LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Liberty Theological Seminary

Conforming to the Image of Christ: Addressing Spiritual Immaturity Utilizing Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling in a Rural Church Context

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to

the Faculty of the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

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Doctor of Ministry

by

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT
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Strong and healthy churches are made up of strong and healthy disciples. The ministry context for this qualitative action research project was the Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church, a predominately Black congregation located in the Pea Ridge community of Brewton, Alabama. The problem was some members at Saint Mark engaged in spiritually immature actions that evoked immature reactions which yielded unhealthy relationships. To address the problem, the researcher developed and implemented the "Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Program" (SBPCP), a strategic Christian ministry that provided participants one-on-one pastoral counseling opportunities for the purpose of building up spiritually healthier Christians. SBPCP consisted of 10 participants that voluntarily took part in a seven-week predetermined counseling agenda that was informed by the themes that emerged from the literature review process. Data was collected using a variety of methods. Pseudonyms were used in lieu of participant's names for confidentiality purposes.

The researcher argued that if certain members of Saint Mark faithfully participated in SBPCP, then they would become spiritually healthier Christians and thereby cultivate a healthier local church. Efficacy was determined in part using various study instruments such as pre-project surveys, post-project surveys, and exit interviews. At the conclusion of the action research project, SBPCP participants self-reported that biblical teaching combined with the personal undivided attention they received while in the program, directly contributed to them being spiritually healthier Christians. The results led this researcher to conclude that Christ-centered, Spirit-led, Bible-saturated, and strategically-designed pastoral counseling is an effective and efficient way to address the problem of spiritual immaturity and build up spiritually healthy disciples in a rural church context.

Keywords: Bible-based pastoral counseling, healthy disciples, healthy churches, rural churches, Black church, spiritual formation, strategic Christian ministry

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Abbreviations

AACC   *American Association of Christian Counselors*

BCPPC   *Board of Christian Professional and Pastoral Counselors*

DMIN   *Doctor of Ministry*

IBCC   *International Board of Christian Care*

IRB   *Institutional Review Board*

NASB   *New American Standard Bible*

SBPCP   *Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Program*

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

LaKaye, a beautiful and vibrant woman, was at the peak of her life. She was less than a year from retirement and was very much looking forward to traveling with her beloved husband and spending more time with her grandchildren. For a period of time, LaKaye had been experiencing flank pain, something she attributed to gallstones. Wanting to rid herself of this nagging pain, she went to see a specialist. Indeed, LaKaye was right, she had gallstones. However, what she did not bargain for and was completely unaware of, was that she also had stage four renal cancer. After getting a second opinion, in December 2022, LaKaye began immunotherapy and was told by physicians that she had about five years to live. Four months later, in April 2023, LaKaye died of kidney failure, a byproduct of renal cancer. In a real sense, the very problem that LaKaye was unaware she had, is what ultimately led to her demise.[1]

Unfortunately, when it comes to spiritual problems, much like cancer, it can be the cause of a person's spiritual demise even if they are unaware that they have a problem. People are hurting, and whether they realize it or not, many of them are severely spiritually wounded. For the spiritually wounded, making contact with a qualified and faithful Bible-based pastoral counselor may prove to be the difference between church engagement and apostasy. In fact, Bible-based pastoral counseling is so critical to a person's spiritual health, it may even prove to be the difference between spending eternity with the Lord Jesus or being eternally separated from Him.

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[1] This illustration is a true story from the researcher's life.

The primary goal of Bible-based pastoral counseling is to come alongside the counselee in the co-facilitation of their spiritual growth.[2] The believer's relationship with God is one that is founded upon Christ, rooted in forgiveness, progresses in faith, and is mediated by the indwelling Holy Spirit.[3] Because of this fact, there is a perpetual need for sound Bible-based pastoral counseling that is anchored by the inerrant truth of Scripture. The mission of the local church and its importance in the pastoral counseling process cannot be overstated. The Lord Jesus, the church's Redeemer, Husband, Head, and King has issued His orders. Failure is not an option. Having stated this fact, when a problem is recognized it should be properly assessed, with possible solutions discussed and also the necessary ingredients to implement the solution thoroughly discussed. The proactive local church will aspire to address those needs as soon as humanly possible in a God-honoring manner and for His glory.

The researcher's conviction of the need for sound Bible-based pastoral counseling for the spiritually wounded person was aided in part by his personal and professional experience. From a personal vantage point, looking back on his own life, this researcher is reminded of the many personal pitfalls that he fell into as a young and immature believer, the overwhelming majority of those pitfalls could have been mitigated or perhaps avoided altogether had he sought and received Christ-centered, Spirit-led, Bible-saturated pastoral counseling. From a professional standpoint, numerous private and state-operated counseling programs are overburdened.[4] This

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[2] David G. Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling: A Short-Term Structured Model*. Second Edition (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 35.

[3] Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical, Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation*. Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 3.

[4] Siang-Yang Tan, "How to Develop an Effective Lay Counseling Ministry," in *The Struggle Is Real: How to Care for Mental and Relational Health Needs in the Church*. Expanded Edition, eds. Tim Clinton and Jared Pingleton (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2019), 121-122.

does not even take into consideration that a significant number of people do not have insurance and cannot afford these state-operated programs without it. Research suggests that Bible-based pastoral counseling programs can come alongside other programs and be just as effective as private and state-operated counseling programs.[5]

Finally, the believer in the Lord Jesus is continually admonished over the course of their entire life to live, walk worthy of one's calling, and grow in Christlikeness.[6] Indeed, the conduct of Spirit-empowered people by and large is indicative of their spiritual health.[7] Taking the previous factors into consideration, spiritual immaturity is rampant in many churches and the spiritual journey of growth as a Christian disciple is not now nor was it ever intended to be an independent endeavor. To say it differently, just because a certain thing or task is "spiritual" in nature does not automatically make that certain thing or task good.[8] With regard to the aforementioned warnings, specifically at it concerns the spiritual journey of a believer in Christ, learning to distinguish the voice of God is one of the greatest lessons a person could ever absorb.[9] The efforts of the qualified and faithful Bible-based pastoral counselor embedded in the local church, who aids a believer in hearing God's voice in all areas of life, could potentially provide life-altering guidance and therefore induce eternal implications. Consequently, counsel

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[5] Tan, "How to Develop an Effective Lay Counseling Ministry," in *The Struggle Is Real*, 121-122.

[6] Paul Pettit, "Introduction," in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, ed. Paul Pettit (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2008), 23.

[7] Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple: 10 Traits of a Vital Christian*. Lexington, MA: Leadership Transformations, Inc., 2013), 19.

[8] Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. 20th Anniversary Edition (Colorado Springs, CO, NavPress, 2021), 10.

[9] Ralph Douglas West, *Living in the In-Between Times: The Life of Samuel* (Fort Worth, TX: Hupomone Press, 2012), 117.

that is Christ-centered, Spirit-led, and Bible-saturated, is a central component to believers

properly discerning the will of God.[10]

Ministry Context

Growing in Christlikeness in community with one another is a need of every Christian,

regardless of their location.[11] The ministry context for this DMIN action research project was the

Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church, located in Brewton, Alabama. The city of Brewton rests

in Escambia County, Alabama, approximately 57 miles from Pensacola, Florida, and 105 miles

from Alabama's state capital, Montgomery.[12] Out of 588 cities in the state of Alabama, Brewton

ranked as the 118th largest in the state.[13] Present day, the church is situated in the Pea Ridge

community, a rural area within Brewton. It should be noted that Brewton (city) and East Brewton

are two separate municipalities that are distinct from one another, despite sharing a border.

Locals will be sure to correct you should you not recognize the difference between these

respective municipalities. The researcher resides in Cantonment, Florida and commutes to and

from Brewton for worship services and any other matters related to church business and

ministry. Cantonment is located approximately 45 miles from Brewton.[14]

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[10] Eric Mason, *Unleashed: Being Conformed to the Image of Christ* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 163.

[11] Paul Pettit,), "Conclusion," in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, ed. Paul Pettit (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2008), 269.

[12] Greater Brewton Area Chamber of Commerce, "Community Data Information," accessed 10/24/2023, https://www.brewtonchamber.com/Area-Data

[13] Alabama Demographics, "Alabama Cities by Population," accessed 11/1/2023, https://www.alabama-demographics.com/cities_by_population.

[14] Information obtained via Google search, accessed 11/4/2023.

Demographics

According to the latest U.S. Census Bureau statistics, as of July 1, 2022, Brewton had a total population of 5,209 people, representing a 1.2% decrease since April 1, 2020.[15] The median income was $44,528 with 18.4% of the population living in poverty. The racial demographic of Brewton is 57.6% White, 38.6% Black or African American, 2.3% identified as two or more races, and 1.3% Asian; within this demographic, 2.4% are of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, and 53.1% of the city's population is female.[16] The racial makeup of the city is quite different from the researcher's local church, 98% percent of Saint Mark's population is Black or African American with the remaining 2% identifying as White or two or more races.

Church History

The recorded history of Saint Mark is fascinating but there are some gaps in what is known about the church, as recordkeeping has been inconsistent at best. It is believed that the church was organized in 1904. Saint Mark was an offshoot of First Saint Siloam Missionary Baptist Church and was constructed for the convenience of people, primarily Black worshippers, in the Pea Ridge community of Brewton. The original site of the church, a log cabin that served dual purposes as a church and school, was located about 250 feet from the church's current site. At that time, the name Saint Mark was known by was "Olive Branch." The first pastor to serve in the church's recorded history was the Reverend Homer Mills.[17]

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[15] U.S. Census Bureau, "QuickFacts Brewton City, Alabama," accessed 10/24/2023, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/brewtoncityalabama.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Church's handwritten history, accessed on October 1, 2023.

The church's recorded history states that "oral tradition" holds that in later years, worship services for Saint Mark were held in a little store owned by "The Champs" and sometime after that, worship services were held at the home of Sister Fannie Robinson. It should be noted that there is no recorded history of other pastors during this period until 1912, when the Reverend B.L. Woods became the pastor of the church. Under the pastoral leadership of Reverend Woods, another building was erected near the church's current location. Membership grew under Reverend Woods's leadership and he ordained I.C. Champ Sr., Berry Isom, John Packard, and Hill Cook as deacons. It is believed that the four men previously mentioned were the first deacons in the church's history.[18]

In October 2018, this researcher had the pleasure and privilege of becoming the 17th and current Senior Pastor in the recorded history of the Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church. During the researcher's tenure as Senior Pastor, two deacons have been ordained, two baptisms have been carried out and four new members have joined the church. Several professed disaffected members have rejoined the church's ranks and visitor attendance has increased during the researcher's tenure at the helm.

At this present time, Saint Mark has nine active ministries and does a few things in the community in an effort to be a blessing to the community in which it is planted. For example, the church hosts an annual breakfast for anyone in the Pea Ridge community of Brewton who wants to come. In the past, the church has hosted local city health officials to come and share various tips concerning lifestyle and nutrition. Additionally, the church conducts an annual church giveaway that is headed by the pastor's wife. At this current time, Saint Mark does not have a formal pastoral counseling program or small group ministry. It is believed that this action

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[18] Church's handwritten history, accessed on October 1, 2023.

research project will be the first time that a formal approach to pastoral counseling or the use of

small groups has been implemented in the church's lengthy history.

In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that the researcher is not a state-

licensed or affiliated psychologist, psychiatrist, therapist, professional counselor, or any other

related occupation. However, the researcher is a "duly-licensed and ordained minister" in the

Missionary Baptist Church, he is credentialed as a "Board Certified Pastoral Counselor" with the

Board of Christian Professional and Pastoral Counselors (BCPPC), and he is a presidential

member of the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC). The AACC is the largest

faith-based mental health organization in the world.[19] In addition to his pastoral counseling

credentials, the researcher is a certified "Master Life Coach" with Transformation Academy, a

secular organization that awards various coaching credentials. Moreover, the researcher is a

recognized chaplain, ordained and ecclesiastically endorsed by the World Council of

Independent Christian Churches (WCICC).[20]

The researcher's incumbent knowledge and skills as a proven minister and Bible-based

pastoral counselor, supplemented by his expertise in life coaching and chaplaincy, are critical to

the success of this DMIN action research project. For more details on the researcher's

qualifications, see Appendix U. It should also be noted that at this present time, the researcher is

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[19] For more information concerning the American Association of Christian Counselors (AACC), see https://aacc.net. The Board of Christian Professional and Pastoral Counselors (BCPPC) is a branch of the International Board of Christian Care (IBCC). The IBCC is the credentialing arm of the AACC, see https://www.ibccglobal.com.

[20] According to their website, the World Council of Independent Christian Churches (WCICC) "is recognized by the United States Department of Defense, the United States Department of Justice, and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, as a recognized church in all fifty states and 78 countries for the purpose of licensing, ordination, and ecclesiastical endorsement for chaplaincy. Accessed on August 4, 2024. https://wcicc.org/chaplaincy.html

bi-vocational and is the only ordained minister serving in his local church and there are not any associate ministers in training at the time of this writing.

Current Landscape

In many ways, Saint Mark is a traditional Black Baptist church, namely, that Black pastors and ministers are expected to serve and meet the needs of the entire community.[21] Like many Black churches, the vast majority of active members in the church are elderly, surpassing 70 years old. There are about 100 people on the church's roster but in reality, between 30 and 60 people attend most Sundays. The key demographic that is missing from the church's blueprint is adults aged 25 to 50 years old. At this current time, there are only four active members in the church between the ages of 25 and 50 years old, and two of those members are the researcher and his wife. There are a few children aged twelve and under who attend regularly, most of them coming to worship service with a grandparent or an older aunt, uncle, or cousin. The researcher also has an eight-year-old daughter who is counted amongst the children twelve years of age or younger who attend worship service on a regular basis.

Saint Mark has a family dynamic at the core of its membership. A few families and their various clans make up a significant portion of the congregation. In addition to the family dynamic, a few of the older members of Saint Mark grew up and went to school with one another. Some of the members of the church look forward to collaborating with one another, building parade floats so that they can attend and participate in the annual parade held in honor of the late civil rights leader, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The aforementioned

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[21] L.H. Whelchel, *The History and Heritage of African-American Churches: A Way Out of No Way* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011), 238.

connections and activities naturally suggest there are some within the church who have strong ties to one another. While strong ties can be great for life and ministry in the church, the loyalty that correlates with those strong ties has at times been a catalyst for trouble and has led to group-think in the past.

The researcher is reminded a story he became aware of, an instance that took place in a certain Brewton-area local church. From the researcher's understanding, a member of the congregation, who happened to be a ministry leader in this particular church, expressed sentiments of wanting to resign their position. After investigating the issue further, the senior pastor of this church believed that the ministry leader was simply burned out and wanted someone else to take the reins from them. The senior pastor later found out from a fellow church member, who was privy to various details involving the subject committee led by the subject ministry leader, that the reality was the ministry leader had a problem with the member of the church whom the senior pastor was considering appointing to the committee headed by the ministry leader. From the researcher's understanding, a relatively short time later, the ministry leader went to the senior pastor under their own volition and shared that they had known this particular member for a significant amount of time and they in fact did not get along with one another. The ministry leader expressed that due to those past experiences, they were not even willing to attempt to work with the member being considered for the position. From the researcher's understanding, it is believed that the subject ministry leader stopped short of giving an ultimatum but made it crystal clear that they would resign should the other member be appointed to the committee.[22]

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[22] Michael orally provided these details to the researcher on or about October 8, 2023.

The tension, which may date back decades at this point, has not only apparently festered all of this time but clearly remains a problem to this very day. Admittedly, the problem discussed above, presuming the researcher's accurate understanding of the facts, is multi-faceted and the researcher concedes that if all details are rightly understood, then it is a bit more on the extreme side. Nonetheless, the issue discussed above is undoubtedly a spiritual problem at its root, a lack of spiritual maturity and a stark unwillingness to grow. It is spiritual issues such as those discussed above that compelled the researcher to address the problem of spiritual immaturity at this particular time.

Problem Presented

Spiritual immaturity can manifest itself in a myriad of ways in the local church. If the pulpit is deficient in addressing basic discipleship matters, spiritual immaturity will almost certainly be the result, negatively impacting the pews.[23] At Saint Mark, the vast majority of the time, members put on their Sunday best attitudes. Then, there are other times when infighting is excessive leading to unhealthy relationships, much of the infighting surrounding events that happened years or sometimes even decades ago.

For example, a few years ago, the researcher became aware of a ministry leader in a certain church who contacted their senior pastor to inform them of their impending departure from the church. Supposedly, an incident of some sort that took place in Sunday School infuriated this ministry leader so much that they had come to the point where they felt they could no longer stand the alleged disrespect of a certain members in the church. According to the

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[23] D. Scott Dixon and Trent A. Rogers, "Discipleship: Clarifying Terms in the New Testament and Secondary Literature." *Southeastern Theological Review* 14, no. 1 (2023): 48.

researcher's understanding, the senior pastor of this church, unaware of what transpired, was initially able to convince this ministry leader to remain at the church and in their ministerial position within the church. However, just a few short weeks later, another unfortunate event at the church, separate from the previous event but allegedly involving some of those same members involved in the first incident, prompted the very same ministry leader to contact the church's senior pastor to inform him that this time they were indeed leaving the church and that there was nothing that he could say to them to change their mind.[24]

The previously referenced example of discourse and dialog and other occurrences mentioned up to this point have occurred at churches that are similar in demographics to the researcher's ministry context. As it pertains to Saint Mark, while no particular event comes to mind at the time of this writing, the researcher has observed some things in the past that concerned him and gave rise to the idea that spiritual maturity or a lack thereof is a problem at Saint Mark that the researcher should be resolved to address. Some of those problems are unforgiveness and gossiping. Then, there is what the Bible sometimes reference as being a "busybody" (1 Tim 5:13). Quite naturally, the previously mentioned problems negatively impact unity within the local church. Prayerfully, with the leadership and guidance of the Holy Spirit, this DMIN action research project will effectively address these types of problems at Saint Mark. To be clear, everyone at Saint Mark does not suffer from spiritual immaturity, in fact, a significant portion if not the vast majority of the members are presumably appropriately spiritually mature in most areas of their Christian life. Yet, there are those who are spiritually immature and engage in spiritually immature actions, they have a tremendous impact on other members of the church and their actions reverberate throughout the congregation, negatively

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[24] Tammy orally provided these details to the researcher on or about April 7, 2019.

impacting the fellowship amongst the saints within the local church. The previously mentioned spiritual deficiencies demonstrate, at least in part, how some at Saint Mark lack spiritual maturity. The lack of spiritual maturity has negatively impacted fellowship and unity in the local church and has provoked some members to leave the church altogether. The problem is some members at Saint Mark engage in spiritually immature actions, evoking immature reactions that yield unhealthy relationships.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to develop and implement a strategically-designed one-on-one pastoral counseling program that efficiently builds up spiritually healthier Christians. This DMIN action research project is in response to the numerous things that the researcher has observed or has been conveyed to him, specifically, members of Saint Mark saying some things and doing other things that are spiritually immature and are not Christlike, which has led to unhealthy relationships in the local church. Accordingly, these unhealthy relationships have played a significant role in the lack of unity within the local body, giving rise to the need for this action research project.

In ideal circumstances, a healthy local church is a local church in which the members therein operate and interact with one another much like a family.[25] It is in this family-like atmosphere, in the local church, where the individual Christian is spiritually nourished in community with other Christians.[26] Pastoral counseling can aid in remedying many of these

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[25] Gene A. Getz, *The Measure of a Healthy Church: How God Defines Greatness in a Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), 28.

[26] Joseph H. Hellerman, *Why We Need the Church to Become More Like Jesus: Reflections About Community, Spiritual Formation, and the Story of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 3 Kindle.

relational problems within the church, and in so doing, build up healthy disciples who make up healthy churches who are demonstratively more Christlike from that point forward.

One of the many essential purposes of sound Christ-centered, Spirit-led, Bible-saturated pastoral counseling programs is the encouragement and fostering of the Christian's spiritual maturity.[27] Pastoral counseling can be one-on-one or be supplemented by a Church-based group experience.[28] Pastoral counseling varies from clinical counseling in numerous ways, as the pastor is substantially so much more than merely a counselor. Pastors connect with those whom they counsel in a myriad of ways, each one of those ways representing only a single factor or a combination of multiple factors that make up the expansive terrain that consists of pastoral care and responsibilities.[29] For example, a clinical counselor, whether they are Christian or otherwise, can restrict their contact with the counselee to only scheduled counseling sessions. The clinical counselor can not only set but actually maintain stringent boundaries with those they treat in counseling sessions. On the other hand, the pastoral counselor does not have the liberty of restricting contact with those with whom they are involved during counseling sessions. Rather, the pastoral counselor engages with the counselee while preaching from the pulpit, in church ministries and committees, and during member fellowship events. The life of a pastor who also ministers as a pastoral counselor is entwined with the counselee in a way that is simply not true for the clinical counselor.[30]

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[27] Larry Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling: A Model for Helping Caring Christians Become Capable Counselors*. Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 29 Kindle.

[28] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 60.

[29] Ibid, 24.

[30] Ibid.

Another distinction between the pastoral counselor and the clinical counselor is that the pastor who is also a counselor has the divine privilege and vocational responsibility to teach biblical principles of Christian living, which may not necessarily be the case with a clinical counselor.[31] Having pointed out this distinction, a pastoral counselor's contact with a counselee is not limited to only Sunday morning or only during counseling sessions, it is very much a package deal that is all-inclusive under the banner of pastoral care and responsibilities that the faithful pastoral counselor must always take into consideration.[32]

The unique role that the pastoral counselor typifies as described above is essential to this researcher achieving the purpose of this action research project. The tangible benefit for the participants who were apart of this action research project was that they gained the advantages of one-on-one counseling, which oftentimes is an unavailable option, while experiencing a small group that was designed to meet the corporate needs of all participants. As a further matter, all participants, whether in one-on-one counseling sessions or group setting, were provided wise counsel that aided their spiritual maturity and growth. The intervention and design of this action research project is discussed in more detail in the third chapter of this document.

Basic Assumptions

Everyone has presuppositions that have been largely shaped over the course of their life by personal experience, education, or some combination thereof. The presuppositions of this researcher and the action research project are referenced here as basic assumptions. As is the case with any research endeavor, the basic assumptions contained herein serve as the

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[31] Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling*, 16 Kindle.

[32] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 24.

fundamental foundation and starting place for this academic undertaking.[33] Frankly, there is a

hoard of presuppositions and assumptions that this researcher brings with him into this task, far

too many to itemize here. Having stated the previous fact, this document will expound on five

basic assumptions on which this action research project rests.

The first and foremost basic assumption of this researcher and the action research project

itself, is that God is real and the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work on the

cross is worth sharing and pursuing with intentionality (Isa 55:6; cf. 1 Cor 1:18). If God is not

real, then quite naturally faith itself and the quest for spiritual maturity rooted in a false being is

futile. The previous point necessitates the existence of God being the foremost basic assumption.

The second basic assumption of this researcher and the action research project itself is

that all participants are genuine believers who are in fact saved by grace through faith in the Lord

Jesus. It is a biblical certainty and long-withstanding conclusion that there are scores of people

spanning the entire world, including Saint Mark, which have sat in the pews for decades, yet to

this day sadly remain unsaved (Matt 7:21-23; cf. John 5:39-40). The situationally keen and astute

pastor is fully aware of the previously stated fact, and does his best to preach evangelistically,

that is, a wrestling match of sorts with the conscience of non-believers.[34] With due regard to the

previous, the target audience of this action research project is those who are authentically God's

very own; professed believers who have placed their faith in Jesus for salvation, the forgiveness

of sins, and believe wholeheartedly that the pathway toward spiritual maturity is a worthwhile

endeavor.

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[33] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 20.

[34] Conrad Mbewe, *Pastoral Preaching: Building a People for God* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Preaching Resources, 2017), 11.

The third basic assumption of this researcher and the action research project itself is that the participants will be faithfully engaged for the duration of the event. If any action research project has even the slightest chance of being successful, that is to prove effective, the participants themselves must be honest and willing contributors. Otherwise, the results of the project will be negatively impacted and may not yield the most accurate research outcomes.[35]

The fourth basic assumption of this researcher and the action research project itself is that the implementation of a formal pastoral counseling program supplemented by a strategically-engineered small group will effectively address the problem. The problem of spiritual immaturity is not unique to Saint Mark and there are many avenues that could have been ventured in addressing the problem. Having acknowledged the aforementioned fact, the researcher assumes that the implementation of a formal pastoral counseling program, supplemented by a strategically-engineered small group provides the best approach in addressing the problem at this particular time.

The fifth and final basic assumption on which this action research project rests is that the Bible is the infallible and inerrant Word of God and that all Scripture is a product of the Holy Spirit's divine work (2 Tim 3:16, 2 Pet 1:21). Simply stated, if one is not convinced of the veracity of the Bible and the claims therein, then the very source that God provided the Christian to rely upon in their pursuit of Christlikeness is fundamentally flawed beyond repair.[36] Thus, the Bible, namely its claims about the person and work of Jesus, is foundational to this action research project.

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[35] Stringer and Aragón, *Action Research*, 49 Kindle.

[36] Voddie T. Baucham, Jr., *The Ever-Loving Truth: Can Faith Thrive in a Post-Christian Culture?* Fully Revised and Updated (Washington, DC: Salem Books, 2023), 137.

Definitions

The literature surrounding pastoral counseling and spiritual immaturity could potentially confound the uninformed average reader. For the previously stated reason and the sake of clarity, this document will define some terms and phrases that will be utilized in a repetitive fashion at various points within this document.

Bible-Based Pastoral Counselor. In his book entitled *Strategic Pastoral Counseling,* David G. Benner conveyed the idea that pastoral counselors are pastors who engage in counseling while simultaneously having other pastoral care responsibilities.[37] Similarly, Charles Allen Kollar opined in his monologue entitled *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling*, that pastoral counselors are pastors in the local church who provide guidance to their parishioners primarily in the areas of Christian maturation and spiritual growth via the one-on-one counseling process.[38] Considering what both of the previously mentioned men remarked, a Bible-based pastoral counselor, then, is a pastor in the local church who counsels primarily in the areas of spiritual growth and spiritual maturity in addition to carrying out other pastoral care responsibilities.

Counseling. The term "pastoral counselor" in a church-based setting naturally conjures up ideas of someone in the counseling or helping ministry of the local church.[39] The "counseling" that pastoral counselors engage in can be defined in a myriad of ways. In this document, Bible-based pastoral counseling is defined as the spiritual advice and direction that is provided by one party and is received by another party who believes the provider of the

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[37] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 8.

[38] Charles Allen Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling: An Effective Short-Term Approach for Getting People Back on Track* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 7 Kindle.

[39] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 25.

information has the ability to assist them in their current context and circumstances.[40] To say the

previous statement differently, this researcher would define Bible-based pastoral counseling as

spiritual advice that is Christ-centered, Spirit-led, and Bible-saturated in content.

Forgiveness. Christians that are mature and growing are those who are willing and able to

forgive one another. The term forgiveness in this document should be understood as rightly

identifying trespasses committed against you as wrongs but absorbing the debt yourself and not

seeking revenge or vigilante justice of any kind.[41]

Spiritual formation, spiritual growth, and *spiritual maturity.* While certainly related and

interdependent in virtually every way and oftentimes used interchangeably, the terms spiritual

formation, spiritual growth, and spiritual maturity are not necessarily the same thing nor are they

easily defined. Neither spiritual formation, spiritual growth, nor spiritual maturity is wholly

reliant upon mere book knowledge, though knowledge of Scripture is of the utmost importance

and is a sign of burgeoning maturity (Ps 119:9). With regard to the previous point, spiritual

formation, spiritual growth, and spiritual maturity are inextricably contingent upon one's

connection with the Lord – more Christ, less individual.[42]

Bill Miller expressed that a believer's connection or relationship with the Lord, their

spiritual maturity, has oftentimes been tied to the hitch of the believer's taking part in an

assortment of spiritual disciplines and practices that supposedly assess a believer's maturity

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[40] Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 13.

[41] Timothy Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?* (New York, NY: Viking, 2022), 10.

[42] Tony Evans, *Kingdom Living: The Essentials of Spiritual Growth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2022), 15 Kindle.

while seemingly ignoring the believer's qualitative relationship with the Lord, namely the love of

God and the love of people made in the image of God.[43]

This action research project is unequivocal in its agreement with Miller's expressed

sentiments. Having acknowledged the previous fact, and despite Miller's wise and informed

assertion, the necessity of some form of metric in assessing a believer's spiritual maturity cannot

be overemphasized. Therefore, it parenthetically must be stated that a lackadaisical approach to

the spiritual disciplines is dangerous territory for a believer in Christ Jesus.[44] Consequently, in

this document, the term "spiritual maturity" is defined as the continuous process of engaging in

and enjoying various spiritual disciplines for the fundamental purpose of growing in

Christlikeness.[45] On the other hand, "spiritual growth" is defined as the transformational process

wrought by the Holy Spirit over the course of time by which a believer permits the indwelling

Christ to increasingly express Himself in a believer's heart and actions.[46] Lastly, "spiritual

formation" encompasses both spiritual growth and spiritual maturity. Spiritual formation is a

matter of the heart, an aspect of the hidden self and not merely actions.[47] Hence, spiritual

formation is defined as the orderly lifelong Spirit-driven process of being conformed to the

image of Christ.[48]

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[43] Bill Miller, "Love and Spiritual Formation," in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, ed. Paul Pettit (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2008), 166.

[44] Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life.* Revised and Updated (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 16.

[45] Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 10.

[46] Evans, *Kingdom Living*, 17 Kindle.

[47] Dallas Willard, *Renewing the Christian Mind: Essays, Interviews, and Talks*, ed. Gary Black Jr. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2016), 83 Kindle.

[48] This definition is a hybrid singular thought equally informed by Kenneth Boa and Dallas Willard. Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 547; Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 2-15.

Spiritual Warfare. It is the position of this action research project that all believers, whether they are aware or not, are in the throes of a spiritual battle that is fiercely being waged. (Eph 6:10-12). Satan is actively attempting to derail the universal church's global mission.[49] Spiritual warfare, then, is the theological term used to describe the multi-level conflict between good and evil, the spiritual battle between the Church and God's holy angels against Satan and his fallen angels.[50]

Unity. It is God's desire that His people are one with Him and one another. (John 17:21). Simply stated, people come to faith as individuals but they grow as a believers in community with God and with one another.[51] Consequently, in this action research project, unity is defined as believers living in the presence of God but together as a community.[52]

Limitations

This action research project was limited by several factors. Each of those limitations affected the research that was conducted. First and chief among all limitations was that of time or the lack thereof. Like many people, this researcher wears many hats. He is a Jesus follower, husband, father to a young child, son to an aging parent and grandparent, student, and bi-vocational pastor who is also employed with the Department of Defense in a civil service position. Free time is something that he simply does not have a great deal of and therefore must properly account for those time constraints.

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[49] William F. Cook III and Chuck Lawless, *Spiritual Warfare in the Storyline of Scripture: A Biblical, Theological, and Practical Approach* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), 198.

[50] Cook and Lawless, *Spiritual Warfare in the Storyline of Scripture*, 2.

[51] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 6.

[52] Kenneth Boa, *Life in the Presence of God: Practices for Living in Light of Eternity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2017), 215.

In addition to the researcher's personal time constraints, there was also the time consideration and constraints of the participants in the action research project. Life did not stop for the men and women who volunteered their time to the researcher's academic endeavors. Being cognizant of that reality, the researcher was necessarily mindful and respectful of the participants' time.

A second limitation that most certainly impacted the action research project was the lack of qualified help for the researcher. Finding members who will volunteer to lead any ministry, even traditional ministries, in the church is always seemingly a tall task. Recruiting a volunteer and training them on the basics of Bible-based pastoral counseling likely would have proven fruitless and only served as a point of frustration for the researcher. At this present time, there are no associate ministers in the church and none in training. Other than the researcher himself, the church has not had another ordained or even merely licensed minister on church staff since 2019 when the earlier mentioned associate minister resigned from their position. The lack of qualified help will affect the researcher being able to facilitate no more than twelve members if the participants are going to benefit from the full spectrum of the action research project.

The third and final limitation this document will expound on is the ministry context itself. The church's setting is a rural area. There are only so many members in the church and within the church's demographic. Then, there are only so many members that can handle the rigors of the program and of those members who can keep up with the requirements of the program. Finally, there are only so many members in the church who will open themselves up to the vulnerability that comes with the territory of participating in pastoral counseling. In light of the factors mentioned in the above paragraph, the ministry context itself was considered a limitation.

Delimitations

In general, virtually every research endeavor requires some sort of delimitation for numerous reasons. One of those reasons is that a researcher cannot address every problem. In fact, there are times when a researcher cannot even address every facet of a singular problem. With regards to the previous statement, the rationale behind these delimitations were to narrow the researcher's focus.[53] This section will expound on the three main delimitations for this DMIN action research project.

The first delimitation was that the action research project's participants were limited to those people who regularly attended worship services at Saint Mark, with "regular attendance" meaning that the participant attends worship services no less than twice per month on average. There are multiple churches of varying denominations within a two-mile radius of Saint Mark. The researcher therefore took the liberty to delimit participants in this action research project to members who regularly attended Saint Mark.

The second delimitation was that the participants would by and large remain confidential. The number of regular congregants at Saint Mark is relatively small in number. Truthfully speaking, it proved to be more challenging than initially expected to fully conceal participants in the action research project. Having acknowledged the previous challenges, the researcher did everything in his power to conceal the participants' identity and was especially certain not to share what happened in one-on-one counseling or small group sessions with the other members of the church who were non-participants in the action research project. As a result, names are not published in any document, pseudonyms were used when deemed appropriate.

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[53] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 20.

The third and final delimitation that was expounded upon in this document was that participants in the action research project were limited to no more than twelve members. Frankly, it is common knowledge that one-on-one counseling in any setting is time consuming. Moreover, it has been posited that depending on what the specific purposes and goals of a small group are, the size of the group should be one of the primary considerations in the finalizing process.[54] The anticipated design of the action research project necessitates that the researcher not only makes allowances for the unexpected but also allot time for unexpected and unforeseen matters that present themselves at any point, regardless of whether they arise during one-on-one counseling or group counseling sessions. Due in part to the researcher having to be cognizant and ready to respond to something that was not on the agenda and allow the participants to experience the full spectrum of the action research project, the action research project as a collective whole will be delimited to no more than twelve participants.

Thesis Statement

The world's turning is under the influence of satanic activity (1 John 5:19). This statement only begins to tell the problem. Satanic activity outside of church can be observed in homes, businesses, government, and a throng of other places. Inside the church, satanic activity can be observed in the swarm of pastors who have traded in the truth of God's word for doctrinal heresy.[55] Flatly speaking, the need for spiritual maturity and steady spiritual growth is at an all-time high in the local church. Problems of any kind in the local church must be addressed

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[54] Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Life-Changing Small Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 158.

[55] Robert Smith Jr., *Doctrine That Dances: Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 127.

quickly, strategically, and comprehensively. The need for qualified and faithful pastoral counselors armed with the necessary tools, tactics, and resources to come alongside godly individuals, couples, and families, cannot be dismissed.[56] Christ-centered, Spirit-led, biblically-saturated programs and ministries, such as the Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Program (SBPCP), can address a variety of problem areas in an abundance of ways, fostering spiritual growth in the church to the glory of God.

Finally, this DMIN action research project aims to achieve the feat of fully eradicating at least one problem at Saint Mark while prayerfully gleaning other vital pieces of information that may prove helpful in solving other problems in the future separate from this action research project. Solving the problem of spiritual immaturity at Saint Mark would foster the Word of God flourishing in the hearts of members while simultaneously promoting growth in the grace and knowledge of the things of Christ (2 Pet 3:18). Effective and efficient problem solving helps bring about healthy disciples which in turn breed healthy churches. Moreover, people come to faith as individuals but they grow as a believers in community with other believers, further highlighting the need to address the problem of spiritual immaturity.[57] Consequently, if certain members of Saint Mark faithfully participate in SBPCP, then they will become spiritually healthier Christians and cultivate a healthier local church.

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[56] Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling*, 9 Kindle.

[57] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 6.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTIONAL FRAMEWORK

To earn the DMIN degree, this researcher must make a contribution that is significant, unique, and relevant to the current body of knowledge. To this end, it is required that the researcher observes what has already been amassed, examined, and assessed in the current bevy of academic dialogue. At the completion of the DMIN degree program, the successful candidate would have demonstrated their expertise and functioning as a resident contextual theologian who is capable of conducting applied research while also practicing theology in the community and the marketplace.[58] As a further matter, the reader should be advised that the themes that emerged from the literature review process and the theological and theoretical foundations, are the basis of which SBPCP was conceptualized and developed for the purpose of building up healthy disciples that make up a healthy local church.

Literature Review

The literature review process is designed to familiarize the researcher with the most current literature in their field, observe and study both the relevant themes that appear, and make the determination if there are any gaps that exist in the contemporary collection of theological and ministry studies pertaining to their problem and topic. Additionally, the literature review process serves as the pillar of a peer review program's function as a quality control component.[59] While reviewing and assessing the current collection of academic work associated with spiritual

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[58] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, xix.

[59] Ibid, 22.

formation, the following themes emerged in the literature and played an essential role in the research process. In addition to the previously mentioned factors, the literature review also highlights how the researcher strategically went about ministering to people under his care by taking various elements of basic Christian spiritual formation and presenting them in a biblical yet unique way.

<center>Pastoral Counseling</center>

The pastoral counseling movement, which sometimes is referenced as "biblical counseling movement," that thrives in the local church today can be traced back to Jay Adams and his 1970 book entitled *Competent to Counsel.*[60] In this pioneering work, Adams contended that a core tenet of "nouthetic counseling," as referenced by Adams, was ensuring that the counselee learned how to address or solve their own problem using the God-breathed words of Scripture.[61] On this particular matter, this researcher agrees with Adams, specifically, that counselees should learn how to effectively use the Word of God to address their own problem.

In the more than five decades that have passed since Adams wrote his groundbreaking monologue, various counseling ministries with their various labels have sprung up in the traditional local church and parachurch contexts. On the surface, different labels such as nouthetic counselor, pastoral counselor, biblical counselor, Christian counselor, and other variations appear the be the same ministry or vocation. While there are indeed many similarities between these respective counseling ministries, the difference in nomenclature oftentimes denotes subtleties that exist among the various counseling ministries. With regard to the previous

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[60] Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 27.

[61] Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling*, The Jay Adams Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 194 Kindle.

statement, the differences among the various counseling ministry nomenclatures speak to different techniques used in those respective counseling ministry spaces and are intended to produce different outcomes.[62]

The aforementioned distinctions amongst the various counseling ministries are noteworthy for their respective nuances. However, for the purposes of this action research project, the counseling ministries referenced in this document are largely employed in an interchangeable fashion and are generally referred to as "pastoral counseling."

<center>Explicit Identification with the One True God</center>

It could be easily argued that many adherents to Christianity spend an excessive amount of time infighting, having a nonsensical preoccupation with tearing down other Jesus followers concerning secondary matters that have no real consequences to the truth of the gospel. Then, there are other matters, "first-order doctrines," that are central to the truth of the gospel and an absolute must to be believed if one is to identify as a Christian.[63] Simply put, a person's spiritual identity matters. God's triune nature is a first-order doctrine and it informs the behavior of the serious Christian.[64]

A properly informed and thoroughly explicit identification with the one true God, namely, the person and work of God the Son, God incarnate, is a matter of first importance. The Lord Jesus's sacrificial death and finished work on the cross for sins is extremely critical to not only one's salvation but how one should conduct themselves and esteem others. Identification

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[62] Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 11-34.

[63] Adam Harwood, *Christian Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Systematic* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 23.

[64] Ibid, 156.

with the Lord Jesus Christ, His life, death, burial, resurrection, and glorious ascension means that the old life that the believer once lived has been exchanged for the new life in Christ.[65] Moreover, the full measure of the believers (and non-believers) creation in the image of the living God is not realized in the life of Adam who sinned. Rather, the New Testament accentuates God's eternal purpose in creating humans in His image was fully realized in the person of Jesus.[66]

Peter Scazzero observed that an emotionally healthy disciple cannot truly be Christ-centered if they are not also cross-centered; that is, one cannot claim they want to follow Jesus and not embrace His cross.[67] Scazzero is not alone concerning the previously expressed sentiments. In another place, what Scazzero labeled as an emotionally healthy disciple, Kenneth Boa referenced the same phenomenon as the "exchanged life". The exchanged life places emphasis on the reality of the new identity that Christians acquire as a direct result of the in-Christ relationship, which may result in a dramatic, yet gradual change for some people.[68] Finally, Rebecca McLaughlin expertly asserted that "If Jesus is the bread of life, loss of Jesus means starving. . . . If Jesus is the resurrection and the life, loss of Jesus is eternal death."[69]

How does an explicit identification with the one true God correlate to unity? Christena Cleveland posited that while the act of embracing a common identity with others may prove

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[65] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 92.

[66] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 570.

[67] Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship: Moving from Shallow Christianity to Deep Transformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 20210, 62.

[68] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 92.

[69] Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 218-219.

especially difficult, it is a foundational piece of true unity.[70] The issue of identity with the one true God is of tremendous importance. Losing one's identity through Christian discipleship means finding eternal life with Christ.[71] It is of critical importance that the believer in Christ knows who they are and who they belong to, as forgetting one's core identity as a beloved child of God has proven to be a constant problem in Christian discipleship.[72] At the very heart of being a Christian means that the believer has a powerful identity in the Lord Jesus Christ.[73] The organic connection of Christians with Christ as their head, the church representing the metaphorical body of the Lord Jesus, is foundational to believers being new creatures and having a new identity in the one called Christ.[74]

To state the above paragraph differently, conformity to the image of Christ begins with a person's explicit identification with the crucified and risen Jesus. One identifies with the crucified and risen Jesus by living their life solely for Him (Rom 6:4; 2 Cor 5:17; cf. Gal 2:20). The closer that each believer comes to the heartbeat of God by living for Him, the more the believer will recognize their need for God and experience the desire to be conformed to the image of Christ.[75] When one is conformed to the image of Christ, they become in union with

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[70] Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 189 Kindle.

[71] Thabiti Anyabwile, *Reviving the Black Church: A Call to Reclaim a Sacred Institution* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 79.

[72] Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, 113 Kindle.

[73] Thom S. Rainer, *I Am a Christian: Discovering What It Means to Follow Jesus Together with Fellow Believers (*Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2022), 2 Kindle.

[74] Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education (*Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 52 Kindle.

[75] Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Special Anniversary Edition (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), 33 Kindle.

Him having surrendered and died to themselves by faith.[76] It should be noted that living for God does not happen apart from the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9-10). Simply stated, what someone believes about the person and work of Jesus matters immensely and therefore is rightly emphasized.

In summary, the intended outcome for anything and everything related to discipleship is conformity to the image of Christ.[77] The intended outcome is achieved in Bible-based pastoral counseling, namely SBPCP, is consistent with the primary goal of coming alongside the counselee in the co-facilitation of their spiritual growth, aiding them in becoming a healthy disciple thriving in a healthy church. Consequently, all matters related to spiritual formation, growth, maturity, and Christian unity start with a person's explicit identification with the one true God. Refer to Appendix L to gain a further understanding on the researcher's thoughts about the importance of the believer's explicit identification with the one true God.

Spiritual Formation, Growth, and Maturity

The term "older Christians" does not necessarily convey mature Christians.[78] Just like a healthy infant requires nurturing, a healthy or spiritually mature believer still needs to grow and be nurtured in Christlikeness. The process of growing in Christlikeness is one that takes place over the course of an entire lifetime.[79] It is likely that even the most feeble and immature believer would agree with the previous statement concerning one's need to continue to progress or be

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[76] P. Adam McClendon, *Paul's Spirituality in Galatians: A Critique of Contemporary Christian Spiritualities* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 26.

[77] Robby Gallaty, *Rediscovering Discipleship: Making Jesus' Final Words Our First Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 163.

[78] Jonathan Hayashi, *Ordinary Radicals: A Return to Christ-Centered Discipleship*. Second Edition (Houston, TX: Lucid Books, 2023), 22.

[79] Evans, *Kingdom Living*, 162 Kindle.

formed in Christlikeness. The question is, what characterizes spiritual formation? What does the process of spiritual growth entail? How does one embark on the path towards spiritual maturity? What total number of paths exist to spiritual wholeness? Is there even a such thing as spiritual wholeness? This DMIN action research project answered a few of those lingering questions.

What is the proper definition of spiritual formation? The research indicates that scholars somewhat vary on a proper definition of spiritual formation. Kenneth Boa defined spiritual formation as "the lifelong, grace-driven developmental process in which the soul grows in conformity to the image of Christ."[80] Dallas Willard defined spiritual formation as "the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ Himself."[81]

On the other hand, James Wilhoit defines spiritual formation as "the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit."[82] While Boa and Wilhoit employ different terminology on the matter of spiritual formation, both scholars agreed that spiritual formation involved being conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. Wilhoit differs from Boa in that Wilhoit emphasizes that spiritual formation is a communal process, that is, something that happens in community with other believers. This is not to suggest that Boa sees spiritual formation as an independent quest of sorts, in fact, quite the contrary.

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[80] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 547.

[81] Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 15.

[82] James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community*. Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 13 Kindle. It should be noted that rather than using the simple term spiritual formation, Wilhoit employs the term Christian Spiritual Formation (CSF) throughout his monologue.

Boa acknowledged that believers come into the Christian faith as individuals but grow as a Christian within a community of fellow believers.[83] Hence, Boa agreed with Wilhoit that spiritual formation has a communal aspect, the difference is that Boa does not highlight the community's role in the definition itself of spiritual formation. Joseph Hellerman, like Wilhoit, made a clear reference to the local church having a crucial role in spiritual formation in his personal definition, opining that community is a salient aspect of faith development.[84] Boa, unlike Wilhoit or Hellerman, emphasized in his personal definition of spiritual formation, that it is a grace-driven process and it is developmental in nature.[85] Only the Holy Spirit is able to accomplish an enduring transformation of a person's character.[86] Any ministry related to spiritual health, to include SBPCP, is reliant upon the Spirit's leading and divine intervention.

In closing, though they may have stated it differently, scholars and experts generally agree that spiritual formation is a process that begins the very moment a person is born again and is a continuous, lifelong process that does not cease until the person's death. Scholars and experts also agreed that spiritual formation is intended to aid the believer in their spiritual growth and maturation process, conforming them over time to the person of Jesus. The Christian never earns a "certificate of completion" when it comes to the gradual process of conforming to the person of Christ. This researcher agrees that spiritual formation begins the moment a believer places their faith in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Moreover, this researcher also agrees with the general consensus discussed herein pertaining to the topics of spiritual formation,

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[83] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 440.

[84] Hellerman, *Why We Need the Church to Become More Like Jesus*, 1 Kindle.

[85] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 547.

[86] Greg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit.* Theology for the People of God (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2020), 111.

growth, and maturity. To gain a greater understanding on specifically how these concepts should

be understood and how they were utilized in the researcher's ministry context, refer to the

definitions section located in the first chapter of this document.

Loving God

To love God completely involves the entire personality, that is, the intellect, emotion, and

will of a person. To love God completely also means that He is not a priority among many

priorities but rather that He is the priority.[87] The better that a person knows God, the more that

person will love Him, and the more that a person loves God, the greater will be a person's

readiness to trust and obey God in all that He calls them to do.[88] It should be evident that those

whom the Lord God has spiritually made alive to Him, also have the Spirit of God kindling the

flames of a person's love for Him on a consistent and daily basis.[89] Loving God is about a

relationship with God, not an immaterial or theoretical concept of God. Kenneth Boa

commented:

> The occupational hazard of theologians is to become so engrossed in the development of
> systematic models of understanding that God becomes an abstract intellectual formation
> they discuss and write about instead of a living person they love on bended knees. In the
> deepest sense, Christianity is not a religion but a relationship that is born out of the
> trinitarian love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[90]

Boa's comments above, contextually speaking, are a prognosis or forecast of what can befall

even the most well-intended theologian. Specifically, for the theologian and the pastor-

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[87] Boa, *Life in the Presence of God*, 21.

[88] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 15.

[89] Donald S. Whitney, *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*. Revised and Updated (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2021), 100 Kindle.

[90] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 16.

practitioner, there is a real danger of God becoming a "thing" to know about rather than a "person" to be loved. This pitfall can easily beset the most devout pastors, preachers, and rank and file members in the local church. Hence, loving God is inextricably linked to healthy disciples who make up healthy churches and ministries.

The believer's journey of a healthy and loving relationship with God chronologically begins with salvation but should result in the believer falling deeply in love with God over time as they get to know Him better.[91] A disciple's belief in the Lord Jesus should organically lead them to an understanding of God as a loving Father and that the only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus, has taught and manifested the truth about God to believers in Him. The believer's response to God's love is to respond accordingly with an open heart of love and obedience to Him.[92] The regular contemplation and daily recollection of the gospel's saving power crystallize the fact that Jesus invites all people to love and obey God.[93]

It should be noted that only those whom the Holy Spirit has embodied and made spiritually alive have the capacity to love God; consequently, the believer should love God because He first loved them (cf. 1 John 4:13, 19). A person's genuine love for God is proved by their faith and obedience to God, the same God that saved them from sin and death.[94] The previously mentioned detail necessitates that Jesus must be the first priority in a believer's life.[95]

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[91] Gary W. Moon, *Falling for God: Saying Yes to His Extravagant Proposal* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2004), 8 Kindle.

[92] Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*, 133.

[93] Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, 160 Kindle.

[94] Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 182.

[95] Gallaty, *Rediscovering Discipleship*, 172.

The believer imitates God's love by loving Him in return.[96] Furthermore, the believer's life should be marked by a gradual yet discernible movement from merely serving God to also loving God and enjoying the fellowship that comes with willingly giving their life to Him.[97] There is nothing or no one who is more satisfying or deserving of love than the Almighty God.[98] It is this researcher's belief that loving God is a choice (cf. 1 John 5:3). Consequently, this researcher intentionally set out to stir up love for God in the participants while carrying out this action research project.

Loving Others

A spiritually healthy Christian disciple makes the most of every opportunity by endeavoring to share the love of Christ, in word and deed, even with those who are outside of the faith.[99] Unfortunately, too often is the case that the local church is where people associate being beaten up the most about their sins rather than being loved by the Lord Jesus.[100] In stark contrast with the previous statement, when those who are in the church strive for true unity and fellowship with other Christians, they are becoming like Christ and consequently demonstrating the love of Jesus.[101]

Christian unity is intuitively connected to promoting love and goodwill amongst believers.[102] The Lord Jesus repeatedly focused on the inextricability of loving God and loving

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[96] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 238.

[97] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship*, 34.

[98] John Piper, *Providence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 209-210.

[99] Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*, 146.

[100] Hayashi, *Ordinary Radicals*, 52.

[101] Rainer, *I Am a Christian*, 46 Kindle.

[102] Dixon and Rogers, "Discipleship", *Southeastern Theological Review*, 60.

others.[103] The term "love" in the context of fellow humans should be understood as the self-giving benefit to others.[104] Loving others is a key component of being a disciple of the Lord Jesus.[105] Love is most perfectly fulfilled when believers bear the hurts and sufferings of fellow believers, weeping with those who weep, and traversing the inevitable valleys in life.[106] The Christian disciple that is growing in love will demonstrate it, as one of the clearest indicators that a person has the Spirit of God is the apparent love they have for fellow Christians.[107] The closer a Christian walks with God, the more empowered they are to manifest their love for God through acts of love and service to others.[108]

In summary, the foremost distinguishing mark of a Christ-follower is their display of love to fellow human beings (John 13:35). There is not a single act in the entire universe that starts with loving God that does not end with loving others.[109] While Christians cannot attain the perfect love of Christ in their fallen state, Christians can and should most certainly learn to love increasingly through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.[110] This researcher beliefs are consistent with the statements mentioned above concerning loving others. Simply put, if a person does not love other human beings, all of whom are made in the image of God, then one cannot possibly love the invisible God whom they have not knowingly seen.

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[103] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Disciples*, 7.

[104] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 237.

[105] Dever, *Discipling*,40.

[106] Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 139 Kindle.

[107] Whitney, *Ten Questions*, 44 Kindle.

[108] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 30.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Rainer, *I Am a Christian*, 45 Kindle.

Community, Fellowship, and Oneness in the Body of Christ

The recognition and recorded literature on the need for the gathering and fellowship of the saints is extensive. Early Christian communities gathered together for the purpose of worship. First, the saints gathered in the physical sense, that is, they fellowshipped as an actual group. Secondly, the saints came together in a unity of spirit that supernaturally transcended their individualism.[111]

Mark Dever posited there is no such thing as a Christian who does not need another Christian.[112] Consistent with that same train of thought, Stephen Macchia opined that for an individual believer's Christian community experience to be the very best possible experience, the believer will need to approach God's glorious throne of grace with a true and earnest desire to assist others in their growth in maturity as they themselves open themselves up to input from others. When the believer enters into a covenantal relationship, the believer tacitly makes an unusual commitment to the body.[113] Fellowship amongst the saints takes the connection and interactions that are experienced in the body with one another and makes those experiences the very instrument for the spiritual contagion of holiness. The more frequent the interaction with fellow brothers and sisters within the body of Christ, the more opportunities that will organically present themselves to positively impact one another within the fellowship of the local church.[114]

The concept of community in the local church is apropos to healthy church life and ministry and a key component of basic Christian spiritual maturity. God specifically designed the Christian to be spiritually-born, protected, and raised within the context of the local church.

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[111] Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 163 Kindle.

[112] Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 48.

[113] Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*, 95.

[114] Lowe and Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age*, 200 Kindle.

Similar to the idea that no sane person expects a baby to grow and develop on its own, God never intended the Christian to grow and develop alone in spiritual isolation.[115] The life of a Christian is certainly a journey of personal spiritual growth, but by no means is it a personal journey that a Christian takes alone. Rather, the journey that the Christian takes is one traveled in the company of fellow believers. Consequently, growing in the Lord Jesus Christ is synonymous with growing in one's commitment and faithfulness as a local church member.[116]

In summary, fellowship with the redeemed people of God is not a trifle of sorts that can be pushed to the very margins of Christian life. Rather, fellowship with the redeemed people of God is something that should be a central focus and strived for with a focused intentionality.[117] A Christian who is not committed to a local church is akin to sheep without a flock or a child without a family.[118] Accordingly, the importance of fellowship amongst the saints is one truth that cannot be overstated. Christian unity and fellowship were mentioned in the problem, purpose, and thesis statement of this document. This DMIN action research project placed a heavy emphasis on these themes. The failure or refusal to make every effort to strengthen the bonds of fellowship in the local church is not only inconsistent with the idea of healthy disciples making up healthy churches but is also willful disobedience towards God's will, namely, God's design for His church.

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[115] Evans, *Kingdom Living*, 151 Kindle.

[116] Rainer, *I Am a Christian*, 29 Kindle.

[117] Anyabwile, *Reviving the Black Church*, 188.

[118] Tony Evans, *The Centrality of the Church: Practicing the Ways of God with the People of God* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2020), 85 Kindle.

Forgiveness

Bill Henard posited that unforgiveness in the local church is by and large the foremost internal conflict most often ignored in the body of Christ.[119] Extending forgiveness to others and receiving forgiveness from others can reestablish a believer's lived sense of their own personal standing as forgiven before the Lord.[120]

Church members have the divine responsibility of enduring one another's failures and faults, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven them.[121] If a believer is going to grow as a disciple of the Lord Jesus, they must forgive people. It is necessitated that the forgiveness a believer extends most certainly includes their fellow church member.[122] Gary Moon observed that during His earthly public ministry, the Lord Jesus felt so strongly about His followers forgiving one another that He commanded that even if you are in the process of giving an offering to the church and you remember at that time that someone has something against you, forget about the offering for the moment and go reconcile with that person, then come back and present your offering (Matt 5:22-24).[123] While one could argue that Moon's previously cited observation involved personal relationships and reconciliation more so than forgiveness, those arguments would likely fall on deaf ears as it is common knowledge that if reconciliation is going to happen, almost invariably forgiveness would have to proceed reconciliation.

When a Christian forgives a fellow Christian, it alleviates unnecessary burdens and allows the other person to not only re-enter a right relationship with them but also allows them to

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[119] Bill Henard, *Can These Bones Live? A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization*. Revised Edition (Athens, TN: ReClaimed Church Publishing, 2021), 165.

[120] Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, 73 Kindle.

[121] Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 437.

[122] Rainer, *I Am a Christian*, 53 Kindle.

[123] Moon, *Falling for God*, 155 Kindle.

re-enter into a right relationship with other believers.[124] This forgiveness benefits the local

church and positively impacts the Christian's witness for the truth of Jesus. Furthermore, having

been forgiven by the grace of God on the basis of the Lord Jesus's finished work on the cross,

believers are exhorted to manifest that same forgiveness in their relationships with others.[125]

In summary, the willingness and ability of a believer to forgive others is paramount to

their spiritual growth. The followers of the Lord Jesus have been given the authority to receive

the confession of sin and forgive sin in His name, to willingly withhold such a precious gift from

others would be unbecoming of a Christian who stands forgiven before Christ.[126] It is this

researcher's experience that forgiveness in the local church can do wonders to relieve "church

hurt" and strengthen the bonds of fellowship within the local church not easily replicated by

other actions. It is also this researcher's experience that forgiveness, whether it is others or

themselves, is one of the most difficult things for a person to do. SBPCP lovingly challenged

participants to seek, find, and forgive at least one person that they had been withholding

forgiveness. This researcher agrees with the late Tim Keller, that is, forgiveness while hard is

necessary if you are concerned with not becoming someone or something terrible you never

intended to be.[127]

Theological Foundations

The theological foundations are designed to convey that the DMIN action research

project itself is rooted in the timeless truth of God's holy and most precious Word and is further

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[124] Lowe and Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age*, 126 Kindle.

[125] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 37.

[126] Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 146 Kindle.

[127] Keller, *Forgive*, 164.

supported by centuries of reliable commentary. Genuine Christians are convinced that the Bible

is not only inspired but also authoritative in all matters concerning faith and life.[128] This section

of the document will lay the biblical groundwork for the methodology that was employed in

addressing the problem explicated in the opening chapter of this document. The theological

foundations to follow include but are not limited to the biblical case or basis for pastoral

counseling, small groups, and unity.

<center>Biblical Case for Pastoral Counseling</center>

The biblical case for pastoral counseling is quite extensive. Pastoral counseling is not

only pragmatic in tackling spiritual problems but also firmly established in biblical principles.

Moreover, the Lord's church uniquely called to care for persons in need.[129] The biblical nature of

pastoral counseling and its use in addressing spiritual problems is evident in the first recorded

book that Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, as the Corinthians had no shortage of

spiritual problems and was thoroughly entrenched in the throes of immorality.[130]

In 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, the careful reader will observe that the Corinthians are divided

amongst one another. The reason for the disunity is not explicitly stated though clues from the

passage indicate that the division is so steep that the bonds of fellowship were broken and some

of the Corinthians were professing their trust and allegiance to mere human ministry leaders (1

Cor 1:12-13). Here, Warren Wiersbe commented that division amongst the people of God has

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[128] Dennis Edwards, *What is the Bible and How Do We Understand It?* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2019), 11.

[129] Felicity Brock Kelcourse, "Pastoral Counseling in the Life of the Church." *Encounter* 63, no. 1 (2002): 137.

[130] Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, Vol. 28, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 19.

always been a problem, even noting that at times the twelve apostles did not get along with one another.[131] Mark Taylor comments on the matter provide a more forthright diagnosis of the problem at hand. Taylor candidly remarked that the Corinthians boasting in men was completely antithetical to the essence of the gospel.[132] Taylor went on to say that the root problem plaguing the Corinthians was a problem of pride – the worst of sins for anyone who identifies with the crucified Christ.[133] The renowned apostle could have taken this occasion to scold the Corinthians for their lack of spiritual maturity. Instead, the discourse closes with Paul lovingly, pastorally, but forthrightly, admonishing the Corinthians. Paul reminded the Corinthians that their allegiance should be to the Lord Jesus who died on the cross for them, not himself or any other ministry leader, all of whom are mere human beings. The problem presented in this action research project is that spiritual immaturity resulting in disunity, just as described above in the case of the Corinthians. Paul, rather than scolding these immature believers, appealed to fellowship by pointing the Corinthians to Jesus Christ, the only One to Whom belonged the preeminence.[134] Concerning Paul's appeal to fellowship, Tony Evans astutely observed that Paul was not pushing uniformity on the Corinthians but rather oneness in purpose, an emulation, albeit imperfect, of God's oneness in His Trinitarian nature.[135] It is important to note that Paul's concern is not only theological in nature, but it is also pastoral.[136] Immature Christians who argue excessively and do not get along with one another, as seen with the Corinthians, can

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[131] Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament*. Vol. I (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 569.

[132] Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 57.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Vol. I, 569.

[135] Tony Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 1149.

[136] Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, 23.

benefit greatly from the efforts of a faithful pastoral counselor.[137] The balanced tone that Paul

struck with the Corinthians is the vein in which this DMIN action research project addressed the

problem discussed in the opening chapter of this document. Ministry leaders within the church

are fallen just like the people they serve. Rather than emulating the fallen one should look to the

person and work of the Lord Jesus. This researcher intentionally designed the action research

project in such a way that it would incentivize the participants to seek the Scripture and behold

the Savior.

With regard to the biblical case for pastoral counseling, in John 21:15-17, the Lord Jesus

can be observed providing some much-needed guidance and encouragement to a heartbroken

Peter, who is fresh off failing the Lord Jesus when it counted the most, denying three times even

knowing the Lord Jesus, let alone being a Christ-follower (cf. Matt 26:69-75). In a scene replay

of sorts, Peter, while standing by a fire, publicly denied knowing the Lord; likewise, by a fire, the

resurrected Lord Jesus publicly restored Peter.[138] The Lord Jesus restored Peter by telling him

three times to "Tend His sheep".[139] Concerning the previous statement, it should not be lost on

the reader that as a follower of Jesus, Peter is actually one of the very sheep that he himself was

charged with caring for.[140] Moreover, it is likely that Peter, who would grow to become older

and wiser, never forgot that he was personally sought out and instructed by his Lord to tend His

sheep (cf. 1 Pet 5:1-3). By taking just a few minutes to sit and spend time with Peter, the Risen

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[137] Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling*, 27-28.

[138] Edwin A. Blum, "John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1983), 345.

[139] Matt Carter and Josh Wredberg, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in John* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 390.

[140] Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 313.

Lord not only comforted Peter, but essentially restored him to fellowship, ministry, and eventually leadership.[141] Peter received a personal lesson on the powerful effects of grace and could now minister to a another person in need in the future in the very same way.[142] Similarly, the faithful pastoral counselor ministers to a person's needs fostering spiritual fruit and grace, the pastoral counselor knowing and constantly reminding himself that he too is a beneficiary of God's grace.[143] This DMIN action research project aimed to witness to the grace of God that comes from being in a right relationship with Him. By the witnessing the grace of God, the action research project strategically nurtured and promoted healthier disciples that contribute to the whole of a healthier local church.

Finally, in his third epistle, Apostle John identified himself as an "elder" in a letter addressed to a man named "Gaius" (3 John 1). John's third epistle is a personal letter that not only involves Gaius but also a man named Diotrephes and mentions another man named "Demetrius." The letter contains a wish or prayer for Gaius's well-being, a commendation for the work he had been doing, and personal counsel exhorting Gaius to good behavior.[144] John seemingly always had three primary concerns, those being unity, truth, and love.[145] Staying the course with the previously mentioned concerns, John condemns Diotrephes's attitude and behavior, specifically Diotrephes's refusal of missionaries sent from John. Here, Daniel Akin posited that Diotrephes's attitude and actions amounted to a "spiritual crisis."[146] Demetrius, on

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[141] Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 391.

[142] Carter and Wredberg, *Christ-Centered Exposition: John*, 392.

[143] Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling*, 61 Kindle.

[144] Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, Vol. 38, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 237-238.

[145] Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary*, 1369.

[146] Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 245.

the other hand, is referenced in a positive light in this brief epistle (3 John 12). Everything being considered, John's letter was necessarily written to Gaius, to encourage him, to ensure his well-being, and the continuation of walking in truth, an essential benchmark of spiritual maturity.[147] Like John, this researcher strived to display godly concern for those who were under his care during the action research project while simultaneously teaching others within the church how to care for one another.

The biblical case for Christ-centered, Spirit-led, and biblically-saturated pastoral counseling is undeniable and should be valued for its spiritually-formative qualities. All of the previous information advised the researcher in addressing the problem in his ministry context. As stated earlier, pastoral counseling is not only pragmatic in tackling spiritual problems but also firmly rooted in biblical truth and principles. Consequently, the Scriptures fully substantiate that the faithful pastoral counselor can and should encourage the Christian who is in despair over their moral and spiritual failings. The researcher designed this action research project with a laser-focus on embodying the previous elements, namely, godly concern for others, specifically the redeemed people of God at Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church.

<center>Biblical Case for Small Group Ministry</center>

The biblical case for a small group ministry is quite substantial. The first small group on Earth was created and ordained by the Lord Himself, that small group being the first humans recorded in Scripture to walk the Earth, Adam and Eve. In the Old Testament, specifically in Genesis 2:18-25, God having already created Adam (Gen 2:7), declared that it was not good for the man that He had recently created, to be alone (Gen 2:18). It is appropriate to note here that

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[147] Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary*, 1386.

God knows all things and therefore foresaw that it was not good for Adam to be alone, God simply tarried before meeting this need and in so doing further demonstrated His creative power to Adam.[148] The careful reader should observe that Adam and Eve are living in harmony with one another and with the Lord God.[149] With the creation of Eve, it could be argued that two small groups were instantly formed, that being (1) Adam and Eve, and (2) God, Adam, and Eve.

Though Adam and Eve were the first created humans and therefore an intricate part of the first small groups on Earth (Gen 1:26-27), there is a small group that existed long before Adam and Eve. The first small group ever, of sorts, is the one that has existed eternally, that being the triune Godhead.[150] It is the position of this action research project, that the doctrine of the Trinity, the perfect oneness of God, gives credence to small groups being a ministry paradigm within the church which has proven effective in bolstering healthy disciples and overall good church health.

The doctrine of the Trinity, God in three persons yet one in essence, is unique to the Christian faith.[151] While the Trinity is not explicitly taught in any singular passage of Scripture, the plurality of God is strongly implied by multiple passages throughout the Bible in both the

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[148] Multiple Faculty Contributors, "Genesis," in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, eds. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 42. It should be noted that in the source the author's name appears exactly as: Multiple Faculty Contributors.

[149] Tremper Longman III, *Genesis,* The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 38.

[150] Bill Donahue*, Leading Life-Changing Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 17.

[151] Harwood, *Christian Theology*, 135.

Old and New Testaments.[152] Wayne Grudem posited that the Trinity is partially revealed in the

Old Testament with more robust information supplied in the New Testament.[153]

Multiple Old Testament passages of Scripture hint at God's triune nature. In Genesis

1:26, God can be observed referring to Himself as a divine plurality.[154] In Genesis 11:1-9, at the

Tower of Babel incident, the Bible recorded God once again referring to Himself in a divinely

plural form (Gen 11:7).[155] In Deuteronomy 6:4, yet again, God (LORD/Yahweh) implored a

unified view of Himself.[156] Eugene Merrill remarked that Moses's declaration of God's unique

oneness demanded that the Israelites view God specifically as He revealed Himself, a signifying

of their obedience.[157] What is more in the Old Testament is that there are passages that seem to

refer to one person as "God" or "Lord" while simultaneously in the same passage distinguishing

another person who is also identified as God.[158] A perfect example of the previous statement is

recorded in the Psalms, "Your throne, God, is forever and ever; The scepter of Your kingdom is

a scepter of justice. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; Therefore God, Your

God, has anointed You With the oil of joy above Your companions" (Ps 45:6-7, New American

Standard Bible). Here, Wayne Grudem commented that the subject passage of Scripture far

surpass anything that could be said of an ordinary earthly king, specifically referencing the king

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[152] Harwood, *Christian Theology*, 136.

[153] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 272.

[154] Harwood, *Christian Theology*, 140.

[155] Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, Vol. 1A, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1996), 467.

[156] John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 177.

[157] Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, Vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1994), 163.

[158] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 270.

as "God" and whose throne will last "forever and ever." Even still, the psalm writer says "God, your God, has anointed You," hence two distinct persons but both very clearly identified as God.[159]

In the New Testament, at the baptism of the Lord Jesus (Matt 3:13-17), God the Father and God the Holy Spirit can be observed separately and distinctly from God the Son. Not only does this passage present a clear and obvious distinction between all three persons of the Godhead, but all three persons have a role in the baptism of the Lord Jesus.[160] For all the passages of Scripture that allude to God's divine plurality, it is this passage that this researcher believes speaks most clearly to His triune nature.

Another element that speaks to the triunity of God that is exclusive to the New Testament is Jesus's self-witness to His own God-nature. In John 8:31-59, there is a discourse between the Lord Jesus and the supposed believing Jews concerning truth's ability to free a person from the slave of sin (John 8:31-36). A short time prior to this discourse, during the Festival of Shelters, the Lord Jesus overtly taught and identified Himself as the Messiah who came from God (John 7:28-29).[161] The events recorded in John 8:31-59 come to a climax when the Lord Jesus, who was already on thin ice with the Jews due to His Messianic assertion during the Festival of Shelters, not only claims to be greater than Abraham but doubles down on that claim by declaring Himself equal to God (John 8:58). The Jews understood exactly what Jesus was saying to them and they responded by unsuccessfully attempting to stone Him to death. Moreover, just before the Lord Jesus's crucifixion, while being questioned by His accusers He was asked "Are

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[159] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 270-271.

[160] David Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 56.

[161] Carter and Wredberg, *Christ-Centered Exposition: John*, 194.

you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" The Lord Jesus replied "I am; and you shall see the

Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven." The high

priest then tore his clothes accusing the Lord of blasphemy (Mark 14:60-62). The previous

Markan passage, a hybrid of Daniel 7:13-14 and Psalm 110:1, was Jesus's way of not only

identifying Himself as Israel's long-predicted and promised Messiah but also wedding Himself

to the Almighty Lord God of the Old Testament.[162]

Concerning Jesus' self-witness, Stephen Wellum commented that the Lord Jesus was

fully aware that He came as the promised Messiah and did not see His role in redemptive history

as separate from everything that the triune God had been doing from creation, but as part of the

collective whole to accomplish the divine plan of God.[163] When the Lord Jesus convened His

earthly public ministry, many of His devout followers acknowledged Him as a Teacher and

Prophet of Israel's God. At the Lord's death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, those same

Jesus followers were convinced that He was indeed Israel's long-predicted and promised

Messiah.[164] The Trinitarian view of God, which is distinctly Christian, developed in part due to

Jesus's followers, namely the church, rightly affirming that Jesus was and is God incarnate.[165]

In summary, all of the previous is not intended to be a full treatment of the doctrine of the

Trinity, nor is it necessarily to convince the reader of the veracity of God's triune nature for mere

doctrine's sake. Rather, the hope is that the reader will understand that even though God has

eternally existed in perfect oneness, the three distinct persons in the Godhead have never

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[162] Daniel Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Mark* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 340.

[163] Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 148.

[164] Harwood, *Christian Theology*, 144.

[165] Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 27.

competed for glory. To say the previous statement differently, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live perfectly as one God with no single person clamoring for attention to the detriment of the other persons in the Godhead. The triune God not only enjoys relationship within the Godhead but He desires a relationship with human beings (Rev 21:3). Small groups should strive to function with the same relational quality demonstrated by the Godhead.[166] This researcher determined that one-on-one pastoral counseling, supplemented by a single strategically-engineered small group, was the best plan of attack at the time for the problem of spiritual immaturity in his ministry context.

Biblical Case for Unity

In the opening chapter of this document, it was revealed that the problem at hand in the researcher's ministry context was spiritually immature actions, evoking immature reactions that yield unhealthy relationships. The symptom that initially led the researcher to consider spiritual immaturity as a problem in his ministry context was a lack of unity in his local church. The Lord has spoken considerably in His Word on His desire for His redeemed people to be on one accord. Pastoral counseling is essential to building up healthy disciples who make up healthy churches, thereby cultivating a healthier more unified local church and glorifying God. The divine work of the Holy Spirit provides the help needed for unity to thrive in the local church.[167] This document will expound on various passages of Scripture from both the Old Testament and New Testament that deal with unity.

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[166] Donahue, *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*, 17.

[167] Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 437.

Unity in the Old Testament

In Numbers 12:1-16, Miriam and Aaron, Moses's older sister and brother and fellow

leaders amongst the Israelites, said ugly things about Moses because he married a Cushite

woman and apparently were envious or jealous of Moses's relationship with God. Albeit timely,

the concern of Moses's wife being of Cushite origin is really nothing more than a smokescreen

for Miriam and Aaron's challenge to Moses's authority.[168] Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are all told

to go to the tent of meeting. Upon their arrival, the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, He stood

at the entrance to the tent of meeting, and immediately summoned Miriam and Aaron (Num

12:4-5). Miriam, the leader of the rebellion, would suffer the brunt of the punishment, being

struck by leprosy turning her skin white as snow. A rather fitting punishment for the crime.[169]

Moses interceded on Miriam's behalf and the Lord graciously honored his request to heal

Miriam's leprosy. Miriam would be quarantined for seven days, but the Israelites did not leave

until Miriam was received back in the camp.[170] The previous is not intended to be a full

treatment of the passage but rather show the reader that the Israelites' disunity with one another,

especially amongst its leaders, dishonored God. The end result was Miriam's being struck with

leprosy, but until Miriam was received back in the camp and unity was re-established amongst

God's chosen people, the Israelites did not leave the camp. This example is one of many in the

Old Testament that emphasizes God's desire for unity amongst His people. While disunity in the

researcher's ministry context is merely a symptom of a larger problem, that being spiritual

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[168] R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, Vol. 3B, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2000), 206.

[169] Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary*, 184.

[170] Cole, *Numbers*, 208.

maturity, the researcher anticipated that unity would be positively affected in carrying out the action research project.

Unity in the New Testament

It has been suggested that it is much easier to talk about the importance of loving people, even those we do not know, than it is to get along with the people we see on an everyday basis.[171] The previous statement is debatable, nevertheless, if one is going to obey the invitation to participate in the kingdom of God here on Earth, then one must heed the call to unity.[172]

In Colossians 3:12-14, the Apostle Paul advised the Christians in Colossae, the chosen people of God, to put on new clothing indicative of a believer's new self in Christ. The new clothing begins with the embodiment of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.[173] Paul was also careful to encourage the Colossians to bear the weaknesses and errors of others and to forgive others just as the Lord Jesus Christ had forgiven them. Here, Wiersbe noted that God's forgiveness in Christ is complete and final.[174] The passage closed with the renowned apostle singling out the most important characteristic of the new self, the characteristic of love which Paul indicated was the attribute that bonded them together and fostered unity in and throughout the church.[175]

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[171] Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 456.

[172] Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 15 Kindle.

[173] Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Vol. 32, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1991), 299.

[174] Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament*, Vol. II (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1989), 138.

[175] Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 300.

Perhaps the greatest call to unity in all of Scripture is found in John 17:13-21 when the Lord Jesus is observed praying in the Garden of Gethsemane just a short time before His being arrested and eventual crucifixion. The Lord Jesus's prayer for His people to be united like Him and the Father speaks to the importance of unity and why it must be contended for in the local church.[176] This researcher, like the Lord Jesus, prayed sincerely for unity within his local church while carrying out the action research project.

In closing, illegitimate disunity disconnects believers from God and potentially renders them ineffective Christians.[177] "The gift of the Spirit to the church is unity, but the church must strive eagerly to maintain that unity."[178] Unity in the local church can be challenging at times, but in responding to those challenges does the church fully realize the meaning of true unity.[179] Consequently, the unifying of God's people is a worthwhile venture. This DMIN action research project aims to eradicate the problem of spiritual immaturity by building up spiritually healthier disciples in his ministry context. Prayerfully, if this action research project proves effective, the disunity in this local church will gradually dissolve over time.

Theoretical Foundations

Stringer and Aragón argue that locating a robust collection of foundational assumptions applicable to a specific social or cultural setting can present problems because human life is dynamic rather than static. With regard to the previous statement, Stringer and Aragón conclude

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[176] Carter and Wredberg, *Christ-Centered Exposition: John*, 344.

[177] Evans, *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary*, 1057.

[178] Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 436.

[179] Ion Bria, "Unity and Mission: From the perspective of the Local Church; an Orthodox View." *The Ecumenical Review* 39, no.3 (1987): 270.

that it may prove best to choose theories based on one's chosen field, industry, or the conditions subject to examination.[180] This researcher's field is strategic Christian ministry, that is, shaping and molding healthy disciples who make up healthy churches for the glory of God. The context for the DMIN action research project is a local church made up of primarily Black congregants located in rural southeastern Alabama.

Directly related to the sentiments expressed above and as indicated in the theological foundations, both one-on-one pastoral counseling and small groups have a place in strategic Christian ministry. While both paradigms will be implemented in accordance with the conditions present in the researcher's ministry context during the action research project, the one-on-one pastoral counseling is by and large the driving mechanism while the small group will merely supplement what took place during the one-on-one counseling sessions. The theoretical foundations that follow are those that have demonstrably proven effective in some form or fashion in the area of strategic Christian ministry within the confines of the local church. Furthermore, the theoretical foundations discussed hereinafter informed the intervention design and implementation phase of this DMIN action research project. The theoretical foundations that follow include but are not limited to the Holy Spirit's role in pastoral counseling, pastoral counseling and preaching, and the role of the local church in the pastoral counseling process.

<div align="center">Effective Pastoral Counseling Strategies</div>

Numerous factors impact the effectiveness of pastoral counseling. Since pastoral counselors operate in a myriad of contexts and operational settings, it should be of no surprise

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[180] Ernest T. Stringer and Alfredo Ortiz Aragón, *Action Research*. Fifth Edition (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2021), 44 Kindle.

then that the role of a pastoral counselor is multidimensional. A pastoral counselor functions can oftentimes look like that of a confidant, or an encourager, or a coach.[181] Specifically as it pertains to effectiveness, this multidimensional aspect of the pastoral counselor's role raises a pertinent question, that is, what is pastoral counseling? Perhaps an even more pertinent question is, what makes counseling "pastoral" in nature and form? Heath Lambert remarked that counseling itself is merely "a conversation that a counselee has with a person they believe to be a counselor."[182] What makes counseling pastoral in nature and form, according to David Benner, is that pastors counsel within the confines of the local church. Benner further contends that because pastors know and see counselees in a variety of situations, it oftentimes makes counseling more effective. Maurice Wagner expressed similar sentiments as Benner regarding effective pastoral counseling. Wagner remarked, "The pastor who fellowships with his people personally answers their questions, counsels them with their problems, becomes sensitive to their anxieties and knows their immaturities."[183] In other words, a pastor who counsels within the confines of the local church has insight that a secular professional counselor lacks with their counselees. Hence, the centrality of the counselee's spiritual growth and its facilitation by the pastoral counselor being the primary goal of pastoral counseling.[184]

In this document, counseling is defined as the spiritual advice and direction that is provided by one party and is received by another party who believes the provider of the

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[181] Elisabeth A. Nesbit Sbanotto, Heather Davediuk Gingrich, and Fred C. Gingrich, *Skills for Effective Counseling: A Faith-Based Integration* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 15.

[182] Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 15.

[183] Maurice Wagner, "Hazards to Effective Pastoral Counseling." *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 1, no.3 (1973): 35.

[184] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 24.

information has the ability to assist them in their current context and circumstances.[185] To state

the previous definition differently, pastoral counseling in the researcher's context should be

understood as spiritual advice that is Christ-centered, Spirit-led, and Bible-saturated in content.

From a methodological premise, it is wise to have an agenda, know or at least have an

idea of what questions you will ask and what homework you will assign, all while being open to

changes based upon the counselee's needs. Information gleaned during counseling sessions

should help the pastoral counselor determine when to continue with or deviate from the plan they

have in place. The better or more smooth a start to pastoral counseling, the greater the chances

that pastoral counseling will prove effective over the long haul.[186] In his ministry context, the

researcher had already identified the problem and communicated the means by which he was

addressing the problem. SBPCP being a voluntary program, the participants who volunteered to

take part in it, sought out counseling for a problem they recognized as a real issue or at a very

minimum, could be improved upon. In closing, it seems that effective pastoral counseling has a

great deal more to do with content and context rather than with structure and delivery format. To

say the previous statement differently, presuming the content and context are apropos, just

because it may not look like pastoral counseling, does not mean that it is not indeed pastoral

counseling. Moreover, two things can be true at the same time, specifically, a program can

function as a personal discipleship program and be Bible-based pastoral counseling.

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[185] This definition is the researcher's own definition but has been informed by other sources, adopted, and adjusted to fit the researcher's ministry context. See: Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 13-15.

[186] Randy Patten, "Lessons Learned Through Counseling Experience," in *Scripture and Counseling: God's Word for Life in a Broken World*, eds. Bob Kelleman and Jeff Forrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 382.

The Holy Spirit's Role in Pastoral Counseling

The person and work of the Holy Spirit is Christ-centered. The same Spirit that empowered the Lord Jesus during His earthly public ministry is the same Spirit who empowers the body of Christ, the church.[187] Quite fittingly, then, the Holy Spirit necessarily has a role in the pastoral counseling process.[188] Simply stated, pastoral counseling that lacks the Holy Spirit's guidance is destined for spiritual failure.

First, it must be stated that this document cannot by any means exhaust the role of the Holy Spirit in the pastoral counseling process. Having necessarily acknowledged the previous fact, one role of the Holy Spirit in the pastoral counseling process is to provide the resources necessary for transformation via the ordinary mechanisms of human personality.[189] When a pastoral counselor begins a relationship with a counselee, the Spirit of God is already present and active to some degree in the counselor and the counselee before the counselor and counselee even speak a word to one another.[190] The Holy Spirit's work is an act of grace. In pastoral counseling, the Spirit working through human agents, employs the ministry of the Word, the sacraments, prayer, and fellowship amongst the saints as a primary vehicle in bringing about the spiritual growth He desires.[191] The transformation of a counselee that may take place is a matter of the heart; that said, it is the Spirit of God who brings about that transformation.[192] Relating to this matter, Heath Lambert commented:

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[187] Harwood, *Christian Theology*, 511.

[188] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 25.

[189] Crabb, *Effective Biblical* Counseling, 102 Kindle.

[190] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 64.

[191] Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 21 Kindle.

[192] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 63.

> For counseling to be successful, the Holy Spirit must take the words of our biblical counsel and press them into the hearts of people…Counseling will never ultimately be effective without the work of the Spirit. Our role as counselors is important. We are to nurture a set of effective skills and work hard at being faithful to the Scriptures when ministering to people. Our skills, however, are never effective on their own. They are effective only when paired with the work of the Holy Spirit…[193]

Considering the previous statement, if pastoral counseling is going to be successful, it will be in no small part due to the Holy Spirit's impressing upon the counselee's heart.[194] The pastoral counselor, then, must presume and discern the Spirit's presence during the counseling process.[195]

Another role of the Holy Spirit in the pastoral counseling process is the conviction of sin.[196] The pastoral counselor must be vigilant in not becoming complicit in assisting a counselee in attaining a sinful or non-biblical goal.[197] Pastoral counseling does not have a unique clandestine agenda, it is the continuation of the work of the Holy Spirit.[198] Eric Mason said it well, "Jesus is the goal of the Christian life."[199] Having pointed out the previously mentioned fact, while being cognizant of the issues that led the counselee to initially seek or agree to counseling, the counselee's spiritual maturity is of utmost importance to the Holy Spirit and therefore should be of utmost importance to the tending pastoral counselor.[200]

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[193] Lambert, *A Theology of Counseling*, 163.

[194] Ibid.

[195] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 64.

[196] Lambert, *A Theology of Counseling*, 161.

[197] Crabb, *Effective Biblical* Counseling, 22 Kindle

[198] Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling*, 9 Kindle.

[199] Mason, *Unleashed, 3.*

[200] Crabb, *Effective Biblical* Counseling, 22 Kindle

Finally, the last role of the Holy Spirit in the pastoral counseling process that this document will discuss is the Holy Spirit's teaching ministry. One of the primary ways the Holy Spirit accomplishes His teaching ministry is the inspiration of Scripture.[201] The teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit is indispensable to the pastoral counseling process; this is true for the pastoral counselor and the counselee. Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins astutely remarked that no matter how intelligent, skilled, or caring they are, if the pastoral counselor does not rely on the Spirit of God to work in them, their efforts will fail to bear fruit for the kingdom of God.[202] Consequently, the faithful pastoral counselor must rely on the Holy Spirit to bring to mind all that the Lord Jesus taught during His earthly public ministry.[203] The researcher relied upon the Holy Spirit before, during, and after the action research project.

The Local Church's Role in Pastoral Counseling

The healthy, vibrant local church, has a profound role in effective pastoral counseling, namely, supporting the pastoral counseling ministry.[204] One way that the local church can provide support is by doing what is necessary to preserve the pastoral counseling ministry within the local church and developing multiple non-counseling support program for those who actively seek pastoral counseling. An example of a non-counseling support program is the formation of small groups in the church that speak to common problems that arise in people's lives.[205]

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[201] Lambert, *A Theology of Counseling*, 166.

[202] Clinton and Hawkins, *Quick Reference to Biblical Counseling*, 8.

[203] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 69.

[204] Ibid, 60.

[205] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 60.

Contributing non-counseling support is one of many ways that the modern-day church can strategically nurture and promote healthy disciples that make up healthy churches.

A second way that the church plays a role in pastoral counseling is that of evangelism, specifically, the sharing of the gospel message.[206] The enthusiastic sharing of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is of first importance in pastoral counseling. A case and point is, oftentimes while the pastoral counselor is ministering to a counselee who is ostensibly a true and professed Christian, the pastoral counselor discerns that the counselee is not actually saved, that is, they are not in fact a Christian at all. An occasion such as the previously mentioned example perfectly demonstrates how the functional aspect of the church played a direct role in putting an unsaved person in front of the pastoral counselor; presumably, the faithful pastoral counselor would share the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ with that unsaved person that they may hear it, repent, and believe.[207]

This researcher believes that healthy discipleship begins with a personal relationship with the Almighty God, specifically, believing and trusting in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Thusly, the role of the local church in pastoral counseling should not be disregarded or minimized. The role of the local church in the pastoral counseling process may very well prove to be the difference between salvation and eternal damnation for the counselee (cf. John 3:36). This researcher's local church, Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church, was a key component to the effectiveness of the action research project.

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[206] Kevin Carson and Randy Patten, "Biblical Counseling and Evangelism," in *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God's Care Through God's People*, eds. Bob Kelleman and Kevin Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 316.

[207] Carson and Patten, "Biblical Counseling and Evangelism," in *Biblical Counseling and the Church*, 322.

The Missional Aspect of Pastoral Counseling

The universal church is a called-out assembly, sent unto the entire world for the purposes and glory of God (cf. Matt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). As a further matter, every Christian has a role to play as the church is to function like a body, each member doing their part and their part only to contribute to the greater good of the entire body. In equipping His church for the work of service, the Lord does His work of soul care through shepherds and teachers in the local church.[208]

While this researcher wholeheartedly affirms that the mission of God (*missio Dei*) is the enthusiastic carrying or taking of the gospel unto unreached people groups across the globe, this researcher also believes that it is missional to engage in spiritually-formative work on behalf of the same people on a prolonged, daily, and consistent basis (cf. Gal 4:19). It is in this way, that is, engaging in prolonged spiritually-formative work on behalf of people they are intimately familiar with, that the Bible-based pastoral counselor who is an active and visible member of a local church, contributes to the mission of God in their community. More specifically, this researcher who always strives to present himself as a qualified and faithful Bible-based pastoral counselor, is informed and operates by three tenets: (1) the ministry of presence, (2) person-to-person ministry, and (3) continuing the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Ministry of Presence

A well-known and admired pastor and preacher, H.B Charles, Jr., opined that "Powerful and important theology is communicated by simply being there for your people."[209] The

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[208] Brad Bigney and Steve Viars, "A Church of Biblical Counseling," in *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God's Care Through God's People*, eds. Bob Kelleman and Kevin Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 21-22.

[209] H.B. Charles, Jr., *On Pastoring: A Short Guide to Living, Leading, and Ministering as a Pastor* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2016), 184.

previous comments succinctly describe the mindset that drives the ministry of presence. In this researcher's experience, people understand that you are only human and will not always have the answer, sometimes they just simply want you to be there and to listen to them. Of course, there are times when the Bible-based counselor should speak and not merely be present while remaining keenly aware of how the counselee may perceive their verbal and nonverbal cues.[210] Having made this point, it is still worth mentioning that one of many ways this Bible-based pastoral counselor serves the local church in which he is planted is by being there for the people under his care.

Person-to-Person Ministry

Person-to-person ministry involves some sort of face-to-face encounter. More aptly, person-to-person ministry has someone's name and a specific set of circumstances attached to it. Whereas preaching is generally planned and conducted in a controlled environment, person-to-person ministry oftentimes requires the Bible-based pastoral counselor to think and apply wisdom on the fly in real-time.[211] This perspective, specifically the ability to think and apply wisdom in real-time to a person's present dilemma, contributes greatly to this researcher's thinking and how he goes about conducting business as a Bible-based pastoral counselor.

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[210] Nesbit Sbanotto, H. Gingrich, and F. Gingrich, *Skills for Effective Counseling*, 79-80.

[211] Kevin Carson and Paul Tautges, "United the Public Ministry of the Word and the Private Ministry of the Word," in *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God's Care Through God's People*, eds. Bob Kelleman and Kevin Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 83.

Continuing the Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Perhaps the foremost component of the Holy Spirit ministerial work is the trustworthy and true witness of the person and work of the Lord Jesus (John 14:26; 15:26). The qualified and faithful Bible-based pastoral counselor continues the ministry of the Holy Spirit by sharing the gospel when appropriate and never compromising the truth about Jesus and His finished work on the cross. Moreover, the Holy Spirit initiates, calls, sends, and continuously directs "missionaries" in the field, whether at home or abroad.[212] The faithful and qualified Bible-based pastoral counselor does not operate on their own program, rather they are being led and directed by the Holy Spirit and always seeking His guidance. The Bible-based pastoral counselor, then, should presume and discern the Spirit's presence throughout the counseling process.[213]

Final Thoughts on Missions and Pastoral Counseling

The pastoral counselor has no unique secret agenda in which they operate, they continue the ministry of God the Holy Spirit.[214] The qualified and faithful Bible-based pastoral counselor is leaning, depending, and praying for the Spirit's leadership. When the Bible-based pastoral counselor senses that the Holy Spirit and has sent them to minister to a person in need, they should pray, ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance, and rely on the God-breathed Scriptures that the Holy Spirit has already produced. In fact, this researcher does not want to be in the same room with the counselee if the Holy Spirit is not there. In closing, with regards to everything articulated in this section of the document, it is in this way that this researcher believes Bible-

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[212] Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitations to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2010), 430.

[213] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 64.

[214] Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling*, 9 Kindle.

based pastoral counseling has a missional aspect and fosters health disciples making up healthy churches for the glory of God.

Pastoral Counseling and Preaching

Pastoral counseling is one of the many activities located in the broad range of pastoral care and responsibilities, the preaching ministry of a pastor is no exception.[215] Jay Adams conveyed everything that a pastor does and says while preaching from the pulpit should be deliberate to achieve some God-honoring result.[216] William Hathaway suggested that biblical competency combined with faithful exegesis should be a skill embodied by a pastoral counselor.[217] This DMIN action research project affirms both Adams and Hathaway's previously referenced sentiments. As a result, the faithfully preached Word of God changes lives in a way that nothing else can replicate.[218] Having made the previous assertion, the pastor's purpose in preaching, at least in part, is to impact positive changes among the redeemed people of God sitting in the congregation and building them up corporately as well as individually.[219] In a corporate sense, the preaching of God's Word is intended to build up the church as a body that is in a relationship and in tune with its singular unique parts. On the other hand, preaching God's Word from an individual member's perspective, helps each person in the pew to spiritually grow

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[215] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 25.

[216] Jay Adams, *Preaching With Purpose: The Urgent Task of Homiletics*, The Jay Adams Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 3 Kindle.

[217] William L. Hathaway, "Integration, Biblical Counseling, and Hermeneutics." *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 49, no. 3 (2021): 266.

[218] Mbewe, *Pastoral Preaching*, 100.

[219] Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, 12-13 Kindle.

in their faith, becoming more like Jesus progressively over the course of time.[220] Simply stated, preaching is not merely about informing, it is also about calling to response.[221] During the action research project, this researcher who also is the Senior Pastor at his local church, preached sermons that not only reiterated in the importance of unity for the participants from and individual aspect but also for the church as a whole in the corporate and collective sense. This researcher's efforts in this regard were consistent with the task of spiritually forming healthy disciples who make up healthy churches for the glory of God.

Pastoral counseling and preaching are related to one another not only in content but also in practices and principles.[222] Pastoral counseling is the ministry of the Word of God in conversation, while preaching is the ministry of the Word of God in proclamation.[223] Faithfully ministering as a pastoral counselor requires regular study of the Bible, similar to the discipline necessary for the exposition and application required for preaching.[224] Preaching is a vital soul-care activity.[225] This is especially the case in the Black church preaching tradition. Sermons in the Black church preaching condition can be vivid with imagery, musically influenced, while simultaneously being biblical, expositional, and inspirational.[226] Moreover, preaching that has

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[220] Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, 13 Kindle.

[221] Voddie Baucham, Jr., *Expository Apologetics: Answering Objections with the Power of the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 163.

[222] Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, 114 Kindle.

[223] Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 83.

[224] Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, 114 Kindle.

[225] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 18.

[226] Charlie E. Dates, "The Treasure and Potential of African American Preaching," in *Say It!: Celebrating Expository Preaching in the African American Tradition*, ed. Eric C. Redmond (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2020), 19.

been forged in the pastor's study and the counselor's office tends to be more personal and oftentimes more effective than preaching that is uninformed by the counseling ministry.[227]

From an existential vantage point, practically every person sitting in the church has been impacted by or will be impacted by grief, divorce, depression, violence, loneliness, and a host of other unfortunate events and circumstances.[228] Heath Lambert noted that people seek out counseling when they need encouragement, when they are scared, when they are sad and want joy, and when they are weak and searching for strength.[229] In short, counseling reveals problems in people that the pastor who is preaching in the pulpit should know about.[230] God's Word has divine power, the Holy Spirit can take the preached Word and apply it to the human heart.[231] Even if the person's situation does not change, if the Word of God touches the person's heart, it can change their perspective and make a world of difference (cf. Jas 1:2-4).

All of the previously stated facts being the case, every precaution must be put in place to ensure that pastoral counseling is offered while not compromising other requirements that fall under the umbrella of pastoral care and responsibilities.[232] It is this researcher's experience that preaching has proven effective in pastoral counseling. This researcher's goal was to utilize preaching in a strategic manner that was consistent with the stated purpose of this DMIN action research project which prioritizes building up healthy disciples who make up healthy churches.

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[227] Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, 114 Kindle.

[228] Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins, *The Quick Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 9.

[229] Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 52.

[230] Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, 115 Kindle.

[231] Mbewe, *Pastoral Preaching*, 100.

[232] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 18.

Pastoral Counseling Paradigms

The reader should be aware that terms such as pastoral counselor, Bible-based pastoral counselor, biblical counselor, nouthethic counselor, Christian counselor, and other variations, appear on the surface to be interchangeable or even the exact same occupation or ministry. While there are indeed many similarities between those respective counseling ministries, when one examines the finer details one will find that there are some fundamental distinctions that exist and should be highlighted among these various counseling ministries. Moreover, those nuances and distinctions sometimes not only promote different counseling techniques but sometimes promote altogether different outcomes.[233] Having acknowledged the previous fact, for the purposes of this DMIN action research project, the various counseling terms/ministries mentioned above was used interchangeably in this document. Furthermore, hereinafter for consistency and clarity, with the exception of direct quotes, the primary term that will be used is "Bible-based pastoral counselor" or simply "pastoral counselor" when referencing the various counseling ministries.

This document will briefly explain three popular pastoral counseling paradigms. Specific details of the various models will be explained more thoroughly in the third chapter of this document. Lastly, all of the following pastoral counseling models have their own distinct advantages and disadvantages. Having acknowledged the previous fact, during this DMIN action research project, the researcher used a hybrid version of the paradigms discussed below, incorporating various aspects from the three models. Much of the methodology that was employed during the action research project was informed by the specifics discussed above while

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[233] Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 11-34.

keeping in mind the conditions present in the researcher's ministry context during the project implementation phase.

Church-Based Counseling

Apostle Paul told his protégé, Timothy, "…I write so that you will know how one should act in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15, NASB). Hence, the local church is the premier location to receive counsel that is intended to be heard and applied in the life of a counselee.[234] In church-based counseling, the counseling ministry itself is an organic part of the local church, not merely a solo pastoral counselor engaged in counseling with a counselee who just so happens to be affiliated with a local church.[235]

Like other pastoral counseling paradigms in church-based counseling, the desired outcome of church-based counseling is for the counselee to grow spiritually, that is, growth "into the stature of Christ."[236] However, this does not mean nor does it even suggest that the pastoral counselor ignores or glosses over the everyday issues of life that inevitably present themselves in counseling. In fact, one of the premier advantages afforded by church-based counseling is the opportunity for the counselee to take part in peer counseling and group work.[237] In church-based counseling, with the counselee's permission, the pastoral counselor can connect the counselee to someone else in the local church who may be better able to provide direct assistance concerning

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[234] Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 306.

[235] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 60.

[236] Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 73 Kindle.

[237] Crabb, *Effective Biblical* Counseling, 153 Kindle.

a very specific but urgent need.[238] For example, if a person seeks counseling and shares that they

sought counseling in part because they are depressed after losing their job, then the pastoral

counselor could connect the counselee with someone in the local church who could help the

counselee land a job.[239] Church-based counseling allows the pastoral counselor to assist the

counselee in having very specific urgent needs met that other pastoral counseling paradigms may

prove difficult to replicate (cf. Jas 2:15-16).[240] This researcher believes that one of the easiest

ways for church members to tangibly demonstrate the love of Christ is by means of church-based

counseling, namely, helping a counselee meet an expressed urgent need. In this way, church-

based counseling builds up healthy disciples who make up healthy churches for the glory of God.

Furthermore, when church-based counseling is working in optimum fashion, it equips the saints

of a local church for the work of ministry and provides them with opportunities to exercise their

own unique spiritual gifts for the glory of God, strategically impacting healthy disciples and

whole church health (Eph 4:11-12).

Short-Term Pastoral Counseling

An unfortunate reality is that most pastors do not have time to effectively minister to

hurting believers in their local church.[241] The fact that time is not something many pastors have

in abundance is exactly why short-term counseling is oftentimes not only prudent but preferred.

Counseling limited by time constraints incorporates all of the necessities for counseling to be

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[238] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 61.

[239] Ibid, 62.

[240] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 60.

[241] Jared Pingleton, *Mental Health Ministry: The Struggle is Real* (Tustin, CA: Trilogy Christian Publishers, 2022), 14 Kindle.

effective while keeping the limited time constraints in the proper perspective.[242] The primary

driving force behind short-term pastoral counseling is that if the God-honoring desired outcome

can be reached sooner rather than later, then there is no reason to carry out counseling for a

longer period of time.[243] For short-term counseling to be successful, the pastoral counselor must

be directive and they must be actively engaged. The pastoral counselor and the counselee must

partner with one another. The counseling content itself is usually focused on addressing and

solving one specific problem in a single counseling session. By focusing on one specific problem

per a single counseling session rather than attempting to tackle multiple problems at once, it

becomes less difficult to ensure that time considerations are strictly adhered to.[244] This researcher

is an advocate of short-term pastoral counseling as a strategic Christian ministry because it

affords him the opportunity to help saints address and even solve some problems in a relative

short period of time. This directly impacts healthy disciples in the local church who are not

overly dependent on the pastoral counselor.

Solution-Focused Pastoral-Counseling

Solution-focused counseling visualizes a God-honoring outcome, focusing on the

solution rather than the problem at hand.[245] The solution-focused approach to counseling seeks to

find what is right with the counselee and how to effectively use it for their benefit.[246] In solution-

focused pastoral counseling, the pastoral counselor encourages and reminds the counselee when

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[242] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 48.

[243] Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling*, 213 Kindle.

[244] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 49.

[245] Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling*, 18 Kindle.

[246] Gary J. Oliver, "Solution-Focused Counseling," in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling*, eds. Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 491.

necessary that God is in very much present during times of trouble. The idea is that if God is

called upon, He can bring peace to us and stabilize our situation as He is our stronghold (cf. Ps

46:1-11).[247]

Considering the previously referenced quotes, in solution-focused pastoral counseling,

the pastoral counselor has the critical task of looking for glimpses of the Holy Spirit's imprint on

the counselee's life, that is, taking what is good and strategically using the good to help the

counselee be active in solving their own problem.[248] The pastoral counselor uses the Word of

God as a source of strength, understanding and relying upon the person and work of the Holy

Spirit.[249]

In summary, in solution-focused pastoral counseling the pastoral counselor helps the

counselee by helping them identify and use their strengths, talents, skills, and abilities to combat

their challenges and current circumstances.[250] A pastoral counselor may even provide a

customized spiritual formation plan if they deem it necessary for the counselee, such as the one

included in Appendix T of this document. Additionally, the pastoral counselor points the

counselee to the strength and loving character of the Almighty God.[251] When the pastoral

counselor points the counselee to God, the counselee and pastoral counselor set their sights on

the healing and lasting joy that is found in Christ Jesus, the hope of glory.[252] Helping a counselee

find the steadfast healing and joy in the Lord is how the Bible-based pastoral counselor

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[247] Tim Clinton, *Focus on the Future* (Lake Mary: FL, FrontLine, 2021), XV Kindle.

[248] Kollar, *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling*, 21 Kindle.

[249] Ibid, 22 Kindle.

[250] Greg Smalley, "Strength-Based Counseling," in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling*, eds. Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 493.

[251] Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 261.

[252] Clinton, *Focus on the Future*, 11 Kindle.

contributes to healthy disciples who make up healthy churches for the glory of God. This researcher encouraged counselees to utilize their strengths, talents, skills, and abilities during one-on-one counseling sessions and group counseling. Moreover, during the implementation of this DMIN action research project, the researcher intentionally directed and redirected the participants to the person of Jesus.

Pastoral Counseling with Psychotherapy

There are instances during the pastoral counseling when a pastor incorporates "psychotherapy" in his counseling approach and techniques. Psychotherapy could be defined as the influencing of a person's mind with the intended outcome of alleviating mental anguish, illness, pain, disorder, or deviation by means of the spoken and/or written words.[253] To say the previous statement more succinctly, psychotherapy attempts to repair the counselee to a point where they are good enough to function by themselves and for themselves.[254] Psychotherapy is typically a long-term process of attempting to change the counselee's personality while simultaneously improving their mental health.[255] In pastoral counseling with psychotherapy, the pastors who employ these techniques have at times completely aborted the Scriptures and seemingly their identity as pastors, opting instead for spiritually-enlightened counseling techniques that more aptly align with classic psychotherapy.[256]

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[253] Carney Landis, "Psychotherapy and Religion." *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 1, no. 1 (1947): 17.

[254] John E. Hinkle and Gregory A. Hinkle, "Surrendering the Self: Pastoral Counseling at the Limits of Culture and Psychotherapy." *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 46, no. 2 (1992): 111.

[255] Patton, *Pastor as Counselor*, 9.

[256] J. Hinkle and G. Hinkle, "Surrendering the Self: Pastoral Counseling at the Limits of Culture and Psychotherapy," 111.

Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling

This researcher coined the term "Bible-based pastoral counseling" because while the

researcher does employ some of the elements referenced in the aforementioned paradigms,

namely that it is short-term, church-based, and solution-focused, Bible-based pastoral counseling

is markedly different in other ways. As a further matter, while this action research project should

not necessarily be seen as a wholesale referendum against psychotherapy, Bible-based pastoral

counseling does not incorporate any elements whatsoever of psychotherapy. Bible-based pastoral

counseling is unapologetically spiritually-focused and replete with ideas and principles steeped

in the Word of God.

The sole intended outcome of Bible-based pastoral counseling is the counselee's spiritual

growth. The staunch spiritual focus of Bible-based pastoral counseling should not be understood

or seen as relegating emotions and mental health as unimportant secondary matters, rather,

Bible-based pastoral counseling presupposes that emotional uplifting and improved mental

health will naturally follow over time as a byproduct of enhanced spiritual health. Moreover,

unlike psychotherapy, Bible-based pastoral counseling does not attempt to influence a

personality change in the counselee.[257] In fact, should Bible-based pastoral counseling prove

effective over the long haul, a change of heart will manifest from the transformative work of the

Holy Spirit, not the psychotherapeutic efforts of the Bible-based pastoral counselor.

Finally, Bible-based pastoral counseling is by design in some regards indistinguishable

from personal discipleship. The Great Commission is applicable to all Christians and therefore

Bible-based pastoral counseling is not divorced from the call to make disciples (Matt 28:20).

Having stated the previous fact, it should be recognized that Bible-based pastoral counseling is

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[257] Patton, *Pastor as Counselor*, 9.

so much more than mere personal discipleship. For one, it is common knowledge that personal

discipleship can take place inside or outside the local church. On the other hand, Bible-based

pastoral counseling is interdependent on the resources that are available within the local church.

Secondly, personal discipleship can at times be a long-term relationship if not a life-long

relationship between the mentor and mentee. Conversely, Bible-based pastoral counseling is

strategically-designed to be relatively brief in duration. Lastly, personal discipleship can but does

not necessarily need to address a specific problem. On the other hand, Bible-based pastoral

counseling is intended to address one specific spiritual problem at a time afflicting a member in

the local church. The problem is then addressed in Bible-based pastoral counseling by focusing

on the solution to the problem, not necessarily the problem itself. When Bible-based pastoral

counseling begins, the end is envisioned, remains readily in mind, and is openly discussed and

pursued. To say the previous statement differently, in Bible-based pastoral counseling, the Bible-

based pastoral counselor candidly discusses the end of the counseling relationship with the

counselee, possible solutions to the problem are brainstormed, and the Bible-based pastoral

counselor and counselee begin working collaboratively toward that end by implementing the

counseling agenda.

<center>Small Group Ministry Paradigms</center>

In the Bible, small groups meeting in the homes of individual believers was critical to the

early success of the church at large (cf. Acts 3:42-47).[258] In the modern-day church context, for a

small group to be successful, it must aim for and attract the right target audience. The small

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[258] Steve Gladen, *Leading Small Groups With Purpose: Everything You Need to Lead a Healthy Group* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), Location 402 Kindle.

group leader should ask themself, "What is the purpose of the group?" and "Do the small group members know the purpose that the group was formed?" Questions such as the previous ones being asked and answered by the group leader will foster group success.[259]

The frequency at which the group assembles is impacted by multiple variables that include but are not limited to the purpose, the experience of all stakeholders, the commitment of all stakeholders, and the framework or structure of the group itself.[260] Group counseling, that is, a small group of counselees coming together as a cohesive unit and joining forces, can share their experiences and benefit in a way that cannot be achieved while receiving individual care. The dynamics of group counseling may prove useful in cultivating a greater sense of fellowship and unity in the church.[261] Concerning group dynamics, Jared Pingleton remarked, "Small clusters of people naturally lend themselves to the potential development of warm, intimate connection and close, personal sharing."[262] Accordingly, the small group paradigms that will be discussed are discipleship small groups and spiritual formation small groups. During the lone group counseling session, this DMIN action research project employed elements of both discipleship and spiritual formation small groups. This researcher determined that one group counseling session was sufficient to accomplish the goals that he intended when conceptualizing the intervention design. Moreover, this researcher intended for the small group counseling session to function as a supplement to the one-on-one counseling session rather than be the dominant or equally used asset.

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[259] Gladen, *Leading Small Groups With Purpose*, Location 434-441 Kindle.

[260] Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Life-Changing Small Group Ministry*, 151.

[261] Stephen P. Greggo, "Group Counseling," in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling*, eds. Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 249-251.

[262] Pingleton, *Mental Health Ministry*, 276 Kindle.

Discipleship Small Groups

Discipleship small groups vary in how they are structured. Some discipleship small groups place emphasis on a specific facet or element of a believer's spirituality. Other discipleship small groups focus on developing a trait of an individual's character.[263] In discipleship small groups, group participants usually take their cues from the group's leader or facilitator. Considering the previous fact, during group counseling the researcher must intentionally push past the superficial level if he expects group members to share deep matters of the heart with transparency and authenticity.[264] In discipleship small groups, the goal is not merely getting through the group meeting but also transformation. With regard to the previous statement, discipleship small groups should positively impact group members living out the truth of God's Word.[265] This researcher employed certain elements of this small group paradigm, namely, the placement of emphasis on a specific facet of a believer's spirituality.

Spiritual Formation Small Groups

Spiritual formation small groups have been known to do life together.[266] Like the Lord Jesus during His earthly public ministry, small group leaders need to involve themselves in the lives of others and reciprocate by letting others be involved in their lives.[267] Establishing personal connections is oftentimes what makes this type small group more intense, as group members share spiritual formation practices and mutually mentor one another. In spiritual

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[263] Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Life-Changing Small Group Ministry*, 153.

[264] Gladen, *Leading Small Groups With Purpose*, Location 882 Kindle.

[265] Ibid, 1159 Kindle.

[266] Ibid, Location 461 Kindle.

[267] Donahue and Robinson, *Building a Life-Changing Small Group Ministry*, 153.

formation small groups, the way the leader conducts their own life will have a significant impact on their ability to lead group meetings.[268] Finally, when group counseling is being considered, it is important to group people together who have a similar spiritual journey, it may also prove wise to have people in a group who share similar backgrounds, ethnicity, or nationality.[269] This researcher employed certain elements of this small group paradigm, namely, the further establishment of personal connections.

Conclusion

In closing, this review of literature introduced and familiarized the researcher with the most current literature in his field. The literature review afforded the researcher the opportunity to observe and study both the relevant themes that appeared while also making the determination if there were any gaps that existed in the contemporary collection of theological and ministry studies pertaining to the problem and topic. There were no gaps in the literature that the researcher observed while conducting research and writing this document. The literature that was reviewed and assessed was a sample of the current collection of academic work associated with matters of love, spiritual formation, spiritual growth, spiritual maturity, forgiveness, and unity in the local church. The literature review findings informed the intervention design and the implementation of the intervention design of this academic endeavor.

Additionally, the theological and theoretical foundations that informed this DMIN action research project further crystallized the fact that a comprehensive and strategic approach was needed to address the problem of spiritual immaturity in the researcher's local church. Moreover,

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[268] Gladen, *Leading Small Groups With Purpose*, Location 1167 Kindle.

[269] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 62.

it was proven that both one-on-one pastoral counseling and small groups are not only biblical but were remarkably effective in the researcher's efforts to help members in his church grow spiritually, become more mature Christians, and lay the necessary groundwork to cultivate greater fellowship and unity within his local church. To fit the researcher's ministry context, this DMIN action research project employed a hybrid approach to small groups, combining characteristics from both small group paradigms discussed in the preceding sections. As stated in the opening chapter, the problem was some members at Saint Mark lack spiritual maturity, causing disunity amongst some members while other members leave the church altogether. The lone group counseling session utilized during this action research project addressed problems of spiritually immaturity inducing disunity in his local church, a problem that small groups have proven to effectively combat.

Having made the case that both pastoral counseling and small groups are not only biblical paradigms but effective in addressing spiritual problems, the following chapter will go into further detail on specifically how one-on-one pastoral counseling sessions supplemented by a singular strategically-engineered small group, addressed the problem of spiritual immaturity negatively impacting unity in the researcher's ministry context.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

A major difference between action research and other research forms is the anticipated outcomes of the study.[270] In other research forms, the inquiry seeks outcomes that provide researchers and their target audience with "knowledge" that is relevant to the problems or issues investigated. Conversely, in action research, not only do researchers provide knowledge that directly emerges from their research endeavors, but they also collaborate closely with the participants to apply the knowledge gleaned from the research in an effort to address and prayerfully resolve the problems or issues investigated. Simply put, action research is conducted with people and for people to affect meaningful change.[271] The reader should recall in Chapter 1 of this document it was explained that spiritual immaturity was the problem in the researcher's ministry context. Research indicates that pastoral counseling is an effective tool in positively impacting meaningful change in a believer's spiritual condition.[272] In this way, pastoral counseling builds up healthy disciples who make up healthy churches.

Intervention Design

To address the problem of spiritual immaturity, evidenced by spiritually immature actions that evoke immature reactions and yielding unhealthy relationships at Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church, the researcher implemented the "Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling

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[270] Stringer and Aragón, *Action Research*, 49 Kindle.

[271] Ibid.

[272] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 35.

Program," also known as "SBPCP" The major characteristics of this intervention design are

detailed in Table 3.1 of this document.

Table 3.1 Characteristics of Strategic Short-Term Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling

Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Program (SBPCP)
Counseling sessions begin and end with prayer.
Counseling sessions primarily deal with spiritual matters but can address other matters; however, counseling content is unapologetically Christian.
Counseling sessions are Church-based.
Counseling sessions are intentionally brief in duration (no more than 45 minutes per session; no more than a grand total of seven sessions).
Counseling sessions aim to find solutions to spiritual problems.
Counseling sessions are limited to one topic/problem per session.
Counselees are assigned optional homework assignments to be completed in journals.
The Bible-based pastoral counselor is engaged and facilitates activity.
The Bible-based pastoral counselor makes appropriate referrals for matters outside the scope of care and/or level of expertise.

The intervention design was carefully crafted, keeping in mind certain facts and

circumstances that were present in the researcher's ministry context.[273] It is appropriate to note

here that the table above is the framework of SBPCP, that is, the essential characteristics that

must be in place for SBPCP to be a success. There does not exist a "right way" per se to do

counseling as all people are nurtured in vastly different environments and are gifted in various

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[273] The above table and the intervention have been tailored specifically to fit the researcher's ministry context but has been informed to some degree by works authored by David G. Benner and Charles Allen Kollar, respectively. Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 48-49; Kollar, *Solution-Focused Counseling*, 18 Kindle.

ways, specifically in this case, pastoral counselors and counselees (cf. Rom 12:4-6). Pastors, by

the sheer fact of their divine calling, are de facto pastoral counselors (1 Pet 5:1-3). While fully

affirming the previous fact, nevertheless many local church pastors have not been sufficiently

trained in the art of "private ministry." As it pertains to the previous statement, in a jointly

authored piece, Brad Bigney and Steve Viars remarked:

> One of the biggest mistakes people make with biblical counseling is to boil it down to nothing more than naming a sin and sharing a Bible verse that commands you to stop what you are doing. Biblical counseling is more than simplistic answers. Biblical counseling is not person-centered or problem-centered, but Christ-centered. . . . We want to see the counselee become more like Christ...[274]

The careful reader will note in the above comments, the authors employ the term "biblical

counseling" rather than the term "pastoral counseling" that has been consistently used in this

document. Keeping in mind this researcher's previous comments in the preceding chapter of this

document, specifically, various counseling terms and ministries, Bigney and Viars's use of

"biblical counseling" for all intents and purposes of this DMIN action research project is of little

consequence. The point the authors were stressing, which this researcher agrees with, is that the

result of counseling should not be the pastor telling the counselee to refrain from sinning, give

them a Bible verse, and sending the counselee on their merrily way – but this happens far too

often. What is more, seminary training for pastors heavily focuses on the public proclamation of

the Word in the sanctuary rather than the private ministry of the Word that takes place within the

confines of the pastoral counselor's office. Over the course of their entire seminary education

and training, it is not uncommon for pastors to have had two classes or even less in private

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[274] Bigney and Viars, "A Church of Biblical Counseling," in *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God's Care Through God's People*, 27.

ministry.[275] What is more that certain techniques, namely asking the right questions in their

various forms, may prove more effective in counseling than others.[276] Being mindful of the fact

that many local church pastors lack formal training in the private ministry of the Word, a brief

list of resources for the aspiring Bible-based pastoral counselor has been included in Appendix K

of this document.

Throughout this action research project, the researcher has referred to this academic

undertaking as a "strategic" approach to short-term Bible-based pastoral counseling. This

researcher's approach to pastoral counseling was strategic on three fronts. First, it is common

knowledge that people usually receive counseling of any kind because either (a) the counselee

sought counseling, or (b) the counselee was referred for counseling. However, in the researcher's

model, the counseling is taking place not because the counselee sought counseling nor was the

counselee referred but rather because the researcher himself had observed a persistent problem

and was taking a proactive approach to intervening on the front end by soliciting partakers of

pastoral counseling. Here, it is important note two things, (1) healthy churches learn and grow in

community with one another, and (2) the atmosphere in a local church must be conducive to

development if members have any real chance of development.[277] In light of the previous

statement, seeing that all participants are members of the same local church in which the

researcher serves as pastor, to a certain extent they all have the same problem though symptoms

may present themselves differently in each individual person.

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[275] Deepak Reju, "Dear Pastor: Shepherd God's Flock," in *Biblical Counseling and the Church: God's Care Through God's People*, eds. Bob Kelleman and Kevin Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015), 35.

[276] John Patton, *Pastor as Counselor: Wise Presence, Sacred Conversation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), 29.

[277] Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*, 14-15.

The proactive approach taken by this researcher does not by any means suggest that the counselee did not volunteer to take part in counseling services, counselees did in fact volunteer for counseling, however the various topics of discussion had been largely predetermined in the researcher's model while allowing and encouraging the counselee to speak about other matters not related to the predetermined topics when they felt compelled to do so. Predetermining discussion topics for pastoral counseling may seem unorthodox on the surface but one should keep in mind that as stated in the first chapter, the goal of pastoral counseling is to honor God by partnering with the counselee for the express purpose of their spiritual growth.[278] This researcher fully expected that program participants would grow spiritually as a direct result of having been a participant in SBPCP, which was intentionally tailor-made specific to build up healthy disciples at Saint Mark who positively impact the overall spiritual health of the church. Having made the previous statement, SBPCP is malleable in that it can be adapted to fit any ministry context, whether it be a traditional or parachurch ministry setting.

Secondly, this action research project was strategic in its approach to pastoral counseling in its inclusion of small groups that supplemented the one-on-one counseling sessions. Group counseling has proven effective in the past by providing an opportunity for those who are in counseling to learn from one another and collaborate with one another in meeting mutual goals thereby strengthening the bonds of unity.[279] Why is it important for Christians to collaborate for spiritual growth purposes? According to a 2022 poll, an alarming 56% of Christians felt that their spiritual life was a completely private matter.[280] Frankly speaking, those respondents who

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[278] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 35.

[279] Greggo, "Group Counseling," in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling*, 249.

[280] Barna Group, "56% of Christians Feel Their Spiritual Life is Entirely Private," accessed 11/23/2023, https://www.barna.com/research/discipleship-friendship.

believed their spiritual life was and still is a "completely private matter" are sorely mistaken. On the contrary, Christians are called to lovingly speak the truth in love and admonish one another as a means of growing in Christ (Eph 4:15; Col 3:16). Having made the previous point, when it comes to spiritual growth matters, the healthy Christian disciple does not disregard the "one another" imperatives in Scripture, rather the healthy Christian knows that spiritual isolation is not a viable option.[281]

Third and finally, this action research project was strategic in its approach to pastoral counseling in that it incorporates aspects of Christian coaching. Christian coaching could be defined as the art and practice of empowering individuals and groups to spiritually shift from where they currently are and actively moving towards where they want to be in the near future.[282] With regards to the previous statement, this action research project was strategic in that, like Christian Coaching, is forward-looking, growth-focused, and goal-oriented. This researcher's rationale for designing SBPCP with a forward-looking, growth-focused, and goal-oriented strategy was that while he could not do anything to change the past of a counselee, he could perhaps positively impact their current and future circumstances. The previously mentioned aspects summarize specifically how SBPCP contributes to healthy disciples who make up healthy churches for the glory of God.

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[281] Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*, 96.

[282] Gary R. Collins, *Christian Coaching: Helping Others Turn Potential into Reality*. Second Edition (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009), 14.

Project Conceptualization

Upon IRB approval, the researcher embarked on an overall 13-week plan, to include seven weeks that directly involved the participants. The participants in this program were at least 18 years of age and an active member of Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church located in Brewton, Alabama. Participants were also required to be professed believers in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The researcher serves as pastor for all participants in the action research project and is the project's director. The researcher has no biases or assumptions other than those detailed in the first chapter of this document. All events related to the administering of this action research project took place either over the phone or at the local church. Journals were a requirement for the participants, which were provided by the researcher. SBPCP in the researcher's ministry context could accommodate no more than 12 participants in the investigative phase of the project.

The first three weeks of the action research project were administrative in nature, it consisted of gaining permission to conduct the research, soliciting volunteers, determining the eligibility of the volunteers, and assessing a potential volunteer's suitability for the action research project. Permission was granted by the deacons of the church on February 18, 2024.[283] The researcher anticipated there would not be a shortage of initial volunteers. Admittedly, the researcher was a bit concerned if some of the elderly members, who make up a significant portion of Saint Mark's congregation, while willing would not be able to meet all the requirements of SBPCP. Due to the researcher and the project itself being able only to accommodate up to twelve people at a given time, those who initially expressed interest in counseling were given an initial screening, a suitability assessment of sorts, and were

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[283] In a conversation with the chairman of the deacon board on February 18, 2024.

anonymously assigned a random number. The volunteers were required to remember their number as the researcher was unaware of it. The rationale behind assigning random numbers to volunteers was to mitigate the researcher's biases that could potentially alter true research outcomes. The volunteers wrote their randomly assigned number on the top of the screening document. The results of the initial screening were tallied; those volunteers who scored the lowest on the screening were given the first opportunity to move on to the investigative phase of the action research project. The initial screening that was utilized and factored in making the selection of who moved into the investigative phase of the action research project is located in Appendix B of this document.

The volunteers who agreed to move forward in the action research project were then given a consent form and an intake/questionnaire form, officially transitioning those members from volunteers to official "participants" in SBPCP. In signing the intake/questionnaire form, the participant agreed to a total of six one-on-one counseling sessions and one group counseling session. The consent form and intake/questionnaire form utilized in this action research project are located in Appendix C and D of this document, respectively. After inspecting the documents for accuracy and clarity, the researcher studied the documents for trends and insights.

In weeks four through twelve, the investigative piece of the action research project commenced. The participants were engaged in SBPCP for a total of seven weeks. The twelfth overall week of the action research project, seventh week for the participants, was a group counseling session. A timeline of the overall project plan is detailed in Table 3.2 of this document; a snapshot of the counseling agenda that was followed is detailed in Table 3.3.

Table 3.2 Overall Project Plan Timeline

Project Week	Duties/Tasks
Weeks 1-3	Administrative/Pre-Project Activities
Weeks 4-12	Investigative Phase
Week 13	Administrative/Post-Project Activities

Table 3.3 Counseling Agenda for SBPCP

Week	Counseling Agenda for SBPCP
1	Explicit Identification With the One True God
2	Spiritual Formation Practices
3	Loving God
4	Loving Others
5	Fellowship Amongst the Saints
6	Forgiving Others
7	Group Counseling – Brainstorming Solutions

An outline for each week's counseling agenda and a "Forgiveness Fact Sheet" created by this researcher are located in Appendix G through Appendix N of this document.

Week thirteen consisted of tasks that were administrative in nature. During this final week of the action research project, the Bible-based pastoral counselor conducted any follow-ups that were deemed necessary. Also during the final week, a post-project survey and exit interview was administered, and the researcher preached a sermon from 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 entitled "Reaffirm Your Love," officially marking the end of SBPCP for the participants.[284]

Along with the notes that the researcher recorded in his own personal reflective journal, the post-counseling session survey, post-project participant survey, and the exit interview were

[284] Sermon can be accessed via the following link.
https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=42924124717767

the primary instruments utilized in determining the efficacy of SBPCP. The post-counseling

session survey, post-project participant survey, and the exit interview are located in Appendix H,

I, and J of this document, respectively. Each independent counseling session was designed to be

no more than 30 minutes in duration, with the exception of the group counseling session which is

designed to last no more than 45 minutes. A commonality for each counseling session was

biblically-inspired solutions to spiritual problems and a homework assignment that was to be

completed in the participants' journals, which were provided to the participants by this

researcher. The homework assignments during each counseling session were intended to be

spiritually-formative and reinforce what was discussed during that specific counseling session.

Moreover, homework assignments were always optional but were included and intended to be a

growth mechanism.

Spiritual immaturity, while certainly a problem, was not a particularly unique problem to

the researcher's ministry context. With regards to the previous statement, many paths could have

been trodden in an effort to combat spiritual immaturity in the researcher's ministry context. The

rationale behind implementing a strategically-designed pastoral counseling program was not only

its effectiveness in bolstering spiritual maturity, but also people's interest in pastoral counseling

programs. According to Stringer and Aragón, it is of critical importance in the early stages of any

action research project that the researcher establishes a positive atmosphere that engages the

energy and interests of stakeholders. "Projects that fail to capture the interest or commitment of

the people involved are often ineffective, inefficient, or both."[285] A recent poll on LinkedIn

indicated a consensus, 100% of respondents, believed that a formal pastoral counseling program

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[285] Ernest T. Stringer and Alfredo Ortiz Aragón, *Action Research*. Fifth Edition (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2021), 87 Kindle.

functioning as a vibrant ministry would be a benefit to the local church. The Bible-based pastoral

counselor brings their knowledge and expertise to the counseling relationship. The Bible-based

pastoral counselor is experienced in ministering to families and individuals on multiple levels

and ministering to those who are grieving the loss of loved ones, experience that is invaluable in

Bible-based pastoral counseling.[286] Simply put, pastoral counseling programs garner people's

interest. Having considered and properly accounted for all of the previous factors, the researcher

decided to implement SBPCP with a goal of positively influencing the counselee's overall

spiritual health and building up healthy disciples who make up healthy churches.

Figure 3.1 Recent LinkedIn Poll[287]

> Presuming the necessary qualifications and framework are in place, would a local church benefit from a formal pastoral counseling program?
>
> You can see how people vote. **Learn more**
>
> | Yes ✓ | 100% |
> | No | 0% |
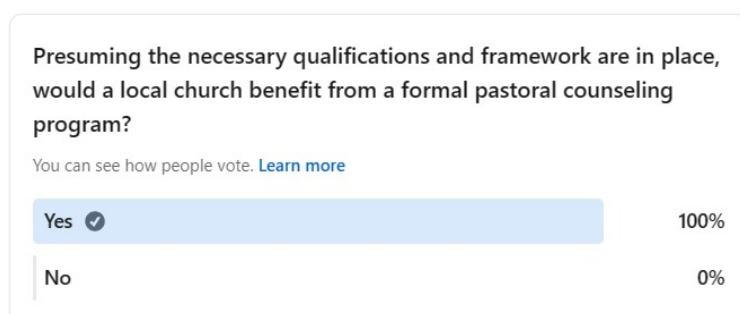
In closing, every reader of this document should take under advisement, especially those

who aspire to be Bible-based pastoral counselors, that while it is prudent to have a plan when

providing counseling services, a counselor of any variety should avoid being overly rigid in their

counseling approach. This researcher and any Bible-based pastoral counselor must consider and

be sensitive to the fact that each person has a story. Every pastoral counseling program,

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[286] Patton, *Pastor as Counselor*, 67.

[287] LinkedIn poll that totaled 26 respondents, accessed 11/26/2023.
https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7133351592283574272

including SBPCP, should strive to create an atmosphere that allows and encourages people to

share freely and not feel as if they are being rushed to a predetermined conclusion. To say the

previous statement differently, every person has a story and their own personal reasons that they

agreed to counseling.[288] This researcher has accounted for the previous facts in the

conceptualization of the action research project. Moreover, the post-counseling session survey

provided at the end of every counseling session included an area where the counselee could

provide information pertaining to a topic they wanted to discuss in the future that had not been

previously discussed. The post-counseling session survey is contained in Appendix H of this

document. For a snapshot of the project conceptualization, see Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2 Project Conceptualization Snapshot

Setting: Rural, Traditional local church rooted in African American worship styles and traditions, about 100 total members. Average Sunday attendance about 50 congregants.
Participant Demographics: Active members of Saint Mark and at least 18 years of age. All participants identified as Black or African American.
Sample Size: 10 participants.
Location: Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church, Brewton, AL.
Duration of Elements of Study: 13-week action research project, seven weeks of engagement with project participants, individual counseling sessions lasting 30-40 minutes.
Resources Needed: Journal for participants, which were provided by researcher. No other tools or equipment were needed other than those things that were already accessible in this local church.
Rationale for Study: To address the problem of spiritual immaturity in this local church, specifically, spiritually immature actions evoking immature reactions that led to unhealthy relationships.

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[288] Nesbit Sbanotto, H. Gingrich, and F. Gingrich, *Skills for Effective Counseling*, 106.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

While the previous section conveyed the plan that the researcher initially intended to employ when he designed the intervention, the implementation of the intervention design, on the other hand, outlines how the events unfolded, were carried out, and data analyzed in real-time with live participants. In addition to the aforementioned statement, a major difference between this section and the previous section is that the implementation phase will reflect any changes that were necessarily implemented due to conditions present and/or changes in the ministry context at that particular time.[289] Data triangulation is a research tool that a researcher can employ as a means of cross-checking the data from three different perspectives thereby providing breadth, depth, and greater trustworthiness of the data that was analyzed.[290] Data triangulation was achieved by examining data collected from the researcher's, the participants, and the church's perspective in an effort to mitigate the researcher's biases.

Finally, this section of the document contains the counseling agenda for each respective week and the "Forgiveness Fact Sheet" that was utilized and referenced during the investigative phase of the action research project. Table 3.3 is a timeline that provides general data about the various duties and tasks that were undertaken during the investigative stage of the action research project, also known as the implementation of the intervention design.

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[289] Stringer and Aragón, *Action Research*, 44 Kindle.

[290] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72.

Table 3.3 Implementation of Intervention Design Timeline

Project Week	Duties/Tasks
Weeks 1-3	Administrative/Pre-Project Activities
Weeks 4-10	Investigative Phase
Week 11	Administrative/Post-Project Activities
Week 12	Participation Awards

IRB Approval

The institutional review process at universities is generally denoted by a group of staff members that are tasked with reviewing research proposals submitted by doctoral candidates.[291] These staff members are oftentimes collectively known as the "Institutional Review Board" (IRB), such is the case at Liberty University. This researcher applied for IRB approval on February 7, 2024. IRB approval was received on February 14, 2024; the DMIN action research project commenced shortly thereafter on February 18, 2024. A copy of the IRB approval letter can be found on the very last page of this document.

Pre-Project Activities

After gaining IRB approval, the action project launched with pre-project activities, that is, the administrative matters that had to be taken care of before moving into the investigative phase of the action research project. Collectively, the first three weeks of the action research project consisted of gaining permission, recruitment, and soliciting volunteers for the action research project. A pre-project church survey was administered on February 25, 2024, a total of

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[291] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 35.

22 people took part in this phase of the action research project. Ten of those 22 people (45.4%) that took part in the pre-project church survey desired Bible-based pastoral counseling and subsequently volunteered to be participants in the investigative phase of the action research project. The pre-project church survey is located in Appendix G of this document. A more thorough explanation of the aforementioned activities is contained in the following paragraphs.

After compiling information from the pre-project church survey, during the first and second week of the action research project, the researcher solicited volunteers to partake in the investigative phase of the action research project. SBPCP in the researcher's ministry context could accommodate no more than 12 participants at any given time for the reasons previously mentioned in this document. A total of ten people volunteered to be a participant in the investigative phase. On February 25, 2024, the researcher provided the initial screening to the 10 volunteers. A copy of the initial screening taken by the volunteers is located in Appendix B of this document.

A short time later, the researcher compiled the results and made contact with the volunteers who took part in the initial screening to advise them that they were all selected to participate in the program. In the end, the 10 people that desired Bible-based pastoral counseling and subsequently volunteered to take part in it, were transitioned to the investigative phase of the doctoral study and thereby went from merely volunteers to live participants in this action research project.

During the third week of the action research project, the participants reviewed the consent form, completed the Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Program Intake Form and Questionnaire, and made necessary signatures, gaining further clarification as deemed necessary. All activities conducted and relevant information, for ethical purposes, were conducted in a

confidential manner with only those who had a need to know being read in on any information or specific activities conducted. The study instruments necessary to complete this phase of the project are located in Appendix C and Appendix D of this document, respectively. The researcher spent the remainder of the third week familiarizing himself with each individual participant's remarks made on the intake form and prepared to move into the investigative phase of the action research project, bringing the pre-project activities to a conclusion.

One-on-One Counseling Sessions

The one-on-one counseling sessions began the overall fourth week of the action research project, with the first session being conducted on March 17, 2024 immediately following that morning's worship service. One-on-one counseling sessions ran though the fourth overall week of the action research project (Week 1 for participants) through the overall tenth week of the action research project (Week 6 for participants), with the last one-on-one counseling session being conducted on May 4, 2024. SBPCP counseling topics were of a spiritual nature; in fact, the counseling topics for each week correspond to themes the researcher unearthed when he conducted the literature review for this academic undertaking. As a result, the counseling agenda for each week was predetermined. However, at the end of each counseling session, the counselee got the opportunity to speak about a problem or issue that was not addressed during the session. The researcher would either address the concern at that time or later, depending on the complexity of the problem or issue, regardless of whether the problem or issue related to the topic discussed during that session.

When the researcher initially designed SBPCP, he planned on conducting all counseling sessions at the church. After discussing matters with the those who wanted counseling, it was

determined that the phone was more efficient for both the researcher and the participants. As a result, the researcher conducted the majority of the counseling sessions via the phone, each session lasting for an average of about 30-40 minutes. The counseling agenda for each week of one-on-one counseling sessions was as follows:

- Week 1: Explicit Identification With the One True God

- Week 2: Spiritual Formation Practices

- Week 3: Loving God

- Week 4: Loving Others

- Week 5: Fellowship Amongst the Saints

- Week 6: Forgiving Others

An outline of the counseling agenda for each week is located in Appendix G through Appendix M. The "Forgiveness Fact Sheet" located in Appendix N was utilized during the final two weeks of investigative phase of the action research project.

After each one-on-one counseling session, the researcher assigned a homework assignment to each participant. The homework assignments consisted of brief journal entries, designed to reinforce what was discussed during the counseling session. Participants were not asked to share details of what they wrote in their journals and were fully aware that the homework assignment was an optional task. Before closing the counseling session, the researcher administered a five question post-counseling survey. The post-counseling session survey had a dual purpose of assessing the effectiveness of the counseling session and determining if the counselee wanted to discuss another matter that was not addressed during the counseling survey. To achieve the desired ends, the researcher asked the following questions:

1. Did you enjoy your Bible-based pastoral counseling experience today?

2. Did today's session promote your spiritual growth or maturity?

3. Did the pastoral counselor seem to have your best interest at heart?

4. Based on today's experience, would you recommend this program to someone else in the future?

5. Is there something that you would like to talk about in the near future that was not addressed today? If yes, please write in the space below a couple of sentences explaining the issue you would like to discuss on a later date.

After collecting responses to the above questions, the researcher prayed with the counselee and concluded the counseling session.

Group Counseling Session

SBPCP was designed with a solitary group counseling session intended to be conducted following the conclusion of all one-on-one counseling sessions. The lone group counseling session was conducted on May 8, 2024, the seventh for participants, the overall eleventh week for the action research project. Ideas and solutions concerning church unity were brainstormed during this counseling session. The "Forgiveness Fact Sheet" that was utilized during Week 6 in the one-on-one counseling sessions was also referenced during this lone group counseling session.

Small group gatherings that have an intentional focus on pastoral care have been fundamental to discipleship virtually since the early stages of the Lord Jesus earthly public ministry, having summoned three fishermen to leave everything and follow Him (Mark 1:14-

19).[292] In light of the previous fact, small groups, especially their facilitators, are critical pieces

to formal pastoral counseling and the perpetual discipleship process.[293] Due to all of the

aforementioned, the group counseling process was viewed and treated as an essential and

worthwhile endeavor. The group counseling session, like the one-on-one counseling sessions,

were closed upon administering the post-counseling session survey and prayer.

Post-Project Activities

Similar to the pre-project activities, the post-project activities were also administrative in

nature. Due to some scheduling conflicts, post-project activities had to commence earlier than

initially planned, beginning on April 28, 2024. The post-project activities consisted of

conducting last-minute follow-ups, ensuring that all paperwork was received, on file, and

contained legible handwriting. The post-project activities also included administering exit

interviews and post-project surveys; the study instruments utilized to complete these tasks are

located in Appendix I and Appendix J of this document, respectively.

Conclusion

Following the end of SBPCP, on May 12, 2024, participants were awarded a plaque as a

small token of gratitude and appreciation for their participation. With the conclusion of the post-

project activities, this brought a fitting end to the action research project for the participants.

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[292] Stephen P. Greggo, "Small-Group Fellowships," in *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling*, eds. Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 255.

[293] Garret Higbee, "Uncommon Community: Biblical Counseling in Small Groups," in *Scripture and Counseling: God's Word for Life in a Broken World*, eds. Bob Kelleman and Jeff Forrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 247.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter will provide an analysis of the results from the action research project, analyzing key qualitative and quantitative data designed to shed light on research findings and outcomes. It is important to note that when it comes to data analysis, all analysis on some level involves "data interpretation."[294] Having acknowledged the previous fact, this chapter will provide a comprehensive summary of the overall results and interpretation of the data contained in this action research project, focusing on analyzing the data from the perspective of the participants as much as humanly possible while keeping an eye on emerging principles and themes.

Collective Results

Collectively, post-participant survey and exit interview results indicated that 100% of SBPCP participants believed that they grew spiritually in their walk with God as a result of participating in the program, see #10 on Figure 4.11. Exit interview data indicated that participants believed that one-on-one attention received from the researcher and his willingness to hear and answer their questions was by and large the most significant contributor to their spiritual growth. All told, the results of this action research project suggested that SBPCP is effective in building up healthy disciples who make up healthy churches.

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[294] Ernest T. Stringer and Alfredo Ortiz Aragón, *Action Research*. Fifth Edition (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2021), 168 Kindle.

Data Analysis

Following IRB approval, the action research project commenced with a pre-project church survey. The rationale that underscored the researcher's decision to administer a pre-project church survey, at least in part, was data triangulation, general fact-finding purposes, and church member's prior exposure to formal pastoral counseling. More specifically, the pre-project church survey provided insight concerning church members thoughts in general surrounding the topic of pastoral counseling.

Prior to beginning the investigative phase of the action research project, data was collected from members in the local church who were 18 years of age and over. A total of 22 people contributed to the pre-project phase of the action research project. At first consideration, 22 people may not seem like a significant number of people. However, the reader should be advised that the researcher's ministry context is rural in nature. With regards to the previous statement, 22 survey respondents make up the majority of adult congregants gathered any given Sunday for worship service at Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church. Finally, of those 22 people that took part in the pre-project church survey, 10 of them, 45.4% of survey respondents, desired Bible-based pastoral counseling and subsequently volunteered to be participants in the investigative phase of the action research project.

After the administration of the pre-project church survey, administrative data was collected from the 10 people that desired counseling and subsequently volunteered to be participants in the investigative phase of the action research project. Having communicated that they desired Bible-based pastoral counseling, an initial screening was provided to those that volunteered to participate in the investigative phase of the study. Following the initial screening, seven weeks of counseling sessions began. Efficacy of counseling efforts were measured on a

weekly basis utilizing a post-counseling session survey containing five questions that were

provided to all participants at the conclusion of each counseling session, those five questions

were as follows:

      1. Did you enjoy your Bible-based pastoral counseling experience today?

      2. Did today's session promote your spiritual growth or maturity?

      3. Did the pastoral counselor seem to have your best interest at heart?

      4. Based on today's experience, would you recommend this program to someone else in the future?

      5. Is there something that you would like to talk about in the near future that was not addressed today?

The above questions not only aided the researcher in determining the efficacy of each individual

counseling session but also were intended to provide an opportunity for the participant to broach

an issue that may not have been organically addressed during the counseling session.

Pre-Project Church Survey Findings

      Over a three-week period, the researcher administered the pre-project church survey for

several reasons. Some of those reasons included but were not limited to gauging church

member's interest in a formal pastoral counseling program, determining church member's prior

exposure to formal pastoral counseling programs, and soliciting church members pre-conceived

notions about what pastoral counseling entailed.

      Survey respondents were asked to consider seven objective statements. The respondents

were instructed to answer with their strongest initial feelings about the statement. The survey

was administered anonymously with potential responses delimited to "yes" or "no" only. A total

of 22 people participated in the pre-project church survey. Respondents considered the following statements on to the pre-project church survey:

1. I have previously participated in a formal pastoral counseling program.

2. Pastoral counseling plays an important role in spiritual maturity.

3. I believe that Saint Mark needs a formal pastoral counseling program.

4. Pastoral counseling and preaching are completely separate ministries that have no relation to one another.

5. Pastoral counseling is for healing, not to help people grow spiritually.

6. Unity and fellowship among members in the church is something that needs to be improved upon at Saint Mark.

7. I would feel safe sharing sensitive information in one-on-one pastoral counseling.

The second statement yielded the highest percentage of "yes" responses, with 21 of 22 people responding in the affirmative (95.4%). The seventh statement had the second most "yes" responses, 20 of 22 people (90.9%). In contrast, the first statement had the highest percentage of "no" responses, with 15 of 22 people responding that they had never participated in a formal pastoral counseling program (68.1%). Interestingly, the fifth statement had the second most "no" responses, 14 of 22 people (63.6%). The researcher anticipated mostly "no" responses to the fifth statement but admittedly thought there would be more "no" responses than what actually proved to be the case. Figure 4.1 below provides more insight into participants' responses to the pre-project church survey.

Figure 4.1 Pre-Project Church Survey Findings

Pre-Project Church Survey	Yes	No
1. I have previously participated in a formal pastoral counseling program.	7	15
2. Pastoral Counseling plays an important role in spiritual maturity.	21	1
3. I believe that Saint Mark needs a formal pastoral counseling program.	19	3
4. Pastoral Counseling and preaching are completely separate ministries that have no relation to one another.	9	13
5. Pastoral counseling is for healing, not to help people grow spiritually.	8	14
6. Unity and fellowship among members in the church is something that needs to be improved upon at Saint Mark.	19	3
7. I would feel safe sharing sensitive information in one-on-one pastoral counseling.	20	2

After collecting and analyzing all of the data from the pre-project church survey, the researcher concluded that prior to the convening of the action research project, members at Saint Mark generally had a high view of pastoral counseling despite the fact that the majority of them had never been exposed to a formal pastoral counseling program. An undeterminable number of factors could have factored into a high view of pastoral counseling, to include their generally favorable view of their pastor. Interestingly enough, while members at Saint Mark had a high view of pastoral counseling, 36.3% of church members at Saint Mark believed that the primary role of pastoral counseling was limited to healing and had absolutely no role in spiritual growth. Moreover, the results suggested that 40.9% of church members at Saint Mark believed that pastoral counseling and preaching were two distinct ministries that had absolutely no relation at all to one another.

In summary, the above detailed analysis led this researcher to conclude that prior to beginning the action research project, members of Saint Mark generally had favorable opinions about pastoral counseling but had mixed feelings and ideas about the role of pastoral counseling as it pertained to spiritual maturity.

Initial Screening Findings

An initial screening was provided to all 10 participants who desired counseling and volunteered to take part in the investigative phase of the action research project. The initial screening had a total of 20 objective statements that participants had to consider and respond to in kind. All 20 objective statements on the initial screening related to the five core characteristics that this researcher believes are essential to being a healthy Christian disciple and healthy church member. The five core characteristics are:

1. Explicit identification with the crucified and risen Christ.

2. Doing good works.

3. Fleeing from sin.

4. Digestion of Scripture.

5. Praying regularly.

After collecting and analyzing the data from the initial screening, the researcher concluded that prior to counseling sessions beginning, the participants held a high view of the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross. The high view of Christ is evident in the fact that all participants "strongly agreed" that (1) the Lord Jesus died on the cross for their "personal" sins; (2) that He was physically, literally, and bodily raised from the dead; and (3) His death was absolutely necessary for them to have eternal life. Figure 4.2 provides more details concerning findings derived from the initial screening.

Figure 4.2 Initial Screening Findings

Initial Screening Statements Considered	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I believe that God exists in three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), yet there is only one God.	9	1		
2. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my personal sins.	10			
3. I believe that Jesus was physically/bodily raised from the dead.	10			
4. I believe that Jesus' death on the cross was absolutely necessary for me to have eternal life.	10			
5. A person must believe in Jesus's resurrection to be a Christian.	9	1		
6. I treat people in a way that I want to be treated.	7	3		
7. I mistreat people who mistreat me.	2	1	5	2
8. I enjoy doing good things for people who are not my family and friends.	6	4		
9. I give money to worthy causes when I can to afford to.	4	5	1	
10. I give my time and talent to those who cannot help themselves.	5	5		
11. I know that I am a sinner.	5	3	2	
12. I do certain things even though I know the Bible says those things are sinful.	1	9		
13. Every day I intentionally try not to sin.	5	5		
14. I have sin in my life that I have not addressed.	2	5	2	1
15. Sometimes it feels good to do certain things that I know are sinful.	2	3	4	1
16. Every day I read my Bible or listen to it being read.	4	3	2	1
17. I read my Bible at least once per week.	8	2		
18. I listen to Bible-based sermons or conversations even when I am not in church.	4	5	1	
19. I take time to study the Bible or seek help for passages of Scripture hard to understand.	2	8		
20. I believe it is important for me to regularly read the Bible.	8	2		
21. I pray at least twice per day.	4	6		
22. I pray at least once per day.	9	1		
23. I pray at least once per week.	7	1	1	1
24. I confess my sins to God in prayer on a regular basis.	9	1		
25. I believe it is important for me to have a consistent prayer life.	10			

There were some noteworthy inconsistencies on the initial screening. The inconsistencies surrounded the topic of "fleeing from sin" and "praying regularly." For example, as it pertained to fleeing from sin, all 10 participants agreed or strongly agreed that they do certain things though they know the Bible says those very things are sinful actions. With regards to the previously stated, two participants (20%) disagreed with the notion that they are "sinners." Similarly, as it pertained to praying regularly, every participant indicated that they prayed at least twice per day and reaffirmed that fact one statement later when all participants indicated that they prayed at least once per day. Yet, two participants (20%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they prayed at least once per week.

As it relates to the inconsistencies mentioned in the above paragraph, after analyzing the totality of the data collected from the initial screening, this researcher concluded that the inconsistencies surrounding "fleeing from sin" and "praying regularly" were nothing more than misunderstandings of the statements. The researcher concluded that it was highly likely that since the participants had already indicated they prayed at least twice per week, they misunderstood how the statement should have been implied.

For the inconsistencies regarding fleeing from sin, when you consider that all participants (100%) strongly agreed that Jesus died on the cross for their "personal sins," it is highly likely that the two participants that indicated they were not sinners held that position because of the Lord's sacrificial and substitutionary death on the cross, they are "no longer" sinners. Similarly, as it pertained to praying regularly, since those participants had already indicated that they prayed at least twice per week, they likely misunderstood how the statement should have been implied. Bolstering the likelihood the participants misunderstood those statements is the fact that the researcher gave zero to little explanation of how the objective statements ought to be

understood. Desiring true and accurate research findings, participants were only advised to respond to the statements with their "gut feelings."

Investigative Phase Project Participants

All 10 investigative phase project participants identified as Black or African-American, seven women (70%) in contrast to three men (30%), which is generally reflective of the make-up of the congregation. Every participant had been a member of the church for at least six years with the exception of one participant, a 52-year-old African American woman.

The oldest participant was a woman, 82 years of age. The youngest participant was 23 years old, also a woman. Ages for male participants were 80 years old, and the other two were 77-years of age when the action research project commenced. The median age for male participants was 78 years old as compared to 61.8 years old for female participants. The combined overall median age was 66.7 years for all investigative phase project participants. A snapshot of the applicable demographics of the investigative phase project participants can be observed in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3 Investigative Phase Project Participant Demographics

Investigative Phase Project Participant Demographics	Age
Black Woman	74
Black Woman	82
Black Man	80
Black Woman	23
Black Man	77
Black Woman	82
Black Woman	56
African American Woman	52
Black Woman	64
Black Man	77
* Average Male Age: 78, Average Female Age: 61.8.	
** 7 Women and three Men, all of whom identify as Black or African American. The cumulative overall average age for all participants was 66.7 years of age.	

Week 1

The discussion topic on the counseling agenda for the first week was "Explicit Identification With the One True God." Week 1 counseling sessions were conducted March 17, 2024 through March 22, 2024. Counseling sessions were conducted with seven of the 10 participants, a 70% contact rate.

Counselees shared their beliefs and feelings about God's trinitarian nature. One of the counselees, a 77-year-old black male, explained that he loves God because Jesus died for his "personal sins." Multiple counselees articulated that they rely on the Holy Spirit for "leadership and guidance" on a daily basis.[295] Moreover, this researcher discussed with each of the

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[295] Michael and Chelsea orally stated these remarks during their respective counseling sessions conducted by the researcher on March 19, 2024.

counselees the significance of Galatian 2:20 and Revelation 12:13-14 as it related to an explicit identification of the one true God.

At the conclusion of the counseling sessions, participants provided feedback on the session by self-reporting on their experience. The results strongly indicated that the first week of the action research project positively impacted the counselees' spiritual maturity. All counseling sessions during this week were conducted via phone with one exception, a 52-year-old woman's counseling session was conducted at the church in the Pastor's office. It should be noted that at the researcher's request and the counselee's subsequent permission, the researcher's wife was allowed to attend this specific counseling session. The counseling agenda for Week 1 is located in Appendix G of this document. A snapshot of feedback from Week 1 is detailed in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4 Week 1 Counseling Outcomes

Outcomes: Week 1		Yes		No	
Did you enjoy your Bible-based pastoral counseling experience today?		7		0	
Did today's session promote your spiritual growth or maturity?		7		0	
Did the pastoral counselor seem to have your best interest at heart?		7		0	
Based on today's experience, would you recommend this program to someone else in the future?		7		0	
Is there something that you would like to talk about in the near future that was not addressed today?		6		1	

Week 2

The discussion topic on the counseling agenda for the second week was "Spiritual Formation Practices." Week 2 counseling sessions were conducted March 31, 2024 through April 6, 2024. Counseling sessions were conducted with eight of the 10 participants, one more

participant than the previous week, for an 80% contact rate. Contact was made with another participant, a 74-year woman, but she declined to take part in counseling due to her being ill.

All counseling sessions completed during the second week were conducted via phone. Counselees discussed their customs and practices of how they usually spent time with the Lord and the quality of their personal prayer life. One counselee, a 23-year-old Black female, was very interested in learning more spiritual disciplines in an effort to strengthen her relationship with the Lord; the researcher shared his thoughts concerning the advantages of various spiritual disciplines with her. It should be noted that all of the counselees received journals from the researcher to use however they deemed appropriate.

The researcher shared insights with all the counselees from Psalm 1:1-3 and 2 Peter 3:17-18 as it related to various spiritual formation practices and disciplines. Counselees revealed that some of the common spiritual disciplines they regularly practiced were Bible digestion, prayer, singing, meditating, and journaling.[296] At the conclusion of the counseling sessions, counselees provided feedback on the session by self-reporting on their experience. All counseling sessions were conducted via phone. Once again, like Week 1, the results from the second week of the action research project had a positive impact on the counselees' spiritual maturity. The counseling agenda for Week 2 is located in Appendix H of this document. A snapshot of feedback from Week 2 is detailed in Figure 4.5.

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[296] Multiple counselees shared orally shared these sentiments during their counseling sessions conducted by the researcher on March 31, 2024 through April 6, 2024.

Figure 4.5 Week 2 Counseling Outcomes

Outcomes: Week 2	Yes	No
Did you enjoy your Bible-based pastoral counseling experience today?	8	0
Did today's session promote your spiritual growth or maturity?	8	0
Did the pastoral counselor seem to have your best interest at heart?	8	0
Based on today's experience, would you recommend this program to someone else in the future?	8	0
Is there something that you would like to talk about in the near future that was not addressed today?	2	6

Week 3

The discussion topic on the counseling agenda for the third week was "Loving God."
Week 3 counseling sessions were conducted from April 8, 2024 through April 12, 2024,
counseling sessions were conducted with six of the 10 participants, a 60% contact rate.
Counselees discussed what it meant to them to love God and how that love compelled them to be
a better Christian. One counselee, a 77-year-old Black male, stated that he was compelled to be
the best Christian he could because the Lord Jesus died on the cross for him. Another counselee,
an 82-year-old Black woman, shared her thoughts from the homework assignment counselees
were assigned the previous week. This 82-year-old was also the first participant to take the
initiative to reach out to the researcher for her weekly session rather than waiting on his phone
call. Also during this week, the researcher shared insights from Matthew 22:26-28 and John
15:10-11 concerning the love that people should have for God.

At the conclusion of each counseling session, participants provided feedback on the
session by self-reporting on their experience. Like the preceding two weeks, counselees self-
reported that the third week of the action research project had a positive impact on their spiritual
maturity. All counseling sessions were conducted via phone. The counseling agenda for Week 3

is located in Appendix I of this document. A snapshot of feedback from Week 3 is detailed in

Figure 4.6.

Figure 4.6 Week 3 Counseling Outcomes

Outcomes: Week 3	Yes	No
Did you enjoy your Bible-based pastoral counseling experience today?	6	0
Did today's session promote your spiritual growth or maturity?	6	0
Did the pastoral counselor seem to have your best interest at heart?	6	0
Based on today's experience, would you recommend this program to someone else in the future?	6	0
Is there something that you would like to talk about in the near future that was not addressed today?	2	4

Week 4

The discussion topic on the counseling agenda for the fourth week was "Loving Others."

During this week, counseling sessions were conducted April 15, 2024 through April 20, 2024.

Counseling sessions were conducted with seven of the 10 participants, a 70% contact rate.

Contact was made with another would be eighth participant for the week, but he stated that he

was not feeling well.

Counselees discussed what it meant to them to love other people, the ways in which they

personally demonstrated their love for others, and why it was important to love everyone but

especially the redeemed people of God. One counselee, a 56-year-old woman, stated that she

does her best to love the people of God, but at times Christians are the "hardest people to love"

when they are demonstrating Christlike behavior.[297] Other counselees had difficulty explaining

how they personally demonstrated their love for people. During this week of counseling, the

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[297] Tiffany orally stated these remarks during her counseling session conducted by the researcher on April 20, 2024.

researcher expounded on his thoughts with each of the counselees from Matthew 22:36-40 and 1 John 4:7-8 as it pertained to the love that Christians should have for other people

At the conclusion of the counseling sessions, counselees provided feedback by self-reporting on their experience. Like previous weeks, counselees self-reported that the fourth week of the action research project was an overall positive experience on their spiritual maturity. Also, three counselees, as opposed to two counselees the previous week, stated that they wanted to talk about a specific matter in the near future that was not addressed during the counseling session. All counseling sessions were conducted via phone. The counseling agenda for Week 4 is located in Appendix J of this document. A snapshot of feedback from Week 4 is detailed in Figure 4.7.

Figure 4.7 Week 4 Counseling Outcomes

Outcomes: Week 4	Yes	No
Did you enjoy your Bible-based pastoral counseling experience today?	7	0
Did today's session promote your spiritual growth or maturity?	7	0
Did the pastoral counselor seem to have your best interest at heart?	7	0
Based on today's experience, would you recommend this program to someone else in the future?	7	0
Is there something that you would like to talk about in the near future that was not addressed today?	3	4

Week 5

The discussion topic on the counseling agenda for the fifth week was "Fellowship Amongst the Saints." Week 5 counseling sessions were conducted April 22, 2024 through April 27, 2024. Counseling sessions were conducted with six of the 10 participants, a 60% contact rate. All counseling sessions completed during the fifth week were conducted via phone. During this week, by design, the researcher asked questions that intended for the counselee to push pass superficial matters and into potentially more spiritually-vulnerable territory.

During this week of the action research project, counselees discussed the importance of fellowship and unity within the local church. One counselee, an 82-year-old woman, stated that she first prayed to the Lord before she engaged in any conflict with a member. Another counselee, a 74-year-old woman, stated that when she had a disagreement with a member in the church, she went to them personally to settle the matter before making anyone else aware of the issue at hand. A third counselee, who was 80 years old when this action research project began, admitted that he does not get along well with many members of the church. After listening intently, this researcher provided personal and practical spiritual advice to this counselee. The researcher also lovingly challenged the counselee to work more diligently at doing his part to repair those fractured relationships. This researcher shared biblical insights with all counselees from Ephesians 2:19-20 and Ephesians 4:1-3, specifically as it pertained to unity and fellowship amongst the redeemed people of God at Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church.

At the conclusion of the counseling session, the counselee provided feedback on the session by self-reporting on their experience. As was the case all the preceding weeks, counselees self-reported that the fifth week of the action research project by and large made an overall positive impact on their spiritual maturity. All counseling sessions were conducted via phone. The counseling agenda for Week 5 is located on Appendix K of this document. For more details on counseling outcomes from Week 5, see Figure 4.8.

Figure 4.8 Week 5 Counseling Outcomes

Outcomes: Week 5	Yes	No
Did you enjoy your Bible-based pastoral counseling experience today?	6	0
Did today's session promote your spiritual growth or maturity?	6	0
Did the pastoral counselor seem to have your best interest at heart?	6	0
Based on today's experience, would you recommend this program to someone else in the future?	6	0
Is there something that you would like to talk about in the near future that was not addressed today?	3	3

Week 6

The discussion topic on the counseling agenda for the sixth week was "Forgiving Others." Week 6 counseling sessions were conducted April 29, 2024 through May 4, 2024. Counseling sessions were conducted with eight of the 10 participants, an 80% contact rate. Counselees discussed forgiving others and their ability or inability to extend forgiveness in the most difficult circumstances. By design, the researcher increased the ante of the counseling sessions, even more so than Week 5, by asking personal questions in an effort to compel the counselee to look deeper into their own heart.

This week proved to be the most difficult to emotionally withstand for this researcher and the counselees. One counselee talked about domestic abuse at the hands of their spouse. Another counselee shared their feelings about the negative impacts of sexual assault. Finally, another counselee talked about being referenced as a "nigger" by a white male at their place of employment.[298] In all of the aforementioned cases, the researcher listened intently. He also did his best to remind the counselees about the peace of God that surpasses all understanding while

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[298] Michael orally stated these remarks during his counseling session conducted by the researcher on May 1, 2024.

at the same time emphasizing that as forgiven people in Christ, the Christ-follower is required to

forgive even the most heinous of acts.

Like previous weeks, this researcher shared biblical insights with each of the counselees.

This week insights were shared from Matthew 6:14-15 and Ephesians 4:32, specifically as it

pertained to the importance of being willing and able to forgive others and its direct correlation

with spiritual healthy disciples. All counselees expressed the desire to want to forgive for various

reasons, such as their own mental and spiritual health, and for the glory of God. One counselee

admitted that they still harbored the effects of those ugly and painful incidents inflicted upon

him.[299] Finally, it should be noted that two counselees shared their experiences with previous

homework assignments that were assigned by the researcher. Counselees were fully aware that

the homework assignments were optional and that they were not required to share their

experiences with the researcher.

At the conclusion of the counseling session, participants provided feedback on the

session by self-reporting on their personal experience. Once again, like all the previous weeks,

the results from the sixth week of the action research project had a positive impact on the

participants' spiritual maturity. All counseling sessions were conducted via phone. The

counseling agenda for Week 6 is located in Appendix J of this document. Additionally, a

"Forgiveness Fact Sheet" was provided to all counselees, it is located in Appendix N of this

document. For a snapshot of feedback from Week 6, reference Figure 4.9.

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[299] Michael orally stated these remarks during his counseling session conducted by the researcher on May 1, 2024.

Figure 4.9 Week 6 Counseling Outcomes

Outcomes: Week 6	Yes	No
Did you enjoy your Bible-based pastoral counseling experience today?	7	0
Did today's session promote your spiritual growth or maturity?	7	0
Did the pastoral counselor seem to have your best interest at heart?	7	0
Based on today's experience, would you recommend this program to someone else in the future?	7	0
Is there something that you would like to talk about in the near future that was not addressed today?	2	5

Week 7

The discussion topic on the counseling agenda for the seventh week was "Brainstorming Solutions." This week's counseling session was conducted on May 8, 2024. A singular group counseling session was conducted with five of the 10 participants, a 50% contact rate. This week was different from the other weeks, as it was a group counseling session rather than one-on-one counseling. Many of the participants had prior commitments and therefore were not able to attend the group counseling session.

During this counseling session, the researcher facilitated a discussion that centered on three questions. The three questions the counselees considered were as follows:

1. Why do some members at Saint Mark not get along with one another?

2. What barriers, if any, are stopping Saint Mark from growing closer as a church family? If there are barriers that exist, do we have the ability to tear down those barriers?

3. What can we do to grow closer to one another and strengthen the bonds of unity within the church?

Counselees noted that some of the problems were due to sinful human nature, and some people having the need to "always be in control." Two factors were identified as barriers, (1) family dynamics in the church, and (2) some people being overly resistant to change. Discussions

included more teaching around conflict resolution and effective communication techniques, which directly speak to cultivating greater unity in this local church. To address and hopefully dissolve this barrier, the researcher advised counselees he would be sharing a message in the near future from Matthew 18:15-17 specifically concerning communication tactics and conflict resolution in the local church. Consequently, this group counseling session provided concrete information concerning the barriers that hindered unity the local church but also provided specifics on what members said they needed to be taught about biblical communication techniques that would subsequently lead to greater unity within the local church.

At the conclusion of the group counseling session, the counselees provided feedback on the session by self-reporting on their experience. As was the case in all the preceding weeks, counselees self-reported that the seventh week of the action research project by and large made an overall positive impact on their spiritual maturity. This counseling session was conducted at the local church. The counseling agenda for Week 7 is located in Appendix M of this document.

This week marked the official end of SBPCP for the participants. On Sunday, May 12, 2024, all counselees were awarded a plaque as a small token of gratitude and appreciation for their enthusiastic participation in SBPCP. For more details on counseling outcomes from Week 7, see Figure 4.10.

Figure 4.10 Week 7 Counseling Outcomes

Outcomes: Week 7	Yes	No
Did you enjoy your Bible-based pastoral counseling experience today?	5	0
Did today's session promote your spiritual growth or maturity?	5	0
Did the pastoral counselor seem to have your best interest at heart?	5	0
Based on today's experience, would you recommend this program to someone else in the future?	5	0
Is there something that you would like to talk about in the near future that was not addressed today?	3	2

Post-Participant Survey Findings

The post-participant surveys were conducted from April 28, 2024 through May 3, 2024.

Participants considered 20 objective statements, with possible responses delimited to "yes" or

no" only. See Appendix J for post-participant project survey. The post-participant survey was

conducted anonymously. For the overwhelming majority of the statements there was a

consensus, that is, all the participants responded "yes" and resulted in a 100% success rate. See

Figure 4.11 at the end of this section. There were two noted exceptions to "yes" responses, those

statements were third and nineteenth on the survey, respectively. The subject statements were:

1. (#3) I now believe SBPCP should be a full-time ministry at Saint Mark.

2. (#19) I plan to continue to use journaling as a spiritual discipline in the future.

Both of the above statements yielded nine positive responses compared to only one negative

response, resulting in a 90% success rate for those respective statements.

One participant failed to respond to the eighth statement on the survey, which was, "After

completing SBPCP, I am a more spiritually mature person than I was before I began the

program." Two possible scenarios arose in the researcher's mind as to possible reasons for the

previously referenced anomaly, (1) failing to respond to the statement was a mere oversight and

was not purposely left unanswered; (2) the statement was intentionally skipped as a way out of

replying with a "no" response to the statement. This researcher concluded that the failure to

respond to the statement was merely an oversight on behalf of the participant. This being the

case was furthered bolstered by the fact that the same participant responded "yes" to every other

statement.

Finally, it is worth noting that during the pre-project church survey, it was discovered that

36.3% of church members at Saint Mark believed that the primary role of pastoral counseling

was limited to healing and absolutely had no role in spiritual maturation. It was also discovered that 40.9% of church members at Saint Mark believed that pastoral counseling and preaching were two distinct ministries that have no relation at all to one another. In stark contrast, the post-project participant survey revealed that 100% of respondents said that (a) the private ministry of the Word, pastoral counseling, is just as important as the public ministry of the Word, preaching, when it comes to spiritual growth and maturity; and (b) pastoral counseling helps people heal "and" grow spiritually.

The previously referenced evidence-based information, ascertained using data from the fourth and fifth statement of the post-participant survey, led the researcher to conclude that those members who responded negatively during the pre-project church survey would likely conclude there is a nexus between pastoral counseling, preaching, healing, and spiritual growth/maturity had they been an active participant in SBPCP. For more details on post-participant survey findings, see Figure 4.11.

Figure 4.11 Post-Project Participant Survey Findings

Post-Project Participant Survey	Yes	No
1. I enjoyed participating in SBPCP.	10	0
2. Bible-based pastoral counseling should be used more at Saint Mark.	10	0
3. I now believe SBPCP should be a full-time ministry at Saint Mark.	9	1
4. The private ministry of the Word (pastoral counseling) is just as important as the public ministry of the Word (preaching) when it comes to spiritual growth and maturity.	10	0
5. Pastoral counseling helps people heal and helps them grow spiritually.	10	0
6. Pastoral counseling positively impacts fellowship and unity in the local church.	10	0
7 Having completed a SBPCP, I believe that the primary purpose of pastoral counseling is spiritual growth.	10	0
8. After completing SBPCP, I am a more spiritually mature person than I was before I began the program.*	9	0
9. SBPCP gave me an opportunity to discuss spiritual matters in a way that usually is not possible.	10	0
10. I have grown spiritually in my walk with God as a direct result of SBPCP.	10	0
11. SBPCP provided me with a better understanding of why unity is so important in the local church.	10	0
12. SBPCP provided a safe environment to share sensitive information.	10	0
13. I would recommend fellow members of our church to participate in SBPCP.	10	0
14. I believe other churches would benefit from SBPCP or similar programs.	10	0
15. SBPCP positively impacts spiritual maturity in the local church.	10	0
16. SBPCP fosters spiritual growth in the local church.	10	0
17. SBPCP has proven more effective than some other ministries in the local church as it concerns my spiritual growth and maturity.	10	0
18. Journaling was an effective way to document and reflect on my thoughts.	10	0
19. I plan to continue to use journaling as a spiritual discipline in the future.	9	1
20. SBPCP has positively impacted my entire life, spiritual and everyday (physical) life.	10	0

* One participant provided no response to this statement.

Exit Interview Findings

Exit interviews were conducted from April 28, 2024 through May 5, 2024. Participants were asked to respond to five open-ended questions. The exit interview was conducted in a confidential manner. The open-ended questions participants considered were as follows:

1. How did SBPCP positively impact your spiritual maturity/growth in ways different than other ministries have accomplished?

2. Why should other church members consider participating in SBPCP?

3. What was the most positive thing about SBPCP?

4. What recommendations would you suggest for improving SBPCP?

5. Are there any other comments you have about SBPCP or the Bible-Based Pastoral Counselor? If so, please write your comments below.

Two consistent themes emerged from the exit interviews (a third theme emerged from the pre-project survey), those being (a) participants thoroughly enjoyed one-on-one time with their pastor talking about spiritual matters, while getting their questions answered; and (b) participants enjoyed being able to discuss their problems in an environment that was safe while being assured that they were not going be judged by the researcher for anything that they revealed during the one-on-one counseling sessions.

Addressing other takeaways from the exit interviews, one participant, in response to the first question referenced above, stated that SBPCP made them study the Bible more.[300] Also in response to the first question referenced above, another participant stated that SBPCP opened their eyes and mind in ways that other ministries did not in past times.[301] In response to the third

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[300] Shelia made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

[301] Evelyn made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

question referenced above, one participant stated that other church members should consider participating in in SBPCP because the answers are provided from the Word of God rather than a worldly perspective.[302] Another participant stated that "the topics were spot on with everyday situations."[303] Finally, a third participant stated that it gave them "an opportunity to reflect with someone knowledgeable about the subject."[304]

In closing, the exit interview findings were consistent with the responses from the pre-project participant survey. The exit interviews revealed that participants enjoyed one-on-one interaction with their pastor and that SBPCP is a great way to positively impact a person's spiritual condition. Furthermore, the exit interviews further confirm that SBPCP is not only a great way to foster spiritual growth in a believer but also that it contributed to healthy Christian disciples in healthy Christian churches.

Unanticipated Outcomes and Obstacles

This DMIN action research project in many ways played out as expected. Then, there were things that were totally unexpected. This section of the document will briefly expound on two unanticipated outcomes and findings, those being (1) the overwhelming positive feedback he received, and (2) the burnout the researcher experienced.

H.B Charles, Jr., a phenomenal preacher and long-time pastor, once remarked, "Powerful and important theology is communicated by simply being there for your people."[305] The

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[302] Dedra made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

[303] Chelsea made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

[304] John made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

[305] H.B. Charles, Jr., *On Pastoring: A Short Guide to Living, Leading, and Ministering as a Pastor* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2016), 184.

researcher bore witness to Charles's expressed thoughts concerning what this researcher refers to as "the ministry of presence." While this researcher did anticipate that SBPCP would produce overall positive results, this researcher was figuratively blown away by the number of participants who stated that they really needed a program such as SBPCP at this particular time in their life. Most of the participants were octogenarians and late middle-aged people who have children and grandchildren that are away and living their own lives. In light of the previously stated fact, many of the participants enjoyed just being able to talk with their pastor in an intimate way about exactly what was going on in their lives at that particular time. As Charles alluded to in the previously referenced quote, participants regularly mentioned how much they enjoyed the program and that their pastor was there for them.

Concerning burnout, which is the second unanticipated outcome, it necessarily must first be stated that this researcher immensely enjoyed this phase of the doctoral study and grew spiritually as well as professionally as a result of having carried out this action research project. Having said that, the intervention design required a tremendous amount of one-on-one interaction. This one-on-one interaction was the personal responsibility of the researcher, with virtually no one to assist him in this particular area. This resulted in the researcher, who is bi-vocational, stretching himself thin in order to accommodate program participants. In the end, the researcher was admittedly burned out towards the conclusion of the action research project. This researcher's experience with burnout reinforced the point that many have made in the past, that is, caretakers need care and rest like any other human being.[306] A remedy to prevent burnout will

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[306] Eric Scalise, "How to Develop an Effective Regimen of Self-Care in People-Helping Ministries," in *The Struggle Is Real: How to Care for Mental and Relational Health Needs in the Church*. Expanded Edition, eds. Tim Clinton and Jared Pingleton (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2019), 97.

be addressed in more detail in the final chapter when the researcher discusses the research implications of this action research project.

Summary of Results

A spiritually healthy Christian is a church member that is growing.[307] In light of the previous statement, after collecting, analyzing, and interpreting all of the data herein, this researcher concluded that under the loving care of a qualified and dedicated Bible-based pastoral counselor, SBPCP overwhelmingly had a positive impact on the participants' spiritual health.

The pre-project surveys, intake form/questionnaires, post-project participant surveys, and exit interviews along with the quantitative and qualitative data were the evidentiary proof that led the researcher to conclude that the action research project proved effective in building up spiritually healthier Christians.

Emergent Themes from SBPCP

Multiple themes emerged from this action research project, however there were three themes that were more prevalent than others. Those three themes were:

1.   Participants in SBPCP expressed that they initially volunteered to participate in the program because they desired a greater understanding of God and His word.

2.   Participants in SBPCP expressed that they enjoyed and valued one-on-one time with their pastor.

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[307] Thabiti Anyabwile, *What is a Healthy Church Member?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 83 Kindle.

3.   Participants in SBPCP expressed that the program provided them with an

opportunity to gain biblical insights not afforded by other ministries within the local

church.

Theme 1: Desire for Greater Understanding of God and His Word

Of the 10 SBPCP volunteers, eight of them made comments in their intake

form/questionnaire that expressed in some way that part of the reason they volunteered to be a

participant in SBPCP was because they desired a deeper understanding of God and His word.

Donald Whitney remarked that, "the eternal tragedy is that if the empty soul never properly

thirsts on earth, he will thirst in hell."[308] With regards to SBPCP, while Whitney's remarks are

not a perfect analogy because SBPCP was specifically designed for believers in the Lord Jesus,

the larger point that Whitney was speaking to is very much relevant; that larger point being "the

reason a person thirsts for God is because the Holy Spirit is at work within him."[309]

In a real sense, for the volunteers that sought counseling via SBPCP, their spiritual

problem was a lack of understanding and/or the desire for more understanding of God and His

word, an indicator that the Holy Spirit was working within them prior to the convening of the

project. SBPCP, a strategic Christian ministry, effectively and efficiently provided an avenue for

members of Saint Mark to glean more about the person and work of God and His word,

cultivating spiritually healthier members in the local church.

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[308] Whitney, *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*, 18.

[309] Ibid, 23.

Theme 2: Participants Enjoyed One-on-One Time with their Pastor

Of the 10 SBPCP volunteers, seven of them made comments during their respective exit interviews expressed that they very much enjoyed and were going to miss the one-on-one time with their pastor. One such comment came in response to the question, "How did SBPCP positively impact your spiritual maturity/growth in ways different than other ministries?" The participant responded, "I could be up front and personal." When asked "What was the most positive thing about SBPCP", this same participant opined "to talk [the ability to speak] freely and personal."[310] Fittingly, Jonathan Hayashi commented, "Many pastors think their greatest impact comes from preaching to many. Not true. Our greatest impact is in discipling a few."[311] Hayashi's insightful remarks bring to recollection that the Lord Jesus did some of His greatest work ministering to 12 men, eleven of whom would go on to do great things for the kingdom of God on Earth. SBPCP provided an opportunity for this a researcher, a Bible-based pastoral counselor, to do one-on-one ministry with relatively a few people, all of whom stated that SBPCP made them spiritually healthier Christians.

Theme 3: Participants Valued Strategic Christian Ministry

Of the 10 SBPCP volunteers, five of them expressed during their respective exit interviews that they valued a strategic Christian ministry. This sentiment was communicated when participants conveyed that SBPCP provided an opportunity to gain biblical insights not afforded by other ministries within the local church. Concerning SBPCP, one member commented that "these sessions afforded me the chance to explore Scriptures that were personal

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[310]John made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on May 3, 2024.

[311] Hayashi, *Ordinary Radicals*, 14.

to situations we discussed which I am thankful for."[312] Another member stated that "SBPCP

fostered Bible-based conversation and problem-solving methods."[313] Finally, another member

concerning SBPCP stated that "it helped me better understand sections of the Bible and opened

my eyes and mind in ways that weren't done from other ministries.[314]" As it pertained to the

predetermined topics, a major characteristic of SBPCP, this same member would later state

during the exit interview that "the topics were spot on with everyday situations."[315] It is worth

noting that in the post-project participant survey, when responding to the statement "SBPCP has

proven more effective than some other ministries in the local church as it concerns my spiritual

growth," all 10 participants replied "yes," affirming their value of a strategic Christian ministry

and its role in building up healthy disciples that make up healthy churches (see #17 on Figure

4.11).

Final Thoughts on Emergent Themes

In summary, the themes that emerged from SBPCP are encouraging for the future

viability of SBPCP or other similarly designed one-on-one counseling programs. The tangible

spiritual benefits alone of this particular strategic Christian ministry makes it a worthwhile

endeavor of implement in local churches, especially those similar in demographics. Moreover,

the themes herein are of ecclesial significance and for that reason are worthy of consideration for

further research.

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[312] Chelsea made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

[313] Susan made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

[314] Evelyn made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

[315] Ibid.

Synopsis

All told, a consensus, 100% of participants, self-reported that they grew spiritually as a direct result of participating in SBPCP. Moreover, 100% of participants also self-reported that SBPCP provided a means for them to discuss other aspects of their life and gain spiritual guidance concerning those matters. Over and above that, 100% of participants self-reported that SBPCP had proven more effective than some other ministries in the local church as it concerned their spiritual growth and maturity (see #17 on Figure 4.11).

Participants largely appreciated a safe one-on-one environment in which they could openly share private matters and not be shunned for their expressed sentiments. In fact, multiple participants stated that they would miss taking part in SBPCP. Participants appreciated an atmosphere in which they could discuss spiritual matters in a way that usually is not available to them. Journaling, a spiritual discipline heavily relied upon in this action research project, proved to be an effective strategy for the participants. In fact, 90% of participants self-reported that they planned to continue to utilize journaling in the future (see #19 on Figure 4.11). Finally, all 10 participants stated that they would recommend and encourage other members within the local church to participate in SBPCP (see #13 on Figure 4.11).

In closing, SBPCP proved to be tremendously effective. While successful contact was not made for counseling with every participant during a single given week, the contact rate also never dipped below 50% of the participants during a single given week. In the researcher's personal experience, it is par for the course that counselees have to cancel appointments. Seasoned Bible-based pastoral counselors realize that life happens and someone will inevitably cancel, in many instances that cancellation comes at the last minute. Having stated the previous fact, it is worth noting that during the course of SBPCP, out of 70 potential counseling contacts,

a total of 46 were successful, yielding an overall 65.7% contact rate for the entire program. Participants by and large remained engaged from the start of the action research project until the very end, with some participants stating during exit interviews that they were going to miss participating in SBPCP.

Having stated all of the previous facts, SBPCP effectively addressed the problem of spiritual immaturity at Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church by efficiently building up spiritually healthier Christians in the local church. As a further matter, SBPCP proved to be a strategic Christian ministry that not only builds up healthy disciples that make up healthy churches but also provides a clear path for believers apart of a local church to embark and continue growing in their faith.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In this fifth and final chapter of this action research project report, the problem, purpose, and thesis statements that were detailed in the opening chapter of this document will be revisited. In addition to revisiting the problem, purpose, and thesis statements, this chapter will discuss research implications, applications, limitations, and further opportunities to broaden SBPCP so that it may expand to other churches.

It is important to note that neither spiritual formation, spiritual growth, nor spiritual maturity is wholly reliant upon mere book knowledge, though biblical "book" knowledge is of the utmost importance and is a positive sign of a developing spiritually healthy disciple. On this matter, Bill Miller posited that a Christian's connection, their relationship with the Lord, has too many times been directly linked to the Christian's participation in a variety of spiritual disciplines and practices that purportedly assess a Christian's spiritual maturity while seemingly depreciating if not completely ignoring the Chrisitan's qualitative relationship with the Lord, namely the love of God and the love of people made in the image of God.[316] Having made the previous point, it would be prudent to not completely disregard those aspects of the action research project that cannot or were not objectively measured.

Revisiting the Problem, Purpose, and Thesis Statement

In the first chapter of this document, it was revealed that the problem was "some members at Saint Mark engage in spiritually immature actions, evoking immature reactions that

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[316] Miller, "Love and Spiritual Formation," in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation*, 166.

yield unhealthy relationships." The reader should recall that it was initially thought that unity or a lack thereof was the problem. However, further investigation led the researcher to conclude that unity was merely a symptom of a much larger problem that was looming, that problem being spiritually immature actions evoking immature reactions that inevitably led to unhealthy relationships within the local church.

The originally stated intended purpose of this DMIN action research project was "to develop and implement a strategically-designed one-on-one pastoral counseling program that efficiently builds up spiritually healthier Christians." The purpose was achieved by implementing a Christ-centered, Spirit-led, Bible-saturated pastoral program that included multiple one-on-one counseling sessions and personal interactions with the counselees that was consistent with the theoretical framework articulated in the second chapter of this document. One-on-one counseling sessions were supplemented by a singular strategically-engineered small group that was designed to meet the counselee's various needs and brainstorm new ideas for the way ahead.

Admittedly, when the researcher initially set to complete this action research project, he planned take a more traditional route in pastoral counseling, that is, allowing members of the church to come to the Bible-based pastoral counselor on their own volition with a personal problem. However, fearing that members may be reluctant of outing themselves by admitting they had problem that they needed counseling to resolve, the researcher determined that an innovative approach may prove better. The innovative approach of having a predetermined counseling agenda, a feature of SBPCP, allowed the researcher to initiate the action and openly invite every member in the church over 18 years of age to participate, mitigating the chances that someone would feel embarrassed that they sought counseling. The goal of pastoral counseling of

any variety is to partner with the counselee in co-facilitation of their spiritual growth.[317] SBPCP was this effective this regard and proved to be a theologically-informed strategic Christian ministry.

Finally, the thesis statement and chief claim of this action research project contained two elements. The original thesis statement asserted that "if certain members of Saint Mark faithfully participate in SBPCP, then they would become spiritually healthier Christians and cultivate a healthier local church." The first element "they would become spiritually healthier Christians," SBPCP was quite effective in building up healthier Christians and was extensively articulated in the previous chapter." As for the second element of the thesis statement, "cultivate a healthier local church," there is evidence that suggests that this element of the thesis statement was also achieved. One participant, when asked "How did SBPCP impact your spiritual maturity/growth in ways different than other ministries have accomplished," she responded "by gaining understanding about the what forgiveness is and what it is not."[318] Another second participant, when asked "How did SBPCP positively impact your spiritual maturity/growth in ways different than other ministries," Valerie responded that "it taught me how to positively handle forgiveness."[319] A third participant, when asked "What was the most positive thing about SBPCP, she responded "the genuine concerned you seemed to have about the concerns shared in confidence. It also provided me the opportunity to apply biblical knowledge to my own life as it relates to forgiveness."[320] Finally, a fourth participant, a 23-year-old Black woman commented that "SBPCP fostered Bible-based conversation and problem-solving methods." A little later,

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[317] Benner, *Strategic Pastoral Counseling*, 35.

[318] Chelsea made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

[319] Valerie made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

[320] Tiffany made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on May 5, 2024.

when asked "What was the most positive thing about SBPCP," this same woman responded that "secular psychologists offer an environment to express, vent, and share problems or concerns, but this program provided these avenues from the Word of God."[321] What is more is that 100% of participants self-reported that they believed SBPCP positively impacted unity in the local church; it is for the reasons previously outlined that led the researcher to conclude that the second element of the thesis statement, "cultivate a healthier local church," was also achieved.

Research Implications

The results detailed in the fourth chapter overwhelmingly proved that this DMIN action research project had a positive impact. This being the case, there are many implications that necessarily should be considered. This document will expound on four of those implications. The first of those implications is the need for qualified and dedicated Bible-based pastoral counselors; the second implication was the sufficiency of Scripture concerning Christlikeness and everyday material life matters; the third implication was Bible-based pastoral counseling is effective; the fourth and final implication is that counselees must be intentional about their spiritual growth.

The first research implication, the need for qualified and dedicated Bible-based pastoral counselors, is too critical of a factor not to mention. In the third chapter of this document, this researcher alluded to the fact that faithful, qualified, and dedicated Bible-based pastoral counselors are in short supply. In the fourth chapter, this researcher mentioned his personal experience with burnout while carrying out this action research project. Burnout and stress overload has oftentimes been the catalyst that prompted people to leave the ministry, further

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[321] Dedra made these remarks during an exit interview conducted by the researcher on April 28, 2024.

speaking to the need for qualified and dedicated Bible-based pastoral counselors.[322] As demand for counseling services increases, qualified and faithful Bible-based pastoral counselors can step in and fill that need.[323] The AACC in conjunction with Light University provides a wealth of training, education, and credentialing opportunities for everyone in the counseling ministry, from licensed professionals to local church lay ministers with zero to little formal training and education.[324] Also, Appendix K of this document contains a list of resources for the aspiring Bible-based pastoral counselor.

The second implication is the sufficiency of Scripture concerning Christlikeness and everyday material life matters is of supreme importance. This action research project demonstrated, as indicated by the results in the fourth chapter, that by beginning with the Word of God and tackling spiritual matters, thus will inevitably lead to addressing physical everyday material life matters and personal problems intrinsic to the human experience. Spiritual warfare and its many facets are best understood by studying God.[325] The spiritually dialed-in Christian will most likely not be overly surprised by the previous assertion as the Bible makes the believer keenly aware of the intersection between the spiritual and the material life matters (Eph:6:10-12). In fact, the intersection of spiritual matters and material life matters is so much a forgone conclusion that Tony Evans commented "Whatever has gone on, is going on, or will go on in your visible, physical world is rooted in the invisible, spiritual realm. If you do not know how to

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[322] Scalise, "How to Develop an Effective Regimen of Self-Care in People-Helping Ministries," in *The Struggle Is Real* ,97.

[323] Tan, "How to Develop an Effective Lay Counseling Ministry," in *The Struggle Is Real*, 132-133.

[324] If one goes to the AACC website (aacc.net) and click the "EDUCATION" tab, it will direct the user to Light University's website.

[325] Cook and Lawless, *Spiritual Warfare in the Storyline of Scripture*, 204.

navigate in the spiritual realm, you cannot hope to truly overcome in the physical realm."[326] Simply put, spiritual warfare is a real phenomenon and the Word of God is quintessential to the war being waged (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Considering the previous paragraph, the qualified, faithful, and dedicated pastoral counselor who is skilled in the private ministry of the Word can be a tremendous aid to the counselee in their quest to improve their spiritual circumstances. The qualified and faithful Bible-based pastoral counselor takes everything they know about the Scriptures and points the counselee to the Lord Jesus so that they will be more like Christ, presuming the pastoral counselor is convinced about the sufficiency of Scripture concerning Christlikeness and all material life matters.[327]

Everything that a person needs, whether it be for spiritual matters concerning Christlikeness or temporal material life matters, "the Word of God is sufficient."[328] It should be noted that the term "sufficiency" does not suggest that Bible is exhaustive on all matters, but rather that the Bible is enough to adequately address the messy circumstances that people often encounter during this life.[329] Hence, the research implication is that the Bible, when taught properly and understood correctly, is sufficient concerning Christlikeness and all material life matters.

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[326] Tony Evans, *Spiritual Warfare: Outfitting Yourself for the Battle* (Eugene, OR: Harvesters House Publishers, 2011), 15 Kindle.

[327] Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*, 318-319.

[328] Ibid, 37.

[329] Kevin DeYoung and Pat Quinn, "Introduction: The Preacher, the Counselor, and the Congregation," in *Scripture and Counseling: God's Word for Life in a Broken World*, eds. Bob Kelleman and Jeff Forrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 21.

The third implication is Bible-based pastoral counseling is truly effective in addressing spiritual immaturity. The final results from the participants in the action research project indicated a consensus, that is, Christ-centered, Spirit-led, Bible-saturated pastoral counseling is truly an effective when addressing the problem of spiritual immaturity in a rural church context. The effectiveness of Bible-based pastoral counseling very much reinforced the first research implication mentioned in this paper, that is, the need for qualified and dedicated Bible-based pastoral counselors.

The fourth and final implication from the research is that counselees must be intentional about their spiritual growth. Apostle Paul conveyed to the Philippians that each individual had a role to play if they intended on improving their own spiritual condition (cf. Phil 2:12). During the investigative phase of this action research project, there was not a single given week when the researcher met or made contact with all the participants, even though oftentimes he would try to connect with them on multiple occasions before moving on. Not to mention, every participant had multiple avenues in which they could contact the researcher to initiate the counseling process for that week, which never happened minus a couple of exceptions and all of those were the same counselee. What is more is that only one participant had a perfect 100% contact rate, having taken part in every counseling session. Another participant was available for six of the seven sessions. All successful contacts with the other participants were five contacts or less. Keeping the previous facts in mind, Dallas Willard articulated it well when he expressed that identification with the Lord Jesus and identification with His emerging community, the local church, should far supersede all other identities.[330] In light of Willard's comment and given the overwhelming evidence presented in this document that Bible-based pastoral counseling is

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[330] Willard, *Renovations of the Heart*, 245.

effective in addressing the problem of spiritual immaturity and developing healthy disciples, the logical conclusion, then, is that people must be intentional with their efforts involving their spiritual growth, that is, each person is responsible to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (cf. Phil 2:12).

If one is truly serious about growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, then they must be willing to sacrifice something lesser to make the necessary space for the greater and more important person or thing. The implication from this action research project is that people must be resolute and intentional about making and spending time with the Lord and thereby grow in Christlikeness, progressively becoming a healthier Christian disciple who is an intricate part of a healthy local church, a fact noted in the precedent literature (see "Spiritual Formation Growth, and Maturity," page 30-33 of this document).

Research Applications

Generalizability is the varying degree in which one's research findings can be applied in another setting with different conditions.[331] As it concerns generalizability, this section of the document will discuss research applications from three perspectives; first SBPCP as a whole, secondly from the perspective of the aspiring Bible-based pastoral counselor, and lastly from the perspective of a counselee.

When the researcher first began conjuring up ideas for this action research project, he intentionally theorized the schematics of any project he designed being flexible and transferable, thereby making the intervention design user-friendly in other ministry contexts . With regard to the previous statement, the intervention design and implementation of the intervention design of

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[331] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 214.

SBPCP was fashioned in a way so that the majority of people would be able to apply it in their own ministry context while simultaneously being able to tailor the program to fit their specific needs of their local church. Gary McIntosh once remarked, "Smaller churches face challenges that are different from those of larger ones. Midsize churches struggle with issues that smaller churches never encounter. Rural churches must make decisions that urban churches do not need to make."[332] McIntosh's sentiments quite nicely framed up this researcher's rationale in designing SBPCP, that is, so it can be applied in virtually all traditional church and parachurch ministry contexts, but especially smaller/rural church contexts. It is common knowledge mega churches do some things really well, but many of the members of these type of churches do not know one another. It is also common knowledge that in a smaller/rural church, there is a far greater chance that most if not all the members know one another, which could lead to a more intimate worship experience. Having made this point, SBPCP is a strategic Christian ministry that could potentially bear much fruit in both a rural church context or large/mega church context, but SBPCP was strategically-designed with the rural/small church in mind.

From the perspective of the aspiring Bible-based pastoral counselor, presuming that one has been called to the counseling ministry, the Scriptures warn believers to not only persevere in weariness, but also to continuously do good by everyone but especially those people who belong to the Lord (Gal 6:9-10). Considering the previous admonition and the fact that there is a dire need for Bible-based pastoral counselors, the person aspiring to get into counseling ministry will have a considerable amount of work to do and a host of things to learn.

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[332] Gary L. McIntosh, *There's Hope for Your Church: First Steps to Restoring Health and Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 59.

It has been mentioned several times in this document that the need for counseling services has continued to skyrocket. The aspiring Bible-based pastoral counselor will undoubtedly feel the strain of being in the counseling ministry. Having acknowledged the previous fact, the aspiring Bible-based pastoral counselor must persevere and continue to do good by those under their care. Since the conclusion of SBPCP on May 8, 2024, multiple members have inquired about future availability of SBPCP. For this reason, an exploratory group was formed in the researcher's local church. The exploratory group, which is led by the pastor's wife, consists of two other members both of whom were participants in SBPCP. The exploratory group initially was responsible for gauging interest in establishing a permanent version of SBPCP at Saint Mark, one that would mitigate counselor burnout. The exploratory group's latest report indicated that interest was high but getting people to serve as counselors was proving to be the biggest challenge. For this reason, with the researcher's guidance, the exploratory group began considering ways, including collaborating with other churches of similar demographics, to get people qualified in an efficient and expeditious way. The exploratory group requested a deadline of October 31, 2024 to report back with their findings, which the researcher agreed to.

Lastly, from the perspective of the counselee, this action research project revealed that the more a believer spends time in the Word of God and focusing on the things of God, the better their spiritual life and material life will be. Thus, the application is "spend time with the Lord and in His word." There is no "one size fits all" approach on how and when to spend time with God, but the spiritual disciplines are indispensable. While this researcher had the participants focus on digestion of Scripture, prayer, and journaling, he acknowledges that his way is "a way not necessarily the way" to nurture one's relationship with the Lord. Keeping the previous statement in mind, Paul Esswein sagaciously articulated a similar point of view when he noted

that whenever one reads, writes, or even teaches about the Lord, they are engaging in a theological rumination of sorts and thereby positively developing their spirituality.[333] Having made the previous point, regardless of the spiritual disciplines a believer employs, the key is to have balance, ensuring steady spiritual growth and becoming a healthy Christian disciple who is a reliable contributor to a healthy local church.

Research Limitations

The reader and any researcher in the future that may reference the data contained in this document can rest assured knowing this action research project has produced accurate, trustworthy, and true research outcomes. Having made the previous assertion, it should also be stated that virtually all research is influenced by presuppositions and biases, and this research endeavor was no different in that regard. Besides the limitations mentioned in the opening chapter of this document, this section of the document will briefly expound on two limitations. The limitations that will be discussed are (1) this amount of time devoted to research efforts, and (2) participants self-reporting.

This action research project was carried out from start to finish in a period of about three months. While three months certainly proved long enough to galvanize the thesis argued in this document, it may prove to be too little a time period to effectively gather facts, analyze details, and interpret those results if the goal is to make wide-sweeping empirical claims. Perhaps if the action research project was carried out over a lengthier period of time with a different pool of

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[333] Paul Esswein, *The River of Your Spiritual Life: Streams That Flow into What we Believe* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2017), Location 103 Kindle.

participants, different research outcomes would have been produced. For this reason, the time period was considered a limitation.

The second limitation of this action research project is participants' self-reporting. Advantages to self-reporting include inexpensiveness and easily obtainable results, there are some notable disadvantages. Some of those disadvantages include subject's failure to interpret what is being assessed and ineffectiveness of rating scales.[334] Having pointed out the previous fact, while reaping the benefits of self-reporting, this document is also likely impacted by the limitations associated with self-reporting. For this reason, participants self-reporting was considered a limitation.

Further Research

In the fourth chapter, it was revealed that three themes emerged from SBPCP, those themes were (1) participants in SBPCP expressed that they initially volunteered to participate in the program because they desired a greater understanding of God and His word; (2) participants in SBPCP expressed that they enjoyed and valued one-on-one time with their pastor; and (3) participants in SBPCP expressed that the program provided them with an opportunity to gain biblical insights not afforded by other ministries within the local church. There are a wide variety of further research opportunities surrounding each of these themes but a golden opportunity exists for a perspective researcher to examine the value of believers spending time with their pastor in a one-on-one capacity, namely, believers spending time with their pastors addressing spiritual health and the impact it has on a believer's mental health.

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[334] Kristalyn Salters-Pedneault, "The Use of Self-Report Data in Psychology," Verywell Mind, updated April 14, 2023, accessed June 6, 2024, https://www.verywellmind.com/definition-of-self-report-425267.

This action research project via SBPCP has provided anecdotal evidence that suggests when spiritual health is prioritized in pastoral counseling, life in general improves for the believer (see #5, #9, #10, #12, and #20 on Figure 4.11). However, there are further research opportunities to observe if this trend expands into mental health, specifically, the impact on mental health when spiritual health is the focus and priority in pastoral counseling.

Closing Thoughts

Everything under the umbrella of what is labeled "pastoral counseling" does not honor God. What does honor God is pastoral counseling that is Christ-centered, Spirit-led, and Bible-saturated conducted in the right way and with the right heart. To say the previous statement differently, pastoral counseling that honors God is pastoral counseling that facilitates a person's spiritual growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ for the glory of God.

This researcher recommends two books, besides those mentioned in Appendix S of this document, that he believes will be an incredible help to the aspiring Bible-based pastoral counselor. The two books are *Kingdom Disciples: Heaven's Representatives on Earth* written by Tony Evans and *Scripture and Counseling: God's Word for Life in a Broken World* edited by Bob Kelleman and Jeff Forrey, respectively. In his book, Evans does an excellent job plainly detailed what he believes are becoming of "Kingdom Disciples". The monologue edited by Kelleman and Forrey, on the other hand, did a superb job in gathering and organizing some of the world's foremost pastoral (biblical) counseling practitioner's best work into one convenient resource. Parenthetically, it must be stated that this recommendation does not by any means suggest that this researcher agreed with everything the authors presented in their respective works. Having necessarily stated the previous fact, this researcher is convinced that the two

aforementioned books, especially when considered simultaneously, collectively are a tremendous asset for the aspiring Bible-based pastoral counselor.

Similar to the public ministry of the Word, the art of private ministry of the Word cannot be absorbed overnight. However, when one digests the contents of the monologues referenced in the above paragraph and the tools recommended in Appendix S of this document, the aspiring Bible-based pastoral counselor will set themselves up for success in their effort to become a qualified and faithful Bible-based pastoral counselor. A host of qualified and faithful Bible-based pastoral counselors is the key to Christ-centered, Spirit-led, biblically-saturated, short-term pastoral counseling being conducted across the globe. In so doing, the qualified and faithful Bible-based pastoral counselor will not only triumph in the private ministry of the Word but will foster healthy disciples who make up healthy churches for the glory of God.

Ultimately, SBPCP proved to positively affect spiritual maturity at Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church. Unity, the symptom that gave rise to the idea that spiritual maturity was a problem at Saint Mark, from the researcher's perspective, has been improved upon since the conclusion of the action research project. Moreover, the thesis statement and chief claim of this action research project was that "if certain members of Saint Mark faithfully participate in SBPCP, then they would become spiritually healthier Christians and cultivate a healthier local church." In this particular case, the thesis statement proved to be true, as SBPCP was effective in building up spiritually healthier disciples and cultivating a healthier local church. Prayerfully, in the very near future this will lead to more fruitful ministry at Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church for the glory of God.

Appendix A

Christian Formation and Human Development Addendum

Russian theorist Lev Vygotsky's theory is founded upon the presupposition that intellectual development is contingent upon the context a person has been nurtured. To say it differently, Vygotsky's theory suggests that the way a person progresses intellectually is based upon, at least partly, the cultural context one resides or spends the most time.[335]

Vygotsky posited that development takes place in zones, that is, a "nonlinear area of development."[336] Vygotsky's intellectual development theory is comprised of three zones, (1) Actual Development, (2) Potential Development, and (3) Proximal Development.[337] The proximal development zone can be described as the proverbial space or distance necessary to move a person from what they can currently do to what they "should" be able to do in the future. The authors contend that the proximal development zone captures and best represents the Russian theorist's contribution to the human development field.[338]

This researcher selected Vygotsky's theory because, regardless of Vygotsky's worldview, the theological veracity of his claims is virtually indisputable. In the Old Testament, God was adamant that the Israelites completely drive out the original inhabitants of the land and have nothing to do with them, having foreknew that the inhabitants of the land would cause His people to be ensnared by sin (Exod 23:32-33). In the New Testament, in unequivocal terms, the Lord Jesus knowing the evil hearts of the Pharisees and Sadducees, taught and warned the

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[335] Jonathan H. Kim, "Intellectual Development and Christian Formation," in *Christian Formation: Integrating Theology and Human Development*, eds. James R. Estep and Jonathan H. Kim (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 72 Kindle.

[336] Ibid, 73.

[337] Ibid.

[338] Ibid.

disciples to beware of their false teaching (Matt 16:1-12). Also in the New Testament, Apostle

Paul, in unambiguous terms, flatly told the Corinthians that keeping bad company would

ultimately lead to moral corruption (1 Cor 15:33). The aforementioned passages of Scripture

speak directly to the idea, as Vygotsky argued in his theory, that the context in which a person

spends the most time will most certainly play a role in how they progress and develop, what

deeds they engage in, and what deeds they refrain from engaging in.

     The information contained herein concerning Vygotsky's theory admittedly did not

significantly impact the researcher's thought process, at least not on a conscious level.

Nonetheless, this addendum has been included in this document because of the theological

implications of Vygotsky's theory and to satisfy Liberty Theological Seminary's DMIN action

research project report requirements.

Appendix B

Initial Screening

The Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Program (SBPCP) can accommodate about 12 people. By completing this form, you will be on the list and possibly selected to participate in the investigative phase of this doctoral study. Do NOT write your name on this sheet. You will be anonymously assigned a random number. Write that number at the top of your paper. You must remember your number. After all the forms have been processed, you will be notified no later than one week of your role in the study.

Questions	4	3	2	1
1. I believe that God exists in three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), yet there is only one God.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my personal sins.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3. I believe that Jesus was physically/bodily raised from the dead.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4. I believe that Jesus' death on the cross was absolutely necessary for me to have eternal life.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5. A person must believe in Jesus's resurrection to be a Christian.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6. I treat people in a way that I want to be treated.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
7. I mistreat people who mistreat me.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
8. I enjoy doing good things for people who are not my family and friends.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
9. I give money to worthy causes when I can to afford to.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
10. I give my time and talent to those who cannot help themselves.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
11. I know that I am a sinner.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
12. I do certain things even though I know the Bible says those things are sinful.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
13. Every day I intentionally try not to sin.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
14. I have sin in my life that I have not addressed.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
15. Sometimes it feels good to do certain things that I know are sinful.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
16. Every day I read my Bible or listen to it being read.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
17. I read my Bible at least once per week.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

18. I listen to Bible-based sermons or conversations even when I am not in church.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
19. I take time to study the Bible or seek help for passages of Scripture hard to understand.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
20. I believe it is important for me to regularly read the Bible.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
21. I pray at least twice per day.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
22. I pray at least once per day.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
23. I pray at least once per week.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
24. I confess my sins to God in prayer on a regular basis.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
25. I believe it is important for me to have a consistent prayer life.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Appendix C

Consent Form

Title of the Project: Conforming to the Image of Christ: A Strategic Approach to Short-Term Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling in a Rural Church Context

Principal Investigator: Leonard Carpenter III, Doctoral Candidate, John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Doctoral Study

You are invited to participate in a doctoral study project. To participate in this doctoral study project conducted via field investigative techniques, you must be at least 18 years of age, a member of Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church, and a professed believer in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Taking part in this doctoral study project is completely voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this doctoral study project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to determine if a proactive approach to strategic short-term Bible-based pastoral counseling is an effective tool in fostering spiritual growth at Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Return the suitability assessment survey that was handed out during the recruitment phase to determine your availability to participate in the project.

2. If selected, complete the intake form and questionnaire.

3. Commit to six weekly one-on-one pastoral counseling sessions with pre-determined topics. The topics are (1) Explicit Identification With the One True God, (2) Spiritual Formation Practices, (3) Loving God, (4) Loving Others, (5) Fellowship Amongst the Saints, and (6) Forgiving Others.

4. Commit to at least one group counseling session with the other members who were selected to be part of the project.

5. Be prepared during each session to take a written assessment during each counseling session.

6. Be prepared to make journal entries.

7. Be in attendance/available for every counseling session or promptly reschedule, preferably within three days.

8. Be open to the possibility of doing things differently in your spiritual life than you may have in the past.

9. Participate in exit interviews, surveys, and/or questionnaires.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

A tangible benefit of participating in this study is learning from others who are taking part in the program. Another benefit is that you would have played a key role in adding to the body of knowledge, advancing pastoral counseling and pastoral care practices in the Black church and community at large. Lastly and most importantly, a tangible benefit of taking part in this program is experiencing one-on-one counseling and gaining valuable tools that aid spiritual growth and maturity.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study include a requirement to report anything disclosed that has mandatory reporting requirements, such as child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, intent to harm self or others, and any anticipated criminal violations. If the facilitator observer becomes aware or senses any significant psychological risk resulting from participation, the session may be terminated abruptly.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. No reports published will include any information that would make it possible to uncover your identity. All project records are confidential. Project records will be stored securely, and only the doctoral candidate will have access to the records. The below is also applicable and should be considered:

- Data collected from you may be shared for future use by other doctoral candidates, even if that is the case, your identity will be protected and any information that could potentially identify you will be removed before sharing.

- Participant responses used will be kept confidential via the use of pseudonyms.

- Counseling sessions will be conducted in a manner to mitigate as much as humanly possible non-participants overhearing the conversation.

- Data from this doctoral study will be stored in a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations.

- After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

- Counseling sessions will be recorded and transcribed, they will be stored on a password-locked device. Only the doctoral candidate will have access to these records.

- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed for group settings, although it will be greatly encouraged.

- While discouraged, other group members may share what was discussed with people outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

Should you choose to withdraw from the study, please get in touch with the doctoral candidate at the email address/phone number in the below paragraph. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected from you, with the exception of group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this doctoral study. Group data will not be destroyed but your contributions to the group will not be included in the study

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The doctoral candidate conducting this study is Leonard Carpenter III. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 757-692-7244 or LCarpenter1@liberty.edu.

You may also contact the doctoral candidate's faculty sponsor, Dr. Paul Esswein, at pesswein@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a doctoral study participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the doctoral candidate, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study and participate in all parts of the study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The doctoral candidate will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The doctoral candidate has my permission to audio record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix D

Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church
Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Program Intake Form and Questionnaire

Name_____   **Race**_____

Phone_____   **Age**_____

Email_____

What total number of years have you been a Christian?   0-2   3-5   6-10   11-20   20+

What total number of years have you been a member of Saint Mark?   0-2   3-5   5-10   10+

Disclosure: The Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Program is a church-based, spiritual counseling program. The primary goal of this program is to address matters that are spiritual in nature and aid the believer in forming effective spiritual practices. This program is unapologetically Spirit-led, Christ-centered, and aims to be God-honoring in every regard.

Disclaimer: The Bible-Based Pastoral Counselor is NOT a State-licensed psychologist, psychiatrist, therapist, professional counselor, or any of the sort.

For any matters that present themselves in counseling sessions that are outside the scope of care and/or area of expertise of the Bible-Based Pastoral Counselor, counseling for that specific matter will be terminated immediately and you will be promptly referred to an appropriate provider. The Bible-Based Pastoral Counselor is a credentialed Board-Certified Pastoral Counselor and is a member of the American Association of Christian Counselors. The Bible-Based Pastoral Counselor and the Counselee equally reserve the right to terminate the program at any time and for any reason.

I have read and understood everything detailed above, including the disclaimer, and wish to proceed with Bible-based pastoral counseling. By signing this form, I agree to engage in a total of (6) one-on-one counseling sessions AND at least one group counseling session. ☐

Print_____

Signature_____

Date_____

Questionnaire

1. What do you want to get from this counseling relationship?

2. What are your short-term spiritual goals?

3. What spiritual matters do you have questions or concerns about?

4. What do you do to improve your relationship with God? How often do you do those things?

5. Why did you volunteer for this Bible-based pastoral counseling program?

6. How can I assist you in your walk with God right now?

7. What do you want me to pray for you?

Appendix E

Permission Letter

2/18/2024

Deacon Board
Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church
1970 Pea Ridge Road,
Brewton, AL 36426

Dear Saint Mark Deacons,

Grace and peace to you. As a doctoral candidate in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting a doctoral study project as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. I am conducting the study to better understand the correlation between spiritual maturity and unity in the local church. The title of the project is "Conforming to the Image of Christ: A Strategic Approach to Short-Term Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling in a Rural Church Context". The purpose of the project is to positively impact the member's spiritual growth.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my doctoral study involving members of our church and to ask that you invite them to participate in the doctoral study. Should members volunteer to take part in this study, they will be asked to do return the suitability assessment distributed during the recruitment phase to determine their availability to participate in the program. Then, complete an intake/questionnaire form.

Additionally, volunteers would be asked to commit to six weekly one-on-one pastoral counseling sessions with pre-determined topics. The topics are included in the consent form and the volunteer would be well aware of the topics prior to committing to the program. Finally, volunteers would be asked to commit to at least one group counseling session with the other members who were selected to be part of the project. Should you volunteer to participate, be prepared to complete multiple surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and make journal at various point throughout the duration of the project. Participants will be presented with more detailed information in the consent form prior to commitment. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you kindly for considering my request. Should you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to the doctoral candidate's email address included in the signature line of this letter. Thank you.

Yours in Christ,

Elder Leonard Carpenter III
Senior Pastor
Doctoral Candidate, John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University
LCarpenter1@liberty.edu

Appendix F

Recruitment Letter

Dear Prospective Participant:

As a doctoral candidate in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting a doctoral study project in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry. The title of the project is "Conforming to the Image of Christ: A Strategic Approach to Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling in a Rural Church Context."

The purpose of my project is to determine if a proactive approach to strategic short-term Bible-based pastoral counseling is an effective tool in fostering spiritual growth here at Saint Mark.

If you would like to volunteer as a participant in this program, you must be 18 years of age or older, an active member of Saint Mark, and a professed believer in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Participants will be asked to take part in six one-on-one Bible-based pastoral counseling sessions. The counseling sessions will take no longer than 30 minutes. You also will be asked to participate in at least one group counseling session with the other members who are in the program. You should also be prepared to complete multiple interviews, surveys, questions, assessments, and journal entries before, during, and after the project.

Counseling sessions will be confidential, that is, what we speak about in private will not be shared with anybody who does not have a need to know. Moreover, anything that must be shared for the purposes of the project will be scrubbed of any references to your identity.

Should you agree to participate in this voluntary project, your name will remain confidential. Also, you will be required to sign a consent form. The consent form contains additional amplifying information about the project.

If you would like to participate in this project, please see me in the fellowship hall immediately following worship service.

Yours in Christ,
Leonard Carpenter III
Senior Pastor, Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church
Board Certified Pastoral Counselor
Doctoral Candidate
Email: LCarpenter1@liberty.edu
757-692-7244

Appendix G

Week One

Explicit Identification With the One True God

Counseling Agenda

1. Open the counseling session.

     a. Pray with the counselee.

2. Discussion questions to be considered.

     a. Why is God important to you?

     b. What is significant to you about the person and work of the Lord Jesus?

     c. What role, if any, does the Holy Spirit play in your Christian walk?

3. Biblical considerations.

     a. Galatians 2:20.

     b. Revelation 14:12-13.

4. Homework assignment.

     a. Journal entry: Write down how God's trinitarian nature informs you about your relationship with other Christians, specifically, members of Saint Mark.

5. Close the counseling session.

     a. Closing thoughts.

     b. Pray with the counselee.

Appendix H

Week Two

Spiritual Formation Practices

Counseling Agenda

1. Open the counseling session.

    a. Pray with the counselee.

2. Discussion questions to be considered.

    a. What do you do to spend time with God?

    b. What role does prayer play in your relationship with God?

    c. How do you want your relationship to grow stronger with God?

3. Biblical considerations.

    a. Psalm 1:1-3.

    b. 2 Peter 3:17-18.

4. Homework assignment.

    a. Journal entry: Write down and commit to five things I am going to do differently/better to improve my relationship with God.

5. Close the counseling session.

    a. Closing thoughts.

    b. Pray with the counselee.

Appendix I

Week Three

Loving God

Counseling Agenda

1. Open the counseling session.

      a. Pray with the counselee.

2. Discussion questions to be considered.

      a. What does it mean to you to love God?

      b. How does the love of God compel you to be a better Christian?

      c. Why is it important that you love God?

3. Biblical considerations.

      a. Matthew 22:36-38.

      b. John 15:10-11.

4. Homework assignment.

      a. Journal entry: Write down and commit to three things you are going to do to demonstrate your love for God.

5. Close the counseling session.

      a. Closing thoughts.

      b. Pray with the counselee.

Appendix J

Week Four

Loving Others

Counseling Agenda

1. Open the counseling session.

    a. Pray with the counselee.

2. Discussion questions to be considered.

    a. What does it mean to you to love other people?

    b. How do you personally demonstrate your love for others?

    c. Why is it important that you love all people, but especially, the people of God?

3. Biblical considerations.

    a. Matthew 22:36-40.

    b. John 13:35; 1 John 4:7-8.

4. Homework assignment.

    a. Journal entry: Write down and commit to two things you are going to do to demonstrate your love for other people.

5. Close the counseling session.

    a. Closing thoughts.

    b. Pray with the counselee.

Appendix K

Week Five

Fellowship Amongst the Saints

Counseling Agenda

1. Open the counseling session.

    a. Pray with the counselee.

2. Discussion questions to be considered.

    a. How well do you get along with the majority of members at Saint Mark?

    b. How have you handled disagreements with members of Saint Mark?

    c. What have you done in the past and what do you do now to ensure you maintain a good relationship with members of Saint Mark?

3. Biblical considerations.

    a. Ephesians 2:19-20.

    b. Ephesians 4:1-3.

4. Homework assignment.

    a. Journal entry: Write down and commit to one thing that you could do better to improve your relationships with members at Saint Mark.

5. Close the counseling session.

    a. Closing thoughts.

    b. Pray with the counselee.

Appendix L

Week Six

Forgiving Others

Counseling Agenda

1. Open the counseling session.

     a. Pray with the counselee.

2. Discussion questions to be considered.

     a. When has someone hurt you and you did not forgive them?

     b. Why did you not forgive the person that hurt you?

     c. What does a person have to do to earn their way back into your good graces?

3. Biblical considerations.

     a. Matthew 6:14-15.

     b. Ephesians 4:32.

4. Homework assignment.

     a. Study the "Forgiveness Fact Sheet" that was provided to you.

     b. Journal entry: Write down the name of one person that you have not forgiven, preferably a member of Saint Mark if applicable. Go to the Lord in prayer and ask Him to help you truly forgive that person. If possible, contact that person and tell them that you have forgiven them.

5. Close the counseling session.

     a. Closing thoughts.

     b. Pray with the counselee.

Appendix M

Week Seven

Group Counseling – Brainstorming Solutions

Counseling Agenda

1. Open the counseling session.

     a. Pray with the counselees.

2. Discussion questions to be considered.

     a. Why do some members at Saint Mark not get along with one another?

     b. What are the barriers, if any, stopping Saint Mark from growing closer as a church family? If there are barriers that exist, do we have the ability to tear down those barriers?

     c. What can we do to grow closer to one another and strengthen the bonds of unity within the church?

3. Biblical considerations.

     a. John 17:20-21.

4. Homework assignment.

     a. Continue the practices you have put in place over the last six weeks.

5. Close the counseling session.

     a. Closing thoughts.

     b. Encourage counselees to attend worship service on Sunday for Scripture reading and brief message preached from 1 Cor 12:4-12.

     c. Pray with the counselee.

Appendix N

Forgiveness Fact Sheet

What is Forgiveness?

- Forgiveness is a decision, a behavior that you convince yourself to engage in.

- Forgiveness is the letting go of negative emotions toward a person or group.

- Because forgiveness is a decision, the negative emotions associated with the wrong/hurtful act committed may not be immediate but follow at a later time.

- Forgiveness is what God commands the followers of Jesus.

What Forgiveness is not?

- Forgiveness is not as simple as saying "I forgive you", in itself.

- Forgiveness is not necessarily rebuilding a relationship or reconciling with a person or group.

Biblical Wisdom

- Matthew 6:14-15; 18:21-34.

- 2 Corinthians 2:6-11.

- Ephesians 4:32.

Practical Lessons from Life and Literature

- When one has made the cognitive decision to forgive but the emotions have not followed, you must seek the Lord's face in prayer until the emotions correlate with the cognitive decision.

- The spiritual consequences and possible relational and mental health consequences of not forgiving others are not worth it.

- "Having been forgiven by the grace of God on the basis of Christ's finished work on the cross, we are exhorted to manifest forgiveness in our relationships with others."

 - Kenneth Boa

Appendix O

Pre-Project Church Survey

Thank you for participating in this survey. Please indicate your honest response to the following statements below. This survey is anonymous; therefore, please <u>do not</u> write your name anywhere on this paper. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

1. I have previously participated in a formal pastoral counseling program.   Yes   No

2. Pastoral counseling plays an important role in spiritual maturity.   Yes   No

3. I believe that Saint Mark needs a formal counseling program.   Yes   No

4. Pastoral counseling and preaching are completely separate ministries that have no relation to one another?   Yes   No

5. Pastoral counseling is for healing, not to help people grow spiritually.   Yes   No

6. Unity and fellowship among members in the church is something that needs to be improved upon at Saint Mark.   Yes   No

7. I would feel safe sharing sensitive information in one-on-one pastoral counseling.   Yes   No

Appendix P

Post-Counseling Session Survey

Thank you for trusting me today. Please <u>honestly</u> answer the questions below. Your feedback is greatly appreciated and will be strongly considered now and in the future.

1. Did you enjoy your Bible-based pastoral counseling experience today?   Yes   No

2. Did today's session promote your spiritual growth or maturity?   Yes   No

3. Did the pastoral counselor seem to have your best interest at heart?   Yes   No

4. Based on today's experience, would you recommend this program to someone else in the future?   Yes   No

5. Is there something that you would like to talk about in the near future that was not addressed today? If yes, please write in the space below a couple of sentences explaining the issue you would like to discuss at a later date.   Yes   No

Appendix Q

Post-Project Participant Survey

This is a post-project survey about pastoral counseling in general with some specific questions regarding the Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Program (SBPCP).

1. I enjoyed participating in SBPCP.   Yes   No

2. Bible-based pastoral counseling should be used more at Saint Mark.   Yes   No

3. I now believe SBPCP should be a full-time ministry at Saint Mark.   Yes   No

4. The private ministry of the Word (pastoral counseling) is just as important as the public ministry of the Word (preaching) when it comes to spiritual growth and maturity.   Yes   No

5. Pastoral counseling helps people heal **and** helps them grow spiritually.   Yes   No

6. Pastoral counseling positively impacts fellowship and unity in the local church.   Yes   No

7 Having completed SBPCP, I believe that the primary purpose of pastoral counseling is spiritual growth.   Yes   No

8. After completing SBPCP, I am a more spiritually mature person than I was before I began the program.   Yes   No

9. SBPCP gave me an opportunity to discuss spiritual matters in a way that usually is not possible.   Yes   No

10. I have grown spiritually in my walk with God as a direct result of SBPCP.   Yes   No

11. SBPCP provided me with a better understanding of why unity is so important in the local church.   Yes   No

12. SBPCP provided a safe environment to share sensitive information.   Yes   No

13. I would recommend fellow members of our church to participate in SBPCP.   Yes   No

14. I believe other churches would benefit from SBPCP or similar programs.   Yes   No

15. SBPCP positively impacts spiritual maturity in the local church.   Yes   No

16. SBPCP fosters spiritual growth in the local church.   Yes   No

17. SBPCP has proven more effective than some other ministries in the local church as it concerns my spiritual growth and maturity.   Yes   No

18. Journaling was an effective way to document and reflect on my thoughts.   Yes   No

19. I plan to continue to use journaling as a spiritual discipline in the future.   Yes   No

20. SBPCP has positively impacted my entire life, spiritual and everyday life.   Yes   No

Appendix R

Exit Interview

Please answer the following questions concerning your overall experience with the Strategic Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Program (SBPCP).

1. How did SBPCP positively impact your spiritual maturity/growth in ways different than other

ministries have accomplished?

2. Why should other church members consider participating in SBPCP?

3. What was the most positive thing about SBPCP?

4. What recommendations would you suggest for improving SBPCP?

5. Are there any other comments you have about SBPCP or the Bible-Based Pastoral Counselor?

If so, please write your comments below.

Appendix S

Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling Resources

Below is a list of resources that a busy local church pastor can reference in their efforts to assist a believer who seeks them out for one-on-one Bible-based pastoral counseling.

Solution-Focused Conversation Starters

1) I am interested to know what you want to talk about. In as few words as possible, tell me, what is going on that compelled you to seek counseling?

2) So, what has led you to seek counseling at this time?

3) How can I be of service to you?

4) What are your counseling goals during our time together?

5) For you to consider counseling a success, what would have to happen?

6) So, tell me…why counseling, why now?

7) What do you want my help with?

8) As best you can, in the fewest words possible, tell me what you want my help with.

9) Tell me in a few words…why are you here?

10) If I could help you fix one thing right now, what would that one thing be?

Helpful Books

1) *The Quick-Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling* by Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins

2) *Pastor as Counselor* by John Patton

3) *A Theology of Counseling* by Heath Lambert

4) *Biblical Counseling and the Church* edited by Bob Kellemen and Kevin Carson

5) *The Popular Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* edited by Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins

6) *Strategic Pastoral Counseling* by David G. Benner

7) *Solution-Focused Pastoral Counseling* by Charles Allen Kollar

8) *Quick Scripture Reference for Counseling* by John G. Kruis

Note: None of the resources referenced above are of greater benefit than the Holy Spirit, the truth contained in the Word of God, and prayer.

Appendix T

Personal Spiritual Growth Plan[339]

Leonard Carpenter III

DSMN 815: Personal Spiritual Formation

December 2022

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[339] This paper was originally written and submitted for the course and calendar date as reflected above. It has been included in the appendices of this action research project because it gives insight into how this researcher thinks about certain spiritual matters, namely, an actionable plan intended to affect some measure of spiritual growth in a believer under their care. While the Likert Scale referenced in this assignment is not included here in Appendix L, suffice to say that it was similar to the initial screening provided to the participants who took part in this action research project. As stated throughout this action research project, the primary goal of a qualified and dedicated Bible-based pastoral counselor is to co-facilitate the counselee's spiritual growth, hence the inclusion of a personal spiritual growth plan in this section of the document. As a final matter, it should be noted that this version of the assignment has been slightly modified to accommodate Liberty University's policy on submitting previously written academic papers from a different course.

Introduction

Disciples, biblical jargon for followers, want to be like their leader. A Christian's leader is none other than the Lord Jesus. If a person really desires to be like Jesus, it will take dedication and practice, that is where the Spiritual Disciplines come into play. In the end, the goal of a disciple should be that they will be like Jesus. Spiritual Disciplines are of vital importance to healthy Christians in their service to Jesus Christ. It is common knowledge that many believers do not consistently engage in Spiritual Disciplines. In fact, it is possible if not likely that some Christians do not even believe that Spiritual Disciplines serve any useful purpose. This paper will disprove the previous and will provide a spiritual growth plan that is specific, measurable, practical, and prayerfully – repeatable. Additionally, this paper will report data from a previously administered spiritual formation assessment, analyze that data, and provide a customized spiritual growth plan based on one of the participants in the assessment.

Spiritual Disciplines as a Means of Godliness

By means of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Peter elegantly wrote, "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, and like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord." (1 Pet 2:1-3, NASB). Equally potent, the Apostle Paul wrote, "Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. So they do it to obtain a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way as not to run aimlessly; I box in such a way, as to avoid hitting air; but I strictly discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified." (1 Cor 9:25-27). Inarguably, two of the three greatest Christians who dwelt on this planet established the

foundation and continuing need to engage in spiritual disciplines. With regard to the previous statement, the importance of spiritual disciplines cannot be overemphasized. For the purposes of this paper, spiritual disciplines are those contained in the book entitled *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald S. Whitney. The theme of Whitney's book, borrowed from 1 Timothy 4:7 as recorded in the *New American Standard Bible* is, "discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness."[340] This theme succinctly summarizes why Christians endeavor the way they do – to be like God; specifically, like the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ. The goal of the believer is not only to read the Bible but to understand it and how that understanding of God's word transforms believers.[341] Also, there is biblical evidence that strongly suggests that the younger a person is exposed to the words and things of God, the better it is for their spiritual formation (Gen 18:19; Deut 6:7; Mark 10:13-15). Considering the previous, laying a foundation for faith during childhood is critical to spiritual formation and future growth.[342] The bottom line is, "to be a Christian means to be a disciple. There are no Christians who are not disciples. . . .There are no disciples of Jesus who are not following Jesus."[343]

Disciples loyally following Jesus is clearly established in Scripture. When the Twelve were called, they immediately followed Jesus without delay. (Matt 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20). Moreover, this dedication was not expected only of the Twelve, but all that would follow Jesus afterward. In Luke 9:57-62, Jesus encountered three unnamed men. Two of those men half-

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[340] Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Revised and Updated (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 4.

[341] Dennis R. Edwards, *What is the Bible and How Do We Understand It?* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2019), 13.

[342] Don Willet, "A Biblical Model of the Stages of Spiritual Development: The Journey According to John." *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 3, no. 1 (2010): 98.

[343] Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 15.

heartedly volunteered to follow Jesus, but their true loyalties were elsewhere. Jesus even flatly

told a third man to follow Him, but he gave an excuse as to why he could not follow at that time.

Robert H. Stein comments about the stringent nature of discipleship. He contends, "Jesus

demands unqualified commitment."[344] In light of this expected commitment, Christians must be

disciplined, minding how they use their time and behave themselves, knowing that evil is at an

all-time high (Eph 5:15-16). In the end, godliness unlike almost everything else is beneficial in

this life and the life to come (1 Tim 4:8). May the individual believers in the Church, have a

heart aimed at service, not "ignorant of the call to love and serve others in the community,"

hence the need for Spiritual Disciplines.[345]

Assessment Results

Utilizing a Likert Scale, the personal spiritual formation assessment was administered

between the dates 22 Nov 2022 and 27 Nov 2022. A total of 10 people took part in the

assessment; seven of the ten participants were women, while the other three were men. The

highest possible score on the assessment was 125, with the lowest possible score being 25. The

range for this assessment was 89 (lowest score) to 122 (highest score); the range for each

individual statement was 1 to 5. The overall average score was 101.3; the average score of all

statements combined was 4.052. The spiritual growth plan that will later follow in this paper is

based on and customized for the person that achieved the lowest score.

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[344] Robert H. Stein, *Luke*. Vol. 24. The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 300.

[345] P. Adam McClendon and Jared E. Lockhart, *Timeless Church: Five Lessons from Acts* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2020), 4.

Further metrics and demographics from the spiritual formation assessment revealed that all participants identified as Black or African American and they are members of the same local church, where this practitioner serves as Senior Pastor. In addition, all participants reported being professed Christians for at least six years; 80% of the participants reported they had been Christians for 20 or more years. Lastly, the demographics captured that six of the ten participants were 60 years of age or older. The education level of the participants varied, reported as four having only high school education or less, three had earned bachelor's degrees or higher, two had earned associate degrees, and one had some college but lacked a degree of any kind.

As it relates to the assessment itself, the assessment had a total of 25 statements, five statements for each characteristic. The highest mark was a tie between Statement 2 and Statement 3 (4.8). The lowest mark was a tie between Statement 15 and Statement 16 (3.1). The subject statements are below.

2. I believe that the body of Jesus was physically buried in a tomb/grave.

3. I believe that Jesus was literally and physically raised from the dead.

15. I sometimes get pleasure from doing sinful things, even if that pleasure is minimal.

16. I read my Bible daily.

The averages for each characteristic of a disciple are as follows:

- Identification With the Crucified and Risen Christ (4.72)

- Doing Good Works (4.1)

- Fleeing From Sin (3.62)

- Digesting Scripture (3.82)

- Praying Regularly (4.0)

The implications of the assessment are quite telling. On the one hand, the members of this local church generally have a high view of Christ and for the most part, understand the basics concerning the gospel that was given to Paul (1 Cor 15:1-4). However, even in this critical area, everyone did not rate a 4 or higher on every statement. It is essential that everyone who claims to be a Christian understands that God did not spare the Son but rather had given Him in love on the cross. He was given to be born, to suffer and die, and be raised for the sake of humans caught in the vice-grips of sin.[346] Consequently, areas concerning Jesus's life, death on the cross, burial, and resurrection – what that means for humanity as a whole, and believers in particular, is an area that the Senior Pastor can spend more time preaching and teaching.

The assessment also revealed that some members did not believe that they were sinners or are no longer sinners. Others were not convinced that Jesus died for their personal sins and not merely the sins of the world. While the practitioner acknowledges that sin is corporate (1 Cor 15:21-22; 1 John 5:19), the Bible is clear as crystal that all have sinned (Rom 3:23; 1 John 1:10) and that the Lord Jesus died on the cross for all sins (John 3:16; 1 John 2:2). Again, this reveals an area where the Senior Pastor can spend more time laboring in the Word of God (Galatians 4:19). This is of particular importance, as the need to be bold and forthright in preaching and teaching cannot be exaggerated (2 Tim 4:2). Robert Smith, Jr. aptly stated: "these are times when preaching has exchanged its birthright of sound doctrine for an unsatisfying bowl of doctrinal heresy."[347] Indeed, the pulpit is a powerful tool that must be yielded in the proper fashion. The assessment revealed that all the members engaged in good works, with the only exception being

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[346] Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 13.

[347] Robert Smith, Jr., *Doctrine That Dances: Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 127.

the person that scored the lowest on the assessment – the Christian that the customized growth plan was created. Finally, the assessment revealed many members do not spend time daily reading their Bible or praying. On the other hand, 90% of the participants reported reading their Bible at least once weekly and 80% reported praying at least once weekly.

Individual Assessment

The person that scored lowest on the assessment is an African American female who is at least 60 years old, her overall score was 89 out of a possible 125. She reported being a professed Christian for more than 20 years, her education level is high school or less. In the interest of transparency, it should be noted that another African American female also scored 89. The practitioner studied and analyzed each of those individual assessments, paying attention to each statement. The practitioner determined that this woman, based on her being over 60 years of age and 20-plus years of being a Christian, was the weaker of the two. In comparison, the younger woman is between the ages of 18 and 24 and reported that she had been a Christian for six to ten years. It is also noteworthy that the younger woman has some college education while the older woman does not have any college education. As a further matter, it should also be noted that the woman determined to be the weaker Christian scored lower in the most critical area of the assessment (Identification with the Crucified and Risen Christ) than her younger counterpart.

The Christian deemed weakest, oddly enough, highest marks were in the very area that determined she was in fact the weakest Christian; that being, "Identification With the Crucified and Risen Christ." This was her highest-rated area, but she disagreed that Jesus died on the cross for her personal sins. It is the practitioner's belief that statements in this category are most important because they are "qualifying marks" or "first-order doctrines," which may indicate that

the person may or may not truly be a Christian. The assessment indicated that this Christian's weakest area of discipleship was *Doing Good Works*. She reported "Neither Agree or Disagree" for all five statements in this category. That said, the practitioner is familiar with this Christian and believes that this may simply be humility at work, as she is regularly observed at the church participating in ministries and other events that are intended to bless other people – she is regularly seen doing good works. This indicates that it is possible that her responses in this section may have been the marks of a humble person. "Humility must abide in us and become our very nature. . .not a posture we assume for a time."[348] In light of the previous statement, a customized spiritual formation growth plan has been created with this believer in mind.

Customized Growth Plan

This is a "customized" spiritual formation growth plan. The plan below takes into account that the practitioner is familiar with the believer and is aware of some of her perceived strengths and weaknesses. While this growth plan is customized for this individual, the challenge to minister to her in an effective way is still a reality. Dennis K. Orthner writes:

> But how is a pastor or ministry leader to understand where their people are in their journey of spiritual transformation? Looking out at the people attending a church service on Sunday, or at a Bible study during the week, with their smiles and looks of attention, can give us some sense of whether people are connecting with the message or teaching, but this really provides little true awareness of whether this is influencing their underlying spiritual identities or the behaviors they enact when they have left the building or in their daily lives during the week.[349]

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[348] Andrew Murray, Humility: *The Journey Toward Holiness* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 53.

[349] Dennis K. Orthner, "Assessing Spiritual Development: Reflections on Building a Community Measure." *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 14, no. 2 (2021): 199.

A Likert Scale was administered to identify beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses. As a result, this customized spiritual growth plan may contain things that are considered typical and others that are atypical. The growth plan is as follows:

1. Pray Ps 19:1-14 at least once. Also, pray that you will grow in your faith and that God will provide you with a godly mentor.

2. Select a mentor amongst the godly women in the church (cf. Tit 2:3).

3. Agree with your mentor on a time to meet at least once weekly to pray and study the word of God (certain passages of Scripture will be recommended based on the specific area of weakness). In this case, the passages will be John 19:1-20:31; 1 Cor 15:1-58; 1 Thess 5:16-18.

4. The Senior Pastor (practitioner) also recommended the following books based on the specific needs of the believer. The believer had glaring weaknesses in two categories: (a) Identification With the Crucified and Risen Christ and (b) Praying Regularly. Considering her specific needs, the believer was provided with books entitled *The Passion of Jesus Christ* by John Piper and *It Happens After Prayer* by H.B. Charles, Jr. These books were recommended based on the area of weakness and the non-academic approach to writing and truth engaged in by the respective authors. It should be noted that both books have been read and endorsed by the practitioner.

5. The Senior Pastor will meet with the believer every other week to get a progress report.

6. The plan is to be implemented over a period of eight weeks and adjusted accordingly as necessary.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the theology of spiritual disciplines as a collective whole. This paper also discussed a spiritual formation assessment and provided a customized growth plan intended to evoke spiritual growth. This paper was delimited, namely the customized growth plan, which is based on one specific person who took the assessment. Another delimitation was only 10 participants were sampled in the assessment to account for the time needed for analysis and reporting in this assignment and previous assignments. Lastly, this paper was delimited to those spiritual disciplines contained in Donald S. Whitney's book entitled *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life.* The practitioner recommends the following books for further study: *Timeless Church: Five Lessons from Acts* by P. Adam McClendon & Jared E. Lockhart and *Family Shepherds: Calling and Equipping Men to Lead Their Homes*. These books approach spiritual formation from different angles. Timeless Church is more academic in nature, yet not so esoteric that it proves futile to its non-academic readers. Family Shepherds is practical in its methodology. Even if one does not wholeheartedly agree with Baucham's paternalistic approach to the matter at hand, it is this practitioner's position that the practices he writes about are of tremendous benefit to every Christian.

Appendix U

Spiritual Vita

Elder Leonard Carpenter III, D.Min.

Senior Pastor, Saint Mark Missionary Baptist Church, Brewton, AL
Oct 2018 – Present

Professional

- Board of Christian Professional and Pastoral Counselors, Forest, VA | Board Certified Pastoral Counselor | Dec 2023
- American Association of Christian Counselors, Forest, VA | Presidential Member | Nov 2023 – Present
- World Council of Independent Christian Churches, Charleston, SC | Ecclesiastical Endorsement for Chaplaincy | Sep 2019 – Present
- World Council of Independent Christian Churches, Charleston, SC | Certificate of Ordination | Sep 2019 – Present
- Greater First Baptist Church, Cantonment, FL | Ordained to Gospel Ministry | Mar 2017
- Greater First Baptist Church, Cantonment, FL | Licensed to Gospel Ministry | Mar 2017
- Greater First Baptist Church, Cantonment, FL | Associate Minister | Dec 2015 – Oct 2018
- Justified Incarcerated Ministries, Pensacola, FL | Prison Minister | Sep 2015 – Dec 2016

Education

- Liberty Theological Seminary, Lynchburg, VA | Doctor of Ministry | Oct 2024
- Apex School of Theology, Durham, NC | Master of Divinity | May 2019
- Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA | Master of Arts | Dec 2016
- Columbia Southern University, Orange Beach, AL | Bachelor of Science | Jun 2013
- James S. Rickards High School, Tallahassee, FL | Diploma | May 2000

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LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 14, 2024

Leonard Carpenter
Paul Esswein

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY23-24-1347 Conforming to the Image of Christ: A Strategic Approach to Short-Term Bible-Based Pastoral Counseling in a Rural Church Context

Dear Leonard Carpenter and Paul Esswein,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds that your study does not meet the definition of human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your project is not considered human subjects research because it will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" according to 45 CFR 46. 102(I).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application. Any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

For a PDF of your IRB letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study Details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. **If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word** *research* **with the word** *project* **throughout both documents.**

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application's status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office