists under the philosophy section of his info page state that he is a Christian. He lists five of his favorite quotes, of which the following is an example:

“Any lie, frequently told, will gradually gain acceptance” -- Adolf Hitler, Mein Kamp

Under music, he lists 52 musicians that include artists such as MikeBeas, EDG, Death2Self, Linkin Park, and MGMT. His only book listed is the Bible. He has ten top movies including Next, Transporter 2, The Matrix, and Star Wars. Seventeen television shows make it to his list, including Lost, Futurama, Kate Plus 8, and DORMS. Under activities and interests, he lists making music and writing lyrics. Other interests include reading informative, deep, thoughtful, twisting reality, and five others. In the basic information section, Austin writes that he is interested in women, networks with Springville High School, and says this about himself:

This ain’t a game, this is real life!
I'm 20 years old - have a deep passion for the things I'm passionate about. Trying to navigate through this world and to determine my purposes. My relationship with God is something I cannot function without. I am lactose intolerant. I've been 6'3" since middle school. If you wanna know other crap about me, just hit me up!

The media section includes 315 pictures of himself, friends, and family. He also has uploaded 21 videos, mostly relating to his music.
Over a six-month period, Austin had a total of 1,625 status types (397 total posts, 826 responses to posts, and 402 people who checked the “like” toggle). Of his 1,297 friends, 162 interacted on his wall for a total of 855 times. The most any person posted either status or response was 59 times, for a total response rate of 10%. Only 1% (19 people) posted a significant amount of times (more than ten times).

In the following figures, the y-axis is the number of responses and the x-axis is the category of responses.

*Figure 31.* Austin’s Participants’ Status Posts.
Figure 32. Austin’s Friends’ Responses.

Figure 33. Austin’s Friends’ Posts on Participants’ Wall.
Within Case Analysis

For Austin, Facebook is a place to encourage his friends (e.g. “love this!”), make connections (e.g. “Austin and Joe are now friends”), and share information (e.g. “like this if you have received the new Nintendo Console”). His friends engage him with videos, information, and encouragement. Even his responses are largely for answering inquiries from friends and encouraging them (e.g. “Ah friggin sweet! This is incredible!!!”). It is a positive place where humor is used, and people are encouraged. It is a reflection of his home growing up, “We were always there for one another.” Negative emotions and chastising, however, were kept to a minimum. In fact, only a .2% of the posts in Austin’s Facebook community were used to confront another friend (e.g. “Ok buddy, chill out”). In his home conflict was dealt with in a “professional” manner, “I guess as calm as you can, and not too intense.”
He was far above average (130) when it came to his number of Facebook friends. However, he only engaged 12.5% of friends over the six-month period. This indicated that Austin used his friendship list on Facebook for more than just personal relationships, but for broader connections for his music. He saw his community as a part of his “dream” that he was trying to achieve, which his mother constantly encouraged, “I would express to my mom that I feel empty inside…she would just push me through it, and she’d keep reminding me of my dream.”

Austin’s understanding of biblical community included acceptance, accountability, genuineness, and togetherness. These are also suggested as important to the whole student body. The SCS indicated that acceptance (I feel as if I am as important as other people, 33 respondents scored “mostly” or “completely”), accountability (I hold myself accountable to other members of Premier, 30 respondents scored “mostly” or “completely”), genuineness (I am concerned about other people’s needs at Premier, 42 respondents scored “mostly” or “completely”), and togetherness (I share the same values as Premier 44 respondents scored “mostly” or “completely”). These characteristics are also reflected in what he believed should be in the church, “I would say real, real or genuine.” He said these characteristics are about “doing life together,” which is a phrase common to Premier students.

In his second interview, Austin explained how Facebook fits into his communal life by saying,

Facebook plays a large part in both real and virtual life. Facebook is a tool that enhances the relationships at a much faster rate. Which means for community that it brings people together, faster. So after developing a
relationship, you can go home and still continue to progress in that relationship within the walls of Facebook.

In explaining the different characteristics that are found in his Facebook community, Austin explained:

- Humor is important all around because it is the simplest common ground that people find interest in. The kind of humor has to be within the bounds that are acceptable within that community, however.

- The information on Facebook, I think, is beneficial for community, as well as it can tear people apart from it. I believe all information needs to be thought out before deciding to post on Facebook. Every idea needs to go through some filter. Of course, it all depends on what kind of information it is. If it is the time and whereabouts of a get together, people need to know!

- Empathy is an important part of how people connect. Empathy, I know, can be overwhelming, depending on how serious a matter is, when all of a sudden you have all 300+ friends posting on your wall, saying how they are thinking and praying for you. That’s the last thing anyone needs when experiencing a rough patch. Empathy, I think, should be expressed through the private matters of messaging, to play it safe.

- Chastisement should not be encouraged at all within the Facebook realm. I would even say that chastisement should not be delivered through a text, either. This is a matter that needs to be handled face to
face, privately. People deserve enough respect to be communicated to on a similar ground.” In our first interview, Austin expressed that chastisement or accountability should be a part of community, “Accountability. It’s every type of accountability-spiritual and academic.”

- On the opposite spectrum, when it comes to encouragement, I feel like Facebook is completely based around it. It is the epitome of speaking words of greatness about a person, to someone else, while the person being praised is a part of the current conversation. When it becomes an issue is when people’s self-esteem and morale results in the activity of their Facebook wall.

- Positive and negative emotional responses are the foundation of Facebook. All Facebook is, is a tool to connect, relate, and grow with people. The only way to do it is by finding common ground and continuing conversation off of those points. So negative and positive emotional responses help others relate, as well as leaves an opportunity to show that you are feeling for that person. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

Austin is fairly consistent in his application of what he sees as appropriate and inappropriate for Facebook. Though he does display negative (e.g. “Man, I feel delirious. Passes out”), and positive emotions (e.g. “Austin is no longer listed as single!”), they are not as prominent as information and encouragement. He stated that Facebook is not a place for chastisement, but does express some on his site (e.g. “Ok buddy, chill out”).
Rachel

When I arrived at the room where I was going to set up for the interview, I was delayed because a class was in session. Rachel came up behind me and introduced herself. We chatted for a few minutes as we waited for the class to dismiss. Once the door was open and students began to file out, it was obvious that Rachel knew most, if not all, of them. She greeted them warmly before stepping through the door. One young man commented, “Rachel, where’s my hug?” Later I asked her about her relationship with the young man and if they were close, and she said,

It’s not typical of all. There’s a lot. I think we just get to the point we’re so [much] a family. Like, it was Mick, my spiritual grandfather. I love Mick so much, and so, when I see him I just want to, like, give him a big hug. I think that also comes from being a kid and not getting all the love and affection that I wanted, so now that I have people that are willing to give, I like to get them.

She quickly added, “Now I don’t give it all the time. I’m not like creepy,” we laughed.

As we settled in, I went through the usual forms and information, assuring Rachel of confidentiality. She is in her third year at Premier and is a senior. Her major is Vocal, and she is minoring in Worship Leadership. She will stay on a fourth year to complete the two. We started with the first question on how she became a Christian. She said,

I became saved at the age of 18. I grew up in a Christian home, went to church, but it was more about the rituals and routines. I didn’t really understand the relationship until I was 18. A friend of mine, her dad’s a pastor, and they finally got me to go to their youth group. I saw what it
meant to have a relationship with God and really worship Him instead of just living out the daily life.

Family

Rachel described her family as typically dysfunctional. Her dad worked all the time, she has two younger brothers, and her mom took care of all of them. In regard to church, she says, “There wasn’t a lot of teaching on their part. We mainly learned everything we knew, Christian wise, through church. I don’t remember a whole lot from my childhood.”

She had mentioned that her dad worked all the time, so I asked her about his role in the family. “My dad was the bread maker [winner]. He got the money and put the food on the table. That was my dad, he was gone a lot for his job.” Rachel’s father was an “IT guy and computer consultant for several different companies.” This was when she was much younger. She recalled, “At one point, he was working for Hines and we lived in Pennsylvania. He would travel to Pittsburgh through the week and then come home on the weekends. He did that for about one year.” She explained that he lost his job and is no longer an IT manager.

Her memories of her father are most vivid from the time when she was in grades 8 through 12. She stated, “I remember it most of just ‘where’s dad?’ Once we moved from Maryland to Pennsylvania, that’s when it started getting a little better because my dad was closer to home. She tried to get close to her dad, and she really wanted him to be proud of her. She said,

My dad grew up in a family that wasn’t very affectionate, so he didn’t really know how to show affection. We were always kind of
disconnected. When I was a little girl, I was always daddy’s girl.

However, once my brothers were born, it was kind of just like I felt more disconnected from my dad.

Since her dad coached softball, she tried to connect with him through sports, but he was more comfortable with the rough and tumble boys. Her favorite memory was when they went golfing, and her dad would let her putt the ball when it was close to the hole.

Family dynamics were strained and Rachel described it like this,

My dad tended to get kind of upset at things if my mom didn’t have, like, the laundry done or she didn’t have dinner ready. She would kind of take it as my dad not being pleased with her, and then things wouldn’t go so hot the rest of the evening. There was a lot of quarreling, a lot of yelling, and a lot of just nothing’s right. When he came home, it was just kind of like everything was on edge.

Dad was the breadwinner, but mom wore the pants. My mom had a tendency to be controlling. My dad is very passive when it comes to my mom. My mom is just very loud, very controlling. Things have to be her way, but my mom could juggle a million things. She is the typical homemaker/provider.

As far as close friends, she said,

I tend to get friends pretty easily; I didn’t really have a whole lot of close friends. I’ve never had close friends until I came to this school (Premier).

I was more of the one that everybody picked on.

She laughed at the idea of her family being dysfunctional and said,
I mean a lot of things would go undone because we wouldn’t need them to get done if my dad’s not around. I would end up doing a lot of stuff because my mom would just get tired of doing everything on her own. So I would just suck it up and help her with stuff.

Rachel had mentioned that her dad was the provider, but that her mom wore the pants, so I was interested in knowing how decisions were made, especially since her dad was gone so often. She explained it this way:

When it came to big decisions like moving, and that kind of stuff, she put in her two cents, but it was more my dad. I think she just didn’t want to deal with it, but when it came to other decisions, she had a big sway. She would definitely let you know her opinion on it and want it to be her way. My dad just didn’t want to deal with it, so just kind of went along with what she wanted, at times.

Her father made decisions on the big things and her mom for the day-to-day activities. Neither one wanted to create conflict when it came to the other’s domain.

They had moved three times by the time that Rachel was 18. She said, It was a really hard switch for me because I went from knowing everybody to coming to Pennsylvania, and I got picked on a lot. One example was in the new school they knew cursive and I didn’t, so I always felt behind in things, so I think the first move was the hardest.

When I asked if her parents solicited input from the children, she laughed and said, “No.” She thought for a moment and then recalled, “I think when I got older they did on some
things, but for the most part, no. She would not listen to my input. That wasn’t gonna happen.”

**Church**

It was in 2008 that Rachel decided to go to the youth group with her friend. Before, she would have thought the experience to be freaky as she saw the teens raising their hands and worshipping God. She said about this first experience,

But because I knew them and I knew their hearts, I knew that there was something more there than just for show. So I went a few more times, and I went back one time after I graduated over the summer. Then it was three more times, then the last time, June 15, is when I finally decided I needed to give myself up to God. It was something I really wanted, so that night at my house I said, “Okay God, I’m giving myself to you because I don’t want this anymore.

“The youth were so on fire for God,” she explained. Rachel continued, “They knew so much Bible knowledge, so much more than I did. They just were so eager to learn more and wanted to get people to understand a relationship with God. It was such an incredible experience.” It was here that Rachel began to have friends who were closer. “I still tended to get picked on a lot. I just have always been easily picked,” she laughed, “but yeah, it definitely was there that people started to accept me.”

She had mentioned being picked on a couple of times, so I inquired why she was such an easy target. She said, “I was super naïve, just naïve with everything. I tended to get upset really easily. I didn’t really know much. That’s pretty much the biggest reason. I was just so weird and so dorky.”
When it came to community in the church, Rachel explained,

To me, community is pushing past judgments, pushing past what people have done and accepting them for who they are. We are all sinners, so being accountable for each other and lifting each other up. It is like a huge family under God. God is the head of the household.

Comparing her father and God her heavenly Father, she said,

I tried a lot to please God. I tried really hard to just make Him proud of me. I had to do all this stuff in order for God to be pleased with me, and finally God was just like, “I’m pleased with you because you’re my daughter.

She was quick to answer when I asked her to describe four characteristics of community. She stated, “definitely communication, healthy communication. Love above anything else, without judgment for sure. I think awareness of what’s going on and just meeting of needs.”

She described community that works with the following example:

There was a family nearby that had ten kids. The parents were divorced and they both had other spouses, and two of the children were in jail. We decided to come together and find ways to bring them to youth group. I would come by with my minivan and pick them up and take them to youth group. And then someone else would take them home. We found ways to provide meals for them through the week. Finally, after a while, they started coming to church. We really just started loving on them like they were our own kids. We just tried to let them understand that we don’t see
them for what they’ve don’t, but we see them for who they are and for
who they’re gonna be.

When it came to community not working, Rachel boiled it down into one word,
“Gossip.” She laughed as she explained,

There have been a lot of times in the church where gossip starts, and all of
a sudden you’ve got different groups of people. Right now, there is this
huge division in the church between the youth pastor and the pastor.
They’re trying to kick the youth pastor out. The youth pastor is reaching
to kids who aren’t nicely dressed and nicely behaved, and a lot of the
elders of the church don’t like it and want to go with the new pastor.
There is this huge separation because people can’t see the other side, and
there’s just so much gossip.

College

Rachel came to know about Premier Music College for the first time at a music
festival called Creation in Pennsylvania. She recalled, “I saw that while there in 2008. I
saw one of the brochures at the stand, and I applied and got in.” When she arrived to the
campus, she found a small student body and low teacher-student ratio. I asked her why
she thought the school was so small. She said,

I think to me if they were to accept more people than 120, you would
really lose the feel of this community. The community is just a large
family. I think that if you were to get even more people here, you would
lose the connections. You would have a lot more students to teachers
instead of the close bonds that we have with the teachers. I think it would
get into the issue of students being numbers instead of people, instead of helping them grow.

When I asked her how many close friends she had, Rachel laughed and said, “I know everybody, but I’d probably say closest friends, maybe ten. I make it a point to try and get to know everybody here, even for a little bit.” She was realistic in regards to personality differences when she said,

There are some people I’m not gonna hang out with a lot because you just don’t click, but I make it a point, especially at the beginning of the year, to make myself known to people and just say, ‘I’m Rachel, who are you?’

Being close means different things to different people, so I asked Rachel what it meant for her. She replied,

I can be honest with them. They know me spiritually and they know me in every sense of the word. I can go to them when I’m dealing with something and know that I can trust them, and they know me, and they’re not going to judge what I do because they know who I am, and they know my motives and my heart.

Four characteristics of community that Rachel believes the school is trying to instill in their lives are

A sense of awareness, definitely. I gonna keep that word, “awareness,” because they want us to be aware of everybody, of being aware of the needs, being aware of people around us, and just seeing everybody for who they are, so awareness. Being Christ to each other is another one.
I asked her to expand on her last statement. She responded by saying, “Being Christ to one another just means putting, I guess we could use the cliché, WWJD, ‘what would Jesus do?’ Doing what God would do or Jesus would do in the circumstance.” She used Jesus as her example and stated, “Jesus would not turn a blind eye to someone in need. He would do what he could to someone in need, showing compassion to everyone, no matter who they are.” Describing Premier, she continued, “You have so many people from different places. There’s somebody from England, from the Czech Republic, every state in the United States, and you have different cultures and they’re all coming together.”

Pondering all that she said, Rachel tried to come up with another characteristic.

“Well, Be Premier,” she said as she laughed. She continued,

Being visible to our community. Ken [the president] originally wanted the school to be for Christian musicians, for those who were good at music, but not so good spiritually, and those that were good spiritually and not so good musically, to come together and help each other grow in the Lord to have the best of both worlds. Then after growing, we are to go out into the world and be visible to the world. That’s a huge thing, just letting others see us, in the world, in Memphis, and wherever we’re from.

Laughing, she realized that she had only three characteristics. She then went on to state the fourth:

I guess communication is a big one. There’s a lot of times that some people will feel as they are getting pushed under the rug or behind everybody else. They need to ask for help. In student government, our
job is to have communication between the staff and students. Instead of having students over here and staff over there, we try to bring them together, and so there needs to be communication.

**Decision Making**

I brought up the student government and asked her if the school endeavors to include them in the decision-making process. She said, “I don’t know. I don’t think so.” Recalling a specific instance she stated, “I think that was just the teachers, and they might have, they might have asked a few students, but I don’t think it was the whole community.” When I asked in what decisions students would be included, she responded,

> Currently they’re asking us for like, what kind of gear we want for, with the new logo. If there’s something that doesn’t seem to be working well, and they want to know what the students think about it, they’ll ask. They try and be as open with us and have as much communication with us as they can.

**Discontent**

When it comes to expressing discontent, she explained,

> We have ICE forms. At the end of each semester, we have a survey. We do it online. They ask if we liked the class, was there something wrong, and was the teacher proficient. If you have any gripes and any complaints, you can put it on the form.

Rachel is in the student government and talked about how the school engages the SG and the staff when they want input on a specific issue. However, more than forms
and focus groups, Rachel said one of the main ways that discontent is expressed is through the relationships that has been built between students and teachers. She remarked,

Also, the teachers try and go one-on-one as well. I know Rob Murphy; he’s so good at that. In our class, he’s in my English class and my theology class, and if there’s something that doesn’t seem to be going right, he’ll come to us and just say, ‘Okay, what is something that I can do better?’ He’ll even take us one-on-one. He took me aside the other day, and he’s like, ‘Is there anything that you think that I could do that would more relate to musicians?’

It was easy for Rachel to remember an instance when community worked at Premier. She recalled,

My freshman year, myself and two of my friends had no money and no food. We had been going without for, I think it was like, two days. We were just really hungry and one of our friends found out. He told his other friend, and [Chris] worked at Starbucks. At the end of [of the day] at Starbucks, they always have a big thing of bagels and muffins that they get. Normally, he would just take it and he would eat it with his friends. Well, that night I got an iChat that said come to the forms [outside the dorms]. So I went and there he was with this huge bag of bagels and muffins, and I was like, ‘oh my gosh! This is great,’ so he gave it to me. I went in the room with the two girls and we divvied up the food. We just
sat there eating and just totally joyful and praising God for the blessing. It was just so incredible that he saw that and was willing to give it to us.

I asked her why she and her friends had not told anyone that they were going without food. She said,

I feel bad with people doing stuff like that for me. I’m the one that loves to give. I love giving to people in this community, especially those that are in need. I love giving them money and food, groceries, anything. When it comes to myself, I have a really hard time saying I’m struggling, and I need help. I grew up with you don’t ask people for help. That is something that I’ve had to learn.

“Seeing community that hasn’t worked,” she said in response to my question, “is definitely gossip. There’s been times in this community where something has happened, and the gossip train has gone big time.” Rachel recounted that another major problem is relationships between men and women. She said,

There’s not many females [at Premier]. There tends to be very quick relationships that happen because they’re in close quarters, seeing each other every day. Unfortunately, when those relationships go bad, go sour, everybody in the community feels it. It’s not just the two people that were in a relationship, it’s everybody.

Rachel admitted that it is going to be difficult for her to leave. Premier has been a place where she has found family. She tears up as she says,

It’s gonna be really hard because this place has really showed me what a community is about, what a family is about, because they really, they
accept me for who I am, and they’ve helped me grow into the woman that God wants me to be. It’s gonna be super hard, but I also know that this is a preparation for the rest of my life, and I want other places to experience what I’ve experienced here.

For Rachel, community is about acceptance without judgment, love and accountability, and genuine Christ-likeness lived out in a visible manner. These characteristics were what was missing in her life growing up, and now, as a believer, they play a crucial part in her community.

Facebook

According to Rachel’s profile page, she is in the graduating class of 2012 at Premier Music College. She is obtaining a bachelor’s degree in vocals. She attended Bermudian Springs High School. She lists 11 of her favorite quotes, which include, “Girls just wanna have fun” and “In Christ there is such a thing as a transformed, well-adjusted, spirit-filled artist!” – Bill Hybels.

She listed 79 of her favorite music albums. He tastes are varied and include Adele, Frank Sinatra, and Redvelvet September. She lists Bourne, The Prestige, and Gladiator among her five favorite movies. Crazy Love, The Bible, Tuesdays with Morrie, and Battlefield of the Mind are among her favorite books. When she watches television, she prefers shows like The Office, Scrubs, Deadliest Catch, So You Think You Can, and American Idol. She lists as her favorite activities singing and cooking, and her favorite interests making people smile and music. Rachel has posted 1,231 photos of herself and friends, as well as 27 videos.
Basic information she wants her friends to know about her is, “I have been made in the image of God. Nothing can take that away from me,” “I love the Lord and where He has placed me right now. I am trying to follow His will and enjoying the journey He has put me on. I love to sing; hence, I am a vocal major. And I LOVE being in the outdoors and playing sports! Yep, I just love life!” She is interested in men, single, female, and networks through Premier Music College.

Rachel is an avid note writer, with 20 postings on her site. The following is an example:

So the time has come. The end of the school year is here and people are starting to pack and leave. It feels like one by one each member of my Premier family are packing their memories of friends and fun and moving on to fun in the sun for the summer. I am left waving the hand on those thoughts and memories. Not wanting to let go of that warm embrace of friendship and bonding that happened all year long. It feels like we were just starting to be as one community, and now we are breaking the bond. Some people graduating and God taking them to a whole new adventure. A few getting married or have gotten married this past year. There are also those who have decided that God put them here for a year and they now need to follow His path in a new direction. We will be getting newborn family members next year, and I just hope that we all can scoop them in our arms and be a Premier family again! I thank everyone for taking me in this community and helping me grow into a woman of God. I have changed so much and have gained so many brothers and
sisters in Christ! Love you all!!!

I will certainly miss everyone over the summer! Don't forget about those staying here to help the school move! Keep me updated about the things that you are doing over the summer! And PLEASE Whatever you do, DON'T leave without saying bye and giving me a hug!

Over a six-month period, Rachel had a total of 2,703 status types (817 total posts, 1,021 responses to posts, and 865 people who checked the “like” toggle). Of her 1,018 friends, 160 interacted with her on her wall for a total of 919 times. The most any one person posted either status or response was 59 times, with only 26 who posted ten times or more (average response was 5.7 times).

In the following figures, the y-axis is the number of responses and the x-axis is the category of responses.

Figure 35. Rachel’s Participants’ Status Posts.
Figure 36. Rachel’s Friends’ Responses.

Figure 37. Rachel’s Friends’ Posts.
For Rachel, Facebook is a place to express her opinion (e.g. “This was little more realistic! Give me a little more credit then the I’m pregnant joke!”), share information (e.g. “Rachel attended Put your Records On”), and encourage people (e.g. “My dear friend Daniel nailed his recital!!!!). Although her father “wasn’t very affectionate” and her mom “was depressed,” Rachel was a highly relational person; she engaged people in conversations at a higher rate than some of the other participants. She said, “I tend to get friends pretty easily, but I’ve never had close friends until I came to Premier.” The close feelings associated with Premier are reflected in the SCS, where 41 of the respondents scored mostly or completely that they are recognized when walking down the hall.

While her spiritual life was important to her, she was less likely to express direct spiritual statements on Facebook (e.g. “Thank you God for all the blessings”). Her first experience with a church youth group was “freaky” because students were raising hands.
She is very careful not to be showy about her faith. Her friends are encouragers who request information and share information (e.g. “Park day when I get back! Plan on it”).

On Facebook, Rachel’s understanding of biblical community is expressed in her high degree of interaction, acceptance of a large friend base, and her encouragement of those friends (e.g. “Congratulations! I am excited for you”). As seen in the SCS, 37 respondents scored “mostly” or “completely” when asked if the college listens to their concerns. Premier, with its small teacher/student ratio and discussion-based classes, fosters an environment where acceptance among is prominent. It was little wonder that Rachel was far above the average when it came to friends. She had 1,018, compared to the Facebook average of 130 (Facebook Statistics, 2012). She had a 15.7% interaction rate with her friends, but that dropped to 2.5% when it came to consistent interaction (more than ten times). For Rachel, chastising was not an integral part of her Facebook Community. Only .9% of the posts on her site chastised another person for his or her online behavior (e.g. “I hope you apologized”).

In her second interview, Rachel was very specific concerning the part that Facebook plays in her community. She said,

Facebook plays a big part in my community life. I am the Vice President of Student Government, and it allows me to let everyone at the school know when events are and keep in contact. Because I am at college, it also is a great way to keep in touch with my community back in Pennsylvania. We can write little words of encouragement or “thinking of you” notes to stay in touch.
Rachel described how the characteristics that have been identified in this study should be expressed in her virtual community:

- Humor is okay for Facebook as long as the people you are communicating with understand the humor. If you use sarcasm with someone who doesn't really know you, there could be issues and someone could become offended.
- Information can be good. I used my page to keep my friends and family up to date with my Europe trip over the summer. It's not good to give too much info out, though. You must be careful how much personal stuff you let everyone see.
- Empathy is fine, again as long as you won't be doing it to someone who could take it too far, such as someone of the opposite sex who could read too much into it.
- Chastisement should not be used on Facebook. There is a possibility that you could say something you wouldn't say in person and cause a very big issue. “I think Facebook should be used for encouragement. It's always nice to see a sweet comment from a friend to brighten your day. It's like when you get a letter from a friend or a quick text or phone call. It’s just a nice way to love on someone who may be too far away to be there for them in person.” Accountability was an important characteristic to Rachel. She mentioned in the first interview, “We are all sinners, so being accountable for each other and
lifting each other up [is important].” But it is definitely to be done in person.

- Conversation is good, but sometimes the conversations should be in a message to someone and not on the wall. There are some things that should not be put for everyone to see. But I think it is a really cool way to converse with someone in another state very quickly.

- Positive and negative emotional responses are tricky. Because I think Facebook is a good way to encourage, I also think it is okay to express that you are having a bad day or need prayer. On the other hand, you should not describe every negative thought for all to see. I think positive emotional responses are good and lets people know you are doing well. It can also be an encouragement for others.

Summarizing what she saw as the place of Facebook in her community, Rachel said, “Facebook is a great way to communicate and express your feelings and thoughts. However, you must be careful not to express too much. There are things people don't need to know.”

Rachel’s top five categories included response opinion, information, encouraging, conversations, and humor; her friends responded in kind. Facebook exhibited aspects of community, but not all of them. Those characteristics that were of a more personal nature were reserved for face-to-face interactions. However, there were times that Rachel used her Facebook pages to hold others accountable (she has chastised 18 times). She also expressed negative emotions 14 times. She did not see a disconnect between her real-world community and her virtual community.
When the evidence from one case substantiates a pattern within another, the finding is stronger. Therefore, the following cross case analysis compares the findings of eight cases, highlighting similarities and difference.

**Cross Case Analysis**

**Predominant Themes**

In developing biblical understanding, the research looked at three categories of influence: the family, the church, and the college. For each participant, these foundational institutions influenced positively or negatively their view of community life. Home life centered on aspects of the parental role, family structure, and changes that may have occurred that affected the participants’ understanding of community. The participant’s involvement in church life, specifically youth group, and how his or her experiences within the church community life positively or negatively impacted his or her understanding of biblical community. Each of the participants attended a Christian college. The college setting, dorm life, chapel discussions, and school activities shaped the participants’ thinking about community life. In the cross case analysis, the researcher compared and contrasted how each of the participants were shaped by these different institutions.

**Home.** Across the board, each of the participants felt that acceptance and inclusion were important aspects of community. How they arrived at that understanding was different. The home environment greatly influenced their sense of acceptance. Austin, Trent, Bridget, and Ester grew up in homes that were safe places, where people felt included and accepted. Bridget reflected on her parents’ attitude toward her rebellious sister, “We’re not going to condemn you. We still love you.” For Austin,
was expressed through a stable family relationship, “I have a mom and dad and they’re still together.” Trent described his family as “a team.” He was a child of a blended family. It was in this context that he saw his parents chose to work out their differences and commit themselves to their marriage, “I would say there was a couple of times where they almost got divorced.” Their families would be considered stable, providing support and encouragement. Stability did not mean the absence of conflict. However, each family sought to resolve their conflicts and accept one another.

On the other hand, John, Rachel, Eric, and Ann grew up in families that did not foster healthy community perspectives. Eric remembered, “She (mom) tried to kill herself, tried to actually kill herself in front of us one night where she was trying to hunt us down.” Their family lives were more volatile, marked with depression, divorce, neglect, and self-preservation. Instead of teaching healthy values, they learned to fend for themselves or take responsibility for other family members. Ann recalls,

The person she had been when my dad married her [is gone]. He’s told me even within the first couple of weeks after [they were] married, she started to change. She got postpartum depression, she tried to commit suicide, and she doesn’t connect logical dots anymore.

John described his father, “He’s very much a perfectionist, strict. He’s, ‘if you want it done right, do it yourself,’ type of guy.” It was this perfectionism that made it difficult for John to accept people.

The former group felt accepted within the family context, whereas the latter sought acceptance because it was absent at home. In each case, acceptance became a prominent theme in their description of a healthy community.
Church. Bridget, Ann, and Ester saw their church experience as positive and supporting. Although they acknowledged the church failed at times to be an accepting community, their overall experience was good. For Ann, church became a place to feel safe, “I loved it and I grew up knowing the people in the church and always having a place there.” Even as a little girl, she would walk to Sunday school on her own. There she was mentored and learned what it meant to be a woman, “watching other women just be themselves…I had a lot of women correct me if I was wrong…being corrected gently.” For Bridget, it was the close social environment and a compassionate youth pastor, “I definitely looked forward to going to youth group because I had a wonderful Youth Pastor.” Ester experienced relationships in her church growing up through small groups. In a church of 1,200, the only way to make friends was to be a part of small group, “Another thing is they do small groups, so they have a big sign-up thing, like, once a year to sign up with a small group in your area.” Though the small groups were cliquey, it was the mentoring relationship that made it a positive experience. The common thread in these positive experiences was a caring adult: mentoring women, caring youth pastor, and a small group leader who poured time and care into their lives. It helped to develop a positive sense of community. For the women participants, church revolved around relationships, with caring, accepting people.

John, Eric, and Austin saw church as place to connect socially. Church was not a place for true community, but rather a place to participate in safe, recreational activities. They liked church, but not for the mentoring relationships; they were there to have fun. For Eric, it was also a safe place. He was overweight and made fun of at school. Church became a place to vent his frustration on others, “It was a social gathering. At youth
group, we had some fun times and went to camps and that kind of stuff, and listened to a lot of sermons, listened to a lot of messages, but that was about it. It was just kind of a place to go hang out.” John and Austin were from ministry families, and yet their experience with church was not any deeper than Eric’s. Austin questioned whether he would have gone if his father were not the youth pastor,

If I had a choice to, like my dad wasn’t the youth pastor, I wonder if I would have gone. Probably not, because I wasn’t really close with any of those guys. I had to bring my own friends in order to feel like close within that community. There was no intimacy; there was no real bonding or supporting one another. Everyone was just so standoffish.

John, whose dad was in camp ministry, only went on occasion. He said, “I mean, it’s a group of people for a lot of things. It’s a good environment to just hang out with people.”

It is interesting that even positive, church going families have a difficult time passing on to their children the values of biblical community.

College. The participants from Smallville acknowledged that the college spoke a lot about community, but found it difficult to identify how it was manifested in real and meaningful ways. Bridget said, “They push, like, community, like they talk about community, but they never give a clear definition of what they’re looking for.” At the same time, they expressed how their dorms were places where their relationships flourished. They struggled, viewing the larger college context as a healthy community environment. Ester saw Smallville as safe. “When I first came, I didn’t know anybody. It wasn’t like I came here with a friend or anything. I was like, people are not gonna like me, and it’s gonna be miserable. That lasted for maybe three days, and then I figured out
that I could easily make friends with girls on my floor at the beginning.” Trent saw it as necessary, and John was not sure he wanted to be there, “I think in that way, and so that’s why I picked that, and I came to Smallville, partly, it was not super far away at the time. It was kind of a last-minute thing because I didn’t start looking for colleges until after I graduated high school.” Bridget loved it. However, each of them found community in their own way. John’s introversion kept his community small. He said he did not call too many people friends, but he still found community, “Well, we have some pretty good community in Joy (dorm). We just share a lot of just everything together. We have some deeper discussions, and a lot of it, a lot of it’s just like good friendship.”

Overall, they felt that the college had too many cliques, broken up by their majors. Generally, their fondest memories of community, in the larger context at Smallville, were when the students bonded together for a common goal, whether that was foreign missions or community service. Bridget described it, “They recently had a fundraiser for Japan, and I think that kind of, in itself, showed some real community in helping those in need.” This correlated with their church experience. They saw the church function best when all the churches worked together toward a common goal.

At Premier, it was different. The participants said they never understood community until they went to Premier. Ann said that Premier provided everything that a family should be, “I love that we have an emphasis on community. I’ve made the best friends of my life here, and it’s difficult, and its taxing to have to build relationships with people that you don’t necessarily want to have a relationship with, but it doesn’t matter because that’s not who Christ was and that’s not what the church was.”
For Eric, Premier brought community into focus, “I think it is holding each other accountable, speaking into people’s lives, being there when people are hurting, calling people out when they need to be called out, putting up with people’s crap, and realizing people are a mess. It’s about helping people get over their stuff, whether it’s a sin issue or getting annoyed just because I moved your stuff.” Rachel saw Premier as a large family, “The community is just a large family. I think that if you were to get even more people here, you would lose the connections. You would have a lot more students to teachers instead of the close bonds that we have with the teachers.” Austin, who came from a very loving family, said he never understood community until he went to Premier Music College, “There’s so much accountability. There is so much accountability that when I first got here I couldn’t ever bear it. People cared too much. Perhaps this is because of my previous community experience, and no one really cared at all; then going to the extreme.”

The smaller school, the close staff/teacher relationships, a common purpose (music), and a higher degree of accountability, all served to give the participants a positive feeling of community. They saw community as a daily occurrence between teacher/student and student/student. There was a stark contrast between Premier’s environment of community and what the participants experienced at home and church.

Each college made a concerted effort to build an environment to foster authentic biblical community. Premier seemed to have had a greater impact on the participants who attended. Three of the participants who attended Premier came from deeply troubled homes. Leaving their homes to find a college deeply committed to community met a
deep need. The small nature of Premiere actuated their feelings of acceptance and family. At Smallville, it was easier for students like John to hide away and not be involved in the community life of the college. Size makes accountability more difficult, though not impossible.

**Outliers.** Of the case studies, John is the only outlier. Though he engages people in community life, he considered himself an introvert. His personality impacted how he engaged, but not why. He believed that the term “friend” on Facebook was too simplistic; “I’m hesitant to call somebody a really close friend. In fact, for the longest time I was hesitant to even call somebody a friend.” Therefore, he had few friends and engaged them infrequently on Facebook. He would rather spend time with them face-to-face. John also said, “I enjoy using Facebook mostly to share things I am excited about.” As the other participants saw Facebook to see what others were doing, John was more self-centered in his use of Facebook. On the one side, he indicated that engagement on Facebook was simplistic and shallow, yet he said that it was important to him.

**Research Questions**

The research questions guided the study and kept the researcher focused on information that was relevant to the research. Family, church, and college were strong influences on students lives, and understanding their affect helped to understand how the participants’ understanding of biblical community was formed.

**Research Question #1**

How have institutions such as family, church, and college contributed to the participants’ understanding of community? Though the structures of relationships are often called institutions, family, church, and college, it is the people within these
institutions who impact and shape lives. Listening to the participants, four big themes began to emerge that impacted their lives and understanding of community. Each expressed, in their own way, that community was safe, accepting, inclusive, and family. The term “family” encompassed each of the participants’ relational contexts. Whether they had a negative experience or a positive one, “family” was always pictured as something important, positively longed for or positively experienced. A true family was a place safe to be expressive, accepting of others faults and failures, and inclusive of all whom wanted to join. Each of the participants had unique experiences as reflected below.

Bridget. Bridget grew up in a home that fostered a safe environment. She said, “I’m really close with my dad…I go to him for everything…[he] is willing to help anyone who needs it.” This safe environment extended to her church experience as well, “I had a wonderful Youth Pastor…who truly cared for us.” When she arrived at Smallville, she was overwhelmed with feelings of acceptance and inclusion. She felt safe to be herself. In her Facebook community, she wanted the same kind of environment. She said, “All the characteristics (displayed on Facebook) should be positive and uplifting, yet not too personal because you don’t want to get too personal.” Judgmental, chastising, critical, and negative emotional responses do not foster a safe environment and are avoided in her Facebook community. Deeper relationships were left to face-to-face encounters.

Acceptance was also important to Bridget. Her parents’ acceptance of her sister was an act of love and community. Bridget’s parents did not condone their daughter’s bad behavior, but they “listened and prayed” as their avenue for change. When the
church did not accept the worship style of a parishioner, Bridget saw their treatment and subsequent exclusion of her as a poor example of an accepting community. She had said, “She wasn’t harming anyone. So, I think they could have handled it in a more kind, gentle manner.” As she went to Smallville, it was its environment of acceptance that captured her heart and gave her a desire to attend. She brought the characteristic of acceptance to her Facebook community. Bridget said, “It is a place to expand my community.” Though Bridget had expressed that Facebook was integral to her total community experience, it had its limitations. She identified Facebook as a public forum, and as such it fit into her community understanding in the way that any public space would occupy.

One of the more prominent characteristics of community was belonging. As Blok (2008) said, “Community is about the experience of belonging . . . to belong is to be related to and a part of something” (p. 13). The participants in this study all expressed this as an integral part of their community. They used words such as “acceptance,” “together,” and “tight” to express this idea. Inclusion was also very important to them, and this was evident in the large number of friends whom they incorporated in their Facebook community. The average Facebook community was 130 friends (Facebook statistics, 2011). The average number of friends on the participants’ sites was 692.13.

There was a difference between belonging and inclusion. Though their online community consisted of hundreds of people, their personal interactions were much less. On average, participants engaged consistently (more than ten times) with only 14.75 friends. Biblical community, however, was manifested when its members replicated the love of God through authentic hospitality and love for each other. Anything else was
merely a religious club (Marty, 2005). This type of community would be impossible with so many friends. It was natural that their interaction revolved around a smaller group. All the participants expressed that positive emotions, encouragement, and empathy were important aspects of their Facebook community. This played out on their walls, prominently in regard to encouragement. Encouragement consistently was in the top five of status updates.

**Ester.** Ester’s view of community could be summed up in one word – family. Her family had the greatest impact on her understanding of biblical community. She grew up in the same house, in the same church, and was homeschooled. Ester’s parents modeled patience, care, and responsibility to the family. She said of her dad, “He worked hard….he would do anything for any of us.” Her closest friends lived on the farm down the road, and they were much like her. Like her family, they “could talk about anything.” Whether in her home or with her friends, Ester learned to be vulnerable within a safe environment.

That characteristic was exemplified in how her family dealt with conflict and decisions. She described her home as an “environment where my parents weren’t bickering all the time,” they made decisions “mutually,” and there was a harmony in her family that expressed itself through their common interest in music. Her parents were open to complaints, they listened, and then they made decisions.

Ester was not involved with the church until later in high school because she and her older sister had had bad experiences. She avoided church because, unlike her family, it did not provide an environment that felt safe. Nevertheless, she described what she believed to be good characteristics of church community with words like “love,”
“selflessness,” and “support.” As a practical matter, she saw its role as an active participant in the local community.

The family played a large role in her decision to attend Smallville. She said, “it was closer to home.” The fear of being thrust into an unsafe environment was a concern as she went away from home for the first time. “People are not gonna like me, and it’s gonna be miserable,” she feared. Ester came to find Smallville to be safe and has embraced its community. When describing Smallville’s desire to foster a community, she said it wanted to empower, serve, and hold one other accountable. Though there was varying degree of influence that students had in the Smallville community, she said, “they really do listen…they really do care.” Being listened to is reminiscent of her family and played a big role in her understanding of community.

Ester saw a downside in the size of Smallville. She felt it created cliques and prejudices. These same feelings were expressed in regard to her youth group. For Ester, the whole working together was a sign of healthy community, and she felt it was lacking at her college.

Family became a driving force within her Facebook community as well. Of her list of 25 things she liked, 7 referred to family. She explained that Facebook “is about connecting with people.” It was also about a safe environment. Negative emotions, empathy, and chastisement are private matters. They could be addressed, but not in a public forum. Ester said, “Facebook plays a huge part in my community life.” However, there were levels even for her. With 906 friends, Ester divided them into four categories: classmates, people from church, people she hangs out with, and close friends. The high number of friends revealed a desire for inclusion and connection, but out of that number
only 26 interacted with her consistently. She interacted with her friends more than the other participants, and with one friend 131 times. Facebook was Ester’s extended family, and she wanted them and her to feel accepted and safe, as they stayed connected.

**Trent.** Though born a middle son, Trent described himself as the oldest. The first-born son in a blended family gave him a different perspective on family. His younger sister and brother were opposites, and he related more with her because they both loved music. His dad was an introvert and the disciplinarian. Trent described him as mean, but not abusive. He saw his father filling the role of “disciplinarian” and “provider,” the head of the house. His mother was the extrovert who all his friends liked. It was these opposites, introvert and extrovert, that created tension in the home. Trent’s dad would retreat in the face of conflict, and his mother would pursue, and the arguments were less about the original problem and more about conflict/resolution styles. “The arguing was not excessive,” Trent said, “But a couple of times they almost got divorced.” He saw himself more like his mother. He said that his father’s temperament softened when they moved to Peoria. Though the children were not included in decision-making, the parents collaborated. Trent did not use feeling words as he described his family, though you could tell that he loved his parents. Conflict in community was normal and the resolution of difficult situations to a positive conclusion would influence Trent’s understanding of community.

Consistency with church involvement was challenging for Trent since his family bounced from church to church. The perspective this revolving church experience provided for Trent was to see church community from a broader perspective. Both his description of positive and negative community revolved around Christians from
different churches working together. The role of the church was “God’s hands and feet.” He said, “I hate when there’s anything negative…it should be as much positive as possible.” Like in his family, Trent did not like conflict in the church. Community was about positive interaction reflected in caring for people in the local city.

When asked about community at Smallville, Trent centered on “mission stuff.” His particular experience was at freshman orientation when the school performed service projects for the town of Smallville. When it came to decisions and dissent, Trent was not involved in the venues offered by the school. He knew about fireside chats, comment cards, and emails, but like in his home, other people made the decisions.

Facebook reflected Trent’s understanding of community. It was the big tent where people came together to socialize and have fun. He had 624 friends, and of all the participants, he interacted with them most often. However, these interactions were more about information, humor, and banter. Though his wall reflected the lighter side of his community, Trent posted more “spiritual” content to his friends than the other participants. “Facebook,” Trent explained, “has allowed my community to grow.” Facebook played an important role in Trent’s community, but it had its limits. It was a place for humor, information, and encouragement. Negative emotions, like negative interaction in church, should be dealt with somewhere else.

**John.** Community for John was teamwork. His home experience centered on camp life. His father, a camp director, was constantly busy with his work. Though he had meals with the family, the never-ending work of camp stole his time. John’s father was a perfectionist, a characteristic that he inherited. His mother and father worked together as a team to make decisions for the family, in which the children played no part.
His father was a private man, another trait that John shared. John also related that he was homeschooled, and though he liked it, he attributes his lack of close friends to that environment.

John expressed that church community was about people being together to have fun, learn, and do stuff. He enjoyed his youth group experience, but it was not a place where he made close friends. In fact, John shared that he was wary of identifying anyone as a close friend, let alone a friend. The only experience he could remember that was positive community revolved around some family friends who let them live in a basement while his father looked for work.

Smallville offered John an opportunity to experience community in a different way. Though he spoke of Smallville’s emphasis on community, he really did not seem interested in being a part of the community overall. It was his experience in the dormitory that had the greatest impact. Still cautious of calling anyone a friend, he had developed relationships that grew over time, and he attributed it to the vulnerability that is exhibited by the community shower.

John’s understanding of biblical community was about family. The picture he paints of his family was hardworking, team oriented, and perfectionistic. Even so, underneath the veneer of private life were words like “vulnerable,” “inclusion,” and “respect.” His community was cautious about including others, but it desired deep relationships. His most endearing feeling was expressed after his family found a job and moved from the basement, “You know, they sent us off in prayer.”

Facebook, for John, was a reflection of his face-to-face community. He was cautious about what he shared; he did not include many in his circle of friends, and he
limited his interaction to an even smaller group of people. Facebook was a utility that served a purpose, a directory of information. It was a venue to share what interested him, but not to engage people in conversation. For John, Facebook was an extension of his community, but not an important one.

**Ann.** For Ann, biblical community was a Christ-like family. However, the picture of a healthy family did not come from her biological family. Ann said that she was close to her father, but that she and her mother never got along. Her mother was an obsessive/compulsive schizophrenic who was unable to function as either a wife or mother. The children reacted by isolating themselves and going to their rooms, or leaving and staying with friends. For advice on problems, Ann went to friends or people in her church.

It would be the women in her church who took on a mentoring role that her mother could not fill. Of all the things that could have drawn Ann away from God, she was inextricably drawn to church, often walking on Sunday mornings by herself. Where her father was too exhausted and ill equipped, the women of the church guided her into womanhood. It would be their unconditional acceptance that would shape Ann’s understanding of biblical community. That acceptance extended not only to her but to her mother, as well.

Ann said that she had few close friends growing up. Her mother’s condition was beyond their understanding, and they often rejected Ann, as a result. It was not until she went to Premier Music College where that changed. For Ann, Premier provided everything that a biblical family should provide. She used words like “discernment,” “friendship,” “small,” “structured,” and “love.” Most of all, the community at Premier
was Christ-centered. These characteristics were absent from her family growing up, but now formed the basis of good community.

When it came to Facebook, Ann made clear where she saw it fitting into her community. It was a relational place, but not an intimate place. Ann placed a high value on face-to-face relationships, and if not careful, Facebook could become a distraction. In fact, Facebook’s greatest value was that it facilitated face-to-face encounters. Isolation from family was her experience as a child. She understood biblical community to be something more and deeper. To the extent that Facebook contributed to the intimacy of face-to-face relationships, was the extent to which it had value in her biblical community.

**Eric.** For Eric, biblical community was living life together. However, his understanding of a healthy biblical community did not come until later in his college years. Home life was a turbulent time. Eric was an overweight child whose interest in science fiction and fantasy became a cause for teasing. His family was poor, as well, and their economic situation was met with disdain. His dad worked hard and was a self-employed handyman. Though he cared for his family, between work and school, he was not home very often. It would be Eric’s mom who tried to be the nurturer. However, her emotional instability made home life difficult. She was often depressed and spent most of her off work hours in bed. At one point, she tried “hunting her children down to kill herself in front of them.” As a child, Eric thought his mom’s depression was laziness. She and her husband fought often, which increased the tension in the home. He considered his friends more acquaintances and found that his weekends were “rather lonely.”
Church was a place where people hung out socially. From his perspective, church community was about legalism and status. The youth group, for Eric, was a safe place, not because it ministered to him emotionally, but rather because he could become the bully. It would not be until Eric was into his 20’s that he started to understand unconditional love within the context of church community. When he went off to his first college, he attended a church where they lived out their relationships with Christ in authentic ways. Eric began to understand love, acceptance, worship, healing, and family.

Premier Music College brought all this into focus for Eric. When describing community, it was about “caring for one another, speaking into each other’s lives, being there for one another, and living in close proximity.” Acceptance was a key word in Eric’s description of biblical community. It was a word that filled a deep space left vacant in his family and church as a child.

Facebook was an extension of Eric’s community, but it was not an integral part. It was good for keeping in contact, encouraging, and sharing information, but it could not replace face-to-face relationships. Eric saw biblical community as an accepting place, which is expressed on his Facebook by the number of his friends. He also expressed encouragement and spoke the truth into the lives of his friends through Facebook. However, when it came to the harder characteristics of community, chastisement, and negative emotions, they were to be left out of Facebook. They were to be conducted in person and expressed face-to-face.

**Austin.** For Austin, biblical community was every day. His father was a youth pastor, so growing up was filled with church activity. Austin’s father was organized, a leader, and fun. He was the one who enforced the rules but was also extremely
personable. The most memorable moment for Austin was after an argument, and his father came and apologized. Although he described his father as supportive, it was his mother who understood his dreams. With her, he felt free to express his hopes and aspirations, and knew that she would understand and encourage him to follow his heart. Austin’s brother was his best friend. They shared a room and were always there for one another. He said that he could share anything with him.

They always went to church. However, church was not where Austin learned community. Even with his father as the youth pastor, the youth group was about events and not about deep relationships. In fact, there were so many cliques, he was not sure if he would have attended the youth group if his father had not been the Pastor. Austin could not give an example of positive community in the church. He said it was not until he came to Premier that he began to understand what it meant to live in a biblical community.

Austin could not give me a specific instance of healthy community at Premiere because he said that it happened every day. Community was about living life together, sharing what you own, accountability both spiritually and academically. He said it was the only college he knew where the professors cared if you did your work or not, and would confront you personally.

In his family, Austin experienced a loving, supportive, accountable community. At Premier, the concepts became honed, and it would be those values and characteristics that would find themselves in his Facebook community. Austin saw Facebook as an integral extension of his face-to-face community. He saw Facebook as speeding up the process by allowing what takes place in the real world to continue in the virtual world.
Like the other participants, Austin saw Facebook as a place to encourage and share information. Unlike the others, he saw positive and negative emotions as a fundamental aspect of the community. The reality was that on his Facebook site there was very little activity in regard to negative emotion. So, even though he believed it was important, he was not likely to express negative emotions on Facebook.

**Rachel.** For Rachel, biblical community was being Christ to others. However, that description was not learned in her family growing up. She said that her family went to church, but there was not any transference of the Christian values at home. Her father worked out of town most of her life, and as a result, was an absent father. She considered him a provider and head of the home, but he was dictatorial when he was home. Her mother ruled the house when he was gone but frequently neglected household responsibilities. Rachel said she often assumed those responsibilities. Her father and mother habitually quarreled over what was or was not done. Rachel wanted her father’s respect and tried sports to gain his approval. He, however, diverted his attention to her brothers. She felt that love and affection were lacking as a child.

Church was ritualistic and an obligation for her family. Her relationship with God was a mirror image of her human father’s. It was performance-based, and she worked hard so God would be proud of her. Not until she attended youth group with a friend did she see that the spiritual life was deeper and more meaningful. She described the teens as “on fire,” biblically knowledgeable,” and “eager to learn.” It was a place where she felt accepted. She described church community as pushing past judgments and accepting others. These were important characteristics for Rachel, having been absent in her home.
Premier’s small teacher/student ratio was what drew her to the college. Her description was that Premier was “just a large family.” The expression of love and acceptance experienced at Premier filled a deep need that was absent in her life. At Premier, she found a family where sharing and caring went hand in hand. It is this expression of community that became a visible illustration of Christ to the city of Memphis.

Facebook was a “big” part of her community. As Vice President of the Student Government, it provided a tool to keep in contact with students and promote school events. However, its role runs deeper. With over 1,000 friends, Rachel was very inclusive and accepting. She displayed her understanding of biblical community through encouragement and interaction. Since relationships were important to Rachel’s real-world community, it was notable that she used Facebook to develop, enhance, and continue those relationships.

Developing an understanding of biblical community is complex. Many factors worked together to fashion how the participants’ understood how a biblical community should function. The following question looked at how the participants manifested their understanding of biblical community on Facebook.

**Research Question #2**

How do students express their sense of community on Facebook? People’s sense of community is identified by feeling that their needs are met, by being a member of the community, influence truly occurs, and there is a shared emotional connection (Chavis, 2011). The coding utilized during the observation of Facebook was grouped into the categories felt needs, shared emotional connections membership, and influence. Each
participant expressed, through his/her interactions, characteristics that reflected a sense of community. All of the participants, except for John, saw Facebook as an important part of the community.

**Felt Needs.** As the coding process continued, certain types of status updates were identified as felt needs. Spiritual, encouraging, negative emotions, positive emotions, empathy, and conversations all expressed how the participants had needs to be met, and a desire to meet the needs of others. All of the participants felt that Facebook was a place to stay connected. Ester said, “There are about 15 people that I try to stay in almost constant contact with, and Facebook helps accomplish that.” This was the most emphasized purpose of Facebook. It was a place where they could express encouragement and receive encouragement from their “friends.” John, who did not use Facebook as much as the others still felt that, “Facebook should be a place where people can post the ups and down of life. Share their joy and excitement with others as well as they pain and sadness.” Ann, however, was quick to note it was not a place for intimacy, and though the others did not articulate that, their interactions on their walls would reinforce that sentiment. Ann said, “I attempt not to parade my heart all over Facebook as though it belonged to the acquaintances reading my posts.” Her use of the term acquaintance revealed what she felt about most of the people she “befriended.” She may have felt the sting of too much ‘openness’ as she said later, “Since people who are on Facebook involve themselves in meddling and gossip more heavily and boldly than they would in a real life setting.” Trent, however, had a different experience. Talking about conversations and encouragement he commented, “Sometimes it’s (encouragement) between friends or loved ones who know someone is going through a hard time. They’ll
just comment or post on their wall a short message of encouragement.” Rachel gives an apt warning when addressing felt needs, “Empathy is fine, again as long as you won't be doing it to someone who could take it too far such as someone of the opposite sex who could read too much into it.”

The needs that the participants met most often were emotional and spiritual. Encouragement, empathy, spiritual quotes, and positive comments were encouraged in their Facebook community. However, most commented that too much emotional exposure on their Facebook pages was not good; “avoid any negative emotions” was Ann’s caution.

**Shared emotional connection.** They all agreed that connection was a primary function of their Facebook community. The depth of connectivity, however, was limited to only a handful of “friends” and was expressed positively. Emotional connectivity, in Facebook, was developed through sharing personal pictures, videos, and messages. A friend posted on Ester’s wall, “That hip hop cello player is AMAZING. I can’t stop watching the video 😊.” Austin posts a video and comments, “Cat snuggling a Dolphin.” A friend responds, “That cat reminds me of Figaro in Pinocchio.” Posts like these connect people together emotionally. Friends bond over common interests and activities, like when Trent shared, “Remember when you hit that poor duck?? Yeah..I almost hit one. Luckily, I didn’t But I freaked out because I pictured Callie after it happened to you.” To the extent that the participants shared and/or reviewed others was the extent to which emotional connectivity took place. Eric commented, “I see Facebook as a way to keep in touch with friends and family…and let them know what is going on in my life.” Ann pointed out the importance of using media to connect emotionally with friends when
she said, “If there is a new video on Facebook one of my friends hasn’t seen yet, then I will most likely tell that person I’ll send them a link. The most I’ve ever heard people in my community talk about Facebook is in the form of, “hey, did you see that post yet? It is ___!” Though emotional connectivity would seem limited in a virtual world, the more the participants shared common interests through music, video, and pictures, the more bonding took place.

Membership. All the participants felt Facebook provided a place of membership. They saw their “friends” as part of that membership and included them in varying aspects of their lives. Membership is about connectivity. “Do I feel a part of this group of people?” Engagement in conversation, the sharing of information, playing games through applications, and even the common use of humor created feelings that this place was where people gathered together and they belonged to one another. Even John, who saw Facebook more about himself, connects with friends through playing games, “When are we playing age of empires? Let me know! Friday at 11:42 am.” Trent, who had more conversations on Facebook than the other participants, begins a conversation, “Guess what!? We’re in the new chapel…can’t wait!” Eight exchanges later, Trent ends it, “I need to know how much class to skip!” Conversations that centered on common interests and making plans forged a bond of membership as participants felt a sense of belonging.

Trent also saw his membership in the virtual community as overlapping with his real-world community, “Whenever someone is holding an event, such as a concert, a cookout, a party, or even more important meetings and such, they often send me a Facebook event invite.” Inviting and sharing information created a connection that says, “I belong to this community.” Though Rachel saw information as a way to be a part of
the community cautions, “Information can be good. I used my page to keep my friends and family up to date with my Europe trip over the summer. It’s not good to give too much info out though. You must be careful how much personal stuff you let everyone see.”

The place of membership in a virtual community differed than real-world community. Where real-world communities are localized, the Facebook community included people from greater distances. Distance, however, did not diminish the membership status within Facebook, rather, it was enhanced. Bridget noted this when she said, “Facebook has allowed me to stay connected with friends who have moved away and those who I rarely see while I am away at school.” Because connections could be maintained, despite distance, Facebook was a powerful tool for their community members. Ann described, wonderfully, Facebook and her community at college,

I would liken Premiere virtual community to walking through someone’s fully furnished home, reading all the notes on the kitchen counter and the post its on the mirrors, and gathering an idea of the people who live there without actually meeting them. Facebook is merely an appendage of convenience, but one used so often it’s known as a necessary part of the community social life.

Belonging is a strong need that every human possesses (Chavis, 1986). Whether on Facebook or in their real world, the participants developed a sense of membership through the connections they made using information, conversation, and common activities. However, membership is not enough to formulate strong communities. Having influence that affects the community is just as important.
Influence. Influence was a limited factor in the participants’ Facebook community. Holding one another accountable, sharing one’s opinions, and asking and answering questions were indicators of influence in the participants’ Facebook communities. Serious conversations on the participants’ wall were avoided because they often created tension and conflict. It was difficult, if not impossible, to influence others without serious, and sometimes contentious, dialogue. Holding friends accountable for aberrant behavior was also discouraged. Ester noted, “I think that chastisement has no place on Facebook. I firmly believe that if you have an issue with someone, it should be private and face-to-face.” Bridget felt that people who held others accountable were “responses [that] just seem to be attention grabbers for people to feel sorry for you or for you to stir up trouble.” Eric, in one of the few times he held someone accountable, posted, “Steve; I hate to say this but…” However, in the second interview, he stated, “It [accountability] should only be done face-to-face.” Instead, he was more apt to use “positive comments and encouragement to speak truth into peoples lives, individuals have done the same for me.” Austin emphasized the same point, “This (accountability) is a matter that needs to be handled face to face, privately. People deserve enough respect to be communicated to on a similar ground.”

Accountability was not the only way participants sought to influence their friends. Austin noted that humor was the simplest way to connect with other friends. This idea emphasized what the other participants believed about the types of interaction that were appropriate on Facebook walls. They held that only positive and uplifting posts were suitable.
Influence is also about working together for a common purpose. This is difficult in a Facebook community and Trent succinctly pointed that out, “One thing I don’t feel Facebook does in regards to community is help everyone work together towards a goal. As I said in my previous interview, I feel that is a huge part of community.” Facebook may be a place where people could express positive and encouraging remarks, but it was unlikely that meaningful influence could take place.

Facebook, however, was only a part of the participants’ community life. The following question sought to answer the connection between the participants’ Facebook community and their real-world community.

**Research Question #3**

What connections are there between student’s OSN community and their real-world community? Facebook was a place for connection and information. Information was the most common form of Facebook status updates. Information about events, dates concerning travel arrangements, and conversations between people in the same room connected the Facebook community to their real-world communities. Trent used Facebook to solicit participants, “We’re filming for the Smallville College dating montage movie in third floor west oak! If you want to partake, come on up, it will be amazing!” A conversation ensued where people asked additional information. Ester’s friend wrote on her wall, “Ester’s senior viola recital is about to begin. Come show her how much you love. Because she’s pretty flippin’ amazing.” Luke engages in a conversation regarding a meeting with one of his professors,

Professor, “you need to come see me😊

Professor, “I’m open till 11 am.”

Conversations and posts like these tie the Facebook community to the participants’ real-world communities. Bridget said, “It has helped in my real community because I am constantly aware of what is happening to those around me; whether it is through messaging, chat, status updates, or events.” Austin agrees with her, but comes at it from another direction, “Facebook is a tool that enhances the relationships at a much faster rate. Which means for community that it brings people together, faster. So after developing a relationship, you can go home and still continue to progress in that relationship within the walls of Facebook.” Even John saw Facebook as a utility, “It also acts as a master address book. Most people have contact information such as email, phone, and physical address, as well as just being able to send a private message to them or post to their wall.” For the participants in this study, Facebook was another room where they met their friends, and at times they would leave that room to meet and engage in the real world.

Friendship on Facebook is obscured because of the number of people regarded as friends. The following question explored the differences, if any, between online friends and real-world friends.

**Research Question #4**

How do Christian students treat their friendships within the OSN differently than their friendships in the real-world community? The quick answer is no, there was no difference in how they treated their friends online as they did offline. Eric remarked that, “Facebook was not originally intended to mimic real-world communities,” but he believed that over the years it evolved to where community characteristics are naturally
displayed in Facebook. Austin believed that it enhanced relationships at a faster rate. However, they were all quick to point out that Facebook was not the place for negative responses. Bridgett explains, “I think that Facebook should be used more for positive emotional responses than negative ones. But, I am a firm believer that we should try to be positive and find hope in the hard times. I find myself very annoyed when I see "life sucks" statuses of Facebook.”

The participants in this study treated their friends more positively on Facebook than they might offline. Confrontation, accountability, and chastisement were interactions left to private conversations, “should only be done face to face,” Eric emphasized. This was different than what Donath and Boyd (2004) found, where people online tended to make themselves into something they truly were not. The participants in this study believed that biblically, negative expressions of community are best done face-to-face. In this way, they treated them differently.

The participants merged their online and real-world experiences, but is what John said, “What is said on Facebook, stays on Facebook,” a true statement? The following question examined how participant interaction moved them from Facebook to their real-world experiences.

**Research Question #5**

How does the participant’s involvement in the OSN move him or her to real-world interaction? The question raised above is a need-based question. In other words, when a friend expressed a need did the participant respond in the real world? There were many instances where friends asked questions of the participants and were quickly answered within the Facebook community. However, there were other times when help
with homework, moving, and other practical opportunities arose, and participants helped
in the real world. A friend asked Eric, a dorm supervisor, “hey bro, I am in need of
someone to pick me up from the airport Sunday night. I was wondering if you could do
it?” Ann who worked in student government was asked, “Ann, can I catch a ride for
class?” Bridget was involved as a resident assistant. She wrote on a friend’s wall,
“Hope you’re feeling better soon! Let me know if I can do anything for you.” Facebook
was a way for them to stay connected with the “friends” they served. If information was
made available, they were able to assist in a timelier manner. However, other needs,
more emotional in nature, depended on the nature of the need. Frustrations, dislikes, or
discouragements were expressed at times on participants’ walls. Austin posted, “is no
longer listed as in a relationships.” Ester expressed, “Wish these dang knots would leave
my body!!!:( “ These types of needs were often met with encouragement online, and
depending on the closeness of the real-world friendship, the participants would engage
the friend offline.

Because Facebook was used more for encouragement and information, the
movement from online to offline relationships was limited to events and actives.
Emotional needs were either ignored, or if the real-world relationship was sufficiently
close, met offline.

Summary

The participants had varied experiences with home, church, and college.
However, each of those institutions influenced how they viewed and understood biblical
community. Whether the experience was positive or negative, they all saw biblical
community as accepting, loving, and serving. Their understanding expanded and grew
with each new experience and, when they came to college, their understanding of biblical community became more focused. Both colleges fostered healthy communities. In this context, the participants came to understand biblical community in greater depth.

All of the participants viewed their community on Facebook as important. Their “friends,” though varying in number, centered on a few close associations. They believed that Facebook was an extension of their real-world community, but was limited to information, humor, and positive interactions. They saw Facebook as a virtual conversation, so sharing information was not narcissistic, as much as their side of the conversation. If friends “lurk” they are passive listeners, but if they respond they become participants in the conversation. Chapter Five will discuss the findings, draw conclusions, and suggest further study.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings

The question raised in this study was: How does Christian college students’ understanding of biblical community manifest itself on Facebook? To understand this fully, the researcher utilized a qualitative descriptive multi-case study design to better comprehend how students developed an understanding of biblical community in the real world and then applied it in a virtual community. Interviews were conducted with eight students, four from Premier Music College and four from Smallville Christian College. Participants were asked questions about family, church, and college to ascertain how these institutions helped to formulate their thinking about community.

Sense of Community Survey

The Sense of Community Survey was designed to measure how students felt about belonging to their respective colleges. Premier Music College (883 out of 1012 points or 87%) and Smallville Christian College (3590 out 5880 points or 61%) had more respondents scoring in the “mostly” and “completely” columns for all the questions. This indicated that students at both colleges had a deep sense of community. The intentional nature of the schools in creating environments where students felt they belonged, and could participate, appear successful, when compared to the survey.

Premier students’ high sense of community may stem from several factors, all surrounding the size of the school. Their small class sizes, discussion-based teaching, and emphasis on openness and honesty can lead to a greater sense of ownership and
belonging. The Sense of Community Survey indicated that the college encourages the development of their gifts, at some point.

Smallville seemed strong on structure, and though the intent was to give students a voice, there was a disconnect between what they strived for and how the students felt. This may be the result of little emphasis on small-groups where students can express themselves in meaningful ways. Smallville may offer small group opportunities, such as fireside chats, but students did not feel their voice influenced the institution on issues of great importance.

**Interviews**

The participants described characteristics of biblical community. Though the participants struggled to express what their school wanted them to know, and even what they believed to be biblical community, articulation and practice are different. They lived and practiced community, but never had to explain its nature. Their understanding of biblical community focused on acceptance, inclusion, service, accountability, and love. For participants at Premier Music College, biblical community was about doing life together. For the participants at Smallville Christian College, community was the whole school working together for a common goal. Participants at both colleges began to have their concepts of community focused when their respective colleges emphasised its importance.

**Facebook**

The final piece was observation of six months of Facebook interactions to see if the participants’ understanding of biblical community was applied to their Facebook community. The researcher identified and coded 17 types of interactions that occurred
and catalogued those findings (humorous, informational, spiritual, encouraging, chastising, negative emotion, question, positive emotion, empathy, quote, answer, video, pictures, music, application, response, opinion, and conversation). These codes were then refined and grouped into four categories: membership, influence, emotional connections, and felt needs.

Relating to their understanding of biblical community, Facebook was an extension of the positive aspects of community life. Chastisement, accountability, and conflict were considered inappropriate for a public forum. Even expressions of negative emotions were to be limited. The consensus was that people who constantly expressed negative emotions were attention seekers and annoying.

Discussion In Light of the Relevant Literature

Focusing on the community of Facebook, this research found that it encompassed many of the characteristics established in real-world communities. Both Bott (1957), Stacey (1969), and Blok (2008) pointed out that the expression of communities is about connectedness. This plays well in Facebook, which is an unbounded community, is less about physicality and more about being connected with people. All but one participant, in their second interview, expressed that Facebook played an important role in both their virtual and real community. They saw Facebook as a bridge between the times that they were together. Even for friends who were miles away, information shared through status updates prompted emails and phone calls. All of the participants agreed that negative emotions and controversial dialogue should not be displayed on Facebook. However, if a friend posted something of this kind, it often encouraged a visit or phone call. For all the participants, sharing information about events was paramount. Facebook became a
virtual community bulletin board where real-world events brought them together. Mainly it was about being connected with their friends, whether the friends were in the next chair or hundreds of miles away.

It is interesting that, in the case of the students at Smallville Christian College, the larger community cohesion was important to them. Nevertheless, when asked who made up their core relationships, they centered on people who had common interests, majors, or floor designation. McPherson et al. (2001) said, “Homophily is the principle that contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people” (p. 416). Even though they desired to have a higher degree of crossover between the athletes, musicians, mathematicians and so forth, the reality was a lot different. This was not an issue for Premier Music College because all the students were musicians.

One study found users’ responses toward friends were dependent on what they saw on their Facebook pages (Walther et al., 2008). The more complimentary the status updates on another user’s wall, the greater credibility he or she had as friends. For the participants in this study, however, this did not hold true. Their relationships with their online friends were extensions of their face-to-face community. Relationships formed in the real world were not affected by status updates. Though they had large online communities, their consistent interactions were with people they had contact with in their real-world communities.

Premier Music College has limited their student body to 120 students. They believe that this is the optimal number for developing community. This is consistent with sociological studies that have found that the optimum size of a community is around 150 participants (Acar, 2008; Hill & Dunbar, 2002; Tilburg, 1998). However, the participants
at Premier had a larger Facebook Community than would seem manageable for a close community. Of course, when one takes a closer look at their consistent interaction, the reality is that their actual online community shrank considerably.

The participants had said that their Facebook communities were a very important part of their community experience. That did not mean they believed that every aspect of community should be displayed in the virtual environment. As Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002) have pointed out, people use the Internet as a supplement to their established social network. Still, for the participants in this study, their online community was more than just a supplement; it was as integral a part of their interaction as face-to-face interactions, it just had a different role.

Whereas Danath and Boyd (2004) found that people added friends to bolster their standing in the community, the participants in this study added friends as a matter of inclusion. The only exception to this was Austin, who has 1,339 “friends.” As a musician, he has used his Facebook for a combination of actual friends, acquaintances, and fans.

For the participants of this study, Facebook was a place to share, engage, and connect. Summer (2007) talks about how online social networks create a narcissistic environment where young people merely engage in self-aggrandizement. This, however, is true with any relationship where people engage in communication. There are healthy and unhealthy narcissistic tendencies (Sedikides, Rudich, Greeg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). People share personal information, stories, and information freely between one another. As part of their community, Facebook was the place where these types of interactions took place. They seemed one-sided, but in reality, they were not. As people
responded, shared, and chided, the Facebook environment became a virtual conversation. Even though there were varying numbers of “conversations” on the participants’ walls, for them the Facebook experience was a conversation. They did not see it, necessarily, as narcissistic, but as a mutual exchange of information and experience.

Their virtual conversations were extensions of their real-world relationships, and how they treated one another reflected real-world intimacy. This was consistent with Gosling (2011) whose research found that online and offline behaviors mirrored one another. What was seen about Trent online was a reflection of his offline personality. Trent described his mother as funny, a cutup, and the “cool” parent. His friends enjoyed being around her. She wrote on his wall, “A man runs over his wife. Whose fault is it? The man, he shouldn’t be driving in the kitchen.” Her humor, and their close relationship, was displayed on Facebook. Even in the case of Austin, who used his Facebook community to network musically, wanted to see his friends at concerts or buying CDs. The participants in this study were very careful of the content they display on Facebook. They also had expressed that what you saw about them on Facebook was how they were in real life.

Moving from online to offline relationships was important to the participants. They either informed of upcoming events, reported events that had already occurred, or shared pictures and videos of events in which they had participated. Zhang, Jiang, and Carroll (2011) said, “One major adaptation of Facebook use is supporting social events.” They went on to express that real-world weak and strong ties were qualitatively different than those on Facebook. This helped to understand how the participants in this study
viewed their Facebook interactions. They saw their interactions as important, but casual, connecting, but not intimate. Facebook was limited in the kinds of ties it could create.

**Discussion in Light of the Theoretical Framework**

Community, whether real-world or virtual, exhibit certain characteristics. Blok (2008) identified nine characteristics of healthy communities, listed as follows:

1. Belonging
2. Gifts
3. Involvement
4. Decision-Making
5. Accountability
6. Small Groups
7. Conversation
8. Common Purpose
9. Ownership

The research found that, though important to the participants, not all these community characteristics were present in Facebook.

**Belonging**

Facebook was essentially about belonging. The participants expressed that inclusion of people within their Facebook was important. This was expressed in the number of friends within their Facebook community. The number of friends varied from 112 to 1,339, the average number of friends was 242.5. They “feel” that they belonged, although, belonging to a community involved contributing more than just a name to a list. Community belonging was a combination of all the characteristics.
Gifts

Gifts are talents and abilities that contribute to a healthy community. In a biblical context this would include such things as teaching, administration, leadership, encouragement, and so forth. Community gifts also include skills. These work together for the community’s common good. For the participants, there were few opportunities to express skills and talents; however, gifts related to encouragement, spiritual comments, and empathy were displayed on the participants’ walls. Encouragement was the second most expressed type of comment on their walls. Administrative skills were seen when certain participants used their wall to announce real-world activities. Gifts then, are an important aspect in a Facebook community, but are limited in the scope and application.

Involvement

Involvement is a key aspect of Facebook; however, it is different than involvement in real-world community. Involvement in Facebook revolved around the content that was expressed, not a physical event attended. Involvement in Facebook was a contribution to a virtual conversation. All but one of the participants contributed on a regular basis.

Decision-Making

Decision-making was a characteristic that was not a group event in the Facebook community. Each Facebook account was an individual effort, whether it was a decision to include a friend or what music or video to post. The only way that decision-making became a community event was when there was a conversation about a real-world activity.
Accountability

Only one participant felt that Facebook was a place for accountability. The other participants felt that accountability should be conducted in a private, face-to-face environment. Since Facebook was a public forum, accountability, like negative responses, should not be posted.

Small Groups

A small group within the Facebook community was new phenomena in 2011. Google took the lead and Facebook followed, allowing users to create smaller groups of friends. This was not available during the fieldwork of this study. Further study needs to be conducted to see how users integrate the idea of small groups in the context of virtual communities.

Conversation

The idea of conversation in community is one of deep and meaningful dialogue for the health of the community. Facebook was a virtual conversation, but as a public forum the type of conversations that took place were limited. Serious dialogues on topics that create tension were avoided. Participants’ conversations revolved around encouragement and humor. Humor, or banter, was common among the participants, but was not what Blok (2009) meant by meaningful conversation.

Common Purpose

As a community, Facebook users had the common purpose of connection and belonging. Beyond this commonality, it would be difficult to create goals and strategies as a community. Any common purpose expressed on Facebook revolved around real-world activities. The closer the real-world relationships were, the greater the discussion
of common purpose occurred. The participants had connections with people from
different areas of the country and the world. However, within this limited manner,
Facebook exhibited the characteristic of common purpose.

Ownership

The participants felt an ownership of their Facebook community in three ways.
First, they controlled the content that was placed on their walls, pictures, video, and a
host of applications. Secondly, they had the ability to “friend” or “unfriend” people.
Thirdly, users could remove conversations that they felt were inappropriate in a public
forum. This was somewhat illusory. Ownership entails contribution and loss for the
maintaining of the community. When a participant left, or unfriended, someone from the
community easily, it was about individual control instead of community involvement.
Ownership of a community meant the individual accepted responsibility for the whole.
Ownership on Facebook was about the ability of the individual to come and go as he or
she pleased. It contributed to narcissism.

Looking at the participants’ activity on Facebook through this theoretical
framework, the researcher concluded that Facebook as a community was limited. It
would be like having a public square in the real word, where no one knows where the
others live. However, the participants, as a whole, had manifested certain biblical
characteristics within their Facebook community. Spiritual comments, encouragement,
offers of help, empathy, and even humor were important ingredients of biblical
community. Facebook, therefore, is a helpful addition to biblical community, but not a
substitute for real-world community involvement.
Limitations & Recommendations

By focusing on specific colleges and individuals, there will be aspects of the research that were limited it in scope, but gave direction for further research. The participants were all ethnically Caucasian. Participants were selected conveniently from a group of people who expressed interest in the study. Nonetheless, it limited the study to the perceptions of an ethnically defined group. There was also an age limitation. The study revolved around students who spent more than 20 hours per week online. Most people who fit into that category fall between the ages of 16 to 21 (Jones, 2002). Though a couple of the participants were older, the mean age was 22. Marital status was not considered in this study. All the participants were single college students. By nature, case studies are limited by the number of people who are involved in the study. Eight students gave a glimpse into the lives of college students and their Facebook interactions, and the data cannot be considered normative for all students. Location is a limitation since both schools were located in the Midwestern United States. The study was also limited in that the students who participated (except John) were highly motivated, leadership students. As leaders in the school, they may have had a greater understanding of biblical community than others students who had not gone through leadership training. Though valuable principles can be gleaned from the findings of this research, caution must be used in drawing universal principles.

Further study needs to be conducted in order to draw broader conclusions as to the place Facebook and other OSNs play in biblical community. A qualitative case study focusing on one college and incorporating more student interviews would help colleges
understand the dynamics of developing community and its use online. A quantitative study that would be more inclusive and can focus on the beliefs of students in regard to appropriate and inappropriate behavior in the context of biblical community would be beneficial. Also, looking at what other avenues are used by students to facilitate community such as emails, instant messaging, video conferencing, and chats might give future researchers valuable information about the concept of community and its connection to the virtual world. A quantitative study of Christian college students’ practice of biblical community in their real-world communities would help determine the extent to which Christian students are actually applying their beliefs about biblical community in their own lives.

Also, further study needs to be conducted to determine how gender, economic status, and ethnicity influence understanding of biblical community, and how these areas impact Facebook interactions.

**Audience**

The audiences that would find this study interesting and most helpful would be:

1. Academic colleagues who have an interest in virtual communities and how students engage in them.
2. College administrators who seek to develop environments where students learn and express biblical community.
3. Pastors who want to be proactive in developing biblical community understanding in young people.
Conclusion

All but John believed that Facebook was an integral part of their biblical community. However, even John held that Facebook was a place for sharing, encouraging, and building up other people. The participants saw Facebook as a place to connect, encourage, disseminate information, engage in humor, share interesting media, and express their personalities through notes and blogs. It was an extension of their real-world community, and, for the most part, the friends they included were important to them on a personal level, even if they had not posted in awhile. The only exception to the perceived value of Facebook friends may be Austin, who broadened his Facebook community to include a music fan base.

How does Christian college students’ understanding of biblical community manifest itself on Facebook? The conclusion to this question is summed up in four words.

Acceptance. Biblical community is about acceptance and inclusion. Even though the participants responded to only a small group of their friends, they believed that including people into their community was important, and as such had accumulated a large “friend” base.

Encouragement. Biblical community is about building up one another, and encouragement is a large part of that characteristic. Encouragement was consistently in the top four characteristics displayed on their Facebook pages.

Communication. Biblical community is all about communicating a message and community activities. Though the Christian message was not a large part of their interactions on Facebook, sharing information about themselves and community activities
was prominent. Communication was about inclusion. When an invitation to an event was posted on a Facebook wall, it became an open invitation to all who read it, creating the sense that all were included in the event.

Private Accountability. Participants were careful with what they post on Facebook. They felt that negative comments, chastisement, and accountability dialogue was best kept for fact-to-face interaction. They believed that truly caring individuals dealt with negative issues in private, not in a public setting such as Facebook.

These eight participants had varied and colorful backgrounds that shaped their understanding of biblical community. Most came to understand that biblical community centered on their relationship with Jesus Christ and their relationship with people, both in their real-world community and in their virtual community.
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Appendix A

Adapted Questions from the Pew Research Project

1. How often do you go online?

2. Students use the Internet MOST OFTEN to:
   - Communicate socially
   - Engage in work for classes
   - Entertainment
   - Communicate professionally
   - Not sure/Don’t know

3. The Internet has had a positive impact on my college experience, in general
   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neutral
   - Disagree
   - Strong Disagree
   - Don’t know/Not sure

4. I use email for clarification of homework assignments
   - Often
   - Sometimes
   - Seldom
   - Never
5. With whom do students communicate most while using the Internet?

Friends
Family
Professors
Romantic Partner
Work Colleagues

6. What Internet communications tool is used most by college students?

Email
Online Social Network such as Facebook
Instant messaging
Black Board or other Educational software

7. How often do you respond to friends’ status updates?

Often
Sometimes
Seldom
Never
Appendix B

Revised Sense of Community Index by Dr. Chavis

Sense of Community Index
Community Science 1

**SENSE OF COMMUNITY INDEX II**

The following questions about community refer to: [insert community name].

How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members?

**How well do each of the following statements represent how you feel about this community?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at All</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Mostly</th>
<th>Completely</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I get important needs of mine met because I am part of this community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Community members and I value the same things.</td>
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<td>3. This community has been successful in getting the needs of its members met.</td>
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<td>4. Being a member of this community makes me feel good.</td>
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<td>5. When I have a problem, I can talk about it with members of this community.</td>
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<td>6. People in this community have similar needs, priorities, and goals.</td>
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<td>7. I can trust people in this community.</td>
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<td>8. I can recognize most of the members of this community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Most community members know me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. This community has symbols and expressions of membership such as clothes, signs, art, architecture, logos, landmarks, and flags that people can recognize.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. I put a lot of time and effort into being part of this community.</td>
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<td>12. Being a member of this community is a part of my identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Fitting into this community is important to me.</td>
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<td>14. This community can influence other communities.</td>
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<td>15. I care about what other community members think of me.</td>
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<td>16. I have influence over what this community is like.</td>
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<td>17. If there is a problem in this community, members can get it solved.</td>
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<td>18. This community has good leaders.</td>
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<td>19. It is very important to me to be a part of this community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. I am with other community members a lot and enjoy being with them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. I expect to be a part of this community for a long time.</td>
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<td>22. Members of this community have shared important events together, such as holidays, celebrations, or disasters.</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. I feel hopeful about the future of this community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>24. Members of this community care about each other.</td>
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1 2 3 4 5 6
Prefer not to be Part of This Community
Not Important at All
Not Very Important
Somewhat Important
Important Very Important

Sense of Community Index

Community Science 2

Not at All | Somewhat | Mostly | Completely |
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Sense of Community Index
Community Science 3

Instructions for Scoring the Revised Sense of Community Index

1. Identifying the Community Referent
The attached scale was developed to be used in many different types of communities. Be sure to specify the type of community the scale is referring to before administering the scale. Do not use “your community” as the referent.

2. Interpreting the Initial Question
The initial question “How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members?” is a validating question that can be used to help you interpret the results. We have found that total sense of community is correlated with this question – but keep in mind this may not be true in every community.

3. Scoring the Scale
For the 24 questions that comprise the revised Sense of Community Index participants:
Not at All = 0, Somewhat = 1, Mostly = 2, Completely = 3
Total Sense of Community Index = Sum of Q1 to Q24
Subscales Reinforcement of Needs = Q1 + Q2 + Q3 + Q4 + Q5 + Q6
Membership = Q7 + Q8 + Q9 + Q10 + Q11 + Q12
Influence = Q13 + Q14 + Q15 + Q16 + Q17 + Q18

Shared Emotional Connection = Q19 + Q20 + Q21 + Q22 + Q23 + Q24
Appendix C

Sense of Biblical Community Survey Adapted from SCI-2

1. In this community, I feel as if I am as important as other people.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

2. I share the same values as this community.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

3. I am concerned about other people’s needs in my community.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

4. When I am struggling, people in this community encourage me.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

5. I feel that other people listen to my concerns.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

6. This community can meet the needs of its members.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

7. I can trust the people in this community.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

8. I know most of the people in this community.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

9. When I walk down the hall, people in this community recognize me.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

10. This community has symbols and rituals that set it apart.
    Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely
11. I am an active participant in this community.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

12. My identity as a believer is connected to my community.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

13. This community makes me feel like they need me to participate.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

14. This community has an impact on the people in other communities.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

15. I hold myself accountable to other members in this community.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

16. I feel like I have a voice in this community.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

17. This community is able to work out its own problems.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

18. The leaders in this community are people of integrity.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

19. Everyone should be an active participant in this community.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

20. Being in a small group is important to me.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

21. I plan to be a part of this community for at least three years.

   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

22. I enjoy being a part of the special programs of this community.
23. I feel hopeful about the future of this community.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely

24. People in this community forgive one another.
   Not at all  Somewhat  Mostly  Completely
Appendix D

Biblical Basis for Biblical Community Index

1. In a community, everyone is of equal value (Phil. 2:3).
2. In a community, everyone should have the same mind on shared values (Eph. 4:3; Phil 2:2).
3. A community cares for everyone’s needs (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 12:2-6).
4. Encouragement is important in a community (1 Thess. 5:11).
5. It is important to listen to other people’s problems (James 1:19).
6. A strong community has the ability to meet the needs of its members (Rom. 12).
7. Trust is essential for community life (Cor. 4:2).
8. Knowing most of the people in a community is healthy.
9. It is important that people are recognized in a community.
10. Communities are recognized by their symbols and rituals (Gal 3:27; Rom. 6:3; 2 Cor. 11).
11. Participation by community members is important (Eph. 2:10).
12. A believer’s identity is wrapped up in biblical community (Romans 12).
13. Every member should be made to feel a part of the community (1 Cor. 12:13,27).
14. Communities should impact the world (Matt. 28:18; Acts 1:6-8).
15. Members of a community should be mutually accountable (1 Tim. 5:1; Matt. 18; 1 Cor 5:12).
16. Every member should be heard in the community.
17. A community should be able to work out its problems (1 Cor. 6)
18. Leaders with integrity are important to a community (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6).

19. Being a part of community is essential for everyone (Heb. 10:25).

20. Being a part of a small group is important to community health (Acts 2:46).

21. Length of membership is important to community stability (Eph 4:3).

22. Shared community celebrations solidify community relationships.

23. A community with hope will last (Jer. 29:11).

24. Forgiveness is foundational to community cohesion (Matt. 6:14).
Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Title of Research: The Manifestation of Biblical Community Understanding in a Facebook Community: A Qualitative Study among Christian college students

Investigator: Paul William Perkins

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose, procedures, benefits, risks, discomforts, and precautions of the program. Also described are the alternative procedures available to you, as well as your right to withdraw from the study at any time. No guarantees or assurances can be made as to the results of the study.

Explanation of Procedures

This research study is designed to examine how students in Christian colleges manifest their understanding of biblical community on Facebook. Participation in the study involves completion of a survey, two interviews (one in person and one through online video protocol), and observations of participant’s Facebook pages. The in-person interviews will be audiotaped by me and later transcribed by professional transcriptionist for the purpose of data analysis. The interviews will be conducted at a setting that is mutually agreeable to the participant.

Risks and Discomforts

“The concern is that VoIP data sometimes travels unencrypted over the Internet.
Therefore, it is technically possible for someone to collect VoIP data and attempt to reconstruct a conversation. Although it is extremely difficult to achieve, some software programs are designed to piece together bits and pieces of VoIP data in an effort to reconstruct conversations. While such activity is currently rare, you should be aware of this possibility as it may increase as VoIP becomes more widespread” (DeSantis, 2008). Potential risks or discomforts include possible emotional feelings of sadness when asked questions during the interview. There are no other risks or discomforts that are anticipated from your participation in the study.

Benefits
The anticipated benefit of participation is the opportunity to see how college students practically integrate what they believe about biblical community with their Facebook virtual community.

Confidentiality
The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in a locked drawer during this project. Only the researcher and Liberty University IRB will have access to the study data and information. There will not be any identifying names on digital medium, and participants’ names will not be available to anyone. Aliases will be used during the writing process. The digital recordings will be destroyed at the completion of the study. The results of the research will be published in the form of a graduate dissertation and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional
meetings. The information will help educators and others to better understand how to better integrate beliefs and online social networks.

Withdrawal without Prejudice
Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Each participant is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice from this institution.

Participant’s initials: ____________

**Title of Research:** The Manifestation of Biblical Community Understanding in a Facebook Community: A Qualitative Study among Christian college students

**Investigator:** Paul William Perkins

**New Findings**
Paul William Perkins will provide any significant new findings that develop during the course of the study, which may affect a participant’s willingness to continue in the research, to each participant.

**Cost and/or Payment to Subject for Participation in Research**
There will be no cost for participation in the research. Also, participants will not be paid to participate in this research project.
Payment for Research Related Injuries

Liberty University has made no provision for monetary compensation.

Questions

Any questions concerning the research, participants can call Dr. Sims (faculty advisor for this project) at ___________. Questions regarding rights as a person in this research project should be directed to [please place name of current IRB chairman here], Liberty University Institutional Review Board Chairman, at ________________.

Agreement

This agreement states that you have received a copy of this informed consent. Your signature below indicates that you agree to participate in this study.

____________________________________  ___________
Signature of Subject                     Date

____________________________________
Subject name (printed)

____________________________________  ___________
Signature of Researcher                  Date
## Appendix F

### Sense of Community Results - Visible Music College

110 surveys sent and 44 Surveys returned = 38% return rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Mostly</th>
<th>Completely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q4: At Visible College, I feel as if I am as important as other people.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q5: I share the same values as Visible College.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q6: I am concerned about other people's needs at Visible College.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7: When I am struggling, people at Visible College encourage me.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q8: I feel that other people at Visible College listen to my concerns.</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<td>Q9: Visible College can meet the needs of its members.</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcement of Needs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q10: I can trust the people at Visible College.</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q11: I know most of the people at Visible College.</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q12: When I walk down the hall, people at Visible College recognize me.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q13: Visible College has symbols and rituals that set it apart from other colleges.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q14: I am an active participant at Visible College.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q15: My identity as a believer is connected to Visible College</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q16: Visible College makes me feel like they need me to participate.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q17: Visible College has an impact on the people in other communities.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q18: I hold myself accountable to other members of Visible College.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>COLlegehttp://elderaffairs.state.fl.us/faal/consumer/facilityselect.html#financial.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>Q19: I feel like I have a voice at Visible College.</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Q20: Visible College is able to work out its own problems.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
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<td>Q21: The leaders at Visible College are people of integrity</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<td>Influence</td>
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<td>101</td>
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<td>Q22: Everyone should be an active participant at Visible College.</td>
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<td>30</td>
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<td>Q23: Being in a small group at Visible College is important to me.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
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<td>Q24: I plan to be a part of Visible College for at least three years.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>Q25: I enjoy being a part of the special programs at Visible College.</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>Q26: I feel hopeful about the future of Visible College.</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q27: People at Visible College forgive one another.</td>
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<td>Shared Emotional Connection</td>
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<td>Total Sense of Community</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>50%</td>
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### Appendix G

**Sense of Community Survey Results - Greenville Christian College**

1200 surveys sent and 255 Surveys returned = 21% return rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<th>Completely</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Q5: I share the same values as Visible College.</td>
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<td>58</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q6: I am concerned about other people's needs at Greenville College.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q7: When I am struggling, people at Greenville College encourage me.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>66</td>
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<td>Q8: I feel that other people at Greenville College listen to my concerns.</td>
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<td>Q9: Greenville College can meet the needs of its members.</td>
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<td>114</td>
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<td>Q10: I can trust the people at Greenville College.</td>
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<td>73</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q11: I know most of the people at Greenville College.</td>
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<td>90</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>Q12: When I walk down the hall, people at Greenville College recognize me.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>79</td>
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<td>Q13: Greenville College has symbols and rituals that set it apart from other colleges.</td>
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<td>Q15: My identity as a believer is connected to Greenville College.</td>
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<td>130</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>265</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q16: Greenville College makes me feel like they need me to participate.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>71</td>
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<td>Q17: Greenville College has an impact on the people in other communities.</td>
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<td>Q18: I hold myself accountable to other members of Greenville College.</td>
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<td>121</td>
<td>94</td>
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<td>Q21: The leaders at Greenville College are people of integrity.</td>
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<td>61</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1903</td>
<td>2278</td>
<td>1095</td>
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<td><strong>Reinforcement of Needs</strong></td>
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<td>433</td>
<td>704</td>
<td>298</td>
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<td><strong>Membership</strong></td>
<td>130</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Sense of Community</strong></td>
<td>604</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>2278</td>
<td>1095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10%</strong></td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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### Total Sense of Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Mostly</th>
<th>Completely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>604</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>2278</td>
<td>1095</td>
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Appendix H
Status Comparison Chart

311


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<th>Understanding of Biblical Community Chart</th>
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<td><strong>Appendix I</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Worship</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Prayer</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Forgiveness</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Love</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Caring</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Community Purpose</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Small Groups</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Accountability</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Decision-Making</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involvement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizenship</strong></td>
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</table>

| **Visibly**                               |
| **Lead Activities**                       |
| **Government**                            |
| **Student**                               |
| **Church**                                |
| **Journeying/Every**                      |
| **Liturgy**                               |
| **Vulnerability**                         |
| **The Together**                          |
| **Accountability**                        |
| **Honesty**                               |
| **Openness**                              |
| **Community and Students**                |
| **Unity among all**                       |

| **Clearly**                               |
| **Diversity**                             |
| **Grace**                                 |
| **Forgiveness and**                       |
| **Connection**                            |
| **Reform**                                |
| **Community**                             |
| **Mission**                               |
| **Leadership**                            |
| **Theories**                              |
| **Thinking for one another**              |

| **Amplified**                             |
| **Love**                                  |
| **Acceptance**                            |
| **Worship**                               |
| **Another**                               |

| **Visible**                               |
| **Clear-mindedness**                      |
| **Written**                               |
| **One with and one another**              |
| **Support**                               |
| **Community**                             |
| **Righteous**                             |

| **Visible**                               |
| **Clear-mindedness**                      |
| **Written**                               |
| **One with and one another**              |

| **Visible**                               |
| **Clear-mindedness**                      |
| **Written**                               |
| **One with and one another**              |

| **Visible**                               |
| **Clear-mindedness**                      |
| **Written**                               |
| **One with and one another**              |

| **Visible**                               |
| **Clear-mindedness**                      |
| **Written**                               |
| **One with and one another**              |

| **Visible**                               |
| **Clear-mindedness**                      |
| **Written**                               |
| **One with and one another**              |

| **Visible**                               |
| **Clear-mindedness**                      |
| **Written**                               |
| **One with and one another**              |

| **Visible**                               |
| **Clear-mindedness**                      |
| **Written**                               |
| **One with and one another**              |

<p>| <strong>Visible</strong>                               |
| <strong>Clear-mindedness</strong>                      |
| <strong>Written</strong>                               |
| <strong>One with and one another</strong>              |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>World</th>
<th>Be Visible to the other Christ-like to each other Awareness of compassion</th>
<th>Heart needs to be right without knowing the non-internalized love Communication</th>
<th>God's household of all other living beings and each other</th>
<th>Visible</th>
<th>Invisible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Love community setting the other receiving one receiving one accountable spiritual and accountable</td>
<td>Life together commission serving love</td>
<td>Core beliefs upholding and build them encounter them to include growing to equip and to</td>
<td>Visible</td>
<td>Invisible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Accepting people people are building being there when accepting accountability together doing life</td>
<td>Growing wounds another healing there for one promoting love acceptance</td>
<td>People come to a place where</td>
<td>Visible</td>
<td>Invisible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix J

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain what you believe are crucial elements to biblical community.

2. Describe for me the dynamics of your family growing up.

3. What do you think your father felt was his role in the family?

4. What do you think your mom’s role in the family was?

5. How did family roles change as a consequence of family changes?

6. Tell me how you became a Christian.

7. What do you believe are the core beliefs necessary for biblical community?

8. What do you think is the primary function of the church?

9. Describe how you have seen community work in a church? How have you seen it work at college?

10. Can you describe an experience where biblical community worked for you?

11. How do you become a part of a community?
IRB APPROVAL

IRB Approval 1085.051111: The manifestation of biblical community understanding in a Facebook community: A study among Christian college students

3 messages

IRB, IRB <IRB@liberty.edu>                      Wed, May 11, 2011 at 10:39 AM

To: Paul Perkins <pandrperkins@gmail.com>
Cc: "Sims, Veronica" <vsims3@liberty.edu>, "IRB, IRB" <IRB@liberty.edu>, "Garzon, Fernando" <fgarzon@liberty.edu>

Good Morning Paul,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB.

Attached you'll find the forms for those cases.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project. We will be glad to send you a written memo from the Liberty IRB,
as needed, upon request.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
IRB Chair, Associate Professor
Center for Counseling & Family Studies

(434) 592-5054

40 Years of Training Champions for Christ: 1971-2011
Appendix L

CHAPEL HANDOUT

Social Network Research

__________ College is participating in a social networking research project. To help in this project please follow the link below and fill out a short 10 min., 35-question survey.

www.zoomerang.com