Nazarene Theological Seminary

Engaging the Colonias:
A Vision for the Church's Role in the Mexican-Majority Communities of the San Gabriel Valley

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

By

John Martin Cabrera III

Kansas City, Missouri
February 2022

NAZARENE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Doctor of Ministry Dissertation Approval

Student Name: Johnny Cabrera

Dissertation Title: Centralizando las Colonias: A Vision for the Church's Role in Community Development within the Mexican-Majority Communities of the San Gabriel Valley

Date of Defense: March 9, 2022

We, the undersigned, determined that this dissertation has met the academic requirements and standards of Nazarene Theological Seminary for the Doctor of Ministry program.

Linda Settles
_____
Faculty Advisor, Linda Settles

Michael A. Mata
_____
Second Reader, Michael Mata

_____
DMin Program Director, Levi Jones

Acknowledgments

This project took every ounce of determination I had within me, and I would not be at this point if not for God's unending grace and steadfast faithfulness. I am thankful for the heart of God within me to serve the least of these, and for the opportunity to put my head into what my hands are already eager to do. Even with that eagerness, however, it was the Holy Spirit's encouragement and conviction that drove me forward. I would be nothing without the humble servant Jesus Christ, who is the goal of everything I am in life.

I have to thank my wife, Gloria. I know this has been the toughest three years of our life together, and that was even before the pandemic. I know it must have seemed insane for me to continue in this course of study with everything going on and while we have three young children, but I thank you for your support. I love you.

To my children, Elise Gibbeum, David Seunggi, and Isaiah Giwon: I know you do not fully understand what your dad has had to do these past three years, but someday I trust you too will know the sweet experience of following a God-given opportunity toward enrichment and finding not only success, but fulfillment. May your eyes always look for the marginalized, for that is where Jesus is too. Follow him there, serve, love, and be loved.

To my fellow students in the Innovative Leadership in Changing Cultures DMin program: I am so grateful for you. Even though I did not keep in touch with all of you on a regular basis, especially not during the writing phase, I appreciated everything we learned together and how learning alongside you made it an even more enriching experience.

To my small cohort members, Richard Griffiths and Olivia Craker Metcalf: I can confidently say that I would not have finished this project without you. You cheered me on, you

pushed me forward, and you gave me a vision for what it would look like to be on the other side of this. And you let me do the same for you.

Dr. Linda Settles, your warm and encouraging spirit propped me up on my lowest of days. When I thought there was no way on earth that I could finish this project, you helped me believe that I could. Thank you for your helpful feedback, your wise direction, and your supportive attitude.

Dr. Levi Jones, Rev. Isaac Petty, Dr. Charles Thurman, and all the NTS staff (past and present) who worked behind the scenes on all the details of this program, I thank you so much! Your tireless work has been a blessing to me and will be a blessing to students in the future.

Many thanks to the professors from whom I learned over the last few years: Dr. Michael Mata, Dr. Ron Benefiel, Dr. Nell Becker Sweeden, Dr. Federico Canales, Dr. Josh Sweeden, and Dr. David Wesley. What I appreciate most about all of you is your humility and how it augments everything you impart to your students. And thank you Dr. Mata for not only being an excellent professor and one of our guides through our adventures in Los Angeles, but you were also my second reader and have been a model to which I aspire.

To my Pops, John Cabrera II, I was not surprised that you said yes to being my editor, but I admit I was a little surprised at how quickly you got your edits back to me and at how thorough they were. Considering that you were working nights without sleep, I am humbled that you joined me in this journey. You made this project better.

To my Mama, Sonia: You have always been my most avid supporter, and this endeavor was no exception. Thanks to you and Dad for all the weekends you took the kids, and thank you for your prayers. I know you often felt like there was not much you could do to help me, but you did plenty. Thank you!

Finally, to my grandparents, John and Guadalupe Cabrera, I thank you. You raised a family and stood as strong examples of proud Mexican-American Angelenos. To my abuelita, Hermelinda Zavala, muchas gracias. Yo te amo. I will never know the extent of the struggles you all had, but I know I would not be here without you. I miss you all. This work is dedicated to you.

Contents

John Martin Cabrera III

Engaging the Colonias:

A Vision for the Church's Role in the Mexican-Majority Communities of the San Gabriel Valley

The San Gabriel Valley is the largest majority Latinx and Asian region in the United States, and it is faced with the challenge of ever-increasing socioeconomic disparity. This has created an urban-suburban environment, bringing many of the challenges that are normally associated with the inner city into the suburban context, such as densely-populated and low-income areas, underperforming school districts, and an increasing houseless population. The local church must be ready to address the needs already in our cities. Church congregations in this context must be able to centralize marginalized people in this region, but do so in a way that engages the community, with the goal of development and transformation. Utilizing Latinx theologies, examining real congregational examples, reflecting on stories of success and failures throughout the San Gabriel Valley, and considering work that is already being done, this work culminates in a framework that church leaders can use to guide their congregations to reflection and action.

Chapter 1:

The San Gabriel Valley

"*The SGV is a region of America where a lot of Chinese and Mexicans have learned to live together, most of the time in harmony*."

–SGV streetwear brand "Chimexica Flag T-shirt" description

Introduction to the San Gabriel Valley

The San Gabriel Valley (the SGV) rests immediately east of the city of Los Angeles. The westernmost cities of the SGV, Monterey Park, Alhambra, and Pasadena, and further north there are the cities of La Crescenta and La Cañada. To the north and center are Altadena, Arcadia, Monrovia, Azusa and Glendora. The farthest south are Montebello, Hacienda Heights, and Rowland Heights. At the far east end are the cities of Pomona, Diamond Bar, La Puente, Bassett, and Claremont. In the center are the valley's namesake, San Gabriel, along with El Monte, Rosemead, and Temple City.

The SGV gets its name from the San Gabriel River, a mostly dry wash depending on the time of year, that runs through the center of the area, which derived its name from Misión San Gabriel Arcángel (San Gabriel Mission), one of the primary missions established by the Roman Catholic Church during the Spanish settlement of California in the mid 18th century. San Gabriel Mission was established in 1771, and while for many decades the area developed into an agricultural hub, the area is today almost completely urbanized and suburbanized.[1]

[1] "Wikipedia: San Gabriel Valley," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified February 8th, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Gabriel_Valley

To the north of the San Gabriel Valley are the San Gabriel Mountains, a modest range which helps provide the Los Angeles Basin its Mediterranean climate, and on a clear day are clearly visible from almost anywhere in the SGV. Then there are the Puente Hills to the south, the San Rafael Hills to the West, and the Chino and San Jose Hills on the east border of the San Gabriel Valley floor. (See Appendix A.)

There is a wide range of cultures and ethnicities in the SGV. In La Crescenta there is a large community of South Koreans. The cities of South Pasadena and Sierra Madre are the only two cities in the SGV that are predominantly White. Historically, the cities of Pasadena and Monrovia have had large Black communities; however that has changed in the last decade, with droves of Black San Gabriel Valley residents moving further east or even to Arizona, Texas, or Georgia.[2] In Rosemead, San Gabriel, and Monterey Park there are sizable Vietnamese communities.

For decades now, however, two groups have dominated the ethnic demography of the area: Mexican and Chinese, both first-generation immigrants and citizens alike. In fact, the San Gabriel Valley is the largest Mexican and Chinese-dominant area in the entire country. (source) On the one hand, this has associated cities like El Monte, Baldwin Park, and La Puente solely with the Mexican community. On the other hand, cities like Arcadia, Walnut, Rowland Heights, and Temple City are predominantly Chinese.

One needs only to take a drive from North to South or East to West in the San Gabriel Valley to get the idea of how both Mexican and Chinese cultures predominate. In a matter of miles or even blocks, one will encounter Mexican *panaderias* (bakeries), Spanish-named grocery stores, and street vendors selling tacos or fruit. Then, suddenly the scene will change to *dim sum*

[2] Lauren Helper, "The Hidden Toll of California's Black Exodus," July 15th, 2020, https://calmatters.org/projects/california-black-population-exodus/

restaurants, boba tea houses, and Chinese herbal dispensaries. Granted, these elements are often mixed within the same communities, as in the cities of Rosemead and El Monte. The majority of cities, however, are predominantly one or the other.

This segregation of ethnicities and cultures, and issues that follow them, is a major focus of this study. Statistics will show that the areas inhabited predominantly by Mexicans (or the Latinx population in general) do tend to struggle economically, educationally, and socially. This can be proven to greater degrees elsewhere, but this study examines that reality in the San Gabriel Valley. Not all areas inhabited by Chinese would be considered affluent; to be sure, there are Chinese and other Asian residents of the SGV living at or below the poverty line. However, this study posits that predominantly Mexican communities do tend to suffer in the abovementioned ways, and that evangelical churches in this context have a unique opportunity and responsibility to participate in community engagement that leads to appropriate community development and transformation, in service to their surrounding marginalized Mexican-majority neighborhoods.

Understanding how the San Gabriel Valley became the unique area it is today, including the long-standing inequities, requires traveling back to its origins. There is the Latinx story–this is predominantly Mexican, though there are other smaller Central and South American communities in the SGV. Then there is the Asian story, predominantly Chinese, but with strong representations of the Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, and Filipino, Hmong, and Laotian communities.

Mexicans in the San Gabriel Valley

The story of Mexicans in the San Gabriel Valley is truly a saga of racism, conquest, and exploitation. It is also a story filled with triumph and hard-fought respect. Originally, the area called the San Gabriel Valley was home to the native tribe called the Tongva, who had their own language and customs, but were decimated by illnesses introduced by the European colonizers who imposed themselves onto the land and forced the Tongva into labor on the increasingly developed territories surrounding and even within San Gabriel Mission itself. It is estimated that 6,000 indigenous people died at the mission alone.[3]

Mexicans did begin inhabiting the area in the 1800s, primarily to govern the land, oversee its preservation, and facilitate its development. However, there would be further colonization, with the American government overpowering the Mexicans who controlled Los Angeles and its surrounding areas like the San Gabriel Valley, leading to the Mexican government ceding the land to the American government in 1847.[4]

On the KCET website's "A Brief History (and Geography) of the San Gabriel Valley" from 2014, Wendy Cheng explains:

> "A racialized land and labor hierarchy developed alongside the citrus economy, with land and profits concentrated in the hands of Anglo Americans, and Mexican Americans and Asian Americans (Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, South Asian) constituting the labor force. Mexican and Mexican American laborers lived in *colonias, also called barrios* [italics mine], throughout the SGV but especially in the El Monte area. One of

[3] Wendy Cheng, "A Brief History (and Geography) of the San Gabriel Valley," August 4th, 2014, https://www.kcet.org/history-society/a-brief-history-and-geography-of-the-san-gabriel-valley
[4] Ibid.

these colonias, Hicks Camp, was the site of an important, multiracial, agricultural worker strike in 1933 -- at that point the largest agricultural strike in California history."

A popular saying among native Mexicans, when facing discrimination for being immigrants or the descendants of immigrants, states, "We didn't cross the border; the border crossed us." This is true. Justo Gonzalez writes, "As far as time is concerned, it is not the Hispanic-American but the Anglo-American who is the newcomer to this country...Actually, the first Hispanics to become part of this country did not do so by migration but were rather engulfed by the United States in its process of expansion--sometimes by purchase, sometimes by military conquest, and sometimes by simple annexation of territories no one was strong enough to defend."[5]

Leland Saito explains,

> "Mexicans had inhabited California long before the state was annexed by the United States through conquest and the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, but their numbers in the labor force were relatively small. That changed during the early 1900s when the Mexican population increased dramatically in the U.S. because of the completion of railroads linking the two nations, a revolution in Mexico, and U.S. labor recruiters who sought replacements for the diminishing supply of Asians."[6]

Mexicans have always had at best a tenuous relationship with the United States as a country, simply due to the fact that their value--especially in a land that once belonged to their

---

[5] Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 31.
[6] Leland Saito. *Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 18.

own people--was always derived from labor needs. In this way, as in many others, the White American became the occupier and oppressor to the Mexican citizen, establishing an empire in the name of Manifest Destiny.

Says Felipe Fernandez-Armesto,

> "Imperialism is not the whole story of the United States, but it is [a critical] part of the story, and needs emphasizing now to counter its former neglect. Unless US citizens acknowledge and understand their country's imperial past, they will not be able to understand its present or future. Much of the recent and current Hispanic resettlement of parts of the United States is a consequence of empire…Countercolonization follows colonization, and the waves of migrants always flow back like returning tides".[7]

Regardless of historical injustices, however, the fact remains that Mexicans (as well as those from Central and South America) continue to attempt to make their home in the United States. Furthermore, Mexican Americans have long been a significant part of the makeup of the United States, especially in areas near the Mexican border. This inevitably has changed the overall ethnic landscape of the USA over the years. Before the start of the school year in 2014, the U.S. Education Department released projections that for the first time in the history of America's public education system, there would no longer be a white-majority population. "The percentage of students who are white will drop from 51% in 2012 to 49.7."[8] The Pew Research Center went further, projecting out to the current year in 2022; they estimated the white

---

[7] Felipe Fernández-Armesto. *Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 80.

[8] Valerie Strauss, "For first time, minority students expected to be majority in U.S. public schools this fall," August 21st, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/08/21/for-first-time-minority-students-expected-to-be-majority-in-u-s-public-schools-this-fall/?arc404=true) 2014

enrollment will be at 45.3%, with what have been considered racial minorities at 54.7% enrollment.[9] These projections reflect more than just the public school systems; the entire cultural and ethnic makeup of the United States has been changing and has been for decades.

Pew Research's Paul Taylor released findings in 2014 that "[our] intricate new racial tapestry is being woven by the more than 40 million immigrants who have arrived since 1965, about half of them Hispanics…"[10] That was in 2014, and though the path for immigrants from certain countries has been made much more difficult over the last couple of decades (and even just the last few years), immigrants continue to arrive in the U.S., many of them Latin American. As of June of 2019, Pew Research released findings that "[today], more than 40 million people living in the U.S. were born in another country, accounting for about one-fifth of the world's migrants."[11] Since 2013, Mexico has actually been outpaced by China and India for the most immigrants coming to the U.S., and between 2010 there were actually more Mexicans departing the U.S. than entering. Still, the top destination for Mexican immigrants is the United States of America.[12]

Narrowing down to the San Gabriel Valley, this trend holds true. Take the percentage of Spanish speaking residents as one example. Of all residents in the San Gabriel Valley, 44.7% are Latinx. In a city such as El Monte, 67% of residents speak Spanish at home; La Puente is at 53% and Baldwin Park at 72%. According to the San Gabriel Valley Community Health Snapshot, "[racial]/ethnic populations are highly concentrated in specific geographic 'pockets' throughout

---

[9] Abby Budiman, "Key findings about U.S. immigrants," August 20th, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/

[10] Paul Taylor, "The Next America," April 10th, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/next-america/#Two-Dramas-in-Slow-Motion

[11] Abby Budiman, "Key findings about U.S. immigrants," August 20th, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/

[12] Emma Israel and Jeanne Batalova, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," November 5th, 2020, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states-2019

the [Valley]."[13] These high-density "pockets" present challenges, mainly economic and educational and social, in serving and developing certain communities and cities.

In his book "In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills," Jerry González recounts the history of Mexican-majority neighborhoods, throughout Los Angeles County overall and specifically in the San Gabriel Valley. He speaks of the development of what were known as *colonias,* encampments or makeshift communities which housed the migrant Mexican workers who primarily labored in the many farms, orchards, and ranches that used to make up most of the Los Angeles Country area. "Two concurrent historical processes characterize Mexican American suburbanization in this region. First, developers and city planners displaced colonia residents and removed the neighborhoods following the war. Those that remained morphed into suburban barrios from the 1950s onward."[14] Here we already see the marginalization of these Mexican immigrants and Mexican American people, regardless of the early value they provided to the agricultural vibrancy of the area.

González continues, "The second process involved migration into those suburbs. The number of Spanish-surnamed residents in Los Angeles County nearly doubled during the 1960s, a dramatic increase strongly suggesting Mexican American in-migration from southwestern states such as Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas."[15] At this time, natural migration was creating areas that were primarily inhabited by Mexican people, whether immigrated from Mexico or even more so immigrated from other parts of the U.S., and those areas were gradually defined by segregation.

---

[13] Greater San Gabriel Valley Hospital Collaborative, "Greater San Gabriel Valley Community Health Snapshot," February 6th, 2020, http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/chs/Docs/SGV_Snapshot.pdf. 4.
[14] Jerry Gonzalez, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 2-3.
[15] Ibid. 3.

Wendy Cheng again writes,

> "Spatially, the SGV has historically been divided by race and class from north to south (though with exceptions such as long established African American communities in East Pasadena, Altadena, and Monrovia). Wealthy, racially exclusive areas like San Marino -- the site of railroad scion Henry Huntington's lush estate -- and leisure towns like Pasadena shaped the north, while poorer, browner communities, like El Monte and South El Monte, developed in the south. In the nineteenth century, Huntington Drive constituted the dividing line in the western SGV, north of which people of color could not live, except as servants."[16]

Jerry Gonzalez also compares the experience of Mexicans in Los Angeles County and the San Gabriel Valley with the experience of the Black community in the same area. At the same time that Mexicans were being moved into their own segregated *colonias*, "African Americans were systematically concentrated into several neighborhoods along Central Avenue in Los Angeles, the east side of Pasadena, and the southern part of Monrovia," a remnant of which can still be seen today in those areas, though in much smaller numbers.

In contrast, this is how González characterizes the areas where Mexicans lived:

> "Colonias...were ubiquitous, distinctly working-class Mexican suburbs. They emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and provided refuge for laborers who toiled in the fields, foundries, factories, and privileged homes found across metropolitan Los

[16] Wendy Cheng, "A Brief History (and Geography) of the San Gabriel Valley," August 4th, 2014, https://www.kcet.org/history-society/a-brief-history-and-geography-of-the-san-gabriel-valley

> Angeles. Despite the protection they offered as culturally affirming spaces, colonias were plagued by *endemic poverty, substandard housing, lack of municipal services and infrastructural improvements, public health concerns, and property devaluation."* (italics mine) Residents frequently built their own homes from salvaged materials and arranged the built environment according to community needs. People with less to spend established colonias in abandoned railroad boxcars near downtown Los Angeles. With their access to decent housing effectively blocked by race-restrictive covenants, many adapted to life in the United States in these impoverished, segregated communities."[17]

If this were only an occurrence of the past, there would be no need for a study like this. Though the San Gabriel Valley residents of Mexican-majority neighborhoods do not usually find themselves in houses composed of boxcars or salvaged material, the abovementioned endemic poverty, substandard housing, public health concerns, and property devaluation, along with lower performing and lower ranked schools–and as a cause and effect, racist perceptions–persist. It is a major claim of this study that these colonias still exist, though they look different today, and that the Church in San Gabriel Valley has a role in engaging and developing these areas, with the end goal of transformation.

Vignette: Struggle Amidst Affluence in Arcadia

My first encounter with Joaquin was through the shared wall in our tiny apartment on Golden West Avenue in Arcadia. Shortly after we were married, my wife and I found our first apartment, a tiny but well-maintained one-bedroom apartment on the north side of Huntington

[17] Jerry Gonzalez, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 4.

Avenue, one of the city's largest streets. Rent was $875 per month, a rate virtually impossible to find these days. After a year there, and after finding my wife was pregnant with our first child, we were fortunate to find a two-bedroom apartment just two blocks south of our first apartment, on the same street. The rent for that new apartment: $1,110 per month, also miraculously low and impossible to find in 2022. That second apartment was where I met Joaquin Alexander and his mother, Raquel Miraflores. They are a Mexican-American family.

I had heard of financially struggling families who scoured apartment listings in Arcadia, hoping to find one reasonably low, just so they could enroll their children in one of the most highly ranked school districts in the San Gabriel Valley. Arcadia is predominantly Asian. As a native of Arcadia myself, though from the unincorporated and less affluent part of the city, I never actually attended public schools. My parents were both teachers at a private school in the city of Azusa, for most of my grade school years, so I attended there. If I had gone to public school, though, it would have been through the Monrovia School District, not as highly ranked as Arcadia.

The perception to me, from people who talked about school districts, was that I was fortunate to have gone to a private school, because otherwise I would have had to go to Monrovia schools. This perception has persisted, and families of affluence and poverty alike continue to find ways to get into districts like Arcadia and out of districts like Monrovia, or worse still like El Monte; of course it is much easier for families of affluence to find a place to live in Arcadia.

One reason this is possible for the less wealthy families, whereas it is not in other districts, is that Arcadia has entire neighborhoods comprised of apartment complexes. In the past they have been reasonably priced apartments. And families like Joaquin’s would do their best to

get one, just so they could attend an Arcadia school. They would struggle and scrape by, but at least parents like Raquel could have a little more assurance that their child(ren) would be in "a good school district."

And who could blame them? Considering where Raquel and Joaquin had come from–a world of drugs and danger, irresponsibility and addiction–living in a safe neighborhood within a highly ranked school district was an ideal situation for them. Ideal, that is, as long as Joaquin could stay clean himself, avoid the wrong influences, and get through high school. As Raquel would soon discover, it would take a village for that to happen.

It was not long after we moved in that I began to hear shouting from next door, and I had already seen the teenager and single mother who lived there. At the time, I was a youth pastor at a modestly sized church in the city of Monterey Park, another predominantly Asian city like Arcadia, to the far west of the San Gabriel Valley. The question that would not let me go was, "How can I call myself a pastor of youth or a pastor at all if I do not at least attempt to be a pastor to the young man and his mother who live on the other side of this wall?"

I decided to leave a letter in Raquel's mailbox, simply saying that I am a youth pastor and I would love to serve their family in any way I could. I left my phone number and then waited. It was only about two days until I received a text message from Raquel, thanking me for reaching out and expressing her deep concern for her son. Not only did he have a learning disability, but he had already been in trouble with drugs. Furthermore, he had a very sad and troubling story from his early childhood, which was the reason he and his mother were living by themselves. She was a Christian strong in her faith, and she knew that it was not by accident that my wife and I moved in next to her and Joaquin.

From that point on, I would take him every Friday to youth group, and Raquel would bring him every Sunday to the church gathering. I was discipling Joaquin and Raquel was being encouraged by other Christians. We joined a life group with Raquel. Joaquin attended youth mission trips and retreats. There was significant breakthrough and it was clear this was a God-ordained situation.

It was not all perfect though. During Joaquin's junior year of high school, he was arrested in the middle of the night for possession of narcotics. Gloria and I woke up around 2am, to the sound of police banging on their door. After he was taken away, we sat with Raquel in our living room, praying with her as she cried. Still, I witnessed him graduate with his high school diploma, an achievement we all knew was only by the grace of God.

So, what did I glean from this? Would the situation have turned out this way if Joaquin and Raquel had lived in a Latinx-majority city like El Monte or La Puente? It might have. Negative influences and trouble were present even in a "safe city" and a "good school district" like Arcadia. It was not the city nor the school district that spared him an irreversibly destructive outcome. It was the Church–in this case my wife and me, and eventually our larger faith community–engaging this one struggling family, and guiding them in developing the life of a young man. That could have happened in any city where the Church is present.

Vignette: Yvonne and Her Daughters

Yvonne is not from Los Angeles nor the San Gabriel Valley. Part Mexican and part Native American of the Apache Tribe, she was born in Northern California, but had been raising her girls by herself in Oregon. Yvonne needed to escape a domestic violence living situation and she came to the San Gabriel Valley hoping for a fresh new start. She works and makes just

enough to provide a simple life for her and her daughters, one in junior high and one in elementary school. For better or for worse, she chose the ultra-affluent city of Walnut.

Walnut homes start at a price of somewhere around $900,000, and can easily exceed $1 million. Walnut does not have apartments, the streets are well-kept and clean, and it is predominantly Chinese, both foreign and native-born. Yvonne chose Walnut because she knew it would be a safe community for her daughters to go to school, as well as a safe place to live. The only place Yvonne could afford to live was in the spare bedroom of a home, rented to her by the owner. She and her girls had shared use of the kitchen and bathroom.

Yvonne is a proud Native American, and she is teaching her daughters the traditions of their people, how to pray to the Creator and care for the earth. She speaks of people, White and even Brown (that is, Latin-American) people, who have "colonized" minds: they blame immigrants and marginalized people for the destruction of the environment--she used the term "eco-fascist"--and they fail to recognize on whose land America stands, namely the First Nation and Mexican peoples.

Sadly, things did not go well between her and the owner of the house where she and her girls were living. He became annoyed by their use of the kitchen and became violently angry. This triggered the domestic violence trauma Yvonne and her girls experienced, and she refused to put them in danger again. They immediately began making plans to either find another affordable place in the area, or to move all the way back up to Portland.

After looking around for affordable housing in the area, and even checking the availability of local domestic violence shelters, she found that it would be better for them to just move back to Portland. By this point, her girls had already missed so much school, and it would be weeks before they would even be enrolled in school back in Portland again.

This is a sad story, but the point is that in a city like Walnut--affluent and overwhelmingly Asian--there is no place for someone like Yvonne. Even she, as a proud Native American woman with girls who are part Native American and part Mexican, perceives that to have lived in a Mexican-majority area would have been more dangerous to her family. It was not desirable.

I reached out to the school her younger daughter attended, the same school as my children attend, and explained Yvonne's situation to the principal. (My children only attend that school because our business falls just within the city limits of the city of Walnut; we cannot afford to live there either.) I implored them to help her with any resources they had available, resources for rental assistance, or at least for motel vouchers so they did not have to stay in a dangerous situation. It became apparent very quickly that schools like this one, in extremely wealthy communities, have no idea what to do with families like Yvonne's. They offer free or reduced lunches, but their priority is not to serve a single mother barely providing for her family, who has found a safe community--though not a safe home--to live.

Perhaps the saddest part of this story is the invisibility of the local Church in her story. Yvonne grew up in the Jehovah's Witness faith, and within that tradition she endured abuse at the hands of a church leader. For that reason, she currently is not interested in any kind of Christianity. To her, that is the faith that brought her personal pain, and it is the faith that brought her people oppression. With at least a dozen evangelical Christian churches in the city, there could have been a different representation, but how could any of them have known Yvonne was ever there? They were a Native-American and Mexican family, in an affluent Asian-majority community, and their time there was short-lived.

Still, our family encountered her. We invited her to our place of business, so she could have some time to reflect and rest, and so that her girls could enjoy some playtime. We invited her and her girls to attend church with us, though she politely declined. We helped her with some of the needs she had. And we prayed over her before she departed to go back to Portland.

I could not help but lament the ugly truth. There was never going to be an option for Yvonne, where she could live long-term in a community like Walnut. There was never going to be a Mexican-majority city in the San Gabriel Valley where she would perceive that she could be safe enough or not living at the level of poverty like those who would have been around her. And churches, whether in cities like Walnut or in Mexican-majority cities like La Puente, do not often know how to do the work of developing--or even starting with engaging and exegeting--the community, so that all who live therein can thrive.

Chinese in the San Gabriel Valley

The story of the Chinese in San Gabriel Valley also began under challenging circumstances, though unlike Mexicans, they truly were immigrants to this continent and to the Southwest in particular. Beginning in the mid-nineteen hundreds, the Chinese were among other Asian settlers in the American West. Sue Fawn Chung tells two stories about Chinese settlers in the West. The first is about the Chinese as part of the Gold Rush in the 19th Century. "The Chinese were not unlike other immigrants in their dreams of instant wealth, new opportunities, and a better life."[18]

It was not so easy to find this wealth, however, and they faced many hardships of their own. Fung continues,

[18] Sue Fawn Chung. *In Pursuit of Gold: Chinese American Miners and Merchants in the American West*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011), XVII.

> "They faced enormous challenges from hostile miners who wrote anti-Chinese regulations to govern their districts and influenced state and federal legislation. When economic depression and high unemployment affected the EuroAmerican miners, they targeted the Chinese as a major cause of their plight because of the low wages paid them."[19]

These low wages contributed to the perception that the Chinese were merely "cheap workers," and were therefore making it harder for the non-Chinese (the White workers) to receive higher wages. In spite of all of their battles, Chinese settlers managed to become vital parts of development in their respective communities, and they still found a kind of success.

Another story Chung tells is of the Chinese in the forests of the American West. Though not much has been written about their integral part in the work in the woods, they were a force in that industry.

> "A closer look at the Chinese men in the woods, with a focus on the Sierra Nevada in the 1870s to 1890s, reveals that these men often constituted 90 percent of the workers, performed a variety of tasks, had limited upward mobility, sometimes earned more than the one dollar per day salary generalization (and even surpassed non-Chinese workers in wages earned), interacted with the larger community while maintaining close contact with their fellow countrymen, and left the occupation around the turn of the twentieth century for reasons beyond their control."[20]

That reason, it turns out, was that they were thought to be physically incapable of doing the work of logging and lumbering, even though they had already proven the contrary.

---

[19] Ibid. XVII.
[20] Ibid. 15.

Though Los Angeles was established by Mexican settlers in 1781, Leland Saito points out that it was during the 1870s that the Chinese community gained a foothold in the area.[21] The strength of this community continued to grow and develop as the areas around Los Angeles grew and developed.

Furthermore, he recounts that "[between] 1970 and 1990 Los Angeles County experienced another transformation. The number of whites…declined, and the population changed…to a minority white one." He continues, "Largely due to immigration, Latinos tripled in number, while Asian Americans quadrupled their population during the same period."[22]

According to Saito, for Chinese-Americans in the Los Angeles County area, "The San Gabriel Valley has become the focal point…linked with the immigrants' countries of origin and ethnic Chinese communities in other cities, such as Sydney and Vancouver."[23] He explains that the presence of necessary elements for development and growth fueled the Chinese-American growth in the San Gabriel Valley. Property was (and is still) cheaper than in the city of Los Angeles, there was and is still an abundance of low-wage immigrant labor–both Mexican and Chinese immigrants–and there remains a presence of highly skilled technicians and engineers. He says that "Chinese entrepreneurs have placed the San Gabriel Valley directly in the global economy."[24]

Economic Disparity

[21] Leland Saito. *Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 18.
[22] Ibid. 18.
[23] Ibid. 20.
[24] Ibid. 21.

Residents of predominantly Mexican communities tend to suffer economically. As with other areas of struggle, this is nothing new to Mexicans living in the San Gabriel Valley, Los Angeles County, and many other parts of California and the United States. The context of the San Gabriel Valley is unique for two reasons. First, there is extreme wealth in certain parts of the San Gabriel Valley, as in the case of a city such as San Marino. "The city is one of the wealthiest places in the nation in terms of household income. By extension, with a median home price of $2,699,098, San Marino is one of the most expensive and exclusive neighborhoods in the Los Angeles area."[25] This wealth is so prominent in some areas that it may not be immediately apparent that poverty exists relatively nearby, primarily where there is a Latinx/Mexican majority.

Second, Mexicans have a long history in Los Angeles and its surrounding areas, and that history is almost completely tied to labor and segregation. Saito explains, "[Both] Asians and Latinos have been the major source of the seasonal labor force throughout the history of agriculture in the state, with its often physically grueling work and harsh living conditions."[26]

In the city of El Monte, whose residents are over 65% Hispanic/Latino, the economic landscape presents areas of strength and thriving, but also struggle. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 16.5% of El Monte residents are living below the poverty line, while another 6.4% are at or near the poverty line.[27] Looking at it another way, in El Monte over 20% of residents are

---

[25] "Wikipedia: San Marino," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified January 26th, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Marino,_California.

[26] Leland Saito. *Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 27.

[27] Church of the Nazarene, Community Demographics, 2022, https://maps.nazarene.org/DemographicsNazarene/economic.html?y=4038365.4090397484&x=-13139258.79419385&b=1.5,

living with less than a $25,000 annual income, and another 19% are living with $44,999 or less annually.[28]

For perspective, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) determined that, for the year 2021 the federal income level for a household in Los Angeles County (where El Monte is located), the median household income is to be $80,000.[29] In other words, there are some families in Los Angeles County living with a much higher income, and there are those living with a much lower income.

Based on this number, HUD has set amounts for low, very low, and extremely low income levels. In the San Gabriel Valley, the average household consists of three people.[30] So, based on the average household size–three people–low income is set at $85,150, very low is set at $53,200, and extremely low is set at $31,950.[31] With this in mind, consider the above mentioned information from ESRI that indicates 20% of El Monte residents are living with even less income than the extremely low income level set by HUD.

El Monte is just one example. Pomona, another Latino-majority city, has nearly 18% of its residents living below the poverty line, with nearly 7% living at the poverty line.[32] Likewise, Baldwin Park has nearly 12% below the poverty line, with nearly 6% near the poverty line.[33] La Puente has nearly 12% below the poverty line, with nearly 7% near the poverty line.[34] One more

---

[28] Ibid.
[29] Los Angeles Almanac, Poverty and Lower Living Income Level Guidelines, 2020, https://www.laalmanac.com/social/so24.php
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Church of the Nazarene, Community Demographics, 2022, https://maps.nazarene.org/DemographicsNazarene/economic.html?y=4036130.904011118&x=-13107989.149230018&b=1.5
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

example, the city of Montebello, has nearly 14% living below the poverty line, with another 6% living near it.[35]

While the percentage of those living at or below the poverty line appears small, it does affect a significant portion of the residents. In many cities across the country, there are people living in relative poverty. What makes this stand out in an area like the San Gabriel Valley, however, is the extreme wealth that exists in other cities. This wealth does not exist in cities where Mexicans/Latinos are the majority. The San Gabriel Valley is the largest Mexican and Chinese-majority area in the United States, so it should go without saying that the Chinese-majority cities stand in stark contrast to the Mexican-majority cities.

Consider Arcadia, a predominantly Chinese city just north of the Mexican-majority city of El Monte. Over 52% of the population is Asian, with 31% of the city's population earning over $125,000 per year. The San Gabriel Valley, and Los Angeles County as a whole, is a notoriously difficult place to buy a house. Los Angeles has once again been ranked as one of the most expensive cities to live in, ranked just below New York City.[36] It is no surprise, then, that a suburban area just east of the city of Los Angeles would share similar challenges.

As of December 2021, the average cost for a house in Arcadia was $1.1 million.[37] In a city where over 30% of the population earns more than $125,000 per year, this seems reasonable. Contrast this to housing in a city like the aforementioned El Monte. The average house there is well over $600,000, with the housing value in this city going up by 14.1% over the last year. On the one hand this is good news for those who already own a home in El Monte and for those who

[35] Ibid.
[36] Evie Carrick, "10 Most Expensive Cities to Live in around the World,, December 7th, 2021, https://www.travelandleisure.com/trip-ideas/most-expensive-cities-in-the-world
[37] Arcadia Housing Market, https://www.redfin.com/city/645/CA/Arcadia/housing-market

have a steadily sufficient income. However, recall that nearly 21% of the population of this city are living at or below the poverty line.[38]

What does it mean that over 20% of the population cannot (and continuing as they are could never) afford a home in the city where they live? For most people in this situation, it means leaving for more affordable housing elsewhere outside the San Gabriel Valley. According to the San Gabriel Valley Health Snapshot, presented February 2020, "Residents who can no longer afford to live in their homes are moving to the Inland Empire or the Antelope Valley area, further from work and school. Longer commute times contribute to poor physical and mental health."[39]

It is worth noting that the goal of this project is not to encourage church congregations to participate in community engagement for the end result of making Mexican-majority communities more like Asian or White communities. There is rich culture in many of these communities, while at the same time there is great frustration at the lack of resources and great embarrassment at their appearance and perception to other more affluent communities. The fact remains that poverty is real in Latino/Mexican-majority communities, and this poverty has been woven into the story of these communities from their inception. Need this poverty always exist?

Educational Disparity in the SGV

An area's demographic does not only influence its economy, especially for families looking for a suitable place to raise a family. Nothing brings the reality of educationally

[38] This refers to the statistic on page 19, recorded under footnote #27, which states that "According to the U.S. Census Bureau…16.5% of El Monte residents are living below the poverty line, while another 6.4% are at or near the poverty line.# Looking at it another way, in El Monte just over 20% of residents are living with less than a $25,000 annual income, and another 19% are living with $44,999 or less annually."

[39] Greater San Gabriel Valley Hospital Collaborative, "Greater San Gabriel Valley Community Health Snapshot," February 6th, 2020, http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/chs/Docs/SGV_Snapshot.pdf. 8.

segregated neighborhoods closer to home than having children of one's own. Every year, countless families find themselves having the conversation about where the best schools are, which often determines where they want to look for a living space to buy or rent. Not surprisingly, the areas that tend to suffer economically are also the areas that have less than desirable schools. In the San Gabriel Valley, this means that schools with a predominantly Mexican or Latinx demographic tend to be poorly ranked.

Wendy Cheng explains that over the last century in the San Gabriel Valley,

> "a form of racialized privilege among Asian Americans manifested particularly in the schools and in comparison to Latina/o students, although predicated on racial otherness as well as attributes that applied unevenly to a heterogeneous 'Asian' population, the relatively privileged status of Asians. As a result, Latina/o students tended to be devalorized in schools."[40]

This "devalorization" may persist in large part due to the low percentage of educated Mexican immigrants living in the United States. It certainly did not help that widely known political figures like former President Donald Trump said things like, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best…They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems [to] us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."[41] No doubt, attitudes like this perpetuate negative attitudes toward not only Mexican immigrants but Mexicans in general.

---

[40] Wendy Cheng, *The Changs Nextdoor to the Díazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), Kindle Edition. Location 416.

[41] Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "Donald Trump's false comments connecting Mexican immigrants and crime," July 8th, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/

It stands to reason then that these attitudes prevail when considering the schools in these Latinx/Mexican-majority areas. Elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools all fall prey to the same narrative, and unfortunately the numbers tell the same story.

In El Monte, all of the schools have more Latinx students than any other demographic, ranging from 63% to 96%. In the schools with percentages of Latinx students in the 90s, Asians are the next largest demographic, often at 4% to 5%.[42] At some schools, there is no other demographic there. This not only speaks to the predominance of Latinx (Mexican) and Asian (Chinese) people in the San Gabriel Valley, but it also indicates the overwhelming presence of the Latinx residents in areas where they are the majority. It is not a slight majority; in some areas it is almost completely Latinx. As we will see later, this is hardly ever the case in areas where Asians are the majority, at least in the San Gabriel Valley.

Revisiting the discussion of economic challenges in Latinx-majority areas, there is no public school in the Latinx-majority city of El Monte where the percentage of low-income students is below 83%. At some schools, as much as 98% of the students at the school are from low-income households.[43] To be clear, "low-income" does not mean "no income," but as we established in the previous section, many families do not earn nearly enough to live comfortably in an area like the San Gabriel Valley. Many do not even make enough to live comfortably in a city like El Monte.

Contrast this again to the city of Arcadia and its schools. We have seen that, as a city, Arcadia is quite affluent in the San Gabriel Valley, and that does mostly reflect onto the schools. At all but one public school in Arcadia, Asians are the majority, with percentages ranging from

[42] Great Schools: El Monte, Equity: Test Scores, 2022, https://www.greatschools.org/california/el-monte/schools/?tableView=Equity&view=table
[43] Great Schools: El Monte, Ratings Snapshot, 2022, https://www.greatschools.org/california/el-monte/schools/?tableView=Equity&view=table&page=1

44% all the way to 78%.[44] As previously stated, cities and school districts with a majority Latinx demographic, the remaining demographic consists largely of Asian and no one else. However, in cities where the schools are majority Asian, there tend to be larger percentages of other ethnicities present as well.

Another important statistic is that there is one school in Arcadia that does not have a majority of Asian students, Rio Hondo Elementary. They are 72% Latinx, with 22% Asian and Filipino and White students rounding out the remaining percentages. Of all the students, 87% of them are low-income.[45] It is telling that this school is located not in the areas where there is a high concentration of Asians, but rather in South Arcadia, which is right on the border of the city of El Monte.

At the risk of being anecdotal, ask any parent in the San Gabriel Valley which school district they would prefer for their kids, and it is fairly certain they will name a district like Arcadia. It is no secret that other ethnicities tend to want to go to school where Asians are the majority, and it is equally well-known that most would prefer to *not* send their kids to schools where there is a Latinx majority.

What does all this mean for the quality of the schools themselves? The purpose of this project is not to delve into the intricacies of how and why American public school systems overall tend to fail low-income students of color, not to mention how this has become even worse during the COVID-19 pandemic.[46] Here the facts are simply being plainly presented, to paint the picture of ongoing struggle for the Latinx communities in the San Gabriel Valley.

---

[44] Great Schools: El Monte, Equity: Test Scores, 2022, https://www.greatschools.org/california/arcadia/schools/?st%5B%5D=public_charter&st%5B%5D=public&tableView=Equity&view=table

[45] Ibid.

[46] Steve Giegerich, "Schools Have Failed Children of Color during the Pandemic," September 1st, 2020, https://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2020/august/schools-have-failed-children-of-color-during-the-pandemic/

Vignette: Spotlight on Monrovia Unified School District

Sonia taught preschool in Monrovia for almost 30 years, and in that time she has arguably seen it all. Sonia was a lead teacher at Canyon Early Learning Center, a state-funded institution specifically for low-income families, and was on staff there for nearly 30 years.

When Sonia started at CELC in the 90s, she recalls there was a 40/40 split between Black and Hispanic families, with a smattering of other ethnicities making up the rest. Like Los Angeles and many cities near it, there has been a mass exodus of Black families out of Monrovia, moving east to states like Texas and Arizona. At the end of her tenure at Monrovia, she saw hardly any Black families at all, and there has been a slight increase in Asian families, but the majority of families she served were low-income Mexican families.

On a positive note, she sees a lot of hard-working close-knit families. Though most of those parents are living paycheck to paycheck, and she has seen the worst-case scenarios become reality in some cases, she estimates that 80% of the kids she serves are cared for by strong families. She attributes much of this to the strong moral and religious affiliation in those families. On the negative side, the other 20% are families who are severely struggling, usually very young and/or single parents whose children show the impact of their household's challenges.

Though she was sad to say it, Sonia could not name very many local organizations who are doing a very good job of partnering with Canyon Early Learning Center. At the beginning of

---

Speaking to incoming students at Columbia University, former Education Secretary John King lamented that, "children of color have also been disproportionately affected by COVID's social-emotional toll, which includes higher death rates in their communities, increased food insecurity and, concurrently with the pandemic, the police shootings of unarmed Black Americans. He also argued that any assessment of how minority students performed during the final months of the 2019-20 school year should recognize the largely inferior quality of education that many were receiving prior to the onset of the pandemic."

her tenure at CELC, she held the title of community liaison, in addition to being a teacher at the school. One of her responsibilities was to build a network of relationships with local residents, businesses, institutions, and government agencies. While most of the low-income families she saw then were receiving government assistance (as they are now), she noticed a tremendous lack of participation from those who would have had the resources to help the more needy families. The city of Monrovia is set right at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains, and the further you go into the mountain residential areas, the more affluent the households become. Some of those families are even themselves local business owners. During the years when she filled the community liaison role, she visited many of the affluent business owners and residents, but she was often left disappointed that so few (if any) were interested in supporting and partnering with Canyon Early Learning Center. Today that position has long since been deemed no longer necessary.

One of the most surprising observations Sonia made was regarding the presence of the local church at Canyon Early Learning Center, or rather the lack thereof. There is a large and growing multicultural church in Monrovia, known locally for developing beneficial relationships with local elementary and middle schools, as well as with Monrovia High School. Unfortunately, Sonia says, these benefits have not yet reached CELC, though this is where she believes they should be starting. If they really want to develop relationships with the community and find out how they can help meet the needs of the most vulnerable children, this would be a prime opportunity. However, from what she has seen, Preschool children and families are largely forgotten as somehow not a regular level of school. These families certainly do have real needs, though, and it is important for the Church to have just as much of an impact on their lives as those at any other level.

Vignette: Good School District or Bust(ed)

I had not heard from Ariana for months when she contacted me. It sounded desperate. Her son, Francisco, needed my help in a way I was not expecting. They could not stand to keep him in El Monte Unified School District any longer, and they were trying to get him back into the school district where he had been previously: Monrovia Unified School District.

Interestingly enough, Monrovia Unified School District is not itself always perceived as the most desirable district either. It has long had the unfortunate distinction of being directly adjacent to Arcadia Unified School District, one of the most highly ranked school districts in the San Gabriel Valley.

By comparison, Arcadia is a highly sought-after school district in Los Angeles County, while Monrovia is often perceived as not as desirable. It has already been demonstrated that this perception of different school districts has become focused on ethnic demographics: Where Asians are the majority, the reputation and performance is positive. Where Latinx (Mexicans) are the majority, bad perceptions abound. Ironically, it was this relatively less desirable school district where Ariana wanted her son to be.

Francisco's older brother had already been the fallen prey to poor decisions and poor surroundings. After getting deep into drugs and failing at his high school in El Monte, he had completely dropped out by the time Ariana contacted me. He was already living in his own apartment with his girlfriend, holding down a job and making no plans of returning to school. Ariana was afraid this would be Francisco's fate too, and she desperately wanted him to return to Monrovia, the district where she thought he would have a better shot at staying in school and

completing his high school education. So, she asked if they could use my address, ideally allowing him to attend Monrovia High School.

Though I knew that I legally should not say yes, I wanted to help this family. These boys had already been living away from their biological mother and father for many years–Dad was deported to Mexico a long time ago and Mom disappeared–and their Aunt Ariana had done everything she could to raise them as her own and keep them on the right path. Her husband of just a few years is the Spanish pastor of a church in Rowland Heights and together they have one daughter. Still, she has raised her nephews the best she can, and with very little resources. I was heartbroken to hear about her older nephew dropping out, and I wanted to do whatever I could to help Francisco.

He is a bright and polite young man, always willing to help where needed and always trying to stay positive about his situation. By the time Ariana came to me with this request, I had already known Ariana, Francisco, and their family for five years. I had watched Francisco grow from a little elementary school student to an intelligent young man brimming with hope and possibility. I was sure that, as long as he stayed out of trouble and did his best in school, he would be able to remain in the Monrovia Unified School District and using my address would not be an issue.

Still, on a random weekday afternoon, an employee of Monrovia Unified School District showed up at my door, along with a Monrovia Police officer. They were there to see if indeed Ariana and Francisco lived there, which of course they did not. They reminded me that I was in danger of committing perjury, and that the only reason I had not done so yet was because he had not yet started attending Monrovia High School. I had to let Ariana and Francisco know that,

even though he had done nothing wrong and our intentions were good, it was not going to work out.

Among other lessons, the most prominent takeaway from this is that one family's undesirable school district is another family's dream destination. El Monte stands as the epitome of bad school districts in the San Gabriel Valley, and for Ariana and her family it represented everything she wanted to avoid for her kids. Still, to hear more affluent families discuss school districts, Monrovia was on the less desirable side of the scale, and Arcadia was the goal. It must not sit right with members of these communities, not the least of all church leaders and members within or near the city of El Monte, that there are school districts full of families who are there simply because they cannot afford to go anywhere else. And often parents in these districts feel their only option is to take an action similar to Ariana: ask someone to do something illegal and say something untrue, just to give a child a chance at a better school experience.

Social Disparity in the SGV

One might wonder, looking from the outside in, what it is about Latinx people that makes their economic status typically so poor and their schools so widely undesirable. Or on the other hand, one might wonder what it is about Asian people that makes their economic status typically so affluent and their schools so desirable. People within communities all over the San Gabriel Valley, including leaders and members of church congregations in San Gabriel Valley, are left with two options. Option A is that there is something inherently inferior about Latinx people. It is unnecessary to go into detail about why this option is abhorrent and unacceptable, yet there are likely those who hold this opinion. Option B is that there is a long-standing system and resulting perception that has hindered many people of color–the Latinx and Black population in the San

Gabriel Valley–from excelling or even from simply supporting themselves and their families with sufficient income and housing.

With the long history of the subjugation of the Latinx community in the San Gabriel Valley, it is inevitable that a negative perception of them would pervade the opinions of those living in this area. Looking more closely at the history of Mexicans in the San Gabriel Valley, however, it is evident that the story they carved for themselves was not always one of inferiority.

Jerry Gonzalez writes,

> "It is…imperative to recover Mexican Americans' suburban history, because it adds a new dimension to understanding how people negotiated collective identity, often revealing that struggles to preserve places, to combat discrimination in housing, and to participate in local politics helped to forge a cohesive nonwhite identity exercised through local place-making practices."[47]

Homelessness in the San Gabriel Valley

All of this is not to say that community engagement and community transformation is unnecessary in Asian/Chinese-majority cities like those described above. In largely affluent cities across the San Gabriel Valley, there are desperate needs, the most pressing among those being homelessness. The report from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority was that "There were 4,489 homeless individuals in the Greater SGV in 2019; 63.3% of these were unsheltered homeless."[48] This number has apparently improved, with the number of homeless in the Greater

[47] Jerry Gonzalez, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 9.
[48] Greater San Gabriel Valley Hospital Collaborative, "Greater San Gabriel Valley Community Health Snapshot," February 6th, 2020, http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/chs/Docs/SGV_Snapshot.pdf, 8.

San Gabriel Valley dropping by 19% in 2021.[49] This could mostly be attributed to the focused attention given to the homeless population by the cities in the San Gabriel Valley and in Los Angeles County overall, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most prominent example of this focused attention was Project Roomkey, which provided crisis shelters to people experiencing homelessness, especially those "who are at high-risk for hospitalization if they contract Coronavirus…High-risk includes seniors 65+ and/or those suffering from chronic illness."[50] With efforts like this, and with an overall push to reduce the amount of individuals and families experiencing homelessness, it is not a surprise that this number has gone down. Still, it is uncertain how this number might change when the pandemic is not as serious, and when possibly the crisis housing is not as abundant as the need requires.

Also, it is worth noting that across the San Gabriel Valley and regardless of the city, as of 2019 the overwhelming majority of individuals experiencing homelessness were Latinx. At that time, they comprised 46% of the overall population of individuals experiencing homelessness.[51] On the one hand, this is not surprising, considering that Latinos are the overwhelming majority in the San Gabriel Valley as a whole.[52] It is alarming that, while African Americans make up only 4% of the total population in the San Gabriel Valley, they make up 22% of the population of the people in the San Gabriel Valley who are experiencing homelessness. That is more than 1 out of every 5 people experiencing homelessness. Still, the rest of that population is still overwhelmingly Latino.

---

[49] Penny Rosenberg and Elizabeth Chou, "San Gabriel Valley's Sheltered Homeless Population Declines by 19%," July 21st, 2021. https://www.sgvtribune.com/2021/07/21/san-gabriel-valleys-sheltered-homeless-population-declines-by-nearly-one-fifth/?clearUserState=true

[50] Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, last updated July 29th, 2021, https://www.lahsa.org/news?article=705-project-roomkey

[51] Greater San Gabriel Valley Hospital Collaborative, "Greater San Gabriel Valley Community Health Snapshot," February 6th, 2020, http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/chs/Docs/SGV_Snapshot.pdf, 8.

[52] Ibid.

This only serves to further clarify the need for focused attention on the Latino communities across the San Gabriel Valley, whether housed or unhoused. As shown above, Latinos in certain areas tend to endure struggle even when they are not experiencing homelessness, and the problem becomes even worse when they are.

Chapter 2

Literature Review: Identifying and Centralizing the Margins

In the history of the Church, there exists a rich history of service to the poor. From the earliest days of the followers of Christ there existed a special care for ~~the~~ poor believers, as well as those outside the church. Acts 2:44-45 tells us, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and *distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need*" (italics mine). Who has more need than those who have nothing?

In addition, we see in Acts 6:1-7 that the desire to serve the poor even became somewhat of a distraction to the apostles, who understood that they must focus their energy on prayer and preaching. It became an issue, not because serving the poor was tangential or less important than prayer and preaching, but because some people were being neglected in the food distribution. Because of this they arranged to have *Spirit-filled* disciples overseeing the ministry to the poor, precisely so that no one would be left out, because it was a critical ministry of Jesus' followers. It continues to be a work that is rightly considered *justice,* often also referred to as *social justice*.

Still, right alongside the clear and inextricable connection between the ministry of the gospel and service to the poor, there also stands an unnecessary push against this type of service, because it is said to present a distraction from the work of the gospel. Well-known and respected pastors such as John MacArthur have made the authoritative claim that the work of justice actually runs counter to the work of the gospel of Jesus Christ. "Social justice is not a part of the gospel. I'll go one step further...It is a serious [hindrance] to the gospel."[53]

This battle between the work of evangelism and the work of justice has been a fixture in the landscape of the American Church since the early 1900s. In fact, many scholars even point

[53] MacArthur, John, "Social Justice and the Gospel, Pt. 1," August 26th, 2018, https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/81-21

to a very specific time when the Church underwent what David O. Moberg calls "The Great Reversal". He writes,

> "There was a time when evangelicals had a balanced position that gave proper attention to both evangelism and social concern, but a great reversal early in [the 20th century] led to a lopsided emphasis upon evangelism and omission of most aspects of social involvement."[54]

That was not the end of the discussion, however, and Moberg expresses hope that there has been a reversal of the Great Reversal, "bringing new winds of the Spirit into contemporary evangelicalism an differing the potential of restoring it to its rightful place of leadership in regard to the social implications of Christian faith."[55] Moberg wrote that in the 1970s, and though there remains a conflict between a focus on evangelism and justice, there also remains hope.

Clearly, the disagreement comes down largely to a difference in understanding of what the gospel is. To pastors like MacArthur, the gospel is a matter of personal holiness conquering personal sin. "The gospel says whatever your condition in the world, however you've been treated, whatever's gone wrong is a small issue compared to your own sin."[56] According to this perspective, the good news is that you can be saved spiritually, even if your physical and social condition do not change, and even if no one who helped lead you to faith in Jesus Christ does anything about it.

---

[54] David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism and Social Concern*, (New York, J.B. Lippincott Company, 1977), 25.
[55] Ibid. 26.
[56] John MacArthur, Social Justice and the Gospel, Pt. 1, August 26th, 2018, https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/81-21

To determine the full nature of the gospel, we will be examining a parable from Jesus Christ, the one who embodied and proclaimed the gospel himself. This is the one who, in his first teaching in the synagogue, read Isaiah 61:1-4:

> "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor…"

Considering Jesus' ministry, this gospel he brought, this good news, was for the oppressed of all kinds: socially oppressed, physically oppressed, financially oppressed, and spiritually oppressed.

Here we will examine the parable of the sheep and the goats, found in Matthew 25:31-46. It will become clear that this parable speaks in no uncertain terms about the criteria which the Son of Man will use to judge the world at a time foretold. Jesus will not judge based ~~not~~ simply on how convincingly ~~some~~one has assented to Christian doctrine, nor ~~will it be~~ how well ~~some~~one has managed to overcome ~~his/her own~~ personal sin. It is clearly tied to the care and compassion shown, in tangible ways, to the marginalized poor of society.

Reading Jesus' Parables in Context

Before we can fully understand what Jesus meant by this crucial parable, we must take a step back and define the parable's context, considering both how Jesus would have intended it and how his hearers would have received it. Though we cannot experience Jesus' parable firsthand, we can explore the text itself, as well as the extensive study that has already been, which will be presented in a later section.

This section will set guidelines for studying Jesus and his parables, specifically to identify some of the dangers of reading Jesus and his teachings with a Western—or specifically White American—approach. These dangers must be avoided if we are to understand and apply Jesus' teachings. Beyond that, this section will provide guidelines on how to read Jesus and his teachings properly.

In their book "Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes," Richards and O'Brien explain the following:

> "…because we believe that the Bible is God's Word to us, no matter where on the planet or when in history we read it, we tend to read Scripture in our own when and where, in a way that makes sense on our terms…As we will see, it is a better method to speak of what the passage meant to the original hearers, and then to ask how that applies to us. Another way to say this is that all Bible reading is necessarily contextual."[57]

Naturally, most of us reading the Bible today in our American context will be inclined to interpret it in a way that makes sense for us in our context and circumstances. Likewise for those who preach the Bible, there will be a tendency to want our hearers to understand in a way that will appear to automatically be relevant for them. This is acceptable to a point, but it must never be the only method.

One reason we want to be careful to not *only* do this is that there is deep meaning and much to be learned from an understanding of the original context. Instead of simply understanding from our own "when and where," we will no doubt be able to glean even deeper meaning from a contextual study of Jesus and his teachings.

---

[57] Randolph E. Richards & Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*. (Downers Grove:Intervarsity Press, 2012), 11.

The writers warn that we bring our own assumptions into whatever Scripture we read, not necessarily so we can suppress those assumptions, but to caution us not to ~~only~~ use those lenses exclusively in our interpretations. "Once we've become aware of our own mores—what goes without being said for us—we should consider what went without saying for the original audience to whom Paul's letter was addressed."[58] And they continue, "What we want you to see is that what goes without being said for us concerning certain mores can cause us to misread the Bible."[59]

Richards and O'Brien provide three helpful tips for reading past our own presuppositions to get to the core of what is written. First, they recommend,

> "Take the time to complete these sentences: (1) Clearly, this passage is saying (or not saying) _____ is right/wrong. (2) Is (that issue) really what is condemned? (3) Am I adding/removing some elements? The way you answer these questions can help you uncover what mores you take for granted."[60].

Next, they suggest that the reader "look for clues in the text you're reading. Sometimes the biblical writers help us identify the mores at issue."[61] Anyone who is familiar with the inductive approach to Bible study will most certainly understand this simple suggestion. On the surface, they are referring to the process of observation. The value of this comes in the reader letting the text direct where the interpretation is going.

For the last recommendation, they share that the "best way to become sensitive to our own presuppositions about cultural mores—what goes without being said for us—is to read the

---

[58] Ibid. 39.
[59] Ibid, 48.
[60] Ibid. 48.
[61] Ibid. 49.

writing of Christians from different cultures and ages." This is not an obvious solution, but it could help to vastly improve our understanding.

From another vantage point, Bailey laments the ignorance in the West of the perspective of the Middle Eastern Christian. Reading Scripture--specifically the life and teachings of Jesus--takes on deeper meaning when one considers the way Middle-Eastern disciples of Jesus Christ would have received it, and in many ways how they still receive it.

> "Few are aware of the existence today of more than ten million Arabic-speaking Christians who possess a rich heritage of ancient and modern literature. Speaking a Semitic language, these Christians are a people who live, breathe, think, act and participate in Middle Eastern culture; they are rooted in the traditional ways of the Middle East. Their voices, past and present, need to be heard in biblical studies."[62]

Bailey explains that Jesus' parables are simultaneously rooted in their historical and cultural context and open to interpretation by readers of any other historical or cultural context. He writes,

> "Simply stated, our task is to stand at the back of the audience around Jesus and listen to what he is saying to them. Only through that discipline can we discover what he is saying to any age, including our own. Authentic simplicity can be found on the other side of complexity. The theological and ethical House of the Parables of Jesus awaits. May all enter with great expectations!"[63]

---

[62] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through MIddle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 11-12.
[63] Ibid. 283.

In agreement, Amy-Jill Levine writes, "The Gospel writers, in their wisdom, left most of the parables as open narratives in order to invite us into engagement with them. Each reader will hear a distinct message and may find that the same parable leaves multiple impressions over time."[64] This assessment does not support the idea that these parables can have *whatever* meaning a reader may choose, but to approach any of Jesus' teachings with too narrow an understanding or too ready an interpretation is to miss the dialogue into which we are being invited.

In the discussion of Biblical interpretation, there are layers to what we aim to do in this study: not only are we looking deeply into Scripture, but we are looking deeply into a New Testament text, into a specific teaching of Jesus called a parable. Parables are not simply devices employed by Jesus in his teachings, but they function as critical pieces to understanding his entire message.

Young asserts, "If we do not understand the parables, we miss what may be known about the historical Jesus. One must understand parables to know Jesus."[65] He explains that to understand or know Jesus, we must understand him in his historical context as as Jewish teacher. Jesus, as was the custom, taught using Jewish *haggadah* or "storytelling with a message."[66] To the Jewish teachers of Jesus' day and for Jesus himself, *haggadah* was important for two

---

[64] Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 1.
[65] Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 7.
[66] Ibid. 7.

reasons: First, they understood it as the way to truly know God and comprehend His ways. "One who seeks to know God must listen to the stories from haggadah and learn its message."[67]

The second reason is that "Haggadah bridged the gap between the common people and the highly educated. By focusing on the heart and the imagination, haggadah reaches people on all levels, from the learned to the untutored, in the ways of Torah."[68] This communicates a message that is not only deep, but also wide, probing into the vastness of God's character in such a way that even the most unlearned would comprehend. This is the beauty and the strength of Jesus' parables, and of his teaching overall.

Inductive Study of Matthew 25

Let us first consider the parable's scriptural then cultural context, for this is in itself crucial to the process of inductive study. The parable of the sheep and goats sits at the end of a long list of teachings and parables that pertain to the end of the world as it is known, as well as to a time of judgment on all who have ever lived. This sequence of teachings and parables is initiated in Matthew 21:1-11, with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, to a crowd of people proclaiming, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

As the "Son of David," who had come in God's name to save his people, the first thing Matthew records is Jesus bringing judgment. Starting in verse 12, Jesus enters the temple in Jerusalem and begins driving out the money changers. His anger was aimed directly at those who were taking advantage of the devout who had come to pray, by using the temple as a marketplace

[67] Ibid 8.
[68] Ibid. 8.

to exchange foreign money and selling animals to be used for sacrifices. Immediately following this, in verse 18, Jesus finds a fig tree that is not bearing fruit and curses it, causing it to wither.

This is what was meant when the angel told Joseph that Jesus would "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). He was saving his people from their sin by calling it out, and he was not being polite about it. He responded physically and visibly, with a ferocity we do not often see in Jesus nor often associate with him. Truly, he is a just judge, but he is not timid in meting out His justice.

It is critical also to note that in the midst of his acts of judgment–specifically after his outburst at the temple–we see that he also ministered compassionately to the "blind and lame," curing them. Treatment of the poor and marginalized matters greatly in the overall theme of judgment which pervades the next few chapters of Matthew, but most graphically in the parable of the sheep and goats.

It is important, then, to our understanding of Jesus' parable being examined here to grasp that he is at the same time Just Judge *and* Compassionate Healer. C.H. Spurgeon writes,

> "Some people seem to think that, if the very poor come into places of worship, they are out of place, but this is the vain notion of a wicked pride. The poorest and the most sinful may come to Jesus. We, too, came into the assembly of the saints at one time, spiritually blind and lame, but Jesus opened our eyes and healed us of our lameness. If He sees anything amiss with us now, we are sure He will not drive us away from His courts, but He will heal us at once. Let all the blind and lame come to Him now."[69]

[69] C.H. Spurgeon, *Commentary on Matthew: The Gospel of the Kingdom*, (Dublin: Cooper Publications, 2020), 329.

The entire text of the parable of the sheep and the goats will not be included here, nor is this the format to do an exhaustive verse-by-verse examination of the entire passage. Instead, it is an analysis of what can arguably be the major sections of the parable; as parables go, this is actually quite a long one, so it is easy to divide it into clear sections. The sections I have identified are as follows: 1) The Gathering, 2) The Sheep, and 3) The Goats.

In The Gathering, we see the self-identified Son of Man gathering all the people of the world before him. Jesus says, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory." This stands out to one who has read the other parables in this section. Some parables start with Jesus using a simile or metaphor to illustrate a comparison to the kingdom of God, some start with Jesus asking with what the kingdom of God can be compared, and the parable of the wicked tenants starts out with him telling them plainly that he is about to tell them a parable.

Instead, this is so different that some might question whether this is even a parable at all. Blomberg argues, "Strictly speaking, this text is not a parable. The likening of God's people to sheep and his enemies to goats are simply similes, straightforward comparisons at the beginning of the passage, and afterward their real identities are maintained."[70] Whereas the other parables are completely allegorical, this one starts with Jesus naming the protagonist of the story (himself as the Son of Man), and then he goes on to label the other characters as "sheep and goats," eventually identifying who they are.

Still, traditionally this story is listed among the parables, as it does include elements common to parables such as comparisons of the kingdom of God and the personification of nonhuman things. There is significance too that it is most commonly believed to be the last

[70] Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 206.

parable Jesus told before he went to the cross, standing as a kind of ultimate or culminating parable. Not only does Jesus foretell of his final judgment, but he foretells exactly who and how he will judge.

Another reason why this parable looks so different is that Jesus clearly states in verse 32 who is being gathered before the Son of Man, and then compares them to sheep and goats. He uses the term "all nations" to refer to who is being gathered for judgment, which in the Greek is the word "*ethne*," the root of English words like "ethnic" and "ethnicity." This is reminiscent of Revelation 7:9 - "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."

In this picture, however, the "*ethne*" are not pictured worshiping before the throne. Instead, they are going through a separation process, as a shepherd would have separated sheep from goats. The New Revised Standard Cultural Background Study Bible explains, "Sheep were considered more valuable than goats, were usually raised in greater numbers, and were much more obedient. The OT depicted not only Moses and David as shepherds of God's people, but especially God himself; God's people were depicted as sheep."[71] Even more specifically, Jesus refers to himself as "the good shepherd" in John 10:11.

In the next section, "The Sheep," Jesus pronounces his judgment on the "*ethne*," starting with those he identifies as the sheep. They were placed on his right, and were invited to inherit the kingdom prepared for them, because according to Jesus, they served Jesus in a compassionate and physical way. Verses 35 and 36 read, "...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked

[71] *NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2019).

and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Note the value Jesus places on not only service, but a certain kind of service. These are acts of service specific to the needs of the marginalized poor. This is true today just as it was then. This speaks of Jesus' unequivocal care for the poor, and to the care that he expects his followers to show.

For many Christian theologians and leaders, there is no question about what our Christian response must be to the marginalized poor, in any and every way we can respond. Tim Chester says, "Social involvement is rooted in the character of God. He is the God who upholds the cause of the oppressed, who provides for the poor and liberates the prisoner; he sustains the marginalized and the vulnerable."[72] Truly, we see this throughout Scripture, both in the Old Testament and the New. In fact, the more one reads the teachings of Jesus and watches what he does as recorded in the gospel accounts, the more one will recognize that Jesus is constantly advocating for the oppressed and poor and confronting those who have held them down.

Jesus' true value is placed on those who simply have the desire to serve the poor and who actually do such work. It is not that Christians who serve the poor believe that meeting physical and social needs sum up the entire gospel. Most Christians believe every person who has ever lived has experienced spiritual or metaphysical needs. For the marginalized poor, however, it appears those needs can and must be met simultaneously.

The second point to notice is that Jesus has not only identified himself with the poor, but in his explanation he has identified himself *as* the poor. This brings up an important issue that we need to understand as we read this and all of Jesus' life and teachings: Jesus was poor. Some

[72] Tim Chester. *Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 21.

scholars will say that he might have actually been fairly well-off, making a decent income working as a carpenter. One pastor even claims we can see evidence that Jesus was wealthy, specifically because he received gifts from the Magi that only kings would receive, and because the Roman soldiers gambled over his garments, the kind of expensive garments that would be worth acquiring. This pastor directs his parishioners to not take on a poverty or victim mentality, but rather to recognize the resources and relative "wealth" they do have, so they can share it with those who do not have the same.[73] Whether Jesus came from a wealthy or poor family we do not know for certain. What we do see is that, during the time of his ministry–from baptism to ascension–he lived as one who was poor.

Another reason it is so important for us to understand Jesus' identification with and as the poor is that anyone who would call himself/herself a follower of Jesus Christ must recognize the call to identify ourselves in the same way. Only then can we serve the poor among us in a way that does not further distance us from them. Lee Anne Reat says,

> "When we recognize Christ's presence as we gather around tables with the poor, feeding programs transform into eucharistic celebrations, as hearts are filled along with stomachs. When we join in the meal we soon discover that we, too, are the hungry in need of food. We, too, are the lonely, afraid, and in need of friendship. We discover Christ in the other and Christ in ourselves."[74]

---

[73] John Blake, "Passions over 'prosperity gospel: Was Jesus wealthy," *CNN*, December 25th, 2009, https://tinyurl.com/2ddw53n8

[74] Mike Kinman, Bo Cox, Allison Duvall, Hugo Olaiz, Lee Ann Reat, Becca Stevens, Richelle Thomson, *Meeting Jesus on the Margins: Meditations on Matthew 25*, (Cincinnati: ForwardMovement, 2015), Kindle Edition, Location 59.

This teaching reveals to us that, in our journey to follow and become like Jesus Christ, we too are not only to identify *with* the poor--a task which is difficult enough for most--but we are moreover to identify ourselves *as* the poor. Our perspective changes when we do this, because then we are no longer serving the other or "those people," but we are helping bring life to people with whom we belong.

Up until this point, one might think that the sheep recognize themselves as sheep. Who makes the conscious decision to serve the poor, without realizing what is being done? Still, we find out that it was not Jesus they thought they were serving, but the literal marginalized poor of the world. They never realized that they did all these things for Jesus. His response is another important piece to understanding this parable. "And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

Here we must address an important argument among scholars about the meaning of Jesus' clarification: When Jesus mentions "the least of these who are members of my family" or "the least of these my brothers," is he speaking only of the poorest among those who believe and are saved by faith in Jesus' message, or is he speaking of the poor in general of any faith or spiritual maturity? In other words, are the sheep rewarded because they served the Christian poor or because they served the poor?

On the one hand, there are scholars like Craig L. Blomberg who hold that Jesus is speaking strictly about those who are spiritual brothers (and sisters), having believed. Specifically, they will cite the word he used to refer to his "brothers," the word "*adelphon*." Blomberg explains, "The word is common in Matthew's Gospel, and in every other instance

refers either to biological siblings or to spiritual kin—a Jew speaking about a fellow Jew, or Jesus or one of the disciples speaking about another follower of Christ."[75]

We do see evidence of this in the recorded stories of Jesus' life. He is constantly praising or rebuking people, depending on their display of faith or lack thereof, so belief is of paramount importance to Jesus. We do see that Jesus' final command to his disciples, often called the Great Commission, is to make other disciples of him, others who believe and live the same as the disciples have been taught to. Perhaps most convincing is that earlier in Matthew, Jesus' teaching is interrupted by his mother and brothers. His response is to ask, "'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?'" He then points to his disciples, the ones following him and learning to have faith in him. "'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'" The word that he uses for his "brothers" is once again "*adelphon*."

As convincing as this argument is, that is not the only way to interpret this passage. This is not to take anything away from supporting poor Christian brothers and sisters, especially in parts of the world where their very lives are being threatened by either abject poverty or the wickedness of violent people. However, as always, there is another way to look at it.

Again, Tim Chester:

> "We are the presence of God's liberating kingdom in a broken world. We are the place where liberation can be found, offering a home for exiled people. We are to welcome the broken people to a community of broken people. We are the community among whom

[75] Blomberg, Craig L. *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004, 206.

liberation is a present reality—the jubilee people who live with new economic and social relationships. We are the light of the world, a city on a hill."[76]

What many Christians understand is that Jesus' heart is not just for some select poor, not just the poor who identify with our religious affiliations. If we are to minister to a broken world and an exiled people, as Chester speaks above, then that means to all the people of that world. There can be no discrimination.

Additionally, if someone does not realize they are serving Jesus Christ by serving the poor, then that means they already do not discriminate based on the recipients' faith. They are simply serving the poor, because that is what is in their heart to do. I wonder what it means that "the sheep" in this parable do not even seem to have recognized Jesus. Are they even supposed to be Christian themselves? Might they not just be people who reflect the heart of Jesus, perhaps without even knowing it, perhaps without having professed faith the way that we understand it? Jesus does indicate many times that what matters to him is what someone actually does with what they believe, not just what they say they believe.

The final section, titled "The Goats" is just as important as the first two, however much of it is a repeat of the previous section. All of the things that Jesus praises the sheep for are the very same things for which the goats are declared "accursed." The same compassionate Jesus who cares for the poor also now shows no mercy to those who have ignored them (and him). Jesus tells them, "...depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

There are scholars who believe that Jesus was using hyperbole in his judgment on the goats, some even saying that the fact that he brought them all together in the first place means

[76] Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 107.

that he does not intend to then cast them away, but instead to include all in his heavenly glory.[77] While the purpose of this section is not to debate the punishment of hell or the reward of heaven, it is no doubt clear that we can take away from the parable that Jesus absolutely cares for the poor, and expects his disciples to follow suit.

Evangelism and Justice for the Poor

What then is to be done with the argument between those who believe that service or justice for the poor is essential to the work of the gospel and those who do not believe this? What does the parable of the sheep and goats have to say about it? The final assessment boils down to three points.

First, Jesus' judgment of the sheep and goats--those who cared for the poor and those who did not--clearly has nothing to do with converting people to our faith. That is not to say that evangelizing people to enter into the family of God is not important. What becomes clear, though, is that at the very least our care for the physical needs of the poor must at least be equal to our care for their spiritual needs. I would go further to say that the two can and must go hand in hand. It may be best to practice the model of ministry that allows for immediate physical needs to be met, and which also allows for the building of relationships based on trust and respect. If someone is not already a believer in Jesus Christ, then that relationship will yield a harvest of faith, as each heart is ready to receive and as each servant is ready to lead that direction.

Second, we can glean that our pure-hearted service to the poor is more important a sign of our faith in Jesus Christ than many others that 1st Century or modern believers might identify.

---

[77] Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), Kindle Edition. Location 2141.

Again, there is nothing in this parable that would make us believe that Jesus is saying words of evangelism cannot be included with physical service to the poor, but there is no denying that Jesus does care for "the least of these."

Third, as we see in Jesus' explanation to the sheep, when we are of true service to the poor we are bringers of good news not only to those we serve but to ourselves. By serving the truly poor and marginalized, Jesus has sealed this parable in history and reality to remind us that we ourselves are "blessed by [the] Father" when we meet the needs of the poor, that we serve Jesus when we serve them, and that we ourselves are the poor who have our needs met through our commitment to the way of Jesus. Truly all have the opportunity to serve and be served.

The parable of the sheep and goats illustrates for us to whom Jesus is nearest, with whom his heart resides. This final parable of Jesus makes it clear that Jesus has such compassion on the marginalized poor of society that he has only loving-kindness for those who show the same compassion, and that he has only wrath for those who do not. May we be among those who love and are loved by Jesus in this way.

Liberation Theology in a Latinx Context

In light of 1) the Church's presence in Latinx/Mexican-majority areas, as is the case in many Christian congregations in the San Gabriel Valley, and 2) the many marginalized Latinx/Mexican-majority areas that exist in the San Gabriel Valley, it is crucial that there be a robust understanding of what justice and compassion look like. If the work of the Church in these areas is to follow Jesus in the full work of the gospel, including and focusing on the marginalized as Jesus Christ himself did, then what is it that will help guide this work? For church congregations in the San Gabriel Valley, it has already been shown that the Mexican-

majority communities struggle economically, educationally, and socially more than any other demographic within the region. How does the Church in these areas begin to approach this work, without imposing a White or Western American theology?

It is incumbent on the Church, and especially on Church leaders, to choose for themselves to act and live toward reconciliation and restoration and redemption, and lead their congregations toward the same. As Virgilio Elizondo writes,

> "The church…must serve society. To do so, it must understand how power is used and abused--how people are subject to systematic economic and political exploitation. And the church must bring the gospel of Jesus into these concrete realities. This Gospel is not only a message of personal salvation from sin and entrance into the eternal kingdom of God, but also the transformation of injustice in the present."[78]

For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on a uniquely Latin American theology: Liberation Theology. It will be helpful here to define the terms I will be using. The term "Latin American" can be a controversial one, as it can be interpreted to emphasize the European roots and deemphasize the indigenous peoples of Mexico, and Central and South America, but it is the most direct and so will be of use here. A more recent term is "Latinx," meant to be gender neutral and also thus more concise than writing "latino/a" or "latino and latina." The term "Latinx" will be used frequently in this project as well.

The term "Latin American" is commonly meant to denote people of Mexican, Central American, or South American descent, without having to constantly state "Mexican, Central

[78] Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 7.

American, and South American." For clarity, people from Spain or Portugal are not Latin American, but instead are European, though they speak Spanish and Portuguese respectively.

An understanding of and alignment with a specifically Latin American theology is imperative for any church in the United States who desires to serve, or who is currently serving Latin American people. I say this recognizing that not every church congregation is in a location where there is a significant representation of Latin American people. Furthermore, there may be churches who have no desire, whether due to racism or simply lack of awareness, to serve Latinx people. I would not say those churches should seek to attract and serve Latinx people.

Liberation Theology

In order to understand how Liberation Theology–or a specifically Latinx-focused theology–can help address the problems already described, it is necessary to first understand its roots and tenets. Liberation Theology was founded by Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian philosopher, theologian, and Dominican priest in the Roman Catholic Church. The seminal idea of his trademark theology is in statements such as this one: "I come from a continent in which more than 60% of the population lives in a state of poverty, and 82% of those find themselves in extreme poverty."[79] As a Christian, a Christian leader, and a theologian, his goal was to be a proponent of change within the Church, to address the tremendous needs of those people with whom he identifies.

The manifesto of Liberation Theology is in his book, "A Theology of Liberation". What becomes clear in reading Gutierrez is a desire to serve and protect not only a people from which he came, but moreover a people who are seen in a special way by God.

[79] "Wikipedia: Gustavo Gutiérrez," Wikimedia Foundation, Last updated December 20th, 2021, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustavo_Guti%C3%A9rrez#cite_note-19.

He describes the world in which the poor live, a world which has not drastically improved since he first penned these words in 1973:

> "The world of the poor is a universe in which the socio-economic aspect is basic but not all-inclusive. In the final analysis, poverty means death: lack of food and housing, the inability to attend properly to health and education needs, the exploitation of workers, permanent unemployment, the lack of respect for one's human dignity, and unjust limitations placed on personal freedom in the areas of self-expression, politics, and religion. Poverty is a situation that destroys peoples, families, and individuals…"[80]

His goal then is to resist and work to change a society in general who allows and perpetuates people living in these conditions. "In order to achieve this non-repressive society, however, it will be necessary to challenge the values espoused by the society which denies human beings the possibility of living freely."[81] By this he means that impoverished people—specifically those of Central and South America, but generally impoverished people everywhere—are victims of a societal system that keeps them oppressed, and it must be the Church's job to work for change.

Because of the way churches and para-church organizations usually work, one might imagine that the solution to this in the Church would be as simple as offering more money, sending more goods, or deploying more missionaries. This is where the idea of liberation enters. Gutierrez's goal is not primarily to increase wealth or possessions; from his writings, it becomes clear that he considers societies that place high value on accumulation of wealth and possessions a major part of the problem. Rather it is the responsibility of the Church at large to adopt a

[80] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1971), xxi.
[81] Ibid, 21.

theology that helps the poor enter a freedom, a liberation from the system that has oppressed them and continues to oppress them.

Gutierrez does explain further what he means by liberation. His first point has to do with the value of the poor and oppressed people themselves. He writes, "In the first place, liberation expresses the aspirations of oppressed peoples and social classes, emphasizing the conflictual aspect of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes."[82]

Rather than starting off by speaking of a liberation from an oppressive system, he begins by recognizing that oppressed people need a liberation to pursue what their God-given hopes and dreams and strengths seem to make possible, but which has been stifled by certain nations and classes. In other words, the goal is to restore dignity to people who have been perceived and treated in a very undignified manner, in their own respective countries and often in a country like the United States. He clarifies further:

> "The poor countries are not interested in modeling themselves after the rich countries, among other reasons because they are increasingly more convinced that the status of the latter is the fruit of injustice and coercion. It is true that the poor countries are attempting to overcome material insufficiency and misery, but it is in order to achieve a more human society."[83]

And he continues:

> "The poor countries are becoming ever more clearly aware that their underdevelopment is only the by-product of the development of other countries, because of the kind of relationship which exists between the rich and the poor countries. Moreover, they are

[82] Ibid, 24.
[83] Ibid, 24.

> realizing that their own development will come about only with a struggle to break the domination of the rich countries."[84]

Though he does place a great emphasis on the oppressors, it is only so that he may make it clear that there are real and valuable humans underneath the oppressors, humans who are made in God's image and who have just as much a right to thrive as those who enjoy wealth and luxury. However, this thriving does not have to look like the countries who have long controlled the power in the world.

His second meaning of liberation is in reference to the ability humankind has to reflect upon the decisions it has made, whether good or bad, and to rectify what has harmed another. "At a deeper level, liberation can be applied to an understanding of history. Humankind is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for its own destiny."[85] He explains it like this:

> "What we have often called the 'major fact' in the life of the Latin American church--the participation of Christians in the process of liberation--is simply an expression of a far-reaching historical event: the irruption [or the breaking and intruding upon] of the poor. Our time bears the imprint of the new presence of those who in fact used to be 'absent' from our society and from the church. By 'absent' I mean: of little or no importance, and without the opportunity to give expression themselves to their sufferings, their comraderies, their plans, their hopes."[86]

---

[84] Ibid, 17.
[85] Ibid, 14.
[86] Ibid, 17.

Here we see Gutierrez not only saying that it is long past time for the impoverished and oppressed people of the world to rise, but for the Church to be the one to lead that charge. As I have said previously, the goal is not to cause the poor to necessarily rise in wealth and possession; in order for that to happen, someone has to lose. Instead, the Church's task is to bring to the forefront the value of these people long kept back in the shadows of the world's view, truly because they have never left the grace and favor of Christ's view.

This leads us to Gutierrez's third and final extrapolation of the term "liberation."

> "…the word liberation allows for another approach leading to the Biblical sources which inspire the presence and action of humankind in history. In the Bible, Christ is presented as the one who brings us liberation. Christ the Savior liberates from sin, which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression. Christ makes humankind truly free, that is to say, he enables us to live in communion with him; and this is the basis for all human fellowship".[87]

Here is the most important piece to understanding liberation theology, which is its foundation in Christ himself. This is not simply the agonizing of a Latin American man for his people, though that alone is worth giving one's attention. The foundation for this is Gutierrez's understanding of how Christ gave himself for the liberation of all people. Yet, he goes further still, making the claim that God in Christ not only cares for and works for the liberation of all people, but that God in Christ gives special favor to the poor and oppressed.

> "An essential clue to the understanding of poverty in liberation theology is the distinction...between three meanings of the term 'poverty': real poverty as an evil--that is

[87] Ibid, 24-25.

> something that God does not want; spiritual poverty, in the sense that of a readiness to do God's will; and solidarity with the poor, along with protest against the conditions under which they suffer. This is the context of a theme that is central in liberation theology and has now been widely accepted in the universal church: the preferential option for the poor...The very word 'preference' denies all exclusiveness and seeks rather to call attention to those who are the first--though not the only ones--with whom we should be in solidarity. In the interests of truth and personal honesty I want to say that from the very beginning of liberation theology, as many of my writings show, I insisted that the great challenge was to maintain both the universality of God's love and God's predilection for those on the lowest rung of the ladder of history. To focus exclusively on the one or the other is to mutilate the Christian message. Therefore every attempt at such an exclusive emphasis must be rejected".[88]

The term "preferential option for the poor" is the cornerstone of Liberation Theology, so it is critical that one understands its meaning, in order to comprehend Liberation Theology as a whole. Though Gutierrez does name different types of poverty, both spiritual and physical, he names those who suffer what he calls the "evil" of poverty as the ones God actually prefers. It must be highlighted that he is in no way indicating that God does not care for those who are not in fact impoverished and oppressed. He is saying that the impoverished and oppressed—as well as those who choose to identify and advocate for them—are those with whom the Church must stand in solidarity, and those on whose behalf we must work. And we the Church are to do so, because this is central to the heart of Christ.

---

[88] Ibid, xxv-xxvi.

Liberation Theology in Dialogue

As mentioned in the introduction, there are other theologies and theologians who align with the thinking Gutierrez has fleshed out in his writings. One theologian who walks very closely to Gutierrez is Virgilio Elizondo. Though his context comes from within the Mexican-American experience—that is, as opposed to Gutierrez's South American background—he expresses similar thoughts to Liberation Theology, both in addressing the problem and in offering the gospel of Jesus Christ as a solution.

In speaking of the mistreatment of indigenous Mexican and Native American people, he writes,

> "As masses of persons were slaughtered or condemned to a life of abject misery and menial labor for the enrichment of others, a mentality justifying the inhuman treatment was built up, justifying the outrages and social despoliation of entire people."[89]

He acknowledges wrongs committed, but he goes further in seeking to challenge the Church to a way forward.

> "It is the new relationships through a third person—God-Abba—that allows us to break through the exploitor-exploited dialectic and form a new partnership. Thus there are not the dominant who can afford to be charitable to the dominated--and in being charitable continue to dominate and dehumanize--but neither is there a role change whereby the dominated now become the dominant. There must be a restructuring from a bipolar to a tripolar model of relationship. The third other offers the possibility of a new

[89] Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 7.

> 'us.' Through the third other, the 'we' (dominant) and the 'they' (dominated) will be able to see each other in a new way--in what they really are as human beings and not as masked, stereotyped, or categorized by society. In the new 'us' certain differences will continue but they will be seen in a new way--not in terms of exploitor-exploited, master-slave, civilized-savage, superior-inferior, but in terms of interdependence and cooperation of all in a common undertaking for the benefit of all.[90]

It must be understood that the "third other" refers to God revealed in Jesus Christ, through whom there is reconciliation and true "interdependence and cooperation." This is important for anyone who considers Liberation Theology (and theologies like it) focused all too much on social transformation, and not nearly enough on the ultimate answer to all injustice and oppression, which is spiritual transformation in Christ. In the writings and the lives of both Gutierrez and Elizondo, there can be no doubt that they believed and taught that submission to Jesus Christ was and is the only remedy to centuries of wrongdoing.

Elizondo continues,

> "If the church is to be a faithful witness of the Master, it must be identified with the poor and the oppressed of the world. If instead it is identified with the rich, the installed, and the powerful, it betrays by its life the very gospel it proclaims in words. Poverty, in solidarity with the poor, is of the essence of church life. A church that is not poor will not be the light of Christ in the midst of the darkness of today's world."[91]

---

[90] Ibid, 63.
[91] Ibid, 94.

That faithfulness to the Master, who is Christ, looks like an intentional and radical solidarity with the most vulnerable. These vulnerable ones are in our own communities, they are across our border, and they are seeking to cross our shared border.

Justo Gonzalez, while he also strongly echoes themes of Liberation Theology, also writes a timelessly relevant explanation of why a Latinx Christian theology is imperative for the United States to heal the wounds of the past and build a future together. His challenge is that we as a people cannot make this change merely on an individual level, but it needs to happen on a larger societal level. This change, no doubt, needs to start with the Church, the body of Jesus Christ.

> "If theology is the task of the church, and the church is by definition a community, there should be no such thing as an individual theology. The best theology is a communal enterprise. This is a contribution that Hispanics can bring to theology. Western theology—especially that which takes place in academic circles—has long suffered from an exaggerated individualism...Ours is not a tradition that values individualism..."[92]

There is much to be appreciated in a specifically Latin American theology—or as Gonzalez calls it, a "Hispanic Theology"—that not only focuses on what the privileged class must do to right wrongs, but focuses on the collective work of theologizing and making theology work for all people.

Probably the most difficult aspect of Liberation Theology for American Evangelicals to embrace is its association with Marxism. Beyond that, it is inaccessible to many American Evangelicals because Gustavo Gutierrez and other proponents of Liberation Theology were Roman Catholic. It is most widely accepted that, while not all Christians are Roman Catholic, all

---

[92] Justo González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 29.

Roman Catholics are by definition Christians. There are, in fact, more Roman Catholic Christians than there are Christians of all other denominations worldwide.[93] Whatever issue a typical American Evangelical Christian may take with Roman Catholic theology or practice, remaining in dialogue with those who seek to embody Christ is critical to living out our Christian faith.

Still, for the purposes of this project, it is helpful to dialogue with another theological perspective more familiar to most Evangelical Christians. Liberation Theology has already been presented as firmly rooted in Scriptural integrity, and Gutierrez has already been shown to have been sincere and steadfast in his devotion to Jesus Christ and to living out Jesus Christ's attention to the poor. Still, the purpose of this study is to give a robust theological support for Evangelical church congregations in the San Gabriel Valley to give special attention to engaging the Latinx communities therein. Therefore, a theology more explicitly aligned with traditional Evangelical Christian thought would be helpful to this end.

Misión Integrál (Integral Mission) was founded by, among others, primarily C. René Padilla and Samuel Escobár. This was meant to be a kind of new social theology, that

> "despite being sympathetic to many of the concerns of Liberation Theology…opposed the explicit adoption of Marxist theology, the sacralization of revolution, disregard for the authority of the Bible, and any simplistic reduction of the gospel to political, sociological or economic terms."[94]

[93] Martin E. Marty, "Roman Catholicism," https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism
[94] Robert Chao Romero, *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 154.

Misión Integrál saw its inception when Padilla sought to develop a new evangelical social theology, as an alternative to Liberation Theology. His own approach to evangelism and social concern was formed during his years studying at Wheaton College and participating with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. When he began his own work with college students throughout South America, he found that many theology students there were reading Liberation Theology. This pushed many toward more Marxist ideologies and away from faith in Christ and faithfulness to Christ's calling for his Church.[95]

He was himself a child of poverty, born in Ecuador but eventually moving with his family to Colombia, due to the Great Depression. He knew what it was to be one of the marginalized poor, living not only among others who were poor but also within corrupt systems. This experience–along with his education, mentoring under a well-respected Scottish Biblical scholar, ministry with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and work with South American college students–drove him to create a way of developing Misión Integrál.

The trademark of Misión Integrál lies in its balanced focus on both evangelization that leads to genuine faith and scripturally-based social concern. It was Padilla's staunch proposal that every iteration of the Church throughout the world was to be on the mission set forth by Jesus Christ, or it was failing to truly be the Church.

> "When the church is committed to integral mission and to communicating the Gospel through everything it is, does and says, it understands that its goal is not to become numerically large; or materially rich; or politically powerful. Its purpose is to incarnate the values of the

[95] Wikipedia: René Padilla, Last updated December 21st, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_Padilla

> Kingdom of God and bear witness to the love and the justice revealed in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit, for the transformation of human life in all its dimensions, on a personal and community level."[96]

Explained further, Integral Mission is not meant to introduce a new kind of radical evangelicalism, though it can be seen that way. Rather it is meant to revive or recover a truly Scriptural faithfulness to the mission given the Church by Jesus Christ. As such, the emphasis on coming to faith in Jesus Christ is not merely for the purpose of personal salvation, but something much greater. Also, the term "mission" should not be interpreted to mean that this theology is especially tailored to those who have heeded a call to be a missionary in some capacity.

The mission Padilla describes is for anyone who calls herself or himself a Christian.

> "Consequently, [Integral Mission] focuses on crossing the frontier between faith and no faith not only in geographical terms, but in cultural, ethnic, social, economic and political terms for the purpose of transforming life in all its dimensions, according to God's plan, so that all people and human communities may experience the abundant life that Christ offers them."[97]

Along these same lines—this from a non-Latinx perspective—Pastor Soong Chan Rah has also written heavily on the issues of racial reconciliation and social justice, all from a Christ and gospel-centered perspective. He proposes,

> "...being a biblical Christian community requires not just being a superficial multiethnic community where we simply tolerate one another, but becoming a genuinely

[96] C. René Padilla, *What is Integral Mission?* Regnum Books International, 2021. 23.
[97] Ibid. 24.

> racially-reconciled community that exhibits racial justice. I challenge [my] students to consider ways that systemic and corporate racial injustice could be confronted with the gospel of Jesus Christ."[98]

Like Justo Gonzalez, Rah emphasizes the need to move away from a strictly Western or White American method of theology formation and practice. In order for transformation to occur, it becomes necessary for the dominant thinkers and influencers to adopt the characteristics of the cultures with whom Western or White America must seek to reconcile. Rah states, "…an overemphasis on individualism in our theology and practice yields an evangelical Christianity seeing social justice and racial reconciliation as a distraction from the "real work" of personal evangelism."[99] He continues,

> "The American church, in taking its cues from Western, white culture, has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual. The cultural captivity of the church has meant that the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture. The individualistic philosophy that has shaped Western society, and consequently shaped the American church, reduces Christian faith to a personal, private and individual faith."[100]

Perhaps the most prominent theologian to support the thought and work of Liberation Theology is James H. Cone. Though he is also not Latin American, nor do his writings advocate

---

[98] Soong Chan Rah. *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*, (Dowers Grove: IVP Books, 2009), 42.
[99] Ibid, 41.
[100] Ibid, 29-30.

directly for Latin American people, he has been on the front lines of naming the oppression and the oppressors, expressly those of Black or African American people. Having grown up in the deep South of the United States, he saw and experienced some of the worst of what this country has done to Black people.

While Gutierrez first drafted his "Teología de la Liberación" in 1971 (originally in Spanish), it was within the next decade that James Cone released his "Black Theology of Liberation." Though one could argue that these two theologies were developed independently from one another, there is no doubting the connection between the two motivations and expressions, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

> "Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ. This means that its sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused. In fact, theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the oppressed. For it is impossible to speak of the God of Israelite history, who is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, without recognizing that God is the God of and for those who labor and are overladen."[101]

[101] James Cone. *A Black Theology of Liberation,* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 301.

When reading Cone, one cannot ignore his passion and his justified anger toward the historical atrocious mistreatment of Black people in the United States, treatment that had not been eradicated during his time and which cannot be denied still exists today. He recounts that, even as a learned scholar, he experienced the condescension and exclusion among his White colleagues. This, he explains, spurred him on all the more to develop a theology that calls the oppressor to task and that calls the oppressed to rise.

> "There will be no peace in America until whites begin…asking from the depths of their being: 'How can we become black?' I hope that if enough whites begin to ask this question, this country will no longer be divided on the basis of color. But until then, it is the task of the Christian theologian to do theology in the light of the concreteness of human oppression as expressed in color, and to interpret for the oppressed the meaning of God's liberation in their community."[102]

This idea that Christian theology is and must be a theology of liberation, combined with the call for the Christian theologian to formulate and live out theology that liberates, reinforces Gutierrez's Liberation Theology all the more. Because of God revealed in Jesus Christ, there is inherent value in those who have been unjustly devalued, and there can be only a renewed advocation for those who for too long had no critical mass of privileged people advocating for them. Cone's Black Theology of Liberation, like Gutierrez's Liberation Theology, calls for a transforming solidarity with those in every and all societies who have suffered greatly and have been most oppressed.

---

[102] Ibid, 52.

Finally, and most importantly, it is crucial to understand Liberation Theology in the light of the very words of Jesus Christ himself. This speaks to the nature of the gospel. Defining the gospel can veer off in so many different directions, making it hard to nail down one verse that encapsulates its essence. However, since this is a journey toward deeper understanding of Liberation Theology, we will frame it in the context of the people it represents. It is not a stretch to say that Scripture does not merely support Liberation Theology, but the heart and tenets of Liberation theology support what always has been in Scripture.

There is a passage that speaks of Christ the Savior and Liberator, one which is first in the Old Testament, and again repeated by Jesus Christ himself as the fulfillment of that original passage.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor…
Isaiah 61:1-2a

One can stop at the word "favor" because this is what Jesus did in this story, found in Luke 4:18-19, when he read it to the congregation gathered at the synagogue. And after he read it he said, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). This passage, both in the book of Isaiah and the Gospel account of Luke, contains a representation of the gospel that aligns with the themes of Liberation Theology. Not only does this passage contain the words "good news," which is the literal definition of the word "gospel," but it contains the kind of good news which Gutierrez names and of which he calls the Church to be proponents.

This is the kind of good news that does not simply throw money at ~~the poor~~ or drop off donations to the poor, nor does it treat the poor as incapable and invalid. Rather, this good news binds up those who have been wounded, sets free those who are captives, and releases from darkness those who need a ray of hope. This is the kind of good news that proclaims favor, or in Gutierrez's words "preferential option," for those who have suffered from both spiritual and physical poverty and oppression.

To be sure, Liberation Theology has received plenty of criticism over the years, which is understandable but also largely misguided. The greatest flaw attributed to Gustavo Gutierrez's work is that it too closely resembles Marxism, "a method of socioeconomic analysis that views class relations and social conflict using a materialist interpretation of historical development and takes a dialectical view of social transformation."[103] To put it simply, Marxism is largely responsible for bringing about Communism, which governs a few countries today, and which has proven to be destructive and devastating to already struggling countries. Though the original goal of Marxism was to underscore the inequality in a society's classes and to bring about some kind of equality, in reality it fails to do that. In Communism, as in any other human-made method of governance, a few always must be at the top and in control and the rest must continue to live in oppression. Marxism, and likewise Communism, simply does not work.

In a 1984 New York Times article, just a few years after the release of Gutierrez's seminal work, the writer records the pushback that Liberation Theology's proponents were receiving. Here are some of the concerns the writer expressed.

> "Liberation theology is a method of defining Christian faith in the political context of underdevelopment, in a partisan spirit committed to action. It is not

[103] Wikipedia: Marxism, Last updated on February 13th, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxism.

> distinctive for wishing to apply Christian faith to social action. It is not more concerned about "the working class" or "the poor" than Pope Leo XIII, whose 1891 encyclical underlined Catholicism's responsibility to these groups. Nor can it be universally defined as Marxist. Yet it gains its excitement from flirting with Marxist thought and speech, and from its hostility to the "North." Today, nearly 50 percent of the world's 800 million Catholics live in developing nations - predominantly in Latin America and the Philippines, but also in Africa and the small yet vital Catholic communities of Southeast Asia. If Marxism, even of a mild sort, flourishes in these lands, and if it were to be officially blessed by Catholicism, two powerful symbolic forces would then have joined hands. What would be the actual consequences of such a merger? Would the revolution - for that would be the first effect - truly eradicate past traditions of political oppression and poverty? Would liberation theology truly liberate?"[104]

Not the least of Liberation Theology's naysayers was then Pope John Paul II himself. "The indispensable cry for justice and the preferential solidarity with the poor need not be mortgaged to ideologies foreign to the faith."[105] It seems clear that opponents of Liberation Theology did see, and perhaps still see, no other option than to dismiss it as Marxism wrapped in theological terms.

It is hard to see past the criticism with words like this:

---

[104] Michael Novak, "The Case against Liberation Theology," *The New York Times*, October 21st, 1984 https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/21/magazine/the-case-against-liberation-theology.html.
[105] Ibid.

> "Only a radical break from the status quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence would allow for the change to a new society, a socialist society—or at least allow that such a society might be possible."[106]

The word "socialist" alone is enough to repel many Christians–especially in the political climate wrought by radical conservatism and the likes of Donald Trump, arguably brought about by two groundbreaking terms with President Obama–with many claiming that the agenda of "the Left" is to oppress White American people, culture, and history.

Though Gutierrez does focus on the change of societal systems, and still further even governmental systems, it is still clear from his writings that his heart is one of love for Christ and the poor. The Church can and must look past these flaws for two important reasons. First of all, any time the Church has undergone major change for the better, it has always taken someone willing to go beyond where predecessors have gone. Though there are many shoulders upon whom those radical trailblazers stand, it remains that there are those who have followed in ways that change the landscape of the Church and the world forever.

Three people who come to mind immediately are Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, and the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. Though they may receive criticism for their words, their approach, their methods, or their personal lives, there is no denying that the Church is different today because of their unique response to Jesus Christ in their own lives. For this reason alone, the Church and her leaders—both Catholic and Protestant alike—must not dismiss a voice like Gutierrez out of hand.

---

[106] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation,* (New York: Orbis Books, 1971), 17.

A second reason the Church can and must look past scary words like "socialism," to see the real heart of Liberation Theology, is the way how it challenges the Church herself. Once again Gutierrez:

> "…Charity has been fruitfully rediscovered as the center of the Christian life. This has led to a more Biblical view of the faith as an act of trust, a going out of one's self, a commitment to God and neighbor, a relationship with others. It is in this sense that St. Paul tells us that faith works through charity: love is the nourishment and the fullness of faith, the gift of one's self to the Other, and invariably to others. This is the foundation of the praxis of Christians, of their active presence in history. According to the Bible, faith is the total human response to God, who saves through love. In this light, the understanding of the faith appears as the understanding not of the simple affirmation—almost memorization—of truths, but of a commitment, an overall attitude, a particular posture of life."[107]

Moving past words we may not like—and governmental systems that have reaped destruction—the real heart of Liberation Theology is a genuine charity, a love that flows from the very heart of God for oppressed and vulnerable people. Perhaps theologians like Gutierrez would like to see societies like the United States actually become socialist or even communist. Plenty of theologians have expressed controversial beliefs on various topics. However, to get caught up with this is to miss the point and to avoid the challenge Gutierrez levels toward the

[107] Ibid, 6.

church: Stop loving and serving money and affluence, and start serving the poor and oppressed; we are not truly liberated until we all are liberated.

How Liberation Theology Addresses the Problem

At this point, it will be helpful to explain what Liberation Theology has to do with church congregations in the United States and how they attract and serve Latin American people--and specifically Mexican-majority communities in the San Gabriel Valley. Up until this point, we have an overview of the state of the Church in the United States of America, as it pertains to the challenge of multicultural congregations who serve Latin American people. For primary content, we have an understanding of the basic tenets and scriptural/theological underpinnings of Gustavo Gutierrez's Liberation Theology, as well as support from similar theologians.

The goal of this final section is to present a picture of how Liberation Theology can guide a congregation in properly attracting and serving people of Latin American descent. The first opportunity Liberation Theology offers to the Church is a way to remain at the forefront of change in the world around us. As Gutierrez writes, "In order to achieve this non-repressive society…it will be necessary to challenge the values espoused by the society which denies human beings the possibility of living freely."[108]

The society he speaks of is in large part influenced and upheld by the Church, as an institution, but more importantly as a living breathing organism made of people. It is the role of the Church to challenge oppressive values and at the same time remain humble enough to have her values challenged. The Church needs this challenge everywhere she embraces actions that further marginalizes the marginalized, everywhere she worships the material wealth over which

[108] Ibid, 21.

lives have been sacrificed, and everywhere she influences her members to stand away from the vulnerable instead of standing with them.

Going deeper, Liberation Theology is simply a revealing of the coming kingdom of God, the reign of Jesus Christ over all things, the making new of all things.

> "To conceive of history as a process of human liberation is to consider freedom as a historical conquest; it is to understand that the step from an abstract to a real freedom is not taken without a struggle against all the forces that oppress humankind, a struggle full of pitfalls, detours, and temptations to run away. The goal is not only better living conditions, a radical change of structures, a social revolution; it is much more: the continuous creation, never ending, of a new way to be human, a *permanent cultural revolution."*[109]

What a beautiful and lasting image, and what a confirmation that Liberation Theology is about infinitely so much more than social change. This "cultural revolution" happens because, and only because, of the belief that we struggle alongside Jesus Christ himself. We struggle for the "permanent," which I dare say means "eternal" cultural revolution, heaven come to earth. This cultural revolution of which Gutierrez speaks is not bound by race or skin color or language. This is a Kingdom Culture, a way to live that this world system outside of Christ cannot know and cannot replicate. This is a great mission with which the Church has been tasked, and to engage in it is to be who we were meant to be.

It should be clarified that Liberation Theology is meant to advocate for people who are Latin American immigrants, but it is a call to those of Latin American descent who were born in the United States, as well as those who are not of Latin American descent at all. Solidarity is

---

[109] Ibid, 21.

foundational to Liberation Theology, and church leaders are responsible in maintaining that solidarity. This solidarity is displayed in the theology that is formed, as well as how that theology is practiced.

Gutierrez writes,

> "Theological reflection--that is, the understanding of the faith--arises spontaneously and inevitably in the believer, in all those who have accepted the gift of the Word of God. Theology is intrinsic to a life of faith seeking to be authentic and complete and is, therefore, essential to the common consideration of this faith in the ecclesial community. There is present in all believers--and more so in every Christian community--a rough outline of a theology. There is at present an effort to understand the faith, something like a pre-understanding of that faith which is manifested in life, action, and concrete attitude. It is on this foundation, and only because of it, that the edifice of theology--in the precise and technical sense of the term--can be erected. This foundation is not merely a jumping-off point, but the soil into which theological reflection stubbornly and permanently sinks its roots and from which it derives its strength."[110]

He is calling all people in the Church to be theologians, in thought and in practice. By applying Liberation Theology to a church congregation's way of life, it brings a much-needed change to a growing divide in church congregations today, and it bridges gaps that seem to only be growing wider. In the first place, it communicates to congregants or visitors or members of the congregation's surrounding community who are first-generation Latin American people, and

[110] Ibid, 3.

who have suffered poverty, that the congregation does recognize and validate them and their experience.

Second, it teaches and reminds that same solidarity to United States-born Latin Americans, for whom it would be easy to forget about the people from whom they have descended, and for whom it is a responsibility to serve those who do suffer poverty. It is all too common to see people of Latin American descent—even those who were born in Latin America and did suffer poverty—develop a resentment and spite toward Latin Americans who are trying to make a life in the United States. More and more today, those immigrants are left with little to no choice but to come through illegal means, to remain undocumented, to fail to speak English fluently, or (as some may perceive) to be slow or resistant in acclimating to United States culture.

The reality is that the impoverishment of Latin American people is not only in their lack of financial resources, but also in being underserved and underrepresented in more affluent or exclusive societies, as in large portions of the San Gabriel Valley. The Church, in spite of herself, can end up being one of those affluent or exclusive societies, or both. The goal, then, is to preach the good news, both by word and by deed.

> "By preaching the Gospel message, by its sacraments, and by the charity of its members, the Church proclaims and shelters the gift of the Kingdom of God in the heart of human history. The Christian community professes a 'faith which works through charity.' It is--at least ought to be--real charity, action, and commitment to the service of others."[111]

[111] Ibid, 9.

May the Church in the United States become more and more bound to that "charity," that radical, life-giving, sacrificial love which always makes space for another, just as God has made space in His heart for us. In that space, the least of these is no longer the least, for all are liberated and all are one.

Why Liberation Theology?

Orlando Costas writes, "The cry of the oppressed Latin American neighbors is loud and clear, and if North American Christians but look around them they can easily detect ways and means available to them for a committed and responsible response." And he continues, "…the cry of the Latin American world puts at stake the integrity of the Christian profession of faith in the United States. They can take all the time they want, but only at the expense of their Christian integrity."[112] Though he is writing specifically about Latin Americans in their native countries, it is clear that our Latin American neighbors are here, and the time to serve them is now.

The proposition made here is that an understanding of Liberation Theology in American church congregations, especially in an area like the San Gabriel Valley. Latin American people are the majority in many areas, and moreover the areas where they are the majority is characterized by poverty. To many Christians, Liberation Theology's approach may appear extreme, but there are times when extreme measures are appropriate and necessary in order to bring lasting change.

One word of caution would be that a dialogue like the one presented above always be present in any conversation where Liberation Theology is being propagated. All of those voices,

---

[112] Orlando Costas, *Christ outside the Gate: Mission beyond Christendom*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1982), 114.

and many others, communicate the breadth of Latin American theology, which is needed for any church congregation looking to serve Latinx communities.

Chapter 3

The State of the Church in the US and in the SGV

In light of the struggle of Latinx people throughout the history of the San Gabriel Valley, it is clear that the presence of the Christian Church can and must make a lasting impact, specifically in the Mexican-majority communities throughout the area. Historical events recount the struggle of Latinx (mostly Mexican and Mexican American) people in the San Gabriel Valley, and current data reveals that this struggle continues.

This impact must be very specific and innovative, although many church congregations may not be ready to participate in this way. As an institution focusing on spiritual realities, the Church generally holds certain topics to be familiar and acceptable, such as evangelism, spiritual discipline, holy living, and public service, usually referred to as “outreach”. These are all basic elements of church communities, and church leaders must take care not to lose these elements.

Still, the contemporary American Church has its own struggles to handle. The coronavirus pandemic has forced many congregations to radically adapt their ministries, while others have had to shut down completely.[113] Surprisingly, church congregations that have adapted during this time have actually found that this has accelerated the ministry impact in their respective communities.

A study released in November 2021 analyzed data from a survey that garnered 820 responses from a variety of congregations across the United States. Among other pertinent findings, the study reveals that 54% of congregations either started a new ministry or expanded an already existing one because of the needs that arose in their surrounding communities as a direct result of or that were exacerbated by the pandemic.[114]

While the study generally found that churches expanded their ministry in typical ways– such as using existing church space for food banks or utilizing church members to make connections between neighbors during lockdowns and social distancing–the long answer portion of the survey revealed much more innovative and effective ministry changes. Some congregations launched new ministries focusing on elder care, while others used their financial resources to provide trauma counseling, job training, or relief funds.[115] If the data presented in this report is representative of the state of the Church overall in America, then out of the roughly 320,000 Christian congregations, "nearly 175,000 churches contributed hundreds of thousands of

---

[113] David Sharp, "Millions Skipped Church during the Pandemic. Will They Return? June 229th, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-pandemics-lifestyle-health-religion-cd5fbac2318cb58e1d5ec4a5d1c00ecc

[114] "Congregational Response to the Pandemic: Extraordinary Social Outreach in a Time of Crisis," https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Congregational-Response-to-the-Pandemic_Extraordinary-Social-Outreach-in-a-Time-of-Crisis_Dec-2021.pdf. 1.

[115] Ibid. 2.

new and augmented ministries, funds and supplies in response to the pandemic over the past two years."[116]

This is very encouraging and one hopes that this will continue even after the weight of the pandemic is finally lessened. Not only will the marginalized poor still exist all over the United States, including the San Gabriel Valley, but Christian congregations will also need to show that their hearts are genuinely compassionate toward their suffering neighbors, and that these innovative and effective ministries were not just passing trends.

The Church in America, including the San Gabriel Valley, were already struggling even before the pandemic. Church attendance and even mere identification with Christianity was already on the decline over the last decade. The struggles intensified with the changes that most church congregations made during the pandemic.

As of December 2021, "about three-in-ten U.S. adults (29%) are religious 'nones' – i.e., people who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or "nothing in particular" when asked about their religious identity."[117] Alongside that, the majority of people who do claim to go to church, do so about one or two times a month. Almost as many claimed that they seldom attend religious services, and the same with those who never attend.

In light of this project's focus on church participation in community engagement that leads to community development and community transformation, statistics like the ones presented above are crucial. The proposal is not intended for church participation in community engagement with the ultimate purpose of inviting more people to attend our respective congregations. Recent studies will reveal that it is not necessarily a disagreement with ideology

---

[116] Ibid. 4.

[117] Gregory A. Smith, "About 3-in-10 Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," December 14th, 2021, https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/

that is causing church attendance to decline.[118] Church congregations across America, and specifically in the San Gabriel Valley, need to decide whether the resources they do have will go toward building or rebuilding inwardly or developing the communities around them.

This brings us to two significant roadblocks the Church in America and in the San Gabriel Valley must overcome, in order to possibly move toward a new way of functioning. Without a resolution, the Church in the SGV will be missing a major piece of who she is called to be in this context.

Social Justice and the Gospel

There exists a large portion of the Body of Christ, including pastors and leaders in the Church, who hold that care for the poor remains a secondary or auxiliary matter. There are many disagreements in the Church, and this is one of them. It need not and *must* not exist. Since the Industrial Revolution, there has been a battle over whether or not social justice has any place within the Church. On the one side are Christians who oppose the Church doing the work of social justice, claiming that the Church's primary work is to train and equip people to do the work of engaging in personal evangelism, promoting conversion, and contributing to church growth. For Christian leaders opposing social justice, it is at least a distraction from the most important task of the Church, and at most it is a detriment to the Church and its most important work. As one influential Christian leader has said, "The Devil has effectively enticed many churches to welcome godless ideologies into their environments. And he's done it through the trojan horse of what is called 'social justice.'"[119]

[118] Wendy Wang and Alysse Elhage, "Here's Who Stopped Going to Church During the Pandemic," January 20, 2022, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/january-web-only/attendance-decline-covid-pandemic-church.html
[119] Tom Ascol, "Progressive Ideological Challenges to Biblical Christianity," Conservative Political Action Conference, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrKSyODfFic, 2019.

On the other side of the debate are Christians who do not by and large oppose the work of evangelism, but who view the work of social justice as a critical component of the work of evangelism. As one writer put it,

> "It is neither realistic nor fair to ignore the continuing social effects of hundreds of years of state-sponsored oppression, cruelty and stolen wages. It is neither realistic nor fair to ignore the current damage of mass incarceration and failed educational institutions on minority groups. Prejudice and institutional evil are ongoing — deeply ingrained in social practice and ratified by indifference. Repentance is in order — along with a passion for social justice that is inseparable from the Christian gospel."[120]

The latter is the perspective presented here, the perspective that holds up the work of social justice not only as of equal status as the presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but social justice as an integral part of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Understanding Justice and Gospel

"Justice" and "Gospel" are two words found in Scripture, though the word "justice" is much more prevalent, and there is no definitive evidence they were ever considered mutually exclusive of one another. It is imperative first that we define the two primary terms being examined here, both linguistically and within the context of Scripture. Without giving an exhaustive study of the use of these words in Scripture, here are examples of their use in Scripture and will explain how those examples help to define and understand the words.

Webster's dictionary, among other sources, explain that the word "gospel" comes from the Old English combination of two words: "god" meaning "good" and "spell" meaning "tale" or

[120] Michael Gerson, "Christians Are Suffering from Complete Spiritual Blindness," *The Washington Post*, September 10th, 2018.

"news."[121] So, at its most fundamental, "gospel" is a good story or good news. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 1:16-17, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes…For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" The word "gospel" in these verses is being used clearly as something inherently good, something about which Paul has no need to feel embarrassed. It is universally agreeable to share good news.

Furthermore, verse 17 clearly states that a central part of the good news is that the righteousness of God is attained by faith, meaning that we as people do not gain it by anything other than a saving faith in Jesus Christ. This is by no means a promotion of a gospel of salvation by anything other than grace through faith. As Paul also says in Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Arguing for social justice must still maintain that any work, no matter how godly or effective, can purchase salvation for someone; it is only the faith a person puts in the grace of God that saves, which was revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What I am arguing here is that the work of social justice is a necessary result, a clarion call to which every faith-filled gospel believer must respond and to which they will respond if grace and gospel are understood fully.

What is this gospel though? We know that it is good news of salvation from God, and we see that it is good news because this salvation does not require works on our part, but only faith in the work that God has done through Jesus Christ. Interestingly enough, neither Jesus nor Paul nor any other speaker or writer in Scripture actually give a clear explanation. In the entire Bible,

[121] Merriam-Webster: Gospel, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gospel?src=search-dict-box

the word is used 25 times, and those are found only in the New Testament. I believe this lack of definition may have been intentional, as the gospel (good news) cannot be limited to words, but rather is made real through life: both the life of Jesus Christ and the life that he calls his followers to live.

In Mark 8:35 Jesus says, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life *for me and for the gospel* will save it." Again in Mark 10:29-30, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you…no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields *for me and the gospel* will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life." (italics mine) These are two out of the seven instances where Jesus uses the word "gospel." Using that phrase "for me and the gospel," Jesus indicates that He Himself is the good news, or that the good news is about Him. It is of the utmost value to give one's life for Jesus Christ himself and the good news about him, who he is and what he has come to do, and what he has come to command and enable his disciples to do. From this, we can gather that perhaps a good and concise working definition of the gospel is "the good news about Jesus Christ and his kingdom." This is good news all of Jesus' followers would have understood, as we are to understand today, that we are to proclaim to everyone and in all ways. A critical component of the good news of Jesus Christ is that he came to abolish injustice and establish his perfect justice, and that he intends to do it through his Church.

What is this justice? As there are elements of the good news in the Old Testament, so there are proclamations of justice in the New Testament. In the Old Testament we see God calling his people to be just. Even from the beginning, when God chose Abraham to be the one through whom he would grow his own people, Israel, God said: "I have chosen him, that he may

charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18:19, NRSV). Even before there was the understanding of God's good news limited to personal salvation, there was God's plan to display to the world the good news that He is a God of justice, who does what is right and true and fair.

Justice is a clear theme throughout the story of God's people in the Old Testament. The people of God consistently reflect the reality of the God who chose them with reference to His justice. It was critical to God's plan for His people; at one point he tells them, "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Deuteronomy 16:20, NRSV). Justice is clearly not something peripheral to God nor His people, nor was it a distraction from something else.

In a compelling instance of the word "justice," God reveals in Amos 5:21-24 what he desires from His people more than even the basic practices of sacrifice and praise.

I hate, I despise your festivals,
    and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
    I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
    I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
    I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
    and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Behold, the heart of God on display. This God does not care for the show of what today would be worship services held, sermons preached, songs sung, ministries run, and people converted. He does not care for them, that is, without the flowing—not a trickling or a stagnant presence, but the *flowing*—of justice and righteousness.

God alone has the authority to say who may enter the eternal Kingdom of God and who may not. This reference is simply what justice means to God—and what it must therefore mean to us today—in the Old Testament and the New Testament, in the old covenant and the new, with God's chosen Israel and with God's chosen universal Church.

Three Perspectives of Social Justice and the Gospel

Many theologians have spent a great deal of time discussing social justice, either advocating for it, opposing it, or working toward a balance between works of social transformation and movement toward personal decisions of faith. A later section will discuss opposition to social justice as a work of the Church, but the intent here is simply to lay out the centrality of social justice in the church, and why it is clearly synonymous with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What has become clear in study is that this conversation on social justice and the gospel rests largely upon three theological perspectives: 1) the nature of the Kingdom of God, 2) a comprehensive ecclesiology, and 3) a full understanding of sin and salvation. Though not an exhaustive list of perspectives to the social justice and gospel conversation, understanding these three allows for greater insight as to where the two intersect.

Defining the Kingdom of God may seem at first look to be merely a matter of identifying the king: Jesus Christ. This King has not only given us a gospel to proclaim to the world, but he has come to be the living embodiment of that gospel. Taking the literal translation of the word "gospel" as the Greek word for "good news," Jesus Christ Himself *is* the good news: God has come, God is with us, and God's Kingdom of peace, justice, and freedom will reign forever.

However, there is an obvious discrepancy within his church. There are those who believe that the King Jesus Christ gave only the command for his disciples to impart good news which leads to a choice toward conversion and further discipleship within a church context, and that the work of social justice is auxiliary and peripheral at best; then there are those who believe that the King Jesus Christ gave the mandate to make disciples and teach them to follow, but that a central and non-negotiable means of discipleship and teaching is through the work of social justice.

Beyond that, Scot McKnight writes that "the 'kingdom of God' is…the all-encompassing rule of God over the whole created order, and the church is but one element in God's universal kingdom."[122] This reminds us that the Church and the work that the Church can do is not the entirety of the work of the Kingdom of God, contrary to much of the way the term "Kingdom of God" is used. This echoes what Jesus Christ already said, when he told his disciples, *"*Go into *all the world* and preach the gospel to *all creation"* (italics mine) (Mark 16:15).

This also reinforces the themes that God's kingdom work is more than simply the work of gaining converts for the institution of the Church itself, and that this good news is to be taken everywhere and to all creation. That phrase "to all creation" denotes people of different countries, cultures, languages, and contexts, and without a doubt would require a gospel that does more than mere speaking and preaching can do.

---

[122] Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014), 232.

McKnight does hold a firm view that traditional decision-based evangelism is primary to the Church's work of the gospel.

> "We cannot enter into this story without surrendering. Why? Because if Jesus is the one and only King, we must surrender to Jesus as the King. There is no kingdom mission apart from submitting to Jesus as King and calling others to surrender before King Jesus…It is good to seek the common good, but not at the expense of personally surrendering to King Jesus. If the kingdom story is the true story, in fact, *there is no good for the common good until humans surrender to King Jesus*." (italics mine)[123]

McKnight's argument is largely based on this rightful understanding that Jesus Christ is the King of the Kingdom of God, and therefore must be the central focus. Still, he recognizes the importance of the work of social justice, though that importance to him is conditional.

> "...kingdom mission means that social justice activism, the social gospel, and liberation theology are important paths for Christians to express love to those in need...the public sector and systemic elements of social activism are not kingdom mission but instead Christians "doing good" in the public sector for the common good. As such--this activism is good--very good and inevitable--but good works are not the same things as kingdom work. Good works are the overflow of love toward those in need."[124]

McKnight sees this work as important, but somehow he does not see it as advancing or adding to the work of the Kingdom of God. He goes on to say,

> "The kingdom citizen is inspired by the kingdom vision to be a more loving person and to create a more just world. This is how we are to explain the social gospel and liberation

[123] Ibid, 37.
[124] Ibid, 118.

> theology, and *this kind of activism is entirely good*. But that doesn't make it kingdom work; it makes it good work."[125]

In reading his work in its entirety, it is clear that McKnight does truly see the value in the work of social justice, but that what must not be lost is the sovereignty and primacy of a God revealed in Jesus Christ. Because of this, he finally recognizes that

> "[kingdom] theology, shaped as it is now…by transformation and liberation approaches…has become a combination of good people doing good things in the public sector and an activistic striving to undo injustices and establish justice against the oppressive systemic forces of, most especially, capitalism and colonialism."[126]

Pastor, author, and writer Tony Evans writes about this aspect of the Kingdom of God from a different perspective;

> "What we need now…from our kingdom-minded pastors and church leaders is a return to the fundamentals of the faith. If we are going to carry out the commission of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to impact culture for good, we must return to a focus on evangelism and discipleship that results in spiritual and social transformation."[127]

Evans is presenting a kingdom where the gospel and social justice are inextricable. Though he believes that one must come before the other—the presentation of the gospel, the

---

[125] Ibid, 118.
[126] Ibid, 238.
[127] Tony Evans, *Our Witness to the World: Equipping the Church for Evangelism and Social Impact*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020), 11.

choice to believe, and discipleship—he makes it clear that social justice is indeed central to the work of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

> "[The] role of the church, as a participant in God's socio-political kingdom and as His bride, is to execute divine justice on behalf of the defenseless, poor, and oppressed. Scripture relates biblical justice distinctly to these groups as a primary concern because it is these groups that most represent the helpless in society and bear the brunt of injustices."[128]

Like McKnight, Evans attempts an even-handed approach, although he differs by giving gospel proclamation by means of social justice equal primacy along with traditionally understood verbal evangelism or gospel preaching.

> "The social without the spiritual may help people in time but leave them impoverished for eternity. The spiritual without the social may have people looking forward to a great eternity but missing what God wants to do to, through and for people in history. Both are essential for the transformation of individuals, families, churches, and our nation."[129]

One could add to this statement the transformation of other countries as well, not as work for American missionaries to attempt as would-be saviors, but rather for all of Christ's Church to advocate for (or at least be aware of in prayer and giving) those throughout the world who suffer injustice.

---

[128] Ibid, 98.
[129] Ibid, 102.

All in all, the Kingdom of God perspective is one that leads toward an understanding of the greater picture. Doing the work of evangelism *and* social justice removes the option of playing favorites, doing what feels comfortable or familiar, or choosing a side simply because it aligns with or opposes a particular political agenda. The Kingdom is ruled by a King, and it is he who has commanded his people what to do: proclaim the gospel, by verbal proclamation and by the work of social justice.

The second important perspective of the conversation on social justice and the gospel is the formation of a complete ecclesiology, or theology of the Church. One's theology of the Church—what the Church is, for what and for whom it was established, and what the Church is to be doing on the earth—will certainly direct and define where one tends to lean when considering social justice and the gospel. None of the sources used for this project—no theologian, no pastor, no scholar—argue against the fact that Jesus Christ is the head of the Church, and that any definition of the Church or mandate to the Church come from Jesus Christ.

Christopher J.H. Wright gives a solid description of the church and her assigned work when he speaks of

> "the existence of the church itself as the missional community of those who have responded to, and entered, the kingdom of God by repentance and faith in Christ, and who now seek to live as a transformed and *transforming* (italics mine) community of reconciliation and blessing to the world."[130]

He goes on to ask; for what, at the most fundamental level, is the Church here on earth? Just as the people of God through Abraham were called to "be the vehicle of God's mission of

[130] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 43.

extending his blessing to the nations," so the Church is also "to be a people through whom the nations are blessed."[131] The result of the personal revival and transformation, for the people of God and followers of Jesus Christ is always to show itself socially or in the world. How we live in the world, responding to the injustices and the structures that perpetuate them when they are brought to our attention, is what makes our faith effective.

Lesslie Newbigin was a prominent theologian who wrote extensively on ecclesiology and the Church's mission. After he spent decades doing missionary work in India, he returned in the 1960s to his Western context of origin—specifically the United Kingdom—to find a church that was failing to be what Christ had established it to be: either too aligned with the surrounding culture to stand out in Christ-like witness, thus failing to adequately proclaim the gospel verbally to the world; or too unaware of the dynamics of the surrounding culture to engage fruitfully with it, thus failing to live out the gospel by addressing the injustices found there.

He argues that, while we must start the conversation of faith with a focus on a personal response to God's saving grace, this kind of life must develop into one that pursues social transformation. In his book, "The Gospel in a Pluralist Society," Newbigin writes, "...it is clear that action for justice and peace in the world is not something which is secondary, marginal to the central task of evangelism. It belongs to the heart of the matter. Jesus' action in challenging the powers that ruled the world was not marginal to his ministry; it was central to it. Without it there would be no gospel."[132]

He concludes that there is no gospel without social justice after decades as a missionary in India, and from all the years of calling the Church in England to wake up. While he is very

---

[131] Ibid, 43.

[132] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), Location 2608, Kindle.

firm on the importance of the church's pursuit of social justice, all of his work points toward fullness of both the gospel being presented through words and preaching and through social justice.

> "If I am not mistaken, the conflict between these two ways of understanding mission is profoundly weakening the Church's witness. The conflict continues because both parties have hold of important truth. And I am suggesting that both parties are inadequately aware of the central reality, namely that mission is not primarily our work--whether of preaching or of social action--but primarily the mighty work of God."[133]

Most Christian leaders—whether pastors, teachers, scholars, or theologians—would agree with this. Here he is not contradicting previous statements and arguing against the centrality of social justice as the work of the Church, but he is warning the Church not to fall victim to believing that it is not our commitment to social justice alone nor our commitment to verbal proclamation of the gospel that saves anyone, but only God who is working through a commitment to both.

Even John Wesley, the theologian, pastor, writer, and preacher, weighed in heavily on the issue of social justice as central to the gospel of Jesus Christ. What is fascinating about Wesley's legacy is that those who claim to follow his footsteps and know his work and advocate what he stood for will often ignore or are unaware of the extensive and even radical writing and work he did in the area of social justice.

Theodore Jennings, writing about Wesley's approach to social justice, writes this:

---

[133] Ibid, Location 2578.

> "Those who seek to deflect attention from the pressing themes of social transformation by speaking of the evangelical imperative to save souls cannot find solace in Wesley's practice or thought. While Wesley did emphasize personal conversion, this was always inseparably linked to a real transformation in the form of one's life."[134]

And once again he speaks very strongly:

> "Those 'evangelicals' who preach a conversion that does not turn us to the poor, that does not result in redistribution of wealth, cannot plausibly claim that there is any relation between saving persons and changing society. Rather they are offering individual salvation as a substitute for meaningful transformation either of persons or society. Such a project receives no support from either Wesley or the gospel he sought to serve."[135]

It is important to keep in mind that neither Jennings, nor any other scholar who seeks to uncover Wesley's social justice side, has any intention of downplaying the critical work John Wesley did to guide a theology of spiritual formation and discipleship. In Wesley, one can find "a provocative wedding of evangelical fervor and radical social witness."[136] What a powerful assessment. Who can debate that John Wesley did indeed have an "evangelical fervor?" Who can dispute that he cared deeply and worked extensively for people to be not only converted but discipled in Christian teaching and fellowship? This he did believe was critical work of the Church. However, he also held to beliefs that would be disparagingly considered by some conservative Republican Christians as socialism.

---

[134] Theodore W. Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 17.
[135] Ibid, 17.
[136] Ibid, 37.

Perhaps one of the simplest explanations of an ecclesiology of the fullness of social justice and the gospel comes from Richard Stearns, former president of World Vision, arguably the world's largest and most effective Evangelical Christian humanitarian aid, development, and advocacy organization. Though he is not a theologian or scholar by profession, his ideas and experience are still helpful in understanding how working toward social transformation is not peripheral to being a Christian, and how this embodies the good news Jesus sent his followers to proclaim.

> "More and more, our view of the gospel has been narrowed to a simple transaction, marked by checking a box on a bingo card at some prayer breakfast, registering a decision for Christ, or coming forward during an altar call...It was about saving as many people from hell as possible--for the next life. It minimized any concern for those same people in this life. It wasn't as important that they were poor or hungry or persecuted, or perhaps rich, greedy, or arrogant; we just had to get them to pray the "sinner's prayer" and then move on to the next potential convert."[137]

The Church must heed the words of someone who has a global perspective like Stearns, one who understands the widespread horrendous injustice that is in the world, which leads to poverty, oppression, and marginalization. He continues,

> "Proclaiming the whole gospel, then, means so much more than evangelism in the hopes that people will hear and respond to the good news of salvation by faith in Christ. It also encompasses tangible compassion for the sick and the poor, as well as biblical

[137] Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel: The Answer That Changed My Life and Might Just Change the World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 17.

injustice, efforts to right the wrongs that are prevalent in our world. God is concerned about the spiritual, physical, and social dimensions of our being."[138]

This is a common theme with Christian theologians and leaders who advocate for a social justice focus: *personal* salvation and sanctification is only part of the Christian story and only part of the Church's work. In fact, this brings us to the third theological perspective imperative to understanding social justice as central to the work of the gospel. The traditional Western understanding of the themes of sin and salvation have severely crippled the Church's ability to be effective in engaging the work of social justice, not because the entirety of the Church is not doing this work, but because the Church is so violently divided on this issue.

Though denominations will disagree on specific theologies of sin and salvation—Calvinism versus Arminianism and the like—the basic traditional theology of sin and salvation goes something like this: people are sinful and unable to save themselves from this sinfulness, so God sent Jesus Christ to die for our sins, in effect granting entry to heaven when we die and saving us from hell. Let it be clear that I am not arguing against this basic story, because I do adhere to this basic story myself, and because that is not the goal of this study. This story of sin and salvation is reflective of popular Western Christian methods of evangelism such as *The Four Spiritual Laws*. This important concept is reflective of popular Western Christian understandings of evangelism or the gospel in that there is an entire other side of the theologies of sin and salvation that is largely unknown, especially in the American Church.

Orlando Costas provides just such a perspective in "Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom." His book is one half challenge to the American Church and another half

[138] Ibid, 22.

exposé specifically on the plight of our neighbors south of the United States border, and he does push to expand the American understanding of sin and salvation. Outlining an extensive view of sin, he says the following:

> "…sin means injustice. It is the opposite of God's dealings with creation. God is just in all judgments. Human beings are by nature unjust in all their relationships. Sin represents a deliberately aggressive action against others. If disobedience implies rejection of the lordship of God, injustice signifies hatred and repudiation of the neighbor. Sin, then, is every unjust act--every lack of consideration for the well-being of one's neighbor, every insult to human dignity, every act of violence done by one to someone else."[139]

Before this he does state that sin primarily means disobedience to God, but he also clearly connects this disobedience to the natural consequence of injustice. Regarding salvation, he speaks of it with equal significance as liberation. We are saved and liberated from sin, and we are also saved and liberated to be what God created us to be. Specifically, he writes about and from within the context of the suffering of Mexican, Central American, and South American people.

> "The Holy Spirit is showing us already signs of social and political justice and structural liberation in many places and situations. We know that an event is a sign of the justice of God when it enables the poor and oppressed to experience a measure of economic, sociocultural, and political liberation. We know that liberation is 'evangelical' when it tears down the structures that perpetuate divisions among peoples, among men,

[139] Orlando Costas, *Christ outside the Gate: Mission beyond Christendom*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 23.

> women, and children, and between the human family and nature--divisions that promote hate, hostility, and resentment, instead of love, well-being, and freedom. Every movement that dignifies human life, that promotes equitable economic relations, and that encourages solidarity among individuals and peoples can be said to be, therefore, a manifestation (though partial) of the saving power of the gospel."[140]

Here Costas posits that salvation equals justice equals liberation. These are truly evangelical, as they are acts and signs and proclamations of the good news of Jesus Christ, who came to tear down the spiritual *and* social walls of condemnation, injustice, and oppression. Costas and others like him surely stand on the shoulders of preceding theologians, whose work stands as fundamental to an understanding of social justice as the gospel. Referring back to John Wesley, one of the themes on which many current Wesleyans tend to focus is sanctification, a result of being saved or liberated from sin.

On this theme, and referring back to John Wesley, Joerg Rieger writes,

> "Wesley…understood that the fallen state of humanity has implications for not only individuals but also social relationships and the world as a whole. Where conservatives, both past and present, for instance, tend to blame the sinfulness of the poor for the problems they face, Wesley pointed out the role of wealthy landowners in pushing the poor off their lands, thus broadening the understanding of sin to include not only the bottom but also the top and particular social conditions. Since nothing and nobody is excluded from sinfulness, nothing and nobody is excluded from the need for salvation.

[140] Ibid, 30.

> Wesley's hope was for an all-encompassing salvation that would make a real difference in the world and that would ultimately amount to a new creation by the grace of God."[141]

Clearly, the Church must not fail to emphasize personal salvation from personal sin, but so must the Church preach corporate and national repentance that leads to salvation from a larger understanding and reality of sin.

Another well-respected voice on the issue of social justice and the gospel is Walter Rauschenbusch, the leader of the Social Gospel Movement in the early 1900s. His writing is backed by tremendous work in calling the American Church to action in meeting the needs around them, as a response to Jesus Christ himself.

> "Jesus was not a child of this world. He did not revere the men it called great; he did not accept its customs and social usages as final; his moral conceptions did not run along the grooves marked out by it. He nourished within his soul the ideal of a common life so radically different from the present that it involved a reversal of values, a revolutionary displacement of existing relations. This idea was not merely a beautiful dream to solace his soul. He lived it out in his own daily life. He urged others to live that way. He held that it was the only true life, and that the ordinary way was misery and folly. He dared believe that it would triumph."[142]

Theologians who advocate for social justice as critical, gospel-themed work of the Church often refer to the person and life and teachings of Jesus Christ as evidence of the complete gospel he brought, the one that emphasizes preaching of spiritual salvation and an

---

[141] Joerg Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology*, (Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2018), 20.

[142] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*, (New York: Harper One, 2007), 71.

equal (or sometimes greater, depending on the context) emphasis on social salvation (justice) as well.

Gustavo Gutierrez says,

> "The God whom we know in the Bible is a liberating God, a God who destroys myths and alienations, a God who intervenes in history in order to break down the structures of injustice and who raises up prophets in order to point out the way of justice and mercy. He is the God who liberates slaves…who causes empires to fall and raises up the oppressed. The whole of the climate of the gospel is a continual demand for the right of the poor to make themselves heard, to be considered preferentially by society…"[143]

Injustice is the sin, and liberation is the salvation. This is a true and valid perspective of sin and salvation, and it must be included in the regular language of the Church in order for the Church to have a full understanding of the sin from which God through Christ rescues, and the salvation which God has in store through Christ.

A limited view of sin and salvation could actually contribute to the perpetuation of injustice in the world just as much as the actual direct sources of those injustices. Unjust people can be nothing other than what they are, but the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ must proclaim a salvation from sin for all people in all contexts, or else be complicit in the injustice that plagues countless many in the world. This is true, but there would be no need to present social justice as an unequivocally critical component of the gospel of Jesus Christ unless there were forceful opposition to such an idea.

---

[143] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation,* (New York: Orbis Books, 1971), 69.

Opposition to Social Justice as the Gospel Itself

In 2018, The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel was released, initiated by Christian leaders such as John MacArthur and Voddie Baucham—all of whom are men and most of whom are white. Among its many troubling statements, its denials seem most heavily bent on opposing the social justice movement.

> "We deny that political or social activism should be viewed as integral components of the gospel or primary to the mission of the church…we deny that these activities are either evidence of saving faith or constitute a central part of the church's mission given to her by Jesus Christ, her head."[144]

There is more than enough evidence that social justice does not in any way threaten the mission of the church, and that it is furthermore central to the gospel-centered work of the church.

The statement goes on to say,

> "We deny that anything else, whether works to be performed or opinions to be held, can be added to the gospel without perverting it into another gospel. This also means that implications and applications of the gospel, such as the obligation to live justly in the world, though legitimate and important in their own right, are not definitional components of the gospel."[145]

[144] John MacArthur, et al, "The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel." https://statementonsocialjustice.com/, 2022.
[145] Ibid.

Though many people who claim Christianity might also hold a works-based view of salvation, there are no doubt many Christians who still hold the biblical truth that "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8 NIV).

However, the second part of the denial unnecessarily associates salvation with what they call "an obligation to live justly in the world," claiming that this obligation is not a "definitional [component] of the gospel." Not only does this make a needless correlation between works-based salvation and social justice, it moreover seems to ignore clear mandates from Scripture, such as Micah 6:8, which do not seem to leave much room for anything other than social justice as a mandate from Jesus Christ himself and thus "a definitional component of the gospel":

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God."

In a third denial intended to cut down the Christian work of social justice, the statement ramps up its intensity:

> "And we emphatically deny that lectures on social issues (or activism aimed at shaping wider culture) are as vital to the life and health of the church as the preaching of the gospel and the exposition of Scripture. Historically, such things tend to become distractions that inevitably lead to departures from the gospel."[146]

[146] Ibid.

In the end, it marginalizes Christian leaders for even talking about social justice issues and it continues to ignore the root causes of the injustices it seeks to explain away, thereby perpetuating the harmful ideologies that initiated them in the first place. This is by no means the only or most vehement movement opposing social justice as a critically important part of the Church's gospel work. There have been and surely will be others. What has become clear through the voices of the many Christian leaders presented here is that the Church can no longer deny that the gospel is not entirely good news if it does not extend to people suffering injustice. The full and complete gospel must include social justice.

Shift for the Church

In order for the Church to live within the fullness of the gospel God has given us through Jesus Christ, there must be a shift in thinking. Van Gelder and Zcheile argue that the mission to which God has called us is His mission, and not ours. Therefore, each pastor or church board does not get to decide what that mission will be. Instead, it is incumbent upon all of God's people—His entire Church—to seek out what God is doing in the world and how he is calling us to participate. This is especially true in America, where the schism between social justice and a lack thereof may be the most prominent.

> "Instead of wondering how the church can either remake itself to be relevant again to a changing culture or try to recover a lost past, we must begin with wondering what God might be up to in the world, particularly whatever local context we find ourselves inhabiting, and how we are gifted and called to participate in God's mission. Instead of focusing on strategies and techniques that would attract people who are leaving the church back to it–or working to reclaim a once powerful privilege in society–the

> church must deepen its discernment about what it means to practice [Jesus'] Way as it faithfully translates the gospel into relationships of reciprocity with its neighbors…It pushes us beyond the questions that consume so many church leaders today, about how to do church differently, and invites us to explore more deeply the cultural context in which we find ourselves."[147]

There are bigger questions than just those that pertain to building the institution we call "church," but honestly is a far cry from the vibrant, effective, Spirit-filled body we were meant to be. When we begin to look like that, we will no doubt have eyes to see how God is calling us to engage. Not all congregations are going to be equipped for or passionate about immigration rights or helping the homeless or fixing the foster care system.

However, the more every part of the Church aligns with the mission of God in the world, we must believe that the Church will become more of what it was always meant to be. The good news will be preached and proclaimed and displayed, through bold words and through selfless and extravagant works of justice. This gospel will be proclaimed from the pulpits and on the streets, to the believers and the non-believers, to those who give faithfully and to those who cannot give anything, in word and in action. This is the only response from the Church that is truly reflective of the heart of the God to whom we belong, and the heart of His son, Jesus Christ.

Pastoral Shift in America

Another prominent challenge for the Church in America, and in areas like the San Gabriel Valley, pertains to who pastors and church leaders are expected to be. A pastor in the

---

[147] Craig Van Gelder & Dwight J. Zcheile, *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America,* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Group, 2018), 58-59.

San Gabriel Valley may be amicable to all of the arguments presented here, but if she or he does not have the freedom to pursue justice through community engagement that leads to development and transformation, then it will never be a priority.

The Bible has very little to say about pastors, using that specific word, in the context of the Church in the New Testament. Will Willimon writes, "We search the New Testament in vain for much stress on continuity of structures of Christian leadership. Continuity of faithful witness (2 Tim 2:2) is the main concern. The New Testament sources are notoriously inconclusive on precisely which structures of leadership were in place."[148]

Perhaps the most prominent use of the word "pastor" is in Ephesians 4:11-13, where the Apostle Paul writes, "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." This passage puts equal weight on all of these roles named--not only the pastor--tasking them with the equipping of the people, for the purpose of bringing all to unity and maturity in Christ.

While one will only find the English word "pastor" once in Scripture, one will also find many instances of the word which pastor signifies, which is the Hebrew word "*roi*" (רֹעִי), the Greek word "*poimen*," or literally "shepherd." The word "*roi*" is used 11 times in the Old Testament, and the word "*poimenas*" is used 18 times in the New Testament, but interestingly it is only used once in reference to what we would know as the religious role of a pastor, the above mentioned Ephesians reference to pastor, among other vital roles within the Church.

---

[148] William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. Revised Edition. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 28.

Since we are looking at the role of pastor (or shepherd) in the context of what is now known as the Church, we will examine references from the New Testament, as that is the time period when the Church was formed and when the role of pastor was named and defined. The first and most important point to make about the pastor or "shepherd," is that Jesus Christ himself is the prime example of what this role must be. Other than a few references to literal shepherds, as in the ones who heard about Jesus' birth and went to see him, all uses of "*poimen*" refer to Jesus Christ himself.

In Matthew 9:36 and Mark 6:34, we see the account of Jesus looking on the crowds of Jewish people with compassion, because they were like "sheep without a shepherd." The religious leaders of the time were not understanding their role as more than merely keepers and interpreters of the law, and he had to correct them and teach them--and the people they were supposed to be caring for--the truth of the gospel. This is perhaps the clearest example of Jesus the perfect shepherd, showing one of the most important characteristics of being a shepherd/pastor, which is compassion or empathy. He was not in their situation; he had a deep and unshakeable connection with the Father. Yet, he saw them in their situation and his heart went out to them. Also, Jesus shows the heart of a pastor in this instance because he is concerned for the crowd, much as a pastor is to be concerned for and has compassion for her/his congregation.

Matthew 25 shows a different side of Jesus the Shepherd, giving a different kind of directive to pastors within the church. In verses 31-46, we see the parable of the separation of the sheep and the goats, in a scene depicting the final judgment of the world, and particularly of the Church. The sheep are the ones who in their lifetime served the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned, and by doing so served the Lord Jesus Christ himself,

while the goats represent those who did not. Of course, the role of Jesus in this parable--here referred to as "the Son of Man"--is as Sovereign Lord and Judge. I am not suggesting that this is somehow a prescriptive for pastors, neither for the early Church nor for today. However, it does imply that a shepherd knows his/her sheep, knows the condition of each one and can identify false sheep.

As a side note, it is my assertion that a primary responsibility of a pastor/shepherd is to know the health of her/his sheep, especially in the light of a passage like Matthew 25: 31-46. Not only must a pastor know the condition of the sheep, but she/he must also know how to shepherd those who would be considered goats, those who are not displaying their faith as Jesus here commands them to. This might be known by different terms, such as discipleship or correction, but the goal of this kind of shepherding is to lead people in the way of Jesus Christ.

One more example of Jesus specifically being referred to as a shepherd is John 10:1-16. Here, Jesus gives an elaborate description of what a true shepherd is, and how this shepherd protects his sheep from perils of all kinds. The true shepherd is the one who "enters by the gate" (v. 2), who "calls his sheep by name and leads them out" (v. 3), whose "sheep follow him because they know his voice" (v. 4). He also refers to himself as "the good shepherd," who "lays down his life for the sheep" (v. 11). Again, there is no earthly pastor/shepherd who can lead people in the way that "the good shepherd" does. However this does give us an image of what a true shepherd does.

A pastor can absolutely model her/his leadership based on the type of shepherd Jesus is. She/he can "enter through the gate," meaning legitimately and honestly, not using any kind of manipulation or underhandedness to gain access to the sheep's trust or attention. A pastor can know the people who she/he has been tasked with leading, well enough so that those people see a

pastor who can be trusted, someone whose leadership is founded upon the example of Jesus Christ himself.

In addition, a pastor can and absolutely must, "lay down his life for the sheep." This likely will not happen physically, but a pastor must always be ready to sacrifice herself/himself for the good of the sheep, i.e, the congregation. This echoes John 13, where Jesus washed his disciples' feet, and then said to them, "You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." In his actions and words, he is commanding his disciples to lay down their lives for others, in whatever way necessary.

Returning to Ephesians 4:11, where we see Paul's one use of the specific word "pastor," it would be helpful to explore more deeply what Paul understood to be the role of a pastor. Scholars are divided on whether or not Paul really was a pastor, or whether or not he had pastoral leadership gifts. However, there are many things about Paul that can be considered pastoral. Jonathan Lo asserts that "although Paul is unlike the modern pastor in certain respects, his attachment to his congregations and his concern for their holistic well-being can rightly be understood through the lens of pastoral care" (2).

As one snapshot, Ephesians 4:11 occurs in a letter to the Church in Ephesus, where he is calling them to experience God's matchless power and otherworldly unity in order to overcome the conflict and division they have already been facing. And in the immediate context, this portion of chapter 4 is all about how God has appointed leaders to equip them for the work of ministry. Even though Paul traveled to different locations where the Church was growing, in the above brief instances we can see that Paul exhibits pastoral behavior. He knows what the people

need and where they are struggling, and he writes to them accordingly. He comes to them honestly, not trying to mislead them in any way. He is willing to lay down his life for the Church, even literally, so that they can follow his example in following Christ.

James Thompson supports this idea of Paul as pastor. "Paul's pastoral ambition, as he states consistently in his letters, is community formation. His Gentile communities now participate in Israel's story, living between their initial adoption (or 'election') into that story and the final day, when they will be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Paul's pastoral ambition is to participate with God in effecting the transformation of his communities."[149] This is an excellent reminder of what every pastor's goal must be: the transforming of not just individuals, but of entire communities, to the image of Jesus Christ. It is, as Thompson calls it, an "ambition," but it is one that is worthy of the great God who is calling everyone to Himself.

In Jesus Christ, we have numerous characteristics of what a pastor must be, as he is the perfect shepherd. In Paul, we have an excellent example of someone who followed the good shepherd, and thus in a way he became the pastor/shepherd to the Church God needed him to be.

A Very Brief American History of Pastoral Shift

In Scripture we find divinely inspired words helping us to understand the role of the pastor, as it originally would have been understood and intended. However, anyone familiar with ministry can tell you that the way things play out practically-- especially in a culture like the US--is often far removed from life in the days of the early Church in many aspects. Within the context of the US, there has been a tremendous shift from how Christianity and the role of the pastor would have looked in the early church to what it looks like today.

---

[149] James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul: A Biblical Vision.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Group, 2006). 20.

It is important to outline how the role of a pastor can shift in the context of a country like the USA. What I propose is that theological shifts impact everything else, including how a pastor functions and how the role of the pastor overall is perceived. Theology matters immensely. James Neiman writes, "theology operates as the innate and self-conscious language through which the church says...what it is and what it intends to be."[150] Though the USA quickly became a land of great diversity, there are still clear overall phases of the shifting theology in the American Church from which we can learn.

In discussing theology, it is necessary to examine not only the beliefs themselves, but the practice of those beliefs. Andrew Root writes extensively about the shift in theological focus and spiritual practice.

> "...where the Reformation [and Reformed Theology under the influence of Martin Luther, and later John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards] had said that there was no divide between the sacred and secular because *everything* (particularly our ordinary lives) was sacred, things shifted…[people] began to assume that because there was no divide between the sacred and secular and ordinary life was important, maybe everything was just secular."[151]

If the pastor was just one of the many occupations one could have, one of many positions of influence in society, one of many people who spoke on behalf of the divine, then perhaps the pastor was not as set apart as previously thought. Beyond that, perhaps the pastor's role did not serve the purpose originally thought. Root continues, "As industrialization took hold, we needed

---

[150] James Nieman, "Attending Locally. Theologies in Congregations," *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 6, no. 2, (2002): 200.

[151] Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019). 11

pastors to check our secular excesses and to encourage us to live upright lives…[we] needed pastoral exhortation not to keep us from hell...but to allow us to flourish, *as an end in itself*."[152]

What Root is identifying here is what some historians and theologians see as the movement from the pastoral call to confession, repentance, salvation, and sanctification to the pastoral call to personal betterment or self-realization. They lament the shift in pastoral focus, painting the picture of a pastor who no longer needs to know how to lead people into the awesome sacredness of God's holy presence, but rather simply exists to make people feel good about themselves and find the place of greatest flourishing in their own lives. They also paint the picture of a people who no longer need someone to exhort them to radical transformation, but rather someone to encourage them to figure out how to thrive in their current circumstance. The challenge Root and others take on is not to merely lament this change, but to deeply examine and adequately portray how the work of God through these people called "pastors" is still doing the work of spiritual transformation. In the end, it is a testament to the transcendent power of the Holy Spirit, who is not bound by cultural nor theological shifts.

A theme that emerges in this study is one of evolution. The Church, along with the entire culture of the United States, has changed. It is not today what it was in days past. E. Brooks Holifield writes, "Pastoral theology was never a self-contained intellectual system, but rather a complex of inherited ideas and images subject to continued modification in changing social and intellectual settings."[153]

---

[152] Ibid. 11.

[153] E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1983), 30.

Root uses this term "immanent frame," to describe what has always seemed to be an inevitable slide toward the secular (as opposed to the sacred) becoming the way the Church--and pastoral function along with it--operated. He writes,

> "The immanent frame was being used to define as completely secular not only our ordinary lives but also the pastoral task...the goal of Christian education was not the transcendent (sacred) reality of the kingdom of God but the democracy of God: an immanent bound space of human flourishing that had no need for a transcendent referent."[154]

Again, Root is identifying the shifting theological perspective, which not only changed the face of Christianity in America, but likewise the theology of pastoring along with it.

So, where did this shift happen? Root talks about one of the earliest Christian influencers--at least on what was then a national level--Jonathan Edwards. He was a revivalist in the Great Awakening, who saw multitudes of people transformed by the Spirit speaking through the Word of God. Root explains,

> "For Edwards, ordinariness, particularly of raising children, held such cosmic weight that his primary pastoral task (particularly from the pulpit) was to push his congregants to live upright ordinary lives in order to raise children well enough to keep them from hell. For Edwards' Calvinistic Puritanism, ordinary life was the stage where heaven and hell collided."[155]

---

[154] Root, Andrew, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 12-13.
[155] Ibid, 6.

It was truly a different time, where people could be led to see the spiritual realm at work in even the seemingly mundane. The devil and his influence were taken seriously, and all harbingers of the devil's work were dealt with in the harshness they were thought to have deserved. Those thought or known to be witches were pushed to the forest, and the forest came to represent all that was dark and destructive.

On Edwards' type of pastoral theology, Root concludes,

> "the only way for human beings to flourish was to repent of sin, find discipline, and therefore be free from hell. But this freeing from hell had the concrete manifestation of creating a society where people's ordinary lives led to human flourishing most directly in order, decorum, and politeness. Puritan Calvinism created dependable structures to order our ordinary lives, so that the world became a place where human beings could flourish."[156]

This order he speaks of was the only way to keep the sacred at the forefront of the society they were building, not allowing the devil a foothold through disorder.

It is important to understand how Christianity remained dominant in the early days of American colonialism, because this is a prominent piece of the foundation upon which American Christianity is built. Though order, decorum, and politeness were the goals of every good Christian family of that day, other vital Christian characteristics--justice, compassion, peace--were clearly neglected. Slavery was allowed to continue, the subjugation of Native Americans was a regular practice, and witch hunts and killings often became paranoid and irrational, leading to the punishment of many innocent people.

---

[156] Ibid. 6.

As with all aspects of society, Christianity too began to shift, and by the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a new pastoral theology had come to dominate the scene. Though the new pastors also desired human flourishing, as did Jonathan Edwards and the like, flourishing and the means to achieve it looked very different. Whereas people in the earlier days believed that everything was sacred and that this sacredness was something for which they must fight, people in the nineteenth century began to believe that everything was probably just secular. The pastor was still seen as important, because he still helped keep people cared for and in check (like a chaplain), but the pastor was important in a different way: "though the pastor held this seemingly important place, he was no longer the lynchpin of our cultural life. Now that ordinary life was no longer sacred, but only secular, it wouldn't be long until the chaplain position was extraneous."[157]

I believe it is entirely possible and even right for us to glean what is good from different stages of the Church. It can be argued that early American Christianity needed that strict adherence in order to build a strong foundation. It can also be argued that American Christianity needed a shift to pastors as chaplains, helping people flourish through listening but also through pushing them to pay attention to the social issues that had long been neglected by the American Church. And as we will see in the next section, though the faithfulness of the current role of the pastor to its original intent is hotly debated, this too has its importance in history.

The Role of the Pastor Today

There are many pastor-theologians who lament what much of pastoring today has become. Will Willimon writes,

---

[157] Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 12.

> "We live in a therapeutic culture where all human problems are reduced to sickness. We want not so much to be saved or changed but rather to feel better about ourselves…[the] pastor becomes not the teacher, preacher, or moral guide, but rather the therapist who helps evoke spiritually inclined sentiments in individuals—soothing anxiety, caring for the distressed, and healing the maladjusted."[158]

He is addressing what he and many others lament, the shift of the pastor to the role of counselor. To be sure, there has likely always been an aspect of pastoring that has included counseling. Considering the Scriptural examination of the role of pastor that we did previously, especially where it is informed by the example of Jesus Christ himself, it is hard to ignore the characteristics of a counselor naturally present. What is a shepherd, if not one who leads sheep to safety, nourishment, and rest?

Yet, it is important to recognize the legitimacy of the concern. Andrew Purves asserts the following:

> "Biblical and theological perspectives, however, no longer shape the practice of much pastoral work. The modern pastoral care movement within the North American Protestant theological academy by and large revolves around psychological categories regarding human experience and symbolic interpretations about God. A relatively comfortable synthesis results in which pastoral theology, and, consequently, pastoral practice in the church, have become concerned largely with questions of meaning rather than truth,

[158] William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. Revised Edition. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016). 62.

> acceptable functioning rather than discipleship, and a concern for self-actualization and self-realization rather than salvation."[159]

There is clearly strong pushback against the interpretation that the spiritual needs and problems of a society can be addressed using psychological and even medical means. Still, that seems to be the consensus on where much of today's pastoring finds itself. Willimon echoes Purves' critical interpretation of the modern pastor, though he offers a challenge within the criticism:

> "Contemporary ministry has been the victim (or the beneficiary, depending on how one reads our history) of images of leadership that are borrowed not from scripture but from the surrounding culture—the pastor as CEO, psychotherapeutic guru, or media savvy hipster. One of the challenges of the ordained ministry is to find those metaphors for ministry that allow us appropriately to embody the peculiar vocation of Christian leadership. Uncritical borrowing from the culture's images of leadership can be the death of specifically Christian leaders."[160]

While Christian leaders must fight hard to be the influencers and not the influenced in areas of society that are not healthy or Christ-like, critics like Willimon and Purves may miss how the Church is being shaped not by the societal or cultural expectations themselves, but by the way God may be teaching and even correcting the Church *through* the societal and cultural shifts that have occurred.

---

[159] Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001), 3.
[160] William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. Revised Edition. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 58.

This is not to mention the plentiful scientific discoveries about the development of human life, resonating (at least in its meanings and implications) with what is already found in Scripture. For example, in 2018 the American Psychiatric Association Foundation and the Mental Health and Faith Community Partnership Steering Committee released a booklet titled "Mental Health: A Guide for Faith Leaders." It states, "Faith leaders encounter individuals with mental health conditions in a number of circumstances that require different approaches. They are always called to see the person rather than the illness first, and to understand their own religious assumptions regarding the role of the divine in their encounters with others."[161]

Holifield takes a balanced approach, stating,

> "Every pastor, wittingly or unwittingly, adopts some 'theory' of pastoral counseling, whether it be derived from the seventeenth century or from the twentieth. The history of pastoral counseling does not yield itself to interpretation solely through the tracing of ideas. The pastor has always been immersed in a society."[162]

This is crucial to understanding the shift in pastoral theology, and the shift therefore in pastoral function. It is not a terrible thing for a pastor to be immersed in a society; this is not a shirking of the " in the world but not of it " teaching with which many Christians are familiar. Instead, it is a recognition that in order to reach the people within a society, a pastor not only has permission to be immersed in that society, but she/he *must* be immersed. The pastor must learn the languages, learn the habits, learn the values, and yes even learn the idols. Only then can a

---

[161] American Psychiatric Association Foundation and the Mental Health and Faith Community Partnership Steering Committee, *Mental Health: A Guide for Faith Leaders*, (2018), 2.

[162] E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1983), 350.

pastor appropriately counsel or "shepherd" the people who live within that same societal context. Is that not what pastors are called to do?

Taunya Tinsley, in her work on the importance of pastoral counseling and the need for pastors to pay attention to developments in psychology and therapy, takes a very positive approach. "Pastoral counseling and modern psychology are not mutually exclusive of each other. There is a synergy to be realized when the difference as well as the importance that each area of expertise brings healing and comfort into lives of persons in need of healing - emotional, spiritual, and psychological. It is important to be able to discern the need and identify which area of expertise is called for."[163]

Through her work, Tinsley shows the relevance of psychological developments, not a replacement to the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and Scripture, but to be a tool used by God to provide healing and wholeness to people and in all facets of life. The method and terminology is different from what pastoral theology used to be, but the goal remains the same: direct people toward Jesus Christ, the only one who saves.

Churches and the Work of Community Engagement

As demonstrated above, two major challenges that face the Church in America and in the San Gabriel Valley are 1) the theological and practical dissonance between Christians who consider the work of justice crucial to Christian life and those who consider it auxiliary, and 2) the changing role of the pastor or church leader. By no means is this an exhaustive list of the challenges that the Church in America faces today, however they are pertinent to the focus of this project.

---

[163] Taunya Marie Tinsley, "Is Pastoral Theology Still Relevant in an Age of Modern Psychology?" *Testamentum Imperium,* Volume 5, 2016, 18.

Before continuing, it is important to address the second issue, wherein the role of a pastor often includes fulfilling the role of counselor or therapist, perhaps much more than in eras past. The arguments above are not meant to indicate that all pastors should function formally as counselors or therapists, as this role requires very specific education and training. The fact remains, however, that the expectation is often there, and that is not to be dismissed.

Pastor as counselor speaks to the church leader's role in helping to usher in an authentic picture of the blessing the Church is meant to be in the world. Pastor as counselor demonstrates Christian leadership that is not focused on the building of an institution nor the preservation of a denomination within a city. Ultimately, pastor-as-counselor fosters a true sense of compassion, a genuine compassionate love that reflects to the world the heart of Jesus Christ. Pastor-as-counselor may be what the Church in America needs.

Henri Nouwen writes that compassion is more than feelings. "The compassion that Jesus felt was obviously quite different from superficial or passing feelings of sorrow or sympathy. Rather, it extended into the most vulnerable part of Jesus' being."[164] Pastors in America and in the San Gabriel Valley ought not take on the burdens of the world, and so be weighed down to the point of inaction. The compassion must be so real that it transforms its recipients into bringers of the same to others.

This is where a pastor's role as counselor–or caregiver if you will–connects to the church's role in community engagement that leads to community development and transformation. A pastor must constantly seek to balance compassion for congregation and compassion for the surrounding community, a balance of compassion for insiders and outsiders. By caring for the congregation, a pastor or church leader builds up the fellowship of believers

[164] Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglass A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, (New York: Double Day, 1983), 14.

into which an outsider may be invited. By caring for the community, a pastor or church leader may lead the congregation to fuller and more authentic discipleship in Jesus Christ.

Vignette: Catalyst San Gabriel Valley

Jesse Chang has a long history in the San Gabriel Valley, but the San Gabriel Valley is not his original home. He grew up near Boston, a child of two Taiwanese immigrants. He earned his Master of Divinity at Fuller Seminary, he spent several years as a pastor, and he currently serves on the pastoral leadership team at River of Life, a church plant in Monterey Park. His primary work, however, is as executive director of Catalyst San Gabriel Valley, a non-profit organization that focuses on serving people and families in need throughout the SGV. From their website:

> "We believe that helping activate as many community stakeholders of good will and good faith together is a key to real and lasting change in our communities. We specialize in helping activate local congregations to become active stakeholders in the cities they worship in. In the complex and complicated web of cities and communities in the San Gabriel Valley, the need for bridging and collaboration is all the more urgent."[165]

That aspect of activating and collaborating with local church congregations cannot be overstated. It is truly the power behind what Catalyst SGV exists to do, more than simply raise funds and meet needs as an organization. Their goal is to engage with local church congregations –a critical component of the "community stakeholders" mentioned in the mission statement–and mobilize them to build relationships in their particular community, so that needs can be assessed

[165] "Our Mission," Catalyst San Gabriel Valley, accessed January 3rd, 2022, https://www.catalystsgv.org/our-mission.html

and met and assets can be recognized and maximized.

I have known Jesse for about 15 years, and for about eight of those years I have sat on the board of Catalyst San Gabriel Valley. In that time, I have witnessed Jesse's dedication to the San Gabriel Valley, especially the West San Gabriel Valley. He and his wife moved there over 20 years ago, raising their kids and sending them to local public schools. He is well-connected; he can hardly go to any city event where he is not recognized by almost everyone. Still, he admits it remains difficult sometimes to communicate to potential stakeholders exactly what it is Catalyst SGV does, in a way that will draw them into participating with the work they are doing.

For over 10 years, Catalyst SGV was a branch of Kingdom Causes, a national organization focusing on bringing together people and organizations for "the peace and prosperity of the city" (Jeremiah 29:7). At that time, they were the branch of Kingdom Causes focusing on Alhambra and Monterey Park, two neighboring cities just east of the city of Los Angeles. However, in the early 2000s, Jesse and the board at that time decided to branch out into becoming their own non-profit organization, free to focus not only on two cities, but on the San Gabriel Valley as a whole.

Much of Catalyst SGV's work is with local public schools, and Alhambra Unified School District covers Alhambra and much of Monterey Park. They currently have the most impact in community gardens on public school campuses, development programs with at-risk or in-risk teens, and services for homeless families. The latter falls under a program called HOPE (Homeless and Parent Engagement), and it is enacted when partner school districts notify the HOPE team of families who are homeless or in danger of becoming homeless.

Even with the coronavirus pandemic that began in early 2020, and the widespread restrictions set in place throughout Los Angeles County, Catalyst San Gabriel Valley has

continued to impact many lives and make forward progress. California Native Plant Society honored the school garden established at Garvey Intermediate School. Family Promise, a national organization that partners with networks of houses of faith to house and support families experiencing homelessness, Jesse Chang at their 10th Anniversary gala for his exemplary support of the community. Two new programs were launched, one to connect local churches with struggling families in their community, and another to provide books to families during the pandemic lockdown. During Thanksgiving Break in 2021, 16 San Gabriel Valley churches teamed up to provide 2,800 HOPE meals to families in need, in the Alhambra and Montebello school districts. Over 200 youth were educated through Project Rise, a program that teaches teens about healthy relationships. And the list goes on.

It is evident that Catalyst San Gabriel Valley has been a tremendous asset to the communities they serve, and their reach continues to grow. Still, Jesse Chang admits that inviting church congregations to a long-term commitment to partnership is one of the hardest aspects of his job. Many congregations are open to the idea of one-off outreach opportunities throughout the year, events where congregants can give of their time and energy. An organization like Catalyst exists to make possible and much more accessible long-term connections in a church congregation's immediately surrounding community, but it takes more convincing for many congregations to see how these long-term connections are relevant to their own long-term plans.

In spite of the many difficulties Catalyst SGV staff are seeing, one bright spot is revealing itself. With churches in the San Gabriel Valley having to adapt their approach to ministry due to the pandemic, there is more of an understanding within those congregations that have survived the pandemic that there may likely not be a complete return to the way things were before. This is especially true for what churches usually call "outreach."

From what Jesse and the staff are starting to see, congregations are starting to realize that their best and possibly only way forward is to start making long-term investments in their local neighborhoods. This is how they make a lasting impact in the lives around them, and this is how they display to the world that they care about more than simply building their own congregational numbers. As this continues to happen, Catalyst SGV has the opportunity to continue living up to its name, being a critical piece of the unfolding story of the Church in the San Gabriel Valley.

Chapter 4

Moving the SGV Church to Reflection and Action

It is imperative that the Church begins to focus on community engagement, which leads to community development and transformation. In the San Gabriel Valley, that shift needs to happen especially for church congregations in the Latinx-majority communities, which tend to suffer economically, educationally, and socially. This focus on community engagement that leads to development and transformation is not necessarily the same as what churches usually engage in as community outreach. They may attempt to reach the same people, but the end result can be very different. This chapter will help understand what is unique about the community engagement, development, and transformation proposed here.

Joseph W. Daniels Jr. assesses, "It [is not] that congregations [do not] know that they are supposed to be outwardly focused. There is conversation in many churches about reaching the community. In fact, most congregations have some type of outreach ministry."[166] Most pastors

[166] Joseph W. Daniels Jr. *Walking with Nehemiah: Your Community is Your Congregation*. (Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 2014). xiv.

and church leaders would agree that this is the case, and many are continuing a long-standing conversation about what outreach looks like in these times. A Christianity Today 3-part series teaches church leaders how to keep reaching the people around them, even during the current ongoing pandemic. The ideas they give are mostly technology-based: social media, email, websites, etc.[167]

The question for many church congregations is not whether or not an outward community focus is relevant or necessary, but instead the question is how. The reason the "how" often remains unknown, Daniels Jr. says, is a matter of not knowing *who* is in our communities. "We are often doing ministry for people, but not with people. Many of us are doing 'caring' ministry, but are we engaged in 'transformational' ministry?"[168] This work takes prayer and planning, and it requires patience. Notice that the goal is not a ministry that makes a particular congregation better. The goal is the transformation of the community. The end goal of church congregations in Latinx-majority communities must be transformation. As Scripture explains–and as Latinx theologians like Padilla, Gutierrez, and others will agree–the gospel does save and it saves holistically.

Tim Soerens echoes this: "We can't make progress by asking questions about the church before we start asking questions about what God is up to, and we can't really ask questions about what God is up to without the particularity of our lives in the places we live. This is the heart of the matter."[169] Context matters. This project is ultimately about contextualization, the work of

---

[167] https://www.christianitytoday.com/partners/gloo/2021-church-outreach-jumpstart.html
[168] Joseph W. Daniels Jr., *Walking with Nehemiah: Your Community is Your Congregation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), xiv.
[169] Tim Soerens, *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 29.

discerning what the gospel is to look and sound like, within a specific place and among specific people.

Before this project lays out the five areas that will set the framework for the Church's work in the San Gabriel Valley–a framework that can eventually be applied to the formation of a usable curriculum for church leaders–it is imperative to explain for whom this framework is meant. The Church is not a monolith, and as such there is a myriad of viewpoints, strengths, and deficiencies.

Undoubtedly, there are many pastors and church leaders who might oppose the Scriptural interpretations laid out in previous chapters, while others could take issue with the espousal of Liberation Theology. Still other pastors and church leaders could very well read this project and feel it has no relevance to their own work and context, or perhaps who feel that the propositions here are too idealistic. Within the context of the San Gabriel Valley, there are likely pastors who feel that the type of church focus being proposed here is not the work that the Church should be doing nor spending its resources to accomplish.

On the other hand, there are pastors in the San Gabriel Valley–some of them have been named and described at different points in this project–who are already in agreement with what has been presented here. Some are already doing this work, whether as pastors in the church context or as pastors representing a parachurch organization. They are doing the long-term and hard-fought work of community engagement, development, and transformation, and have made a tremendous impact in their respective communities. For their purposes, a project like this would function as support for the ministry work they are already doing.

The presentations and arguments made in previous chapters, and the following recommendations, are intended primarily for the pastor who has a deep longing to make a lasting

and profound impact in the neighborhood where her/his church is, but who 1) does not know how to get started, and 2) needs a pastoral voice giving permission to pursue the work of community engagement, development, and transformation. For pastors in this situation, a common question may be, "Does work like this count as church ministry?" All of the positions presented in this project have been crafted with the intention of answering that question with a resounding, "Yes." As explained in Chapter 3, permission to look after and bring holistic good news to marginalized people and communities is really no permission at all; it is a mandate from Jesus Christ himself.

The five areas recommended for pastors in the San Gabriel Valley are as follows: Theological Relevance, Racial Justice, Contextual Evangelism, Community Exegesis, Expanding Opportunities, and Community Partnerships. Each one of these recommended areas is bolstered by the work of pastors and church congregations who are already doing this work, as well as by theologians and scholars who have studied and written about them.

Theological Relevance

Dr. Robert Chao Romero, in describing why so much of Chicano/a studies and so many of the younger Latinx generation reject Christianity as their chosen way of life, explains why it is important to develop and foster an understanding of Latinx-context theologies and practices, which he refers to as Brown Church. Latinos in the United States, he says, have often been marginalized. In a positive light, "Brown is symbolic of the cultural and biological mestizaje, or, mixture, in Latin America."[170] In a negative light, however, Brown serves "[as] a metaphor for

[170] Robert Chao Romero, *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latino/a Social Justice, Theology, and Identity*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 14.

racial, cultural, and social liminality."[171] Sang Hyun Lee defines liminality as "the situation of being in between two or more worlds, and includes the meaning of being located at the periphery or edge of a society."[172] It describes a stage or phase where someone's value or position is uncertain and perceived as unimportant.

He continues, "In a very real sense, the history of Latinos/as in the Americas is one of systemic racism perpetuated by white individuals claiming to be Christian."[173] He is referring to the mostly European conquistadors and clergy who occupied areas in Central America, South America, and along America's west coast, as well as the other European settlers who moved westward to claim the lands that had previously been inhabited by Mexicans and First Nation People.

That being said, it is tragic that because of this history of oppression in the United States, many Latinx people write off Christianity altogether, labeling it a "white" religion. "This common rejection of Christianity by Chicano/a studies is regrettable, because it ignores not only the contemporary Christian landscape of the Latino/a community, but also the central role that Christianity has played in social justice movements among Latin Americans and US Latinos/as."[174] Specifically, he is referring to the justice movements led by giants in the Latino/Mexican community, such as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta.

It must be understood that the word "white–or the idea of "whiteness" in general–is not intended as an indictment on all White people, nor is it a shaming of all people of European descent. In clarifying "whiteness," Willie James Jennings explains that whiteness "does not refer

---

[171] Ibid. 14.
[172] Sang H. Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), Location 100.
[173] Robert Chao Romero, *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latino/a Social Justice, Theology, and Identity*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 6.
[174] Ibid. 8.

to people of European descent but to a way of being in the world and seeing the world that forms cognitive and affective structures able to seduce people into its habitation and its meaning making."[175] It is a way of functioning in the world that imposes one's own privilege and often contributes one's ignorance to the oppressive systems the use of that privilege can perpetuate.

With this history and current cultural landscape in mind, for pastors in the San Gabriel Valley–particularly those whose church is in neighborhoods that are predominantly Latinx–the first necessary step toward community engagement that leads to development and transformation is to cultivate a theological foundation that guides the approach to ministry among Latinx-majority communities. In a previous chapter, we examined two uniquely Latinx theologies: Liberation Theology and Misión Integrál. There are others that are more recent and not as well-known, such as Mujerista Theology.[176] The common thread through these various theological lines of thought is a focus on social justice in the Latina/o context.

Whether a pastor is White, Black, Asian, or Latina/o, the argument here is that it is essential for all evangelical pastors in Latino/Mexican-majority areas to study and understand Latin American theologies, in order to understand how best to do community-based ministry in those areas and in order to teach their respective congregations to understand as well. The goal is not larger or more complex church outreach programs, though there is a place for effective outreach programs, as a way to help people get acclimated to simple ways of serving members of the community who may not yet be part of the church community. Gaining a deeper understanding of Latina/o theologies guides pastors in the San Gabriel Valley to understanding who their given community is, becoming familiar not only with its needs, but also with its assets.

---

[175] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 18.

[176] For a succinct understanding of these and other Latina/o Theologies, see Chapter 8 of Dr. Robert Chao Romero's book *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity*.

Racial Justice

This study has demonstrated that the subjugation and marginalization of Latino/Mexican-majority communities in the San Gabriel Valley is a direct result of racist attitudes and policies, which were established long ago and have persisted in many ways until today.

Jemar Tisby writes and speaks on the American Church's complicity in racial injustice and its necessary role in establishing racial justice. His work focuses on this need specifically on behalf of Black communities, but he does express that the challenges he brings also apply to the Brown–that is, Latino–community as well. This study would not be complete without a discussion on the role of the San Gabriel Valley Church not only in collectively recognizing the racist past of those who colonized the area, but also in doing the work of actively standing and working against this racism as it is manifested today. He writes, "The social, political, and cultural divide requires the church to follow the path of costly anti-racist action. It requires unprecedented urgency to ensure that the past doesn't become the future."[177]

It is also important to be mindful of his distinction between racial justice and racial reconciliation. The latter is a cause that many American church congregations find they can actually comprehend, but often for misguided reasons. The problem lies in an attempt to reconcile White and Black–historically this was Oppressor and Oppressed–without an explicit recognition of the sin of racism in White America's past and the ways in which that racism persists, what would be considered Confession in Christian terms. Furthermore, he argues that there must be a Repentance as well, which indicates not only a turning away from racism and its manifestations, but also a moving and working toward true justice.

---

[177] Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 135.

He argues that there are three assumptions that have allowed the misdirected journey toward reconciliation to continue. First, he names *Accountable Individualism*, which is the belief that every person is free and autonomous, but which fails to recognize that there is a need to recognize corporate guilt and that in reality autonomous individuals can still be influenced toward evil. Second, he describes *Relationalism*, which is the elevation of personal relationships above all else; having Black friends is not in itself the same as fighting for racial justice and a renouncing of racism. Thirdly, he lists *Antistructuralism*, the idea that systemic racism is a myth and that structures and systems do not have the power to influence or control people.[178]

In place of those assumptions, he offers a practical framework for church congregations–whether demographically White or theologically/ideologically White or both–who are ready to heed the call toward antiracism. He calls it the ARC of racial justice: Awareness, Relationships, and Commitment. He is careful to note that these three steps are 1) helpful in distinguishing certain iterations of racism and therefore steps to counter them, and 2) not formulaic nor linear; they must be applied with consideration for every context and individual, and they do not need to be completed in the order he names them.

First, he names Awareness. As it sounds, this action step calls Christians to make themselves aware of the various aspects of both racism and antiracism: who has been a proponent of racism, who have been the major figures opposing racism, how was racism established and how does it persist today, what antiracism actions are being taken currently, and so on.[179] Naming the "who" is not intended to stir up hatred toward the proponents of racism and glorification of those who have opposed it; naming the "who" is about learning the history of racism in America. For the San Gabriel Valley, that story of racism is about the oppression of

[178] Ibid, 134.
[179] Ibid, 194.

those indgenous to this land, first toward the Tongva people, and then toward the Mexican people.

Next, he lists Relationships. This is not a contradiction of his earlier caution, that personal relationships are not the cure for racism. However, he does encourage relationship-building for the purposes of putting real faces to the negative effects of racism.[180] It is nearly impossible to ignore the reality of racism in this country, and namely in the San Gabriel Valley, when one's life intersects with the lives of those daily impacted by racism in this area. This action may be the most prone to misstepping, so caution is advised. The steps he describes are simple to understand but perhaps not as simple to enact: change of routine, change of places for entertainment, or going to the people one already knows and asking them how they have experienced racism or how they are experiencing current events directed by the effects of racism. It may also be difficult to engage Latino people in the San Gabriel Valley in this sort of conversation, because they may not even realize that what they are experiencing is essentially due to historical and systemic racism.

Finally, he challenges White or White-oriented congregations to Commitment. This is the action step that takes the work of antiracism to a new level, because it communicates to those impacted by racism that one is a true advocate. "Commitment to the ARC model requires a total shift in disposition so that antiracist activity is a way of life, not simply a topic to which you give occasional and superficial attention."[181]

When an individual takes on a challenge like the framework of ARC, it can make a powerful impact toward countering racism. However, even more will antiracism take effect when

[180] Ibid, 195.
[181] Ibid, 196.

a church congregation makes a joint effort toward addressing and countering the history that has taken root in the San Gabriel Valley.

Contextual Evangelism

This project has discussed at length the tension between the gospel of proclamation and the gospel of social justice, arguing that exclusivity between the two is unnecessary and harmful. The social justice side of the debate has been emphasized because this work is necessary to alter the conditions in which the Latino community often finds itself, in Latinx/Mexican-majority areas. This is not to say that the work of verbally proclaiming the gospel is irrelevant in these areas; people in Latinx/Mexican-majority communities do need to experience spiritual salvation, redemption, and sanctification.

Church leaders and their congregations need to gain an understanding of contextual evangelization. Orlando Costas was an evangelical theologian, closely associated with the groundbreaking work of C. René Padilla and Misión Integral. He writes, "evangelization is a witness that takes place in a given social and historical context,"[182] and as such, "[evangelization] always deals with people who have both sinned and been sinned against."[183] Whereas theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez tended to focus solely on ways the oppressed have been sinned against, as well as on bringing correction by extreme measures to those areas of oppression and injustice, Costas is here explaining that the gospel addresses both the sin of an individual and the ways that sin has harmed that individual.

[182] Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989), 21.
[183] Ibid, 22.

As church leaders and their congregations discern how best to participate in the work of evangelism, a work central to the call to follow Jesus Christ, there must first be an understanding of the ways in which the gospel speaks to particular people in particular communities. In order to do that, congregations must practice incarnational ministry, that is the ministry of being present and living among the people with whom one wants to evangelize. Costas says, "There cannot be evangelization without incarnation."[184] This is an important reminder for church leaders and congregations that evangelism is not simply a transactional encounter: a Christian has information that the hearer receives. There must be a sense of presence, solidarity, and an understanding of the context of the hearer or an openness to understand that context.

He continues,

> "The evangelistic task is always carried out under the assumption that the God who has spoken in Jesus Christ addresses each and every human being in his or her time and space. The gospel is not a generic message…It is a personal word from God for all and for each human being."[185]

It is clear that this work is not simple or quick. It is work that takes the patience of building relationships and understanding people where they live. Furthermore, Costas rightly asserts that this work is only possible through the enabling of the Holy Spirit. "Evangelization involves persons addressed by a holy and loving God with the liberating news of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit."[186] Without the sensitivity and authenticity of the Holy Spirit,

[184] Ibid, 24.
[185] Ibid, 24.
[186] Ibid, 23.

evangelism makes people territory to be conquered or a project to be accomplished. Costas reminds us that evangelism always starts with God and what he calls the Divine Initiative.

Community Exegesis

It is clear that church leaders and church congregations must come to an understanding of the ways in which specific people or communities have been sinned *against*, as well as assessing what are the areas of strength and need. Therefore it is critical for churches in the San Gabriel Valley to learn the practice of community exegesis. The word "exegesis" is typically used in reference to analyzing written text, specifically biblical text. Applied to the work of community engagement, the word "exegesis" paints the picture of communities with their own stories to tell and meanings to uncover.

Dr. Michael Mata has developed an outline that can be utilized by any church congregation and in the context of any community, with the goal of doing the work of community exegesis. Explaining Dr. Mata's process of community exegesis, David P. Leong explains that the process allows for a "breadth and depth of research that engages both urban ethnography and urban sociology in a specific community."[187]

When considering how to do the work of exegeting a community, it is helpful to think of the steps taken to exegete a text. This is the process commonly known as inductive study. Very simply, those steps are Observation, Interpretation, and Application. When applied to a text, this process allows us to see the text for what it is, apply meaning to what we have seen, and then identify the action steps to which the text calls us.

---

[187] David P. Leong, *Street Signs: Toward a Missional Theology of Urban Cultural Engagement*, (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 103.

This same process can be applied to a community. We first observe, without making judgements or prescribing solutions, but simply with an eye to see things as they are. Along with this observation comes questions, signifying a posture of learning in humility. We then interpret, determining what our observations indicate about the community we have observed. We must discern what further learning is required, what relationships need to be fostered, what needs must be most urgently addressed, and what assets must be intentionally nurtured.

Much of Dr. Mata's work has been applied to urban contexts, however there has been a shift in many suburban areas. Whereas the city of Los Angeles is largely urban, any cities or communities within the San Gabriel Valley are generally considered suburban, with some industrial areas spread throughout. An urban community is generally defined by location within 12 miles of the center of a city and a household density of more than 1,314 households per square mile.[188] What makes a suburban community, then, is not necessarily nearness to the center of a city; it is household density.

In specific regard to the urban sprawl of Los Angeles, there are specific characteristics, distinguishing it from common understandings of suburban communities. Los Angeles contains high rates of poverty among its residents; one out of every 4.9 residents is living below the poverty line.[189] There tends to be more rampant crime and blatant drug use; crime in Los Angeles rose 3.9% from 2020 to 2021[190] and drug overdose deaths have become so prevalent in

---

[188] Ruth Igielnik Wieder, "Evaluating what makes a U.S. community urban, suburban or rural," November 22nd, 2019.
https://medium.com/pew-research-center-decoded/evaluating-what-makes-a-u-s-community-urban-suburban-or-rural-159f9d082842

[189] WelfareInfo, 2019, https://www.welfareinfo.org/poverty-rate/california/los-angeles#:~:text=The%20poverty%20rate%20in%20Los%20Angeles%20is%2020.4%25.,Los%20Angeles%20lives%20in%20poverty.

[190] Jon Regardie, "New Crime Stats Revealed: Homicides in Los Angeles Soared in 2021," *Los Angeles Magazine*, January 17, 2022.
https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/new-crime-stats-revealed-homicides-in-los-angeles-soared-in-2021/#:~:text=Violent%20crime%20in%20the%20city,in%202021%20than%20 in%202019.

Los Angeles that California lawmakers are considering safe injection zones, where the addicted can use drugs under supervision and with directions on safe injections. The houseless population has long been at a crisis level, with almost 67,000 houseless people on the streets of Los Angeles alone.[191]

One of the unique aspects of the San Gabriel Valley, however, is that many areas within it bear similar characteristics, though often on a smaller scale, to those seen in the urban setting of Los Angeles. Many of these elements, such as poverty and homelessness were discussed in Chapter 1. Therefore, when a suburban community bears many of the same characteristics as urban communities, a distinction is needed. Many cities in the San Gabriel Valley are not truly urban, but they are not entirely suburban. They are more accurately defined as urban-suburban: locationally and statistically suburban, but urban in regards to the issues many of these communities face.

The process developed by Dr. Mata is outlined in his lecture titled, "Mailboxes, Stucco, and Graffiti: Learning to Read and Assess the Story of an Urban Community."[192] This process can easily be utilized within the communities of the San Gabriel Valley, whether Latino/Mexican-majority or otherwise.

Dr. Mata first outlines various places and elements to observe, which an untrained exegeter may not consider. One can observe space, looking at physical appearance and surroundings, historical clues, and political presence. In observing structures, an observer

---

[191] City News Service, "2022 Los Angeles County Homeless Count scheduled for Jan. 25-27." December 13, 2021. https://spectrumnews1.com/ca/la-west/homelessness/2021/12/13/2022-los-angeles-county-homeless-count-scheduled-for-jan--25-27#:~:text=In%20January%202019%2C%20Los%20Angeles,2019%2C%20and%2041%2C290%20in%202020.&text=The%20Greater%20Los%20Angeles%20Homeless,our%20neighbors%20experiencing%20unsheltered%20homelessness.

[192] Michael Mata, "Mailboxes, and Graffiti: Learning to Read and Assess the Story of an Urban Context," (paper presented at the International Urban Associates Conference: Transforming the City: From Dream to Reality, November, 1994)

determines the original use for certain buildings or plots of land, as well as the size and architectural style of certain buildings. He directs us to look at scraps of life, which are unattended or discarded artifacts, which may tell us about who lives in that community or possibly who travels through it. Observers may look at signage and symbols (including graffiti), indicating the influence of religion or politics, the indication of the community's economic status, or the presence of artists or gangs.

There are also sounds and smells to observe, giving clues about the cultures, languages, and businesses in the area. He encourages observers to look for signs of hope, not only focusing on sites of pain and despair. This will help to determine which religious organizations serve spiritually and otherwise, which clinics provide medical services, and which organizations provide recreation or entertainment. Finally, he directs observers to notice social interactions or the lack thereof, between social and cultural groups, between various age groups, and between people of differing socioeconomic backgrounds.

When church leaders and congregants begin to learn who their surrounding community is, even if it is an area fraught with struggle and needs, there can no longer be a perception of negativity. As a church congregation becomes deeply connected to and familiar with a community, there is no longer a place for disparaging language toward that community. While it is important to recognize the struggles and needs of communities, in order to address those struggles and needs, the language we use about them can be tremendously helpful or deeply harmful. Especially for pastors and church leaders, what we say teaches those who we have been called to lead; whether we realize it or not, our perceptions and judgements will be reflected in them.

"We need to find a new location for our church, because this is becoming a bad area." "You do not want to live there, because the schools are bad." "Do not buy a house where there are lots of Latinos." Comments like these are common in areas like the San Gabriel Valley. Instead, community exegesis leads us to change our language because we have truly understood the story unfolding in the surrounding community.

Pastor Jonathan Brooks writes these words of conviction:

> "If we were to get down to our underlying belief about certain communities, it would echo this sentiment. There are certain people and places that we believe God's presence has yet to reach. Not only do we believe God's presence has yet to reach them but sometimes even that God's presence has fled and abandoned them, which, in turn, gives us permission to do the same."[193]

Taking this to heart, pastors and church leaders must instead learn to say, "We need to determine how to engage the community around us, because there are concerns arising that were not as prevalent before." They must now say, "If you live in this particular community, be ready to spend time getting to know the residents and school employees there. It is a city with much potential, but the schools are in need of special attention." No longer can there be any derogatory language used toward Latinx people, but instead pastors and church leaders must communicate to the people they disciple, "If we're going to be present in a Latinx/Mexican-majority community, it is imperative that we immerse ourselves in everything that community is, learning to love and serve it with all of its admirable qualities and ongoing limitations." Beyond our

[193] Jonathan Brooks, *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 13.

human perception and discrimination, we can reflect the heart of God toward even the most neglected and embattled of cities.

Expanding Opportunities

There are spaces where many in the Church have not yet learned to be active or even present. Especially with many church congregations reeling from the coronavirus pandemic, and church leaders scrambling to adapt their ministries to the changing landscape of church influence, certain spheres of influence are far from their line of vision. However, there are opportunities for the Church in the San Gabriel Valley to participate in work that would likely bring a new understanding of what it means to be the Body of Christ in a given context. Three of these opportunities are in community organizing, economic development, and public discourse.

Though many church leaders believe that engaging in social justice and social discourse is a distraction from the work of the gospel, there are other viewpoints as to the relevance of social involvement to the work of the gospel. Alexia Salvatierra presents a model for community organizing that does not simply apply Christian principles as afterthoughts but instead is founded and guided by the life and work of Jesus Christ. She calls it "faith-rooted organizing."

Dr. Salvatierra explains, "Organizing is the practice of bringing people together to create systemic change in their community."[194] This can be done for religious purposes or for completely secular reasons. Faith-rooted organizing is by definition utilized by those who bear Christian faith. "Rather than adapting a secular model, faith-rooted organizing is shaped and guided in every way by faith principles and practices. Faith-rooted organizing is based on the

[194] Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heitzel, *Faith Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World*, (Dowers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 8.

belief that many aspects of spirituality, faith traditions, faith practices and faith communities can contribute in unique and powerful ways to the creation of just communities and societies."[195]

The more one explores the work of Dr. Salvatierra and others like her, the clearer it becomes that organizing is not only an ideal direction, but a valid and effective way for a church congregation to become part of work that is often already happening in a given community or city. Many non-religious groups do not deal with the tension between meeting spiritual needs and physical/social ones; they see a need and gather as many community members as they can to help address that need. It is time for church leaders to release the fear of neglecting the gospel for work in the social sphere and recognize that the social sphere is often where the gospel is needed most and where the gospel has so much to contribute.

Another opportunity for churches in the San Gabriel Valley is in supporting or participating in the work of economic development. Chapter 2 has already outlined the poverty that exists in Latinx/Mexican-majority communities in the San Gabriel Valley, and there is a pathway for the Church in the San Gabriel Valley to join in bringing practical change. According to Pastor Jonathan Brooks, this work at its heart is about valuing–or in some cases *restoring* value–to certain communities. He laments, "Communities all over the world experience this same internalization of labels placed on them by outside people and societal narratives and stereotypes. The perpetuation of one-sided narratives causes people to devalue the places where they reside, as well as the residents who live there."[196]

As an alternative, he supports the idea that church congregations can not only be a part of reversing the devaluation of communities, but moreover be part of contributing to its value. He

---

[195] Ibid. 9.

[196] Jonathan Brooks, *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 121.

gives the example of starting a coffeehouse that supported the economy of his poor Chicago neighborhood; jobs were provided and the landscape of certain areas changed. He is careful to clarify that he is not in favor of gentrification, as a means of bringing change to a community.

> "Reestablishing the value of place is bigger than gentrifying communities and making them economically viable. It is about affirming the dignity of all human beings by investing equitably in every place where people dwell. For some communities, recognizing the value of place is truly a matter of life and death. It only makes matters worse when these neighborhoods are not only neglected by society but by the local church."[197]

One final opportunity for the Church in the San Gabriel Valley is one that may be the hardest to grasp, but one that is no less relevant to a church congregation's engagement with its community. In many spheres, such as public health, the Church is largely absent, except where an issue intersects with a congregation's particular political leanings. This is not the same as a church protesting outside Planned Parenthood or the like. Instead, the idea of joining public discourse is more about introducing Christian thought and principles to dialogues that are typically relegated to secular spaces.

Benjamin Valentin speaks directly to Latinx theologians and church leaders, arguing that "Latino/a theologians should be attentive not only to the needs of 'local' theologies but also to the possibilities of 'public' theologies that can engage the broader context of social and political life, and that may revitalize a populist sentiment and coalitional energy in our society."[198] What

---

[197] Jonathan Brooks, *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 122.
[198] Benjamin Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), xvi.

begins as a lament of disenchantment turns into a meaty envisioning of what it could look like for Latino/a theologians, and all theologians whose goal it is to stand for a marginalized people group, to develop theologies that can keep up with and have the impact of those who develop social theories, social organizing, and social good.

He poses the challenge to what he calls "liberationist theologians"—that is, those who stand for the liberation and recognition of historically oppressed people—to continue propagating theologies that represent the underrepresented, but to do it in a way that does not focus too narrowly on just one people group. Instead, he proposes theologies that bear relevance to other spheres of society, thus making it a more *public* theology.

By "public theology," he means a theology that has a place in public discourse, signifying the relevance of Scriptural truth and a commitment to faith in Jesus Christ. Again, he is not encouraging more protest and opposition to hot button issues among many evangelical Christians. He is calling on Christians and church leaders who have an understanding of how the gospel impacts public and social life to be present in conversations that impact the progress of marginalized communities.

> "What is necessary is a desire to make a difference in the world, a concern for social justice, a yearning to move, occasionally and/or when necessary, beyond the space of specific cultural knowledge and allegiance in order to make liberatory connections across the boundaries of difference in our society–in short, what is necessary is a desire to go public with our thoughts, discourses, and activisms."

Even for pastors and church leaders and church congregants in the San Gabriel Valley who are not Latino/Mexican, the work of engaging and developing communities will require not

only spiritual discernment and local observation. It will require the development of ecclesiologies specific to the context of a community or city. As those lines of thought are developed, those ideas will become relevant in conversations where the Church is often absent or silent.

Vignette: A Stint in Consulting

In June of 2020, I left an associate pastor position of 10 ½ years, in order to make space for the struggling leadership of the new lead pastor. Not only was the timing bad due to the raging pandemic and lack of open positions, but our only other source of income was all but completely cut off due to pandemic lockdown. The fact that my wife and I still felt we needed to make this decision, in spite of my loss of income at an already desperate time, speaks to the severity of the situation that had developed at the church, but that is another story entirely. We were blessed by so many people who had previously been part of our church community, and they reached out to us with spiritual and financial support. Still, it was clear that our family desperately needed me to secure gainful employment. What I found was not the answer to our economic woes, yet still a gift of an experience that has left a lasting impression on me.

Dr. Michael Mata introduced me to Valerie Coachman Moore, the founder and CEO of Coachman Moore and Associates, an organizational and community development consulting firm. They were looking for someone to help with some ongoing projects, and some of my experience seemed a good fit for the work that needed to be done. After an interview and friendly introduction with this warm and vivacious woman, I was hired as an independent contractor, for the duration of the projects on which I was needed.

Mrs. Coachman Moore is herself a woman of faith, most recently having attended All Saints Church in Pasadena. At the first all-staff meeting I attended, she started by reading Jesus' healing of the woman with internal bleeding, out of Mark 5. She acknowledged that not all on the staff were of the Christian faith, nor were some even religious at all. Still, she wanted the staff to recognize that we did emulate the attitude of Jesus in the work we were doing, whether we realized it or not. Jesus always looked for the marginalized and oppressed, and he brought healing and restoration to them; so must we. It was a beautiful moment and I was inspired.

Originally, I was hired to help with the organizational reimagining of the mission and vision for Stars, a ministry of Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena. Formerly called Lake Avenue Community Foundation, Stars serves local families in Pasadena, many of them low-income status and predominantly Latinx/Mexican. Their usual services to local families was mainly through educational support, providing tutoring, mentoring, family counseling, and cultural and learning experiences. Because of the pandemic, and especially because of the tremendous impact on the Latinx/Mexican community in cities like Pasadena, they had shifted their services to offer a weekly foodbank, providing online group gatherings to combat isolation, and financial support for families who were in the greatest need.

What surprised me was the difficulty they had, not only during the pandemic but even in years past, with finding church congregations to partner with them. There was only a small handful of church congregations that had been partnering with them to begin with, but because of the pandemic even those had put their partnership with Stars on pause. While I understood that many church leaders made the hard decision to cut back on certain ministries in order to preserve what they did have, actively partnering with Stars seemed like the perfect opportunity to be a blessing to families during a time when so many who already had very little struggled to survive.

Another project to which I was assigned was All in for Azusa, a branch of the Healthy San Gabriel Valley initiative. The goal of this initiative was to create a collaboration of institutions, medical providers, schools, and city departments, to offer comprehensive wellness services throughout the Greater San Gabriel Valley. All in for Azusa was the group specifically coordinating the efforts within the city of Azusa, a predominantly Latinx/Mexican city to the north, right at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains.

Once again, I was surprised at the lack of church involvement in this initiative. Pastor Rick MacDonald was one representative of the Church in Azusa that was relatively consistent with his involvement. He is the pastor of Azusa House of Prayer, a Foursquare church. He has a long history in Azusa, having pastored there for decades. He almost left to pastor somewhere else at one point, when the body of an executed gang member was found outside the church building, but the Lord convinced him and his wife that this was all the more reason why their faithful presence was needed in the city. He was the only pastor who joined an All in for Azusa meeting more than once, at the request of the initiative's organizer.

Unfortunately, though there was much going on with all of these projects, there was not consistently enough that would give me enough hours to provide the financial compensation I needed. I had to let that job go in order to find something more consistent. In the end, the most valuable lesson I gleaned from this experience was that the Church's absence leaves a gaping hole in the sphere of community development. There are church congregations and church representatives to be sure. However, the involvement is sparse and far from what it could be.

Church Partnerships

One lingering question for pastors at this point could be what to do if a congregation is in a Latinx/Mexican-majority city or area, but they do not have the resources to fully meet the needs and maximize the assets they see. The answer is that no one church congregation alone can complete the work of community engagement and development, nor was one church ever meant to do so. The larger the impact a church congregation desires to make, the more expansive the vision must be.

Fuder and Castellanos challenge the American Church to stop thinking in terms of competition and segregation, and rather consider the breadth of gifts found within the Body of Christ. They write that "all are essential members of the Church with a capital C in a given city. The question that we must ask ourselves is this: Are we more concerned about everyone being like us, or the residents of our city and neighborhood becoming like Jesus?"[199] This question cuts right to the core of the issue, whether we care more about gaining adherents to our particular brand of Christianity or more about the wholeness of all who live in the community where our congregation and other congregations worship.

Community Outreach vs. Community Engagement

At this point, there must be a clear distinction between the work called "outreach" that church congregations typically do and the work described here. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to advocate for a widespread adoption of the community engagement model, rather than simply a resignation to the community outreach model. This is not to demean or discount the work of church community outreach. Many church congregations, in the San Gabriel Valley and elsewhere, have participated in community outreach and thus forged long-standing and effective

[199] John Fuder and Noel Castellanos, *A Heart for the Community: New Models for Urban and Suburban Ministries*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 56.

relationships with their surrounding communities. Some common examples of community outreach are toy drives, soup kitchens, harvest festivals, and participation in city events. To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with these other other efforts.

It would be fair, however, to say that the work of community outreach should be the beginning and not the end. It should always be considered the starting point to what will become community engagement, and which will ultimately lead to community transformation, and not the ultimate goal in itself. This is because the work of most community outreach ministries is simply to make the initial contact, to meet people and introduce them to the church congregation. It does not necessarily seek to address or help a community progress beyond the problem or weakness identified–be it lack of finances, hunger, or safe, family-friendly entertainment–but instead simply connects with a community in its current state.

Community engagement, on the other hand, seeks to help a community address the core causes of the struggles it faces, and it seeks to join a community in progressing beyond those struggles to a new level of wholeness wherein all members can thrive and understand their value. There may be some elements of community outreach within the totality of the community engagement model, but those are only present as means to the greater goal, which is progression toward a thriving community.

Example #1: Church of the Redeemer in Baldwin Park

Emily Solano is a pastor's kid, her dad being the pastor at Church of the Redeemer (COTR), a Latino-majority Assemblies of God congregation in the Latino/Mexican-majority city of Baldwin Park. She is also a youth advocate and health coach with Catalyst San Gabriel

Valley, a non-profit organization that serves families primarily in the West San Gabriel Valley, but which is starting to increase its presence further east as well. Serving the community is in her blood, and she makes no distinction between the work of the gospel through the church and the work of compassion and justice through her job with Catalyst SGV.

Her dad has been a professor at Azusa Pacific University, having a reputation as a scholar and also an advocate for the church's role in works of compassion and justice. This reflects in the work of the church, not only during the pandemic, but even from his years as a pastor before the pandemic. For many years, Christ Redeemer Church has run a food bank out of their campus, but during the pandemic, the number of families in need of food skyrocketed.

Though their main sanctuary remains a regular place of worship on the weekends, the room that was once their fellowship hall has now become a storage space for all of the supplies needed for the weekly food bank. The parking lot now has a large canopy, provided by the Department of Public Health, who partners with them in running the food bank.

As an added benefit, she remarked that the providing space for the food bank has in fact resulted in the numerical growth of their congregation. She acknowledges that this is not why the church started this ministry, but that they have done their best to make the most of the opportunity to have hundreds of people passing through their church campus every single week.

COTR is an example of a predominantly Latino church doing the work of both verbally proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, while at the same time actively living out the gospel of Jesus Christ through service and compassion. The missing piece, however, is that they have not done much in the specific realm of community development or organizing. There is no doubt that they care for their surrounding community, and through the food bank ministry they are constantly building relationships with the people who live in the community. Once the pandemic

has subsided and there is more margin to expand their thinking, perhaps there is broader work they could join. Maybe Emily may even find a crossover between her church ministry and her work with Catalyst SGV, and the church can become an official partner.

Example #2: Chinese Evangelical Free Church in Monterey Park

When Pastor David Park first came to Chinese Evangelical Free Church (CEFC), their community ministries were scant. What they did do focused solely on the Chinese residents around them, and even that was inconsistent at best. It is kind of hard to do much else when your congregation's name somewhat limits for whom the church exists and to whom the church intends to minister. Pastor Park was hired to bring something different to the congregation.

As the lead pastor of the English-speaking congregation, he has focused on building as many connections and relationships as he can within the city of Monterey Park, such as the police department, schools, and city governance. By modeling and setting that example, he has been able to lead his congregation in doing the same. Most of the work that has been done has been through sermon series that focus on working toward the welfare of the city, as well as community groups who are given the freedom to participate in local ministries of their choosing.

The benefit that he has seen is that the efforts begun by members in the English ministry has inspired members of the Chinese-speaking congregants. Though many of the Chinese-speaking or Chinese immigrant members have much to learn about doing ministry in an American context, especially in spheres where Latinos are the majority, Pastor David is encouraged that there is a willingness and excitement to learn.

I had the chance to observe some of their members at a gathering with some families their church had been supporting. All of the church members present were Chinese, as most of them

are overall, but the families they were interacting with were all Latinx. I wondered about how that impacted the way they prepare for ministry, and what kind of work they did to prepare to minister to predominantly Latinx people, especially as non-Latinx people themselves. Pastor David admitted that they have not done that kind of preparation work yet, but that he is heartened by the openness of many church members to learn about a culture that has previously been completely unfamiliar to them.

Pastor David recognized what he was dealing with soon after he came on as pastor. For its entire history, CEFC has been a church of Chinese immigrants and their American-born children. The Chinese immigrants stay in the Chinese-speaking services, while the American-born children largely populate the English-speaking services. However, he noticed that the demographics even of a Chinese-majority city like Monterey Park have been changing over the years. While Chinese residents still outnumber all others in the city, pockets of Monterey Park are becoming Latino-majority, causing Pastor David to wonder how they can shift their focus in ministry, and even their focus as a church overall. Can they still continue to be a church primarily for Chinese people, because CEFC is at a crossroads.

The best way forward now for Pastor David is partnering and learning from Latino leaders and residents in the surrounding community, building relationships that lead to deeper engagement with the needs and assets therein. CEFC has come a long way in its missional focus, so it would be easy for Pastor David and other leaders to sit back and be satisfied with the changes that have been made. However, they continue to pray about how they can build upon the growth they have already experienced, so that they can be a fuller expression of the mission for which God has placed them in that city.

Example #3: La Fuente, a ministry of Pasadena First Church of the Nazarene

Pastor Marcos Canales is a thoughtful man and a theologically deep thinker. When one looks at what has grown to become La Fuente Ministries, a ministry of the Church of the Nazarene denomination, it is clear that this did not happen by accident; he and other leaders poured prayer and a strong foundation into what the congregation looks like today. La Fuente is not its own church; it is a ministry of Pasadena First Church of the Nazarene, one of the longest-standing Nazarene churches in the Los Angeles District and in year's past one of the numerically largest.

He said three things that indicated how he leads and the place from which he comes in serving the poor and marginalized in the church's surrounding communities. First, he expressed frustration and cynicism toward the denomination to which he belongs. Though he did not give specific examples, he has been disheartened by what he often saw as a colonial mindset, the promotion of the superiority of whiteness, and racial hierarchy. He did not go into detail about these, but I can imagine. This indicated to me that his approach to ministry would be very mindful of the injustices he named, and that he would oppose them at all times.

Second, he pushed back against the idea that God's redemption is only meant to be for the individual. Instead, he believes that redemption is for all creation, and for all aspects of creation. In other words, there is no such thing as a salvation and redemption that only saves the individual, but that salvation and redemption must be part of the progress toward a fuller establishment of wholeness for all. Referring back to Chapter 2, his theology is much more in line with the likes of C. René Padilla and Gustavo Gutierrez.

Finally, he helped to clarify a healthy way for a church to be present in their surrounding community, especially in spaces inhabited by oppressed or marginalized people. When asked

about his approach to seeing redemption in the surrounding communities, he expressed a preference for the term “community engagement” as a primary focus. The reason is that the engagement, with an attitude of humility and a posture of learning, will lead eventually to the development and transformation. However, with engagement at the forefront, it will guard a church congregation from falling into the pitfalls mentioned above: colonial mindset, superiority of whiteness, and racial hierarchy.

One of the specific ministries he and the congregation have participated in recently is an outreach to the jornaleros (day laborers) who live and work in the San Gabriel Valley. He visited and eventually partnered with the Pasadena Community Job Center, a service to immigrant laborers that connects them to long-term employment. Because of the pandemic, the job center had been shut down, but they continued to serve the laborers in any way they could. Pastor Canales met with the directors of the job center, as well as with some of the people they serve, and he facilitated a partnership with La Fuente that allowed them to support some of these families directly.

Pastor Canales knows what he believes, he preaches what he believes, and he practices what he believes. It appears he is leading the way in forming a congregation that does the same.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Vignette: The Rise and Fall and Hope of an SGV Church

Trinity Church of the Nazarene in Monterey Park has an intriguing and sad story that includes a bold start, a shifting middle, and a third act full of growth, disaster, and uncertainty. The congregation was originally birthed out of the Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene, the very first Nazarene church to be established. That church started a mission to the Chinese immigrants and their children, who lived and owned businesses in Los Angeles' Chinatown. From there, First Chinese Church of the Nazarene was formed in 1950.[200] This was the "Bold Start."

The church was located on the corner of Jefferson Avenue and Trinity Street, in Los Angeles. This would eventually be where the church would derive its name, but it remained a predominantly Chinese congregation in downtown Los Angeles. In the 1960s and early 1970s, it was becoming clear that the neighborhood around First Chinese Church of the Nazarene was changing. The surrounding residents were increasingly more Latino and Black, and First Chinese Church of the Nazarene was staunchly committed to reaching mainly Cantonese-speaking Chinese people.[201]

Members who are still alive today are reluctant to admit it, but it is clear that this move was driven not only by a commitment to the mission but also by fear. This congregation of mostly Chinese people, many of them first-generation Chinese, had an undeniably negative impression of Latino and Black people. They did not know how to minister to them, nor how to address the issues of poverty that were already arising at that time. Moving the congregation to a predominantly Asian community seemed the best option to the pastor at that time, who felt like a city like Monterey Park held more opportunities for the congregation to grow. Interestingly, the

[200] Trinity Church of the Nazarene, "Our History," Accessed on February 13th, 2022, https://onetrinitychurch.org/history/
[201] Ibid.

church changed its name to Trinity Church of the Nazarene. The change was meant to memorialize the street where the church used to be, but also it was meant to signify that it was no longer a church for only Chinese people; all were to be welcomed at Trinity Church of the Nazarene. This was the "Shifting Middle."

Throughout the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, the demographics of Monterey Park itself began to change, with many more Latino neighbors in the area. More Latino families were enrolling their kids in the church's preschool, Monterey Park Christian School. Some of those families started attending church services regularly. Trinity Church of the Nazarene was becoming more Latino.[202]

It was under the leadership of Pastor Albert Hung, who is now District Superintendent in Northern California, that Trinity Church really began to shift. He hired the first Latino pastors in the church's long history. He addressed issues from the pulpit that were controversial but important. Perhaps most important is that he led the congregation and staff in a shift from a focus on traditional evangelism to community engagement. He wondered aloud to staff and congregation, "What difference would it make in this community if Trinity Church were not here tomorrow?" He wanted the congregation to have such an impact that it would be noticeable if they were not there.

That vision had been well communicated, and the congregation was in a rhythm of community engagement. Leaders were constantly considering how the ministries they oversaw could benefit outsiders in the community, and people were willing to invest their time and resources toward Trinity Church growing as a church for the city.

---

[202] It was from this point on that the story is known through lived experience, rather than recorded documentation.

So firm was Trinity Church's commitment to blessing our surrounding communities, proclaiming and embodying the gospel of Jesus Christ, that Trinity even agreed to merge with another struggling congregation in Rowland Heights, another predominantly Asian city about 13 miles east of Monterey Park. This was so embedded in the fabric of Trinity Church that when Pastor Albert and his family left to take on the District Superintendent role in 2018, the congregation maintained many community relationships, continuing to make our presence known with compassion and good news.

Trinity Church was partnered with Family Promise, an organization serving families experiencing homelessness. The overwhelming struggle of homelessness impacts so many people, even families with children. Trinity was active for many years with an organization that has an over 80% success rate helping parents secure gainful employment and long-term housing.

Trinity Church was also partnered with Angel Tree, a ministry to families with one or more parent in prison. The congregation participated by inviting them to the church a week or so before Christmas, offering them a lavish meal and specially-planned entertainment, and ending the night with a message of encouragement and a time of handing out gifts to each child on behalf of their incarcerated parent.

These ministries were important not only because they addressed tangible and urgent needs, but they also engaged people who lived in or were from the surrounding communities of Monterey Park. Of all the families we served over our years of just these two ministries, the overwhelming majority were Latino/Mexican, sometimes first-generation.

All of that came to a screeching halt, however, when a new pastor entered the picture in 2019. With a fundamentalist approach to evangelism, he did not see the value in the compassionate ministries that had been facilitating community engagement, in Monterey Park

and in surrounding areas. He was not interested in continuing or even learning more about the community relationships Trinity Church had built over the years. With two campuses to oversee, this pastor felt that the campus in Rowland Heights was the one he wanted to build up; the Monterey Park campus simply was not a good fit for him nor did he feel he was a good fit for the Monterey Park campus.

In January of 2020, just before the coronavirus pandemic hit and everything including churches was shut down, the pastor of only three months announced that he would be closing down all ministries except for the school at the Monterey Park campus, moving all ministries and people to the Rowland Heights campus. Not surprisingly, this was met with great sadness and frustration from congregants at the Monterey Park campus. Many congregants had been born into Trinity Church on the Monterey Park campus. So many relationships had been formed, and the faith of many had started and been strengthened in this place. Trinity Church in Monterey Park had become so closely connected with the surrounding community that a sizable part of the congregation was from the surrounding neighborhood. Still, it was not the campus where the pastor wanted to invest.

This pastor eventually left in December of 2020, just over a year after he started as pastor at Trinity Church. Not only did about 80% of the congregation from Monterey Park not follow him in shifting everything over to Rowland Heights, but many people were disappointed with how he dealt with the fallout from the decision to shut down Monterey Park campus. He could not understand why people were so upset, and he pushed past any objections that came his way. Combined with a pandemic that he believed was a hoax and restrictions he therefore felt were unnecessary, he came to the unfortunate conclusion that he was not long for Trinity Church.

Today, Trinity Church finally has a new pastor, someone who has been ministering in other urban and suburban areas, and who has a passion for multicultural ministry. This pastor also recognizes that much damage has been sustained over the last couple of years, and so he is taking his time walking with the congregation through healing and restoration, before unveiling any big changes or plans. There is even talk of reopening the campus in Monterey Park, but tremendous healing and rebuilding must happen first. Perhaps Trinity Church will never return to what it was, but it can at least regain its attention to living out the gospel in word and action, once again becoming a blessing to the surrounding community.

For Further Study

This project is only the continuation of a movement toward God's justice being established, through the Church within the San Gabriel Valley. Surely, there are church congregations already at work, engaging their respective communities with the goal of development and transformation. God is always at work, and Christ's body can only follow. Considering this reality, there are subjects that would be useful for continued study, though they could not be covered in this project.

One topic for further study is the difference in the level of struggle between Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants. In most of the communities discussed in this project, those two demographics are mixed, and so the struggle is shared. However, there are issues that immigrants must face–especially undocumented immigrants–which American citizens simply do not. In addition, the issues are more complex when the family is mixed, with one or more parents being undocumented immigrants and the children being born in the US and therefore citizens.

Another topic for further study is that of the perspective and experience of Latinx pastors, especially if they themselves are among the marginalized of whom this project speaks, or when their congregants are among the marginalized. It would be worthwhile to consider how, or even whether or not, pastors in this situation are able to engage in the work of community engagement. Perhaps everything they do is considered community engagement, even more so if they live in the neighborhood where their church congregation meets. It may also be the case that, because many immigrant Latinx pastors are bi-vocational, they simply do not have the margin to mobilize the church to much more than Sunday services and other basic church ministries.

One more subject for further study pertains to denominational differences, particularly within the San Gabriel Valley. To be sure, some denominational theologies already lend themselves to an openness to ideologies such as Liberation Theology, and even more would likely be open to a more balanced approach such as Misión Integral. Most denominations have resources and trainings for congregations to participate in effective local impact efforts. It would be interesting to find out how many church leaders even know about Liberation Theology or Misión Integral, and if so how they align with either or both. A deeper understanding of denominational differences in the San Gabriel Valley could help to guide leaders within each denomination, specifically those who align with the idea of community engagement and theologies of liberation.

Final Thoughts

The state of the world is no less volatile and uncertain than it was when this project was started. As a country, we are more divided than ever, and the Church in America is no exception. Though the pandemic seems to be subsiding, the impact of it will be felt for a very long time; some families will never fully recover. In the San Gabriel Valley, poverty and homelessness are at all-time highs, meanwhile church congregations all over the area are struggling to survive, if they have not already shut their doors.

Still, there is work to be done and there is a sense of excitement at the opportunities that await the Church in the San Gabriel Valley. This work can serve to unify the Church, as we heed Christ's call to join him in displaying his transforming love and healing power. This work can see change in what seem like insurmountable issues, such as familial poverty, failing school districts, and homelessness. And there can be a revitalization in the Church, as Christ-followers all over the San Gabriel Valley come to an understanding of what this new season of the Church can be.

Tim Soerens writes, "We are being shaken up to follow God into a bold new future where our faith guides our entire lives. It shapes our neighborhoods, cultivates an entirely new imagination for how we live, and draws us together when everything else seems to be tearing us apart."[203]

How will we respond to this shaking up? Learning a radical new way of thinking about Latinx communities, such as Liberation Theology, can feel like shaking up. Engaging in new types of ministries like community organizing or economic development or even community exegesis can feel like shaking up. Challenging church leaders and congregants to commit to the long process of engagement and development within a community can feel like shaking up. May

[203] Soerens, Tim. *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 11.

we be so brave as to follow Jesus to where he already is, and by doing so find who we are as the Body of Christ.

Bibliography

American Psychiatric Association Foundation and the Mental Health and Faith Community Partnership Steering Committee. *Mental Health: A Guide for Faith Leaders*. 2018. https://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Cultural-Competency/faith-mentalhealth-guide.pdf

Ascol, Tom. "Progressive Ideological Challenges to Biblical Christianity." Conservative Political Action Conference. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrKSyODfFic. 2019.

Arcadia Housing Market, https://www.redfin.com/city/645/CA/Arcadia/housing-market

Bailey, Kenneth E. *Jesus through MIddle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, Downers Grove, IN, Intervarsity Press, 2008.

Blake, John. "Passions over 'prosperity gospel: Was Jesus wealthy," *CNN*, December 25th, 2009, https://tinyurl.com/2ddw53n8

Blomberg, Craig L. *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation*, Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2004.

Brooks, Jonathan. *Church Forsaken: Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighborhoods*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

Budiman, Abby, "Key findings about U.S. immigrants," August 20th, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/

Capon, Robert Farrar. *The Parables of Judgment*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989. Kindle Edition.

Carrick, Evie. "10 Most Expensive Cities to Live in around the World," December 7th, 2021, https://www.travelandleisure.com/trip-ideas/most-expensive-cities-in-the-world.

Catalyst San Gabriel Valley. "Our Mission." accessed January 3rd, 2022, https://www.catalystsgv.org/our-mission.html.

Chao Romero, Robert. *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020.

Cheng, Wendy. "A Brief History (and Geography) of the San Gabriel Valley," August 4th, 2014, https://www.kcet.org/history-society/a-brief-history-and-geography-of-the-san-gabriel-valley

Cheng, Wendy. *The Changs Nextdoor to the Díazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. Kindle Edition.

Chester, Tim. *Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel*, Wheaton, IL,

Crossway, 2013.

Chung, Sue Fawn. *In Pursuit of Gold: Chinese American Miners and Merchants in the American West*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011. XVII.

Church of the Nazarene, Community Demographics, 2022, https://maps.nazarene.org/DemographicsNazarene/economic.html?y=4038365.4090397484&x=-13139258.79419385&b=1.5.

City News Service, "2022 Los Angeles County Homeless Count scheduled for Jan. 25-27." December 13, 2021.2022 Los Angeles County Homeless Count scheduled for Jan. 25-https://spectrumnews1.com/ca/la-west/homelessness/2021/12/13/2022-los-angeles-county-homeless-count-scheduled-for-jan--25-27#:~:text=In%20January%202019%2C%20Los%20Angeles,2019%2C%20and%2041%2C290%20in%202020.&text=The%20Greater%20Los%20Angeles%20Homeless,our%20neighbors%20experiencing%20unsheltered%20homelessness.

Cone, James. *A Black Theology of Liberation.* New York: Orbis Books, 1986.

"Congregational Response to the Pandemic: Extraordinary Social Outreach in a Time of Crisis," https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Congregational-Response-to-the-Pandemic_Extraordinary-Social-Outreach-in-a-Time-of-Crisis_Dec-2021.pdf. 1.

Costas, Orlando. *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom*. Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1982.

Costas, Orlando E. *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989.

Daniels Jr., Joseph W. *Walking with Nehemiah: Your Community is Your Congregation*. Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 2014. xiv.

Elizondo, Virgilio. *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*. New York: Orbis Books, 1983.

Evans, Tony. *Our Witness to the World: Equipping the Church for Evangelism and Social Impact*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020.

Fernandez-Armesto, Felipe. *Our America: A Hispanic History of the United States*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.

Fuder, John and Noel Castellanos, *A Heart for the Community: New Models for Urban and Suburban Ministries,* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013),

Gerson, Michael. "Christians Are Suffering from Complete Spiritual Blindness." *The Washington Post*. (September 10th, 2018).

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/its-impossible-to-separate-social-justice-from-the-christian-gospel/2018/09/10/26764628-b528-11e8-94eb-3bd52dfe917b_story.html

Great Schools: El Monte, Equity: Test Scores, 2022, https://www.greatschools.org/california/el-monte/schools/?tableView=Equity&view=table

Great Schools: El Monte, Ratings Snapshot, 2022, https://www.greatschools.org/california/el-monte/schools/?tableView=Equity&view=table&page=1

Giegerich, Steve. "Schools Have Failed Children of Color during the Pandemic," September 1st, 2020, https://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2020/august/schools-have-failed-children-of-color-during-the-pandemic/

Gonzalez, Jerry. *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017.

González, Justo. *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.

Greater San Gabriel Valley Hospital Collaborative, "Greater San Gabriel Valley Community Health Snapshot," February 6th, 2020, http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/chs/Docs/SGV_Snapshot.pdf.

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation*. New York: Orbis Books, 1971.

Helper, Lauren. "The Hidden Toll of California's Black Exodus," July 15th, 2020, https://calmatters.org/projects/california-black-population-exodus/

Holifield, E. B. *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1983.

Israel, Emma and Jeanne Batalova. "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," November 5th, 2020, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states-2019.

Jennings Jr., Theodore W. *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1990.

Jennings, Willie James. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020.

Kinman, Mike; Cox, Bo; Duvall, Allison; Olaiz, Hugo; Reat, Lee Ann; Stevens, Becca; Thompson, Richelle. *Meeting Jesus on the Margins: Meditations on Matthew 25*, Cincinnati, OH, ForwardMovement, 2015.

Lee, Michelle Ye Hee. “Donald Trump’s false comments connecting Mexican immigrants and crime,” July 8th, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/

Lee, Sang H. *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), Location 100.

Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, last updated July 29th, 2021, https://www.lahsa.org/news?article=705-project-roomkey

Leong, David P. *Street Signs: Toward a Missional Theology of Urban Cultural Engagement*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012.

Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 2018.

Lo, Jonathan W. *Pastoral Theology in the Letters of Paul: The Basis for Paul’s Pastoral Responsibility*. Hong Kong Baptist Theological Seminary.

Los Angeles Almanac, Poverty and Lower Living Income Level Guidelines, 2020, https://www.laalmanac.com/social/so24.php

MacArthur, John, “Social Justice and the Gospel, Pt. 1,” August 26th, 2018, https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/81-21

MacArthur, John, et al. “The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel.” https://statementonsocialjustice.com/, 2020.

Marty, Martin E. “Roman Catholicism,” https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism

Mata, Michael. “Transforming the City: From Dream to Reality.” Lecture presented at the International Urban Associates Conference, Atlanta, GA, November, 1994. https://telchar.com/theocity/.

McKnight, Scot. *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church*. Grand Rapids, MI, Brazos Press, 2014.

Moberg, David O. *The Great Reversal: Evangelism and Social Concern*. New York, J.B. Lippincott Company, 1977.

Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.

Nieman, James. "Attending Locally. Theologies in Congregations," *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 6, no. 2 (2002): 198-225.

https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt.2002.6.2.198

Nouwen, Henri J.M., McNeill, Donald P. & Morrison, Douglass A. *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*. New York: Double Day, 1983.

Novak, Michael "The Case against Liberation Theology," *The New York Times*, October 21st, 1984 https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/21/magazine/the-case-against-liberation-theology.html.

NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan Publishing, 2019.

Padilla, C. René. *What is Integral Mission?* Regnum Books International, 2021.

Pew Research. "Key findings about U.S. Immigrants." June 17, 2019. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.

Pew Research. "The Next America." April 10, 2014. https://www.pewresearch.org/next-america/#Two-Dramas-in-Slow-Motion.

Purves, Andrew. *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

Rah, Soong Chan. *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*. Illinois: IVP Books, 2009.

Rauschenbusch, Walter. *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*. HarperOne, 2007.

Regardie, Jon. "New Crime Stats Revealed: Homicides in Los Angeles Soared in 2021," *Los Angeles Magazine*, January 17, 2022. https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/new-crime-stats-revealed-homicides-in-los-angeles-soared-in-2021/#:~:text=Violent%20crime%20in%20the%20city,in%202021%20than%20in%202019.

Richards, Randolph E. & O'Brien, Brandon J. *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*, Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2012.

Rieger, Joerg. *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology*. The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2018.

Root, Andrew. *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need God*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2019.

Rosenberg, Penny and Chou, Elizabeth. "San Gabriel Valley's Sheltered Homeless Population Declines by 19%," July 21st, 2021.

Salvatierra, Alexia & Heitzel, Peter. *Faith Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World*. Dowers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014.

Saito, Leland. *Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

Sharp, David. "Millions Skipped Church during the Pandemic. Will They Return? June 29th, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-pandemics-lifestyle-health-religion-cd5fbac2318cb58e1d5ec4a5d1c00ecc

Smith, Gregory A. "About 3-in-10 Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," December 14th, 2021, https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/

Soerens, Tim. *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020).

Spurgeon, C.H. *Commentary on Matthew: The Gospel of the Kingdom*, Dublin, Cooper Publications, 2020.

Stearns, Richard. *The Hole in Our Gospel: The Answer that Changed My Life and Might Just Change the World*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010.

Strauss, Valerie. *The Washington Post*. "For first time, minority students expected to be majority in U.S. public schools this fall," August 21st, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/08/21/for-first-time-minority-students-expected-to-be-majority-in-u-s-public-schools-this-fall/?arc404=true

Taylor, Paul, "The Next America," April 10th, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/next-america/#Two-Dramas-in-Slow-Motion

Thompson, James W. *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision*. Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Academic, 2006.

Tinsley, Taunya Marie. "Is Pastoral Theology Still Relevant in an Age of Modern Psychology?" *Testamentum Imperium*, (Volume 5, 2016): 34.

Tisby, Jemar. *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020.

Trinity Church of the Nazarene, "Our History," Accessed on February 13th, 2022, https://onetrinitychurch.org/history/

Valentin, Benjamin. *Mapping Public Theology: Beyond Culture, Identity, and Difference*,. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002.

Van Gelder, Craig & Zscheile, Dwight J. *Participating in God's Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.

Wang, Wendy & Elhage, Alysse. "Here's Who Stopped Going to Church During the Pandemic," January 20, 2022, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/january-web-only/attendance-decline-covid-pandemic-church.html

WelfareInfo, 2019, https://www.welfareinfo.org/poverty-rate/california/los-angeles#:~:text=The%20poverty%20rate%20in%20Los%20Angeles%20is%2020.4%25.,Los%20Angeles%20lives%20in%20poverty.

Wieder, Ruth Igielnik. "Evaluating what makes a U.S. community urban, suburban or rural," November 22nd, 2019. https://medium.com/pew-research-center-decoded/evaluating-what-makes-a-u-s-community-urban-suburban-or-rural-159f9d082842

"Wikipedia: Gustavo Gutiérrez," Wikimedia Foundation, Last updated December 20th, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustavo_Guti%C3%A9rrez#cite_note-19.

"Wikipedia: Marxism," Last updated on February 13th, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxism.

"Wikipedia: René Padilla," Wikimedia Foundation, Last updated December 21st, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_Padilla

"Wikipedia: San Gabriel Valley," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified February 8th, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Gabriel_Valley

"Wikipedia: San Marino," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified January 26th, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Marino,_California.

Willimon, William H. *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.

Wright, Christopher J. *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*. Zondervan Academic, 2010.

Young, Brad H. *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation.* Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 1998.

Appendix

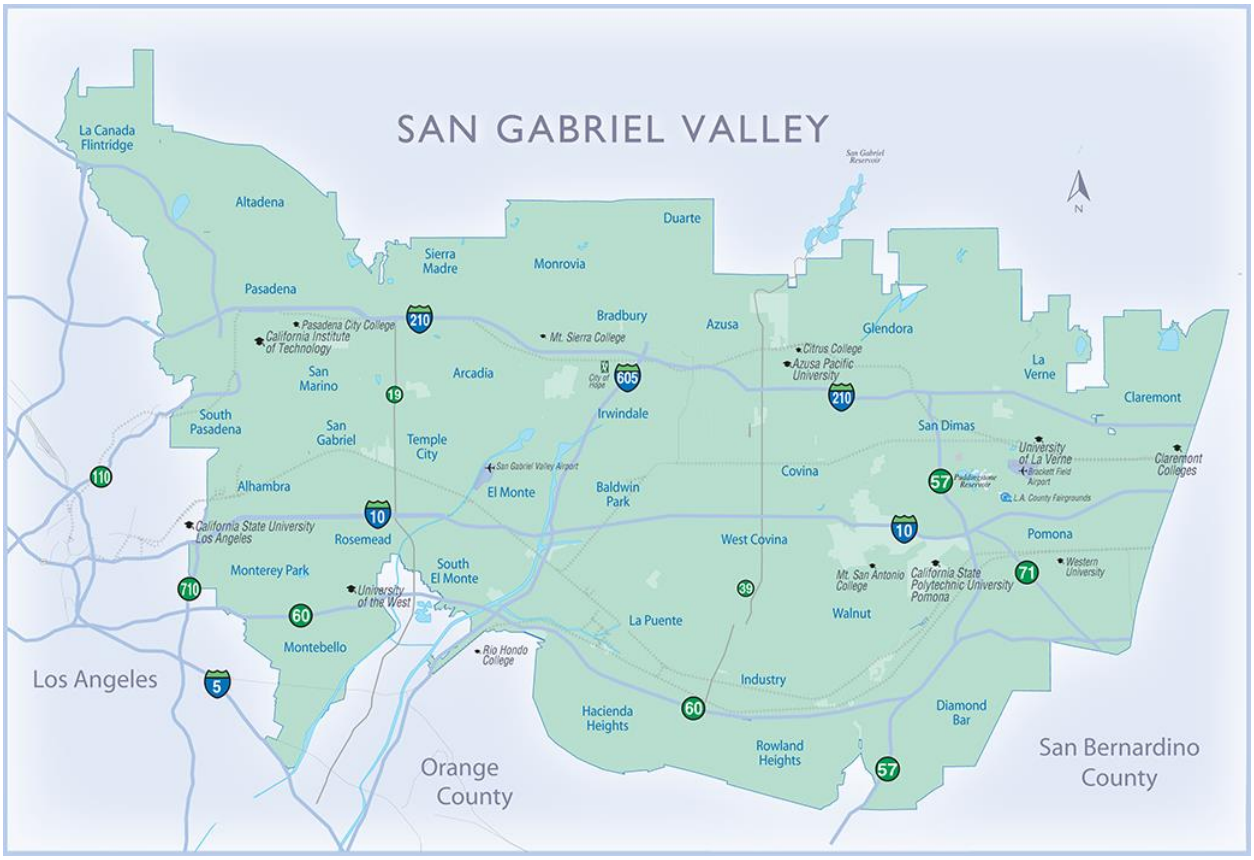

Figure 1. *The San Gabriel Valley*. San Gabriel Valley Economic Partnership.