

**Evaluating Biblical and Theological Training in the Developing World Through the Lens
of Communication Infrastructure Theory**

by

David Keep Sr.

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Ph.D. in Communications

Liberty University School of Communication and the Arts

2023

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The author has no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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ABSTRACT

Research that shows the impact of training throughout the developing world is positive and limited. Informed by Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) and framed within the Cybernetic tradition, this study expands communication research to understand the impact of biblical and theological training among marginalized people in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. Through semi-structured interviews and direct observation, this qualitative research study shows how the curriculum developed by Shepherd's Global Classroom (SGC) and deployed through Ezra Biblical Seminary in San Gabriel works to equip believers and church leaders in their developing-world context. The storytelling network of CIT is examined and discovered to be active and growing in San Gabriel Mixtepec to inform those who need and desire the biblical and theological training extended by SGC through Ezra Biblical Seminary. This study has found that the information processing characteristic of the cybernetic communication tradition is critical to communicating content from one language and culture to another. Hindrances to communication and training were discovered to have been recognized by professors and eliminated. Thoroughly identifying and evaluating the outcomes of this biblical and theological training effort, this study answered whether the SGC curriculum, through the training efforts of Ezra Biblical Seminary, is working to equip believers and church leaders in the developing world. Future research should consider additional contexts in which the SGC curriculum is disseminated and used throughout the developing world to understand whether commonalities in training strategy and outcome exist and identify markers that shape the best results.

Keywords: Biblical and theological training, developing world, communication infrastructure theory, cybernetics

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Dedication

I will be forever grateful to my wife, Julia, and our children, for their support and sacrifice as I have negotiated this academic journey. It has not been easy on you, and I am sincerely thankful you have put up with my “absence,” even when I was in the same room.

This work is dedicated to the countless Christian believers and church leaders throughout the developing world who have limited or no access to biblical and theological training. As I have pursued this research, it has been my prayer that my work would aid in disseminating the education you crave and the content you desperately need. Others have worked tirelessly to create that content; I am praying this study will assist them in getting it into your hands and achieving the outcomes they have toiled for.

This study is possible, and I have been inspired to embark on this journey, because Jesus Christ revealed Himself to me personally when I was still in my youth. Jesus has given me the desire and ability to accomplish this research and present it here. To Him, I owe the most incredible debt of gratitude and honor. May it achieve all, and only, what He intends!

Acknowledgment

I have completed this work with the aid of those scholars whose wisdom and encouragement got me across the finish line. The faculty of Liberty University School of Communication and the Arts has set a high mark, and both encouraged and equipped me to achieve it. Dr. Wes Hartley, you have been a better chair than I could have hoped for and have chased away any nightmares of what this process might be. Your counsel, humor, and relentless support pushed me to achieve more than I believed I could. This study is my work, but I am confident your contributions to it and to me will positively influence marginalized populations for many years to come.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The need for training is significant to the developing world in everything from economics and poverty reduction to healthcare, vocational preparedness, and human capital formation (Bennel & Segerstrom, 1998; Frese et al., 2016; Hubley, 2005; Miyamoto, 2005). In coordination with increases in adult literacy, for example, developing countries are investing in the growth of human capital, i.e., education and skills, seeing this investment in the growth of human capital as critical to the expansion of foreign direct investment on the part of multi-national enterprises (Miyamota, 2005). “Training interventions to [enhance] participants’ entrepreneurial skills and motivation” (Frese et al., 2016, p. 196) are likewise used in developing countries to increase entrepreneurship and alleviate poverty. Health-related education, for both the patient and healthcare worker, has reduced health disparities among the poor in the developing world (Hubley, 2005). The need for training in the developing world also extends to biblical and theological training.

Overview

There is an essential distinction between evangelism and discipleship. Evangelicals have emphasized one and need to do better with the other (Moreland, 1997). As the world’s population has grown, the percentage of Christians is relatively unchanged. Roughly one-third of the world’s population is Christian (Werner, 2011). “This apparent stability, however, masks a momentous shift. Although Europe and the Americas still are home to a majority of the world’s Christians (63%), that share is much lower (93%) than it was in 1910” (Pew Research Center, 2011). Earls (2022) demonstrated this global shift through research highlighting Christianity’s rapid growth in the global south.

The places where Christianity is growing the fastest? Africa (2.77% growth) and Asia (1.50%). In 2000, 814 million Christians lived in Europe and North America, while 660 million Christians called Africa and Asia home. This year, 838 million live in the global North, while almost 1.1 billion Christians live in Africa and Asia alone.

Trends that Kohl (2007) expressed 15 years ago continued to expand in 2022, and his assertion that “theological training in the developing world is either deficient or outdated and in need of ‘radical change’” (p. 114) seems to be as accurate today as it was then. The local church’s leadership will affect its direction, as what they have learned or are learning will determine how they lead (Kohl, 2007; Moreland, 1997).

Human growth and training are not straightforward, and traditional first-world mechanisms should not be relied upon to achieve the advances that industry and organizational leadership desire. The absence of “the modern man” (Inkeles, 1975, p. 327) has hindered developing nations from entering the modern world. Further, they are not immediately guaranteed to produce results consistent across the population.

We have come, in time, to realize that nation-building and institution-building are only empty exercises unless the attitudes and capacities of the people keep pace with other forms of development. Mounting evidence suggests that it is impossible for a state to move into the twentieth century if its people continue to live, in effect, in an earlier era. (Inkeles, 1975, pp. 323–324)

The need for comprehensive growth conditions an approach to training. In other words, it shifts the focus to an inside-out approach that attends to the needs of the individual and expands out of necessity. As Inkeles (1975) asserts, personal growth benefits the collective. It subsequently creates positive change within an organization, a community, a culture, and a nation.

This research, explored in the following pages, examined this focus on the individual by studying it in the context of biblical and theological training in the developing world. This research intended to observe an underserved Christian community interacting with newly introduced biblical and theological training opportunities. Moreland (2007) asserted, “If evangelicals placed more value on the mind, we would give more to developing intellectual leadership around the world” (pp. 29–30). The present study agrees with Moreland’s assertion. It seeks to understand whether curriculum and training designed for the developing world context effectively develop both the individual and the community.

Background

A training college in Guatemala discovered students who came to the city to study were not returning to their hometowns. They found that the advantages of the urban centers too often enticed students to remain after their education was complete, diminishing the opportunity for churches in rural areas to employ adequately trained leaders. Theological Education by Extension (TEE) was thus founded to overcome the distractions of city life and take the training directly to the people (What is Tee, 2011). Utilizing courses from other organizations, TEE continues to bring theological education to the most needed places so that ministry can grow and expand within the developing world context.

One of TEE’s affiliate organizations, Study by Extension for All Nations (SEAN), was born of a need to offer biblical, theological, and agricultural training to indigenous people in southern Chile (Doherty, 2021). Founder Tony Barrett, a missionary with the South American Mission Society, recognized the potential of these people to learn and develop. Their limited educational background prevented them from meeting entry requirements, and their relative poverty prohibited them from leaving their family and subsistence farming for a prolonged

training period (Doherty, 2021). With time, Barrett and his small team developed educational materials and facilitated group learning opportunities (Doherty, 2021) to prepare leaders for the growing number of congregations.

Founding of Shepherd's Global Classroom

In the early months of 2012, Tim Keep (personal communication, October 1, 2022), the president of an international mission organization, taught in a small coastal village in Mozambique. It was a humble setting. The group of 8–10 pastors and lay church leaders was gathered under a tree, hungry to receive training from the Word of God. According to the organizational presidents' vivid recollection, these pastors were biblically literate and wanted to learn. However, they did not have access to training materials that would shape them for their essential work.

Since there was no electricity in that small Mozambique village, the training continued until dark (Tim Keep, personal communication, October 1, 2022). The group disbursed, and each went to their respective home to return the following day for continued training. In the early morning hours, before the group reassembled, Tim was meditating on Jesus' word to his disciples in John 13:14, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (English Standard Version, 2001). As he pondered the Scripture and the setting in which he was teaching, Tim sensed the Holy Spirit apply the truth to the present context, the dirty feet (importantly) representing the prevalence of spiritual heresy and false teaching throughout Mozambique and the developing world.

The encounter Tim Keep (personal communication, October 1, 2022) had in Mozambique birthed a vision for what would eventually be called Shepherd's Global Classroom (SGC), an organization "founded to equip underserved Christian leaders around the world by

providing a comprehensive curriculum for grassroots theological training” (Shepherds Global Classroom, 2022). Over several years, from the events that birthed the idea, denominational leaders, academic professionals, and critical stakeholders embraced the vision to develop a fully scripted biblical and theological curriculum they would offer free of charge to marginalized populations without access to needed evangelical training. The team overcame obstacles and witnessed miracles to see the vision come to fruition.

Introduction to the Problem

The problem the present study proposes to address is implicit in the founding of SGC and is alluded to in the documented multiplication of the Church in the nonwestern world (Kohl, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2011). Christianity is growing. “With a 1.17% growth rate, almost 2.56 billion people will identify as a Christian by the middle of 2022. By 2050, that number is expected to top 3.33 billion” (Earls, 2022). As noted previously, while the percentage of Christians is similar concerning the world population, roughly 30% more of those Christians lived outside Europe and the Americas in 2010 than in 1910 (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Recognizing the rapid growth of the Christian church in the developing world, Fuliga (2011) articulated problems related to its theological education. Fuliga argued the West has influenced a form of theological training that is harmful to developing world leaders and churches. The emphasis on formal training that does not meet the need for leaders who will shepherd their congregation has resulted in seminary-trained leaders receiving an incomplete education and inadequate preparation for their pastoral roles (Fuliga, 2011). Consequently, these leaders are ill-equipped for the work, their churches are underserved, and opportunities for growth through training at the congregational level are diminished (Fuliga, 2011).

In a statement that clarifies and supports Fuliga's (2011) observations, Banda et al. (2020) asserted, "In ministerial training, effective integration of academic excellence, spiritual formation, and vocational training is critical to producing holistically trained Christian leaders" (p. 165). Holistically trained leaders, whose knowledge and work align with the pattern set by Jesus, who will be shepherds to their people rather than executives, are integral to the spiritual health of congregation members and the continued vibrancy of the Gospel message in the developing world (Kohl, 2007).

The Problem Statement: A Common Theme Emerges

The problem is that a lack of access to holistic biblical and theological training has resulted in a lack of depth at the church's pastoral and lay leadership levels throughout the developing world. This systemic theological malnutrition of church leaders can contribute to church members' diminished vibrancy and spiritual health. The reasoning behind organizations such as TEE and SEAN and the founding story of SGC reveal several consistencies that are important to the present study. First, they reveal an education gap, as church leaders in the developing world do not have immediate access to the training they need. Second, they show the problem of access is related to both economics and opportunity. And finally, they expose the need for nontraditional methods, whereby training is taken directly to the people. As noted in the following paragraph, literature detailing the need and impact of training in health, economics, education, etc., in developing countries supports these assertions.

A significant study by Brown et al. (2019) challenges the correlation between poverty and the nutritionally deprived, noting that information is a constraint that leads to poor health among the disadvantaged. Those with knowledge and expertise in health matters are generally healthier than those who do not have them, and healthcare systems are only as effective as

training healthcare workers (Azad et al., 2020). Similarly, an effective education system is undergirded by well-qualified and adequately trained educators (Wagner et al., 2021). As Ching-Yaw et al. (2007) noted, the quality of training enhances the economics of individuals and the collective.

Implications Related to Cross-cultural Research in the Developing World

Manathunga (2009) highlighted the complexity of contemporary research that crosses cultural boundaries and “examines the consequences of a lack of intercultural sensitivity and equity” (p. 165). Further, leveraging the postcolonial notion of a “contact zone,” Manathunga (2009) asserted the contemporary researcher should assume a posture of respect and appreciation, arguing that among the qualities needed for effective research are “intercultural knowledge and skills, abilities to cross intellectual, cultural, social, and professional borders, [and] abilities to deal with the simultaneous joy and discomfort of working across multiple spheres of cultural interaction” (p. 174). While this study did not focus on culture, significant cultural and language implications were considered related to the developing world context in which this research took place (Van der Vijver & Leung, 1997).

As the interview was one of this research’s primary data collection mechanisms, the experience and insight of Wijngaarden (2020) helped address the challenges related to intercultural communication. Having conducted extensive ethnographic research, Wijngaarden (2020) suggested that neglect to understand and appreciate the cultural implications of research interactions can lead to low-quality data or the researcher returning from the field empty-handed. Skills and strategies are not always learned prior to conducting intercultural research interviews, but “there is literature available from experienced researchers that helps prepare interviewers for the field and help to improve the quality of the data they gather” (Wijngaarden, 2020).

Missing Literature

Studies related to health, education, and economics (Akyeampong, 2022; Brown et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2006) affirmed that training has implications throughout the developing world. Brown (2019) discovered the nutritionally deprived were characterized more by their lack of training than by economic status. Likewise, sub-Saharan Africa's educational deficiencies result from a shortage of adequately trained teachers (Akyeampong, 2022). In the Cambodian banking industry, Chen et al. (2006) demonstrated that a robust internal training program offsets poor education among the workforce.

The literature, however, lacks similar research highlighting the importance of training in the developing world from a theological and biblical viewpoint. Although correlating studies prove that education and training are game changers in health, education, and economics, it is unclear whether research has been conducted to affirm the impact and effectiveness of training for pastors, churches, and lay leaders in the developing world. What is needed is a study that targets participants of locally-led theological training programs and provides insight into how such training can be made accessible and how it can and should be conducted.

Purpose of the Study

Research has shown the developing world has benefited from training in matters of health, education, and economics (Akyeampong, 2022; Azad et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2005). This qualitative case study sought to fill a gap in the literature and describes how increased access to biblical training in the developing world influences the spiritual life and vibrancy of the faith community in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico.

The Significance of the Study

The significance of the study should be understood in terms of the potential for spiritual impact in a multitude of developing world communities that do not have immediate access to practical biblical and theological training. This present study sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of the SGC curriculum and training in San Gabriel Mixtepec so a model for training can be developed that extends similar opportunities to marginalized communities throughout the developing world. This study is further significant because it adds to the body of communication literature by researching biblical and theological training in the developing world.

Theoretical Framework - CIT

Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) is the theoretical framework that informed and guided this study, conceived as a means of understanding “the communication fabric of the community and examining its importance with regard to civic engagement” (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 173). More broadly, “CIT is an ecological approach that explores the relationship between community-level resources and people’s problem-solving capacities in their everyday lives in neighborhood contexts” (Burgess et al., 2021). Using the neighborhood storytelling network, CIT facilitates health campaigns and promotion to marginalized people, reducing health disparities among disadvantaged populations (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Wilken et al., 2010; Wilkin, 2013). Wilkin et al. (2010) argued that “in addition to providing a useful theoretical perspective on neighborhood health, CIT provides a practical way for health practitioners to understand, reach, and impact their communities” (p. 611). CIT provides a valuable framework and useable parallels for this study focusing on spiritual health.

The communication infrastructure is a central component of CIT. As Estrada et al. (2018) asserted, “A strong and diverse communication infrastructure is essential for communication to improve health” (p. 773), the strength or weakness of which is crucial to information equality. Wilkin et al. (2011) defined communication infrastructure as “The basic communication system available within a community, relied upon by residents for the information needed in their everyday lives” (p. 202). Communication infrastructure consists of two elements: the storytelling network and the communication action context, each crucial to getting information to neighborhood residents and reducing disparities within the community (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Estrada et al., 2018; Wilkin et al., 2011).

Communication Infrastructure Theory & Health Disparities

Minority groups within the United States are disproportionately affected by health complications resulting from poor or inadequate information. African American women, for example, are “less likely to develop breast cancer than non-Hispanic White women, but they are more likely to die of it. In addition, they are more likely than non-Hispanic White women to contract cervical cancer and more likely to die from it” (Matsaganis et al., 2014, p. 1496). CIT is a valuable framework to help understand these trends in disproportionate health information. Matsaganis et al. (2014) explained that CIT has been used more often to describe “the relationships among elements of the communication infrastructure and health outcomes. A much smaller number of projects have employed CIT as an intervention mode” (p. 1498). The Matsaganis et al. (2014) study offers “refinements to CIT” (p. 1498) that improve a community’s storytelling network and proposes to enhance its role in leading to better health outcomes.

A Different Kind of Health

CIT has been employed in implementing and understanding health campaigns relating to the physical dimension (Wilkin et al., 2010) and applied in this study to understand and improve training programs designed to strengthen the spiritual health of Christian communities in the developing world. As noted previously, disparities in physical health extend to many marginalized populations in areas related to spiritual health. According to Wilkin et al. (2010), the healthcare community seeks to communicate more effectively with the disadvantaged to improve their physical health and offer them the best chance for quality of life. This study reaches into the developing world context to understand what communication barriers exist and extend practical training opportunities to those needing and desiring to embrace them.

San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico

The site of this qualitative case study was the small village of San Gabriel Mixtepec, located in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico, a 2-hour drive from the beautiful coastal city of Puerto Escondido. In 2020, the population of this small mountain village was 4910, an increase of 3.7% since 2010 (San Gabriel Mixtepec, 2022). Mexico has been the focal point of studies ranging from self-employment and migration (Gutierrez-Li, 2022) to social welfare and public safety concerns (Bradley & Rios, 2022; Flores-Macias, 2020) and improving solid waste management (Olay-Romero et al., 2020). It is a strategic country with both problems and potential, with more than 127 million population at the time of this study, up from around 25 million in the 1950s (Mexico Population 2022 (live), 2022).

Located in this mountain village is a small training institute called Ezra Seminary, equipped with the SGC curriculum. Starting in 2020, Ezra Seminary has been extending biblical and theological training to the local community of believers in San Gabriel Mixtepec. This study

enlisted participants from Ezra Seminary and affiliated churches and, through semistructured one-on-one interviews, group interviews, and direct observation, sought to understand whether the training effectively achieves the vision of SGC's founders to equip underserved church leaders in the developing world.

The Cybernetic Tradition

According to Craig (1999), problems in communication in the cybernetics tradition are related to the "flow of information" (p. 141). Feedback is an essential concept within cybernetics, as are interference and static in theorizing effective communications (Craig, 1999). As in systems processing, the less interference, the better the feedback and the more efficient the communication (Craig, 1999).

Information processing and the flow of communication through the neighborhood storytelling network are among the concepts that place this study within the bounds of the cybernetic communication tradition. Combined with CIT, the cybernetic tradition focuses on the process and problems that have been identified. "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, so it is important for...communicators to...look at the communication process from a broader, systematic viewpoint" (Craig, 1999, p. 142).

According to Duffey (1984), "the word 'cybernetics' was coined by Norbert Weiner in 1947" (p. 33), who was among those who pioneered the concept in the mid-1900s when he was thinking about "how to more effectively shoot down airplanes (Hamilton, 2017, p. 407) during World War II. Duffey (1984) explained, "Cybernetics offers an effective method for study and control of systems that are complex and dynamic" (p. 34). Cybernetics is different than systems theory by "emphasizing behavior, processes, and circular communication [rather than] whole and

parts, interreactions, and hierarchies” (Duffy, 1984, p. 34). “Communication is operational rather than simply message-oriented (Peters, 2016, pp. 166–167).

Apter and Wolpert (1965) identified “information theory” as one aspect of cybernetics that is concerned “with problems of transmission of information, rather than the measurement of information” (p. 248). The transmission of information is the dimension of the cybernetic tradition with which this study was primarily concerned. This research studied whether the communication of biblical and theological training information to the developing world is adequate to affect the spiritual health of individuals and impact the local community in positive and exponentially powerful ways.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following central question in the developing world context of San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico.

Central Question: *Is the curriculum of Shepherd’s Global Classroom meeting the need to equip believers and church leaders through Ezra Seminary in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico?*

Three additional questions were also addressed to flesh out the central question more thoroughly.

- **RQ1.** *What aspects of Shepherd’s Global Curriculum are most applicable?*
- **RQ2.** *What obstacles are hindering the communication of Shepherd’s Global Classroom materials?*
- **RQ3.** *What role does Communication Infrastructure Theory’s storytelling network play in the communication of Shepherd’s Global Classroom materials?*

Summary

Training deficiencies in the developing world are visible in health, economics, education, and spiritual life categories. These deficiencies are often the result of a lack of access to

educational opportunities. However, research indicates (Akyeampong, 2022; Azad et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2005) that where training is prioritized, positive change results. Regarding spiritual health and development, marginalized populations seem to be significantly disadvantaged; many do not know they need theological training and would be unable to access it even if they knew it was needed. Concerned people understand these realities and have undertaken to resolve them. They have created biblical training materials to be used in group sessions or as self-study and have worked to make those materials accessible anywhere in the world.

This study assumed that the problem is best addressed at the community rather than a global level so that solutions can respond to the unique needs of the local culture. Communication infrastructure, whereby neighborhood storytelling is employed, is offered as a model for making these materials available and deploying the training that will minister to the needs of the Christian congregation in the developing world. With good communication processes in place, those interested in biblical training will know it is available and gain access to it. This study sought to understand these assertions in a specific developing-world context and increase biblical training opportunities for marginalized populations worldwide.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter includes a discussion of the literature concerning the comprehensive impact of training on generational poverty, educational achievements, health at the community and cultural levels, and economics in the developed and developing worlds. This chapter identifies and discusses the literature related to this research's primary topics and accompanying ideas within communication and associated fields and highlights implications that guided the present study.

The literature review also identifies and discusses relevant literature related to a proposed theoretical framework for the study. Specifically, the literature review discusses communication infrastructure theory in the context of its history, its initial usage, and the ways it has the potential to guide the present work. Finally, literature on sociopsychological, sociocultural, and cybernetic communication traditions is shared. Their strengths and weaknesses are discussed, particularly emphasizing the formation and the foundational concepts the cybernetic tradition brings to the study.

Importantly, this review isolates the gaps within the literature that need to be addressed. The review emphasizes the marginalized and developing-world demographic this study attempted to target. Sections highlight missing literature to connect existing research and the need for this present study. Based on the literature reviewed, assumptions and inferences were made to guide this study.

Mexico as Developing World Study Context

Mexico is located on the fringes of what is referred to as the Global South and is “often referred to as part of the larger group of ‘rising powers’ that challenge the dominance of the ‘Western/Northern’ world” (Huag, 2021, p. 2020). While not the official religion of Mexico,

“Roman Catholicism is the dominant faith and deeply culturally pervasive. It is estimated over 80% of the population identifies as Catholic” (Evason, 2018). The population of this developing country has grown steadily over the past 2 decades, “the result of better medication and vaccines, which reduce the chances of death and increases the chance of successful live births” (Mexico Population 2022). The population growth makes Mexico the country with the most Spanish-speaking people in the world (Mexico Population 2022).

According to Magana-Valladares & Cooper (2011), the National Institute of Public Health in Mexico proactively establishes policies and responds to changing health workforce training needs. Conditions, however, in other sectors, such as building water capacity, have identified needs that have not been developed or implemented (Tortajada, 2009). Further, Mexico has the world’s 9th largest crude oil reserve and is rich in renewable energy sources (solar, wind, etc.), but “the potential of this type of energy has not been fully exploited” (Aleman-Nava et al., 2014). These points are highlighted in the context of this research to demonstrate the context of this study. Mexico has resources that could potentially be released through the focused work of training and development.

Generational Change and Better Health Through Training

A substantial body of literature speaks to the impact of training on critical dimensions of life throughout the developing world. In the context of 8 years of community involvement, Briscoe (2022) sought to understand how community leadership development would influence generational poverty. Arguing for a broader meaning of poverty than is generally understood, Briscoe contends for a definition that “capture[s] more holistic and multidimensional aspects, such as feelings of powerlessness...[and] fear, restricted rights and freedoms, and limited access to many supports” (p. 138). While this idea of poverty is not entirely specific nor clearly defined,

the study asserts it is a multi-generational problem to be addressed in ways that target the people in tackling the problem. Briscoe (2022) asserts, more specifically, that “Approaches to ending poverty should aim to invest in building the human capital of people, especially those living in poverty and who have restricted access to capital” (p. 139). The idea to invest in human capital and the years of exposure to various nonprofit groups and humanitarian organizations intent on ending generational poverty within this community inspired the research Briscoe would ultimately conduct in Muñoz, Dominican Republic.

Brown et al. (2019) addressed the issues of poverty and training in a study that revealed that “most of Africa’s nutritionally deprived women and children are not found in poor households” (p. 631). This means that targeting communities based on their perceived prosperity will not be an effective method for reaching the nutritionally deprived. It also means there are additional and underlying reasons for dietary shortcomings. For example, Brown et al. noted that “health shocks often impede nutritional absorption” (p. 642). In addition, several health risks could be contributing factors, such as “local health environments and intrahousehold resource allocation” (p. 643). And while study authors are careful not to claim that “information is the only constraint” (p. 643), Al-Shorbaji (2012) asserted, “health is an information-driven and knowledge-based sector” (p. 2). This research is essential because of its implication in the larger communications context. As Shariff et al. (2008) found, information disseminated in the context of proper training and technique, especially early in life, increases knowledge and “promotes healthy dietary behaviors” (p. 119).

Further articulating the challenges related to healthcare worldwide, Azad et al. (2020) pointed to both a shortage of workers and inadequate training. The World Health Organization (WHO) projects a deficit of nearly 13 million healthcare workers by 2035, which calls for

“innovative models of service and delivery” (Azad et al., 2020, p. 1). If those who remain are adequately trained and committed to ongoing education, it will help serve the population’s needs. “Gaps in practice and knowledge lead to poor outcomes” (p. 2), and continuing education mitigates these gaps. These identified studies make a connection between training and physical health outcomes. They are essential to the present study to identify gaps in activity related to training spiritual healthcare workers and the subsequent spiritual health of the community.

Training is also the Difference in Education

Research points to the fact that education similarly depends on good teacher and student training. U.N. Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasizes “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, n.d.). Such a goal, however, requires quality teachers who, according to Akyeampong (2022), are not always available to students or classrooms in poor and marginalized communities. For example, “in sub-Saharan Africa, about 85% of children are not reaching minimum proficiency levels despite being in school” (Akyeampong, 2022, p. 77). According to Akyeampong, this number is primarily because of one or two factors: insufficient teachers or teachers are not trained to “meet the learning needs of poor and marginalized children” (p. 77).

Implications for the Present Study

The literature that has been reviewed is relevant because it discusses the impact of training, especially in developing countries where many poor and marginalized people are affected. According to Briscoe (2022), training community leaders has profound potential to shift the narrative and stop the recurring nightmare of generational poverty. Similarly, trained healthcare workers and an educated population throughout the developing world will result in less sickness, disease, and even death (Al-Shorbaji, 2012; Azad et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2019).

Likewise, and perhaps most apparent, practical training in the field of education will lead to increased literacy that has broad implications for the culture at large (Wagner et al., 2021). The economic implications are the most striking, the next important focus of this review.

Banking Works Better Because of Good Training

Chen et al. (2005) conducted research that noted the poor quality of education was neutralized in the Cambodian Commercial banking arena by the effectiveness of their internal training programs. Relative to the literature, Chen et al.'s study connects the importance of training to the economic sector in two ways. First, it makes a case for increasing a person's worth to a corporation and their individual earning potential. Second, a well-trained and effective workforce adds value to the corporation "as human capital, knowledge, and skills become competitive assets or tools within organizations" (Chen et al., 2005, p. 844).

Practical implications of the study note that "even though good training can make up for poor education, it is only a short-term solution" (Chen et al., 2005, p. 843). Ultimately, the study concludes that an effective workforce should operate full circle to influence the quality of education. Only as education is enhanced will a country and its people realize their full potential. Also not worthy is the observation that "this research provides a good framework for commercial banks in other developing countries to compare" (Chen et al., 2005, p. 843). Practical training at the corporate level can overcome poor education. Organizations in developing countries should recognize the potential of empowering their workforce to achieve based on internal training programs designed and executed to that end.

Research by Bartel (1994) demonstrates a trained workforce is noticeably more effective than untrained ones. "Unlike previous research that has relied on data on individual employees, this study utilizes data on the personnel policies and economic characteristics of businesses in the

manufacturing sector” (Bartel, 1994, pp. 422-423). The significant finding is that businesses experiencing lower-than-expected employee production in 1983 that implemented training programs for the workers had rebounded by 1986 and were experiencing production levels equal to or greater than expectations and on par with “comparable businesses” (p. 423).

Leadership and Economics

Before moving from the subject of economics, it will be helpful to return to Briscoe (2022), whose research seeks to engage in a broader conversation related to leadership and the economics of a community. The study aims to understand whether the development of leadership at the community level would provide the support that lifts the economic burden of many and changes the narrative related to poverty levels. Within the framework of the Briscoe (2022) study, “community leadership is different from more traditional notions of leadership that involve a leader asking, persuading, influencing followers” (p. 149).

These insights were affirmed in a study by Bukoski et al. (2015) that highlighted the value of leadership in the community framework of urban school districts “where poverty is prevalent, and students of color are the majority population” (p. 412). In addition to challenges within the academic environment, leadership must confront “a complex array of socio-political issues” (Bukoski et al., 2015, p. 412). Bukoski et al.’s study pointed to evidence that supports the value of quality leadership at the community level. It concluded that inadequate attention is placed on the educational and leadership qualities of those who must navigate these complexities and lead students and the organization to increasing levels of success.

The global COVID-19 pandemic reaffirmed this need for what Uhl-Bien (2021) called “complexity leadership” (p. 144). Complexity leadership requires the development of leaders who “know how to enable adaptive responses” (p. 145). Uhl-Bien’s study emphasized

coordination between leader and follower, whereby they respond collaboratively to challenges to produce the best outcome. Consistent with the leader described by Briscoe (2022) as one who helps, the study asserted, “The underlying takeaway is that leadership should not be seen solely as a position of authority but as ‘emergent, interactive, dynamic’” (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

Generational Poverty

Central to Briscoe’s (2022) study was the idea of generational poverty, a concept that Lee (2007) demonstrated a connection to “nutritional stress in utero or early infancy [that] could have a dramatic impact on childhood development that was irreversible” (p. 69). Citing a series of experiments in mice, Lee (2007) noted that pregnant animals who were nutritionally deprived 1 week before delivery and until their young were weaned (at 3 weeks of age) produced pups that were significantly (25%) smaller than the control group and never caught up. However, they were fed as the others for the rest of their lives (Lee, 2007). The experiments and Lee’s (2007) study illuminated evidence that points to iron deficiency anemia (IDA) as one of “the major nutritional stresses that lead to permanent behavior changes in both experimental animals and humans resulting in poorer cognitive, motor, and social-emotional function” (p. 69).

Walker et al. (2007) affirm these findings, arguing that “poverty and associated health, nutrition, and social factors prevent at least 200 million children in developing countries from attaining their development potential” (p. 145). The study describes relevant risk factors and notes that “randomized trials that provide food supplements to improve children’s nutritional status and development show concurrent benefits to motor development, mental development, and cognitive ability” (p. 146).

In a final related study, Wang (2021) cited education as “the most basic human capital investment and an important way for families to get rid of generational poverty” (p. 944).

Wang’s study discussed the ‘poverty by education’ phenomenon that attributes a family’s effort to escape generational poverty through education to the high cost of education and the poverty it produces. Distinguishing between long-term and short-term deprivation, Wang concluded that education’s economic and poverty-reducing advantages are real but should be balanced with its cost. Families in poverty should prioritize education but not overspend (Wang, 2021).

The Missing Literature

The aim of the literature has been to highlight the impact of training on individuals, the organization, and the culture. The need for training is real, and its implications are widespread. The literature missing from the present study is relevant to research related to current and ongoing biblical and theological training in the developing world, specifically among those who do not have access to higher education.

Articles that get close to the topic are outlined but do not adequately address it. These studies point to theological training in the developing world and its deficiencies. De Gruchy (2018) discussed the action by the World Council of Churches in 2002 to give attention to the need for a program of theological education in Africa. De Gruchy acknowledged a growing interest in theology and development in South Africa and argued for a reflection and response that properly understands this action in the context of historical events and the national tensions they produced, which are potential obstacles to creating good theological curricula. De Gruchy presented the dilemma but did not offer tangible solutions.

A somewhat outdated and informal study by Boivin (1970) revealed findings related to the perception of Zambian church leaders regarding their theological education. The Zambian

church leaders indicated their theological education was more academic and intellectual than practical, with most concluding the training was “largely irrelevant to their ministry” (p. 329). Boivin (1970) concluded that creators of theological programs and curricula are disconnected from the people they seek to communicate with, are unfamiliar with their needs, and their training is impractical and irrelevant on the level of real change, spiritual or otherwise.

Hedebe (2017) asserted theological education in Africa and, by extension, in other developing countries “is being exported from one country to another, particularly the United States. The commodification of theology has resulted in uncontextualized teaching material and curriculum plans” (p. 1).

Theoretical Framework

A study by Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) observed, “the new communication environment brought about by macro-level forces—for example, globalization, new communication technologies, and population change—presents both opportunities and challenges to civil society” (p. 174). While opposing views suggested either a decline in civic engagement or restructuring of civil society, the Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) study posited an alternative perspective that “focuses attention on the communication structures and processes that negotiate 21st-century conditions of urban life” (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 175). These communication infrastructures “make it either easy or difficult for residents of a local community to build community. A basic assumption of communication infrastructure theory (CIT) is that some communities have rich and strong infrastructures for civic engagement and others have poor and weak infrastructures” (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 175).

Communication Infrastructure Theory & Health Disparities

Establishing a framework for understanding CIT, especially as it relates to health factors, Wilkin (2013) argued that “Health disparities occur when certain segments of the population (e.g., lower income, lower education, females, or males, or certain ethnic groups) are disproportionately affected by particular health problems” (p. 181). For example, one demographic is more susceptible to a particular disease or condition, or a marginalized population is not granted the same access to health information or services (Wilkin, 2013). “Health problems are often intensified by other disparities related to healthcare access and the quality of healthcare” (Wilkin, 2013, p. 181).

Burgess et al. (2021) indicated, “Research has repeatedly demonstrated that individuals who think they will have to confront many obstacles (e.g., too expensive, too painful, too time-consuming) are less likely to seek medical treatment” (p. 361). Information is vital in confronting the obstacles the marginalized encounter. Because information and communication go hand in hand, “Communication infrastructure theory has been at the heart of a number of recent studies exploring community-level health disparities” (Wilkin, 2013, p. 182). In a separate study, Wilkin et al. (2011) defined communication infrastructure as “the basic communication system available within a community and...relied upon by residents for the information needed in their everyday lives” (p. 202).

Further, adding rural populations to the list of those with potential health disparities, Estrada et al. (2018) asserted that “a strong and diverse communication infrastructure is essential for communication to improve health. When that infrastructure is weak, health information fails to reach appropriate audiences” (p. 773). This “weak infrastructure” is characterized as “a component of information inequality that contributes to health disparities” (Estrada et al., 2018,

p. 773). Focusing on “geographic communities and/or ethnic communities known to experience health disparities, researchers have argued CIT has the potential to provide a theoretically grounded approach for community-based health communication outreach and mobilization” (p. 182).

Although not restricted to research on health disparities, Wilkin et al. (2010) suggested that “Communication infrastructure theory (CIT) offers a unique perspective on communication and health by investigating how neighborhood communication patterns are intertwined with the health of communities and their residents” (p. 611). Every community, according to CIT, is characterized by unique communication networks with the potential to convey information essential to the health of its members. As Wilkin et al. (2010) asserted, “CIT provides a practical way for health practitioners to understand, reach, and impact their communities...and help remedy varied health problems” (p. 611).

In a statement that effectively summarizes the preceding paragraphs related to CIT and maps the way forward, Estrada et al. (2018) suggested,

The theory proposes understanding the public information environment as an ecological system wherein creators and consumers of communication at multiple levels, including individuals, social networks, community organizations, and media, are nested within a community where communication is shaped by geography, the built environment, and organizational and political structures and systems. (p. 774)

This idea of ecology considers the relationship members within a community have with one another, and it is more of a systems approach to communication and problem-solving than is addressed at the individual level. Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) emphasized, “CIT provides a specific way of understanding an ecological relationship between a communication environment

and communicative action” (p. 176). CIT addresses a single community, the multitude of individuals within that community, and the systematic means of communication between them to benefit one and all.

Components of Communication Infrastructure Theory

“One of the primary propositions of CIT is that local neighbors are more likely to recognize their common problems and participate in various activities to solve them when connected to the local community storytelling network” (Jung & Kim, 2021, p. 745). The components of this storytelling network (STN), according to Wilkin et al. (2010), are the macro-, meso-, and micro-level storytellers, each operating within the bounds of a communication action context (CAC) in which the storytelling network operates. The study asserted that “When a communication action context facilitates a strong neighborhood STN, positive health outcomes are experienced at the individual level [through] increased chronic disease knowledge and increased health information seeking” (Wilkin et al., 2010, p. 611). Similarly, at the community level, “Strong STNs impact neighborhood health through increased levels of civic engagement, neighborhood belonging, and community efficacy” (p. 611).

Storytelling Network

Ball-Rokeach et al. (2001), whose work established the framework and substance of communication infrastructure theory, spoke of the storytelling neighborhood as “The communication process by which people go from occupants of a house to being members of a community” (p. 394). The study further explained, “Storytelling is the act of constructing identity through narrative discourse, and storytelling neighborhood is the act of constructing an identity as a member of a residential neighborhood” (p. 394). This act of storytelling is central to CIT and is a crucial component of the structures of which it is made. As evidenced by Son

(2018), “When Korean immigrants form social ties at church, they become more embedded in their local storytelling networks, which leads to an increased sense of neighborhood belonging” (p. 4766).

Another foundational study asserted that “CIT defines ‘neighborhood storytelling’ broadly as any communicative action that addresses residents, their local communities, and their lives in those communities” (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 178). Storytelling in the CIT framework is not limited or narrowly defined. It can contain many types of information and be communicated in near-limitless ways. The single requirement is that the storytelling must be about the local community. According to Savage et al. (2018), “Storytelling is the process engaged in by community members to construct a vision and a reality of their neighborhoods as places where they belong and engaged shared concerns” (p. 115).

Information dissemination is an essential aspect of neighborhood storytelling, and community health is often rich or poor, depending on the availability of that information. A study by Savage et al. (2018) indicated, however, that sociocultural traditions are often communicated via storytelling networks that have significant implications for the health of community members. The study reported poor oral health behaviors were “not necessarily the result of poor oral health knowledge” (Savage et al., 2018, p. 118). Stories within the community reflected a lack of prioritization of oral health among older generations, competing health-related behaviors (e.g., tobacco use), and “perception of potentially problematic responses by oral health providers” (Savage et al., 2018, p. 118).

Adding another dimension to the storytelling network, a study by Wilkin et al. (2011) indicated, “The multilevel storytelling system comprises micro, meso, and macro-level agents who produce and disseminate information about the community” (p. 202). At the micro-level,

“Community residents as constituted in interpersonal networks serve as storytelling agents and engage in storytelling through everyday conversations and neighborly interactions” (Nah et al., 2022, p. 329). “Geo-ethnic media are the meso-level storytelling agents who primarily produce discourse about a particular residential area or racial/ethnic group” (An & Smith, 2018, p. 4293). Finally, “macrostorytelling (sic) agents such as mainstream media tell stories...about the city, the nation, or even the world, where the imagined audience is broadly conceived as the population of the city, county, or region. CIT focuses on meso- and micro-level storytellers” (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 179).

Lewis (2011) briefly outlined the historical significance of story to human experience before wondering “if story is central to human existence and understanding why, in the research world, is there not more storytelling, particularly in the social sciences?” (p. 506). Approaching this idea of the story from a slightly different perspective, Polletta et al. (2011) argued for its sociological implications and contended for more in-depth research related to storytelling, i.e., politics, religion, and storytelling’s influence in shaping cultural thinking. The power of storytelling has long been understood and communicated. CIT leverages that long-standing tradition as an aide to building community, transmitting important health information to those within the community, and shaping new habits/patterns that can improve the well-being of its members (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Wilkin et al., 2010).

Communication Action Context

The final dimension of CIT to be explained in the context of the literature is the communication action context (CAC) in which storytelling takes place. Taken from the work of Habermas (Ball-Rokeach, 2001), the CAC in communication infrastructure theory refers to the “boundaries of a residential area as defined by shared conventions (e.g., major cross streets,

incorporated area, real estate sections, or geographic labels)” (p. 396). A study by Embry (2019) asserted, “The communication action context is any constructed or social piece of the environment that either encourages people to engage with others in communication or discourages interpersonal communication” (p. 7). These are parks and recreational spaces, restaurants, meeting facilities, auditoriums and stadiums, malls and shopping, and indoor and outdoor spaces that invite congregation and interaction. Each CAC can be differentiated as either open or closed. Communication open contexts are “those that encourage people to engage one another in communication, whereas a closed context discourages such encounters” (Ball-Rokeach, 2001, p. 396).

Wilkin et al. (2011) explained that “the elements of the CAC that may enable or constrain connections to the storytelling network include the availability and safety of meeting and greeting locations, work conditions, communication resources...ethnic and linguistic diversity of residents, [and] transportation” (p. 203). The literature also refers to comfort zones and communication hotspots. “Comfort zones refer to the businesses and community institutions to which residents feel closely connected and communication hotspots are the places where community members tend to engage each other in conversation” (Wilkin et al., 2011, p. 203). A study by Wilkin (2013) further identified the communication action context as a potentially understudied aspect of communication infrastructure theory when it claimed, “Elements of the CAC involved in constraining access to the STN may be the first step in discovering the elements of the larger ecology affecting health disparities” (p. 188).

Communication Infrastructure Theory and the Present Study

Two crucial observations connect communication infrastructure theory to this study, focusing on health disparities. First, CIT studies physical health disparities, while this work was

concerned with study participants' spiritual health. And second, physical health among marginalized populations is strengthened by the information and services available to them. CIT is used to understand and facilitate the delivery of that information and those services. This study assumed marginalized populations cannot access the materials and training opportunities that best contribute to their spiritual health and well-being. CIT is the guiding framework for assessing the validity of that assumption.

The Primary Deployment of CIT

It is helpful to conclude this portion of the review with a look at the literature representing the primary research target of CIT. Burgess et al. (2021) argued that a rapidly growing population of Hispanics/Latinos in the United States are "less likely to actively search for information by themselves, [making] health-related conversations with family and friends [that much more] critical" (p. 362). Concerning access to healthcare, "Nearly 20% of the population [is] not covered by health insurance, as compared to the 6.3% of the non-Hispanic White population" (Burgess et al., p. 362). With a particular focus on a singular aspect of CIT, Burgess et al.'s study focused "on the potential ability of communication hotspots to reduce barriers to healthcare by increasing the frequency of conversations about health, as well as the size and diversity of social networks" (p. 362).

Research by Estrada et al. (2018) identified their study context as Merced County "in the heart of California's Central Valley where 60% of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, a majority of all residents live in poverty, and educational attainment is low" (p. 775). Arguing that much of the CIT literature is situated in an urban environment, Estrada et al. (2018) articulated their goal of addressing communication inequalities, thereby reducing health disparities among the minority population in this rural community.

Moving away from the focus on health disparities, research by Villanueva et al. (2017) examined “the revitalization of L.A. River and its surrounding communities [with a particular concern related to] gentrification—the displacement of lower-income communities that often leads to a change in a neighborhoods cultural character” (p. 474). As prior research indicated, these revitalization projects have often favored the elite to the detriment of the marginalized (Villanueva et al., 2017). Villanueva et al. (2017) elevated the role of communication, particularly utilizing CIT, to engage with macro-, meso-, and micro-level storytellers and remain abreast of the concerns of individuals within those communities throughout the revitalization project.

Hubley’s (2005) notable work documented relevant literature on training and communication in the developing world related to patient health. “More than 800 studies were reviewed...provid[ing] evidence that well-planned patient education that takes into account the needs of patients and applies appropriate communication methodologies can work...to improve the health of the disadvantaged and poor of the developing world” (p. 161–162). Hubley highlighted research emphasizing training and communication and suggested that positive outcomes will result from initial research on the problem and the proper application of communication and training procedures.

Articulating its Relevance

Having concluded the preceding discussion related to CIT, it is helpful to articulate its relevance to the present study. The minority or developing world population was the focus of this research. Communication is a primary function of the effort to reduce the disparities they experience in discipleship materials and training. That CIT has primarily been deployed in the

context of marginalized populations makes it the most useful theoretical framework to position this study and to understand the community this research intended to explore.

CIT and Communication Tradition

Research by Hayden and Ball-Rokeach (2007) stated, “Communication infrastructure theory provides an empirically tested model illustrating the ways in which communication processes (such as community storytelling) work within the ecological constraints of technological and socio-economic factors” (p. 237). The assertion is supported by Moran et al. (2016) who affirmed that CIT is an example of “an ecological work that theorizes interactions across levels...i.e., the interplay between communication environments, individuals, and communities” (p. 137). Further emphasizing certain qualities of the CIT strategy and positioning it within the communication traditions, Wilkin and Ball-Rokeach (2011) asserted,

Ecological approaches take into consideration multiple levels of influence rather than concentrating on a specific level (e.g., individual, social network, community, government, society). People develop their own communication systems or ecologies whereby they establish connections to other people and to media for the purposes of attaining everyday life goals. (p. 240)

History of Cybernetics

The ecological or systems approach firmly positions communication infrastructure theory within the cybernetic tradition that Craig (1999) theorized as “information processing [that] explains how all kinds of complex systems, whether living or nonliving, macro or micro, are able to function and why they often malfunction” (p. 141). The cybernetic tradition has multiple founders and has roots in various disciplines (Bowker, 1993; Duffy, 1984; Peters & Peters, 2016). Norbert Weiner, W. Ross Ashby, Warren McCulloch, Claude E. Shannon, and Stafford

Beer are considered “cybernetics pioneers” (Duffy, 1984, p. 33), each with science, mathematics, or communications credentials.

According to Lafontaine (2007), “Cybernetics took root at the core of the technoscientific project implemented by the American government during the Second World War” (p. 28). Within the context of a scientific endeavor that would ultimately lead to the atomic bomb and the bombing of Hiroshima in August of 1945, Norbert Weiner and associates began to think about how to shoot down airplanes. They applied probabilistic analysis to the problem and developed the notions of information, entropy, and feedback. After the war, Wiener rendered this set of ideas coherent, offering “the science of cybernetics,” positing “the essential unity of one set of problems centering on communication, control, and statistical mechanics, whether in machine or living tissue” (Hamilton, 2017, p.408). As it turns out, this was groundbreaking work. Cybernetics was a “revolutionary contribution to science” (Hamilton, 2017, p. 414). It is useful within communications and would influence many disciplines (Duffy, 1984).

Sociocultural Tradition

Sociocultural is a further tradition that adds value to this study as communication is “typically theorized as a symbolic process that produces and reproduces shared sociocultural (sic) patterns” (Craig, 1999, p. 144). Theories in the sociocultural tradition focus on shared meaning and the implications of socially constructed interpretations for “organizational life” (Changorok, 2017, p. 7). Reality is not an objective set of arrangements (Littlejohn et al., 2017). In the sociocultural tradition, “communication is theorized as the (re)production of social order. Reality is socially constructed through micro-level interaction processes” (Maguire, 2006, p. 90). Problems within sociocultural theories are related to what Craig (1999) calls “Gaps across space

(sociocultural diversity and relativity) and across time (sociocultural change) that disable interactions by depleting the stock of shared patterns on which interactions depend” (p. 145).

Sociopsychological Tradition

More relevant to this research is the sociopsychological tradition wherein communication resides within the individual and “is the process by which individuals interact and influence each other (Craig, 1999, p. 143). While judgments are influenced by society, those judgments are “biased in predictable ways by our strong beliefs, attitudes and emotional states” (Craig, 1999, p. 143). Divided into behavioral, cognitive, and biological categories, the sociopsychological tradition is sometimes associated with the science of communication with its focus on “individual characteristics in a communicative context” (Patrick, 2013, para. 1).

The Situation to Communication Tradition

The cultural implications of sociocultural and personal interaction and the influence of the sociopsychological tradition have value in theorizing communications. As indicated, they are also crucial to the present study. Approaching the problem from a systems perspective, the present study fits best within the cybernetic tradition with its appeal to information processing, transmission, and feedback processes (Craig, 1999). Arguing for cybernetics’ philosophical underpinnings, Peters and Peters (2016) contended, “Wiener’s theory of communication is operational rather than simply message oriented” (p.167).

Communication problems “are [conceived in cybernetics] as breakdowns in the flow of information” (Craig, 1999, p. 141), and a cybernetic approach to problem-solving examines the relationships between elements while emphasizing the whole as a system (Duffy, 1984). One of the earliest theorists, Ashby (1956), wrote, “Cybernetics was defined by Wiener as ‘the science of control and communication, in the animal and the machine’” (p. 1). Ashby (1956) later

declared, “It offers the hope of providing the essential methods by which to attack the ills—psychological, social, economic—which at present are defeating us by their intrinsic complexity” (p. 6).

Summary

This chapter identified and discussed the literature related to training in the developing world, emphasizing its impact on health, education, the economy, and individual and community success. Existing literature relevant to this research’s primary topics and accompanying ideas within communications and associated fields were highlighted, along with implications that guided this study. Additionally, this chapter identified and discussed relevant literature related to communication infrastructure theory and this study’s theoretical framework. Literature describing sociocultural, sociopsychological, and cybernetics traditions was identified and discussed, highlighting the communication tradition in which this study was best situated.

This review detailed the developing world context that was the focus of this study, isolated the gaps within the existing literature, and highlighted missing literature that connects existing research to the need for this study. Inferences and assumptions were made to guide this research.

The following chapter, methodology, will identify and discuss the research design, setting, participants, procedures, and ethical considerations essential to developing world research. The chapter will also address reflexivity as the researcher’s role is clarified and will explain in detail the proposed data collection and analysis methods most suitable for the present study. The trustworthiness of this research is crucial, and Chapter 3 will address both dependability and credibility and how each will be assured.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study aimed to understand whether evangelical training via Shepherd's Global Classroom (SGC) curriculum meets the need to equip pastors, church leaders, and their congregations in the developing world. Marginalized people often experience training deficiencies in health, education, and economics (Akyeampong, 2022; Azad et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2006), with broad implications for the whole community (Al-Shorbaji, 2012; Briscoe, 2022; Brown et al., 2019; Bukoski et al., 2015). This qualitative case study focused on deficiencies in biblical and theological training in the developing world. Chapter 3 will explore the chosen research method, design, setting, procedure, and ethical considerations important to developing world research.

Research Method and Design

“Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p.43). Though varied in design and methodology, qualitative research is characterized by “natural setting, researcher as key instrument, multiple methods, complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic, participants’ multiple perspectives and meaning, emergent design, and reflexivity” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 43). This present study used qualitative research methodology “because a problem or issue needs to be explored, [and] this exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices” (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 45).

The implications of qualitative research are broad and diverse regarding methodology and interpretive and theoretical frameworks (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative research can assume one or a combination of specific designs, such as narrative, phenomenology, and

grounded theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The present study was a qualitative case study, the specifics of which are forthcoming.

One characteristic of qualitative research is its emergent design, which includes the procedures by which that research is conducted (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This means decisions are subject to change as the study progresses and moves in unforeseen directions. While a research strategy and procedures are set forth initially, a study characterized as emergent allows for modifications that will result in the most efficient data collection and analysis and produce the most accurate research outcomes. Emergent is essential to the present study because the researcher has a limited understanding and vision of what to expect in the research context, its participants, and the general setting in which the study will take place. Further, the procedures articulated later in this chapter should be understood in the context of a case study that, though bound by space and time, cultural and ethical considerations (Creswell, 2016) are subjective relative to the most effective methods for doing good research.

In addition to being described as emergent, this research was a case study, a design chosen because it sought to understand a contemporary social science topic within a bounded geographical context (Yin, 2018). Among the conditions that distinguish case study research from other research designs are the type of questions it asks, the researchers' need for control over behavioral events, and whether the focus of the study is contemporary or historical (Yin, 2018). Consistent with a case study design, this study pursued how and why questions; it required no control over behavioral events and focused on contemporary rather than historical events.

Research Questions

As Creswell (2016) asserted, “Because qualitative research takes place in a specific setting, often the setting where the research problem occurs, the context is most important” (p. 105). And as Yin (2018) argued, “Case studies allow you to focus in-depth on a ‘case’ and to retain a holistic and real-world perspective” (p. 5). The observations by Creswell (2016) and Yin (2018) combine to demonstrate how a case study serves to position the researcher within the scope of the research problem to understand whether the communication strategies of SGC are working to effectively extend biblical and theological training to the marginalized of the developing world.

More specifically, the bounds of this proposed qualitative case study provided the researcher access to developing world pastors and church leaders concerning the research problem and positioned them to make the relevant observation of the church and community context that the biblical and theological training should most impact. “In qualitative research, the intent is to explore the general, complex set of factors surrounding the central phenomenon and present the broad, varied perspectives or meanings that participants hold” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 133). To understand whether this developing world training has the potential for broad impact, it was necessary to see how it works in a single case. The central question and additional research questions (RQs) that guided this study were:

Central Question: *Is the curriculum of Shepherd’s Global Classroom meeting the need to equip believers and church leaders through Ezra Seminary in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico?*

To flesh the central question out more thoroughly, three additional questions were also addressed:

- **RQ1.** *What aspects of Shepherd’s Global Curriculum are most applicable?*

- **RQ2.** *What obstacles are hindering the communication of Shepherd's Global Classroom materials?*
- **RQ3.** *What role does Communication Infrastructure Theory's storytelling network play in the communication of Shepherd's Global Classroom materials?*

The RQs sought to understand the relationship between the deployment of the SGC curriculum and the equipping of pastors, church leaders, and lay members in San Gabriel Mixtepec. The questions also addressed both communication obstacles and strategies for access and efficacy. The RQs explored the topic at the center of this study and established an important course of inquiry for the researcher. As an emergent inquiry, data collection and initial findings led to the articulation of additional questions that arose from that discovery (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and were explored as the study progressed.

Setting

One distinction of case studies is that each is bounded by some identifying characteristic that distinguishes it from others as a point of research focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). This study outlined the bounds of Ezra Seminary, a newly formed training institution in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. The mountain village of San Gabriel was home to nearly 5,000 people in 2020, with a demographic almost evenly divided between males and females, more than 32% of whom are under 20 (San Gabriel Mixtepec, n.d.). Another general population statistic relevant to the present study from the Data México (n.d.) website is related to education. At the time of this study, those with a high school diploma or equivalent totaled 20.8%, and those with continuing education degrees (bachelor's degree, etc.) were less than 10% of the population (San Gabriel Mixtepec, n.d.).

This study was positioned within the developing world context of Mexico, and essential language and cultural considerations were addressed. Language and cultural translation are critical to understanding, and this study employed both to provide the most accurate data for analysis. In addition, the researcher triangulated these translations using an indigenous language expert and an American missionary who lived and worked in the region for nearly 10 years and is married to an American originally from Oaxaca, Mexico. The role of the indigenous translator and American missionary will be clearly articulated later in this chapter.

While San Gabriel Mixtepec is the village setting wherein this study was conducted, the case focused on a smaller segment of the population within San Gabriel that is part of the Christian religious community. The researcher has previously visited this proposed study's location of San Gabriel Mixtepec to get a sense of the research context, and what follows is a description of Ezra Seminary, the specific setting within the San Gabriel church community in which this study was conducted.

Ezra Seminary

Seminary could be misleading if understood from the traditional, Western perspective of location, buildings, professors, and academic rigor. Whatever Ezra Seminary becomes in the future, it is none of those things in the present. At the time of this study, the curriculum comprised 20 courses developed and disseminated by SGC, and Ezra Seminary offered one or two classes simultaneously. The training personnel was an American missionary, a 20-something-year-old Mexican professor who was trained in an American Bible College (bachelor's degree) and is completing his master's degree at a theological training institute in Central America, and a Mexican native who is mother-in-law to the missionary and has spent most of her life in the United States. The facilities consisted of a one-room, second-floor office

in the village and a single classroom modified with a metal roof, long tables and chairs, and projection equipment for occasional use of online training materials and collaboration with external sources.

Ezra Seminary was founded by the missionary referenced above, in coordination with SGC, out of the growing awareness of a deficiency of biblical knowledge and application within his denominational church in Mexico and the subsequent relative spiritual sickness. Lack of emphasis on evangelical training meant the church was more expansive than deep, a reality impacting relationships locally and nationally within the church in Mexico. Leaders were conducting themselves in ways that were antithetical to the faith and divisive to the church. Ezra Seminary was born after prolonged prayer, fasting, and preparation (B. Muir, personal communication, June 3, 2022).

Participants

Situated within the broader contexts of San Gabriel Mixtepec and Ezra Seminary, those people perceived to have the most to offer this study in terms of experience and outcome are pastor, leader(s), and lay members in the local denominationally affiliated church who have participated in classes at Ezra Seminary. Research participants were teachers and students as well as the local pastor, the missionary, and the denominational leader with insight into the impact of training on those who have experienced it. The study enlisted 13 San Gabriel Mixtepec residents with Ezra Seminary connections.

In addition to local participants, this study triangulated the findings by engaging founding leaders of SGC to ascertain whether there is consistency between the founding purposes of the organization and what Ezra Seminary participants disclosed related to their development.

Participants included the founding visionary, curriculum writers, denominational leaders, and original board members.

Procedures

Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted, “Prior to beginning data collection, a key activity involves the researcher seeking and obtaining permission from [the] institutional review board [IRB]” (p. 151). To that end, before this research began, the researcher “provide[d] evidence to the review board that the study design follows their guidelines for conducting ethical research” (p. 151). The procedures section articulates the measures this study took related to how research subjects were selected, how each was briefed on the investigation, how their identity was protected, and how informed consent was documented.

Once approval from IRB was gained, research was conducted over 2 weeks on location in San Gabriel Mixtepec. The researcher lived in rented hotel space in the village and engaged with research participants per the data collection methods outlined below. Communication took place with the help of an interpreter, and participants were recruited by a one-page questionnaire disseminated to the most suitable students with support from Ezra Seminary personnel.

Researchers Role

An observation by Creswell and Creswell (2018) is relevant to the present study. They noted, “Qualitative research is interpretive research [and] the inquirer is typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 183). This has implications for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Immersed in the cultural context in which this study was conducted, the researcher was the data collection instrument in this qualitative case study. In each of the specific data collection measures, the researcher was

directly involved in “build[ing] an in-depth picture of the case” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 162). The researcher was also central in interpreting and analyzing that data.

Objectivity and Insider Knowledge

The researcher understood some of what was at stake related to the outcomes of its training endeavors because he once pastored in the denomination of which Ezra Seminary is a part. He knows many of the people most invested in its success. In addition, the researcher has an educational and ministry background and a personal inclination toward discipleship and growth that elevated his desire to see the best outcomes from the proposed biblical and theological training research. These connections to the research site and research topic were areas of potential bias. Recognizing this, the researcher,

“Record[ed] notes during the research process that reflected [his] own personal involvement (i.e., [his] background, how [that] background shaped [his] interpretations of data), the likely impact the study will have on readers, and how participants react[ed] to the study” (Creswell, 2016, p. 225).

Data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted considering the researchers’ potential bias; notes were recorded that reflect the same, and relevant information was included in the final qualitative research report.

Data Collection

To gain the best data, Creswell and Poth (2018) argued for “a strategy of sampling... [that produces] a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination” (p. 148). Consistent with Creswell and Poth’s (2018) recommendation, the present study used purposive sampling, called “intentional sampling [whereby] a sample is selected from a population based on defined inclusion criteria” (Terrell, 2016, pp. 75–77).

Participants were selected in collaboration with Ezra Seminary personnel (Kung et al., 2016), each of whom were male or female college-aged (at minimum) adults who could read and respond to informed consent.

Participants were each presented with an informed consent document in their native language that explained the research, clearly and accurately detailed its purpose, and the participants' role to that end (Terrel, 2016). The informed consent process included clear language regarding voluntary participation. Involvement in the study was entirely voluntary; informed consent documents did not have to be signed. Research participants were notified of how data would be collected and securely stored and assured of privacy and confidentiality. Personal information and interview responses would be held securely (Creswell, 2016). Signed informed consent documents would be kept in secure storage throughout the research and kept on file indefinitely as needed.

In addition to informed consent, the privacy of each research participant was protected via the use of pseudonyms, and steps were taken in the formulation of questions and during the interview process to prevent actual or perceived power structures from undermining the collection of data, analysis, interpretation, or research outcomes (Creswell, 2016). Considering potential power-structure concerns related to developing-world participants, no leading questions were asked, and participants were given time to respond to interview questions without interruption from the researcher (Creswell, 2016). The only interjections during the interview process were to seek clarification or to ask follow-up questions.

As previously noted, the researcher was the data collection instrument, which included semistructured interviews, direct observation, audiovisual recordings, and group interviews to capture information pertinent to the study to best understand the problem that was the focus of

this research. The cross-cultural nature of the study required the use of interpreters who were engaged in each one-on-one and group interview and as needed in the observational phases of data collection. Two interpreters were used and consulted throughout the research phase of the proposed study, one of whom was indigenous, the other an American Missionary with a firm grasp of both the language and the culture. Throughout the research, a language interpreter translated Spanish to English, and a cultural interpreter took a broader view to provide context and meaning to the data collected.

While Ezra Seminary was the focus of the study, local participants were crucial to data collection. Yin (2018) highlighted principles that are “important to any data collection effort in doing case study research” (p. 110), one of which is to “use multiple sources of evidence (two or more...converging on the same findings)” (p. 110). Thus, interviews were periodically conducted via Zoom with a member of the SGC founding team to triangulate findings and discover whether the realities in and through Ezra Seminary were consistent with the founding vision.

Semistructured interviews

Face-to-face—one-on-one interviews are a primary data collection vehicle in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study will conduct face-to-face—one-on-one semistructured interviews with ten to twenty research participants to understand why each is involved with Ezra Seminary and how that involvement impacts their lives. Interviews with the staff of Ezra Seminary will seek to validate the testimony of students concerning their development in the program. In contrast, interviews with the local pastor and church leaders will seek to understand the implications of the Seminary’s impact on the spiritual health and growth

of the church. An effort to corroborate findings will include semistructured Zoom call interviews with SGC founding members referenced above.

Direct Observation

In addition to semistructured interviews, the researcher directly observed Ezra Seminary and associated personnel and procedures. According to Creswell and Poth (2018),

“Observation is one of the key tools of collecting data in qualitative research. It is the act of noting a phenomenon in the field setting through the five senses of the observer, often with a note-taking instrument, and recording it for scientific purposes” (p. 166).

The researcher spent 2 weeks in San Gabriel Mixtepec, witnessing training sessions, talking with missionaries, church leaders, and current and former students of Ezra Seminary, and gaining a complete history of the dynamics that inspired the founding of this training institution. The researcher collected information through sight and sound and wrote detailed, thick descriptions of San Gabriel, its people, the church, Ezra Seminary logistics, and the general setting in which this study was conducted. Those details are relevant to the findings as well as the transferable nature of this study. They are included in research findings as the context in which Ezra Seminary experienced either success or failure.

A further dimension of direct observation was to understand the culture of Ezra Seminary concerning teacher and student interactions, the energy present in the learning environment, and the contagion with which these students influence others to engage in learning. The researcher observed students in their daily routines to understand whether this evangelical training impacts their daily lives. Direct observation intersected with research interviews with missionaries and trainers to get more in-depth information regarding what the researcher observed in the daily

lives of research participants. This study embraced direct observation as crucial to its discovery and essential to answering the central RQ and addressing the research problem.

Audiovisual Data and Data Storage

Audiovisual recordings were essential to capturing the data vital to this research. These recordings made the data available for analysis and interpretation and, where applicable, were included in the qualitative research report. Recordings included photography, audio, and video capturing data relevant to the study. Interviews were recorded to supplement field notes and to ensure accurate recall, analysis, and interpretation. Photos and videos were taken during direct observation to supplement field notes and assist in articulating thick and rich descriptions of people and places relevant to the study.

Interview recordings were backed up to a computer hard drive daily and uploaded to iCloud to be preserved. Field notes, all textual data, and supplementary documents received from Ezra Seminary or SGC related to this emergent qualitative study were assembled in a designated research notebook and kept in secure storage when not in the immediate possession of the researcher. A daily summary of field notes was preserved in a password-protected computer program called Evernote.

Group Interviews

Using communication infrastructure theory as a framework for understanding oral health beliefs and behavior among young adults in Appalachian Kentucky, Savage et al. (2018) conducted focus groups as the primary data collection because they were interested in a “collective story” (p. 116). As Savage et al. (2018) observed, “Focus groups provide a safe atmosphere, where the synergistic discussion that is generated is greater than the sum of individual inputs” (p. 117). This present study sought to inspire a similar kind of “synergistic

discussion” (Savage et al., 2018, p. 117) to generate collective storytelling centered on how participants learned of Ezra Seminary and became a part of the evangelical training it projects. Walter Fisher described people as “inherent storytellers” (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 348), and those who built off his work believed “narratives are a sense-making process [and] build community” (Littlejohn et al., 2017, pp. 349–350). Engaging participants in group interviews is intended to discover the collective sense in which Ezra Seminary influences participants’ lives. The group interview process also served as a corroboration of one-on-one interviews.

Data Analysis

Yin (2018) suggested that “case study evidence is one of the least developed aspects of doing case study” (p. 165), and researchers often begin without an adequate plan related to handling the collected data. Qualitative research yields a large amount of textual data, and “the process of analysis...involves organizing the data, conducting a preliminary read-through of the database, coding and organizing themes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation of them” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 181). This study used conventional data analysis to find categories “derived directly from the data” (Creswell, 2018, p. 156).

Consistent with an observation from Creswell and Poth (2018), data analysis in this study was not a subsequent step. It began during the data collection process as the data were carefully managed, themes were identified, and categories were carefully coded around the research problem and the central RQ. Yin (2018) contended, “There are no fixed formulas. Instead, much depends on the researcher’s rigorous empirical thinking style, with a sufficient presentation of evidence and careful consideration of alternative interpretations” (p. 165).

Computer programs have limited case study or qualitative research analysis ability. The work of coding, identifying themes and patterns, and “developing a rich and full explanation or

even a good description of your case, in response to your initial ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions, will require much post-computer thinking and analysis on [the part of the researcher]” (Yin, 2018, p. 167). In pursuit of a straightforward approach, this proposed study will follow a manual coding, theme identification, and critical thinking approach to data analysis.

Trustworthiness

This emergent qualitative research project positioned the researcher on location in the developing world context. In this context, the problem and central RQs could be studied and understood in greater depth, intending to offer solutions and greater spiritual depth to the church in marginalized communities throughout the developing world. The nagging questions in the mind of the qualitative researcher regarding accuracy and transferability were anticipated and addressed before the study began (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Creswell and Creswell (2018) observed, “Researchers need to convey the steps they will take in their studies to check for the accuracy and credibility of their findings” (p. 199). While aspects related to these have been addressed throughout this chapter, the following paragraphs of this qualitative case study articulate those steps using “a synthesis of validation perspectives” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 257).

Credibility

A consistent means of ensuring credibility in qualitative research is enlisting participants to assess the findings and interpretations. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), in most qualitative studies, this “involves taking the data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (p. 261). Credibility can also be achieved by collaborating with participants “in varying ways and degrees” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261).

This study was done through ongoing and consistent feedback from the American missionary who was well-versed in Mexican culture and the biblical and theological training process. This missionary further understood the research problem and desired solution and knew more than anyone what was at stake. The missionary's potential subjectivity was taken into account. The language and culture expert this study enlisted for credibility was an American-educated Ezra Seminary professor of Mexican descent and assisted in understanding from a cultural and educational perspective.

Authenticity

Authenticity centers on whether different voices have been heard (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation is essential to authenticity. It was addressed in this study by periodic interviews with SGC founders and leaders as a follow-up to what was being learned on location in San Gabriel Mixtepec. As a component of the emergent nature of this study, the interviews and direct observation surfaced information that, in turn, generated questions to be asked of SGC leadership.

The emergent questions were not leading questions. For example, if a participant revealed a particular outcome, the question was not whether that was the intended outcome but rather what the effect was intended. Another way of triangulating in this study was through interviews with Ezra Seminary students and personnel. These responses indicated consistency between what the personnel sought concerning outcomes and their success at the student level.

Dependability and Confirmability

The issue of reliability in a case study is concerned primarily with whether another researcher following the same procedure and conducting the same research would arrive at the same conclusions (Yin, 2018). The most effective means, according to Yin (2018), of achieving

reliability is by thoroughly documenting each aspect of the study, a tactic Yin (2018) referred to as “case study protocol” (p. 46), and by maintaining a “case study database” (p. 46). These steps have the added benefit of creating an audit trail by which an external auditor can examine documentation and judge its dependability and confirmability. While this study’s design did not include an external auditor, Yin’s (2018) procedure was a best practice this study followed.

Transferability

Creswell and Poth (2018) argued, “The researcher allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability because the writer describes in detail the participants or setting under study (p. 262). Creswell and Poth further asserted. “With such a detailed description, the researcher enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred” (p. 262). The researcher leading this proposed qualitative case study was committed to rich, thick descriptions of the geographical setting, participants, Ezra Seminary, and the religious context in which the study was set. This detailed, thick description encompassed the training environment in which Ezra Seminary personnel and the SGC curriculum were engaged to address the research problem and answer the RQs. These descriptions aimed to bring the study to life in the minds and hearts of readers and highlighted the characteristics it shares with other contexts in which other developing world pastors and church leaders require biblical and theological training.

Ethical Considerations

Yin (2018) noted, “A good case study researcher, like any other social scientist, will strive for the highest ethical standards while doing research” (p. 87). The researcher leading this proposed study embraced a high ethical standard that included qualities Yin (2018) highlighted: “being honest, avoiding deception, and accepting responsibility for your work” (p. 87). Though

cultural and language barriers may impede communication efforts (Creswell, 2016), ethics in research, as it applied to this present study, included obtaining necessary permission to conduct research, informed consent, and consideration toward all research participants concerning their privacy and the fair and proper treatment of data gleaned from interviews and observations. No real names were used, data was securely stored, and the researcher took extensive measures to provide understanding to participants throughout the research process.

Summary

This qualitative research project was a qualitative case study that addressed the following central RQ: *How is the curriculum and training of Shepherd's Global Classroom serving to equip believers and church leaders through Ezra Seminary?* The study was conducted at Ezra Seminary in San Gabriel Mixtepec, a town in Oaxaca in southwestern Mexico. Participants included students of Ezra Seminary who were pastors and leaders of the church in San Gabriel Mixtepec, personnel to be defined as the founders of the Seminary, and at least two professors who taught there regularly. Data was collected using semistructured interviews, direct observation, and group interviews. Data recordings were backed up to iCloud each night, and all field notes were stored securely in the researcher's possession.

This research only commenced after application and approval from the IRB. The researcher paid careful attention to the fair and ethical treatment of study participants. The study thoroughly described the informed consent process and the nature of participant involvement. It included explicit language about the voluntary nature of inclusion, and the investigation proceeded after informed consent documents were signed and stored securely.

In addition to the commitment to honesty and an ethical code of conduct, the study pursued trustworthiness in data collection, analysis, and interpretation by triangulating interview

responses from Ezra Seminary participants with corresponding interviews with SGC founders and curriculum writers. The researcher collaborated with participants “in varying ways and degrees” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261), thoroughly documented all data collection, analysis, and interpretation aspects, and created and maintained a secure database of research findings.

The need for biblical and theological training in the developing world is significant. Effectively reaching the right people, this training can potentially extend opportunities for growth and spiritual impact to pastors, church leaders, and the churches they serve. This qualitative research aimed to understand whether the training that Ezra Seminary and SGC have extended to the developing world context of San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, in southwestern Mexico, is adequate.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview

This study aimed to understand whether the curriculum of Shepherd's Global Classroom (SGC) meets the need to equip believers and church leaders through the work of Ezra Seminary in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. The following chapter presents the findings of data collected through qualitative, semistructured interviews and direct observation. The results are organized around themes identified in that data and are presented as a narrative under headings and subheadings derived from the research questions (RQs). The findings of this study are tied more directly to the central RQ at the end of Chapter 4, and the chapter concludes with a summary of the results.

Introduction

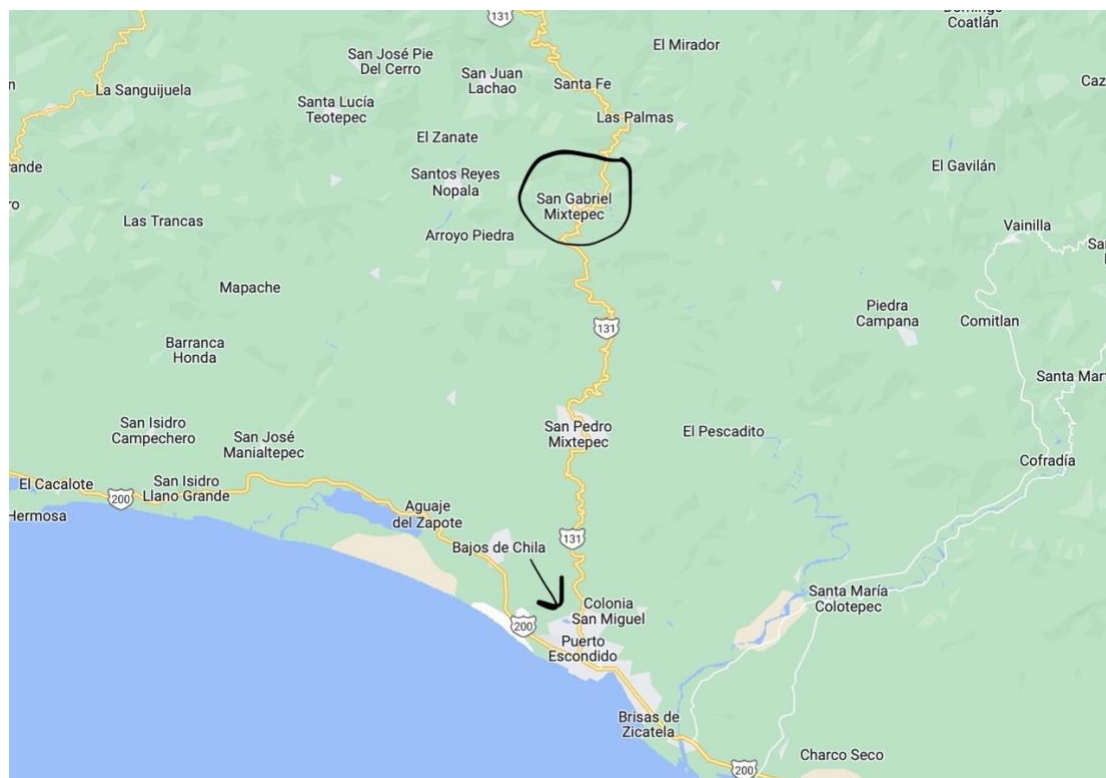
The village of San Gabriel Mixtepec is bustling as I walk under the archway that separates the courtyard of my hotel from the street. Cooking fires burn in the marketplace, and smoke wafts from places of business along the main street. The locals greet me warmly, muttering *Hola* or smiling as I pass. I cannot help but notice the dogs that sprawl lazily in sunny spots along the sidewalk or sniff and search for a morsel or an undiscovered treat near the closest food source.

I pass through a gate and climb the steps that lead to the second-floor headquarters of Ezra Seminary. This approximately 500-square-foot room is an educational space and an administrative office. On the stairway landing, I duck to avoid hitting my head on the concrete above me and carefully navigate the uneven steps at the top. Once at the top, it is a short walk down along the concrete railing to where a class is already in session.

On this evening of blended learning, there is about the same number of students in the classroom as are online (six), and each fully engages with the lecture and materials. The course is World Religions, and the focus this evening is the Seventh Day Adventist. The lecture is entirely in Spanish, and the professor provides foundational materials from the text, followed by supplemental resources to enhance the understanding and learning of the student. Figure 1 shows where San Gabriel Mixtepec is located in relation to the coastal city of Puerto Escondido (Google, n.d.).

Figure 1

San Gabriel Mixtepec in relation to Puerto Escondido



Note. Google, (n.d.).

Figure 2 shows where San Gabriel Mixtepec and the coastal city of Puerto Escondido are in relation to the northernmost parts of Mexico (Google, n.d.).

Figure 2

Puerto Escondido and San Gabriel Mixtepec in relation to Northern Mexico



Note. Google, (n.d.).

This village, this seminary, these students, and professors comprised this research's setting and were the study's focus. Participants were professors and students at Ezra Biblical Seminary in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, as well as a small group of founding leaders and curriculum writers from SGC. Each participated in one or multiple semistructured interviews, and all consented to be part of this critical study. Professors, students,

and SGC founding team members are introduced individually in the following participant section of this chapter. The professors are identified by their given names. Pseudonyms protect student identities per the disseminated and signed consent form.

Participants

Participants will be introduced by the group of which they are a part. Each will include a summary, and any further detail regarding unique contribution to the study, where necessary, will be given later in this chapter or Chapter 5. The last three names, also pseudonyms, under the student participant subheading, represent students who are pastors either in the village of San Gabriel Mixtepec or one of the surrounding villages.

Ezra Seminary Professors

Two men were interviewed as professors. Neither of them is native to San Gabriel, but each has become embedded in the community as an expression of their desire to improve the spiritual well-being of families there. Though they come from different places, each proved crucial in gaining objective data for this study.

David Martínez

David is from Guadalajara, Mexico. He was educated in an Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) school in Mexico, where he learned English. This skill equipped him to travel to the United States for Bible College Training. He was later asked to help translate SGC courses into Spanish. He was eventually invited to join in the ongoing biblical and theological training work at Ezra Biblical Seminary in San Gabriel Mixtepec.

David spent the first year working with Ezra Biblical Seminary from a distance, and in the Spring of 2022, he moved to San Gabriel Mixtepec to become an official part of the team. He

had also enrolled in Central American Theological Seminary (CAT) and, in the Spring of 2023, completed his MA in Bible and Theology at CAT.

Brennan Muir

Brennan is the founder of Ezra Biblical Seminary and its original professor. He and his wife Ivon came as missionaries to San Gabriel Mixtepec because the director of the Bible Methodist Connection of churches understood the need for biblical and leadership training in Mexico was great. The San Gabriel church was the largest of the Bible Methodist churches in Mexico and, they believed, had the most potential to that end.

Brennan was born into a Christian family. His dad was a pastor. While growing up in the church, he did not intend to pursue a college education or ministry. His dad, however, wanted him to do at least 1 year of Bible College, so he set off for God's Bible School and College and was there much longer than he had planned. Through a string of events in which he took an unexpected trip to Ukraine as the worship leader on an evangelical mission, he got engaged to a girl whose mother was from Oaxaca, Mexico. He later received a call from a denominational leader asking if he would consider being a missionary to Mexico. Brennan pursued and received his BA in Intercultural Studies.

After finishing his degree, he married Ivon and started the 2-year process of being approved by the Board of the Bible Methodist Connection of Churches to lead their work in Mexico. They were approved, sent to language school on the border, where they studied for two full semesters, and finally went to Mexico full-time in 2014. At the time of this study, Brennan was studying for his master's degree. A demanding ministry load and field responsibilities meant he could take just one course per semester. Still, Brennan persisted because he understood there was an ongoing need to stay sharp so he could effectively and faithfully teach others.

Student Participants***Fernando***

Fernando is from San Gabriel Mixtepec. In addition to being a student at Ezra Seminary, he is also a physical education teacher at one of the schools in the village. Fernando said that within the past 2 years, he converted from Roman Catholicism and became a genuine follower of Jesus. He is an earnest young man in his mid-20s who indicated he seeks the Lord's direction concerning full-time Christian service. He completed 12 courses at Ezra Seminary, including his current enrollment in courses ending May 2023.

Rosita

Rosita is a self-described missionary who has served the Lord among her people in San Gabriel Mixtepec and nearby villages for 13 years. Her mission work has been intermittent as she has had to address family emergencies and spend extended time with her parents, who were sick and unable to care for themselves. Rosita has been seeking biblical or seminary training for a long time, but two things hindered her. First, because she is a woman, her requests for information have been treated with indifference. Second, she believes that people in authority in the church hindered her or prevented her from studying. Rosita thought that if she were going to learn more about the Christian faith, she would have to take matters into her own hands. Thankfully, she heard about Ezra Seminary from a friend and began taking courses. Between her trips back and forth to Mexico City to visit family and care for her parents, she has taken five (5) courses through Ezra Seminary.

Diego

Diego is also from San Gabriel Mixtepec. In addition to participating in six (6) courses through Ezra Biblical Seminary, he is studying biology and working on the final project to

complete his degree. Diego has a big personality and is well-liked in the seminary and the community. Many of his family are restaurant and shop owners in San Gabriel.

Isabella

As are most of the students who attend Ezra Seminary, Isabella is from San Gabriel and owns a small bookstore where she sells Bibles. Having taken 11 courses, Isabella is one of the Ezra Seminary students most involved in her local church. She is the youth pastor and often preaches when the pastor is absent. Her experience as a woman leading in the church contrasts Rosita's (noted earlier), and Isabella is the one who informed Rosita of the opportunity to learn through Ezra Seminary. In addition, Isabella is occasionally involved in evangelistic outreach to the surrounding villages, something she refers to as missionary trips. She has also served with an evangelical organization that helps teach people how to read.

Miriam

Originally from Mexico, Miriam spent many years in the United States. Miriam recently felt she should return to her own country and hometown and present the gospel to her people. Miriam helps in various aspects of the work of Ezra Seminary and the local church and serves wherever she is needed. She is a magnificent cook. Evangelistically minded, her service in the community is generally united with telling someone about Jesus. The six (6) courses she has taken assist in fulfilling her calling.

Pearl

Pearl works as a teacher in the elementary school in San Gabriel. She has been looking for a Bible institute to study at but could not find one for years. So, Pearl studied to become a teacher, even completing her master's degree at the university. The tools and resources she gained professionally have helped her tremendously in her seminary studies. She now

understands that the opportunity to study at Ezra Biblical Seminary answers a prayer she prayed many years ago. Pearl has participated in or completed 13 courses.

Sofia

Sofia was initially uninterested in participating in Ezra Biblical Seminary training because she was not involved in local church ministry and believed it was only for pastors and church leaders. Sofia agreed to accompany Camila in taking one of the courses at her friend's invitation. She soon learned that the curriculum offered practical training for everyday believers. So far, Sofia has taken 10 courses. She is 26 years old, has two brothers, and is a teacher in the local elementary school. In addition, Sofia owns a brick-oven pizza shop on the outskirts of San Gabriel, where she makes and sells pizza. It is delicious.

Camila

Camila is from San Gabriel and serves in the church as a pastor. She also works in commerce. Most homes in the village have a space that opens to the street, usually with a door that can be raised and lowered, for selling produce, homemade food items, merchandise, or trinkets to those in the community. If you are not a shop owner in San Gabriel Mixtepec but work in commerce, this is generally what is meant. Camila has participated in eight (8) courses.

Luis

Luis is a local pastor who works in a government-sponsored convenience store for low-income communities. No others from his church are involved in Ezra Seminary as students. His involvement is strictly for his personal spiritual growth and development. He has taken six (6) courses.

Rafael

Rafael is a husband and father of two, and for the past year and a half, has served alongside founder Brennan Muir in the administrative offices of Ezra Seminary. Rafael also serves in one of the churches in a sister village. He has completed the application process to be licensed as a minister in the Bible Methodist Church, the denomination with which Ezra Seminary is affiliated. Brennan Muir, who works closely with him almost daily, speaks highly of Rafael and notes how much he is flourishing in his spiritual development and Christian service. Rafael has taken 10 courses and is taking more of a leadership role, and his understanding and involvement have matured.

Carlos

Carlos is from a village proximate to San Gabriel. After growing up in Santiago, Carlos moved to a state on the other side of Mexico, where he received training to become a teacher. Because of his work as an elementary teacher, Carlos was later transferred to a village about 20 minutes from San Gabriel.

Juan

Juan is the local Bible Methodist Church pastor, the church most closely aligned with Ezra Seminary. His church has nearly 200 weekly attendees and many more parishioners. While Juan audits Ezra Biblical Seminary courses and is as engaged as possible, his ministry responsibilities in this Mexican village prevent him from completing many assignments. Juan has been pastoring for more than 20 years. He said he was converted at the age of 14. His life is devoted to Christ and the work of His Kingdom.

Antonio

Antonio is the Good Shepherd Church pastor, a Pentecostal Church in San Gabriel Mixtepec. His congregation has the unique advantage of having the most students at Ezra Biblical Seminary who are also engaged in service in their local church. Good Shepherd Church has minor theological differences with Ezra Seminary and the Bible Methodist Church, but Antonio does not view these theological distinctions as problematic.

Shepherd's Global Classroom Founding Team

While in Mexico, an interview with the SGC founding team was conducted virtually to triangulate findings and identify connections between the original intent of SGC curriculum and the outcomes it produced. This discussion afforded me the opportunity to speak directly with those responsible for the creation of SGC content about the design of the curriculum and the philosophy behind it. Emerging questions for this interview were inspired by things previously learned during data collection on site in San Gabriel.

Tim Keep

Tim has been a missionary to the Philippines and the Director of Missions for the Bible Methodist Connection of Churches, the organization under which he had served for more than a decade. He has traveled the globe preaching and teaching the gospel and is passionate about equipping underserved church leaders in the developing world. Out of that passion and obedience to Christ, Tim started SGC under the leadership and direction of a team he assembled to guide him. During the SGC founding team interview, it was evident that Tim was the one whose vision had given birth to the work of SGC. Each person contributed significantly to the conversation, and Tim often deferred to the other team members for things relevant to their expertise. Nevertheless, his overall understanding of the ministry and its efforts was apparent.

Dr. Randall McElwain

Randall is one of two primary curriculum writers and one of the original founding members of SGC. Throughout the interview with the SGC founding team members, questions regarding the curriculum, e.g., its conceptual underpinnings and the theological posture of its authorship, were referred by the SGC founding team to Randall for response and feedback. His answers were thorough, and his insights were clarifying. Randall has been an overseas missionary in Taiwan, served as a professor for more than 30 years at Hobe Sound Bible College in Florida, and has written multiple books on holiness and Christian living. Dr. McElwain recently joined the staff of SGC as the Director of Global Training (Shepherd's Global, 2023).

Dr. Mark Bird

Mark is a founding member of the SGC board of directors and was part of the team that fleshed out the vision for this new global ministry. He was particularly tuned, during the interview, to the founding documents the team had created to shape the vision of SGC and its ultimate outcomes. From our interactions, it seems Mark leaves nothing to chance. Dr. Bird is a lifelong academic, holds multiple degrees, is passionate about apologetics, evangelism, discipleship, and spiritual formation, and most recently serves as Professor of Theology at God's Bible School and College in Cincinnati, Ohio (Shepherd's Global, 2023).

San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico

The mountain village of San Gabriel Mixtepec is just over 1 hour outside the coastal city of Puerto Escondido, one of the top 10 surfing destinations in the world. This proximity is somewhat misleading as San Gabriel is far removed from the amenities the tourist destination of Puerto Escondido offers. Regular trips down the mountain would be needed for those tourists

who prefer more options and lower prices. However, better options and lower prices are not the only things worth considering.

Beyond the usual tourist trappings, San Gabriel Mixtepec features some essential and compelling characteristics. For an out-of-the-way village in Mexico, it is a fascinating place to visit! Clean, attractive, and well-stocked shops line the streets. The celebrated food of Oaxaca is readily available, and tourists can even get the more traditional American fare of a bacon cheeseburger, French fries, and a milkshake when the craving hits. Just outside the village limits, a park-like area has been created for the villagers. It consists of a picnic shelter and lovely green space, and there is a comfortable spot to meditate or read a book alongside the clear and fast-flowing river. Suppose you like what you experience and plan to stay awhile. In that case, the most prominent hotel is sanitary, comfortable, and inviting, and the people are as friendly as those you will find anywhere. Moreover, though San Gabriel is not generally considered a tourist destination, James, a Canadian citizen, has been there for months and (as of this writing) does not have plans to leave. If more people had a chance to spend time in this attractive village in the mountains of southern Mexico, perhaps many more would visit.

San Gabriel Mixtepec is the village in which Ezra Biblical Seminary was founded. The village is also the location of its only existing classroom and is considered home to most students and professors who engage with it weekly. San Gabriel is also the setting in which the story of Ezra Biblical Seminary is being written and the backstory to the question central to this research. In this section, the need for this training center will be understood as some of the spiritual deficiencies of a church and community are explained through the lens of research participants.

The Bible Methodist Church in Mexico

Findings detailed in an interview with the current missionary and founder of Ezra Biblical Seminary, Brennan Muir, provide essential background information and bring the work taking place in San Gabriel Mixtepe into focus. The Bible Methodist Mission work in Mexico was established nearly 50 years ago, and in the late 1980s, a training institute was founded that closed around the year 2000. As mentioned, the American leadership understood the need for training and commissioned Brennan and Ivon to engage in that work. SGC curriculum was a good option for such training. For unspecified reasons, the Mexican Church's leadership opposed using that curriculum. Negotiations between the mission board and the national leadership broke down, and the initiation of a training program was delayed.

Muir likened the Bible Methodist Church in Mexico to the Corinthian church of the New Testament. Though his firsthand knowledge does not predate the turn of the 21st century, the 15 years before Ezra Biblical Seminary's founding, he said, were marked by division, corruption, and sensuality. After nearly 5 years of working with the national leadership to start a denominational training center and getting nowhere, Brennan and his wife, Ivon, were instructed by the Director of Bible Methodist Missions, Tim Keep, to start locally. As Brennan explained, they were encouraged to pursue their best direction. They had initially hoped to train leaders on a national level throughout Mexico. Instead, the training center in San Gabriel Mixtepec was launched in hopes of the best outcome in that location.

Three Distinct Issues Provide Insight into the Spiritual and Religious Life of the Community

The spiritual deficiencies that seemed to mark the denomination in Mexico impacted the local church in San Gabriel Mixtepec. Three distinct issues were addressed during the interviews

that provided insight into the spiritual and religious life in San Gabriel Mixtepec prior to the start of Ezra Biblical Seminary: division among the churches, a blending of faiths into what could be called syncretism, and a lack of knowledge concerning the Scriptures, in both its interpretation and application. Interviewees regularly cited one of these issues as primary and distinct concerning their desire to study, their need for training, or the benefit they had experienced. Each will be highlighted under the subheadings below.

Division Among the Churches

According to study participants, the division was a distinguishing mark of the evangelical churches in San Gabriel before the launch of Ezra Seminary. Professor David Martinez is not originally from the village. However, through his interactions with students, the local Bible Methodist church, and Professor Brennan Muir, he learned, *“In the village’s history, there was a point at which families would not speak to each other because they were from different churches. They treat[ed] each other very harshly because they were from a different denomination.”* A statement from Diego, who is well known in the community and whose family has significant influence, spoke to the prior division in the Christian community in San Gabriel Mixtepec and supported Professor Martinez’s claim. Diego said, *“Christians [in San Gabriel] did not think about being together in one place.* He says,

Because of what I have learned [through Ezra Seminary] and this dynamic of bringing the brothers and sisters from different churches together in one place...you realize that you are not just an isolated Christian, and your church is not isolated. You are part of a bigger church and must relate to other churches and brothers in Christ.

Throughout the interviews, this sense of learning together and the breaking down of walls became increasingly apparent. The growing sense of unity is particularly noticeable because it

contrasts past relationships. Professor Brennan Muir spoke to this issue most directly when he said, *“Prior to the seminary, I am not sure I could even remember a single time there was a joint activity between churches.”*

Syncretism

During the interview with SGC founding team members, Tim Keep mentioned syncretism as a common problem within developing world cultures and communities. He suggested this is primarily the result of inadequate or insufficient training. Tim’s comments were confirmed in the context of San Gabriel. In talking about the need for Ezra Seminary and the general spiritual conditions within the community prior to its influence, Professor Brennan said, *“In Mexico, in general, Roman Catholicism is powerful. It looks very different than what we normally think of with Catholicism. It is syncretism.”* Muir explained that *“each village [is likely to] have its traditions, beliefs, superstitions, all of which get lumped together so that it can become very dark.”* Moreover, concerning Brennan and Ivon’s early work with the Bible Methodist Mission in San Gabriel, he said, *“We noticed the local evangelical church was not much different, even in some of the extremes. For example, offered Muir, “when someone was sick it was not out of the question for them to have some naturalists come and sprinkle special herbs over your feet. Muir concluded, “In short, being a Christian locally was just a religion.”*

Lack of Knowledge Concerning the Scriptures: Interpretation and Application

As is evident in the interview responses, the issues of division within the Christian community in San Gabriel and the syncretism manifested in its religious expression seem to merge with what students and professors explained is a lack of knowledge and understanding related to the scriptures. The before and after picture that emerged from interviews concerning

both the interpretation and application of the scripture indicated the emphasis the seminary places on equipping students in this area and its effectiveness.

When asked why he thought Ezra Biblical Seminary was an excellent opportunity for him, Juan, one of the local pastors, said, *“I was aware of my lack of understanding concerning the scriptures, and I realized my need.”* He continued,

Once I began to participate, it was more and more clear that my understanding was growing, and I was learning to come to the text and not simply introduce my ideas but take from the text to take into consideration the context and principles for studying the Word.

Juan concluded his thoughts regarding the interpretation of Scripture with the idea that he felt a growing sense of responsibility to share with others this newfound gift with which he had been entrusted.

Fernando admitted, *“Before Ezra, my involvement in the church was mainly focused on tradition. I would focus on the sermon, and that would be it. I would not take the time or the initiative to study the Word of God.”* Rosita acknowledged that her teaching before Ezra Seminary was to offer *“whatever came to mind.”* One student spoke of this training opportunity in the context of the Word of God and its unique ability to influence the lives of its hearers. She articulated the priority of knowing and understanding the scriptures as preparation for effectively sharing the gospel with her fellow citizens. Miriam said, *“You need to know the Word of God to teach the Word of God. My testimony will not effectively transform the lives of the people around me. Only the Word of God is going to do that.”* Gabriel, another pastor, viewed the educational opportunity as a chance to *“understand the Word of God better.”* With that *“understanding”* as

a foundational reality, Gabriel imagined that through the Scriptures he would also *“understand better the spiritual realities of life...and know God better.”*

The relevance of Ezra Seminary to the lives of students living in San Gabriel was expressed by Sofia when she said, *“I consider this to be very beneficial because previously it was just easy to accept whatever you heard in a sermon from a pastor or a teacher, but now we are learning to learn for ourselves.”* Furthermore, Diego summed up his opinion of the focus and impact of Ezra Seminary. He said, *“There are many other things that we did not know before about the Christian faith, and now we are getting to know them...we are learning about God, and through His Word, we are learning about God himself.”*

Each of these preceding statements speaks to the conditions before the founding of Ezra Seminary, and a general understanding research participants would come to possess during the training process. Whether they knew they needed to learn techniques of biblical interpretation prior to their study or figured it out along the way, there was a consensus that the ability to study and exegete Scripture properly was lacking. The implications of this shallow view of Scripture, or a traditional view of the church, were widespread in the community.

All of this points to the general condition within the Christian community in San Gabriel prior to the founding of Ezra Biblical Seminary and the dissemination of the SGC curriculum. The initial condition and the logic behind this training effort are summed up in the words of Ezra Seminary founder and original Professor Brennan Muir. He said,

We have experienced the Corinthian context, perversion in the church, even extreme perversion in the church. It was not being dealt with appropriately. The ritualism, the dualism, in which we have our spiritual life and our everyday life. The only way to combat that is to go back to the basics, and why do we even do what we do? Why do we

believe what we believe? What does it mean to have Christ as our Savior and our Lord? That affects every single aspect of our lives. Because of some of the stuff we were observing and the desperate need, that became our focus.

This was the local soil in which Ezra Seminary would be planted.

Obstacles that Stand in the Way

The spiritual conditions in San Gabriel Mixtepec made it ripe for a training center. There was a corresponding enthusiasm to learn, expressed by Miriam, who said,

I prayed that God would provide here in Mexico a way for us to be taught how to disciple others. Sometimes, when we are in the church, we have this standard of what a Christian is that is not even Biblical. So, we need to understand what a Christian is [and] how we must be disciplined. I am very thankful that God has provided Ezra Seminary, which is here and close to you, so you can study and know how to share with others.

The need and desire helped mitigate some obstacles to disseminating the SGC curriculum in a developing world context. It does not, however, address those obstacles in totality. Some hindrances are specifically related to that curriculum. Others reflect the culture and the context in which the training is taking place. The following subsections articulate the obstacles to learning referenced during interviews and discuss the nuances related to how each was understood and the tactics by which they were overcome.

Academics & Education

There are obstacles at various stages of the training process as professors and students are each challenged to do their part for the success of the whole. A fundamental hindrance for some students is the low academic and educational standards of the village in which they live or of Southern Mexico in which that village is positioned. Addressing this matter, Professor Brennan

noted that 6th grade is the highest students must attend in Southern Mexico. Because this low standard is not strictly enforced, some students have little formal education and thus have great difficulty in expressing basic thought. Professor David said,

In our context, students who did not have further education besides elementary education find it harder to engage with the text in general. Not that SGC is difficult, but some of them would take longer to do the assignments, the homework.”

Lack of previous education is viewed as a hindrance to the training Ezra Seminary offers.

Curriculum Written in the United States & Used in the Developing World

A theme that emerged from early conversations with Ezra Seminary professors was that the curriculum was written in the United States. This, they believed, was a potential obstacle. While curriculum writers made efforts to bridge the cultural and contextual gaps, efforts the SGC founding team confirmed during their interview, at times, these efforts had to be enhanced by work from the local professors to communicate more effectively with developing world students. Students were thus asked to address the language and style of the curriculum and provide insight into whether it was performing its intended objectives for learning. The reality that emerged is that students believe the SGC courses are clear and understandable. They confirmed that content and learning complexities are generally mitigated by the professors' efforts to eliminate potential obstacles before they have a chance to become a problem.

Two students, however, indicated they either had a problem understanding the questions at the end of each lesson or difficulty connecting the lesson's content to those questions. Isabella, for example, said, *“The area I have the most difficulty is with the questions. Sometimes they are difficult to answer. In general, though, I would say the courses are easy to understand.”* For Rosita, both the wording of the questions and the way the content was formatted to those

questions were of particular concern. Concerning the World Religions course, she alleged, *“There is not a systematic way of presenting the information so that it connects to the questions. Whenever I go back and try to answer the questions, there is no clear way for me to find the answers.”*

Diego expressed what seemed to be the sentiment of most students when he said, *“Overall, the content is straightforward. You can get a good grasp of what the author is trying to tell you. There are sometimes word[s] you wonder what he was referring to. Generally, though, the content is easy to understand.”* Furthermore, summarizing the overall sense that the content of SGC courses is far more a help than a hindrance, Camila said, *“You can sense that the person writing the text is somebody that knows God and wants to show that through their writing.”*

Time in Class and for Study

In addition to the issues of prior education and the language and style of the curriculum, time was another factor some students offered as an obstacle to getting the most from the experience. Some wanted more class time, to look at the course content more thoroughly, and to engage in discussion with the professor and fellow students. Others suggested they had insufficient time outside of class to get the most out of the content.

Carlos said, elevating time above other impediments to learning, *“The biggest obstacle is that we do not always take enough time to discuss the lessons. They are critical topics. Every week’s class time is too short, so we cannot really go into detail and discuss it deeply.”* Rafael was insightful in suggesting, *“Some course topics may be discussed very little just for the sake of time or space. For some reason, the author does not explain the topic further.”*

The matter of time outside of class seemed to be a broader concern, as these are all men and women who work professionally, often with two jobs in addition to their coursework and

class time. During interviews, in answer to the question of obstacles to learning, Luis said, “*My work. Sometimes, because of my involvement in my work, I cannot put in the time necessary to complete my assignments.*” Pearl strongly agreed with this sentiment, admitting,

It has been difficult with the time aspect because first, I am teaching in an elementary school, second, I am studying for my master’s, and third, I have commitments with my mother, who is an advanced age. So, I am not a full-time student. I am doing my best to set time aside to make this happen.

One final consideration mentioned during interviews was that of ministry involvement. Those heavily involved in ministry, such as pastors, etc., cannot engage as they would like. As was mentioned earlier, one of the professors noted that the pastor of the Bible Methodist Church in San Gabriel Mixtepec audits courses for this reason. Though he attends lectures regularly, Juan does not regularly complete the assignments.

SGC Origination & Language Translation

Earlier in this chapter, the emerging theme of SGC content origination was noted as whether it presented an obstacle to learning for students in the developing world. In addition to the fact that the curriculum sometimes contains references unfamiliar in the San Gabriel context, and there are some visual references and illustrations that are not clear to the Mexican students in San Gabriel, the translation of that curriculum into the language of the natives is a consideration. Interview questions were added to seek student feedback regarding this concern with mixed reviews.

Students generally had no issue with the translations. Juan, a pastor and a student, said, “*With the translations, there are sometimes words that we would not use here in Mexico, but that has not hindered the understanding of the text.*” Spanish is Miriam’s native language, but having

spent 30 years in the United States, she is also relatively fluent in English. Of the SGC courses, Miriam said, *“They were translated in a way that is easy to understand. Of course, there are some mistakes here and there. However, the language is beneficial for us to understand and to learn.”* Keep in mind while the professors lecture from this material, the students are expected/required to read and respond to questions on their own apart from the lecture, in which all they have is the written SGC text. Regarding translation, one final quote from Carlos is helpful. Carlos reasoned, *“There is no problem with [translation]. If a word or concept is not easy to grasp, there is always the internet where you can look up the terms or something.”*

The images and illustrations were likewise not a significant concern. Rafael works in the seminary office and seems to be more knowledgeable on the subject. In a lengthy but valuable response, Rafael said,

In the past, ...one complication we encountered was that additional or recommended resources were all [in]English. The teacher’s role was to give us resources in Spanish to go deeper into the subject. Also, some images in the text were in English (pictures or whatever). It was useless for us, but I understand that they are working and revising all of that and providing resources in Spanish.

Rafael’s comment regarding the role of the teacher is central to mitigating obstacles and deserves a sub-section of its own.

The Role of the Professor in Mitigation of Obstacles

One more potential hindrance should be added to the obstacles previously mentioned. The findings presented in this subsection provide a context for understanding what interview participants conveyed about the role of the professor in overcoming obstacles to the effective communication of the SGC curriculum. Specifically, the potential obstacle that emerged from

interviews was a theological imbalance in the text of the curriculum because of theological posturing. This means the curriculum is written from the author's theological perspective and does not always appreciate the theological distinctives, if any, of the audience it addresses. The SGC founding team spoke to this in their interview by suggesting they sought, in writing, to maintain neutrality where needed and possible. It was the opinion of professors Brennan and David, however, that occasionally, an aspect of one course or another would come too strongly from the author's theological persuasion and lack generosity to those who do not hold to those beliefs.

Professor Brennan introduced this idea during his initial interview and provided an example to support his claim. Without giving specific details, Brennan mentioned a course that said, in effect, this or that author argued for a particular theological position, "but the Bible says." In other words, the curriculum writer was posturing himself as an arbiter of truth in contrast to the theological views of others. Though these references are not standard throughout the curriculum, they do exist and require some level of mitigation to be circumvented.

To the question, "Do you believe there to be an imbalance with some theological aspect of the curriculum?" Every student and pastor, one of whom has their theological distinctives, said no. One student even observed, "*You can tell the authors are trying to take into consideration the general context.*" Again, Rafael elaborated in his answer because he works in the office and is privy to some conversations other students do not hear. He said,

I hear Brennan and David talking about the subjects and how sometimes they struggle to put more balance into whatever is going to be presented. So, yes, I realize now that some course topics might be the author's posture. If somebody from a different denomination,

church, or belief wants to take the course, they may be discouraged. It is something that, unless you know what is going on, it is not a problem.

This example represents what interviews revealed about the work of the professors concerning all aspects of the curriculum and their lectures. Their efforts to overcome potential obstacles and ensure their students receive the training intended through the SGC curriculum are noted by students and pastors alike. Professors take nothing for granted and make no assumptions about the students' abilities to understand and receive content.

In his interview, Rafael noted that topics in some courses are discussed very little for the sake of time or space, or for whatever reason, the author just does not explain fully. *"The teachers, he said, "have seen that sometimes that is their role, and they take the time to explain some of these topics."* Luis said, *"I have not had any difficulties understanding what the courses teach, but we have the teachers who help us understand everything that is happening."* In response to the question, "Was the training presented in a way that encouraged and inspired learning?" Fernando said, *"What has been the most helpful to me is that we have incorporated virtual tools, online tools, that even if we are somewhere else visiting or with our work, we can continue learning and submitting assignments."*

Diego offered the most complete response to the question of training and summarized the findings by conveying this overarching attitude of the students.

The teachers here have done a good job trying to teach us in a way we all understand. They have put forth the effort to make sure the courses are accessible to all of us. Even in small details like changing locations, they have consulted with us to see if it will be a good fit. Even in their presentations and the ways they teach, they constantly encourage us to study by ourselves. Not only take what is being taught here and what is being taught

in the courses, but to come, study, look at the books in the library, and do our research, and keep studying by ourselves.

The Application of the Shepherd's Global Curriculum

The matter of obstacles is relevant insofar as it does or does not impact the outcomes of Ezra Biblical Seminary. This section will consider the application of the SGC curriculum through Ezra Biblical Seminary and assess whether it meets the need to equip pastors and church leaders in the developing world context of San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. The objective is to provide an account of the experiences of students and professors at Ezra Biblical Seminary, as revealed through interviews, specifically in terms of transformation and personal growth resulting from the courses and events held there.

Courses Most Helpful

A question that each participant answered was, "What course or part of a course has been especially beneficial to your growth?" The list of student and pastor responses, in order of most popular answer, is provided under the subheadings below. Each course identified as most important or beneficial is introduced by a description from the SGC website, and it is supported by at least one quote from a study participant (student) stating why that course impacted them. When asked this question, nearly every student answered "*all of them*" at some point during their answer.

The Life & Ministry of Jesus

According to the course description from the SGC website, the most popular course from the perspective of Ezra Biblical Seminary students is all about "study[ing] the life of Jesus as a model for ministry and leadership in the 21st century" (Shepherd's Global, n.d.).

Regarding this course, Isabella said, *“We learn to teach like Jesus, preach like Jesus, and love like Jesus. I like this course so much that I even teach this course to the youth.”* Miriam was more specific concerning how this teaching has impacted her thinking. She said,

The seminary has taught us to follow the example of Jesus in His ministry and His life.

That example is one of a person who left His glory so that He can be with us to the point of death. That was his service to us; that was his ministry to us. Furthermore, as his followers, we need to have that same mentality of service in the church, not just persons that call themselves Christians but are followers of Christ.

Spiritual Formation

According to the SGC course description on the Shepherd’s Global (n.d.) website, Spiritual Formation teaches students:

To have the attitudes of Jesus, to relate to God the way Jesus related to his Father, to humble [themselves] as Jesus did, to practice the spiritual and personal disciplines of Jesus, to endure suffering as Jesus did, and to engage in the Christian community (the Church) formed by Jesus.

Fernando said, *“Spiritual Formation was especially beneficial for me because, as a new believer, you have many questions about the Christian faith and what it looks like. This practical course helped me grow in my faith”*. Pearl’s insight was more precise. She said, *“Spiritual Formation has given me an understanding of how we are conformed to the likeness of Christ for the good of others.”* Rafael concluded, *“Spiritual formation was fundamental for me as it focused on a new believer in the faith, and that’s what I am. That [course] was foundational for showing me some basic practices and disciplines.”* Finally, Miriam said regarding the course, *“In spiritual*

formation, my understanding has been opened. It is not enough just to attend church; certain disciplines must be in our lives.”

Apologetics

“This course teaches the scientific, historical, and philosophical basis for a Christian worldview and shows how the Christian faith is consistent with reason and reality” (Shepherd’s Global, n.d.). Sofia is described in the participant’s descriptions as a teacher. She taught in a local elementary school and had this to say about the Apologetics course:

Through apologetics, I have become aware of different theories about how the world came to be. The key is that there has always been the ever-existing Creator. When I come to these theories that I am required to teach [in elementary school], this has equipped me to explain to students what the textbook says, then I add, ‘But you should consider these other reasonable options.’ In one case, I specifically remember nervously looking around to ensure my director was not within earshot as I prepared to tell my students that what the textbook said might not be 10% accurate. Studying through seminary has equipped me with the capacity in other areas of learning and teaching to evaluate things based on what I have learned here.

Juan, a pastor, said, “*Because of the Apologetics course, the students have been able to defend themselves in different situations and respond as to why they believe what they believe.*”

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

“This course teaches the principles and methods of interpreting the Bible properly to guide our life and relationship with God” (Shepherd’s Global, n.d.).

Before we would simply attend church, hear the lesson, hear a sermon, and that was as far as our understanding would go. However, we have the tools given to us to teach us

how to study the scriptures appropriately and to see how that benefits our study. That has been great and greatly impactful. (Rafael)

Romans

“This course teaches the theology of salvation and missions as explained in the book of Romans, discussing several issues that have been controversial in the church” (Shepherd’s Global, n.d.).

You know, we are typically familiar with the beginning portions of the gospel. There is a problem, and there are solutions in Christ. However, the rest of it, our responsibility, and what that looks like in practice, [is taught in the Romans course], which has been practical for me. (Rosita)

Christian Beliefs

Christian Beliefs “provides an understanding of the basic doctrines in each major category of Christian theology, such as God, Christ, sin, salvation, etc. The student will learn how to avoid errors in doctrine. The student will be equipped to teach Christian doctrine to others” (Shepherd’s Global, n.d.). “*Christian Beliefs is where everything was solidified in my mind*” (Fernando).

Church History

There are two courses related to Church History. The first, according to SGC, “describes how the church fulfilled its mission and protected essential doctrine through the period from the early church to the Reformation.” The second “describes how the church expanded and faced challenges from the Reformation to modern times” (Shepherd’s Global, n.d.). “*Church history has been a great benefit for interacting with others because I have many friends who are Roman*

Catholic, and knowing our background, where we come from, we have been able to have significant conversations” (Sofia).

Principles of Communication

This course “prepares the Christian leader to help people struggling with issues relating to sexuality, addiction, abuse, trauma, grief, and others” (Shepherd’s Global.com). *“I was a Sunday school teacher for adults and sometimes had a tough time figuring out where to begin [and] what to do. However, Principles of Communication helped clarify that (Rosita). Camila said, “Because of Principles of Communication, I have studied how to prepare a sermon or a lesson and share it. It has given me the tools when I am sharing with others, interacting with others, to give an accurate interpretation.”*

Most Talked about Outcome

A common and recurring theme in the individual semistructured and group interviews, whether professor, student, or pastor, was that Ezra Biblical Seminary training had impacted each person’s approach to Scripture. Because of the ongoing training, the Word of God is more meaningful and powerful in understanding and practice. The following excerpts from interview transcripts represent the findings related to a more excellent knowledge of interpreting and understanding the Scriptures, a higher view, and a better foundational knowledge of the Word of God.

Juan, a Pastor in San Gabriel, admitted his *“lack of understanding concerning the scriptures.”* After participation in SGC courses through Ezra Seminary, Juan said, *“It was clear that my understanding was growing. I was learning to come to the text and not simply introduce my ideas, but take from the text, to consider the context and principles for studying the Word.”*

Carlos, also a Pastor in a nearby village, addressed the question of changes in his church's spiritual life and health since the launch of Ezra Biblical Seminary. He pointed to the Word of God as the foundation for spiritual growth. He said, *"The church understands that we are not the only ones reading the Bible by ourselves, but we need to consider principles to interpret it accurately."* Carlos mentioned the history, the context, and when the Bible was written as essential aspects to understanding its message and concluded by suggesting, *"It is that aspect of learning how to read the Bible and the way it applies to our life."*

Further addressing how SGC courses through Ezra Biblical Seminary impacted their personal growth and development, two pastors discussed their study of God's Word. The pastor of The Good Shepherd Church, Antonio, said, *"These courses have encouraged me by giving me the desire to learn and study the Word of God better. To prepare better."* Carlos said, *"When I prepare sermons now, it is easier. Sharing God's Word with people [who do not know] Christ has become easier. When you become a student of the Word, you become better prepared to serve in ministry."*

This impact has not been for pastors alone. Those students whose lives intersect daily with their local culture and engage in the professional world equally articulated how their learning through Ezra Seminary has impacted their view of Scripture and their ability to read, study, and understand it.

Fernando was the first to emphasize this point. He said, *"Through the curriculum and Ezra, I have been learning to study the Word of God in its context. That has given me a bigger picture of how to see the world with a Christian worldview."* Later in the group interview, he added, *"After taking several courses, I realized that the Word of God must have absolute*

authority over church tradition. There are a variety of traditions, and I have seen how the Word of God can bring harmony despite differences.”

Rafael highlighted the course Principles of Biblical Interpretation. He said, *“Before, we would attend church [and] hear a sermon, and that was as far as our understanding would go. Now, we have the tools to study the Scriptures appropriately. It benefits our study. That has been greatly impactful.”*

Miriam said, *“After taking these courses, I realize we cannot allow ourselves to be guided by our perspectives or ideas. The Word must guide us.”*

From interviews with each participant, it was apparent that the SGC curriculum, presented through Ezra Seminary, makes the Scripture primary in its instructional content. From each participant’s perspective, whatever else is being studied, the Word of God is the centerpiece of learning. The Bible seems to be the primary textbook, foundational to everything SGC and Ezra Seminary attempt to teach.

Increasing in Unity

A foundational problem identified through semistructured interviews and described in more detail in earlier portions of this chapter was how the local church community was divided. Believers were in conflict and disunity, or perhaps merely indifferent to one another. The Christians in San Gabriel did not understand they were united under one Head, Christ. In this subsection, participants revealed how the SGC curriculum impacted their thinking on sister churches through Ezra Biblical Seminary training.

Foundational to this issue is the effort of the founder of Ezra Biblical Seminary to engage with all believers in the community, no matter their church home, and the resulting mix of students participating in Tuesday and Thursday classes each week. Diego said,

What I have learned here, and this dynamic of bringing those from different churches together, has helped me improve my relationships with brothers and sisters from other churches. You begin to realize that you are not just an isolated Christian, and your church is not isolated, but you are part of a bigger church, and you need to relate to other churches and brothers in Christ.

The first participants at Ezra Biblical Seminary were recruited personally by the founder of the training center and expressed the value of that invitation. During interviews, these participants expressed their belief that, from the perspective of the Ezra Seminary founder, there was no distinction between a student who had come from one church and one who came from another church. They were not invited because they were part of a particular congregation or denomination or shared a unique theological perspective. Christians were invited to learn, study, and grow. Those who accepted the invitation realized they were part of something bigger than themselves, bigger even than the congregation they were a part of. Sofia observed, *“We have seen that people who go to other churches, other denominations, or even Roman Catholic churches, are interested and have decided to take some of the courses.”* Rafael said, *“We have even accomplished the goal of this Seminary being nondenominational, and anyone can come in and study.”*

Findings related to unity were present throughout interview responses due to the general growth students experienced through their studies. Professor David Martinez noted, when asked about tangible transformation, *“They can relate to each other from different churches...and I would say the barriers are coming down in large part because of Ezra Seminary.”* Participants, in various ways, reflected this conviction throughout the interview and data collection processes. Articulating this reality from a personal point of view, Camila admitted,

When I started taking the courses, maybe my thinking was closed; I was not very open to understanding other students' points of view or other Christians. As I have been taking the classes, I have come to understand that there are different points of view on many things, so now I can relate better with other students [and] with other Christians.

Ezra Seminary and the San Gabriel Community

In addition to greater unity among believers and churches in San Gabriel, findings indicated that Ezra Biblical Seminary training produces increased engagement by students with nonbelievers in the community as students learn to engage with them in new ways. Students testified to this in their interviews, and the pastors confirmed by their responses that this was an effect of Ezra Seminary training. This engagement with the local community was explicitly demonstrated in Antonio's response to the question, "What changes are you seeing in the ways your congregation engages with the local community since the launch of Ezra Seminary?" He said, *"The Seminary has contributed to their overall disposition. People can tend to be more reserved here in the community, so many are losing that sense of awkwardness and displaying a greater boldness in their willingness to interact with nonbelievers."*

The connection between the inner life of the students and the transformative effect it is having on their service to the community is evident in the students' responses. Fernando said, *"After I knew Christ, and after these courses, I come to an understanding that I need to represent, that I need to reflect and represent Christ in all that I do. That has been the main change in my interactions with the community."* Rafael said,

The professors have started emphasizing what we have learned. They are encouraging us to start putting it into practice in a local ministry, in a local church, and in a practical

way in our community. You feel more ready to get involved because your personal life is doing well.

Students are engaged in professional life. They have jobs, and many are teachers in one of the local schools. A number of those teachers mentioned their work context as the place in which the practical nature of their learning was taking effect, the specific place in the community where they live out these teachings. Sofia said,

I work in the school system; people know I attend church and take these courses. So, I have learned that maybe I have not been as effective in sharing the gospel, and there is a great burden over me now so that my conduct accurately reflects the gospel.

Rafael offered information and confession in a more complete response describing the intersection of Ezra Biblical Seminary instruction and community involvement. He said,

Last semester...we discussed politics [and] whether Christians are supposed to be involved in politics. In the past, I did not think Christians were supposed to get involved in politics—not supposed to get involved in society because you always run the risk of them influencing you. However, after the discussions we have had, I understand that we have a calling from God to be the ones that are influencing them. I understand that my involvement with the community is to put into practice what God has given us as a calling. Now, I feel free to attend their meetings in the community and even participate in cleaning activities here in the village. So, yeah, I believe my involvement has changed a lot.

Pearl also spoke about the intersection of faith and community involvement when she said,

Sometimes, you have the idea in our churches that to follow Christ, you must leave everything, you cannot be a teacher, you cannot be anything else in the community, you

must be a full-time minister. That was my concept. I realize now that God has placed every one of us in different contexts and environments and that we are called wherever we go to be faithful witnesses of the gospel.

From student, pastor, and professor semistructured interview responses, Christian responsibility in the community seems to have been influenced by the training these students have received. Two statements fittingly summarize this subsection and speak to this transformation of thinking at a broad level. The first is from Miriam, who addresses how she understood her responsibilities as a Christian differently. The second, from Rafael, demonstrates how he views the Christian life differently.

I previously had a distorted concept of what it was to be a follower of Christ. I have learned through these courses and understand my responsibility to unbelievers. Whether in my family, coworkers, etc., I have a responsibility to live my calling as a Christian faithfully—to represent Jesus. The least I can do, having gained this extra knowledge, is to walk at that level, according to the love and understanding I have received, to walk worthy of it. (Miriam)

My concept before taking these courses was that there were two ways of looking at life. There was the Christian life, what we do in church, and everything else outside. What I have come to understand is that there are not two lives here; we have one Christian life. (Rafael)

Storytelling Network

The final data collection aspect examined was how students were informed of the opportunity to receive training. This section details how participants learned about Ezra Biblical Seminary and why they engaged with the SGC courses. Additionally, it shows the data received

from pastors who were asked whom they have told about Ezra Biblical Seminary not already involved or who knew little about it. The final aspect looks at storytelling and explains how interview responses speak to the potential influence Ezra Biblical Seminary is gaining in the community as a place of opportunity and healing. The findings are shown here. Chapter five will examine more closely what those findings mean for the questions at the heart of this study.

Participant responses to the question of initial involvement can be summarized in a few primary categories. Friends, family members such as a brother or sister, and pastors are most prominent in the data. In addition, a broad theme emerged related to the two local churches in San Gabriel. Word of the seminary is circulated in those churches by the pastor and existing students of Ezra Seminary, particularly before the start of each new semester.

The first SGC course taught before the official launch of Ezra Biblical Seminary was in the Bible Methodist Church in San Gabriel. Multiple students first engaged with the training during that course. Juan is the local Bible Methodist Church pastor and works directly with Brennan Muir. Juan said,

I first became aware of SGC when Brennan, on one of his return trips from the U.S., brought a collection of the SGC materials, and he gave me that stack. There were several different courses, and he eventually decided to teach one of those courses. I participated, and my desire to learn, grow, and understand persuaded me to continue studying.

Diego was another who took the initial course at the church. He said,

Brennan invited me to the seminary when he was about to start these courses. He told me about it, along with a group of young people, and I got very excited about it, and that is how I got involved with the seminary.

Rafael was also part of that original group. Rafael stated, *Brennan invited me when he started teaching the courses informally at the Bible Methodist Church. Then, when Ezra started officially, I started taking the courses then also.*

Local church connections were also initiated through those who now study at Ezra Seminary and serve in some capacity as youth pastors, etc. They have been telling others about the opportunity to grow in their knowledge and application of the truth through study at Ezra Seminary. Several study participants heard about Ezra Seminary and engaged with it through their church and church leaders.

Ezra Seminary as a Point of Engagement

When asked about engaging with new students and how the word is getting out, Professor Brennan spent most of his time discussing the “end of year celebration” that has become both a tradition and a “big deal.” In Brennan’s words,

At the end of the semester, we celebrate accomplishments through our closing ceremony. We make this a big deal. There is something about celebrating that is attractive. Students throughout the semester may not even be aware of others taking courses. However, now they are together in the same place, and we celebrate student accomplishments.

In discussing this annual event, Brennan enthusiastically described how it is morphing into a strategic means of extending fellowship and spiritual growth in the village. While it has marketing potential, Professor Brennan communicated his sense that the “end of year celebration” has the potential to further unite the Church community in San Gabriel Mixtepec as Christians assemble in one place and as students identify under a single banner of truth and righteousness.

Prior characteristics of this celebration, such as food and awards, are ongoing. The planned change for the 2023 celebration is the intentional decision to celebrate in a local church. Celebrating in a local church serves the dual purpose of advertising the seminary and bringing the church community together in one place, under one roof, to encourage greater ecumenism. The local pastor will give the charge, and in addition to hopes of new interest and students for the seminary, the prayer is for greater unity in the Church. Professor Brennan stated this explicitly. He said,

*Regarding the celebration, we encourage students to invite family and friends, especially those not involved in the seminary. We have current students who are the result of someone inviting them to the celebration. **This year, we are purposely putting the celebration in a local church, inviting other churches, and encouraging the community to celebrate together as fellow believers** (emphasis mine). We have made this celebration a big deal and one of the primary tools for getting the word out regarding Ezra.*

Professor David highlighted this also when asked about tangible efforts to grow the seminary. He mentioned their conversations with local pastors and invitations to what he referred to as “ceremonies at the end of the year. We have a big party at the end of the year, where they eat for free and learn about the seminary.”

Students and professors clearly expressed that they viewed this ceremony as a focused opportunity to get the word out. They want village residents, especially those of the faith community, to know there is an opportunity to receive biblical training and to learn and grow in their faith. Each is welcome to take advantage of the opportunity. The seminary is becoming increasingly recognized and is highly regarded in the village of San Gabriel. This celebration is an intentional means of opening the doors wide so anyone can come in.

Research Question Findings

The preceding insights are relevant to the present study in relation to the central RQ: *Is the curriculum of SGC meeting the need to equip believers and church leaders through Ezra Seminary in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico?* This section will connect the data retrieved through semistructured interviews and direct observation to the central RQ. Chapter 4 provides insight into how research findings relate to the RQs. Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of those findings regarding this study's theoretical, methodological, and practical aspects.

Connecting Findings to the Research Questions

The narrative of this chapter, containing the data retrieved through semistructured interviews and observation, was organized to connect findings with the central RQ. The following subsections will identify those connections and summarize how the findings are relevant to the question this research seeks to answer.

The Setting

The need for biblical and theological training and the conditions in San Gabriel and the surrounding church community offer insight into this study's RQ as they show the context of this training. Why was Ezra Seminary launched, and what was the vision for what it would achieve in this developing world community? The impact of the SGC curriculum and Ezra Biblical Seminary is evident against the backdrop of former thinking and practice within the religious community of San Gabriel Mixtepec. Findings point to a before and after that directly addresses the question at the heart of this study.

Professor Brennan described the Bible Methodist Church in Mexico in terms related to the Corinthian church of the New Testament. Believers were divided. They did not worship or serve with one another and viewed their religious life as separate and distinct from their personal

and professional life. Moreover, findings revealed that believers were syncretistic in their religious expression, and a lack of genuine biblical and theological training marked the church community. This study ascertained the degree to which the SGC curriculum through Ezra Seminary is meeting the need to equip by gaining insight related to the before and after of its effort. A picture of the church culture in San Gabriel before Ezra Seminary and a clear image of the biblical knowledge and spiritual maturity of pastors and students are crucial to understanding whether a shift has occurred.

The Obstacles

Positive change will not occur unimpeded. Findings of semistructured interviews showed that obstacles would have to be overcome if the SGC curriculum, through the structured and intentional training of Ezra Biblical Seminary, will meet the need to equip pastors and church leaders in this developing-world community. Participants pointed to the challenges of communicating content written in the United States to men and women living in Southern Mexico's developing-world context and culture. What are the filters, and do those filters prevent the meaning and message from penetrating? Is the intended outcome of the curriculum achieved? What do the findings reveal concerning these outcomes? Some of this regarding outcomes will be considered later in application but is essential in the context of obstacles to examine the degree to which what SGC intends is being accomplished.

Interviews provided insight into the various dimensions in which obstacles were discovered and by which they were or could be overcome. It was learned that local educational standards and students' academic proficiency are directly related to their ability to receive content. For many students, time was determined to be a consideration because it reflects the local dynamic and one that cannot be altogether understood from the position of SGC founders

and curriculum designers. Language and translation are significant because they communicate the text of the SGC curriculum and are direct to students, completely unfiltered. Theological posturing was an emerging theme seen as a potential hindrance to SGC content reaching its audience through Ezra Seminary. Finally, the work of the professors, as evidenced in the findings, helps show the extent to which they are necessary to mitigate obstacles and assist SGC in achieving its original objectives.

The Application and outcomes

The most significant discoveries were made around application and outcomes. These are tied most directly to the RQ because they indicate the degree to which the SGC curriculum through Ezra Seminary meets *the need to equip*. What the need is has been addressed through findings that described the setting. With an understanding of how things were before the work of Ezra Seminary and its dissemination of the SGC curriculum, it is now helpful to see what, if anything, has changed. The degree to which the spiritual and religious culture of San Gabriel Mixtepec is different or better, as shown by the data, is also the degree to which the equipping referred to in the central RQ is taking place. Obstacles are relevant to this study as they are seen, understood, and mitigated. Outcomes of the training, otherwise known as the application of the SGC curriculum to personal and corporate spiritual life, provide the only clear picture of success or failure.

The research findings relevant to application and outcomes were seen in this chapter concerning specific courses students identified as particularly relevant and robust, as well as the ways students and professors engaged with that material to create transformational thinking and acting in the life and community of San Gabriel. Participants offered insights through interview responses to indicate that the training process works to shape their view of Scripture. Because of

this new way of seeing, pastors and students can better understand and apply the Scriptures to their lives and ministry. Ultimately, this new understanding has implications for the faith community in San Gabriel Mixtepec. As the truths they learn are applied, believers from different churches have come to view one another differently.

Summary

This study sought to know whether the curriculum of SGC through Ezra Seminary meets the need to equip pastors and church leaders in the developing-world context of San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. Chapter 4 summarized the findings of data collected through qualitative, semistructured interviews and direct observation between May 9 and May 23, 2023. Results are organized around themes identified in that data and are presented as a narrative under headings and subheadings derived from the RQs. Those findings were tied more directly to the central RQ as headings and subheadings in this chapter and were connected to an aspect of the RQ central to this study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

There is an established correlation between individual growth, the health of institutions, and the progress of communities and nations (Inkeles, 1975). Further, the need and benefit of training throughout the developing world in health, education, and economics have been recognized (Frese et al., 2016; Hubley, 2005; Miyamota, 2005). The implications of the individual to the collective are relevant to this study in areas related to biblical and theological training.

Highlighting the distinction between evangelism and discipleship, Mooreland (1997) asserted that evangelicals worldwide have emphasized the former and need greater attention to the latter. Concerned and earnest Christian leaders have attested to this need for discipleship by creating and translating biblical and theological training curricula to be used individually or in group study. They have made the curriculum available to marginalized populations throughout the developing world. Informed by Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT), this study observed the deployment of that curriculum in one specific developing-world context.

Literature has been identified and discussed related to training in the developing world and its impact on health, education, and the economy; correlations in the literature between individual growth and community success have been noted. In addition to the literature relevant to this study's primary topics and accompanying ideas within the communications field, literature related to its proposed theoretical framework and the communication tradition in which it is best situated was also identified and discussed. Relevant research on current and ongoing biblical and theological training in the developing world was missing from the existing literature.

This qualitative case study was conducted at Ezra Biblical Seminary in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico, to address the following central research question (RQ): How is the curriculum and training of Shepherd's Global Classroom serving to equip believers and church leaders through Ezra Biblical Seminary? Participants were students and professors of Ezra Biblical Seminary and the founding team of Shepherd's Global Classroom (SGC). Data was collected qualitatively using semistructured one-on-one and group interviews and direct observation, with the researcher being the primary data collection instrument.

Interviews from May 9–May 22, 2023, were transcribed, coded, and analyzed, and results were organized around themes identified in the data. Findings were presented as a narrative under headings and subheadings related to this study's RQs. Insights were provided that relate study findings to the central RQ.

This fifth and final chapter of this study will summarize the research findings presented in Chapter 4 and provide a more detailed discussion of those findings as they relate to the central RQ. Further, this chapter will include the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications as well as delimitations and limitations of this research. There will also be a section on reflexivity to clarify the researcher's positionality within the study. Finally, there will be a section that details how this study might be extended, as well as suggestions for further research.

Summary of Findings

Data collection for this study consisted of semistructured one-on-one and group interviews and direct observation. Study participants were students, local pastors, and professors of Ezra Biblical Seminary in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico, and a small group of founding team members of SGC. This summary of findings will connect the structured data in Chapter 4 to the additional RQs identified as necessary for a fuller understanding of the central

question and help to identify helpful information to answer it. Those questions, or a specific reference to them, are noted in bold throughout Chapter 5.

The section entitled **Discussion** to follow will concentrate on the central RQ and specifically address whether *the curriculum of Shepherd's Global Classroom is meeting the need to equip believers and church leaders through Ezra Biblical Seminary in San Gabriel Mixtepec*. A thorough examination of the data will connect findings to this question and seek to answer it satisfactorily.

Data were retrieved on-site in San Gabriel from May 9–May 23, 2023. Research participants are introduced in Chapter 4. Per signed consent forms, students are not personally identified in the context of the findings. Pseudonyms were used to strengthen the use of quotes throughout the text. Professors are referred to by their given names.

RQ1. What aspects of Shepherd's Global Curriculum are most applicable?

According to study findings, the most practical aspects of the SGC curriculum point to seminary students confronted by truths that captured their hearts for the first time. The curriculum's foundational doctrinal and practical components changed the thinking and habits of students and pastors. Pearl referred to the courses as relevant to her life because "*they are centered on foundational Christ-centered doctrine.*" Sofia affirmed the value of the training and said that rather than merely accepting what they heard in a sermon, students are "*learning to learn for themselves.*" Interviews showed that the training forced students to look at Scripture differently. They learned to interpret and apply the scriptures as they could not have done before.

When this study's participants were asked why they were compelled to accept the invitation to study and be trained through Ezra Biblical Seminary and the SGC curriculum,

responses spoke to both awareness of the need and uniqueness of the opportunity. A biblical and theological illiteracy picture emerged through student and pastor interview responses.

Before Ezra Biblical Seminary, the chance for most study participants to receive biblical and theological training was infrequent. The foundations of the Christian faith, apart from the SGC curriculum, were thus foreign to many of them. There was a strong sense of tradition but a lack of doctrinal understanding. Even when students knew what they believed, they often did not know why. For these reasons, the courses that most captured students' hearts were foundational, rich in doctrinal content, or immersive in the interpretation and application of Scripture. Later in this chapter, a more detailed discussion of the transformative effects will be provided.

RQ2. What obstacles are hindering the communication of Shepherd's Global Classroom materials?

An essential function of data collection efforts was understanding how the SGC curriculum was disseminated in the context and culture of San Gabriel Mixtepec. Interview questions focused on the engagement of the SGC curriculum and Ezra Biblical Seminary students. Does the written text's style, content, and translation communicate well with the receiving culture? Were there additional, unforeseen obstacles? What role did the weekly lectures and the mitigation of professors play in producing positive outcomes?

Findings indicated that some obstacles were embedded in the context, and some were introduced through the curriculum. One embedded obstacle was the educational standards of Southern Mexico in general and San Gabriel Mixtepec in specific. Elementary education is the only requirement; not all families demand it from their children. According to professors, the struggles of less educated Ezra Biblical Seminary students are evident in their inability to express thoughts in writing or in the time required for each assignment. Another embedded obstacle was

time, as even the most educated students struggle with it. Many students are engaged in professional life; some have multiple jobs or work in ministry and lack the opportunity to participate as needed in lectures, discussions, and written assignments. Lack of time in class was also mentioned as a hindrance to learning. Some believed that more time was needed for dialogue and understanding the text.

According to interview responses, the SGC curriculum introduced two additional obstacles. Translating the courses into Spanish was the first obstacle the SGC curriculum introduced. The second was the theological posture of the curriculum writers, who sometimes come across more strongly than is helpful in this developing-world context. Concerning the first, in an early interview with the professors, they suggested discussing the Spanish translation and written style of the SGC courses. These courses were written in the United States and, apart from the information processing done by the professors, did not transfer at all points to the receiving language and culture. Content is complex for some students regarding the questions they find challenging to understand and answer. To what are those questions referring? Where and how are answers best retrieved? According to multiple participants, information in the course text is not always arranged neatly, and this perceived disorganization marginalized the effort to understand and learn.

Concerning theological posturing, interview data showed that students did not find the curriculum to be imbalanced theologically. Findings revealed that professors identified potential hindrances to the communication of theology-related content and eliminated those hindrances by explaining the text. Professors did not change the meaning of the curriculum. They explained the meaning more broadly from Scripture to keep students' minds open to its teaching.

Research findings revealed that perceived barriers such as the language and style of the curriculum were not obstacles at all, or at least they did not hinder students from learning what the curriculum envisioned. As discussed in Chapter 4, Juan suggested that a word or phrase is periodically used in the text that “*we would not use here in Mexico. However, that has not hindered the understanding of the text.*” Carlos responded practically to the idea of barriers in translation when he said, “*If a word or concept is not easy to grasp, there is always the internet where you can look up the terms or something.*” Moreover, Rafael acknowledged that the difficulties are real, but those difficulties have been largely overcome through the diligent and intentional work of the professors disseminating the materials. Later in this chapter, their efforts and how those efforts mitigated barriers to training will be explained more fully in the theoretical implications section.

RQ3. What role does *Communication Infrastructure Theory’s* storytelling network play in the communication of *Shepherd’s Global Classroom* materials?

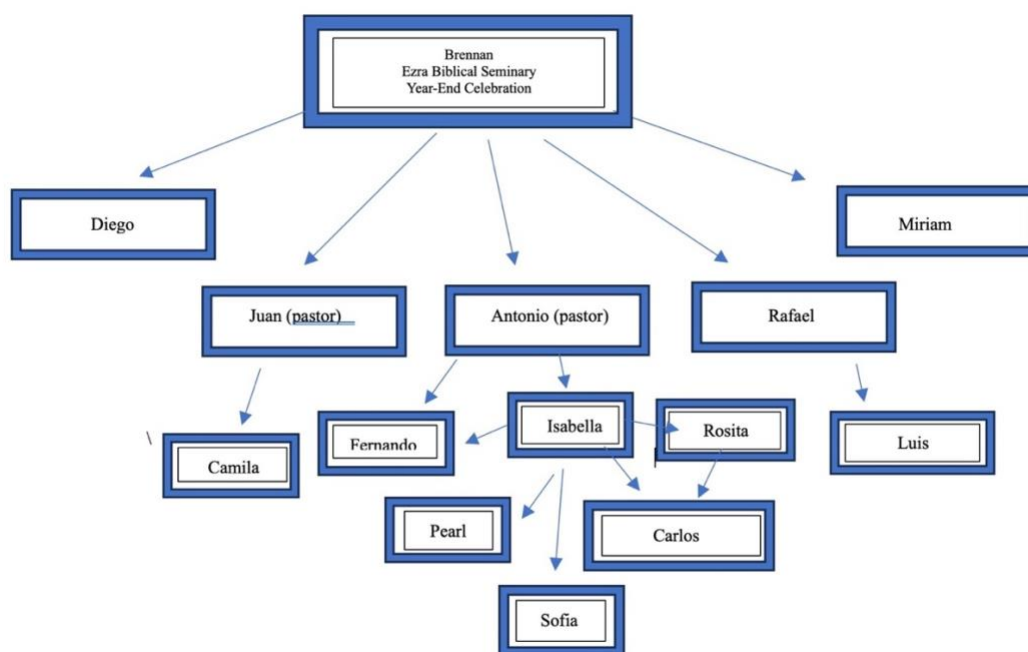
The data collection process included an effort to understand how students learned about and engaged with Ezra Biblical Seminary. Could a storytelling network be identified that was an ongoing means of disseminating information and opportunities related to the SGC curriculum and Ezra Biblical Seminary? This data is relevant to **RQ3**, the *role of Communication Infrastructure Theory’s* storytelling network in the communication of *Shepherd’s Global Classroom* materials.

During semistructured one-on-one and group interviews, students related how they learned about the seminary and why they chose to engage. The founder, Brennan Muir, who is also a professor, was identified as one who invited the most significant number of existing students. During interviews, more students and pastors referred to Professor Brennan as their

primary connecting point to this training. **Figure 1** shows the emerging network that flows from students' initial invitation and engagement with Ezra Biblical Seminary.

Figure 1

Emerging Storytelling Network



In addition to specific individuals engaging with others to enlist and enroll potential students, each of the two local churches in San Gabriel was identified in the data as central places of connectivity. The first point of contact was usually a pastor or minister in either of those churches. Word spread, questions were asked, invitations were extended and accepted, and enrollment at Ezra Biblical Seminary continued to grow.

In addition to the previous references to student enlistment, one final point of engagement was highlighted in multiple interviews as a primary means of creating new interest, recruiting potential students, and pushing back against the spiritual ignorance and immaturity of the faith

community in San Gabriel. Discussing the value of defining moments that serve to shape the trajectory of one's life, Chip and Dan Heath (2019) asserted, "Some moments are more important than others" (p. 11). Citing "Senior Signing Day" (p. 2), created by Yes Prep School to inspire graduates to attend college, some of whom are the first in their families to do so, the authors argued that these moments need not be left to chance but can be strategized and implemented to positive and effective ends (Heath & Heath, 2019).

Study findings related to *the year-end celebration* hosted by Ezra Biblical Seminary leadership suggested that it could be a decisive moment for many marginalized believers and church leaders in San Gabriel Mixtepec and surrounding villages. Designed for the broader church community and intentionally opened to all who might have an interest and opportunity to enroll, Professor Brennan suggested the year-end celebration is evolving to capture the imagination of believers and inspire them to equip themselves through the training that SGC and Ezra Biblical Seminary offers.

An important observation is that during the interview process, the student body size is never hinted at as the primary concern with *the year-end celebration* or any other word-of-mouth activity. The desire for growth in the Ezra Biblical Seminary student body is instead about spiritual maturity and health. Benefitting one student, they believe, serves to help the entire faith community in San Gabriel. Spiritual development and theological understanding of believers and church leaders in the community is the priority of existing students and professors. It is the culture of Ezra Biblical Seminary, a culture that is transforming the culture of the village. Discussion related to CIT and how it connects to a storytelling network in San Gabriel Mixtepec will occur under the theoretical implications section later in Chapter 5.

Discussion

As noted in Chapter 4, participants described the denominational landscape, where Ezra Biblical Seminary took root, as Corinthian because of its former corruption and sensuality. Its leadership opposed founding a training center using the SGC curriculum. Furthermore, the spiritual condition within the faith community of San Gabriel before Ezra Biblical Seminary was characterized by division, indifference, spiritual immaturity, and sometimes darkness, and it even affected student participants of this study. Churches had negligible theological differences but refused to fellowship with one another. The participation of believers in their churches was relegated to Sunday worship. Ministry and service were minimal. Tradition within the church was elevated above Scripture, syncretism was prevalent, and nearly all, including pastors, lacked the skill and resources to study the Word for themselves or apply it to their lives and community.

These findings that revealed the conditions before Ezra Biblical Seminary also provided a helpful backdrop against which to address the central RQs of this study. As noted in Chapter 1, this study's primary quest was to know whether the curriculum of SGC is meeting the need to equip believers and church leaders through the Ezra Bible Seminary in San Gabriel, Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. The discussion in the following subsections will assess the context and logistics of Ezra Biblical Seminary and make some observations about the systems implemented to create the best outcomes. It will then highlight the most relevant research findings and identify several themes that provide an answer to the central RQ.

The Early Days & Growth of Ezra Biblical Seminary

The interviews revealed the importance of the relationship between Ezra Biblical Seminary and SGC as the seminary took root in the community. The early resistance of the denominational leadership in Mexico notwithstanding, Professor Brennan had the backing of

those to whom he was most responsible, and his due diligence in understanding and confronting the challenges and meeting the need was soon evident in the early support and growth of Ezra Biblical Seminary. SGC was vital to this early success. Having developed the curriculum, translated it into Spanish, and provided a cast of supporting characters to assist where needed, SGC was heavily invested in the outcome.

Several study participants noted that the first classes were held in the local Bible Methodist Church. This decision helped generate early interest in the training program and established a core of enthusiastic students who would become magnets for future interest and growth. Alongside this early decision, a foundational attribute of Ezra Biblical Seminary was to keep training as the foremost priority and development a secondary objective. This quality guided the leaders' decision-making and fashioned the seminary for growth, hopefully leading to a better future for the Church in Mexico.

Not everything unfolded as the seminary leadership had hoped. Many students who began the training work did not finish, or at least they had not finished at the time of this study. Furthermore, some in church leadership positions have not yet accepted their need for this effort. The hindrances to learning in Chapter 4 are ongoing as professors and students address the challenges of time, language, theological posturing, and educational deficiency. Still, there has been steady growth in the number of believers and church leaders participating in training. More importantly, those believers and church leaders are being equipped through the SGC curriculum through the activity of Ezra Biblical Seminary. The following themes were identified through interviews and direct observation and provided evidence of training through Ezra Biblical Seminary and the SGC curriculum.

Core Themes as Evidence for Equipping

Qualitative semistructured interviews revealed three core themes that provide evidence of the work the SGC curriculum is doing through Ezra Biblical Seminary among the believers and church leaders in San Gabriel Mixtepec. Responding to general questions about the personal impact of training individually and corporately, students keep returning to these ideas. The themes highlighted here were conveyed throughout interviews in unique and personal ways and were sometimes accompanied by examples to illustrate the point. These themes throughout study findings provide the most thorough and accurate description of students being equipped for their work in the church and community.

Greater Knowledge of & Hunger for the Scriptures

The theme foremost throughout interviews was that a former ignorance of the Scriptures is being replaced by a deep hunger for the Word of God fueled by an increased knowledge concerning the interpretation of it. This was articulated differently but was conveyed almost without exception by students, pastors, and professors. Fernando expressed an idea consistent throughout interviews: *“I have learned to take the Bible as my main authority, and whatever tradition I take it as second place.”* Participants affirmed the authority of Scripture and enthusiastically asserted their newfound proficiency in reading and interpreting the Bible.

Since the SGC curriculum was central to this study, an important insight is that professors confirmed the SGC courses as the source of their instructional content. Students have the text and must read each lesson and answer questions themselves. When necessary, professors supplement the SGC curriculum for language or cultural reasons or, as Professor Brennan said, *“to enhance learning.”* Regarding the weekly lecture, Professor David Martinez suggested, *“In my case, maybe 70% comes from SGC, and the rest comes from supportive material intended to*

make things clearer.” Additionally, Ezra Biblical Seminary has occasionally modified the course schedule to meet the demands of its calendar. Generally, however, the SGC content guides their teaching, provides the depth and substance of each lecture and lesson, and is the standard for equipping believers and church leaders in their developing-world context.

This insight regarding content is essential because it shows students’ increased sensitivity to Scripture directly from exposure to the SGC courses. Fernando again provided valuable insight, saying, *“You can see how these courses are somehow looking at the Scriptures as the basis of their teaching.”* Sofia admitted that before Ezra Biblical Seminary and the SGC courses, *“I had no real interest in studying the Scriptures. This clear teaching has taught me to value the Scriptures and to put that understanding into practice.”* The nuanced reflections of participants regarding the Word of God communicated this point. Carlos, for example, mentioned the history, context, and date of authorship as essential to understanding its message. He suggested, *“It is that aspect of learning how to read the Bible and how it applies to our life.”* Pearl highlighted the course Biblical Interpretations and spoke of it as teaching her *“to rightly divide the Word, to understand a scripture in its context to make an accurate application.”*

Three local pastors offered further evidence of how the training courses enhanced their knowledge of Scripture. Juan said, *“My understanding [of the Scriptures] was growing, and I was learning to come to the text, not simply introduce my ideas.”* Antonio said, *“These courses have encouraged me by giving me the desire to learn and study the word of God better. To prepare better.”* Finally, Carlos pointed to the Word of God as the foundation for spiritual growth and said, *“We need to consider principles to interpret it accurately.”*

Better Equipped to Teach Others

The concentration of Ezra Biblical Seminary and the SGC curriculum on the authority of Scripture was a foundational element in the research finding that seems to have produced a change in other dimensions of spiritual life in the people and community of San Gabriel, Mixtepec. The participants who spoke of having a greater appreciation for the Word of God and possessing more skill to interpret and understand it also referenced a corresponding increase in the ability to communicate its truth to others. There is evidence of a direct correlation between what students learned and their confidence to effectively transmit those lessons to friends, family, and the church.

Each interviewed pastor spoke directly about being better equipped to study, interpret, and preach. Their sermons are richer and deeper, better representing the truth of Scripture. Carlos mentioned that the history of Christianity is represented now in his sermons. He suggested he could not have known how to do that before training. Teaching has also improved for those who are not pastors. Some insinuated that this was the primary evidence of their growth and change. Others noted that their understanding and appreciation of Scripture were further enhanced as they were equipped with the tools to communicate those truths.

Perhaps the most compelling insight related to students' enhanced understanding of Scripture is that many expressed more courage and competence when speaking to their family, friends, colleagues, and the broader San Gabriel Mixtepec community. Participants mentioned, for example, having increased confidence in their interactions within the village of San Gabriel. They have more knowledge when speaking about the Bible and spiritual things. They are more established in their faith and more influential in the community. Moreover, this training has produced in many students a newfound ability to answer the questions of their non-believing

family and friends. Isabella summed this up well when she spoke of following the example of Jesus. That students are learning to teach and preach and love like Jesus, she suggests, is significantly impacting their lives and, by extension, this small Southern Mexico Village.

More Unified as a Christian Community

The reality that the Christian community in San Gabriel, Mixtepec, was divided was unrecognized by nearly every student and pastor before their training through Ezra Biblical Seminary. Worship or fellowship with other believers outside their church was not a consideration. Furthermore, while there was no reference to contemporary conflict amongst the churches, participants indicated that the SGC curriculum and Ezra Biblical Seminary brought awareness and transformation to their thinking and practice. The impact of personal discipleship and spiritual growth evident in the themes articulated above ultimately manifested in unifying believers from different congregations.

The practical step of bringing students together in one place was noted by study participants as helpful in building unity. “*Under one roof,*” as Diego expressed it, these young believers began to see each other from a new perspective and appreciated that they were fellow travelers on this journey with Christ. Different points of view have converged under one banner of faith, and participants were compelled to admit the limitations of their own opinions and traditions. Unity has been born because they ultimately seek the same thing and move in the same direction.

One insight was shared throughout that could be critical to this transformation. Through Ezra Biblical Seminary and the SGC curriculum, students have been invited to know and follow Jesus. Carlos expressed this regarding the differences within families, the church, and the community. The training, he believes, has resulted in change because of “*this understanding that*

we are followers of Christ, and we are called to act as He did.” Carlos acknowledged that change has not been dramatic or hurried. Differences dissolve slowly. However, when those of the same faith are confronted by the truths of the One they follow, their humble and obedient response is bound to result in a transformation at the personal level that is sooner or later manifest corporately.

The SGC founding team spoke of their curriculum being written initially for pastors and church leaders in the developing world. Tim Keep spoke of marginalized pastors and church leaders with little or no access to theological training as foremost in his mind when envisioning SGC courses as an instrument of preparation. The desire to equip developing-world pastors has catalyzed SGC’s efforts. Because, however, not all study participants fit the category of pastor or church leader, and because Ezra Biblical Seminary was not founded with the same focus expressed by SGC’s founding team, there was an emerging need in this study to discover whether this disparity has influenced the educational outcomes for good or ill.

Responding to a question regarding the distinction between equipping disciples and equipping leaders, Professor Brennan indicated he believes no such difference should exist. There are leaders within the church who hold a position, but all Christians are ambassadors. He suggested he leans toward Maxwell’s (1998) understanding of leadership as influence, and by focusing on discipleship and what it means to follow Jesus, Ezra Biblical Seminary has taught students the kind of influence they are to have, the kind most impactful in the world around them. Genuine Christian influence, the kind that reflects the character of Jesus, is especially important, he suggested, in the Mexican culture where leaders of position are revered because of the place they hold and are not often held accountable. Because of those reasons, Brennan said,

We have decided to just focus on what it means to follow Christ, to value the word, to prioritize and apply its basic scriptural principles to their lives and teach them what that means to the community and relationships around them.

Implications of this Research

This section articulates this study's theoretical, methodological, and practical implications. Each will be summarized under separate headings. The first will address the value of this research for the communication theory through which it can be understood. The second will discuss aspects related to study methods and address the study's reliability. The final will offer suggestions based on this work for biblical and theological training throughout the developing world and the SGC curriculum.

Theoretical Implications

The following subsection will explain the ways Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT), particularly its storytelling network (STN), was used to understand how the opportunity to receive training through Ezra Biblical Seminary is spreading throughout the San Gabriel Mixtepec community. A further subsection will address how this study intersects with the Cybernetic tradition to describe the information processing that took place to communicate SGC curriculum in a cross-cultural context.

Communication Infrastructure Theory

It was proposed that CIT would inform this research by offering insight into disparities among marginalized populations and how they are informed and assisted in resolving those inequalities. Used primarily in the dimension of health disparities and related resources, Wilkin et al. (2010) suggested that "communication infrastructure theory (CIT) offers a unique perspective on communication and health by investigating how neighborhood communication

patterns are intertwined with the health of communities and their residents” (p. 611). This study successfully extended CIT beyond the physical health dimension to theological communication, demonstrating the value of CIT in other communication contexts. The storytelling network central to CIT and its Communication Action Context (CAC) were helpful to inform and guide this study.

CIT is also germane to the present study concerning disparities, the resources available to address them, and the stories that inspired participants and solicited their engagement to resolve them. That disparity exists in the spiritual health and educational resources of the San Gabriel Mixtepec community, and that Ezra Biblical Seminary was founded to address those disparities has been established. Informing and engaging the villagers in training to alleviate the spiritual health concerns of the community and church in that developing-world context was needed. An important finding from interviews is that the story is the basis of interest, engagement, and transformation.

Believers and church leaders interviewed for this research often spoke of hearing the stories of their friends, coworkers, or church leaders impacted by this training. The emerging framework of a storytelling network was essential to make sense of growing interest and involvement with Ezra Biblical Seminary and the SGC curriculum. In each case where a story was referenced, the study participant noted the positive impact of that story on their decision to become a student at Ezra Biblical Seminary. The way this storytelling network presented itself in the study is pictured in Figure 1 and briefly described in the following paragraph. The network continues to emerge as more believers engage, spiritual health in the community improves, and stories continue to be told.

At the head of the storytelling network was Professor Brennan, who was found to be personally responsible for connecting with the most significant number of existing students and convincing them to enroll in studies. He was the hub of an emerging network that would grow out of the initial course offering at the Bible Methodist Church and the positive outcomes it generated. Study participants described a growing sense of excitement and anticipation as they learned of the opportunity to receive training through enrolled students. As professors continued addressing spiritual health concerns within the community and positive outcomes were identified, the storytelling network grew proportionately to the number of students impacted. Moreover, the seminary created strategic opportunities such as the evolving year-end celebration to engage the involved and the still-to-be involved in its effort.

The stories repeatedly told and emerging storytelling network indicate that extending spiritual training opportunities through word-of-mouth efforts to believers and church leaders in this developing-world community was helpful in ways like those expressed by Chip and Dan Heath (2019) regarding “Senior Signing Day” (p. 2). It was helpful, first of all, in letting these believers and church leaders know the resources were available for them to be equipped and to grow in their Christian faith. Furthermore, it was a means of inspiring them to take steps to engage and experience for themselves the benefits of Ezra Biblical Seminary and SGC curriculum. The use of storytelling networks as a framework for understanding has potential as a standalone theory that will be explored in the future research section later in this chapter.

Another component of CIT relevant to the present study is the CAC in which the storytelling takes place (Ball-Rokeach, 2001; Embry, 2019). The ongoing CAC for Ezra Biblical Seminary is the local church community in which the students are a part and engage daily or

weekly with whom they engage daily or weekly. The local church is where many of the stories are told and where others witness the spiritual transformations that are taking place.

Cybernetic Tradition

While CIT informed this research, this study fits within the cybernetic tradition of communication concerning the information processing that was learned to have taken place to overcome barriers and deliver the SGC curriculum to the believers and church leaders in San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. A section of the findings in Chapter 4 detailed many learning barriers and separated those embedded in the Southern Mexico context of San Gabriel from those introduced by the SGC content and curriculum. The ways those obstacles were addressed are relevant to this discussion concerning cybernetics.

Rafael works in the seminary office and, as discussed in Chapter 4, is privy to the work and conversation of professors concerning their preparation and teaching. He noted that their effort generally eliminates potential barriers before students know they exist. Interviews revealed that perceived obstacles to learning did not turn out to be real hindrances because Professors Brennan and David processed the lecture thoroughly before the lesson and learning.

Participants explained that potential cultural or language barriers seem to be mitigated by the information-processing actions of the professors. As discussed in Chapter 4, the professors could handle most obstacles that may have arisen during the learning process, such as language translation or theological differences. These adjustments by the professors ensured that students were not hindered in their ability to learn and progress. Thus, professors perform the cybernetic action of processing information and adapting it to be relevant for the students.

The cybernetic action of professors at Ezra Biblical Seminary includes the following, as highlighted in the research findings. They anticipated what the students might struggle with or

might be hindered by and processed the information in ways relevant to their students. Professors dealt with translation issues, added illustrations that fit the context and culture, provided additional resources understandable to their students, and ensured the successful transference of information from sender to receiver. In every case where data was available, the thing that could have been a hindrance to student success was dealt with and fully addressed by the professor.

Methodological Implications

There are several important implications regarding the methodology used to conduct this study. Each is relevant to the context in which this research was born, the reliability of the findings revealed in Chapter 4, the assessment of those findings, and the credibility of this study's outcomes.

The cross-cultural nature of this research and the language barriers it presented required accurate and precise translation of interviews. Two translators were used, one indigenous and the other of American descent. While the indigenous translator was articulate and provided a consistent and substantive translation, the translators conferred on the best translation of a word or idea on multiple occasions. This collaboration dynamic by the interpreting team provided an environment that provided accurate and culturally appropriate translations for this research.

Additionally, the private interview setting with only the researcher and interpreters created a safe environment that allowed participants to honestly express both positive and negative aspects of their experiences. The breadth of student participants and the complexity and nuance in interview responses provided a depth of authenticity to data collection and findings.

A second implication of methodology was related to time spent in Mexico, as 2 weeks of data collection in San Gabriel Mixtepec provided a valuable time of immersion in the context and culture of this study. The student and pastor interviews were conducted in the early days of

the stay in San Gabriel, allowing the researcher to gain rapid assimilation. The researcher walked the village streets, dined in local restaurants, got acquainted with local citizens, and interacted with professors for clarification and continuing questions and answers as needed. Direct observation continued throughout the 2-week stay, as did interviews, and the context was conducive for writing as the data was fresh.

Interview transcripts were created daily and stored securely. Further, to capture the richness of the experience, the initial analysis of the findings began while still immersed in the village's culture. Results were triangulated while in Mexico through an interview with the founding team of SGC with questions that were informed by prior interviews with students and staff of Ezra Biblical Seminary. The proximity of the data collection to the conclusions that would begin to emerge further contributes to this study's authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness.

Reflexivity

Having addressed the study's credibility and trustworthiness and having mentioned the interview with the SGC founding team, it is essential to insert thoughts here regarding reflexivity. This research is of personal importance to the researcher because of his lifelong passion for biblical and theological training and his familial relationship with the visionary founder of SGC, Tim Keep. The researcher also has loose connections to some of the founding SGC team members.

In addition to inside knowledge concerning SGC, these relationships provided the researcher access to SGC and the research context in which the study took place. However, these relationships and inside knowledge have not clouded the researchers' vision or influenced his

findings' objective interpretation and analysis. This scholarly pursuit is only served by trustworthy and honest evidence and outcomes.

The interview with the SGC founding team was conducted after most of the data collection in the village was completed, and much had been learned about the curriculum and its impact in the context of San Gabriel and Ezra Biblical Seminary. Notably, the researcher did not allow these facts to influence the questions he posed to the SGC founding team or the dialogue in which he and the group engaged. Several times throughout the interview, issues were raised about the researcher's inside knowledge based on interviews and observation. He did not disclose that information to the SGC founding team but allowed them to provide objective and unfiltered feedback. This feedback helped deliver multiple perspectives and added layers to research interpretation and analysis.

Practical Implications

The core themes offered earlier in this chapter as evidence for the equipping that Ezra Biblical Seminary is accomplishing provide insight into applying the SGC curriculum in the developing world. This study, therefore, has implications for the efforts of Shepherd's Global Classroom and its work to extend biblical and theological training to developing-world pastors and church leaders with little or no access to these educational resources. This section will highlight the most critical implications for the SGC curriculum, the marginalized populations of the developing world, and the possibility of extending this training effort into other regions.

SGC Curriculum is Helpful as a Stand-a-lone Text

The interviews showed that Shepherd's Global Classroom curriculum was helpful as a standalone text to inform and equip believers and church leaders not previously exposed to this kind of in-depth teaching. Students must read the text for themselves and answer questions based

on what they have read. Despite the occasional translation issue (particularly illustrations and examples) and sometimes navigating the challenges associated with complete understanding, interviews indicated this foundational exercise was important and helpful to the eventual comprehension and assimilation of the content into the lives of students and pastors alike. Apart from the input of professors, the SGC content serves to furnish developing-world Christians with helpful and inspiring knowledge they likely would not otherwise have had.

Information Processing is Critical to Achieve the Best Outcomes

In the context of Ezra Biblical Seminary, the fullness of the SGC curriculum was aided by the vision and tireless effort of two professors committed to its intended outcomes. The curriculum produced the results it did and equipped the believers and church leaders in the village of San Gabriel Mixtepec because these men worked to process its information and overcome all real and perceived barriers to its success.

The interview data show conclusively that Professors Brennan and David anticipated the contextual and cultural hindrances and removed them before any had a chance to impede the message and effect of the SGC curriculum. Further, they managed the schedule, the location, and the technical considerations to benefit their students. The vision and mission of Ezra Biblical Seminary to equip believers and church leaders in the village of San Gabriel Mixtepec and surrounding communities using the curriculum of SGC is succeeding primarily because of the passion and persistence of professors to that end.

Summarizing the implications of this research practically for the SGC curriculum and the equipping of marginalized populations, the results of this study indicated that the SGC curriculum is most beneficial to equip believers and church leaders in the developing-world context under the administration of those with the wisdom and skill to deploy it in their specific

context. The information contained in the SGC text is good. It is best, however, when processed by those who understand how and are committed to doing so.

Delimitations & Limitations of this Study

The focus of this research was the specific context of San Gabriel with its existing structure, leadership, and 4-year track record. Context is the foremost delimitation of this study. Every location is different, and marginalized populations differ in their readiness for and reception of the training offered through the SGC curriculum. Therefore, this study's findings cannot be guaranteed to apply to other developing-world contexts in which the SGC curriculum has been deployed. The principles at work in San Gabriel may or may not work in different contexts, a necessary delimitation of this study.

While studying the SGC curriculum and its application in the developing-world context of San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico, it was further necessary to narrow the scope of this research to a manageable focus. Rather than question whether the SGC curriculum was successful in its implementation through Ezra Biblical Seminary, which was determined to be too broad a query, this study sought to understand whether the curriculum serves to equip believers and church leaders in the developing-world context of San Gabriel.

The insights have ascertained the answer to this question revealed through interviews and direct observation by contrasting the spiritual life of individuals and the community before and after they engaged with the SGC curriculum. This study has not sought to measure that change with any specificity but to determine whether the difference is genuine and results from training through Ezra Biblical Seminary and with the SGC curriculum.

In addition to these delimitations, this research was limited to those study participants who have experienced progress and growth through Ezra Biblical Seminary through their

ongoing participation in training. No one was interviewed who had discontinued their coursework for one reason or another or was dissatisfied by some aspect of the SGC curriculum or of Ezra Biblical Seminary. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, not everyone who started taking SGC courses has completed them. Some have withdrawn from studies, and this research did not seek to understand why they did so. The nature of this study's central questions limited interviews to those participants who have remained steadfast in their studies and experienced what the SGC curriculum and Ezra Biblical Seminary have to offer.

Generalizability of Findings

Creswell and Creswell (2017) asserted, "The value of qualitative research lies in the particular description and themes developed in the context of a specific site" (p. 202), thus limiting the generalizations that can be made. The nature of the present study, however, lends to a different outcome. This subsection will briefly explain generalizable findings and why this qualitative study differs.

SGC curriculum was developed to equip pastors and church leaders with limited access to biblical and theological training in the developing world. It was created as a standalone tool, is a full-text training document, and has been translated to reach most of the world's population. The findings of this study demonstrated the SGC curriculum helps reach its desired audience and achieve the intended outcome.

Professors were the catalyst for the origins of training in this community. Their stimulus to engage and the content of their lectures was derived from SGC and its curriculum. As noted earlier in this chapter, the combination of the SGC curriculum's foundational and practical components changed the attitudes and behavior of students. Developing world believers and church leaders were equipped through the SGC curriculum to read, understand, and apply the

Scriptures in their own lives and communities. An increase in Biblical knowledge resulted in fundamental transformations. The church and its people have been awakened, and the faith community has manifested spiritual vibrancy. These findings are generalizable to other contexts because they directly result from the content created.

Study findings related to the storytelling network through which word of this training has spread within the community are also generalizable. Citing Walter Fisher's description of people as inherent storytellers, Littlejohn et al. (2017) noted the correlation between messages defined as narrative and campaigns to "encourage healthy behavior choices in individuals" (p. 348). Because of the generalizability of the findings related to the SGC curriculum and its impact on students, the stories from this study's research context are likely to emerge from other contexts in which this content is used to train developing-world believers and church leaders. The change will inspire stories from which a network will appear to influence and inspire the engagement of others.

Future Research

This study highlighted future research that could shape an understanding of how biblical and theological truths are communicated and how populations are informed of resources that serve their spiritual health concerns related to the communications field. The limitations of this research point to the first suggestion for future research. Since SGC is a global curriculum, future research should examine additional contexts to determine whether the implications of this study are consistent in other places.

According to R. McElwain (personal communication, December 16, 2020), one of the primary curriculum writers for SGC, SGC does not have an assessment tool for ascertaining whether the deployment of its courses is working in a particular context. While such an

assessment might be out of reach, studying SGC curriculum use in unique contexts throughout the developing world could shape their efforts and refine that work to the most effective ends.

There is another focus of future research beyond the existing scope of Ezra Biblical Seminary. During this study's interview and data collection phase, it was learned that the seminary had expanded its use of technology to accommodate some online students. Soon, there are plans to add another location (Mexico City) where Professor David Martinez will go to build a local student body and hold weekly classes. While this is still in the planning stages, Professor Brennan said they would continue to teach according to their existing schedule, each from their unique location. One evening the lecture will originate in San Gabriel and the other in Mexico City.

Future research should examine whether these logistical expansions are equally helpful in equipping believers and church leaders by using the SGC curriculum. By understanding what the team of Ezra Biblical Seminary is doing to inform, engage, and equip developing world believers and church leaders on an increasing scale, SGC and similar organizations might be able to multiply their resources and work to a promising end.

As CIT has been limited to the consideration of campaigns that serve the physical health of its recipients, in addition to the study of the SGC curriculum in new contexts, future research should consider how CIT and its storytelling network can be understood to communicate and inform marginalized populations concerning spiritual health or other issues. Are CIT and the storytelling network effective in bringing awareness in the developing world? How is it used in a manner most helpful? What limitations should be considered in its deployment?

Future research should further examine the potential of CIT's storytelling network as a standalone communication theory. Storytelling is a core component of CIT, but it is buried

within the framework, so it may not get the focus it deserves. As the essential aspect of CIT used to inform this study, storytelling as a communication theory should inform future research without CIT's added considerations. One final suggestion for future research extends the use of the storytelling network as a theory and applies it to the local church context. Instead of relying on digital communication and algorithms to overcome their interference in getting messages to an audience, future research should consider the impact of word-of-mouth campaigns launched by seeding the church's storytelling network. This dual consideration of storytelling networks can potentially test the theory in the specific context of a single study.

Conclusion

This study examined the problem of a lack of access to holistic biblical and theological training that resulted in a lack of depth at the church's pastoral and lay leadership levels throughout the developing world. Informed by CIT, this study fits within the cybernetic communication tradition and has sought to determine whether the curriculum of SGC, as deployed through Ezra Biblical Seminary, is serving the need to equip believers and church leaders in the developing-world context of San Gabriel Mixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico.

The study was proposed to the researcher's dissertation committee, reviewed by Liberty University's Institutional Review Board, and approved for execution. Travel to Southern Mexico was arranged. During the 2-week stay in Mexico, data was retrieved through direct observation and 17 one-on-one or group interviews. Interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed; themes were identified and analyzed, then presented as a narrative under headings and subheadings derived from the RQs. This study concluded with a detailed review of the findings and a discussion of the work of Ezra Biblical Seminary and its effort to train believers and church leaders in San Gabriel Mixtepec using a curriculum written and disseminated by SGC.

It was discovered that spiritual deficiencies that existed before Ezra Biblical Seminary was founded are being mitigated through the content of the SGC curriculum and the training of the seminary. Believers and church leaders are foremost equipped to study and understand the Scriptures. Their new appreciation and knowledge of the Scriptures have enabled them to teach others and share their faith more confidently and knowledgeably. Through the curriculum, students' exposure to the model of Jesus and the emphasis of the text on his influence in their lives has inspired them to follow His example, prioritize their walk with the Lord, and taught them to interact with fellow Christians in more generous and loving ways.

Marginalized populations do not have broad access to educational resources that equip them to lead and serve in the Christian church. Through a curriculum written to provide comprehensive biblical and theological training, professors who are skilled and able to process that information for their specific context, and storytelling that informs these populations of the opportunity to receive this training for themselves, it is possible to equip believers and church leaders and address the problem of access in the developing world.

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