Learning from Experience: A Critical, Collective Process Following International Short-Term Mission Travel

Nancy Vigander Winfrey
Lesley University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/education_dissertations

Part of the Christianity Commons, Education Commons, and the Missions and World Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/education_dissertations/61

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Education (GSOE) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Studies Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.
LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: A CRITICAL, COLLECTIVE PROCESS FOLLOWING INTERNATIONAL SHORT-TERM MISSION TRAVEL

A DISSERTATION

Submitted by

NANCY VIGANDER WINFREY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

LESLEY UNIVERSITY

Graduate School of Education

December 2015
Learning from Experience: A Critical, Collective Process Following
International Short-Term Mission Travel

Nancy V. Winfrey

Graduate School of Education
Lesley University

Ph.D. Educational Studies
Adult Learning and Development Specialization

Approvals
In the judgement of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

Dr. Linda Pursley
Lesley University
Doctoral Committee Chair

Dr. Audrey Dentith
Appalachian State University
Doctoral Committee Member

Dr. Scott Hagley
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
Doctoral Committee Member

Dr. Jane Vella
Global Learning Partners
Doctoral Committee Member

Dr. Terrence Keeney
Director, Adult Learning and Development Specialization

Dr. Paul Naso
Director, Ph.D. Educational Studies

Dr. Jonathon H. Gillette
Dean, Graduate School of Education

Date

12-18-2015

12-18-2015

12-18-2015

12/18/2015

2/16/2016

2/16/2016

2/16/2016
Abstract

This qualitative dissertation seeks to explore the impact of short-term mission (STM) travel on American Christian volunteers, leveraging the small group structure already present in many churches. Using a participatory action research approach, small groups from two different Protestant churches engaged in cycles of dialogue, reflection and action. The group process was framed by Habermas’ concept of communicative space with emphasis on emotional knowing, cognitive reasoning, and creative expression. Data were collected from session recordings, written documents and process field notes. Content and process analyses were guided by transformative and situated learning theories. Findings were unique to each congregational group, although common themes were not inconsistent with the STM and adult learning literature. Conclusions were as follows: With competent facilitation the small group format can assist adults in learning from their experience, second, because the “mission” in STM was not clear, participants were committed more to a concept than to a situated practice consistent with the mission of their congregation, thirdly, emotion and specific congregational narratives shaped meaning making, and finally, it is especially difficult to be in relation to others in an unfamiliar culture when participants do not practice being in relation to others in their own communities. Recommendations were made for re-envisioning theological education so that STM travel is situated in an accessible missiology, the trips are structured for learning, and small groups are operationalized for exploring and supporting the missional life of the congregation- locally as well as overseas.

Keywords: critical theory, communicative space, participatory action research, transformative learning, communities of practice, short-term missions
Tables and Figures

Table 3.1 Participant Demographics

Table 5.1 Comparison of Themes: Research Findings and STM Literature

Table 5.2 Six-Point Reflective Thinking Scale

Table 5.3 A Theoretical Mapping of Each Small Group Process

Table 6.1 Relationship of Conclusion #1 to Data

Table 6.2 Relationship of Conclusion #2 to Data

Table 6.3 Relationship of Conclusion #3 to Data

Figure 5.1 Comparison of Kolb’s Theoretical and Zull’s Biological Learning Cycles
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. iii

List of Tables and Figures .................................................................................................... iv

Chapter I: Introduction ........................................................................................................ 1
Background and Context of Short-Term Mission Travel .................................................. 2
   A Brief Biblical Foundation ................................................................................................. 2
   Missiology ......................................................................................................................... 3
   The Current Context ......................................................................................................... 4
Problem Statement ............................................................................................................... 6
Purpose Statement ............................................................................................................... 9
Research Approach ............................................................................................................ 10
   The Researcher ................................................................................................................ 11
   Assumptions Regarding the Research Approach ........................................................... 13
Rationale for Conducting this Study .................................................................................. 14

Chapter II: Literature Review ............................................................................................. 16
Sources .................................................................................................................................. 16
Short-Term Missions as a Personal Journey ...................................................................... 18
   Tourism .............................................................................................................................. 19
   Pilgrimage .......................................................................................................................... 21
The Experience of Short-Term Mission Participants ......................................................... 23
   Participant Expectations ................................................................................................. 24
   Perceptions of the Experience ......................................................................................... 28
   Integrating the Experience .............................................................................................. 32
      Materialism .................................................................................................................... 33
      Volunteering and Charitable Giving ............................................................................ 34
      Religious Beliefs ........................................................................................................... 35
      Habits of Prayer ............................................................................................................ 36
   The Power of Religious Narrative ................................................................................... 37
   Change as New Behavior ................................................................................................. 41
Learning from Experience ................................................................................................. 43
   Critical Reflection ............................................................................................................ 44
   Leadership ........................................................................................................................ 46
Making Meaning in a Small Group Context ....................................................................... 49
   Small Group Studies in Other Disciplines ..................................................................... 49
   Application to Short-Term Missions ............................................................................... 51
Theoretical Framework ...................................................................................................... 52
   Transformative Learning Theory ................................................................................... 53
   Situated Learning Theory ............................................................................................... 55
Chapter III: Methodology

Qualitative Research ................................................................. 57
Action Research ................................................................. 58
Participatory Action Research (PAR) ........................................... 59
  Role of the Researcher ....................................................... 61
  Research Sample ............................................................. 64
  Session Design ............................................................... 67
Data Collection Methods ....................................................... 71
Data Analysis and Synthesis .................................................. 71
Reliability and Validity .......................................................... 73
Limitations and Ethical Considerations ................................. 73

Chapter IV: Research Findings ................................................ 76
The Traditional Church .......................................................... 77
  Group Members ............................................................. 78
  Group Dynamics ............................................................ 80
Document Data Sources ....................................................... 81
Researcher Field Notes ....................................................... 83
Dialogue Session Major Themes ............................................. 84
  Finding #1: The Expectation of a Changed Life ....................... 84
  Finding #2: The Power of Perceived Connection .................... 87
  Finding #3: The Difference Between Haitian Poor and American Poor   90
Journaling Summaries .......................................................... 92
The Community Church ........................................................ 93
  Group Members ............................................................. 94
  Group Dynamics ............................................................ 96
Document Data Sources ....................................................... 97
Researcher Field Notes ....................................................... 99
Dialogue Session Major Themes ............................................. 101
  Finding #1: What is a Short-term Mission Trip? ....................... 101
  Finding #2: Why Am I Going? ........................................... 103
  Finding #3: What Are We Doing? ...................................... 104
  Finding #4: Is This Experience Authentic? ......................... 106
  Finding #5: How do I Know? .......................................... 108
Journaling Summaries .......................................................... 110
Common Topics of Conversation ........................................... 111
The PAR Process and Learning from Experience ..................... 113
  The Traditional Church .................................................. 113
  The Community Church ................................................ 114

Chapter V: Analysis ................................................................. 117
Answering the Research Question ......................................... 118
Reflecting on My Assumptions .............................................. 121
  Communicative Space .................................................... 122
Connections to Short-term Missions Literature ......................... 124
  Participant Expectations ................................................ 124
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore the meaning making process of American Protestant volunteers returning from an international short-term mission (STM) trip. A Participatory Action Research methodology was utilized with two local churches- a traditional Protestant denomination, and a non-denominational community church. Both churches have ongoing programs with international partners, where church members are sent on annual short-term trips to serve and build relationships. Two purposeful groups were created, each with four short-term mission volunteers who traveled within the last year, with facilitation provided by the researcher. It was anticipated that a small group setting would provide a safe and supportive space to explore the significance of the trip, articulate individual learning, and begin to integrate that learning into action; in short, the process of learning from the experience. Because these trips are situated in particular faith traditions, the question of how the collective experience was leveraged by each congregation was also explored.

This chapter begins with an overview of the context and background of STM travel, which frames the current phenomenon of American Christians traveling overseas to participate in this trending activity. Following this overview is the problem statement, the statement of purpose, and the subsequent research questions. Also included in this chapter is a brief explanation of the research approach, the rationale for choosing that approach, and the researcher’s expectations and underlying assumptions. Finally, the rationale and expected significance of this research study are stated.
Background and Context of Short-Term Mission Travel

Since the 1950s the international short-term mission trip has evolved from a service to career missionaries abroad, or an exploration of “missionary” as a possible occupation (Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, & Brown, 2006; Raines, 2008) to an opportunity for average church members to make a contribution to the foreign mission work of the church (Howell, 2009). American Protestant volunteers are now crossing cultures on STM trips at an estimated 1.6 million people per year, at a cost of $2 billion for project and travel expenses (Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, & Brown, 2006). Even though this consistently quoted statistic is almost ten years old, the trend toward participating in short-term missions has continued to grow faster than the academic research that could inform the supporting principles and practices. For this broad reason, the topic of short-term mission travel is an area where additional research would make a meaningful contribution to the practice of STM travel.

A Brief Biblical Foundation

The mission of the church, according to Newbigin (1989), is best understood in terms of the trinitarian model of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is the Father and Creator, whose providence upholds all things. With the incarnation of Jesus, his Son, his nature and purposes are made known to mankind. That presence and active working of God in the world is continued through the Holy Spirit. Thus Christian mission can be most simply understood as proclaiming the kingdom of the Father, sharing the life of the Son and bearing the witness of the Holy Spirit.

While this triune communion is an interdependent unity, there is also a theme of “sending,” as God sends his presence as the Son, later as the Holy Spirit, and following that example, Jesus sends his disciples to proclaim the kingdom of God. For example, in Matthew 10
Jesus commissions the twelve disciples and sends them out with specific directions to preach the kingdom message. In Mark’s abbreviated version of the same event, he adds that the twelve returned to report to Jesus all that they had experienced. Jesus later sends seventy-two disciples on a short-term mission, two by two, with similar instructions. Finally, in what is commonly referred to as the “Great Commission,” Jesus directs every disciple to share the Gospel message with all nations of the world. Continuing in the book of The Acts of the Apostles, Philip is sent by an angel to Gaza, where he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch traveling on the same road, and shares the Gospel message with him. Although the Apostle Paul was committed to a missionary career, Slater (2000) suggests that he could also be considered as a STM participant in that he only stayed for a short time in each location that he visited. Biblical references and historical writings support this thematic “going,” or being sent, from a local context to other communities or people groups to share the Gospel news.

**Missiology**

Historically, Christian missions have had a complex role not just in spreading a new doctrine but also in exerting political control, colonialism, and social change. During the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries, missionaries from Europe and North America served overseas for periods of years or decades. The term *Missiology* appeared in Webster’s Dictionary in the 1920s, as “the study of the church’s mission with respect to missionary activities,” although at that time the definition gave no sense of the scope and comprehensiveness of the discipline (Scherer, 1987, p. 511). In most denominations mission work was viewed as a career, with academic programs of study including anthropology, hermeneutics, language acquisition, Old and New Testament studies, leadership, preaching and
teaching, and practicums introducing the work of social and economic change (Occhipinti, 2014).

Nobody knows when American Protestant volunteers started thinking of themselves as short-term missionaries, but Wuthnow (2009) locates the phenomenon in the 1950s and 1960s. Pioneering organizations during that time were *Youth with a Mission* and *Teen Missions International*, which were both focused on sending young adults to experience new cultures while serving and sharing the Gospel message. In a 1967 mission journal article, short-term volunteers were described as those who served from one month to two years, providing support for existing mission teams in fulfillment of the Great Commission (Coggins, 1967). The experience was also viewed as a recruitment tool for career mission work as these young volunteers served for a brief time on the field, and perhaps felt more clearly a “calling” to the necessary preparation for full-time missions. These volunteers were potential missionaries, not missionaries themselves.

Today Missiology is a multidisciplinary field of study integrating four key categories: history, theology, the social sciences (anthropology, sociology and psychology), and mission strategy (Steffen, 2003). There are six journals dedicated to the topic; three well-known titles are *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, *Missiology: An International Review*, and the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*.

**The Current Context**

Over the last fifty years, the philosophy of STM travel has shifted with the context of the times. Discretionary incomes, technology and air travel infrastructure, particularly in the developing world, have created a context where the downside of a long-term missionary
experience (separation from family and friends, lower standard of living, and potential health risks) is replaced with the upside of a short-term experience (feeling good about helping others, doing your part in God’s mission, and international travel). This paradigm shift moved STM trips from being part of a larger mission agenda to a primary focus of participation in various programs, and what was once a preparation for long-term service has become the final destination.

In comparison to the two month/two year commitment of the 1960s, the contemporary STM trip is generally defined as travel of two weeks or less to an international destination, for purposes ranging from evangelism, constructing homes, school or churches, encouraging local Christians, to teaching English as a second language (Priest & Priest, 2008). The participant population is intergenerational, engaging high school youth, college students, and adults of all ages. In terms of high school youth ministry, it has become a staple of programing activities (Howell, 2000; Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, & Brown, 2006; Priest & Priest, 2008). Where in the 1970s summer camp was the core of youth programing, and the concert-like big event was popular in the 1980s and 1990s, today the short-term mission trip is the central attraction (Root, 2008). In a study of US megachurches—those averaging 2,000 or more for weekend worship—Priest, Wilson, & Johnson (2010) found that fully 94% of megachurch high school youth programs organized short-term mission trips abroad for their youth, with 78% doing so one or more times a year. In addition, many Christian secondary schools incorporate STM travel as a senior class project or spring break activity.

College students have opportunities to serve cross culturally through church sponsored trips, faith-based institutions and organizations (Cuban & Anderson 2007; Devine, Favazza & McLain, 2002; Heffner & Beversluis, 2002; Johnson & O’Grady, 2006). Trips are organized
around the academic calendar, with the most travel occurring in June, followed by July and March.

All age combinations participate in short-term mission trips organized by churches during traditional holiday or vacation times (Stanczak, 2006; Zehner, 2006). On a broad scale, Collins (2006) suggests that each year short-term missionaries of all ages are sent out by an estimated 40,000 American short-term sending organizations: 35,000 churches, 3,700 agencies and 1,000 schools. Sending organizations, such as G.O. Ministries, [http://gomin.org/mission-trips/](http://gomin.org/mission-trips/) or 410 Bridge, [http://www.410bridge.org/get-involved/travel/](http://www.410bridge.org/get-involved/travel/) provide opportunities for individual or group service trips, and coordinate partnerships between American churches and materially poor international communities. Other organizations provide stand-alone trips with online preparation and debriefing resources. For example, the website [www.shorttermmissions.com](http://www.shorttermmissions.com) offers a search of 1,454 Short-Term Mission trip options from 108 different organizations. Currently the top ten destinations are Mexico, Dominican Republic, Canada, Honduras, Jamaica, Guatemala, United Kingdom, Costa Rica, China and Peru (Priest & Priest, 2008). In terms of financial investment, the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability reported in their 2012 *State of Giving* annual report that the largest increase occurred in the short-term mission category, where donations jumped 21% from 2010-2011 (Steffan, 2013).

**Problem Statement**

The effectiveness of STM trips and the ensuing long-term impact is a question currently debated in the literature, with most of the research focused on the experience of the American volunteers (Farrell, 2007; Kiely, 2004; Linhart, 2006; Park & Smith, 2000; Priest & Priest, 2008; Ver Beek, 2006). Moreau (2008) suggests that “increasingly the goal of short-term missions has
shifted from participation in the Great Commission or exploration of long-term possibilities to [one of] personal fulfillment” (p. 230). Supporters of STM travel who acknowledge that the activities of a short-term team have limited value for the receiving community, emphasize instead the positive benefits for those who go (Lewis-Anderson, 2009; Priest, 2010; Slimbach, 2000). Qualitative data collected shortly after volunteers return is a common approach to assessing those positive benefits, which speaks to immediate interpretation of the experience and personal intentions going forward, yet there is little longitudinal data that measures behavioral change. Ver Beek (2006) states there is little empirical evidence of any kind that participating in a short-term mission trip has significant impact on the individual’s lifestyle, and in fact, Friesen (2005) reported research results that one year after returning, STM participants exhibited a decline in positive beliefs and spiritual disciplines initiated by their short-term mission travel.

Occhipinti (2014) reported on a STM program that emphasized the building of relationships, and despite the barriers of language and limited time, the team she studied felt as though they had created bonds of friendship and fellowship on their STM trip. “There is importance in building relationships, in getting to know people,” stated the mission trip leader, “that is the point of the mission trip” (p. 39). Given that relationships are built on communication, Occhipinti questioned the reality of creating authentic relationships when the volunteers were unable to speak the local language, tended to collapse cultural differences, misinterpret actions, and project nostalgic values on the culture being visited.

Such a lack of critical reflection can be the result of what Howell (2012) calls the “overarching narrative” of STM that is situated in institutional and cultural practices, and with which participants interpret and articulate their experience. Theological language is attached to alleviating physical need with the distribution of goods and services. As a result the good done
for others is tensely juxtaposed with the belief that the real purpose of the trip is not to do the planned activities, but rather to change the people who went.

Nonetheless, the experience of crossing cultures can be a powerful learning event, not easily replicated by other scenarios. Merriam and Heuer (1996) suggest that encountering an experience that challenges our understanding of self and the larger sociocultural context in which we interact is a necessary first step in adult learning and development. Since Dewey’s 1938 publication *Experience and Education*, the conversation of applying existing knowledge to a new experience has been a significant part of the adult education dialogue. Lindeman (1989), a contemporary of Dewey and early explorer of group work in adult education, wrote that ‘the resource of highest value in adult education is the learner’s experience” (p. 6). Following Lindeman, Knowles specifies four ways in which prior experience impacts the adult learning process: (1) with age comes a wider range of individual differences, (2) experiences can be tapped as a rich resource, (3) acquired biases shape or can inhibit new learning, and (4) experience provides grounding for self-identity (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1989).

Applying these concepts to the cross-cultural experience of a STM trip generates a foundation for an inquiry into how, and what, adults might learn from that experience. With preparation the STM trip participant can productively serve overseas, but with thoughtful reflection they could also examine their American worldview in a new light, expand their capacity for compassion, or make connections between the culture they served and their own socio-economic context. Learning is a process of making meaning from all experiences—cognitive, emotional, physical, social and spiritual—and the engagement in STM trips could feasibly tap into all those domains.
However, the potential for learning from the experience of crossing cultures cannot be absorbed in the space of time the trip itself allows; to organize the trip for learning means a long-term view of short-term trips. Whether motivation is articulated as a calling toward the Great Commission, a service to the materially disadvantaged, or an opportunity for personal spiritual growth, there is a need for research that examines how the STM experience is interpreted, articulated, and consequently integrated into the lives of those who participate, once they return to the church that orchestrated their cross-cultural experience.

Many churches use small groups for organizational and development purposes, and these groups provide a context where the process of shifting experience to learning can be explored and ultimately operationalized (Boren, 2010, Myers, 2003). Zepke & Leach (2002) maintain that group interaction is an important feature of adult learning; even where the actual experience is the same, different individuals construct different meanings, and the collective meaning making process can create a container where generative dialogue expands the understanding of everyone involved.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the use of dialogue and praxis, in a small group setting, as a means to support the process of learning from the experience of STM travel. As an initial definition, learning is conceived here as contextualized meaning making, that is, constructing knowledge in a distinctive setting (Zepke & Keach, 2002). As Minnich (2005) points out, meaning making is an ongoing process both enabled and limited by culturally framed interactions. In this case, the framework in which participants make meaning is situated within
their particular church, which provides language and behaviors that enable dialogue, yet could also limit objective criticality.

As a means of exploring this opportunity for learning, the following research questions were drafted:

1. Why do participants choose to go and what are their expectations?
2. How do they make meaning of the experience?
3. What are the personal implications of that meaning?
4. In what ways could small group processes enable returning participants to learn from their experience, and support the integration of that understanding into their lives?
5. How is the entire process situated within the church that sent them?

**Research Approach**

With the approval of Lesly University’s institutional review board, a participatory action research (PAR) project was developed to frame the research questions (McIntyre, 2008). The purposeful sample population for the PAR project was two, five member groups. Each group had four members from different American Protestant congregations, who participated in a STM trip within the last year. Based on two different pilot studies conducted prior to this project, the optimal number of participants was considered to be four plus myself as the participant researcher. Given the content and time frame a small group of five could engage in the amount of dialogue necessary to meaningfully reflect on their experience. The Missions Pastor of each congregation acted as the initial liaison between the church members and the researcher. Wlodkowski (2011) stresses the importance of making adults’ “goals, interests, and perspectives
the context of learning” (p. 76), and of the population invited to the study, those who committed were clearly interested in engaging in this meaning making process.

Because PAR is context specific there is no fixed formula for designing research. In this project the cyclical process of exploration, knowledge construction and action took place within each group over six ninety minute sessions. The sessions were framed by Heron and Reason’s (2001) extended epistemology of knowledge acquisition. The epistemology is extended because it reaches beyond theoretical knowledge to incorporate experiential, presentational, propositional and practical knowing. The sessions were conducted for one group in a church classroom, for the other in a member’s home, and were all taped and transcribed. Documents were collected from three sessions, in addition to signed consent forms, and follow up telephone calls were utilized for clarification and member checking. Each group member is identified in this report by a pseudonym.

The Researcher

At the time of this research project, I was an experienced facilitator of international service trips, having organized and led trips to Grenada, Curacao, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Belize. Separate from those projects, in 2005 I founded a 501(c)3 nonprofit supporting education in Guatemala, and have taken a group there annually to serve for the last ten years. During those trips I was particularly interested in how volunteers interpreted their engagement in a new culture. There are materials available in relation to preparation and activities for reflection and discussion in the field, but I found very little reference for the post-trip meaning making. In my experience, volunteers returned with many questions about poverty, their identity as American Christians, and uncertainty about how to engage cross culturally in an appropriate way. Equally
interesting, I had volunteers who traveled and served oblivious to the context and counted the experience as a stand-alone “working vacation,” and who were not interested in a deeper dive into meaning making.

This experience, in conjunction with my education in adult learning, led me to create materials and facilitate various activities for the volunteers who served in conjunction with my nonprofit, in order to support the process of learning from the experience of crossing cultures. In this doctoral program I have continued to focus on the lack of research and support materials specific to understanding and operationalizing the most common outcome of a STM trip, the remark that “It changed my life!”

In addition, I have worked on a church staff and am familiar with the functionality of small groups in that setting. I am also familiar with generative dialogue and accessing multiple ways of knowing. Certainly, this familiarity with the context, research procedures and topic helped in the design of the PAR sessions, but could also be a liability when interpreting data. Creswell (2013) cautions that those researchers who are familiar with the sample population might “write ourselves into the study by reflecting on who we are and the people we study” (p. 56). My assumptions and theoretical frame of reference was made explicit to each group at the beginning of the sessions, and a reflective journal kept throughout the process provided a space to track my questions, observations and record conflicts with personal interests. I made a conscious effort to focus on the process of these particular STM participants, and to leverage my experience to accurately document their learning journey, rather than filter the information through my own experience. In addition, a well-informed and critically reflective committee was instrumental in monitoring researcher bias during the analysis stage of the project. As Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014) point out, however, qualitative research is never completely
objective; it is an iterative process framed by the researcher’s implicit concepts, and self-awareness and care on the part of the researcher is imperative for an ethical process and authentic final product.

General limitations were as follows: the information that was collected was indirect, that is it was filtered through the perception and memory of the participants, it was gathered in a local setting rather than in the natural contexts of the particular group trips to Haiti or Kenya (Creswell, 2009), and the quality of the collaborative process was dependent, in part, on the competencies of the researcher who designed and facilitated the discussion (Patton, 2002).

Assumptions Regarding the Research Approach

Based on the researcher’s experience with STM travel, and background in teaching and learning, four assumptions shape this research approach and are made explicit here. The first assumption is that adults want to have meaningful experiences, and an opportunity to care for others is considered a meaningful experience. American adult volunteers who participate in STM travel generally have the financial means and available time to invest in an activity that they believe will be meaningful to the recipients, themselves, and ultimately, to the common good. Second, that the production oriented, fast pace of our American culture inhibits the process of critical reflection that is so important to learning from experience. Thirdly, that people will invest in the opportunity for directed dialogue regarding their STM trip, based on the difficulty they perceive in creating that space independently during ordinary circumstances. And finally, that collective praxis, in a safe space, is the most effective way to explore meaning, generate new knowledge, and operationalize that knowledge. This is especially true given that the returning
STM volunteers in this research project are all members of the same (two) congregations, and part of an ongoing partnership between the church and the location where they served overseas.

Rationale for Conducting This Study

Given the large numbers of American church goers who participate in STM travel every year, the documented need for better training and partnership models, and the expected, but seldom documented benefit to the volunteers, there is a need for additional research on the STM phenomenon. Although many current studies call for future research on post-trip processes, (Friesen, 2005; Lederleitner, 2008; Occhipinti, 2014; Van Engen, 2005; Ver Beek, 2008) there is a particular gap in the literature on the subject of learning from the STM experience. Many church members choose to participate based on the urging of church staff, or the encouragement of the previous year’s volunteers, who consider the STM trip to have been a life changing experience. Chamberlin-Quinlisk (2005) points out that access to a cross-cultural learning opportunity, however, does not translate directly into new understanding. “The key to transforming access into opportunity,” she explains, “lies within the participants’ ability to… bring their assumptions and beliefs into question and then have the opportunity to revise their assumptions” (p. 471).

The rationale for this research project, therefore, is situated in the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of STM travel. Utilizing Mezirow’s (2000) transformative learning theory, and Lave’s situated learning theory (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) adult education can serve as the conceptual framework for understanding the cross-cultural experience in a way that illuminates how and why (or why not) adults learn. This could be a significant contribution to the missiological literature in terms of leveraging STM travel as a
means to individual spiritual formation and congregational impact, rather than simply “poverty tourism” that leaves participants with ethnocentric or unexamined worldviews, having intentions toward personal change but lacking the tools and support necessary to develop and sustain new behavior.
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review of academic literature details the current research on short-term missions that is relevant to the aims of this study, and the connections to learning from that experience in the informal setting of a church sponsored trip. By assessing the research that has already been published and how it is significant for my research questions, a link to theory can be made that connects adult learning concepts to the stated outcome of “life changing” STM travel experiences. This link provides a new perspective and suggests a research methodology that will contribute to the collective knowledge and offer recommendations for practice and continued study, as articulated in successive chapters.

Sources

A fairly extensive populist literature on STM travel emerged by the 1990s, but it was not until the last decade that scholarly research began to appear (Priest & Howell, 2013). The majority of current research on STM travel is published in six journals specific to the study of missions. In 2000, two of those journals, International Journal of Frontier Missions and Evangelical Missions Quarterly published special issues dedicated to the topic STM trips. In 2006 and again in 2013, Missiology: An International Review published editions focused on STM. However, STM is an interdisciplinary field with contributions from authors in Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, Intercultural Studies, and Christian Education. As evidence of the fact, research utilized in this study comes from a variety of academic journals, including Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, Reflective Practice, Latin American Theology, Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, Social Forces, Christian Education Journal, Journal of Psychology and Theology, International Journal of Lifelong Education, Action Research, and Journal of Experiential Education.
Research and conceptual articles on STM generally fall into categories of defining, questioning or justifying the practice of STM itself, promoting mutuality and partnerships between churches and/or parachurch organizations and sending agencies, or articles providing case studies, cautions and best practices. For the purposes of this study, articles from the first category are used when necessary to provide a historical context for STM, and to highlight the current disparity between articulated outcomes for participants, and empirical studies to substantiate those claims. Articles focused on the paradigm of STM as accompaniment, or partnership between Northern and Southern churches, were not included. These articles address an important component of STM, and certainly the experience of the volunteer is impacted by the overarching philosophy, structure and facilitation of the trip. However, the issues inherent in creating and sustaining a mutual partnership are outside the focus of this study. Research outside missiological circles that addresses related principles, practices and theories were located with keywords such as “critical reflection,” “learning from experience,” “transfer of learning,” “collaborative inquiry,” and “communities of practice,” all in connection to crossing cultures and meaning making.

In this review, research relevant to my question will focus on a conceptualization of STM as a personal journey, the subsequent expectation, perceptions and integration of the experience by the STM participant, and the power of religious narrative in shaping that experience. The following section will expand the concept of learning from that experience and the meaning making process in terms of adult learning theories. Finally, related research on meaning making in a small group context will be explored and connected to the participatory action research methodology.
Short-Term Missions as a Personal Journey

The problem with short-term missions is that they are short. (Rickett, 2008). Many STM trips are designed to fit into the windows of time North Americans have available for vacation travel. For working adults that typically means a two week time frame, for college or high school students the window is longer in the summer, but could also be the 7-10 day window of spring or Christmas break. The element of time is not irrelevant to how these trips are understood and experienced. The brevity reinforces stereotypes, perpetuates misconceptions about the poor and plays into the critique of simple “poverty tourism.” This section briefly compares the overlapping literature on working vacation, tourism, pilgrimage and STM travel.

The concept of short-term international service trips, or working vacations, for adults began in the late 1980s and blossomed in the 1990s. Habitat for Humanity was founded in 1976, and Global Volunteers in 1984, both secular counterparts to the STM movement (Howell, 2012). In 1987 Bill McMillon wrote *Volunteer Vacations: Short-Term Adventures That Will Benefit You and Others*, with an eleventh printing in 2012. These “voluntourism” trips provide economic aid, often with moral dimensions, in faraway locations. Pelt (2008) suggests that the rise in working vacations, and the parallel growth of STM travel, are in part a result of the “baby boomers” (people born between 1946 and 1964) coming into the age of discretionary incomes and flexible schedules. She describes baby boomers as adults motivated by materialism, immediate gratification and other comforts not necessarily congruent with long term world missions. They are, however, interested in a short-term experience. Fanning (2009) concurs, adding that baby boomers are less likely to support a program, either financially or personally, without first-hand knowledge, and the more tangible the better.
Tourism

Tourism, at face value, is the pleasure-seeking activity of affluent individuals and families. In 1976 MacCannell reported on the rise of tourism with a theory that the leisure class was participating in a cultural ritual in response to the pervasive alienation of modernity (as cited in Howell, 2012). Affluence enabled an escape from daily life to an international destination where travelers anticipated a transcendent experience in which they would be entertained, inspired and ultimately “renewed” before returning to the mundane life momentarily left behind. Since MacCannell’s original work the idea of tourism as a kind of ritual has been studied through the interactions, language, photos and consumption of tourists. Over time travel of all types has become the largest transnational industry, generating more than twelve percent of the global gross national product (Slimbach, 2008).

Certainly a comparison of tourism, with its narrative of travel, discovery and personal growth, to STM travel, has overlapping themes. Critics of STM travel combine tourism and missions into the label “religious tourism” and are quick to point out the ethnocentric, patronizing and consumer-driven approaches of some STM participants (Lo, 2000; Zehner, 2006) and the fact that most STM travel involves transporting rich, white meaning-makers into societies where the population is poor and dark-skinned. Sending agencies and host churches provide “culture brokers,” who act in the same manner as tour guides to provide meaningful tasks and basic Western amenities such as flush toilets, fresh coffee, and assistance negotiating souvenir purchases in the local market (Slimbach, 2000). Adeney (2006) points out that many of the people encountered in another country are service providers, such as hotel and restaurant staff, and are simply part of the backdrop of a cultural experience. It is feasible that a STM participant, who is focused on showing the love of God to the community in which they are
engaged, could subsequently ignore the taxi driver who transports them back to the hotel, even
though he is also a member of that community. Howell (2012), as a participant observer during a
STM trip in the Dominican Republic, noted that the recreational time spent swimming at a
nearby waterfall was not viewed as an opportunity to share with the locals on site, nor was it
discussed in the evening debriefing, but was “subtly cordoned off from the ministry work we had
come to do” (p. 167).

This separation between the mission language of service and cultural encounter, and
the tourist language of pleasure and consumerism, is a continual tension in the STM literature
(Howell & Dorr, 2007; Rickett, 2008; Root, 2008; Schwartz, 2003). Tourism is a problematic
framework for understanding trips with such an explicit religious narrative, and STM
participants uniformly reject the cultural implications of the “tourist” label, though the
similarities are many. In fact, Root (2008) argues that the unexamined, underlying motivation for
STM travel is fueled not by religious “calling,” but by a consumer driven society coupled with
the access of globalization, where a STM trip provides an experience, to those who can afford to
go, of seeing something new and different while doing some good. Our collective, American
way of being is often one of motion, and the movement is perpetually toward new experiences
and new sensations. As a collector of sensations, the STM participant moves from the experience
of extreme poverty, to the experience of negotiating with a local vendor for a new purse, to the
experience of a final day of relaxing on the local resort property. Root explains that, “When our
mission trips are about doing something, then like good tourists we are free to move on and
eventually forget them, for we have done our part and now it is time to move on to another
experience” (p. 318). In many cases the next experience is another STM trip. Wuthnow (2009)
wonders if this process might simply be an acceptable way to fulfill one’s desire to see the world,
and Schreiter (2015) observes that the intense experience of a STM trip can be conceived of as simply another offering of an American consumer culture, without long term effect on the participant’s lifestyle. Indeed, STM travel has the potential to be viewed as the “worst combination of religious fundamentalist zeal and touristic superficiality” (Howell, 2012, p. 27).

Pilgrimage

References to tourism are consistently followed in the literature with a discussion of STM travel as more closely aligned with the concept of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is a consciously ritualized practice where one temporarily leaves the ordinary, compulsory life “at home” and experiences an extraordinary, voluntary event “away from home” (Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, & Brown, 2006). Occhipinti (2014) is in agreement that STM travel is similar to pilgrimage, citing the powerful sense of dislocation, the inability of a monolingual participant to communicate with hosts, and the unfamiliar and demanding physical labor as components of a scenario which take on a mystical property. A mystical experience is the core of pilgrimage- a ritual of intensification that opens the participant to divine intimacy and power. Howell & Dorr (2007) refer to this experience as entering into a liminal state, that is, an escape from social structure and mundane commitments to a new, temporary space. In traditional pilgrimage, the space is associated with a specific location, artifact or event, but in STM the journey itself is the pilgrim’s ritual space. This movement from the familiar to the strange, the secular to the sacred, and the individual life to one of community, could equally be viewed as an alternative frame-one of renewing spiritual devotion- applied to the same perpetual motion toward a new experience as previously described by Root.

A second parallel between pilgrimage and STM travel is the sense of community, which Howell (2012) refers to as communitas. This sense of community among fellow pilgrims, or
STM participants on the team, develops as the group creates their own social mode within the intensified communal context. The process begins during preparatory meetings, with team building exercises, extended corporate prayer, sharing food and creating or practicing deliverable programs and products. The process continues with matching T-shirts worn to the airport proclaiming their affiliation with a church, parachurch or sending organization, their annual service theme, or their destination. Mission trip veterans often articulate a yearning for the communion, the *communitas*, they experienced with fellow travelers and the “saints” in distant lands in the liminal space of previous STM trips.

Finally, a sense of “calling” is evidenced in the STM rhetoric as well as that of pilgrimage. In a study of 96 applicants for a college STM trip, Howell & Dorr (2007) reported a predominately theme of calling as a motivation for applying. This calling came in the form of a “burden,” or pressing desire to meet the perceived needs of those overseas. For example, one applicant wrote,

“I wanted to find a ministry opportunity for the coming summer… I really feel that God laid [this program] on my heart, calling me to that ministry…I feel strongly about abandoning this materialistic, self-centered American culture to serve as God’s hands and feet in the world- and if [this program] can be a way to do this, then I’d be so excited and blessed to be a part of it!” (p. 248).

In this sense the concept of pilgrimage as “good works,” enacted in obedience to a divine mandate, was a call for Western Christians to bestow the blessings they have received upon those who were perceived to be less fortunate.

Occhipinti (2014) addresses the similarities between pilgrimage and STM travel, suggesting that the experience is an American cultural phenomenon where the pilgrim’s normal self-reflective focus is replaced with a constant “doing.” Rather than being problematic, she
argues that being occupied by radically different activities creates a sense of spiritual engagement through action. Pouring cement with other workers, rather than working alone in a computer cubicle, is a task that can prompt heightened awareness of the relationship between self and others that is not as obvious in the routine of American life. Irrespective of the level of engagement, STM participants are neither locals, nor tourists, but exist in the liminal state of pilgrimage. Yet unlike pilgrimage, their activity is explicitly intended to serve others in distant places.

What comparisons of tourism, pilgrimage and STM travel suggest is that all are culturally mediated forms of travel with particular dynamics. Considerable overlap notwithstanding, tourism and pilgrimage emphasize the personal experience of travel and transformation, while STM focuses on service, sacrifice and calling. Personal spiritual growth, adventure, and community are byproducts of the “mission.” This idea that STM is “real missions’ as opposed to educational or leisure travel, was voiced by a church board member in response to a Youth Pastor’s comments on how much their students had learned about different cultures while on a STM trip. The board member said, “It’s important we remember this is real ministry This isn’t just travel, I mean, it’s important that the kids are learning, right? But they’re doing real missions… there is real benefit” (Howell, 2012, p. 124). In this view “real missions” flow out of a missionary identity situated in the U.S. context, where the element of “going” outside a person’s “comfort zone” to serve and share the gospel in a qualitatively different place, opens a global space where barriers of culture and everyday life can be transcended.

The Experience of Short-Term Mission Participants

The experience of the STM participant is divided into three sections. First, relevant research is presented on the American participant’s expectations for the STM trip, second on
their perception of that experience, and finally, how they interpret the meaning of what they see and do.

**STM Participant Expectations**

Across the research data, similar expectations are expressed by those who participate in STM trips. The more traditional expectation is an opportunity to serve the poor, show the love of God, and share the gospel with other people. Even though language remains from the traditional practice of career missionaries, the reality is that current short-term “mission” travel emphasizes service projects and humanitarian aid more than proselytizing or conversion efforts. Priest and Priest (2008) point out that an estimated 84% of STM mission trips are to places where the Christian church is well established, although there are some sending agencies focused on deploying short-term volunteers to assist with new international church plantings (Robinson, 2008). America is a country of charitable and philanthropic values (Schwartz, 2003) with a large percentage of the population having the financial means to combine missionary-type activities with the adventure of international travel (Raines, 2008; Root, 2008) and a desire to make meaningful contributions to those they view as less fortunate.

Critics of this view of STM travel point out that these trips can too often become expensive efforts that quench the guilt of North American Christians, satisfy their curiosity, but do little lasting good (Fanning, 2009). In a study of multiple building projects in Honduras following the destruction of Hurricane Mitch, Ver Beek (2006) surveyed 162 participants in those projects between one and three years after their return. He triangulated self-reported giving through the donor records of the organization that supported the projects, and found no substantive increase in donations. He also interviewed the Hondurans who received the houses.
He found that homes built by North American STM groups versus Honduran Christian organizations seemed to make no difference to the new homeowners—neither positive nor negative—despite the fact that the STM group spent an average of $30,000 to build a house (given travel and lodging costs) that the local organization could build for $2,000. The Hondurans shared that, while they appreciated the effort of the North Americans to visit, they felt as though a better use of resources would have been to build more houses.

The issue of funding is central to many criticisms of STM travel (Priest, Wilson, & Johnson, 2010; Raines, 2008; Van Engen, 2005). Fanning (2009) calculates that the total expenditure for STM travel in 2006 was $1,500,000,000 and calls for an accountability for what is now a significant annual expenditure. He also notes that STM funding depletes “available” funds for local church and benevolent projects, allowing that some of the total amount is sympathetic giving, that is, a donation to family members traveling on “mission” that may not have been given to other mission projects. Guthrie (2001) adds that while the number of short-timers has increased, the financial contributions to sending agencies, which one might expect to increase as a result of an overseas ministry experience, has remained static.

Nonetheless, STM participants see the experience as a worthwhile, meaningful service to others. In a survey of returning college students, Occhipinti (2009) found that slightly more than half of the students said they were motivated by a desire to help others, while the rest believed they had been called to mission work by God. Given the enormous ongoing, collective costs of STM travel, Raines (2008) invites a critical analysis of the cost effectiveness of that sort of service—effective to whom, by what criteria, and whose criteria?
In comparison, Linhart (2005) recorded motivation based less on traditional missionary activities and more on the opportunity to experience a new culture. One young woman in his study reflected that “I wanted a chance to go to a third world country and be exposed to poverty…I saw it as a chance to be stretched and getting out of my comfort zone” (p. 262). Occhipinti (2014) sees motivation on a more broad scale, as emerging “from a deep search for meaning arising out of a discontent with American culture and postindustrial capitalism” (p. 4). She believes the average STM participant expects to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of other people in a way that does not seem possible here in the US, given our comfortable and busy lifestyles. Priest (2010) notes that financial supporters of young participants typically contribute in hopes that they are funding a STM experience that will impact the materialistic lifestyles of those people in ways that similar service at home does not.

The desire for personal or spiritual growth also motivated participants, who articulated an expectation of a deeper sense of purpose in their lives and a connection between their Christian faith and the needs of the world (Farrell, 2007). The experience of crossing cultures can be an impetus for grappling with identity issues based on “having” versus “being” (Root, 2008; Schwartz, 2003), the source and meaning of happiness (Occhipinti, 2009; Ver Beek, 2006), the economics of poverty as a systemic injustice, and the Biblical call to fulfill the Great Commission (Bessenecker, 2008). Fowler (2000), best known for his work on faith development, sees these questions of identity as part of the process of finding and claiming vocation, or a spiritual purpose for one’s life that is part of the purposes of God.

Even though there are many opportunities for youth to serve through secular organizations, the increasing popularity of international mission trips suggests that an opportunity for spiritual growth is a significant expectation of high school and college age
students, not just the expectations of adults (Linhart, 2010; Occhipinti, 2009; Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, & Brown, 2006; Raines, 2008). Locklin (2010) states that the short-term mission trip is

“keyed to practical needs of local community partners throughout the world, [but] the service contribution is in some ways incidental to the vision of the program. The more fundamental element is to place students beyond the boundaries of their current frames of reference and to give them sustained experiences in situations of poverty and pain, in the hopes that they may be radically changed” (p. 5).

Probasco (2013) agrees, stating that approximately 32% of US congregations sponsor international mission trips each year, investing “extensive financial, programmatic, and staff resources into the transformative promise of short-term travel” (p. 203). Van Engen (2005) suggests, however, that what participants call transformative, or life changing experiences, are in fact a temporary emotional response to a situation they do not really understand. Linhart (2006) concurs, stating that the ethical hope in STM travel is that participants will be changed, but instead are likely to simply feel connected to missions, and continue in normal cultural patterns once they return home.

Marginalized peoples realize that Americans come with a desire to see something new and to develop a deeper sense of meaning in their lives (Eitzen, 2007; Farrell, 2007), and yet wished that STM participants would learn more about the host culture (Zehner, 2006). Birth (2006) addressed the short-term volunteer’s desire for spiritual growth through the eyes of Trinidadian Christians where he was living and conducting research on missions. The rural Trinidadian islanders are third world economically, but by virtue of their poverty they are first world spiritually. They explained, “We are poor. That gives us privilege. The poor always claim
intimacy with God over the rich” (p. 503). Yet as Zehner points out, there is no mutual growth in an engagement that one side views as a “mission,” implying a task to complete, even though the hosting community practices a spirituality that the volunteers are seeking to experience.

**Perceptions of the Experience**

The rhetoric of mission is rooted in a long discourse on sacrifice and a sense of calling, which has carried over to the practice of short-term trips as well. By elevating the missiological or theological significance of the trip, the particularities of the location and the cultural context can be overlooked, while the focus rests instead on activity; for example, the necessity of bringing something to a place where there is demonstrable lack. Sacrificial mission language also discourages STM participants from placing emphasis on, or expressing enthusiasm about, the educational benefits to be gained from the trip.

By and large, North American short-termers grow up in suburban communities insulated from both poverty and people of color (Slimbach, 2000), and are typically unaware of their ethnocentric worldview and tendency to confuse middle-class ideals and values with the tenets of Christianity. As a result, Slimbach contends they are predisposed not to appreciate the cultures of the people they intend to love and serve. As an example, Livermore (2004), in a survey of National pastors who hosted North American STM groups, found that the STM participant’s natural ethnocentrism appeared to be reinforced by assuming that culturally-specific notions were transnationally valid because they were situated in Biblical references. This situation is further compounded by the relative affluence of the STM participant, and their assumption that they are providing services and instruction to those who are less capable (Zehner, 2006).
Adeney (2006) expands this line of reasoning beyond pragmatism to theology. Culture is a gift from God, a product of local creativity, emotional resilience and collective purpose that anchors the social reality of the people who live there. To explore a new culture is to appreciate the “celebrations which give zest, values which give a cognitive framework, action patterns which give direction to your days, and associational ties which root you in a human context” (p. 475). If the STM group is predisposed to view “missions” as an undifferentiated place of generic spiritual and material need, every destination becomes a movement from have to have-not, from plenty to want, from wealth to poverty (Howell, 2009). God’s creation of people, cultures and place is overlaid with an ethnocentric, religious narrative that begins in the preparatory sessions that frame the participant’s expectations, and finds validity in their perceptions while on site.

For example, in Howell’s (2012) study of STM travel, participants saw the entire country they visited, the Dominican Republic, as needy. One participant characterized Dominican culture in these words,

“I just learned that Dominicans really live with, like nothing. They just have to make do with almost nothing. I mean, I know America is well off or whatever, but when you compare our cultures, it’s just so amazing that Dominican culture is just totally poor” (p. 210).

Howell noted that the group visited a middle class Protestant church, enjoyed tourist areas, and that their team bus regularly passed massive summer homes with Lexus SUVs and Mercedes sedans parked in the driveway. Yet the conceptual framework generated by the Christian narrative provided little in the way of language regarding economic inequity and cultural dynamics within the country, and thus the conclusion that “Dominican culture is just totally poor.”
There are occasions when the juxtaposition of religious narrative and personal experience calls for critical inquiry. Americans have been socialized to accept a materially oriented life as the means to happiness, which can cause confusion when the poor appear to be just as happy as the American volunteers. Ver Beek (2006), for example, observed American volunteers interpreting the hospitality of their Honduran hosts as evidence that Hondurans are happy despite their poverty. “I find it rewarding in a lot of ways,” one interviewee said, “[as] you see how content those people are with how little they have, and we whine ‘cause we never have enough” (p. 486). Even given that many North Americans are discontented despite their material wealth, this “happy-despite-their-poverty” theme, as Ver Beek refers to it, is troubling for two reasons. First, that those particular Hondurans shared their small homes and food with their guests is more a function of cultural hospitality than evidence of contentment with a life of poverty. A North American would demonstrate hospitality, even in the face of suffering, with a guest as well. Second, Ver Beek concludes that if STM participants believe Hondurans are happy even though they cannot feed their children or send them to school, that belief may be a way of assuaging their guilt about not doing more.

The idea that cultural convention also affects STM trips with an evangelistic focus is addressed by Eitzen (2007), who adds that favorable numbers of converts result, in part, because Latin American courtesy does not allow them to reject the invitation to Christ made by a foreign missionary. In all these scenarios the opportunity for critical thinking was not leveraged by the STM participants and new information was assimilated into their narrative, rather than exploring ways the narrative could accommodate the new experience.

Technology such as television, internet and social media create another factor in navigating a new culture, in that people in other cultures might imitate the dress and music
choices of Americans (Birth, 2006), and such globalization leads American participants to believe they are knowledgeable about third world cultures or that differences are not significant (Farrell, 2007). This view is exacerbated by the very nature of a short-term trip. Linhart (2006) describes the experience as an “interactive museum,” as participants play with children, perform religious dramas or programs, engage in low-labor construction work, and smile across the chasm of a language barrier. In reality, the participants do not usually know or understand the people they meet, are likely to assign American meaning to circumstances and behaviors, and then generalize that conceptualization of the encounter to the entire population. Linhart observed that the “quick pace and very full schedule of the trip, combined with the students’ lack of cross-cultural understanding, did not alter the students’ comfort level in making confident conclusions from their observations” (p. 457) and these conclusions were generalized “to the entire existence of the lives of their hosts and to the culture as a whole” (p. 458). These judgements in the context of a “mission” trip can lead the participants to attach deep and sacred significance to the experiences and purposes of the trip as well.

Finally, the American penchant for “doing” as opposed to a stance of “being” (Root, 2008; Schwartz, 2003) with the people they are visiting, hinders the process of building the relationships necessary to avoid objectification of the poor (Raines, 2008). Volunteers do not problematize poverty or consider the global economic structures that create and sustain it, rather they complete a construction project, deliver supplies, conduct children’s activities and participate in feeding programs with the culture as a backdrop for the experience itself (Occhipinti, 2009; Zehner, 2006). A short-term mission trip is consequently interpreted as successful simply by the completion of the work that was planned.
Integrating the Experience

“Short-term missions is a life-changing experience.” Although this phrase is commonly used in conversation, testimonies, and marketing materials, the details are generally vague. As a recent example, Speakman (2015) asserts

“Although this phrase is well worn and used often, it embodies deep truth. Millions of people, including myself, have personally experienced and witnessed this life-changing experience. The changes in individuals when they return from a mission trip have everything to do with their new perspective. They have a new sense of purpose, sacrifice, and fulfillment, and when they return with their newly-opened spiritual eyes, they are stunned by the very ‘me’-centered world and American Church they encounter” (p. 88).

Trinitapoli & Vasiey (2009) question this anecdotal evidence of changed lives, remarking that “It is amazing that with the proliferation of short-term trips there has been little scholarly research completed of their impact on the participants” (p. 121).

Nearly all the quantitative studies on the impact of STM travel on participants have been conducted since 1990. Ver Beek (2006) set out to analyze forty-four such studies, many of which, in his estimation, were of questionable quality. Thirteen of the forty-four studies applied what he considered basic research procedures for measuring change: a pre and post-test of standardized questions, a post-test with control group, or triangulation with secondary data sources. Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen and Brown (2006) address this issue of quality research by investigating the methodology used in two widely reported studies claiming that STM travel contributes to an increase in financial giving. Both studies asked former participants to retrospectively indicate how much they gave to missions before their trip, and how much (one study five years later, and the second study ten years later) they gave afterward the trip. The
participants were adolescents or young adults at the time of the STM experience, and based on the demographics of that data pool, Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen and Brown contest the conclusion that STM travel was directly connected to their increased giving. They assert that increased giving could just as easily be attributed to an increase in discretionary income associated with an increase in age and subsequent career development.

The following studies are relevant to my research question and meet basic quality criteria for research. These studies looked for an impact in the lives of STM participants in specific areas: materialism, volunteering and charitable giving, religious beliefs, and habits of prayer.

**Materialism.**

Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, & Brown (2006) asked whether or not contact with third world poverty on a short-term mission trip would lower materialism, and they found that “those with extensive short-term mission experience were fully as materialistic as those with none” (p. 440). In a more recent study, Horton, et al. (2011) administered pre and post-test surveys to 568 Texas college students who participated in STM trips, with the post-test occurring three months after returning. In regard to materialism, they found that nearly all the students indicated that the STM trip had affected their attitude toward materialism, yet none had a coherent strategy for addressing materialism in their lives. Only two students mentioned “concrete steps” they were taking. One student was involved in a micro-financing program for small businesses in impoverished countries, and the second, with her family, began to give money to build homes for squatters near a garbage dump. The study concludes, however, that “STM experience (in impoverished communities) does indeed tend to lower the level of
materialism among the participants” (p. 59). It could be argued that the data only shows the students’ perceived attitude toward materialism, as there were no quantifiable changes in lifestyle.

**Volunteering and Charitable Giving.**

Beyerlein, Trinitapoli and Adler (2011) examined the role of STM travel as an explanation for differential participation in civic actions among adolescents in the United States. From a national telephone survey of 3,370 American teenagers, they utilized a multivariate regression analysis to evaluate the association between those who participated in a STM trip, and those who did not, in four types of civic engagement: political participation, financially donating to causes, informal volunteering and formal volunteering. Their results showed that participating in a religious mission trip was a robust predictor of the likelihood of future engagement in all four types of civic youth action.

In a similar study Probasco (2013) looked at volunteerism among adults who had participated in a STM trip as adolescents. Working from data collected from active church members limited her sample to those adolescents who continued to be a part of a congregation into adulthood. However, she reported an interesting finding that the geographic context of a mission trip- international or domestic- mattered most in regard to the impact on participants. The adolescents who served on domestic trips had higher rates of adult volunteering in their local community than those who served overseas. The author surmised that the very exoticism of international service, especially if advertised as a break from ordinary life, might undermine the lasting impact. When the cultural setting in which their service was provided was familiar to the adolescents, they were more able to transfer the practice to their own local context.
Religious Beliefs.

The third topic of research was spiritual or religious beliefs and growth. Tuttle (2000) combined quantitative results from a faith maturity scale with interview questions of 64 Christian college students who had participated in a STM trip, and then compared those to a control group of 67 students from the same institutions who had not participated. Tuttle concedes that spiritual growth is difficult to measure, and that from a developmental perspective, college is a time of transition from parental values to personally owned values and faith. However, students reported that their STM trip was the most important catalyst in their spiritual development, and Tuttle concluded that those students seemed to have a deeper sense of compassion and concern for the lost, and were more self-assured when sharing their faith. In connection to my research question, Tuttle also found that of the four institutions represented, the one with the most extensive training and debriefing program produced students who were more aware of the learning experience and what that experience meant in their lives.

A second study on religious beliefs and spiritual growth was conducted by Friesen (2005) who collected data from 116 STM participants over the course of two years in three stages: pre-trip, post-trip, and a follow up one year after they returned. The research design measured changes in twenty-four concepts related to beliefs and behaviors in their relationship with God, the church, and the world around them. Friesen found that despite initial changes in many of the twenty-four categories, by the one year follow up the mean of all participants’ scores decreased in twenty of those categories. His conclusions are relevant to my research interest in that he recommends allocating more resources to coordinate discipleship training and follow up at the local church level. “The anticipation of an STM experience provides a unique teachable moment in the life of a participant,” he says, and the local church “must go beyond
financial and prayer support… [to] take leadership in discerning suitable short-term mission participants, assisting these participants in building a support team, and offering ‘life coaches’ or mentors” (para. 44).

**Habits of Prayer.**

Finally, Norton (2012) considered how a STM trip impacted the prayer behaviors of participants by administering a Structure of Prayer scale to 118 people before, and then three to six weeks after, their travel. He found that 68% of the participants made changes in their prayer lives as a result of the STM trip, although he also recommended that future studies consider whether changes are “long-term, actual changes versus short-term perceived changes based on personal perspectives” (p. 338). Since the majority of research data on STM trips replies on self-reporting from interviews conducted soon after participants return, the question of long term change is valid. Norton’s distinction between long-term “actual” versus short-term “perceived” changes, however, does not address the possibility of changes in the short term that may well be overt, intentional behavior, or “real.”

Ver Beek (2008) describes this discrepancy between immediate qualitative data, which often shows positive changes in participants, with later quantitative studies that lean toward no significant change. He suggests that the self-perception of change is generally much greater than the actual change. For example, he compared survey responses that indicated volunteers were more generous financially following a short-term mission trip with giving records of the organization with which they partnered and the tithing records from their local church. The triangulation showed that their perception did not match the quantitative data, as there was no significant increase in donations.
In a study which followed STM participants for the longest length of time, Kiely (2004) conducted a six year longitudinal case study of students who served in Nicaragua. He addressed the premise in short-term travel that experiential dissonance combined with critical reflection would lead to changes in the student’s worldview, which would be manifest in community engagement and pro-social action. His findings showed that each student experienced one of six identified forms of perspective transformation, yet he concluded that such a change was “not a sufficient condition for changing lifestyles, challenging mainstream norms and engaging in collective action to transform existing social and political institutions” (p. 16).

A consistent theme in STM research on participants is that lasting change is possible, but outcomes are not observed or clearly articulated in terms of changed behavior. Ver Beek (2006) explains with a metaphor:

“I wonder if [participants] do not more closely resemble young saplings, which can be bent and even held in place for a week or more, but once let loose quite quickly go back to their original position. Those saplings need to be held in place for a much longer period of time for the change in growth to become permanent… we all know that making changes in our lives is difficult, and that exciting experiences and good intentions often do not translate into lasting change” (p. 491).

The religious narrative that shapes the principles and practices of STM travel cannot be overlooked in the process of addressing the disconnect between conventional belief regarding the promise of STM travel as a life changing experience, and the lack of sustained change in the lives of those who participate.
The Power of Religious Narrative

An important reference in this regard is Howell’s 2012 ethnography on the narratives that STM participants create and use in making sense of their experience. His research approach provides a perspective on how people understand and interact with their world, situated within sustained attention to the wider context in which individuals think, speak and ultimately act. For example, common phrases such as “I need to get out of my comfort zone,” “the children had nothing but were so happy,” and “the experience changed my life,” are individual stories that are shaped by the historical and institutional contexts in which they are told. While the context provides meaning, it can also serve to inhibit, or limit, understanding. Those phrases, for example, affirm the theology of personalistic missionary service, while obscuring aspects of the poverty, inequality and cultural difference that create the opportunity to provide that service.

To study how narratives were produced and practiced at the congregational level, Howell engaged in fieldwork with a STM team from an established church in partnership with a children’s organization in the Dominican Republic. As a participant observer, he witnessed the selection process for team members, interviewed members before travel, and participated in all the preparatory meetings. During the trip he participated in most of the activities, and interviewed the participants a second time, eight to twelve months after returning to the U.S.

Howell identified three themes generated by the narrative of STM travel: sacrifice, transcending culture, and divine sanction of the experience. While elements of both tourism and pilgrimage appeared in the narrative, the explicit rhetoric encouraged participants to embrace a divine calling to sacrifice for the poor within the community of fellow Christians, what Howell calls a “particular space in the Christian imagination” (p. 145). The group intended to “share the gospel,” “reach the lost,” “serve the missionaries,” and be transformed in that experience by the
power of God, goals that seem to me to be based on the assumption that it is necessary to travel
to the poor in order to find the “lost.” Success would be defined by rendering service to the poor
and returning as changed people, rather than understanding and addressing the inequality that
sustains poverty. Howell notes that,

“As the narrative weaves together physical poverty with
emotional/spiritual poverty, the presence of a foreign group
lacking linguistic skills, cultural competence and
significant time seems an inadequate, if not
counterproductive, response in terms of the social problems
ostensibly being addressed by the work” (p. 188).

In the follow up interviews with participants, Howell noted that exposure to need, an
explicit goal of the trip, was framed retrospectively as emotional or spiritual needs manifest in
physical need, rather than an economic phenomenon. Why the inequality existed was difficult to
articulate, and participants were more comfortable speaking about the relationships they had
formed and how the experience affected their spiritual lives. The over-riding narrative imagined
poverty as a physical curse that needed to be overcome with assistance provided by the
American participants’ sacrificial effort, an effort embedded with a spiritual blessing of insight
for those participants, provided for them by God.

In terms of learning from the STM experience, Howell discusses the limitation of a
personalistic narrative to address structural inequality and unjust systems. A more holistic
interpretation of service work- installing a water system, for example- could explore the larger
issue of economic development, and the role the U.S. government historically, and consumerism
currently, plays in that process. In a similar way, the focus on personal relationships as a means
of addressing the needs of poor Dominicans, obscures the inefficient use of resources such as
time and money.
What was not clear to the American Christians in Howell’s study is clear to the communities that are being served. For example, Van Engen (2005) recorded a conversation with the director of a Honduran orphanage, where a group of eighteen students raised $25,000 to fly in for a week during their spring break. They painted walls, cleaned the playground and played with the children. One student commented that “my trip… was such a blessing! It was amazing the way the staff cared for those children. I really grew as a Christian there” (p. 20). The director confided that the amount of money raised by the students was over half the operating budget of the orphanage, which supplies staff salaries, building maintenance, food, and clothing for the children. The director lamented that the orphanage could have done so much more to meet their needs with a financial donation of that size, rather than host the students in exchange for low labor work and play time with the children.

In the same way that STM travel holds the tension between tourist activity and mission work, Howell contends that it also holds a tension between learning and doing. If touring is self-indulgent, then learning is also a self-centered, intellectual pursuit to the utilitarian pragmatism of the white, suburban, evangelical community. One of the overlapping narratives of tourism, pilgrimage and STM travel is the anticipated outcome of personal change. The tourist and pilgrim both employ introspection and education, but the STM participant looks for transformation through service and the relationships that develop as a result. In Howell’s analysis, the learning is often secondary to, if not in tension with, the purpose of the travel experience. Similar to the research question posed in this study, Howell asks,

“How does a STM trip become something other than an encounter in which the guiding narrative of personalism, transcendent equality and individualism are reproduced to the exclusion of structural insights and long-term commitments? How can these trips become opportunities to
create long-lasting and significant links between Christian communities, while helping those who travel to interpret the encounter in a transformative way?” (p. 205).

Priest and Priest (2008) add that, even in STM travel sponsored by religious academic institutions, there seems to be “a complete disconnect” between the services performed and the learning opportunities inherent in that service (p. 68). They suggest that seminaries and Christian colleges offer a course taught by a missiologist, so that the best of missiological insight could be brought to bear on the set of practices currently associated with STM travel.

**Change as New Behavior**

While it is true that most proponents of STM travel as a vehicle for change cite general benefits, and critics cite very specific instances of harm rather than help provided, there are examples in the literature of individuals and congregations who have taken concrete steps toward integrating the experience into their American lives.

Seeing God at work in a new context gave STM participants from a Presbyterian church in Oklahoma a vision for outreach in their own community. After visiting a church in Tanzania, their congregation began a mutual relationship with an African-American congregation across town, sharing the work of several joint ministries (Hardy 2001). Individual stories of changed behavior included a middle-aged man who started a carpentry ministry after working on building projects in Costa Rica, and a retired church member who moved from being an observer of ministry to restructuring his time to focus on missions, eventually becoming the project manager for a church partnership with Habitat for Humanity. A single woman shared her story:

“Now that I am back home I take time for personal study almost every day. I think that before the mission trip, I never truly understood my need to do so on a regular basis… I relied a lot on myself and included the Lord when
To the overlap of STM with tourism, Adeney (2006) provides an example of a woman who vacationed regularly in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. She and her husband made intentional connections with the hotel staff and street vendors. They eventually met a local pastor and a community of squatters in the city dump. After returning home she engaged her congregation, community and extended friends to fund a clean water project for the Mexican church. Even after her untimely death, her family and friends have continued to support the outreach programs of that small Mexican congregation.

Integrating learning from an experience, such as a STM trip, implies that learning has visible indicators as changes are made. Vella (2008) uses a three-fold measure to identify and document the process: learning, transfer, and impact. She suggests that indicators of learning can be seen during the experience itself, and the transfer of that new knowledge, attitude or skill is visible when incorporated into a different context, in this case, back home in the United States. The tourist in Puerto Vallarta is an example of that kind of transfer. Impact is the collective result of changes throughout a system or organization. Given the annual number of STM participants-1.6 million- one could reasonably expect to see a ripple effect in sending congregations, communities and across the country, over time, from such a “life changing” experience. Unfortunately, there is no documentation to substantiate an outcome that could be termed “impact” by Vella’s definition.
Learning from Experience

Clearly critics of STM travel are concerned with the continual account of changed lives despite the lack of concrete measures in terms of increased giving, changes in consumptive practices, participation in local service opportunities, or spiritual development. Probasco (2013) reiterates that

“many of the mechanisms used to explain the ‘transformational’ effects of travel rely strongly on the immediacy and physical proximity of a trip experience. Culture shock, emotionally resonant encounters with hosts, and the emotional impact of witnessing dramatic poverty have all been speculated as possible mechanisms for opening travelers to changing their lives” (p. 218).

The link between experience and learning is articulated here by Probasco as an “opening” to change in a participant’s life. The literature on experiential learning provides insight into how to explore, perhaps broaden, that opening into personal meaning making and change. This section sets out a definition of learning from experience, a theoretical base, and key practices that are relevant to the context of STM travel.

As articulated earlier, learning from experience in this research project is defined as contextualized meaning making, or constructing knowledge in a distinctive setting. Fenwick (2003) stresses that the contexts in which we move shape the nature of our experiences, in fact, the experiences themselves can be constructed and bound within the parameters of a particular cultural discourse. She admonishes that

“We must seriously consider our entanglements with our cultural contexts before we assume, unproblematically, that we simply enter an experience, reflect upon it to make
meaning, then apply its lessons in a process we like to think of as learning” (p. 19).

Fenwick outlines five theoretical perspectives on learning from experience: Constructivist, Situative, Psychoanalytic, Critical Cultural, and Complexity. A constructivist theory of experiential learning holds that individuals construct meanings, by a process of critical reflection, from their experiences to produce knowledge. That knowledge can be articulated and transferred to new situations. This theory is relevant to the research question guiding this project, as STM participants consider their experience in light of their past experience, Christian worldview, and personal values. Because those variables are broadly shaped by the American culture in which they live, and specifically by the church culture in which they engage, Fenwick’s Situative orientation also has application. What constitutes meaningful action for a particular individual is, in part, a function of the beliefs and practices of the congregation of which they are a part, and which organized and facilitated the STM trip. Howell’s (2009) research on the influence of Christian narratives, as mentioned earlier, is an example of a Christian community of practice that shapes meaning making.

Critical Reflection

A key practice in the process of learning from experience is critical reflection. Zepke and Leach (2002) argue that for experience, albeit idiosyncratic, to become educational it cannot be accepted at face value, but has to be subjected to critical analysis. Reflection that is critical requires a suspension of belief as unexamined assumptions are brought to the forefront and explored in light of new knowledge or experience. Brookfield (1987) considers such reflection a “lived activity,” (p. 10) and one that is often most productive in dialogue. He outlines three
components of a critically reflective process: identifying and challenging assumptions, exploring and imagining alternatives, and alternating phases of analysis and action.

Cox (2005), in her report on a reflective practice model, is quick to point out that knowing what reflection is does not necessarily enable practitioners to use reflection in meaningful ways. Her recommendation is the use of a reflective model suitable for the intended objectives of the process; in her situation a purposeful debriefing model consisted of three questions, 1) What happened?, 2) How do you feel?, and 3) What does it all mean? Boud and Walker (1996) pose the same three questions as 1) returning to experience, 2) attending to feelings, and 3) reevaluating experience. There are many reflective process models, and Cox notes that most of them closely align with Kolb’s learning cycle (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Miller (2000) also addresses this issue of basing a learning process on a discursive account about the past brought into present dialogue. To ask one’s self, “What happened?” or “returning to the experience,” is subjective, even when several individuals who had the same experience are in dialogue about the same event. Miller acknowledges the reality that “I have told a story about my experience. This autobiographical account has involved sifting, editing, and summarizing of events and experience and is the product of my own subjectivity” (p. 78). According to Cox (2005) the selection and accuracy of details from an event are all viewed as truthful reflection, regardless of the exactness, as the individual’s perception and the meaning they attach to it are the only reality they experience.

A connection in the STM literature to critical reflection is a study by Walling, Eriksson, Meese, Ciovica, and Gorton (2006) that explored cultural identity change following reentry in
STM participants. Eight months post-trip the researchers conducted a focus group of twenty Christian college students, identifying five major themes: Negative reaction to home country, Personal growth/Learning, Cultural awareness, Positive/Neutral reaction to home country, and Adjustment. A negative reaction to home country was the strongest theme, in that their STM trip caused them to be critical of their home culture, or view it with anger or guilt. The second strongest theme was personal growth and learning. In this category the most intense comments were related to understanding their identity as Americans in relation to the material poverty that they witnessed. “Interestingly,” the authors stated, “only one student talked directly about spiritual growth. Given the evangelical nature of their international experiences, it is somewhat surprising that spiritual themes were not more prominent” (p. 161). The study did not include critical reflection on the assumptions students had of the political, economic, historical or spiritual context of their own country, or of those of the various countries they visited. I suggest that a process of critical reflection might have engaged the students in an exploration of their American Christian beliefs in the context of an international evangelical experience, and perhaps deepened or expanded their spiritual development. A way forward might have been developed that deconstructed their anger toward American culture and identified action steps that brought their spiritual belief to application in their context.

Leadership

Zepke & Leach (2002) propose an alternative process to individualized meaning making, which they view as severely narrow compared to knowledge generated in association with others. Their construct has three features. First, that critical reflection should be utilized to access underpinning beliefs, values, emotions and attitudes that influence individual meaning making. Second, because learners are always connected to other people in a particular context, meaning
making necessarily involves interactions with other people. And third, that the critical reflection and collective learning is maximized when there is a more knowledgeable “other” who can introduce questions, alternative interpretations and new resources. The “other” could be a teacher or facilitator, an author, a serendipitous encounter or any other form of media. A person with that influential, or leadership role, can also identify unheard voices, viewpoints outside the official historical context, or those voices in the immediate conversation that could be lost under those of more dominating group members.

The idea of leadership in the meaning making process was addressed in the STM literature as well. Johnstone (2006) provides a paradigm for leaders to frame STM travel as an educational experience. In his view critical reflection must be intentionally facilitated in order to have enduring significance in the lives of those who engage in the process. In addition to post-trip debriefing, Lewis-Anderson (2009) suggests participants meet with an accountability partner for a minimum of six months to ensure they are putting their goals into action and creating new behavioral patterns. In a list of seven best practices for STM travel, LeFeber (2011) names qualified leadership as a best practice, calling for leaders with spiritually mature character, appropriate skills, and values that will empower and equip STM participants in their meaning making process.

Horton (2011), in his survey of 600 college students returning from STM trips, noted that without adequate guidance for incorporating practical changes in attitude and lifestyle, the students simply experienced guilt, and then returned to their previous lifestyles. He says leaders fall short of providing the extensive effort necessary for lasting change in their student participants. Of the 32 students he interviewed, only seven indicated they had any kind of formal follow up session, and over half reported no post-trip session of any sort.
In another STM scenario, Linhart (2010) observed that adult leaders on the trip he attended did not provide intervention and coaching in what could have been teachable moments, so that the students never engaged many of the deeper social and theological issues that are important to the experiential learning process. He noted how infrequently students changed their prior conclusions in the face of disconfirming observations and experience. Linhart surmised that the quick pace of the trip, long travel times and full schedule, were barriers to teaching or practicing the skills of critical analysis. Ballard (2013) concurs, adding that the skill of well-timed, provocative questions to guide reflective practice are crucial leadership tasks in the facilitation of learning from experience.

Blomberg (2008) views the role of mentor/leader as crucial to grasping the significance of what was discovered during the STM trip itself. Multiple debriefing venues over a period of time provide a space to learn how to learn, that is, to question, assess and recalibrate prior values and beliefs. The leader also incarnates a coherent, faith-based worldview. Blomberg sees the church as the locus of Christian faith development, a community that will practice and demonstrate the viability of that worldview, and support the learning process of each individual. Similarly, Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen & Brown (2006) conclude their study with the suggestion that for positive changes in STM participants to last, they must be reinforced by a set of practices, relationships, and virtues taught in the home setting.

Occhipinti (2009) echoes that sentiment, stating that returning STM volunteers may feel profoundly transformed, but there is no strong social recognition of the transformation itself. A brief report to the congregation on the work that was accomplished during the trip is common, but Occhipinti found that volunteers found it difficult to find a space within the congregation to talk about what the experience meant to them. Given these multiple directives for reflection and
critical analysis, under the guidance of competent leadership, over time in a group setting, makes my research question of meaning making within a small congregational group setting a compelling and timely one.

Meaning Making in a Small Group Context

Many faith traditions utilize small groups within the congregation for organizational and spiritual development purposes. A congregational small group could be considered a community of practice, following Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder’s (2002) definition as a group of people who are passionate about improving performance within a domain of shared knowledge and practices. Congregational small groups could be also be defined as nontraditional learning opportunities, as they are typically peer led and self-managed, that is, outside the formal educational system of the church. Despite their informal nature, these small groups carry the Christian narrative that shapes the belief and practices of members as they live out their religious commitments (Stanczak, 2006).

Small group studies in other disciplines.

This section overviews six relevant studies from related disciplines, where learning from experience was situated in a collective meaning making process. First, Guldberg and Pilkington (2006) studied nontraditional students in a professional development course, which was designed around interaction, collaboration and the development of reflection and active learning. The dual purpose of the community of practice approach was first to “construct meaning from a personal perspective, and the second to refine and confirm this understanding collaboratively with a community of learners” (p. 161). Their findings showed a sense of identity developing through stages of shared similarities and differences among the group members, and
that identity was enhanced as trust grew among the students. Affective issues of empathy and awareness of others’ needs and perspectives were observed.

In another professional development group, Nelson, Deuel, Slavit and Kennedy (2010) looked specifically at the dialogue that created and supported new knowledge production. Their research showed an important shift from conversation primarily concerned with sharing information to a dialogue that was more focused on posing questions. This process was initially hindered by two factors, first, a congenial school culture where differences were not deeply examined, and second, the lack of skilled facilitators, which slowed the inquiry process.

The shift to a dialogue that combines conversation and inquiry with reflective practices is addressed in the context of service learning by Bringle & Hatcher (1999). They contend that the experience of serving in the community, in and of itself, does not necessarily produce learning. An inquiry-based learning approach was used to examine existing beliefs of students who served and to use that analysis to inform future action. The article concluded with a variety of reflection practices utilized by the authors.

Reflection is also the teaching vehicle for Seaman and Rheingold’s (2013) study of circle talks as situated, experiential learning groups. Their data was drawn from a diversity program that used adventure-based and service activities as the primary means of instruction. One of their observations was that a divide between experience and reflection creates an artificial process model, as opposed to a conceptualization of learning as reflection within the experience itself. In addition they point out that, although learning is situated as the discussion moves from individual to group praxis, the general discussion addresses the application of learning beyond the circle. Conceptualization is socially constructed and new knowledge is distributed outward.
O’Grady (2010) used an action research process to explore communities of practice in a religious education context. He found that the process was most productive when driven by the participants’ own concerns, and consequently knowledge evolved via practice, reflection and dialogue on topics that were relevant and timely. As an example, O’Grady described a particular group of gifted and talented students, who were chosen as a sample because previous findings pointed to religious education as often academically unchallenging. The storytelling format that was utilized brought individual views forward for dialogue and reflection, making connections between the groups’ experience, beliefs, and the historical context in which they were situated.

In a more specific conceptual paper, Roxburgh (2012) names Christian practices as socially constructed habits formed within small groups, and those groups are set within the local church context. His view is not in opposition to the role of individual or “inward” practices, but rather that the Christian narrative is a perpetual creation of new knowledge, which is enacted, reflected upon, adjusted and discussed in community. “These practices produce a culture,” states Roxburgh, “an embedded, observable way of being in the world” (p. 8).

All of these studies contain elements that are relevant to the discussion of meaning making following a STM trip: non-formal learning, the affective domain, dialogue, reflective practices, application of new knowledge, contextualization, and learning in community. Based on those connections, the small group process stands as a feasible, applicable approach to the central research question.

**Application to short-term missions.**

There is one study in the STM literature addressing post-trip follow up in terms of collective meaning making. Bain (2015) centered his dissertation research around returning STM
participants with interviews to confirm that post-trip follow-up was indeed lacking, although the literature is clear on that point. Second, he generated five recommendations for developing a classroom course design. Finally, he created what he called the *Missionary Academy*, a group process intended to provide discipleship through accountability, encouragement, intentional reflection, and community dialogue. A group of seven former STM participants met for a two-hour discussion once a month for six months. This was not the operationalization of his course design framework, but rather an open dialogue with a three-fold stated purpose: to increase Gospel fluency, cultivate Gospel-centered community, and promote Gospel activity. Four participants finished the six-month project, and feedback from the group centered on managing the time and space between meetings in terms of remembering the content of the session conversations, completing intended actions, and feeling a sense of community support. Given my previously stated assumptions surrounding learning and small group processes, the title of this dissertation, *The impact of short-term missions on the long-term missional development of participants*, sounded like a promising contribution to post-trip learning. I found a disconnect, however, between the research that was conducted, in light of the existing work that has been done, the recommendations resulting from his research, and the quasi-application in the form of a small dialogue cohort, which did not appear to be successful in meeting the stated goals.

**Theoretical Framework**

The preceding research review showed that STM participants have common expectations, various interpretations of unfamiliar cultures, and challenges learning from their experience, that is, articulating and integrating the insight gained from their experience once they return home. Given the potential for making meaning of those STM trips through dialogue, reflection and action within a small group setting, my research question was framed within two adult learning
constructs: Transformative Learning Theory and Situated Learning Theory. This section provides an overview of each theory, with relevant connections to the STM literature.

**Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative theory, originally developed by Jack Mezirow, is a constructivist orientation that describes learning as an examination of meaning perspectives, or worldviews. “In adulthood,” Mezirow explains, “informed decisions require not only an awareness of the source and content of our knowledge, values and feelings, but also critical reflection on the validity of their assumptions or premises” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 7). This awareness is often precipitated by a disorienting dilemma, which is followed by critical reflection, rational discourse, and the integration of new roles or relationships. Crossing cultures on a short-term mission trip sets the conditions for such a disorienting dilemma that can be leveraged toward new understanding and behavior.

There are three studies in the reviewed literature on STM travel that specifically used transformative learning theory, and they are overviewed here. First, Trinitapoli and Vaisey (2009) tested the hypothesis that participation in a STM trip was a probable source of religious change, conceptualized both in terms of religious beliefs and religious practices. Using longitudinal data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, Trinitapoli and Vaisey showed that the STM experience was transformative insofar as it galvanized the pre-existing religious beliefs and practices of participants. Although transformative learning is most often referred to as a change in frames of reference, Mezirow (2000) also includes the process of elaborating existing frames of reference in the definition. It is in this sense that the authors consider the STM experience to be transformational.
Secondly, Henderson (2009) modified the Principles of Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) for use in debriefing the STM travel experience, based on his belief that encountering stressful incidents - the disorienting dilemma of Transformative Learning Theory - and crossing cultures on a STM trip were similar events. His model included preparatory meetings, daily morning discussions during the trip, “interpretive defusings” (daily evening discussions during the trip), and a two-hour debriefing at the conclusion of the trip. Questions used to guide the discussions fell into four categories:

- Examination (“What did you see? What did you hear? What did you feel?”)
- Exploration (“What’s broken? Why is it broken?”)
- Education (“What needs to be done? What does your Christian faith tell you? What have you learned?”)
- Exhortation (“What can you do? What will happen when you go home?”)

Henderson is clear that his methodology is not a substitute for regular, ongoing pastoral ministry intended to continue the transformational process initiated by the STM trip. He suggests ministering in a group setting during the weeks following the participants’ return home. Although Henderson states he has used this process for several years, he does not provide any concrete evidence of transformative change.

Finally, Lederleitner (2008) expands transformative learning theory to a discussion of the construction of meaning, and includes emotion, unconscious processes, soul and spirit, and relational ways of knowing with the more traditional rationality that characterizes the transformative process. Lederleitner recommends a curriculum focused on cross-cultural ministry for churches to utilize. She believes that, “transformation theory reflects a process that
requires risk, the presence of community, dialogue with others, and a supportive environment” (p. 37).

**Situated Learning Theory**

Situated Learning, as conceptualized by Jean Lave, is a process of knowledge acquisition as a function of participation in a group. The learning is in context, rather than being transferred in abstract from the classroom to the scenario where it will be applied, and occurs in social interaction and collaboration. A “community of practice” is the term most often associated with this learning theory, that is, a specific type of social structure with a specific purpose (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The congregational philosophy of meeting the needs of members in small groups provides a community of practice where participants returning from a short-term mission trip could make meaning of their experience in a supportive, collaborative environment.

The notion of communicative space, as conceived by Habermas, could provide a lens through which to examine the small group process. Bevan (2013) explains communicative space in action as a process whereby “people relate to each other through co-operative interpretation of their experiences, during which they understand them...[and are] capable of acting on that knowledge” (p. 14). A critical view of that dialogue would attend to the socially-constructed meaning structure of Christian narratives around “missions” and how that ideology shapes the interpretation and subsequent behaviors of STM participants. Kemmis (2008) agrees that, following Habermas, truth cannot be grasped by individual praxis, but exists in a public sphere in which a group of people explore a particular question. The role of the researcher is to open a communicative space that not only gives voice to the participants for individual meaning making, but provides an opportunity to examine the way in which those participants interact with
each other (Wicks and Reason, 2009). Such a critical epistemology could explore how or why the transformative learning theory dissipates before STM participants integrate new behaviors. In Habermasian terms, the question could be posed “How do the participants’ lifeworlds, with a new consciousness from the cross cultural experience, navigate the system of an American church culture?” This is another way of framing the leadership needs expressed in the STM specific literature.

There is no relevant literature on STM participants and situated learning theory. Based on the findings of two earlier pilot studies, and drawing on my personal experience of working on a church staff and with STM trips over the last ten years, the small group scenario, despite the potential as a setting for collective meaning making, is not often utilized to those ends. For this reason, in view of the studies that have been reviewed, and in relation to transformative and situated learning theories, my proposed research question is an appropriate contribution to the field.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The central research question, “In what ways could small group processes enable returning participants to learn from their experience, and support the integration of that understanding into their lives?” was explored through qualitative methods of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Kemmis, 2002; Patton, 2002; Taylor, Rudolph, & Foldy, 2002). This chapter begins with a justification of qualitative methods, in general, and PAR in particular, as appropriate approaches to the research question. Following that is a discussion of the specific research design, important information sources, the sample population, data collection methods, and the structure of data management and analysis. Finally, the study limitations and relevant ethical considerations are addressed. The chapter ends with a short summary which highlights aspects of the methodology that was utilized.

Qualitative Research

Purpose is a defining force in research; design, methodology, analysis, and reporting style all flow from the stated purpose of the study. The concept of learning from experience, as outlined in this paper, was situated in a broad theoretical perspective of social constructivism. Creswell (2009) details the assumptions of a social constructivist perspective as 1) individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work, 2) individuals develop subjective meanings of their experience in the world, 3) meaning making is a social activity arising out of human community, and 4) that human community is situated in a historical and social context. The design of a study bound by this worldview should be built on an exploration of the complex perceptions of individuals toward their experience. Questions would need to be broad and general to facilitate a process of harvesting impressions, thoughts, assumptions, and
conclusions that each individual makes in regard to their own experience. Because each person replies on their particular perception of the situation, a social constructivist approach utilizes conversation or interactions with other people in order to gain a holistic impression. Such a collective, dialogic procedure also provides a generative meaning making process, where perceptions and conclusions are affirmed or challenged by other participants. In addition to the individual and collective meaning making, the process itself can be observed and deconstructed as part of addressing the study questions.

Thus, both the research question and this philosophical perspective dictated a research strategy that was qualitative in nature. A qualitative study explores a real-world situation in depth and detail, is flexible enough to pursue emerging paths of discovery, and replies on a purposeful selection of the participants. Given that participants in a STM trip are having a joint experience, influenced by the context and narrative of missions, and lacking a space to process their experience, a participatory action research strategy, or method, of data collection was chosen as most productive for the intent of this study.

**Action Research**

As a broad qualitative approach, Action Research is a widely used and reliable method in the social sciences, and has a rich history in adult education as well. Glass, Erdem, & Bartholomew (2012) point to Lewin and Lindemann as early educators who leveraged the action research approach as a “form of social inquiry through which members of social groups interact with one another, engage in open dialogue about their intergroup relationships, and collectively participate in a learning process to create social change” (p. 274). The action in action research starts by challenging assumptions undergirding mental models and unexamined habits, and
naming the systemic context in which those mental models and habitual actions are situated. Patton (2002) states that action research explicitly and purposefully becomes part of the change process by virtue of the participants’ authentic engagement in challenging assumptions and naming contextual factors. With the acquisition of critical inquiry skills, the collaborative process can extend beyond the group’s engagement as new behavior is prototyped, adjusted and ultimately incorporated into their lives. Participation in the creation of new knowledge and behavior also tends to engender the ownership necessary for sustained application of those new behaviors.

**Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

By way of a working definition, *participatory* action research, as utilized in this study, is characterized by the role of the researcher as participant in the construction of knowledge, the promotion of critical self-awareness leading to individual as well as social change, and the collaborative process of planning, implementing and disseminating data (Kemmis, 2002; McIntyre, 2008; Taylor, Rudolph, & Foldy, 2002). Although PAR has not been used in the current research on short-term missions, it was an appropriate approach for this project for the following reasons.

First, the process of learning and meaning making are inextricably intertwined. Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning theory, which undergirds the conceptual framework of the study, describes the connection as

“always involving making a new experience explicit and schematizing, appropriating, and acting upon it. We seek validation when, in the process of interpreting an experience, we find reason to question truth, appropriateness, or authenticity of either a newly expressed or implied idea or one acquired through prior learning. It is important to recognize
how crucial the validation of knowledge is to the learning process in adults” (p. 11).

Collaborative meaning making in PAR enhanced this process as participants considered diverse interpretations of similar experiences, and provided validity checks through dialogue and reflection on those interpretations (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000).

Second, PAR supported both the constructivist individual meaning making process, and the more situated, even critical cultural process, of exploring how the STM trip experience was shaped by faith traditions, and how the collective experience of a STM team could benefit the congregation and future STM travel (Fenwick, 2000). This multi-layered approach was important because the dialogue between participants was shaped by American culture and their particular church doctrine and traditions. This deep thought structure was always present but had not been previously examined, even though that tacit knowledge shaped the very process of interpreting experience and choosing new beliefs or actions (Bohm, 1996).

Third, as researcher and participant, I brought additional perspective and experience to the process, and contributed to the safety of the sessions as an equal dialogue partner, rather than an expert doing research on participants. My background in instructional design was utilized in the application of a particular epistemological approach to the session format, which is detailed later in this chapter. In addition, my experience leading cross cultural trips provided a rapport and a common reference point for conversation, while my experience with facilitation enabled me to create sufficient space for generative conversation, open emerging questions, themes and outcomes (Heron, 1999). This dual role is a critical component of participatory action research, as explored in the following section.
Role of the researcher.

Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007), following the work of Vygotsky, describe learning as a dialogic process where a more knowledgeable “other” facilitates the process for the group. Since participants’ interpretative categories are generally products of long histories and traditions, the researcher must be able to apply a critical epistemology to the design and facilitation of the process. In addition, she must be fully present in relationship to each individual, and fully grounded in her own multiple ways of knowing (Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks, & Kasl, 2006). Ettling (2002) describes the leader as a “germ” in facilitating a field of mutuality for learning. She explains, “We do not see ourselves constructing this field, but rather engendering it through our own ways of being ‘with’ and being ‘in’ the group” (The Import of Relational Bonding, para. 5).

In addition to personal presence, the participant researcher is responsible to create a communal space conducive to authentic meaning making. Habermas advocates for attention to issues of safety and inclusiveness that support the dialogic process, and which he calls the creation of a communicative space (Kemmis, 2008). Four Habermasian presuppositions for discourse that supports a communicative space are 1) no one with a relevant contribution should be excluded, 2) every person has an equal right to participate, 3) participants should mean what they say, and ) 4) communication must be free of coercion.

Within that communicative space, Gunnlaugson (2005) describes the potential for critical discourse to expand toward generative dialogue, following the work of William Isaacs and Otto Scharmer from the MIT Dialogue Project. “The discourse praxis of generative dialogue,” explains Gunnlaugson, “serves as a practical context for exploring changes in learners’ self-
related lines by offering a ‘holding environment’ that supports the development of more complex
stages of consciousness” (Change in Learner’s Stages Within Self-Related Lines, para. 5). In
other words, the process gives participants an experience of moving from “being” one’s thoughts
or feelings to “having” them. With practice, this praxis provides a disposition and a setting for
accessing other ways of knowing that would otherwise be suppressed or left unexplored in
typical group dialogue.

Wicks & Reason (2009) offer an analogy for a communicative space where the
participants’ lifeworlds, as Habermas terms the individual’s worldview, meet the systemic
structures in which they live,

“Rather like tidal wetlands where salt and fresh water mix,
these are not restful places but continually changing and
offering new possibilities and challenges. And, just as
liminal spaces in natural ecologies offer specialist niches,
communicative spaces offer possibilities of new forms of
living relationships quite different from those which are
solidly rooted in the system or the lifeworld” (p. 258).

The “tidal wetland” describes Gunnlaugson’s holding environment, a space that the researcher
takes the lead in creating, and yet where she maintains a balance of neither completely neutral
and objective nor completely biased and subjective (Sandberg & Wallo, 2013).

Issacs (1999) outlines four practices that build communicative space which informed the
four dialogue parameters that I instituted in the initial meeting, and modeled throughout the
project. The first parameter was authentic, rather than abstract sharing. For example, a common
remark in conversation might be, “Everyone is so busy these days!” This is an abstraction
generalized to a large number of people. An authentic comment would simply be, “I am so busy
these days.” This shift to personal truth required regular reminders as habitual patterns of
conversation were typically general in nature. This is an important shift, however, as the beginning of generative dialogue rests in honest acknowledgement of the present. Scharmer (2007) explains that we have a personal “blind spot,” in that we perceive reality as something separate from and outside us- something that happens to us rather than a construct we produce.

The second parameter was focused listening. Scharmer (2007) outlines four basic types of listening, 1) downloading, or affirming what you already know, 2) factual, or attending to new object-based information, 3) emphatic, or listening in relationship to the “other,” and 4) generative, or a collective openness to the emerging field of the future. It was assumed that the fourth level of listening would be beyond the scope of this research project, but the first three were operationalized by directives to refrain from giving advice, ask open questions for deeper understanding, and focus on the view of the speaker rather than on formulating a reply.

The third parameter was accommodating silence. Although periods of silence can be uncomfortable in typical conversations, they served an important purpose in this PAR project. For those participants whose learning style was one of reflection and contemplation, the silence afforded an opportunity for processing. Comments and ideas had a space to germinate, rather than be closely followed by the thoughts of another person. This practice of respecting silence was a bit of a challenge for those extraverted participants who were eager to share their perspective on every topic.

The final parameter was one of confidentiality. The research project was framed by practices intended to respect individual privacy by using pseudonyms when reporting findings and by the secure storage of data that was collected. Participants were asked to refrain from sharing the comments of other group members while in conversation outside the formal inquiry.
process. Sharing personal reflections in relevant conversation aimed at operationalizing learning, however, was appropriate given the format of open research boundaries (Heron & Reason, 2001).

These four parameters were set with the intention of creating a communicative space for the meaning making process. As mentioned in the first chapter, I have worked on a church staff and am familiar with the functionality of small groups in that setting. I am also familiar with generative dialogue and accessing multiple ways of knowing, having led small groups in various settings for many years. My assumptions and theoretical frame of reference was made explicit to each group at the beginning of the sessions, and I explained these four parameters in terms of own experience of creating conversation boundaries that enhance, rather than restrict, a dialogic process. In summary, the role of the researcher in PAR is to create an environment, a communicative space, and to design and support a process within that environment where the group can learn from their experiences.

Research sample.

Two churches partnered in this research project, and from each church one group was established as a purposeful sampling of American Protestants who had participated in a STM trip within the last year. This first group consisted of four Caucasian women from a traditional denominational church, hereafter referred to as the Traditional Church group. This congregation of around 3,000 members was founded in 1936, with a large campus in a historic neighborhood of a large, Southern city. The church has hosted STM trips to Guatemala, Nicaragua, Haiti, Costa Rica and Uganda, which are organized by various outside agencies. The Missions Pastor described the STM program as an effort to build long-term partnerships with international
ministries, and to “empower” members in a general sense. He was not clear if the STM programs impacted financial giving, but he did note an impact on relationships, in that participants were “people you’ve met and know and are growing with,” and that “the people who go down [to another country] consistently go down,” meaning that the church members were creating and sustaining relationships built around the mission experience (J. Baker, personal communication, June 3, 2015).

The Missions Pastor provided contact information for members who participated in a service trip to Haiti in February of 2015. This trip was facilitated by a local organization with an active volunteer who attends this particular church. With encouragement from another member of the congregation who participated in an earlier pilot study, four women committed to the research project. Two of the women were in their 50s and two were in their 60s. The two younger women had completed their first STM trip, one after long deliberation following the STM experience of her husband and other children. Even though she enjoyed hearing stories about their adventures she was hesitant to travel to a materially poor country, navigate multiple “unknowns” in terms of place and process, and engage with people she did not know. The second woman spontaneously decided to take her first STM trip and had no specific expectations. The two women in their 60s had participated in multiple international and domestic mission trips over their adult years.

The Traditional Church group met in a classroom in their historic church building on Monday afternoons. The room had windows and good lighting, and we met around a table near a piano and bulletin board with photos of the special needs adult members who used the room on Sunday mornings for class. The women would often come from tennis or yoga, bringing their own water bottles, and greeted each other warmly. The atmosphere was pleasant and cordial; a
result of the friendly chatter of checking in with each other about family, work and other activities, and following up on conversations that were held outside the formal research session.

The second group consisted of three women and one man, all Caucasian, from a nondenominational community church in a mid-sized Southern town, hereafter referred to as the Community Church group. The congregation was founded in 1998, and currently has over 4,000 members. In 2012 the church partnered with a national sending agency sponsoring projects in Haiti, Kenya, and Uganda, and began a relationship with a village in Kenya. The goal of the church staff is to utilize STM travel to “deepen the partnership we have forged between our communities” (J. Bow, personal communication, February 23, 2015). Each trip is facilitated by the national sending agency, providing team leader training and logistics coordinators on site in the village. The Teaching Pastor of the congregation provided contact information for members who had traveled to the village, although the enthusiasm of a particular participant was the most productive recruiting vehicle.

The community church sponsors two identical trips to the village every year, and the four church members who agreed to participate in the research project represented three different trips. Of those four participants, two were women in their 30s, one on her first STM trip, and the other on her second and acting in the role of team leader for her group. The third woman was a mother of three teenagers, and their entire family of five traveled together on the STM trip. The fourth participant was a male in his early 50s, who traveled with his teenage son and daughter. None of the family members who traveled with these participants were a part of the research project.
The Community Church group met in the evening at the home of the woman whose entire family participated in the STM trip. It was in an expensive neighborhood, although that socioeconomic level was not representative of the entire group. Snacks were served at every session, with participants sharing what became an unspoken task of providing bottles of wine. The atmosphere was upbeat and energetic, and at four of the six sessions the group elected to stay late and continue the conversation.

Table 3.1 provides a combined overview of the participant demographics.

Table 3.1

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annette</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delia</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrison</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Session design.

Each research group met for six sessions of 90 minutes each, over the course of two months. The PAR process of dialogue, reflection and action was divergent, in that participants explored different issues on successive cycles, with research boundaries that were open to relevant participant interactions outside the formal inquiry process (Heron & Reason, 2001). In fact, each session had a handout for continued reflection between sessions (See Appendix B:
Session Materials). Repeat cycling of the process enhanced the validity of the findings, and such
divergence provided a basis for participant triangulation, that is, a collaborative phenomenology
by three or more people concerning validity of experience and interpretation (Bray, Lee, Smith
and Yorks, 2000).

The sessions were framed by Heron and Reason’s (2001) extended epistemology of
knowledge acquisition (See Appendix A: Research Session Design). The epistemology is
extended in that it reaches beyond theoretical knowledge to incorporate experiential,
presentational, propositional and practical knowing.

Experiential knowing is simply the encounter of experience. Reality is articulated through
participative resonance with a place, person or process, and that articulation frames the “knower”
as both attuned to, and distinct from, the encounter. To that end, the first session was designed to
draw participants back to their experience of engaging with another culture by way of stories and
photographs. Those photographs that had special significance were displayed in Smart phone
galleries, a hardback, professionally bound collection, and by removing a framed photograph
from the wall to pass around the group. Participants were also asked to articulate specific
experiences that resonated with them. During the session pressing questions with which
participants returned were collected on index cards, and we analyzed the process each person
employed to describe their experience and to pursue their questions. In terms of logistics, an
overview of the six sessions was provided, and participants signed consent forms.

Presentational knowing is grounded in experiential knowing, and is evidenced in an
intuitive grasp of the significance of the encounter. That understanding is expressed through
forms of imagery, symbolism or emotion. Presentational knowing was utilized in the second
session by articulating the emotions of encountering the “other” and generating “found” poetry.
Sprow (2006) employs “found poetry” as a means to access the essence of an experience without depending on cognitive processing. From the collection of words and phrases the group articulated, in terms of their observations, questions and emotions, each person choose those that were the most significant, and arranged them as a poem. In this way the content was “found” from the earlier work. This exploration of emotional impact was more easily accessed outside the familiar, cognitive parameters of discussion, especially in conversations where notions of creating and sustaining communicative space were new and not easily operationalized by the second session.

The third session shifted to propositional knowing, which is framed by words and concepts. This session explored knowing “about” the purpose, principles and practices of short-term mission travel in relation to issues of poverty and American Christianity. This session invited a critical approach to unpacking the ways in which religious narrative shaped our understanding, especially in light of biblical injunctions to social justice behavior. For example, the opening partner discussion prompt was “What do you mean when you talk about going on a ‘mission’ trip? How is a mission trip different from a working vacation or a volunteer service trip? What is the mission? Whose mission is it?”

The fourth session focused on practical knowing, or the exercise of diverse skills and competencies. Heron & Reason (1997) explain that practical knowledge “fulfills the three prior forms of knowing [and] brings them to fruition in purposive deeds” (p. 277). The bulk of this session was individual journaling regarding personal initiatives toward new behavior. Each participant had a worksheet with a conceptual map linking experience to personal goals and resources, which then funneled into naming a new behavior to undertake. There was also a matrix for identifying possible people, scenarios and circumstances that would support, and/or
hinder, integrating this new behavior into their lives. This deep engagement built on personal lived experience and the collective engagement of the group to label what was learned, and plan subsequent practical, albeit idiosyncratic, application. This was an important step, as habits of meaning making and behavior accumulated over many years do not automatically change with a new perspective (Hoggan, 2009).

Sessions five and six explored how the STM trip was situated within the faith tradition and specific congregation where participants were members, and how that context shaped their next steps. Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993) point out that experience is created in the transaction between the learner and the milieu in which he operates, so these participants would necessarily be influenced in their meaning making by the context of their church. Such an influential context also supplies important moral and spiritual grounding that can give sustaining energy and hope to the transformative process on both individual and collective levels (Purpel, 1999).

“Intellectual insight, critical understanding and theoretical power are surely necessary,” continues Purpel, “but clearly insufficient to a pedagogy of transformation because what is also needed lies in the realm of the spirit in such matters as faith, commitment, hope, passion, and devotion (p. 60). Minnich (2005) concurs that “making sense with one another- which is both enabled and limited by culturally framed interactions- is an ongoing project that can never be completed” (p. 4). At the end of session five, the sixth and final session was planned by the group. The intent was to provide a time for creating an action plan whereby their learning could be utilized by the STM programs in each respective church.
**Data Collection Methods**

The six sessions were recorded, and I transcribed the tapes myself. The transcribing process began after the six week research sessions ended; all the Traditional Church sessions were transcribed in sequence and then explored for themes and coded, followed by the same sequence for the Community Church group. This process afforded me the opportunity to relive the conversations of each group without distraction. In both cases, those transcripts were reviewed multiple times in order to “sit” with the data, as Patton (2002) advises. In addition, written documents were collected in three ways. First, the prevailing question each individual had on their mind following their STM experience was written on cards. Second a “Found Poem” was created. Third, reflective journaling was completed between sessions and collected at the last session. During the coding stage member checking was employed with text, email and telephone calls to clarify details or secure verification of information or observations written in my field notes.

**Data Analysis and Synthesis**

Using Miles, Huberman & Saldana’s (2014) suggested qualitative analysis process, the recordings were overviewed for broad, sweeping impressions during a First Cycle coding. Those impressions acted as a reflective prompt for more detailed exploration of activity, language, processes, meaning, and outcomes. The Second Cycle analysis was an inductive process of naming pattern codes such as themes, causes, relationships between people, or theoretical constructs. All coding work was done by hand rather than with software such as NVivo or Weft QDA, which provided additional familiarity with the data.
Ryan & Bernard (2003) suggest that making explicit the technique used for discovering themes is important in that it allows consumers of qualitative research to assess methodological choices, and provides the foundation for subsequent descriptions and analysis. In particular, I was looking for repetitions of phrases or topics, similarities in attitude or experience, and linguistic connectors which might indicate causal relations. I also utilized word lists for emotion, action, and references to scripture. I color coded clusters, grouped and regrouped, created mind maps and matrixes, and took periodic mental breaks so to review the data with a fresh perspective. I questioned my conclusions, using plausibility as a pointer toward thematic threads in hope of determining a reasonable level of critical confirmability. As Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2014) caution, “Trust your ‘plausibility’ intuitions, but don’t fall in love with them” (p. 278).

Once data were organized into themes, and sub categories were identified, a macro-analysis was framed with regard to learning from experience in the particular context of crossing cultures, and on a “mission” trip. Within that framework, collective learning was examined in light of Lave’s Situated Learning Theory (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) and the context of STM travel within the congregation. Continuing the funneling process to the individual level, meaning making was explored through the theoretical lens of Mezirow’s (2000) Transformative Learning theory. An analysis of the small group process circled back to Heron & Reason’s (2001) holistic, extended epistemology of knowledge acquisition, and Habermas’ conceptualization of communicative space (Gunnlaugson, 2005). Particular themes were explored in light of applicable literature, for example, the concept of “doing” versus “being” was unpacked using Fromm’s (1976) critical theories of alienation and automation conformity.
Reliability and Validity

Theme identification is subjective, and the subsequent analysis can yield results that are equally different and useful. While there is no ultimate demonstration of validity, Ryan & Bernard (2003) suggest two useful practices. First, because theme identification involves judgment on the part of the researcher, my intention, bias and process have been articulated by way of personal disclosure, the theories undergirding the conceptual design, and the methodological details as previously discussed. Second, validity can be confirmed by agreement among knowledgeable researchers. In this case, my doctoral committee was chosen for their expertise in qualitative research and their familiarity with the scenario of crossing cultures. They represent Adult and Higher Education programs at Lesley University and Appalachian State University, Missiology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and cross cultural engagement with Global Learning Partners.

Ryan & Bernard (2003) also suggest that participants can be given the opportunity to examine and comment on themes and categories. In this case emically generated themes were reported alongside etic categories (Patton, 2002) and I did not expect all those findings to align with the beliefs held by the study participants. For example, one theme was my observation of participants repeatedly assigning meaning to individual and societal behaviors in unfamiliar cultural contexts.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

As discussed earlier, my familiarity with the context, research procedures and topic helped in the design of the PAR sessions, but could also be a liability when interpreting data. Creswell (2013) cautions researchers who are familiar with their sample population not to
integrate a personal agenda into the analysis process. A reflective journal kept throughout the process provided a space to track my questions, observations and record conflicts with personal interests and the research process. I made a conscious effort to focus on the process of these particular STM participants, and to leverage my experience to accurately document their learning journey, rather than filter the information through my own experience. As Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014) point out, however, qualitative research is never completely objective; it is an iterative process framed by the researcher’s implicit concepts, and self-awareness and care on the part of the researcher is imperative for an ethical process and authentic final product.

General limitations were as follows: the information that was collected was indirect, that is it was filtered through the perception and memory of the participants, it was gathered in a local setting rather than in the natural contexts of Haiti or Kenya (Creswell, 2009), and the quality of the collaborative process was dependent, in part, on my competency as the researcher who designed and facilitated the discussion (Patton, 2002).

I am not affiliated with the staff of the partnering congregations nor the local or national sending agencies. I did not receive funding for this research. I knew one of the eight participants prior to this project. I will provide a summary report to all participants and the staff of both churches, but neither congregation asked me for feedback specific to their STM program.

An official application for review of human subject research was filed with the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The group session designs did not include topics or questions that put participants at risk of stress or harm, and they were be free to terminate their participation at any time. The group sessions took place at safe, mutually agreed upon locations.
Confidentiality was protected by secure data storage and the use of pseudonyms for the partnering churches and all participant descriptions and *in vivo* quotations.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

As described in Chapter 3, a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology was utilized to explore the central research question, “In what ways could small group processes enable returning STM participants to learn from their experience, and support the integration of that understanding into their lives?” Following Heron and Reason’s (2001) extended epistemology of knowledge acquisition, the six PAR sessions were focused as follows:

1. Initial expectations and re-connecting to the experience.
2. Emotional components and expression through poetry.
4. Personal learning and implications.
5. Short-term mission as situated in the particular congregation.
6. Participant-designed session going forward.

Each research group could be considered a small case study in terms of the context and dynamics of the group. Following Patton’s (2002) directive for laying a qualitative analysis foundation with finding descriptions that are rich in detail and “thick,” each research group is represented here as an idiosyncratic manifestation of the PAR methodology. This foundation made it possible to make thematic connections across session topics, and to compare and contrast groups during the analysis process.

This chapter outlines the participant details and dynamics of each group, describes the data specific to the various document data sources that were utilized, and presents the key thematic findings. The final section is a comparison of the PAR process between the two groups, as utilized for exploring learning from experience.
The Traditional Church

The first group was comprised of four women who traveled to Haiti with the Traditional Church. The six-day trip was organized by a local sending agency focused on serving the country of Haiti, whose founding members were also members of the congregation. Although the trips are not under the oversight of the church staff, they are loosely considered a mission activity of the Traditional Church by virtue of the personal connection and the number of church members who have participated over the years. Although they do not keep records, the sending agency estimated they have facilitated a STM experience for about 75 Traditional church members over the last 5 years.

Seventeen people traveled together on this particular trip, applying through the local sending agency, and met twice a month for the three months preceding the travel dates. Each person read the required book *A Mile in My Shoes*, by Trevor Hudson, which was the topic of discussion in most of the preparatory meetings. Participants were also grouped by service tasks, and those groups met on additional evenings to prepare their projects. The women in this research group self-selected to serve as part of a teaching project, and prepared lesson plans and collected school supplies.

After arriving in Port-au-Prince, the group traveled one hour by bus to a beach-side restaurant for dinner, briefing by their guide and driver, and a devotional. The following day they continued by bus an additional two hours to the community of Poteau, where they stayed for three days at a boarding school for children sponsored by a Western nonprofit. During that time they visited three different schools, teaching in each grade level; modeling and advocating for a more interactive teaching style than is currently practiced in the small, rural schools. In the
evenings they played with the children at the home, and finished each day with a collective devotional.

On day five they visited the local market, hiked up a nearby mountain for a spectacular view of the Haitian countryside, and returned to the beach-side restaurant for dinner and a closing reflective ceremony. The final day was a return journey to Port-au-Prince, where they toured the Mother Theresa Hospital and shopped for souvenirs before boarding their flight home.

One member of the team stayed for an additional week, and after she returned home, the group had a social gathering to share photographs and hear about her adventures. There was no formal follow up planned by the local sending agency or by the Traditional Church staff.

This group met on Monday afternoons from 4:00-5:30 pm, in a second floor classroom at the Traditional Church. The room had tables and folding chairs, a piano, and a shelf for Bibles, songbooks and office supplies. There was a large bulletin board with photographs of the church members who used this room every week for Sunday school. Late afternoon sun streamed in through three large windows, and occasionally a staff member would pop their head in the room while walking by and hearing our conversation. The women were punctual and greeted each other warmly.

**Group Members**

Annette, a 66 year old white woman, was the first person with whom I communicated, and she committed to the group right away. She was instrumental in recruiting additional participants, sending emails to the other team members encouraging them to participate. She was articulate, and in addition to the opportunity to talk about her personal experience, she was interested in a broader view of the STM phenomenon. She had previously participated in STM
trips to Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka. Annette was the team member who stayed for an additional week of touring Haiti; being an experienced traveler she wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to see more of the country.

Natalie, a 67 year old white woman, was soft spoken and generous with supportive comments and gestures throughout the research sessions. This was her second trip to Haiti. She has been very active in the Appalachia Service Project (ASP), an organization founded in 1969 to bring youth and adult volunteers into rural Central Appalachia to repair homes for families in need. Following our research sessions she traveled with a youth group from the Traditional church to an ASP project in West Virginia. She often came to the meetings from her exercise class.

Delia, a 53 year old white woman, was trained as an elementary school teacher, but had elected to stay home with her three children. The youngest had just left for college the previous fall, and Delia was intrigued, but hesitant to travel to a developing country. After hearing stories from her husband and children, who had all participated in STM travel, she finally decided to go herself. Her comments were very thoughtful. Although she contributed to the conversation the least amount, her engagement appeared authentic. She often came to the sessions from the tennis club, where she played on a local competitive team.

Chloe, a 51 year old white woman, was trained as a lawyer, but had also chosen to stay home with her children. Her two teenagers had traveled twice to Guatemala with their private, Christian school, and when Chloe heard that a trip to Haiti was forming at the Traditional Church, she joined right away. She had no specific expectations of the STM trip, and
commented that her decision to go to Haiti was spontaneous and not easily explained. She was outspoken and brought good energy to the discussions.

Group Dynamics

This group of women was very supportive of each other’s comments and very often collaborated by “thinking out loud” through conversation threads as they tried to describe feelings or make meaningful connections to experience. Annette used the most religious terminology in her framing of experience, and generally spoke in terms of organizational or corporate responses to poverty rather than personal action. She and Natalie were the most talkative of the four women and had the most experience in service and mission trips: Annette with international STM travel and Natalie with domestic service trips. Of the four women, Natalie had the best grasp of unjust social systems and the impact over time on individuals and communities. Chloe was the most pragmatic, making connections to scripture and cultural parameters. Delia was very reflective, contributing by way of questions, and the most focused on making personal application. The pace of conversation was consistently slow and congenial, with the most significant spike in energy happening toward the end of the fifth session. That particular conversation was around personal actions in response to their experience in Haiti, and the energy was evidenced by a more animated discussion, less space between comments, and physical gesturing.

In terms of the four dialogue parameters instituted in the initial session, listening and silence were practiced consistently. Participants asked each other questions to assist in meaning making, and periods of quiet were utilized for processing. I was active in posing questions to expand or continue conversation, and shared my experience in Guatemala to create rapport and
illustrate concepts. The practice of speaking in the first person, however, rather than using abstract terms was difficult for the two older women, and particularly so for Annette. For example, she shared,

Annette: I think one meaning of it is that it does enrich our lives and it adds to the underpinnings we have… maybe there’s some reflection or some other points that come to us, or seep into the deepest parts of us that help us live closer to our ideals other times.

Me: Can you say that again using “I,” meaning what is specifically true for you?

Annette: I guess I can say that that’s happened some for me, not that I think I’ve led my life the way I should ideally live my life, but maybe it’s a little bit closer to it than it would be if I’d not had these kinds of experiences.

The women were eager to gather, as twice the sessions were rescheduled to accommodate all five schedules. On the final Monday, Delia texted that she had been sick all day, but when she arrived she said, “I hated to miss this one because there’s no next one!” After the first session when I provided light snacks, the group simply showed up with their water bottles, ending promptly at 5:30 and leaving without lingering conversation.

**Document Data Sources**

Data from the research groups was collected in five ways, four of which were written documents. First, the prevailing question each individual had on their mind following their STM experience was written on cards. Second a “Found “Poem” was created. Third, reflective journaling was completed at home and collected during the least session. The fourth document data source was researcher field notes. This section recounts the findings specific to written data.
Leaving the first session participants were given a worksheet to aid in reflection on what they saw, felt, and did on their STM trip. During the second session each participant was asked to articulate key issues from that worksheet as an open question, to facilitate a process of inquiry. Each prevailing question was written on a separate card. Their questions follow:

- Why isn’t there a way to get clean water?
- Why would people live in this retched city when the lovely green hills are so close by?
- Why has there never been a trash system?
- Why is it so hard to teach others to take care of themselves?
- How can the Haitian people improve their lives, yet keep their unique culture?
- How do people get up each day and go out to face such intransigent distress and even misery?
- Why isn’t education important to the majority of people?
- What can we do to help the young women find a vocation?
- How can they keep smiling when I’ve just heard them ask for prayers for painful ailments, sick children, etc.?
- What can be done to improve the soil so that crops can be grown?

During the second session “Found Poetry” was generated from the question cards and a scripture reference that was utilized in partner discussions. All writing samples included the themes of suffering, care and hope. Natalie wrote the following piece:

```
Smiles
Tears
Struggles
Fears-
Faith
Hope
Love so great
How do they cope?
Poverty
Dirt
Challenges
Where is the work?
How-
Where
Can we know
That God is there?
```
During the final session Annette, Natalie and Chloe turned in the reflective worksheet intended to capture summary feelings and thoughts regarding learning from the experience in Haiti. Delia declined, saying that she could not articulate her thoughts. This was disappointing to me, as she appeared to be the most engaged in personal processing. Two months later, I emailed her asking if she was ready to complete the journaling worksheet. She responded with detailed and heartfelt answers to the reflective prompts. Although the reflective worksheets are part of this section on document collection, because they are summary reflections I locate those findings at the end of the report on the Traditional Church.

**Researcher Field Notes**

The most prominent theme in my field notes was the contrast between being thankful for, and dissatisfied with, the conversation. I was thankful for the eagerness of the group to talk about their experience in Haiti, and their apparent enjoyment of each other’s company. I was dissatisfied with the level of personal reflection and application as a whole, although Chloe and Delia were able to articulate steps forward as the weeks progressed. At times I wondered if I was being pushy, and noted a particular conversation where Annette sounded a bit defensive, though when I periodically checked in with the comfort level of the group, the response was consistently affirmative. Given the age of the women and southern genteel culture of the area, I do not know that I would be provided any different feedback. Nonetheless, I believe that prompts to authentic and critical reflection are important components of learning from experience, and continued to supply them as I felt they were needed.

By virtue of their activities in Haiti, the Traditional Church group was able to imagine some of the suffering inherent in poverty, and was in touch with the emotional side of their
experience. I wrote in my notes, “There is something ironic about talking with these women who drive off in a Mercedes, a Lexus, and a Honda Pilot about what poverty means.” Even so, they pondered the suffering of the women they met, and wondered how they might feel themselves in similar circumstances. Given that the two more talkative women were also the ones who were the most abstract and general in their comments, in the amount of time we had together I suspect we were as personal as possible. The subject came up in my notes, however, on a regular basis.

**Dialogue Session Major Themes**

Three themes appeared as most important in the meaning making process of this group, and are expanded in this section. The themes are: the expectation of change, the power of perceived connection, and the difference between the Haitian poor and the American poor.

**Finding 1: The expectation of change.**

STM travel is often marketed, in formal advertising or informally in conversation, as an experience that will “change your life.” After a partner conversation on the topic of defining a STM trip, Chloe and Delia reported back to the group:

A mission trip is a trip where you donate your time and your talents and your financial resources and you are going to, uh, what did we say after that? (Delia)

You hope you’re going to get something in return. I think most people go hoping that’s what they get, not necessarily expecting it, but hoping, and they also know they’re going to receive more than they give. (Chloe)

Even given their definition of STM travel, neither one had expectations of doing something specific with their time, talent or resources, or of “receiving” from the trip to Haiti. Delia shared, “I thought I was going to see. I had no idea I’d be doing something.” When prompted to name something they might have received, they had the following spirited exchange:
Here’s something we have in common- tennis. Like in a tennis match, I used to get so uptight about the whole thing. It’s interesting- I’ll play these matches now and not even worry about the score, I’m like, let’s just play the next point. (Delia)

But you can still feel like you’re playing as hard (Yeah!) it’s not like your effort is gone (Yeah!) it’s not like you don’t care (Right!) you’re just not worried about it. (Chloe)

It just doesn’t matter, it’s gonna be great if I win this point [and] if I don’t that’s okay too. So that’s been interesting. That’s just one place I’ve seen it show up. (Delia)

Annette and Natalie were more general in response to that same question:

It’s hard for me to express it, and think how things fit together… it feels to me that there isn’t any one thing that [STM] does or is supposed to do, but I think what our talking has helped me to feel is that is just sort of, in some way, becomes part of who you are. (Annette)

Even if you’re just so much more aware of the needs of others and the feelings and the compassion that you have, I think that maybe it’s not everything it should be but that’s a start. (Natalie)

There were no clear conceptual linkages between “receiving,” having a “life changing experience,” or learning from the experience. A subcategory of “Action Taken” emerged that could make the connection between learning and new behavior. Chloe stated that she began sponsoring a child in the school they visited, wrote letters back to three children shortly after returning, and prayed for the children. During the course of the research sessions she volunteered to create an informational brochure for the sending organization, and resurrected their FaceBook page with consistent posts. During the two months of these research sessions Delia also began volunteering as secretary for the upcoming trip, and signed up to travel to Haiti again herself.

Following her earlier trip to Haiti, Natalie organized several Sunday school classes at the Traditional church to raise funds for library books for the school, and shared that she had recently recruited a woman from her exercise class to sponsor a child. Anne was currently
serving as chair of the Traditional Church’s Outreach Committee, and offered to participate in a group effort, but stated that the church had a “shepherd par excellence” responsible for missions and she would “not want to presume to step into those kinds of shoes.” She was pleased, however, that the Outreach Committee had recently donated money to the local sending agency for the work in Haiti.

On a broader scale, the women could see their actions as part of a larger movement within the Traditional Church to benefit the materially poor in Haiti.

It’s unique how [the sending agency] came to be involved; the story of Frank and Helen recruiting members over time… it’s really a lovely way that it’s become a part of things, it’s more organic, word of mouth as the circles widened… it’s a very smart way to get the church officially involved- coming in the back door with the ladies. (Annette)

I feel like that happens in this church…. it’s a testament that so many people support kids that have never been to Haiti, so somebody convinced them, from having been there, to do it. (Chloe)

And now the church is supporting it through the Outreach Committee. I really think this is a great example of turning it around. (Annette)

When the topic of a life changing experience was discussed in the context of teen age volunteers, the women were less inclined to expect significant impact on the youth or on the organization.

My daughter’s school [has a group that] goes to Africa every year, and this one girl who went to Africa came back and said, “You know, I thought it was going to be life changing and it just wasn’t.” But what does that mean? To be a teenager and think you’re going to see something life changing, who knows what they’re thinking- that’s a pretty big thing. (Chloe)

But to go with that expectation [change your life] that’s a recipe for disaster. (Annette)

My daughter went to Guatemala twice with her school… where she worked in the kitchen… but there was not much communication for her because she doesn’t speak Spanish… I wonder, I don’t know… like I’m
not sure she can turn it around. I feel like us as adults can turn it around to people in our church, but I’m not sure kids can. (Chloe)

In the end, the women all wrote in their summary journaling assignment that they had been changed, in specific terms by Delia’s new behaviors, to Annette’s general “sense of what life is about.” Natalie shared that mission trips have “taught me how alike we all are, and I feel like you can see the world through others’ eyes.”

**Finding 2: The power of perceived connections.**

A compilation of all the words expressing emotion showed that the strongest feelings, either positive or negative, were in relation to connections with other people. On the general topic of sending money or paying for STM travel, Annette mused, “It’s kind of a conundrum— you were talking about… the cost of going… but then it comes down to, how do you get that real buy in and the emotional side of things- the connection- if you aren’t sending some folks?” The engagement with other people permeated the conversation in terms of what was considered most important about the trip.

It’s about relationships, and friendships, and that’s one of the things when people say you ought to just send money, well money is important but I think everybody grows from interactions and showing love to each other…. the more you interact with people the better off everybody is. (Natalie)

I would say it enriches who you are, it makes you bigger, more full of life and its experiences. (Annette)

It helps teach you to be open to new experiences, new relationships. We’re the ones that have to keep forming relationships with different groups of people, we all need to do that because there is so much hate and stereotyping in the world…maybe someone in the church seeing us hugging a little black Haitian girl or boy might mean, the more you are exposed to differences [the better off you will be]. (Natalie)
Annette explained the philosophy of STM at the Traditional church in terms of how cross-cultural relationships are conceived:

There are two givers and two receivers, it’s an interaction rather than a giving and receiving because it’s hard to separate who’s giving what and who’s receiving what because it’s another way of human beings interacting… it’s just that we’re there together. I guess giving and receiving aren’t the right words because you don’t think about that with your family, necessarily, you’re just in a relationship. (Annette)

Comparing the visit in a Haitian community to engagement within an American family is problematic for two reasons. First, the communication was difficult as none of the Traditional Church volunteers spoke Creole.

I mean, I communicated with the kids a little bit, but there were a lot of times where a lot of us were just dying to communicate with them, and the women when we were with Jean, that we wished we really could have [talked with]. (Natalie)

I actually liked the language barrier, although it was not as bad as it could have been… We were able to communicate somewhat which was so nice. I liked that we had to use expressions, make eye contact all the time while conversing, and use our hands and bodies to help us communicate. It forced me to listen and think and process. (Delia)

Although non-verbal communication can be misunderstood, in this case it appeared to be genuine. Being genuine, however, does not mean that communication between the STM volunteers and the Haitians was comparable to that of a family who shares language, environment, and a family micro-culture of behavior and tacit meanings.

Second, the emotional nature of the experience, and the desire of building relationships, led the women to make conclusions that were likely not accurate.

It’s amazing what people are facing and they still have a smile and go about their day, but that night hearing about what was going on with those people… these are the same people I might have said they smile no matter
what, to hear what was going on with them and to know they were still smiling, I was saying, “Whoa, would I do that?” (Annette)

[In reference to not sweating the small stuff after returning to the US] obviously it’s from seeing people that suffer so much, and it doesn’t even bother them. It bothers them a little bit. (Chloe)

You realize that everybody has problems no matter how much material wealth they have, they have the same problems and to see that there are people with so much less that seem to have an inner peace, it helps each one of us to grow. (Natalie).

An alternative interpretation might be that the Haitian women were smiling because they were practicing hospitality. It is also possible that a life of poverty produces suffering that is in fact devastating, and the daily problems of White upper-middle class Americans are far different from those of poor Haitians.

There is no doubt, however, that the women felt strong emotions in connection with visiting the children. “It was overwhelming,” said Natalie, “you feel so close to them.” Later she added, “The most meaningful thing to me is meeting those two children that we sponsor, it just means so much to them. I think it means a whole lot to them.”

One thing I learned, I feel like we put up so many road blocks to being able to really see God around us, by all the luxuries that we’ve created for ourselves... we’re just making it so hard to see that what matters is relationships, and we’re making it harder to have real relationships. These people have so little that run this school and have done such a good job of trying to take care of these children, and trying to teach them the right thing. (Chloe)

And they’re loved. There’s a lot of love in that school. (Natalie)

They ARE loved. And they’re loving, don’t you think? They’re really loving to each other and to us. (Chloe)
Natalie concluded, “Many people feel like you’re putting Band-Aids on things, and in some ways you are, but… if you can bring even a little bit of hope to people, [show] that somebody cares…” to which Annette added, “You never know the ripple effects of all that.” In that summary exchange, a moment of potential criticality regarding the larger picture of STM travel was domesticated back into a comfortable, middle-class milieu of “haves” and “have nots.”

**Finding 3: The difference between the Haitian poor and the American poor.**

Threaded throughout the six sessions was a comparison of reaching out to the poor in Haiti and reaching out to the materially poor in the local community. Early in the conversations Annette remarked, “We all had the understanding that happiness is not grounded in material goods, but it’s good to be reminded of that, not that you want people to suffer… but then you can also get that [across town], you know.” Two elements were striking in this regard.

First, the contrast between the local, suburban separation of economic classes and the proximity of materially needy people to those of wealth in larger US cities and other countries was discussed. Chloe described living in downtown Chicago in the 1980s in view of a housing project of 15,000 people where violence and deplorable living conditions made the term “the projects” synonymous with all that was problematic about public housing in the US. To have that view three blocks from her Michigan Avenue apartment was “weird.” Another time she used the same descriptive in reference to the economic disparity at her children’s elementary school.

It’s especially hard when you think… there’s hungry kids at [our children’s elementary school]. There are so many big, nice schools in [this city] and there are so many kids that are really hungry, that’s weird, it shouldn’t be that way… It’s just hard, and we get caught in our lives, and I think that’s why people don’t want to do it. But then they go away and help people and it’s just safer… You can sort of compartmentalize it, instead of it being so close. (Chloe)
Is it easier to go somewhere that you can leave? As opposed to something that’s going to look you in the face all the time? (Delia)

To visit and serve the poor only in another country seemed to perpetuate the notion that when the poor are removed from sight no one has particular responsibility for their situation, or that they are more easily engaged when they are not routinely encountered.

I like this question- What relationships do you have outside your socio-economic circle? You know, not that many… how many black friends do we have? We’re not even remotely racist. I’d like to say I have 100, or I’d like to not even count, I don’t think it needs to be a counting thing, it’s just not part of our lives. (Chloe)

In addition to physical separation, the second element was one of philosophical separation. On the one hand, the group wanted to convey to the Haitians the idea that all people are the same. Natalie explained, “Our perception of Haiti is poverty and their perception of us as Americans is great wealth and everything is nice and perfect… [We] wanted them to hear some stories that we may have more materially, but we are still all the same inside. We all have different things that happen in our lives.” On the other hand, engaging the local poor was viewed as “hard,” and “challenged our thinking.” Chloe candidly said,

I think it’s safer, I think it’s kind of selfish in a way, I mean I did it, I spent a lot of money to go to Haiti and see a bunch of poor people… but to know we’re so different… so I think there is something frightening about going [across town] and seeing how poor people are when they’re so close to us. (Chloe)

Although at times I feel conflicted about needs and what to do in the local community, I serve as I can. It is in many ways easier to be involved in a mission trip where serving and sharing are the focus of the trip and there are not so many conflicting needs facing me! (Natalie)

As an example of bridging the gap between different people, although not economic in nature, the group was encouraged by the “Hope” Sunday school class in their congregation.
I think our church gradually is, not into outreach or mission quite, but in the friendship way, like the Hope class which is adults with mental disabilities….our church has changed since the 1980s, from giving us dirty looks, [we were] afraid people would make fun of them or laugh at them, and we started bringing them into church… but it’s totally different now. They’re integrated. (Natalie)

Journaling Summaries

Although the 4th session was focused on individual learning from significant experiences in Haiti, those worksheets were not collected and were intended to provide a practical framework for each person beyond the bounds of the study sessions. In order for me to get a sense of the learning process by the end of the six sessions, a personal journaling worksheet was distributed during the 5th session, and collected at the final meeting. The primary theme from the summary journaling exercise was the power of making personal connections, and how that impacted everyone’s perspective after returning home. Chloe felt that she saw more clearly the many obstacles Americans create that prevent them from seeing God and Jesus in their circumstances and in other people. Natalie considered STM trips as a very important in her life in that she has “given and received the love of Christ in new ways,” and as a result is “more open and willing to share, make new friendships (such as African American friends).” Delia shared an example of making connections between her experience in Haiti and her life at home:

What I know is that I brought back with me a little of “Haitian time.” And I realize that this is something they did for me, not anything I did for them. I am better at seeing people since I’ve been back. What I mean is that at McDonalds, for example, when I encounter the worker who is helping me, I LOOK at them and speak to them and see them, making eye contact the whole time. I acknowledge their help. I know I didn’t do that before as much as I do now. (Delia)

When asked in retrospect, “How do you feel about the whole thing?” the responses were:

• I’m glad I went, but again, I feel that I benefitted more than they did. I’m planning to go again and I have expectations that I will learn something else. (Delia)
• It is easy to put such experiences and awareness on the back burner, but it never really leaves. I feel that it makes me stay aware and [has] given me the opportunity to grow, to live life as God intends. (Natalie)
• Loved it! (Chloe)
• I now chair the Outreach Committee of my church. I do that both because I believe in outreach and missions and because I believe my experiences with missions give me something to offer as a result. That’s one way I can make these experiences be of continuing benefit- I certainly hope. (Annette)

The Community Church

The second group was comprised of four participants, representing three separate STM trips from the Community Church to Kenya. Each ten day trip was identical in terms of preparation and the actual travel itinerary. After attending an interest meeting, church members applied through the national sending organization, which also provided leader training. The congregation held four preparatory meetings addressing travel logistics, fundraising, conflict management and cultural awareness. Those meetings were led by various Community Church staff. Although only two members of this group traveled together, the experience of all four was so similar that there did not appear to be any limitation in terms of the research process compared to the collective experience of the Traditional Church group.

After arriving in the Nairobi airport, the teams traveled eight hours northwest by bus to Kisumu, where they stayed in a local hotel while visiting their partner village. For the next five days the teams traveled 45 minutes from the hotel in Kisumu to the village, spending roughly 9:00 am to 3:00 pm with the community there. This village of 1,500 people partners with the Community Church, through the national sending agency, on a water filtration project, school building project, and child sponsorships for education. Following five days visiting the village, the teams relaxed for two days at a resort with a safari in a nearby national park. Returning home the four participants took different routes. One woman added on a family visit with her relatives.
in England. Another participant took advantage of an unexpected layover in London where the team leader led an impromptu tour. One person took his teenagers and another father daughter pair on a visit to London and Paris. The fourth participant, as the trip co-leader, continued back home with her remaining team members.

Although the preparatory meetings mentioned follow up activities, only one woman’s team met after the STM trip, and that meeting was organized by a team member, not the trip leader or church staff. She lamented, “We were off the plane, back to school and, like, Bang!... maybe a month or two months off we did get together for dinner and talk about it a little bit but it seemed far removed.”

**Group Members**

This group met at 6:00 on successive Tuesday evenings at the upper middle class home of Julia, a 49 year old white woman. The group moved around the home, utilizing a comfortable living room with overstuffed furniture, one end of a large kitchen table, and outside chairs on the screened-in porch. Snacks were always provided and white chocolate coated popcorn was quickly a favorite and requested at every meeting. Julia even provided a sandwich for one participant who arrived a few minutes late, having come straight from work without dinner. Julia was thoughtful in her comments and was the most focused on her personal learning as a result of the STM experience. She was aware of her financial resources and actively explored questions of monetary giving from her perspective as a working class British woman who married into an affluent American family. She was already engaged in volunteer opportunities within her community and her children’s school. Their entire family of five participated in the STM trip to the Kenyan village; her husband and three teen aged children.
Garrison, a 54 year old white male, works as a technical writer. He traveled with two of his three children, aged 17 and 15. He was instrumental in recruiting participants and started the wine component on the first night with a bottle of Pinot Grigio labeled “Friends.” Garrison was talkative, unabashedly unprepared, and framed his comments more often in abstract, rather than personal, terms. He brought good energy to the group by interjecting humor and providing “color commentary.”

Jill, a 34 year old white woman, teaches sixth grade math at a magnet school for the visual and performing arts. The school has a mixed population of low income students, those living in the community where the school is situated, and middle class students who elect to attend the school. The high school is ranked number nine in the state for rigorous academic standards, college placement, and faculty credentials. Jill is passionate about social justice and lives in the low income community surrounding the school. She was engaged, outspoken and made connections most often between the conversation, session readings, and relevant scripture references.

Ellen, a 37 year old white woman, was transitioning from her sales position with a marketing firm and launching an executive coaching career. She acted as co-leader on her trip and found that responsibility affirming of her desire to lead young adults on cross cultural experiences. Her role in the dialogue was supportive, underscoring points of view and asking thoughtful questions, although her perspective was most often framed as a leader who was facilitating the experience for the teenagers who were participating.
Group Dynamics

Conversation roles in this group were consistent throughout the six sessions, and the group navigated each topic with personal statements, clarifying questions and supportive comments and gestures. In general, Jill and Julia were the most verbal; Jill spoke with passion and a critical eye toward inconsistencies in religious belief and practice, and Julia in a more calm, logical exploration of meaning. Ellen voiced agreement when discussion was in line with her perspective, provided insider information regarding STM policies in the congregation, and asked insightful questions. Garrison approached topics from multiple angles, and often redirected conversation toward a more broad understanding, the status quo, or a related topic, with transitions such as “But wait a minute,” when the dialogue was drilling down to a new or deeper level of understanding.

The four dialogue parameters instituted in the initial session were visible in practice during the sessions, with the exception of respect for silence. This was simply not applicable, as the energy of the conversation rarely afforded a silent space for processing. I did not reinforce that component as there was no one in the group that appeared to need a silent space. The first parameter, speaking in the first person rather than in abstract or general terms was evidenced by comments such as “I thought we got a sense- I’ll speak for myself- I thought that …” and “From my perspective…” One example of listening manifest in asking open questions occurred in the fifth session, when Jill began capturing the groups’ concerns saying, “So I’m making a list of actionable items in the forms of questions” (with a nod toward me, followed by collective laughter), and later by Garrison’s suggestion that “I think our first meeting [with the church staff] we should just ask questions, … we should just say, we were wondering…” The final parameter, respecting confidentiality, became the transitionary expression “Since we’re in Vegas…” from
the Las Vegas marketing slogan “What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas.” Julia summed up the
group dynamics in the last session by naming the research group a “mini Life Group,” the term
used by the Community Church for congregational small groups,

…where you get to know people. This is exactly what they
want people to do. Now the wine has helped us a lot
(collective laughter) but the fact that this is a closed group,
we’ve talked about what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,
we’re open with each other, [and] we’re touched now going
forward, good, bad or indifferent in that kind of learning
way.

The 90 minute session design was intended to provide at least 60 minutes of recorded
collection. In the case of this group, four of the six evenings they elected to stay later than the
designated end time, so that the first two sessions yielded 60 minutes of conversation, two
sessions yielded 90 minutes, and the final two sessions yielded two hours each. In total the group
provided an additional three hours of recorded conversation.

Document Data Sources

Data from the research groups was collected in five ways, four of which were written
documents. First, the prevailing question each individual had on their mind following their STM
experience was written on cards. Second a “Found “Poem” was created. Third, reflective
journaling was completed at home and collected during the least session. The fourth document
data source was researcher field notes. This section recounts the findings specific to written data.

Leaving the first session participants were given a worksheet to aid in to reflection on
what they saw, felt, and did on their STM trip. During the second session each participant was
asked to articulate key issues from that worksheet as an open question to facilitate a process of
inquiry. Each prevailing question was written on a separate card. Their questions follow:
• Did the stated purpose accurately reflect the actual experience of the trip?
• Was it worth it?
• Do you feel like you did enough?
• How can we (in the USA) be a better community? It takes a village!
• Do you feel guilty about not being or continuing to be connected with the villagers?
• How does frequently sending white people to “serve” brown/black people impact the way we view brown/black people?
• Were you supported well?
• How do we come to understand how we are to use our financial and other resources in the global community?
• How important is the relationship when we can fund education?
• How do we come to humble ourselves to realize that we are likely more spiritually needy that those we went to serve?

These questions were broken down into a list of nouns and verbs and utilized in the following session’s discussion on the meaning of short term missions. This process was based on an a priori category of “doing” versus “being” as discussed in the literature review.

In this group, the three women maintained a thread throughout the sessions that was linked to their original question. Julia was concerned with the expense of travel to build relationships compared to the impact of donating funds toward the educational program in the village. Jill continued with observations of White American perspectives of the poor in Kenya versus their perspective of the local poor. Ellen was concerned with young people engaging with an authentic Kenyan experience and supporting their learning process.

During the second session “Found Poetry” was generated from the question cards and a scripture reference that was utilized in partner discussions. The poetry revolved around two feelings. First that the experience was worthwhile for the individual who traveled, and two, that the experience was disruptive and challenging but unclear in terms what it meant. As an example, Ellen wrote:
I’m feeling inadequate
like we “should” be more
but I hate that word “should”
the community we visited was open and accepting
but is that true?
How were/are we different?
Are we special?
Is it real? Authentic?

On the final evening Julia, Jill and Ellen turned in their journaling worksheet, answering summary questions about their learning experience. Garrison chose not to do the reflective work. Because he consistently did not read or refer to any of the session handouts, I did not pursue a worksheet from him. Although these reflective worksheets are part of this section on document collection, because they are summary reflections I locate those findings at the end of the report on this group.

Researcher Field Notes

On a regular basis I noted the comfortable setting and good energy of each session. Two threads permeated my notes. The first was my desire for more time. If the small group setting does indeed provide space for collective meaning making, the process will need more time than the research sessions afforded. I reminded myself that this was exploratory conversation built around a theory of knowledge acquisition and transformative change, more a prototype than an extended small group that could germinate, implement, and sustain transformative change.

A second thread was my observation of each participant as the weeks unfolded. Julia and Jill were more consistently able to apply concepts to their own lives than Garrison and Ellen were. Julia was the most clear about her personal meaning making process and could provide examples of new behavior and musings about the future. Jill’s context was a teaching career
engaging low income, poor, and homeless students. Connections between scripture and social justice behavior were already evident in her life. She shared,

We say we care, and we care when it’s ten days [the STM trip]… [but] its a real spiritual frustration for me… it makes me proud of how of how I choose to live my life. I live [across town], I teach poor kids, I feel like that’s walking the walk. (Jill)

Garrison struck me as more formal in his comments, as though he was giving the correct answer, and did not make use of any of the take home readings or reflective writing. That was disappointing to me. During the session conversation, however, he consistently brought good energy to the group by engaging everyone in conversation (on and off topic), interjecting humor, and radiating a desire to contribute to the process. Ellen maintained her focus on leadership in STM and viewed her experiences as an affirmation of her recent career move to personal coaching. In that regard, I wrote, “Ellen, for all her comments about having already done this personal work, wrote precious little on her reflective piece.”

One significant facilitation note to my self was regarding the task of navigating possible directions for conversation as the participants’ perspectives were articulated and expanded. I wrote, “Where does my personal desire influence the meaning making process for others? What is ultimately important? We have so little time.” Reflecting directly after Sessions 2 and 3, I wondered if I had made the best choices in terms of directing conversation and introducing new questions. Upon listening to the tapes, I believe the prior adjustments to the design and the just-in-time shifts were valuable. I was pleased to hear myself continually asking questions to bring greater clarification to language, provide concrete examples, make personal application, and maintain a tone of appreciation and good humor.
Dialogue Session Major Themes

The six PAR sessions were exploratory, and the practice of asking open questions seemed to infuse the entire group process so that the themes were themselves best expressed as questions. The five themes were: What is a short-term mission trip? Why am I going? What are we doing? Is this experience authentic? and, How do I know? This section continues with details from the session conversations that document, describe, expand or situate the five themes. Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) suggest that qualitative research findings are the story that has been told by the participants, and in this case, the thematic questions are arranged sequentially to flow as a story. In other words, these themes did not surface in the order that they are presented here, nor were they limited to conversation in only one of the six sessions. The themes were threaded throughout all six sessions.

Finding 1: What is a short-term mission trip?

The task of defining short-term missions was ongoing and never yielded a definitive answer. In the context of these discussions, a working definition was not the most important task, yet pointed to the overarching challenge of making meaning from various viewpoints and without boundaries set by the sending church or the team leaders. Ellen quipped, “I think mission trips in general can kind of be a contradictory experience.” After a discussion of various definitions in general, such as evangelism, imposing cultural values, and experiencing first-hand the concept of a worldwide church, Garrison suggested STM was conceptualized by the Community Church as “a continuing conversation with the village… [where] we’re just gonna go and love up on these people, the way everyone’s done before and the people will do after you.” Jill also spoke first of love, saying, “Ultimately the mission is to convey the love of
Jesus…I don’t know you but I believe you have inherent worth as a human being… so I’m here to help and to serve and to come alongside you just because I believe you’re valuable.”

A significant conversation ensued to differentiate between mission travel and other similar international volunteer opportunities. Jill began, “I think ideally it should be different than a volunteer service trip,” and Julia added “I think what made the missions experience different was the fact that we were year three into it.” The concept of church service versus secular service continued with this exchange:

I didn’t like calling it a mission trip. Part of that might be my old baggage that evoked evangelical trips where we’re going to go change someone’s mind or teach them something… I described it as more of a service trip; certainly different from a working vacation or a volunteer service trip… [the Community Church] emphasizes the relationship and just do what you can. I thought they went to great lengths to communicate a sense of us being a part of a larger whole, and because of that we tended to conform to that missionary mindset whereas if it was Kiwanas or some other group (Garrison)

[Julia interrupts] When we boarded the plane in London for Nairobi, man! The plane was full of people going on a mission trip.

[Jill interjects] There were people on the plane that were on mission trips that I heard say very unkind things. I thought to myself, “Have you totally missed the point? What are you doing here? I don’t think you get it.”

Maybe that was the disadvantage that these people on the plane didn’t have, they just signed up for something they thought would be cool, and then they went off and didn’t really prepare themselves for what they were about to embark on, from a spiritual perspective. (Garrison)

The experience was called by various names- it is a service trip, it is not a service trip, it is all about building relationships, it is not a secular activity, and it was a means to convey the love of God. The conversation moved to the issue of traveling internationally as a defining component of a mission trip, since by any definition, the activities mentioned could also be accomplished at home in the United States. Jill pointed out the discrepancy in the group logic:
People go there and uphold poverty and go, “Oh, my heart goes out to you,” [and] when it’s right here they run the other direction… you uphold these kids like they’re amazing and yet you don’t want your kids in school with them… you could be doing all those things [here]… but it’s hard to look people in the face. It’s easy to [do something] but to look someone in the face and say I want to hear your story… because if we were interested in that, it’s way less money, way less time [to do that locally]. (Jill)

**Finding 2: Why am I going?**

On an individual level, the answer to this question was easily articulated. Julia, for example, who is an active volunteer in her community, saw an international experience as a “cool thing to do… although in going to help I heard we would get far more than we gave.” Jill was in transition after mentoring five students from sixth grade through high school graduation, and wanted a way to give that would “orient me in a different direction.” “From my perspective,” said Ellen, “I wanted to impart other lessons on people, not to influence their experience but to open their awareness.” Garrison had always wanted to be on a mission team, but now was more interested in providing an experience for his two teen age children. He wanted them to understand how much they’ve been blessed, and to “get a heart” for people in other parts of the world. “Actually,” he said,

it was three separate trips. First was [the village] and a great time of bonding and five days in the village, getting sick and all that. Then two days we go to the swankiest place I’ve ever been in my life- the game reserve with the wonderful food- we saw a lion kill a cheetah… and then four days in London and Paris.

Collectively, the participants saw themselves as representing the Community Church as part of an ongoing partnership. Once they were in the village, however, Julia said, “I struggled a lot with the purpose of us being there,” and Garrison added, “You think this is a service trip, we’re going to help them build this or that, but they don’t need our help. It’s almost scam like.” Ellen shared
that “There was a lot of time we felt like ‘what are we doing here?’” The narrative of partnership and conveying the love of God to the villagers was difficult to operationalize.

By the sixth session the conversation shifted from representing the Community Church to representing the Kenyan village; seeing themselves as bridging the gap between the American church and the African village in the opposite direction. “It’s the ongoing relationship now that we’re back here,” Jill explained. The following spirited conversation shows the point of this realization:

Jill- The hope is that the mission group comes back to the church and perpetuates the interest
Julia (interjects)- That’s a needed response
Jill (continuing) in these people so that the church will give
Ellen (interjects)- Uh huh
Jill (continuing)- and ultimately the mission trip was worth it because the church funds what the community needed, because the mission team came back and spread the “Hey! These people are great, they need…” (gestures “whatever”)
Garrison- If that’s the case we are failing.
Jill- Right.
Garrison- We’ve all agreed to that.
Ellen- Totally.
Jill- Because there’s no cycle back
Ellen (interjects) Uh huh
Jill (continuing the sentence) when you return.

Finding 3- What are we doing?

Everyone was clear that their trip was “relational,” a word that was used many times. For example, Ellen said, “I feel like we didn’t even serve them very well, we were very relational,” although there was never a clear sense of what “being relational” meant to the group. On the one hand, relationships between the Community Church members and the villagers were described as very close, and on the other hand they were described as a representation of a church providing financial support to a poor village.
I feel like there is kind of a knit heart to certain people in the village to really what we’re trying to do there for them. They really do appreciate and feel that same kind of unity that’s there. (Garrison)

One on one there is no relationship. We go as representatives of [the Community Church] and [the national sending agency]. We are the face of the church at that time... but in the true sense of building a relationship you can’t do it in five days and you can’t do it without any additional communication, so it’s more about upper level representation. (Ellen)

Part of the problem with answering the question, “What are we doing?” is bound up in an understanding of what it means to build relationships. To the Kenyan villagers, a relationship is not about “doing” something, but about “being.” The concept of doing versus being, even what “being” meant, came up the most in the second session on presentational, or emotional knowing.

In the beginning you think, “I’m here to do,” I need to do that. Americans are very goal oriented; what is my task, I must complete the task. By the end it shifted a bit, but on that ten day trip you are really only in the community for five days. (Jill)

There was nothing to do and we were all antsy. Its’ so hard for us to look someone in the eye and listen; we love our distractions. (Ellen)

I knew the physical aspects of travel but was not prepared for the emotional part. It took a long time to understand living in the moment, building relationships, just take it in. (Julia)

In addition to building relationships, and understanding “doing” versus “being,” a third subset of this theme “What are we doing?” revolved around spirituality. Although it was not articulated in specific terms, as mentioned earlier the group was convinced that a STM trip was different from other service trips for spiritual reasons. Yet their preparatory meetings did not focus on spiritual content and their identity as successful Western Christians was often subject to critical reflection in comparison to the Kenyan believers. Jill defined “successful” as a state
relative to the quality of your relationships with other people and your relationship with God.

The spirituality they witnessed in the village, however, surprised them:

One woman had lost five children. She smiled and said, “God is good.” If you were an American and lost one child, you’re in ten years of therapy. Everyone [there] has lost children and they are supported by other women who have also lost children. They are so clear about their dependence on God, which is difficult for us to understand, we’re so muddled. [In the village] God will have to heal me, I can’t pay a professional to work me through that. (Jill)

Their faith was so much stronger than ours, and that was striking, the incredible amount of faith that they had. It was integrated into their lives, into everything they did… It was a significant experience to see the contrast that here we are the Christian church, going on a mission, white people in Africa, and it’s like “Whoa,”… it was way more profound than I could have anticipated. (Ellen)

Finding 4- Is this experience authentic?

As the dialogue sessions progressed, the meaning making process required consistent prompts for clarification of the religious narrative that was used, but not fully understood. Heron & Reasons’s (2001) propositional knowing, or knowing through words and concepts, was the stage where a critical subjectivity was beginning to develop in the group. The ability to suspend previously unexamined beliefs, and collectively construct alternative perspectives, was manifest in the question, “Is this experience authentic?”

For example, in the context of a “relational” trip as described in Finding 3, the issue of investing in personal travel to Kenya to build those relationships, or using that travel money to fund needed projects, took a new twist in this exchange:

Abraham [the sending agency guide] was the one person I talked to in depth, as much as anybody on the trip, as probably you all did, right, but I questioned being there, wrestled pretty hard about the expense, and he was very supportive and felt like his life was touched… we can’t lose sight of simply touching (Julia)
[Garrison interjects] The human element is huge.

[I add here] And he can’t say to you, “No, you shouldn’t have come.”

Yeah, that’s his job! (Ellen)

Absolutely, that would destroy the whole infrastructure. They’re set up to send people over. (Garrison)

The business of the national sending agency is to make connections between Americans with resources and materially poor communities. In the process the agency expects, in fact advertises, to provide a meaningful experience. One of the days in the village was coined “A day in the life of a Kenyan.” On that afternoon visits were arranged in the homes of various villagers for afternoon tea. Garrison and his children spent the afternoon with Ruth, which he considered a highlight “because we got to talk to so many people.”

The people were excited to be there, the women were teaching [his daughter] how to cook the local food; we went to get the water. They take these big old things, huge jugs on their heads, [and] …because you had the time to speak, not just to the one person who speaks English, but through that person to all the different people, by the end of it you really did feel like a part of the village. (Garrison)

I said, is this more of an inconvenience that we were here, with pulling people together? Abraham said, “No, no, no, this is like a holiday for this community. It is a celebration of the blessings we’ve received and a break from the stuff we have to do all the time.” (Julia)

The “Day in the life of a Kenyan” was in fact a holiday, with supplies provided by [the national sending agency] so that each host could prepare food for their STM guests, and a free afternoon to visit. Julia’s family visited with Malda, and all the neighbors came over to meet the honored guests. Malda prepared chapati, an unleavened flat bread, and tea.

I asked how often they get to make chapati, [and Malda replied] “This is a real treat, we get to eat this once a month.” This is a big deal that she had
the supplies… that touched something in me, how special that was for them as a family to get to eat *chapati*. (Julia)

Was it real? Because we were visitors, we were guests in their community… if we were to pop in one day and do a surprise visit to [the village] what would our experience be at that point? It was a holiday, a special occasion. Is Beatrice wearing her pristine white dress every day, or did she dress up for us? If we were able to experience the absolute day to day life would we be able to handle it? (Ellen)

It was interesting to me that no one in the group considered whether the Kenyan villagers might also be wondering if the experience of their white Western visitors was authentic as well.

**Finding 5- How do I know?**

In light of all the questions that were raised, it was interesting that all four participants were able to make definitive statements about Kenyan culture. Garrison stated that the culture, as a whole, was open, welcoming, and joyful, with a “simple nature that’s very refreshing.” Ellen differed, saying “From my perspective, I felt like we were protected, so it was limited a lot of times… driving through [Kenya] it was ‘Close your windows guys, we’re not stopping here…. it’s not safe.’”

Jill told a story about the teenagers on her trip playing “Lion, Lion, Zebra,” a version of the game “Duck, Duck, Goose,” with the village children. She mentioned that the previous STM team made up the game. Ellen replied, “Oh really? I thought that was a Kenyan thing!” In fact the village children had never seen a lion- the American teens were the only ones who could make connections to a lion chasing its prey. Lacking familiarity with the context, many observations were made through an American lens and yielded incorrect conclusions. During a discussion on funding education for the village, the subject of hiring new teachers was addressed.

I got the impression the teachers that they had, they were all pretty young. They seemed to all be there because they wanted to teach. There weren’t
any of these teachers we have here in America at times at the end of their careers and don’t want to teach… [these teachers] really seem to love that school… I don’t think we have to pay a huge premium to get teachers to teach in [the village]. I think anyone would fall in love with those kids the same way we did. (Garrison)

According to the United Nations Development Programme (2013) the unemployment rate in Kenya is 40% and is particularly pressing in the 18-25 year old range. Within that demographic, there are more unemployed women than men. The confluence of high unemployment and lower educational attainment for females could account for an eagerness to teach that is contextual than simply a result of job preference. Julia was more accurate in saying that “Eunice [one of the teachers] was employed by [the sending agency]…and she was so happy to have a steady check, which is not that common out there.”

Garrison’s comment that “anyone would fall in love with those kids the same way we did” reflects the tendency to romanticize the poor as described in the literature review (Linhart, 2006; Ver Beek, 2006). As a result of teaching poor American children, Jill had the most insight into the disparity between attitudes to the poor in Kenya versus the poor in America.

We’re not as sympathetic to the American poor as we are to the poor in Kenya. We use all these words to describe them like spiritual, hardworking, so attune to each other, community, but the way we describe the American poor is leeches, ghetto, white trash, dirty Mexicans. We don’t have grace for their experience and we don’t say any of those positive things about them… the [Kenyan villagers] got to show us five days of their best and that was it. But we live with America’s poor. (Jill)

The Community Church group described the Kenyan villagers as “accepting,” “unmaterialistic,” “thankful,” and “spiritually full,” which seemed difficult to connect to the fact that the villagers were hosting the benefactors of their water filtration system and education program. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the team had limited interaction with Kenyans in general, as Ellen explained, “We really had interactions with very few people at the airport, with
hotel staff who were there to serve us… we weren’t given the opportunity to really interact other than the [villagers].”

In another conversation, Ellen was concerned that the plastic water bottles the team brought into the village everyday were not being disposed of in the manner [the sending agency] had stipulated during the pre-trip training sessions.

There was a conversation in the Leadership Council that bottles go in a pile but people were taking them. It was a conflict for the students because they ran up to me and said, ‘these kids have water bottles and we were told not to give anything,’ … Our understanding was we could give things to the Leadership Council and they would distribute it but it wasn’t being done properly. (Ellen)

Perhaps taking water bottles from the pile was exactly what the Leadership Council had intended, but it was not “proper” as far as Ellen was concerned.

In a humorous example of operating without sufficient contextual understanding, Ellen said she repeatedly asked Abraham, the sending agency guide, if it was going to rain. She recalls that with a bit of exasperated laughter, he finally asked why she was so concerned about the possibility of rain. She said, “We were told if it rains we need to run to the bus!” Garrison added, “So we don’t get stuck up there.” Abraham assured her that there would be no rain at all, because they were visiting during the dry season.

**Journaling Summaries**

Although the 4th session was focused on individual learning from significant experiences in the village, those worksheets were not collected and were intended to provide a practical framework for each person beyond the bounds of the study sessions. In order for me to get a sense of the learning process by the end of the six sessions, a personal journaling worksheet was distributed during the 5th session, and collected at the final meeting.
Themes from the summary journaling exercise were as follows: what was learned revolved around the need for life-giving relationships in the United States, the observation that our society has moved away from a sense of community, the amount of distraction in the United States by way of modern technology, and an emphasis on personal worth in terms of production, contrasted with community dependence and living with hardship in the Kenyan village. While the process of how learning occurred was difficult to articulate, common responses included being present for experience, listening for God, and conversation with others who have participated in a similar experience. Ellen shared that “The group process was incredible, and it’s in similar settings that I’ve gleaned the most from my experiences. People have challenged me, asked great questions, etc.”

When asked in retrospect, “How do you feel about the whole thing?” the responses were:

- “A wonderful opportunity but even though it was about being relational, true relationships are probably more daily/weekly.” (Ellen)
- “I feel conflicted. I feel that these trips can be good if managed properly.” (Julia)
- “If relationship building was the goal then I feel like I failed on that one, but if given longer I could be successful. On the other hand, I believe that ‘showing up’ in life really does matter. I showed up. Perhaps it’s that production-focused part of me that can’t accept that showing up was enough. Does God really call us to show up… and that’s it?” (Jill)

**Common Topics of Conversation**

Although not necessarily developed in equal amounts, there were four topics that were common to both the Traditional Church and the Community Church dialogues. First, in comparison to other STM teams that were in the airport or on the airplane, both groups felt as though they were better prepared and less patronizing in their approach to the local community. Second, neither group was well versed on the local culture, or the influence of power dynamics
on conversation and behavior when crossing cultures. The following conversation in the
Traditional Church group illustrates this point:

We had a really, really wonderful young man who was our driver, I really
felt a connection to him and he did to me… he wanted me to promise to be
his mother at his wedding… we corresponded intermittently…then I got
an email from him [and] he’d been in the hospital… and he asked me for
$500. (Annette)

We’re perceived as very wealthy, and they have nothing, so no matter
what, no matter how good the relationship is, and the friendship, learning
from each other and all that… they don’t mind asking in that way.
(Natalie)

Then why does it bother us so much to say no? (Delia)

I thought we were friends. I was glad to give him motherly advice or
whatever, but if he asks for [money] that’s not what I thought this was
about. (Annette)

[I interjected] If I was texting with Donald Trump regularly, and I needed
money for a life-saving surgery, I’d ask him for help. You know you are
like Donald Trump compared to him.

That’s a good point. (Natalie)

Thirdly, it was difficult to articulate the definition of STM travel in general, and the word
“mission” trip was an unpopular label. This topic has been discussed previously in this chapter.

Finally, everyone in both groups believed that their experience was worth the time and money,
and several people were planning to return or not return for very specific reasons.

I’ve been feeling this real need, I want to have a picture of [the girl we
sponsor] and I don’t have it, and it’s a bit of a hole in the trip… it’s not
that big of a deal but I wanted it and I wanted to send her a copy of it. So
I’m going in January again and pack my husband [to get a good picture].
(Natalie- the Traditional Church group)

I wrestled with the number of dollars we spent as a family to do that trip.
There’s multiple ways to look at that… I would love to go back it was a
wonderful experience… but the bottom line is if I wrote [the agency] a
check for the cost of that trip, they could apply it to their education… [and] I think now that would be a better spend. (Julia- the Community Church group)

The PAR Process and Learning from Experience

Within the PAR design there are patterns of process that involve making connections within a bounded time and space (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The process of learning from experience can be influenced by the structure of the experience itself, the dynamics of the group dialogue exploring meaning, and the limitations of the particular time and space. In the case of this research project, the strongest process pattern was the difficulty of stepping outside the STM narrative to apply a critical view of the entire experience. In neither group was the STM trip structured for learning from the beginning, and the informal setting of group discussions yielded a continuum of expertise on the part of the participants for making personal connections between experience, the course of learning, and new behavior. This final section describes and compares the process patterns for the Traditional Church group and the Community Church group.

The Traditional Church

The Traditional Church rests on a long history of service, outreach and international STM travel. The four women represented a range of personal engagement in the meaning making process. Annette, the most experienced in STM travel, was the most abstract in her comments and also shared that “I would be interested in theory, the best thinking about how things work. Just knowledge. I just love to learn things.” Perhaps given her age and current responsibility chairing the church Outreach Committee, “to learn things” did not necessarily mean taking any new action, but instead meant an engaging conversation. Natalie, returning from her second trip to Haiti, spoke about specific ways she has, and wants to continue, providing assistance. She was
grounded in a belief that giving and receiving the love of God was her work in many years of ASP projects, and currently in her attachment to Haiti.

Chloe and Delia, on the other hand, were new to the experience of crossing cultures with a church-related purpose, and their process involved many questions. They “knew they didn’t know” (and Natalie, to some extent, as well) and so were in a position to explore how their experience impacted their lives, and how they might integrate that new knowledge. This group was more concrete in taking next steps than the Community Church group, as mentioned previously in Finding #2, to a large extent because the structure in which they navigated the experience in Haiti was more clear. Delia, in particular, narrated a story of personal discovery that is presented in the following analysis chapter.

**The Community Church**

In a process similar to that of Delia from the Traditional Church, Julia remained focused throughout the group discussions on “going forward,” a term she used repeatedly. This group progressed collectively toward the idea of “going forward,” as opposed to the individual steps taken by the Traditional Church members. Because the Community Church members felt sure that they “knew” Kenyan culture and their purpose on the STM trip, the research design successfully prompted a more critical exploration of that “knowing,” and the connections between the Community Church and the Kenyan village. In the participant designed sixth session, Ellen opened with the comment, “I think we’re all thinking about what happens after the trip and how do we implement it?” Jill added, “I have the same thought about [tonight’s] agenda, like how do you take this experience and make it more impactful for the whole church?” The lively conversation generated fourteen actionable ideas, and Ellen was designated to bring their work to the church staff.
Alright, Ellen, you’re going to get this together, present it, and we’ll go with you to the meeting. (Julia)
All in favor of Ellen (Jill) [followed by collective laughter]
Wait, wait, wait! Don’t I have to accept the nomination? (Ellen)
No! Thank you Ellen! (Jill) [followed by spontaneous group applause]

In both cases, the time and space limitations of the PAR process influenced the depth of personal exploration, however each group, albeit different in many ways, took advantage of the opportunity to make meaning of their STM experience. Annette from the Traditional Church, who had by far the most experience on international STM trips, said that

I think we could encourage more opportunities… some structured times to get back together. I think this has been great, it’s something that I’ve never done before in similar situations… I’d like to see more. (Annette)

Delia, on the other hand, had participated in her first STM trip. Even so, she was thankful for the benefits of the group praxis, saying

I’m not a person who sits around and reflects on things, I look around and see too much to do, and I like these forced reflections… this MADE me stop and think about it. And I hate to think that I have to be forced to do it, but I get busy with other things. (Delia)

Likewise, the members of the Community Church group reflected on their investment in the meaning making process. Julia referred to the process as “therapeutic” and a “structured unpacking” of her trip to Kenya. Jill took a long-term view of “things I hadn’t pieced together” by noting the value of debriefing over time. She explained, “When you first come back you’re like, whoa, what was that? And as you get more distance on it you make sense of it differently.”

Even though Garrison was the most influential recruiter from his congregation for research participants, he also voiced the most surprise at the outcome of the six sessions,

How many weeks have we been doing this, and here we are at the end of this thing, did you ever think we’d be talking about this? Heck no, it’s like, wow, just six weeks now focusing our memories and our hearts back to what we’ve been through [and] we’ve come to this conclusion. (Garrison)
These findings support, expand, and make conceptual links between many of the theoretical concepts and STM literature themes explored in Chapter 2. In the next chapter those connections are made explicit by way of a detailed analysis.
CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS

The purpose of this Participatory Action Research (PAR) study was to explore the central research question, “In what ways could small group processes enable returning STM participants to learn from their experience, and support the integration of that understanding into their lives?” Qualitative research begins with questions, and a spirit of inquiry framed the participation of both the researcher and the members of each group in our dialogic pursuit of meaning making. While laying out the methodology and reporting findings for the two groups was relatively straightforward, the process of interpreting and synthesizing those findings is now measured by the degree to which I found the data meaningful or potentially useful given the research question of learning from experience. The challenge of qualitative analysis was choosing a process for making sense of massive amounts of data, as there are only guidelines as opposed to formulas or rules. Patton (2012) succinctly states, “In short, no absolute rule exists except perhaps this: Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveals given the purpose of the study” (p. 433).

To fairly represent the data, thick description of each research group was provided in the previous chapter. Following Miles, Huberman, & Saldana (2014) the observations, written reflections and group dialogue were grouped into comprehensible patterns and labeled as specific themes. In addition, each group’s unique characteristics and learning trajectory was described. In this chapter those themes and group processes form a foundation for synthesis as described by Bloomberg & Volpe (2012), that is: How the research questions are answered by the findings, how those findings relate to my assumptions about the study, and how those findings relate to the previously examined literature.
To that end, this chapter begins with explanations that aim to account for the “how” and “why” of the phenomena of learning from a STM experience as an answer to the central research question. Next my assumptions as researcher, in terms of creating communicative space, will be addressed. The third section makes connections between the findings of the study and the relevant literature presented in Chapter Two, using the same categories of Participant Expectations, Perceptions of the STM Experience, and Integrating the STM Experience. The fourth section shows conceptual connections to Mezirow’s (2000) theory of transformational learning, with particular reference to Heron & Reason’s (2001) epistemology of knowledge acquisition, and to Lave’s theory of situated learning (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Finally, the broad context of learning from experience shifts to a personal narrative as illustrated by the story of Delia from the Traditional Church.

Answering the Research Question

The research question had a dual focus, first on how small group processes enable learning from experience, and second, how the group could subsequently support the idiosyncratic integration of that learning. The second focus is based on the belief that learning includes action as part of a coherent process (Fenwick, 2003; Vella, 2008; Zull, 2006), and PAR by definition aims toward integrating cycles of dialogue and reflection into new behaviors. Based on the data collected from both research groups, the process of learning from a STM experience in a group setting was enhanced in the following ways.

First, by committing to participate in the research project each participant invested time for dialogue, reflection and between session readings that would not necessarily be allocated to making meaning of their experience under ordinary circumstances. Second, the session design
provided a framework grounded in adult learning theory that shaped the individual and collective learning process. Third, the facilitator competencies of content expertise, small group leadership experience, and energetic, caring presence opened an environment that was safe and conducive to learning. Finally, the collective desire to engage in the process generated a community of inquiry that affirmed personal experience and supported a critical dialogue toward new understanding. Every participant in both groups expressed appreciation for the opportunity to explore the meaning of their experience, using words such as “this made me stop and think,” “some of those things I hadn’t pieced together,” and “the unpacking— that’s what needs to happen after every one of these trips.” These observations are not unrelated to the theoretical underpinnings of the research design, but participants’ naming of outcomes supports the choices that were made in terms of conceptualizing the project and choosing processes.

The question of how the learning played out within the design parameters was influenced by the individual participants, the dynamics generated between participants in relation to the dialogue content, and the context of each group. Both groups grappled with thematic questions to the degree that they were able given the boundaries of the research project. Additional time and relationship building might have produced deeper exploration of culturally shaped assumptions—both within the particular church narrative and in the larger American Christian narrative—and yielded a more critical examination of their experience.

Broad concerns notwithstanding, each group made progress in making meaning of their experiences. The Traditional Church group consistently conversed within the religious narrative of their congregation, which stressed service within a structured environment directed by staff or volunteer committee members. Showing the love of God to others was important to these women and they were motivated to that, albeit in a way that was comfortable to all involved. The women
were more at ease with service than with spiritual conversation. Delia remarked, “I’m not sure I talk about religion, maybe I should do that more. I’m always worried that I’m gonna get preachy.” Annette elaborated, “I think it’s about being rather than talking; to talk through your actions…because I’m not comfortable talking about religion or the scripture either.” Perhaps that is not inconsistent with women in the 50-60 year old range, from white, upper-middle class neighborhoods, belonging to a southern congregation with a 79 year history.

The Community Church group was less confined to a specific narrative, but struggled for clarity from among the constructs regarding STM trips that each participant brought to the process. They were always respectful but never uncomfortable disagreeing with the church staff in terms of how they perceived the marketing, planning, execution, or long term strategy of the partnership between their church and the Kenyan village. Guided by the design of the six sessions, they were able to formulate alternative approaches to engaging the congregation and strengthening the existing partnership strategy.

There were also direct links from dialogue and critical reflection to action. During the two months in which the groups were meeting, there were specific steps taken by individuals. For example, Chloe from the Traditional Church met with the local sending agency leader and volunteered to create a brochure for the agency. She also took ownership of updating the agency’s FaceBook page. It appears significant that these actions took place toward the end of the research sessions, as opposed to during the four months between the actual trip and the beginning of our sessions. By reporting her efforts to the group, the “trying on of possible selves” by Young’s (2013) description, Chloe was living into a future vision of herself as a person engaged with work in Haiti. These volunteer activities were celebrated within the group,
providing affirmation to Chloe and increasing the sense of community; “that bonding experience,” as she articulated it.

In the Community Church group the steps forward were more a collective movement than individual actions, but again, the group process generated those steps and propelled the group toward an action plan. Grappling with each session’s content relative to their trip to Kenya converted endless questions into an eventual list of actionable items, and that success was empowering to the group. There was an elevated, palatable energy throughout the fifth and sixth sessions. As Brookfield (2006) summarizes, “Learning, by definition, involves change. It requires us to explore new ideas, acquire new skills, develop new ways of understanding old experience…No one is the same after learning something” (p. 214).

As mentioned in Chapter Four, given the boundaries of the research project, neither group was able to move outside their particular religious narratives to apply a critical eye to their experience on a systemic, or worldview level. Even within each espoused narrative there were uncertainties about purpose, outcomes, and meaning; to move to a broader understanding of culture, or a Christian response to poverty, would have required more time for introducing specific content and the opportunity for application. Neither trip was structured as an inquiry into the larger questions of power, equity, systemic injustice, or even what a Christian “mission” meant for those who participated, so perhaps it was not reasonable to expect a discourse on that level in the space of six meetings.

**Reflecting on My Assumptions**

The choice of a PAR methodology was based on my belief, as outlined in Chapter Two, that situated cognition is enhanced by a community of practice, and many churches already
utilize small groups for building a sense of community and for spiritual development. I anticipated that by creating such a small group, and by directing the cycles of dialogue, reflection and action that characterize PAR research, the findings would provide insight into how similar processes might be helpful to learning from experience, in general, and for leveraging the STM experience, in particular, in American Protestant churches. This section includes my thoughts on the specific topic of communicative space within the PAR process.

**Communicative Space**

Using a Habermasian approach to adult learning (Fleming, 2012), the four dialogue parameters that bounded the sessions were effective in creating a communicative space. Those parameters were using authentic “I” statements and asking open questions, listening for understanding of the “other,” respecting silence, and protecting confidentiality. The metaphor of communicative space as tidal wetlands, as described by Wicks & Reason (2009) in Chapter Three, was discernable on multiple occasions. For example, during a conversation regarding a Christian response to poverty, Chloe referred to a survey from the take home reading, saying, “So if everyone thinks Jesus spent time with the poor, and we’re all Christian, why are only 2% of us spending time with the poor? Why aren’t we doing that? [pause] I don’t know.” Her comment was followed by profound silence. Wicks and Reason stated that “like tidal wetlands where salt and fresh water mix, these [spaces] are not restful places but continually changing and offering new possibilities and challenges” (p. 258). Chloe’s identity as a follower of Jesus (what Habermas terms her “lifeworld”) was challenged by the survey results, where the Traditional Church (“the system”) did not provide that particular challenge. Continued dialogue could have explored the lifeworld/system disconnect, but instead the new information was assimilated into the narrative, rather than exploring ways the narrative could accommodate Chloe’s concern. The
group simply did not know. A critical exploration was too uncomfortable at that point in the research process.

One explanation for that discomfort comes from Kemmis (2008), who explains that what is “critical” about critical theory is the exploration of perspectives, practices or social systems as potentially unjust, irrational, or inhumane. A possible analysis of the link between belief and action- the creation and maintenance of prevailing ideology within the Traditional Church-follows here. Habermas would say that ideology is manifest in the language and mental models of the congregants, which shapes their way of seeing, or not seeing, the world around them. Because the goal of a critical, PAR process is to find ways to change untoward outcomes, to take the path of critical reflection eventually involves not only increasing knowledge, but changing individual actions. It is a goal that Kemmis says “aims to serve and transcend the self-interests of individual participants” (2008, p. 127). Indeed, Glassman & Erdem (2014) consider critical action research as a “confrontational concept that requires constant reflection and dialogue during the change process so that individuals can engage in their own negotiations between their desires and their survival strategies at any given moment” (p. 213). For the Traditional Church women, the desire to imitate Jesus was in conflict with their “survival strategy,” the distance they perceived between themselves and the local poor. This distance was described in the third finding from their dialogue, in that engagement with the local poor is conceptualized differently than engagement with poor people in an international setting. In Chloe’s question, “Why aren’t we spending time with the poor?” I heard a sense of frustration- perhaps one of responsibility- that could have opened a deeper discussion of the fear they had identified as a barrier to engaging with the local poor. Instead, the profound silence offered a space for individual
reflection, but the women did not venture toward an exploration of the congregational culture that shaped their belief and action in regard to poverty.

**Connections to Short Term Missions Literature**

The process of making meaning of experience was congruent with many studies included in the literature review. As a beginning point, the ability to define the term “short-term mission trip” was difficult for both groups, evidence of the continual tension in the literature between the missions language of service and cultural encounter, and the tourist language of pleasure and consumerism. Delia from the Traditional Church and Garrison from the Community Church both chose not to use the word “mission” when describing their trip to others, yet they considered the experience more sacred than secular, and like the others, were clear that it was not simply a volunteer service trip.

The STM literature relevant to this research project was organized by categories of participant expectations, perceptions of the experience, and integrating ideas and intentions into new behavior after returning home. In this section the research findings from both groups will be compared to the studies reviewed in each of those categories.

**Participant Expectations**

Delia reflected that, regarding the expectation of a changed life, “I THOUGHT [the trip] would. I thought I would know… I thought I would see something that I was supposed to have seen, and would know it instantly, ‘Oh, THAT’S why I came!’ that kind of thing.” Similar to many accounts in the STM literature, Speakman (2015) states that “Millions of people… have personally experienced and witnessed this life-changing [STM] experience (p. 88), a common statement in testimonies and marketing materials, making Delia’s expectation for change a
reasonable one. Occhipinti (2014) suggests that STM participants believe they can gain personal insight through engagement with a poor community more easily than they can in their comfortable and busy American lives. From the Community Church, Ellen hoped to “open the awareness” of the teens in her group, and Garrison wanted his children to “get a heart” for the poor, although neither of them shared about similar endeavors with young people in a local setting. Even so, every participant in both groups chose to go on a STM trip, in part, to have an experience that would change them and their fellow travelers.

Occhipinti (2014) also explored motivation for participating in STM travel in terms of a search for meaning “arising out of a discontent with American culture and postindustrial capitalism” (p. 4). Chloe’s account of her motivation, which seems simple on the surface, has roots in our cultural affinity for production and wealth as the means to personal satisfaction:

I don’t really know what I was hoping to get out of it. I was just curious… how people lived and were they happy and how could they be happy? Everyone says they’re happy even though they have nothing and I just wanted to see what that meant.

The search for meaning is a uniquely human endeavor, and in the context of STM travel a theological framework would appear to be the obvious resource in terms of exploring happiness, community and personal change. Perhaps, as Jarvis (1993) suggests, theological systems do not necessarily carry the authority in the modern world that they did in earlier times. It is more likely, however, that the religious narratives as described by Howell (2012), albeit specific to each different church in this study, shaped the expectations of the participants. Each person expected a meaningful encounter, and while they were moved in different ways, it was difficult to say exactly what those encounters meant. Neither narrative provided space for sustained inquiry or critical reflection on cultural differences, systemic injustice, or American political
policies that influence current global economics. Linehart (2006) used the term “interactive museum” to describe visiting a poor community without the ability- due to language barriers, time, or lack of intention- to communicate in a meaningful way. Thus, the poor exist as a setting where we visit to see suffering, interdependent community, and concrete hope in spirituality.

Expecting a meaningful sacred outcome from an arguable secular activity was not uncommon in the literature or in the two research groups. In line with Occhipinti’s belief that “doing” in the context of STM travel was anticipated to yield a spiritual encounter, Natalie said, “Having the opportunity to be in the home of the woman living there, without her or anyone else around, the simple act of washing dishes and looking out her window was an experience of being in her life that I will not forget.” Her sense of connection to this woman, through the service of washing her dishes as opposed to deeply personal or lengthy conversation, is another example of Finding #2 from the Traditional Church: the power of perceived connections created by the religious narrative of STM.

Traveling to an international destination for the experience of making a meaningful contribution, and hopefully having a life-changing encounter, did not come without a price tag. While trying to define a STM trip, Chloe and Delia factored into their conversation the expectation of spending money for such an experience. Delia mused, “Practically you are bearing the expense and donation of your time… in exchange for an experience. That sounds kind of materialistic.” Her comment is in line with Schreiter’s (2015) observation that the intense experience of a STM trip can be conceived of as simply another offering of an American consumer culture, without any long term, life changing effect.
In the literature review Fanning (2009) pointed out the need for financial accountability for what is now a significant annual expenditure in American churches. The Community Church group, in retrospect, discussed the cost of the experience against the personal benefits and the value added to the community they visited. Ellen questioned the $4,000 price tag for her ten day trip to Kenya, comparing that amount to a much less expensive vacation she enjoyed to South Africa two years prior. When queried about the cost, the missions pastor at her church could not provide Ellen an accounting for the expense, as the travel details were handled by the national sending agency. The lack of transparency in cost accounting was a concern to everyone in the group. Julia, who traveled with a family of five, had invested $20,000 in the experience. She “wrestled pretty hard about the expense,” and concluded that the most effective partnership the Community Church could provide going forward was financial support of the education program in Kenya rather than an investment in sending members for a STM experience. She did not have the line-item issue that Ellen voiced, but in reflection on value for the money, she did not believe it was the best support the congregation could provide.

**Perceptions of the Experience**

The literature on STM travel is in agreement that misinterpretation of a cross cultural experience is a result of more than poor planning or insufficient preparation. Birth (2006) explains that Western STM visitors step into a complex web of social relationships that a trained anthropologist might spend years studying; there is no conceivable way they could be adequately prepared to understand, and effectively engage in, an unfamiliar culture. The scenario is compounded by Slimbach’s (2000) observation that participants are typically unaware of their ethnocentric worldview and tend to confuse American ideals with the tenets of Christianity. A patronizing disposition can be quietly tucked into the assumption that STM participants are
needed, with Divine sanction, to provide services and instruction to those who are less capable. Chloe remarked, for example, “Why is it so hard to teach others to take care of themselves?” and on another occasion, “Why isn’t education important to a majority of the people?” Perhaps those questions stem from what Major & Townsend (2012) term “status ideology” to describe the belief system that assigns personal value in a given society. In Westernized, capitalistic countries such as the United States, the belief that status is based on individual merit and hard work is the dominant ideology. Thus Delia’s lightbulb understanding that the Haitian men she saw “sitting around” were not “lazy” but in fact had nothing to do; there simply was no work available. She was able to look beyond her initial analysis of the scene- assigning motivation to individuals- to the intersection of ideology, culture and economics that shape the individual’s life, albeit on a surface level. Chloe, on the other hand, was not challenged in her conclusion that Haitians were not interested in self-care or pursuing an education. Her thinking is likely to spawn a colonial view of Western Christians as necessary to provide inspiration, education and capitalistic opportunities to benefit the unmotivated, and thus poor, Haitians.

A significant theme in the Community Church’s experience in Kenya was in line with the American penchant for “doing” as opposed to “being” with the people they visit. Multiple studies in the STM literature conclude that a focus on delivering supplies, completing a construction project, or providing services hinders the process of building relationships necessary to avoid objectification of the poor (Raines, 2008; Root, 2008; Schwartz, 2003). The Community Church had very few tasks to complete, and were clear that their primary goal was to be “relational,” as explored in Chapter Four. Operationalizing the term “relational” was difficult, however, as Ellen described with exasperation in her voice,
There were times when the [teen agers] said, “What are we doing here? We’re just sitting!” As a leader trying to encourage them to talk and to be-it’s the American way to be constantly doing…[the Community Church] kept saying it was a relational trip. Now how do you teach a relationship trip? How do you even convey that? (Italics added)

Here the work of Fromm (1976) can be useful to explore the concept of “doing,” in juxtaposition to the idea of “being,” which was a source of tension while in Kenya and a thematic topic during the research sessions. Fromm summarizes two competing modes of existence: the “having” mode, which is reflected in an aggressive striving for individual material possessions and the “being” mode, which is based on love, the pleasure of sharing, and communal productivity. In a society centered around things, rather than people, the need to accumulate possessions is necessary for a sense of worth, happiness and identity. Given that it is possible to lose items you possess, the constant anxiety of that possibility creates insecurity in what is theoretically a secure station of life. Anxiety leads to a fear of theft, economic change, sickness, what is generally “unknown,” and is seemingly best abated by efforts to accumulate more in order to be better protected from the events of living. Thus the practice of “doing” is a manifestation of living in the having mode.

Life propelled by the “having mode” can leave little time or energy for the practice of “being” in relationship with other people, with God, or with the environment. Multiple days in the Kenyan village provided a space to reflect on Western values in light of the perceived closeness of a community that was materially poor. Jill summarized the dissonant question of what is really important in life:

“When your life is funneled down to the most important things, then you do the most important things. But in America you’ve got all this (gestures) and dialing down to what is important is difficult for us. They have
perfected that and we’re struggling with it. We’re the ones struggling to figure out what life is about.”

Anxiety and insecurity in the quest for material goods are absent, however, in the being mode, as identity does not rest upon what a person has and therefore cannot be taken away. Private property has little affective importance, as having, or owning, an object is not a condition of utilizing or enjoying it. Garrison was particularly impressed that the family he visited gathered chairs from all their neighbors so that the Americans would have a place to sit down. He shared, “As soon as we leave, that room isn’t going to have those same eight chairs— who needs eight chairs? So it was a village collecting their stuff into one house.” Before further reflection on the utility of shared possessions, however, Garrison shifted to the quality of the chairs, saying, “and there weren’t any cushions on these chairs, by the way, they were like outdoor porch stuff with the little straps… so that wasn’t the best but that was all they could provide.”

Even without understanding why culture might dictate certain practices, the interdependence required for survival in extreme poverty was intriguing to the American STM visitors. The Kenyan village functioned in contrast to the Western ideology of “having” as a prerequisite for acceptance. Ellen explained, “It was striking how much you were accepted in the community and how much you have to prove yourself here.” In addition to acceptance, “having” is a Western prerequisite for happiness. Without cultural frames of reference, the temptation on a mission trip is to spiritualize or romanticize poverty, the “happy-despite-their-poverty” theme named by Ver Beek (2006) in the literature review. In a similar way Garrison asserted that the Kenyan villagers “are clearly not as materialistic as Americans, and that’s why they’re happy.” Those living in material poverty appear to be content and somehow predisposed to living in community, when in fact, perhaps, they acknowledge and manage their material lack and suffering through spiritual practices and learned dependence on collective living.
The “having mode” can also apply to achievement and success. Julia said “it blows my mind” when reflecting on a local school teacher who left the village to attend college, and then returned to teach in the village. “She moved from a place where you could turn the tap on, turn the light on- is it an active choice?” In other words, why would someone on a trajectory toward achievement and success choose to return to the village- a choice that was perceived as regressive?

Of the Community Church participants, Jill was most able to navigate the being/doing dichotomy. Her comments were often focused on social justice as a result of teaching in a low income school, and her view from that position was passionately articulated. For example, she shared that “I am deeply entrenched in the idea that my worth and value are intertwined with what I do and produce,” and later said, “What the Kenyans have that I don’t is a lifestyle rooted in meaningful relationships with God and others.”

**Integrating the Experience**

If a person worships power and possessions, existing in Fromm’s “having” mode while professing a religion of love, one could argue that his Christianity is reduced to ideology alone. In Jill’s case, her vocation was already situated in serving a low income community and her experience in Kenya expanded and solidified her passion for “being” with others. Her case was unique, however, compared to the other participants in the research groups. On the same conceptual level but less advanced in terms of practice, Julia from the Community Church was exploring community service prior to the STM trip. She felt that the group dialogue broadened her definition of poverty, saying “I’ve always been that way [serving] a little bit, but now I have
more understanding.” She served on several occasions at a local shelter, although her frustration with practice was voiced in the following comment:

“I’m on a learning curve with this. When [serving locally] I find it difficult to bridge that gap [of ‘being’ with the other] knowing I am the affluent white woman coming to serve dinner. I feel like people don’t want to talk to me either. I’m trying to squeeze something out of them that they don’t want to share.”

In the Traditional Church group, individual actions that the women took prior to participating in the research sessions are evidence of new behavior integrated into daily life. Natalie solicited donations and collected supplies for one of the schools the team visited. Chloe and Delia mentioned their calm demeanor in general, as discussed in Chapter 4. It may be that these particular women asked more questions or had more conversations, without the ongoing tension experienced by the Community Church participants, because they were clear that their mission was to provide service and “see” life in Haiti. As a result, they seemed to develop a “moral imagination” (Dunson & Dunson, 2013) that enabled them to insert themselves mentally into a situation in order to appreciate, if only for a moment, what someone else might be going through. Annette shared,

“There was this young boy from whom the dentist was trying to extract a tooth, and it was awful. She did everything; she was standing with her foot up in the chair trying to pull and the thought that this teenager could have a tooth that bad, and the pain he must have gone through- and then that he was going through having it extracted- that has just stuck with me so much… thinking about how you just feel the pain.”

Smith (2009) believes there is a strong link between the foundational affective nature of humanity and daily practices; the former entailing the latter because “being human takes practice” (p. 131). Bloomberg (2013) elaborates by situating practice as immersion in ordinary, concrete experience where emotional engagement yields empathy and thus action. He continues
that empathy requires intellectual as well as imaginative identification with the other, and ultimately requires a willingness to act, as far as it is possible, in favor of the other. Although the intellectual or cognitive analysis of experience was limited by the religious narrative of the church and the extent to which the group would examine their worldviews, the affective engagement was powerful enough to motivate individual actions upon returning. This progression was manifest in the Traditional Church Finding #2: The Power of Perceived Connections.

In addition to prior experience and emotional motivation, in terms of personal integration, the Community Church sessions often cycled back to a broad, structural comparison of community in the Kenyan village compared to their local community. They noted the spiritual support system among the women who had lost children, as opposed to a more individualistic approach to grief or paying for professional therapy. They noted the collective effort necessary to manage the logistics of their home visits. Livermore (2006) reminds us that the communal nature of churches in non-Western cultures is reminiscent of the Christian church in the third and fourth centuries. A radical sense of community made Christianity appealing to people at that time. One of Julia’s pressing questions was “How can we (in the USA) be a better community? It takes a village!” If the trip had been structured for learning, perhaps she would have leveraged the fact that she was in a village by seeking to understand the principles and practices that shaped the Kenyan culture she had difficulty understanding. The expression “It takes a village” is popular in our American conversation but unpacking an idealized concept in order to implement a more dependent community culture can be incompatible with the American value of independence.

In a similar reflection Chloe from the Traditional Church said, “These are people [in Haiti] that really, really live according to the basic parable teachings. It’s beautiful. These people
take care of each other, they put poor people first, they put children first, they feed each other.” These are some of the actions that build an interdependent community, a faith-in-action that challenges an *American* religious narrative. Yet as Zehner (2006) points out, there is no mutual growth in an engagement that one side views as a “mission,” implying bringing something to a place where there is demonstrable lack, even though the hosting community lives in a community and practices a spirituality that seems to tap into the American expectation of a meaningful existence. A different, deeper engagement could yield the meaningful experience- of meaningful existence- that STM participants desire to understand.

Finally, in both groups the idea that a STM experience would “cycle back” or “turn around” in terms of benefit after the fact surfaced in conversation toward the end of the six sessions. Chloe from the Traditional Church questioned whether the teenagers who participated in STM travel had the maturity or resources to leverage their experience for change, and the Community Church collectively concluded that they were “failing” in closing the relational loop between their congregation and the Kenyan village, as recounted in Chapter 4. Julia lamented, “Some of the journey is what do you do with it once you get back to America? I’m not sure I know the answer for that… bringing it full circle when you walk alongside people, how does that work back here?”

In conclusion, the integration of new behaviors by returning STM participants, as discussed in the STM literature, is viewed as possible, but outcomes are not observed or clearly articulated in terms of long term behaviors. The research question in this case was specific to how small group process could support learning from experience. To that end, the findings show individual actions from the Traditional Church group, and a collective effort toward structural change from the Community Church, as immediate actions resulting from the PAR process.
Table 5.1 provides a visual link between the research findings and the relevant themes drawn from the STM literature.

Table 5.1

*Comparison of Themes: Research Findings and STM Literature*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature Review Themes:</th>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Perceptions</th>
<th>Integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #1</td>
<td>Expectation of Change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #2</td>
<td>The Power of Perceived Connection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #3</td>
<td>The Difference in Haitian Poor and American Poor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #1</td>
<td>What is a STM Trip?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #2</td>
<td>Why Am I Going?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #3</td>
<td>What are we doing?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #4</td>
<td>Is this Experience Authentic?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #5</td>
<td>How do I Know?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Suggestions for Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Connections to Theory

The conceptual map for this research project was a PAR method framed by transformative and situated learning theories. Reason & Bradbury (2008) recap a working definition of action research as

“A participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern… and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (p. 4).

This definition balances the meaning making process with a theoretical framework and application tasks so that practical outcomes are understood in context as they are implemented. The presence of theory provides the link between exploring everyday experience, where action research begins, and the ability to create new knowledge that ultimately contributes to human “flourishing.” Good action research is a developmental process, with new understanding and behaviors emerging as individuals develop skills of inquiry within communities of practice. Life experience is the milieu from which theory provides a cognitive map and language to explore previously unrecognized aspects of reasoning, and a deeper understanding of the interplay of causal factors between the individual and the social environment (Friedman & Rogers, 2009). To that end, Transformative Learning Theory, espoused by Mezirow (2000), showed the most potential for application in this PAR research project, in conjunction with Lave’s Situated Learning (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The following section explores the research findings in light of these two theories.
Transformative Learning Theory

The process of transformation, in Mezirow’s view, has the following general components: a disorienting dilemma, which is thought of most often as a sudden crisis; a critical reflection on the underlying assumptions a person holds about themselves and the world; participation in critical discourse regarding the shifting of perspectives; and finally, taking action based on a new perspective. Learning in adulthood requires not only an awareness of the source and context of knowledge, values, and feelings but a critical assessment of individual and societal assumptions that shape beliefs and actions.

Mezirow uses the term *frame of reference* for the meaning structure composed of *habits of mind* resulting in particular *points of view*. This structure represents cultural paradigms and personal perspectives and values; a coherent way of looking at the world that could also be referred to as a worldview. Hiebert (2008) describes the function of worldview as a model of reality- explaining the nature of things- and also as a model for behavior that is appropriate within that worldview. A worldview supplies answers to the ultimate questions of life, provides emotional security, validates cultural norms, and generally provides psychological reassurance that the world exists in the way that we see it. When people experience a gap between their worldview and their experience of reality, on a STM trip for example, they have a “worldview crisis,” (p. 30) or a “disorienting dilemma.”

The ability to suspend previously unexamined beliefs and collectively construct alternative perspectives was manifest in the Community Church theme labeled “Is this experience authentic?” Reality as they understood it- their worldview- was initially and unconsciously overlaid on the Kenyan community. On one level, there were opportunities to
explore perceived incongruity, for example Ellen mused, “There was no running water but there were cell phones- a strange mix!” but she did not pursue an inquiry into the authenticity of that “strange mix.” In the end, the dissonance of stretching an American worldview to cover life in a different culture was uncomfortable enough that real differences were dismissed as superficial, or explanations for cultural differences were generated from American points of view. This practice was consistent enough throughout the session dialogues that the theme “How do I know?” (Community Church Finding #5) was created. In response to that question, Mezirow (2000) proposes critical reflection as the subsequent and necessary step in exploring current habits of mind in light of new or disorienting experiences.

**Critical reflection.**

Critical reflection, however, is a learned skill, difficult to do well, and needs to be taught with patience and understanding, safety and structure (Qualters, 2010). There were occasions where I would interject questions aimed at a deeper exploration of participants’ assumptions, or revisit topics when they seemed applicable to a current dialogue thread. I often reframed conclusive statements regarding other cultures with a logic model of that same reasoning in the more familiar American context. My hope in directing the flow of conversation in those ways was to open a window to the underlying, unexamined ideologies from which the participants made meaning of their experience. McCarthy (2013) names that process as a three level movement from surface description, to planning or problem solving, to a deep and potentially meaningful inquiry that utilizes analysis and evaluation skills. In that way even the experience of critical reflection itself, in the group setting, could be viewed as dissonant, a “disorienting dilemma” in Mezirow’s (2000) terms. In the case of Chloe’s question about imitating Jesus as a Christian response to poverty, which generated a profound silence in her Traditional Church
session, the way forward from that surface question had sufficient affective weight that the conversation did not flow into McCarthy’s subsequent level of problem solving. As problem solving was a typical response in that research group, the silence was significant. The third level of analysis and evaluation required more time and skill, as mentioned earlier, than the group competencies or research boundaries afforded.

Brookfield (2012) agrees that an important pedagogical component of critical reflection is abstract, conceptual reasoning. As such, a broad view of STM trips would consider ethical behavior or unjust social structures, not just personal opinion or preferences. It is impossible, however, for adults to reflect on that level with a singular focus on the immediate features of their lives. To pursue Chloe’s question the group would have to begin an analysis of their comfortable lifestyles in view of the poverty they witnessed in Haiti, and which they already know exists, to a lesser degree, across town. Here Qualters (2010) provides a reflective thinking scale that is helpful in gauging and naming the progressive, collective, reflective competencies of the Traditional Church sessions, as shown in Table 5.2.
Table 5.2

*Six-Point Reflective Thinking Scale*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nonjudgmental</td>
<td>Report/Description of events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Judgmental</td>
<td>Report/Description of events with suggestions for future action without justification or rationale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Personal Preference</td>
<td>Description/Explanation of events with suggestions for future action with personal preference given as justification or rationale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Theoretical</td>
<td>Description/Explanation with principle or theory given as reason/justification/rationale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Contextual Factors</td>
<td>Description/Explanation with principle/theory and consideration of contextual factors given as reason/justification/rationale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Principled</td>
<td>Description/Explanation with consideration of ethical, moral or political issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* “Adapted from Experiential learning: Making the most of learning outside the classroom,” by D. Qualters, 2010, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 124*, p. 98.

Comments during the six dialogues ranged from nonjudgmental to personal preference, although the word “judgmental” was often used as a negative practice. For example, in a conversation about the term “worthy poor,” as a tacit designation in the American consciousness, Delia declared, “judging is not what I want to be doing, but I do think we put categories on the poor.” From Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the injunction “Do not judge,” was a strong component of the congregational narrative. It was difficult, however, to separate the religious use of passing judgment from a statement of opinion as described in Qualter’s (2010) Reflective Thinking Scale. Part of the problem with developing a critical reflective practice, in my view, was the lack of available language to move the dialogue out of an undesirable religious practice to a process of examining language, meaning, and their influence on thought. Following the
“but,” in her statement, Delia acknowledged that there are categories, or distinctions, within the population we label “poor,” although she could not pursue that line of thought without being “judgmental.” Poplin (2005) theorizes that adults are reluctant to engage in critical discourse because “Most of us have little experience and no training thinking [about experience] through Judeo-Christian lenses at any real intellectual depth… [we have] odd mixes of secular and Christian principles sitting side by side uncontested” (p. 151). Qualter’s (2012) third level of reflection shows Delia’s statements as the ability to name a statement as personal opinion, or an emotional reaction (although Qualters does not incorporate emotion influenced cognition in her model), which is a necessary starting point to the introduction of theory, contextual factors, and ethical concerns.

In comparison, Jill from the Community Church had a sense of the structural inequity that shapes individual lives and was able to take a broad view of her experience- a result of her position as a teacher in a low-income school, and her residence in the surrounding community. Based on her pre-existing knowledge of contextual factors and ethical responsibility, she was engaged in level five and six reflection. She explained, “Because I have been given much… more is expected of me. Therefore, I am passionate about serving the poor… [it is] the best way I know to honor the people of [the Kenyan village]. While I don’t directly impact them daily, I can uplift the poor in my own community.”

The informal climate of a church activity, particularly in the Traditional Church culture, however, was not a setting where participants expected consistent challenges to their way of thinking, and the size and scope of this project influenced the extent to which learning could emerge at a pace set by the participants themselves. Brookfield (2002) points to this “unresolvable tension of critical practice: how to respect the agendas adults bring… while
contradictorily challenging these agendas by offering (and sometimes insisting on) radically different, politically contentious options” (p. 106). Following the experience of Grant (2007), in her reflection on facilitating critical dialogue, I also “came to recognize the need to acquiesce to outcomes as they emerged,” since the time boundaries of the project limited the introduction of new concepts, the amount of dissonance that I could appropriately interject, and thus our progress toward some of the a priori outcomes I did not necessarily expect, but hoped might materialize.

**Exploring new frames of reference.**

Baumgartner (2001) expands on Mezirow’s conceptualization of transformative learning with research that aligns with findings in this study. First, she points to disorienting dilemmas as the result of the accumulation of events over time, in addition to a sudden onset of crisis or an unexpected event. Delia, from the Traditional Church, chose to participate in a STM trip, and made sense of the experience, from early stories told by her husband, the conversations in the research group, and the parallel arrival of “empty nest” status, all of which combined to launch her on a meaning making quest. Chloe, on the other hand, decided spontaneously to participate in the same trip, and had a singular disorienting event stepping into the Haitian context of extreme poverty.

Second, Baumgartner points to the importance of context and culture, which has already been discussed in terms of congregational religious narratives and the general influence of Western society on Christianity. Third, she identified feelings as equally important factors in the transformative process; a more holistic approach than focusing entirely on rational criticality. Congruent with this view is Heron and Reasons’ (2001) conceptualization of knowledge
acquisition as a holistic endeavor, incorporating experience, emotion and practice as factors equally important to cognitive knowing. As detailed in the chapter on methodology, the research session designs were framed by Heron and Reason’s four level epistemology of experiential, presentational, propositional and practical knowing. Following are two significant connections to presentational and proposition knowing, separated here by headings but intertwined in the reality of the group discussions.

**Presentational knowing.**

Presentational knowing is grounded in experience and is evidenced by an intuitive or imaginative grasp of the significance of the encounter. That understanding is expressed through forms of imagery, symbolism or emotion. In an effort to access emotional knowing, the participants created “found poetry” during the second session; examples of which were included in Chapter Four on findings. Comparing groups, the Traditional Church group seemed to make more emotional connections with the Haitian people than the Community Church members were able to make with people in the Kenyan village. Perhaps because they were more clear regarding the purpose of their trip (to serve and to “see”), they used more expressions, and told more stories, that reflected emotional engagement. It seemed that emotion, rather than a new meaning perspective, motivated them to take action after returning. Lawrence (2008) agrees that “only when we are deeply affected by an issue [do we] become motivated to work for change” (p. 72).

Additionally, emotion in the form of guilt was observed as a motivating factor toward action, and appeared in comments from both groups. Sinha (2010) describes a “felt contact” with the other that generates a “nagging sense of concern or discomfort… that ruptures… the self-satisfaction of my daily existence and the stable meanings with which I navigate the world” (p. 462). This discomfort is described as an “owing something” or guilt whose strength of feeling is
not dependent on reflective justification or personal decision. For example, Ellen from the Community Church asked the questions, “Do you feel like you DID enough?’ and “Do you feel guilty about not being or continuing to be connected with the village?” And Chloe from the Traditional Church said the trip left her “wishing I was doing more. All the time I feel like I should be doing more… I see poor people here and I think God I should be doing more, why don’t I do more?”

The Traditional Church women expressed the most significant range of authentic emotions, which shifted over time. For example, Annette said, “[I was] so excited about it and how do you get that to more people? That sense of excitement?” and later Natalie confided, “I want to do more… it’s really, really hard… I’ve thought about it, but so far, life gets in the way and you feel overwhelmed trying to think of something… and then you start feeling helpless.” The progression over time from “excited,” to “overwhelmed,” to “hopeless” is not inconsistent with the research literature, and speaks of the necessity of a holistic approach to learning from experience utilizing emotion for momentum within a reasonable cognitive framework. Linhart (2006) states that the ethical hope in STM travel is that participants will be changed, but instead are likely to simply feel connected to missions, and continue in cultural patterns once they return home. Jill, from the Community Church group, voiced a similar concern,

“You don’t want your experience to just have been, ‘Oh, I learned all these things, had this great experience and it didn’t change me at all.’ Something in one of the readings said if you actually learn something it should change your behavior. I think that’s true.”

While the academy typically leans toward rational cognition, it may be that a religious setting is more accepting of emotional processing as a foundation for meaning making or action. That question might be answered by a study of adult education within American congregations.
In the context of this study, at any rate, it seems that emotional engagement in STM can be high, but cannot sustain change without other learning modalities.

**Propositional knowing.**

Propositional knowing is the exploration and application of words and concepts— the space formal education typically occupies. Knowing at this level is managing facts and ideas into a conceptual framework, from which application can be drawn and transferred to relevant contexts. The stages of Heron and Reason’s (2001) knowledge acquisition framework place presentational knowing prior to the propositional level. This sequence can reduce the tendency to make judgements that Lawrence (2008) terms labeling, that is, a “seeing with words [that] interferes with pure observation… once we put a label on something, we think we understand it and stop looking any further” (p. 67). Yorks & Kasl (2002) concur, also following Heron, that a learning theory privileging discourse is at risk of misinterpreting unfamiliar experiences.

Participants with a common background are able to understand each other’s words because their experiences are similar. In a new culture, however, STM participants cannot “try on” another person’s point of view. Even with the intentionality of asking questions, from a humble rather than patronizing stance, they are limited to their frame of reference by vocabulary and assumed meanings, experiencing what Dunson and Dunson (2013) call “false solidarity” (p. 62). False solidarity could apply to the Power of Perceived Connection theme from the Traditional Church dialogues.

As an example, Garrison from the Community Church transposed “knowing” Southern, middle class white congregants with “knowing” the Kenyan villagers by saying,

I would say there is an established relationship with a certain subset [of villagers]… like there are people I only know at church from seeing them on Sundays, and I don’t know them, but I KNOW them. I’ve got that
connection. In that sense, these mission teams have at least created that level of relationship.

The paradox is that STM participants are often looking for meaningful engagement. They experience strong emotions, but their understanding is limited—by the many factors discussed in this paper—and they are likely to assign meaning by way of cognitive labeling, which is assimilating new information into their particular religious narrative. Without the critical, intentional work of learning from the experience they are not in a position to integrate sustainable action into their lives. A ten-day visit to a foreign culture is not sufficient for living within another person’s point of view, which is the essence of emphatic understanding (Yorks & Kasl, 2002) and a component of holistic knowledge acquisition.

In a recent publication Roberts (2015) speculates that “global friendship,” more than service or evangelism, currently motivates participation in STM travel. Friendship is universally conceived as a positive enterprise, but cross-cultural friendships are “notoriously” difficult to achieve. Additionally, if the enterprise has the overarching intention (tacit or not) of providing spiritual renewal or insight for the Western guest, it “runs the danger of being selfish—of gaining personal spiritual satisfaction on the backs of the poor.” She explains, “Friendship is not ‘random acts of kindness’; rather it involves systematic, kingdom-based practices that require respect, compassion, humility, sharing, giving, and receiving” (p. 182). To that list I would add, “and time.” The temptation exists to label unfamiliar actions with Western concepts, and thus misinterpret experience. In the case of the Community Church experience the labels were dissatisfying enough that the theme “Is this experience authentic?” emerged as addressed in Chapter Four.
Situated Learning Theory

Situated Learning, as conceptualized by Jean Lave, is a process of knowledge acquisition as a function of participation in a group. The learning is in context, rather than being transferred in abstract from the classroom to the scenario where it will be applied, and occurs in social interaction and collaboration. A “community of practice” is the term most often associated with this learning theory, that is, a specific type of social structure with a specific purpose (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

As a means to conceive of congregational small groups, situated learning had application in a broad sense to this study. Much of the research group dialogue was aimed at understanding concepts, accessing the affective domain, and clarifying purpose and reasonable outcomes with regard to STM travel. Perhaps if those components were more clearly delineated by the congregations or sending agencies, the work of the research sessions would have leaned more toward articulating new perspectives, crafting new behavior and exploring ways the group could support that behavior. Over time, however, a situated view of learning would be appropriate as a theoretical framework for developing or analyzing the small group experience. The Traditional Church group most closely resembled a community of practice in that their experience was squarely situated in the congregational narrative, and their focus was on integrating personal experience rather than examining that narrative.

The Community Church, on the other hand, worked to clarify basic tenets of their experience. Once they reached consensus on what being “relational” meant, as the purpose of their STM experience, they were energized toward creating next steps in their collective learning trajectory. Glassman & Erdem (2014), drawing on the work of Freire, view the role of PAR as providing a space for the development of conscientization, a term Freire used for the tipping
point of change. In Freire’s view new community-based problem-solving processes can only be created once the group develops a deep awareness of the socio-cultural reality (in this case the religious narrative) that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality.

By way of summary, Table 5.3 provides an overview of both groups’ experience in light of the research question, “In what ways could small group processes enable returning STM participants to learn from their experience, and support the integration of that understanding into their lives?” This is a simplistic rendering of the theoretical understanding of the research findings, but provides a visual comparison.
Finally, the broad context of learning from experience shifts to a personal narrative as illustrated by the story of Delia from the Traditional Church. Of all the research participants, Delia’s learning trajectory was the most consistent in terms of progression, and also in terms of an intentional process that she was able to articulate and reflect upon.
Delia’s Personal Narrative

A narrative story, as a form of qualitative inquiry, honors the individual’s descriptive account as data that can be used to understand lived experience, or unpack the individual’s perception of that experience. Patton (2002) suggests that stories are more memorable and better support the understanding of a phenomenon than nonstory information. Making meaning of experience through a narrative story involves an interpretation of causes, consequences and relationships, and in the case of this research project, a process that primarily utilized directed group dialogue and reflection. As a form of communicating the “results” of the meaning making process, a brief analysis of Delia’s learning trajectory is provided in this section. The analysis is still within a situated cognition perspective, as Delia’s perceptions are not isolated mental constructs, but are influenced by the context of the Traditional Church’s STM narrative, and the inquiry process design of the research project. All quotes in this section belong to Delia.

The narrative analysis is framed by O’Brannon & McFadden’s (2008) Experiential Andragogy Model of a Non-Traditional Experiential Learning Program. This model was designed based on a study of best practices in four different adult education programs, and influenced by the work of Dewey, Kolb, and Knowles. The model has six stages: motivation, orientation, involvement, activity, reflection, and adaptation. Intended as a process model, with a cyclical movement through the six stages, learners benefit from the interaction between stages and can elect to continue the process loop as needed. The role of the facilitator is to provide opportunities for engagement in each stage of the model, although it is ultimately the responsibility of the learner to participate in an authentic and consistent manner. Because Delia was the most focused on her individual journey her story was best suited for this analysis.
Motivation

The first stage, Motivation, is similar to the concept of self-directed learning. Motivation is an internal force of varying degree and from various sources. Patton (2002) remarks that story is a powerful motivation for action or change, and it was the stories Delia’s husband told of his own STM travel to Haiti that eventually motivated her to go there as well.

I’ve been one of those who declared I would never go, no. It’s just not for me. My husband has been two or three times, my children have not been to Haiti but have been on other trips, so I had all these years of listening to stories, and I love stories… I’m not a good story teller but I like for people to tell me stories, and I would say to my husband all the time, “Tell me a story about Haiti.” He’s a really good story teller, and it’s like slowly, slowly, I’m starting to get reeled in…. my last child went to college in the fall, empty nest syndrome, and it was from the stories over time [that I was motivated to go].

I asked Delia to speak more about the change in her perspective on STM travel, and she added,

I have a very small comfort zone. I like to have all my stuff; I like it to be around me, I’m very set in my nightly routines. I like to be comfortable. Never been camping. I used a Port-a-Potty for the first time maybe four or five years ago (collective laughter in the group)… I’ve just never been an adventurous person so this was completely out of my box…. I think it really was the empty nest, ‘What am I gonna do?’… kind of questioning.

Even though Delia expressed an emptiness after her last child left for college, and linked questions about her future with a trip to Haiti, neither the questions nor the reason for taking the trip itself were easily articulated. She explained, “I went not knowing. Some people had a certain focus or [reason] why they felt like they were called to do it; I did not. I remember saying, ‘I have no idea why I’m going.’”

Fenwick (2003) suggests that there are different degrees of consciousness regarding an individual’s intention to learn something new. These may range from fully aware and deliberate, to a spontaneous reaction to surprising events, to totally implicit learning without intention or
even awareness. Delia could not articulate a clear reason for her decision to go to Haiti, rather she was responding to a sense of possibility opened for her by the “empty nest” season of her life— a sense that was strong enough to overcome her fear of entering into an unknown situation.

**Orientation**

Orientation is the process stage where particular activities or programming is described and participants are acquainted with each other. For Delia, the preparatory sessions and assigned text served as orientation. O’Bannon and McFadden (2008) suggest that this stage is the time to introduce participants to the concept of experiential learning, given that adults likely adopt a formal, passive approach to learning. The local agency did not structure the trip for learning in terms of providing tools or processes to that end, but they did speak of the event as a “come and see” experience. The lack of specific, anticipated outcomes and the loose connection to the Traditional Church may account for the space Delia needed to focus on her own personal experience.

So on a mission trip you’re trying to accomplish a goal, a certain task, but on our mission trip we didn’t really have that, we didn’t build anything… I thought our mission trip was building relationships furthering the relationship of [the local agency] with the people that support that organization. [Paused for reflection] Officially that was our mission.

**Involvement**

Once the purpose of the experience is clear the participants can engage in planning their role, or contribution, or expressing their expectations regarding activities, the stage referred to as Involvement. O’Bannon and McFadden urge that “each learner’s background and experiences must be incorporated into… activity planning” (2008, p. 26) and that plans must be flexible to account for evolving encounters between participants, with other people outside the group, or in terms of a changing environment. Although Delia shared that “When I signed up I didn’t know
we were going to work… I thought I was going to see. I had no idea I’d be doing something,”
during the preparatory meetings she developed lesson plans for a third grade class, utilizing her
training as an elementary school teacher. This was a contrast from her previous contributions to
STM travel:

Practically you are bearing the expense and donation of your time, and
talents and gifts in exchange for an experience- that sounds kind of
materialistic, in a way, but up to this point all I had ever done was write
the checks or pack the snacks or do the tasks involved with [preparing
others for] a mission trip.

Despite her self-described affinity for comfort and predictability, Delia was prepared for the need
to be flexible on the trip. “Anything’s gonna be new and different for me. I was like ‘five
minutes,’ well THAT was a new and different experience, let’s see what the next five minutes
does for me.”

Activity

The fourth stage is Activity, which can be active or passive, involve an individual or a
group, and continue over any length of time. Over the course of the five-day trip to Haiti, Delia
taught in three different schools, visited a children’s home and a hospital, enjoyed a beach visit,
hiked up a mountain, shopped in the market, participated in various devotionals and worship
services, and played with local children three consecutive evenings after dinner. All these
activities involved the entire STM group with local children, adults and/or service providers.

Reflection

Following Kolb, Fenwick (2003) argues that simply participating in an activity does not
ensure learning will occur. New knowledge, skill or attitudes are achieved through engagement
with concrete experience (activity) that is followed by reflection, abstract conceptualization, and
subsequent experimentation. O’Bannon and McFadden do not address abstract conceptualization
as such, but they do follow activity with a Reflection stage. They conceive of reflection either as concurrent with activity, or a post-activity “looking back” intended to “extract meaning” (2008, p. 26) from the experience. In comparison to the other Traditional Church members, Delia was very thoughtful and benefited from the research group dialogue parameters that created confidentiality, support, and a respect for times of silence for mental processing. It was somewhat surprising, then, that she did not complete the individual reflective journaling intended for completion between the fifth and six sessions. A plausible explanation could be Delia’s learning style.

From their study of learning styles, Hall & Moseley (2005) concluded that accounting for learning styles is a fundamental component of an integrated framework for learning. Self-awareness of learning preferences, or styles, underpins the ability to choose between reflective practices during times of difficulty or dissonance. Rather than being an end-point of learning, self-knowledge aids an individual with strategies that can change routine processes, on the one hand, or unfamiliar experiences, on the other, into a learning experience. Based on my previous understanding of learning styles, and observing Delia’s quiet and reflective stance during the group dialogue, I thought perhaps she would benefit from the space between sessions where the personalized reflective journaling would take place. At the time she shared,

This is so interesting because I’ve been thinking about this for months, in parallels, because I’m at this big crossroads [since] my last child just left. I think “pick a direction” and I’m not able to pick any direction. So to put this down on paper, I wish… I don’t know if I can but I’ll try. I feel like I’ve been struggling with it, like what am I going to do next?

I was disappointed that she did not complete the journaling worksheet during the research period, but followed up with her two months later and asked if she felt ready to articulate her feelings. I believed that she did indeed have significant questions and was self-aware enough to engage in a
critical reflection on her experience in Haiti, and what that meant relative to her current life situation as an “empty nester.” Within one week she emailed me an insightful personal reflection based on the journaling prompts. In the following section Delia’s reflective process is examined in terms of reflection that was concurrent with her activity in Haiti, individual reflection after the fact, and the praxis generated by the research group setting.

**Reflection concurrent with activity.**

Delia’s reflective process during the activity stage was enhanced by her sense of self, that is, she was clear about her identity, her strengths and weaknesses, and so had a reference point from which to examine her engagement in Haiti.

I am a person who likes thing to be consistent and safe. I have not always embraced change and new surroundings. I remember being in such a new and different environment in Haiti, asking God to please show me what he wanted me to see and learn. I knew I had to depend on others as well as myself to be able to see these things… it forced me to listen and think and process, something I don’t always do in today’s society. Maybe I glance at my cell phone too much or I’m thinking ahead while talking to others. Going to a place out of my norm forced me to slow down and listen and think. I loved that.

While trying to understand the context of poverty in Haiti, with so many people unemployed and idle, Delia had the following “light bulb:”

There were a lot of people just sitting around, something Stan [the group leader] said set off a light bulb in my brain, “There’s nothing to do.” I just went “Ding! There’s nothing to do!” I don’t know why; it’s so simple… It helped me to see that there are no jobs, there is no work for them…

**Individual retrospective reflection.**

During a conversation about the purpose of the STM trip, that is, building a relationship between the Haitians and the local agency, I asked Delia if she felt as though the trip was successful. She answered,
No, I would have had them all reading on a 3rd grade level by the time I left after one hour (collective laughter), but it was successful for me personally... I had very low expectations for myself, this was my first one, and I’d always avoided missions trips, so for me to complete it, to enjoy it, to take somethings away from it, to experience all that I experienced, to feel grateful for it- all those add up to success for me. It has enriched my life.

I think I thought it would be harder for me than it actually was. Now, I had my moments of hardship, I had times when I didn’t feel good, and I was uncomfortable, but I really thought that I would be more like that the whole time. Just because I’d never done anything like that before. I kind of underestimated myself.

**Group Praxis.**

During a discussion attempting to generate a working definition of short term missions, Delia verbalized her thinking process for the group,

I never said to people when I would talk about going, “I’m going on a mission trip to Haiti.” I’d say I’m going to Haiti. Their next question would always be, “Are you going on a mission trip?” and I would always say “Yes.”

Natalie clarified: “Because you didn’t know what else to call it, right?”

Delia [nodding]: “Which is interesting now; I’d never thought about that.”

Delia made comments during the group dialogue that seemed contradictory, in terms of how she viewed herself:

[In reference to a session handout] My favorite thing is what you wrote, one thing I keep coming back to is “Maybe after all this, something you hoped would be clear, isn’t clear at all.” Because I think I said before I didn’t know why I was going and still not sure why. I know it was a good thing, and I know it impacted me, but if someone asked me to sum it up, I wouldn’t be able to do it. I’m a reflective thinker- can’t talk in the spur of the moment very well at all.

I have to have forced reflection. I’m not a person who sits around and reflects on things, I look around and see too much to do… this MADE me stop and think about it, and I hate to think that I have to be forced to do it, but I get busy with other things.
In my view Delia was a deep thinker, but was not in the habit of investing the time she needed to make meaning. Her busy lifestyle did not afford the space that her learning style needed to flourish, in terms of learning from this, or any, experience. However, given the opportunity in group dialogue, and over time with the personal journaling, she was able to make connections and articulate her feelings.

**Adoption**

The sixth and final stage in the analysis model is labeled Adoption, where individuals make connections between their learning and the role the experience will play in their future. Zull (2002) addresses the connection, from a biological perspective of learning, between what we know, by way of reflecting on experience, and what we do as a result. Using Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, he shows the parallel biological process that also moves from experience, to reflection, to abstraction/conceptual hypothesis, to active testing. As seen in Figure 5.1, in both processes the learner moves from being a receiver of information to a producer of knowledge and action. Zull points out that until ideas (cognitive meaning making) are tested through action we cannot know if those ideas are valid, since “action forces our mental constructs out of our brains and into the reality of the physical world” (p. 208). Biologically speaking, the loop of learning is only closed with action, which in turn provides sensory feedback to the brain and begins a new learning cycle. In a later work Zull states that “Testing our theories is the ultimate step in learning. The testing must be active; it must use the motor brain. Theory must be tested by action in order to complete learning- to discover how our understanding matches reality (Zull, 2006, p. 7). Vella (2008) concurs, framing “knowing” as an active verb, where evidence of learning is manifest as a change of behavior. She explains that “Indicators [of learning] are finely delineated behavioral outcomes” (p. 216).
During the conversation on making personal application by taking action, Delia remarked, “That’s so funny, because I’ve gotten used to not taking action (followed by collective laughter) I went to Haiti and you get back and you settle down, and it was very easy for me to settle back down and not ‘do.’” Nonetheless, she provided several examples of new behavior. As mentioned in Chapter Four, Delia pointed to her new, relaxed attitude toward playing tennis. She also said that, “It’s interesting because I feel like since we’ve been back I’ve been calmer, which is hard to believe that six days will do that to you, but I do. All these little things that can gnaw at you, it just doesn’t matter.”

Also mentioned in Chapter Four was Delia’s example of being present with others, as illustrated in her example of making eye contact and using the name of a McDonald’s worker. In addition, she shared that she wanted to recruit supporters from among her friends, “I’m trying to
talk them into sponsoring children, and I’m trying to find the angle that might strike a chord with them.” She was very intentional in determining an approach that would be comfortable for her, given her quiet countenance, and also attractive to the individual with whom she was talking. Finally, during the time of the research sessions, she volunteered to be the secretary for the next trip to Haiti:

I’ve somehow become the secretary...you know that’s the great thing about Helen [the local agency founder] she just has a way of getting you to help. I don’t mind a bit but she is very good at getting you to want to do it.

**Connections to Theory**

For Delia, the dialogue trajectory of the research sessions shows a movement from interest in a new experience, to an outcome of changed behavior. Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton (2006) in a conversation regarding Transformative Learning processes, conclude that outcomes are the distinguishing mark between a meaningful experience and one that is indeed transformative. Lennox (2005) expands on transformative learning outcomes as most impactful when they are holistic. Her study identified self-reported learning at four levels that she considered as holistic: Self, Relationships, Spirituality, and Health Behaviors. While health behaviors are not necessarily relevant to learning from the experience of crossing cultures, Delia exhibited similar outcomes in the areas of Self (greater self-understanding and awareness, discovery of inner resources), Relationships (increased empathy, tolerance and trust for others), and Spirituality (connective awareness, new resources for the journey). She was able to examine her assumptions about Haitian and American culture, articulate her cognitive progression, reflect on her emotions, and implement new behaviors as a direct result of her personal process.
While the group dialogue regularly returned to the topic of unjust systems of inequity in both the United States and Haiti, Delia was focused primarily on her personal meaning making. In terms of Situated Learning theories, her engagement in collective, critical reflection resulted in what Fenwick refers to as “socially transformative action taken in changing everyday habits and interactions… and construction of new possibilities” (Fenwick, 2003, p. 52). In this way her focus on personal change provided positionality from which she might later explore larger systemic issues.

Within the context of the Traditional Church her perceptions of the poor and her meaning making process resulted in action that was accepted and supported by the group. The strong emotions associated with the experience were also affirmed in the group dialogue. Jokikokko (2009) suggests that the emotional component of learning across cultures is a gradual process in which significant others play an important role. In addition to the women in the research group, Delia’s husband played an important role in her decision to participate in a STM trip and the subsequent meaning making conversations between them before she left and after returning home. Delia shared,

I have the advantage that my husband has been twice before I went, so we did talk a lot. He knew what I was talking about. I could say something and he got it… so that was very helpful in getting me to go and very helpful to have him to talk to when I got back.

In conclusion, Delia’s narrative story provides insight into the personal process of learning from experience, and can be appropriately framed within Transformative and Situated Theories of adult learning. Her story is ongoing, in that she plans to return next year on a second trip to Haiti. She shared, “I am planning to go again and I have expectations that I will learn
something else. I’m supposed to ‘teach’ in the elementary school, but I think the teacher will be the student.”
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the large numbers of American church goers who participate in STM travel every year, the documented need for better preparation and debriefing of volunteers, and the expected, but seldom documented benefit to those who go, there is a standing need for additional research on the STM phenomenon. My assumptions regarding a relevant contribution to the existing research were fourfold. First, that adults desire meaningful experiences in their faith journey, and participation in a STM trip is assumed to yield an experience that is meaningful to the recipients, the volunteers, and to the sending congregation. Second, that the production oriented, fast pace of our American culture inhibits the process of critical reflection that is so important for learning from a cross cultural experience. Even within the scaffolding provided by the faith tradition of the sending agency or church, the literature suggests there is little opportunity for returning SMT participants to reflect, share, and integrate their experience of unfamiliar poverty and international culture. Third, following the first two assumptions, that returning volunteers would invest in a directed, bounded process aimed at exploring their STM experience. Finally, that collective praxis, in a safe space, would be the most effective way to explore personal experience, uncover assumptions regarding faith, culture and poverty, generate new perspectives, and operationalize that new understanding.

Based on the literature review in Chapter 2 and my assumptions as researcher, a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology seemed to be the most reasonable approach. Utilizing Mezirow’s (2000) transformative learning theory, and Lave’s situated learning theory (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) from the field of adult education, a conceptual framework for exploring the cross-cultural experience was created. The research sessions were designed with a particular emphasis on Heron and Reason’s (2001) extended epistemology of
knowledge acquisition, in an effort to illuminate how and why (or why not) returning volunteers learn from their experience. The rationale for this interdisciplinary approach was to supply the conceptual and process tools necessary to learn from experience, thus contributing to the missiological literature on the impact of STM travel on volunteers.

This final chapter presents conclusions based on a synthesis of process observations and outcomes, and findings from both research groups- the Traditional Church and the Community Church- followed by recommendations for a more learning-centered approach to STM travel. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research.

Conclusions

The central research question was, “In what ways could small group processes enable returning STM participants to learn from their experience, and support the integration of that understanding into their lives?” A process analysis of the research approach, as discussed in the previous chapter, showed that the small group structure did open a communicative space, given the boundaries of the project, and participants were able to explore the meaning of their experiences. Transformative and situated learning theories provided a lens to understand the learning process, individually and collectively, of each research group. This leads to the first conclusion, that small group processes could be utilized by churches that send members on STM trips, as a means to encourage meaning making and support integration of that understanding into members’ daily lives. Recommendations to that end are explained in a subsequent section of this chapter.

In addition, three content conclusions surfaced from an analysis of both groups’ data, in light of the theoretical concepts and researcher assumptions guiding the study, and what I observed as a result of participating in their learning process. The conclusions are: Participants
are committed to a concept, Meaning making is shaped by narrative and emotion, and “You can’t do there what you don’t do here.” Those conclusions are examined here in greater detail.

**Participants are Committed to a Concept**

Participation in STM travel is motivated in part by a desire for meaningful engagement in a spiritually situated activity. That statement is not inconsistent with the research literature, but this study shows that the desire for meaning is defused from the beginning of the activity by a loose and inconsistent understanding of the activity itself. The “mission” in short-term missions is not clear. This conclusion is based on the Traditional Church finding of Expectation of Change, and the Community Church findings “What is a STM?” and “Why am I going?” as shown in Table 6.1 and discussed in the previous chapter.

Table 6.1

*Relationship of Conclusion #1 to Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants are committed to a concept</th>
<th>Traditional Church Finding</th>
<th>Community Church Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 Expectation of Change</td>
<td>#1 What is a STM trip?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 Why am I going?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because STM trips carry “divine sanction” there is the expectation that providing service in God’s name will set the stage for inspiration, clarity or spiritual insight into one’s life, in short, a transformative change. “Transformative” in this sense is used as a popular expression of significant change, not necessarily the structural perspective shift that Mezirow intends as a result of his theory on learning and change. STM travel does have many facets that could be transformational for individual participants, however, and in fact, Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) suggest that learning is more likely to be transformative if it has a spiritual component. Even given the reluctance of several participants to use the term “mission” to describe their travel, the
experience is squarely situated in a religious narrative, as explored in the following section on Conclusion #2. The positionality of the experience is mentioned here first, however, because the desire for meaning, connection, service for the common good, and a sense of spiritual partnership that transcends culture could all be addressed in a theological framework taught, modeled and supported by the local congregation at home. Personal spiritual growth and service opportunities exist stateside, which would be a less expensive and more sustainable endeavor.

On the other hand, crossing cultures provides the “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 2000) that is instrumental in opening a window to worldview exploration, and hopefully, a critical look at faith, American culture and questions of care for the “other.” In either scenario, critical dialogue and reflection could venture beyond personal insight to questions of cultural and institutional structures that perpetuate poverty and inequity. Howell (2012) asks the operative question,

“How does a STM trip become something other than an encounter in which the guiding narrative of... transcendent equality and individualism are reproduced to the exclusion of structural insights? How can these trips become opportunities to create long-lasting and significant links between Christian communities, while helping those who travel to interpret the encounter in a transformative way?” (p. 205).

As a beginning point in addressing these questions, participants need to be clear about their needs, desires and expectations within the intentional purposes and desired outcomes of the trip. In other words, the STM trip should be structured for learning from the beginning. Here adult education principles and practices pair well with theological frameworks, if indeed adult educational practice aims to change the way people think and act (Dirkx, 2006) and where theology is understood as a study of God, God’s relation to the world, and “a compelling account of a way of life” (Volf, 2002). Christian beliefs as beliefs entail practical commitments toward faithful action. Brookfield (2011) laments, the “holy trinity of contemporary adult learning”- transformative learning, self-directed learning and critical reflection- focuses on process and
mechanics, consequently disconnecting learning from any particular moral, social, or political purpose” (p. 23). Within theological frameworks, however, these processes and mechanics provide scaffolding for personal and collective understanding and subsequent acts of faith in the world. When STM trips are situated in this concrete course of learning and faith development, rather than approached with a general notion, a “concept,” of purpose and change, the commitment participants bring to the experience is more likely to yield outcomes that can be articulated and incorporated into their lives.

**Meaning Making is Shaped by Narrative and Emotion**

Even with a concrete approach to change, the process is nonetheless situated within the narrative of the participants’ Christian worldview, or the traditions and faith statements of their congregation. That meaning making is shaped by religious narrative and emotion is based on the finding The Power of Perceived Connections, and “Is this experience authentic?” as shown in Table 6.2. The Traditional church women worked entirely within their congregational narrative, a narrative that supported powerful emotional connections between the American women and the people they encountered in Haiti. Those connections were not dependent on communication, as most of the Haitians did not speak English, but on a perceived bond created by the way in which they enacted their role in the narrative.

Table 6.2

*Relationship of Conclusion #2 to Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional Church Finding</th>
<th>Community Church Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meaning making is</td>
<td>#2 The Power of Perceived</td>
<td>#4 Is this experience authentic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shaped by narrative and</td>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>#5 How do I know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Community church members, on the other hand, struggled to generate a cohesive narrative in order to construct meaning. They were hoping to identify, and simultaneously questioning, authentic community in the Kenyan village they visited. Once they constructed a framework- their provisional narrative- they were able to position themselves in such a way that their next steps became clear. Moodie (2013) observes that STM participants “want to help, but… they also want very much to feel,” what she describes as a yearning for authenticity across difference and distance (p. 158). In both groups, rational inquiry was often overshadowed by emotional responses to poverty, difference, and uncomfortable encounters.

The third finding included in this conclusion, “How do I know?” refers to my observation of the definitive statements regarding other cultures made by the Community Church, in particular, but often overheard in the Traditional Church group as well. While there is need to respect and leverage the affective domain in making meaning, the members of both congregations would benefit from a rational exploration of their religious narrative. The local narrative can be a container for personal and collective growth or a boundary that limits critical inquiry. In either case, and in any congregation, adult religious educators who utilize transformative learning theory to move beyond an emotionally-based affirmation of change will need a theological rationale that affirms questioning and critical reflection of the congregation’s expressions of faith and Christian action in the world (Fleischer, 2006). Otherwise, as Howell (2012) summarizes,

“Until the agendas of STM are structurally re-oriented around Missio Dei, with education and community as the primary goals, or at least equally missional as the activities and projects of visiting groups, then the narratives of these trips will continue to be created primarily by the cultural context and historical trajectory from which travelers come” (p. 223).
“You Can’t Do There What You Don’t Do Here”

Our American cultural context with the benefits of modernity, political freedom, and economic security, has distanced the non-poor from the daily life-and-death struggle of people in most of the world. In the process our society has developed a sort of chronic, low-grade confusion about what is really important in life. It could be argued that American STM participants are looking overseas for answers to ineffable questions of meaning that ultimately must be explored in context at home. Tisdell (2003) reasons along those lines by suggesting that Americans who have developed an individualistic religious practice are often drawn to spiritual traditions and practices in other cultures where a sense of community, or wholeness, might be more easily observed and understood. It is against this backdrop that the third conclusion emerged, “You can’t do there what you don’t do here,” as shown in Table 6.3. This statement refers to the divergent view of poor communities overseas compared to poor communities that are local to the STM participants. Navigating encounters with the “other” overseas, in my observation, was a parallel experience to the challenge of navigating relationships in general. Thus the discussion guided by the work of Fromm in Chapter 5 on learning to “be” in relationship in a culture that applauds “doing” as a prerequisite to “having” a successful life.

Table 6.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship of Conclusion #3 to Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Church Finding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You can’t do there what you don’t do here&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The opportunity to learn an alternative perspective of Christian community, or explore expressions of God in culture and conversation, could be a primary benefit of STM travel.
Following Cole’s (1975) comparison of white and black theological themes, I am suggesting that white American Christians do not typically recognize the narrowness of their experience, nor the particularity of their theological expressions. We think of ourselves as universal people, assuming that truth- spiritual truth- is most clearly seen from a white perspective. To begin a conversation with poor brown or black people with an existential view of oneself as a unique, self-determining, white agent might uncover the inconvenient reality that faith and/or religious practice does not automatically provide an understanding of cultural oppression or one’s role in the process.

Our theology must be subject to critical reflection, where we test our espoused beliefs by our willingness to live by them consistently. Cobb (1993) fears “too many of us think that theology is the recitation of doctrines that we should accept. We can be excused for not wanting to devote a lot of time and serious thought to puzzling that out” (p. 41). Recall Chloe, from the Traditional Church, who struggled with her espoused faith and actual faith-in-action, “All the time I feel like I should be doing more… I see poor people here and I think God I should be doing more, why don’t I do more?”

Missiologists have addressed the preference to serve exotic people in distant places over befriending people across town- the inner cities of North America where may people live under inhumane conditions (Adeney, 2008; Cuellar, 2008). Priest & Priest (2008) point out the large number of STM participants who travel to Spanish speaking countries as part of sustained religious partnerships, yet do not engage with Spanish speaking people who live as neighbors at home. It is more exciting- and containable- to serve and share the love of God in Honduras for ten days than to build local relationships with people who might show up on your doorstep with awkward needs or time consuming requests.
Early in the research sessions, Jill from the Community Church asked the question, “How does frequently sending white people to ‘serve’ brown/black people impact the way we view brown/black people?” Van Gelder & Zscheile (2011) propose that the best impact would be an inclusive understanding of God’s global passion; that the church cannot participate in God’s mission overseas alone, but must surrender that posture of control, distance, and mere benevolence in order to enter closely into relational community at home. When members of the congregation are practicing a faith that strives to connect to the local poor, or the local affluent for that matter, they are more able to transfer those practices to an unfamiliar culture. With a spirit of inquiry and a sense of how to “be,” they are in position to “be in relation,” an act of solidarity with the “other” and a manifestation of God’s love rather than simply an act of service. Learning from that experience can transfer back to enrich their congregational and community engagement at home.

These conclusions are specific to this research project, that is, they are not generalizable to STM travel as a whole. They are not, however, inconsistent with the research literature or my decade of experience taking groups to Guatemala, and thus have merit as a foundation for continued dialogue toward a paradigmatic shift in how STM travel is situated in the local congregation and experienced by those members. To that end, I recommend a re-envisioning of theological education as follows.

Recommendations

This section outlines broad recommendations for re-envisioning theological education so that STM travel is situated in an accessible missiology, the trips are structured for learning, and small groups are operationalized for exploring and supporting the missional life of the
congregation- locally as well as overseas. The final section outlines directions for future research.

**Accessible Missiology**

Teaching “accessible missiology,” as Cronshaw (2011) uses the term, is educating local church members as well as theology students or overseas missionaries. As opposed to a church-centric paradigm, where God’s work in the world is dependent on human agency, a missional church reflects a theo-centric understanding that mission is God’s mission. In this sense missionary activity (short-term or long-term, at home or abroad) is not so much the work of the church as simply the church at work. The church is missionary in nature, and thus the mission becomes the responsibility of the whole church. This mission of God, the *Missio Dei*, is a habit of mind and heart, not a menu of programs or service activities. As such, a healthy, effective STM trip is simply one piece of a larger commitment to learning to recognize what God is doing around the world, and consistent with mission engagement in the local church community. Conceiving of STM in this way might shift the trips from a one-time spiritual “high” experience that begs for a repeat consumer, to the mainstream of daily discipleship and congregational spiritual development.

**Structure the Trip for Learning**

It is not commonplace to consider the church as an environment for adult learning, even given the common verbiage of “growing spiritually” as a result of Christian faith and disciplines. Although the weekly sermon, a lecture style format, is prevalent, increasingly more participatory methods are being employed by religious leaders. The church can be viewed as a setting for non-formal education, which is typically characterized by a responsiveness to localized needs, minimal structure, and an assumed nonhierarchical relationship between the learner and
educator. The teaching time is generally short and participation is voluntary (Taylor, 2008). Nonetheless, the tradition of Sunday school or mid-week classes for the purpose of spiritual development lays a foundation for teaching and learning that could include STM trips; the concept of “accessible missiology.”

Roehlkepartain (1993) suggests a “teaching church” must debunk the current myths that Christian education is simply for children, that good teaching occurs without good training, and that structured classes can be productive despite being separated from congregational life. In contrast, adult education that is situated in the social world in which it occurs can leverage experience within the context that gives it meaning. This is a return to Lave’s theory of situated learning that framed the research analysis. Within a church culture of ongoing teaching and learning, adults can develop critical thinking skills and support structures so that their faith is not just a matter of intellectual contemplation, but a practice of justice and mercy.

Koll (2010) suggests that when the practice of justice and mercy extends overseas on STM travel, participants should be equipped with process tools and resources to build an interpretive framework in which to locate what they experience during the trip. This level of preparation is more involved than providing fundraising ideas, engaging in team building activities, and planning service projects. Corbett & Fikkert (2012) advise that pre-trip learning be a requirement, not a suggestion. They question whether or not a participant, who is reluctant to invest in preliminary learning tasks, will exhibit a learning attitude during and after the trip. In contrast to every other published text on STM travel, Corbett & Fikkert advocate for an extensive post trip plan,

“The post-trip learning is absolutely critical. Have a well-planned, mandated, learning journey for at least one year following the trip. Such follow-up uses a discipleship approach to help translate the costly mountaintop experience into an actual, life-changing event” (p. 166).
In this way the STM trip is conceived as part of a larger picture of faith, service, and learning, which necessarily continues over time and within the context of the local congregation. Smith (2009) concurs, stating,

“One of the most crucial things to appreciate about Christian formation is that it happens over time. It is not fostered by events or experience; real formation cannot be effected by actions that are merely episodic. There must be a rhythm and a regularity to formative practices in order for them to sink in… thus disposing us to action” (p. 226).

Here this research project provides a link from the expressed need for an integrative format and processes to a practice that shows potential for implementation and development in churches settings, that is, the utilization of small group meetings

**Utilize Small Groups**

For a church that has seen itself for over a century as the “sender” of goods, services and spiritual training to less developed and materially poor societies, however, recognizing a need to act as a people who primarily want to learn may not come easily (DeBorst, 2015). Shifting the culture to one of inquiry and critical reflection will require facilitation with some degree of expertise, but can be approached by leveraging (or creating) a small group practice. As demonstrated by the research methodology used for this project, small group processes can function to enable STM participants to learn from their experience. Although there are many resources for small group facilitation, I suggest four components that are relevant to making meaning of a STM trip, and which were demonstrated in the two research groups: creating a safe space, tapping into the affective domain, asking good questions, and developing collective, peer support for the integration of new behaviors. These components are discussed in general terms in this section.
Create safe space.

While literal, physical space influences dialogue, and those considerations are important, the goal of “safe space” is more broadly understood as creating engagement parameters such that the contribution of each participant is brought to the surface in an authentic, accepted way. Safety in this sense aids in “resisting our own tendency to clutter up our consciousness” (Palmer, 1993) and yields a cognitive and emotional space for creating new collective understanding. This concept has been discussed in some detail throughout this report, based on a Habermasian concept of communicative space, particularly in the chapters on methodology and data analysis. A full treatment of the practical application of creating safe space is beyond the focus of this chapter, but as a place to begin, general dialogue parameters and facilitation practices that might already be in use could be deconstructed in terms of why they are effective, and then examined, adjusted and practiced in a congregational context.

Tap into the affective domain.

All eight participants in this study reported emotional responses to their STM experience. To this point in the literature, the temporary emotional response often collected in the form of immediate, qualitative data, has been subject to scrutiny and suspect as evidence of a changed life. While my agreement with that analysis remains, it is true that STM can be an emotional experience. Logistically, participants leave home tired from busy lives, often travel many hours, do not sleep well or eat routine foods, navigate communal living with only slightly familiar travelers, and expend extra energy to grasp unfamiliar cultures and determine appropriate behavior. This physical depletion coupled with mental disorientation and the expectation of divine action can actually prepare the heart, in a good way, for a compassionate engagement with
the “other,” if emotions are welcome and expressed in safe spaces. This is not always the case, given our cultural penchant for independence and control.

In the post trip sessions, however, the facilitator can demonstrate, and set dialogue parameters to cultivate, an environment where emotions can be named and explored. This was operationalized in the research sessions by accessing pre-language knowing, what Heron & Reason (2001) referred to as “presentational” knowing. Ongoing assessment of group energy can help the facilitator gauge the emotional stability of conversation, and provide a sense of when to prod for deeper inquiry and when to cede to silence or discomfort.

**Ask questions.**

Critical reflection and sustained inquiry into experience, at the most fundamental level, is a process of asking questions. Good questions shake people out of their conventional thinking, deepen understanding, and help lead the way toward envisioning new possibility. Questions are the engine of knowledge creation, pushing beyond didactic instruction on *what* (doctrines, traditions) to *how* and *why*. Brookfield (2009) suggests that facilitators a) name and demonstrate how to ask questions, and b) experiment with conversational structures that emphasize equity of participation. Vella (2008) adds that questions must be open-ended and authentically posed to generate dialogue, rather than a practice of “fishing” for information from the group that the facilitator hopes to emphasize in discussion.

**Develop peer support.**

Ver Beek (2008) finds two factors that are key in helping people bring about lasting change, and he applies them to the context of integrating new behavior following STM travel. The keys are accountability and encouragement. These keys are well documented in social science research, and even ring true as common sense. For a healthy, balanced small group
experience, the facilitator should develop a community where accountability and encouragement is shared among all the members, and ultimately, exists organically and emerges when needed.

This is important because there are facets of change that reach beyond individual discipleship to the theological commitments of the congregation within our American cultural narrative. In the case of engaging the “other,” the satisfaction of providing a service to the poor can be a distraction from the work of exploring the complex roots of poverty, thus making personal generosity rather than social transformation seem like an effective response. Occhipinti (2014) reminds us, however, that people are poor because resources are unevenly distributed, and resources are unevenly distributed because other people benefit from that. Who are the “other people?” Newbigin (1995) is straightforward in his belief that,

“To work for the reformation of structures, to expose and attack unjust structures, and when the point is reached at which all other means have failed, to work for the overthrow of an evil political and economic order is as much a part of the mission of the church as to care for the sick and to feed the hungry” (p. 109).

While social transformation is beyond the scope of these recommendations, the fact remains that small group support systems are important for the accountability and encouragement of personal spiritual growth, and in time, the questions that will be raised concerning larger, systemic injustice and the appropriate Christian response.

The Traditional Church did not have small groups in this current sense, but were organized by Sunday school classes. There is sufficient similarity as a non-formal teaching/learning environment that these recommendations might be helpful in the setting of a Sunday school class, although smaller, more consistently attended small groups may prove more supportive. On the other hand, the Community Church was organized by small “Life” groups, which were minimally helpful to the study participants as they returned to those groups from
their experience in Kenya. Simply organizing church members into small groups, then, is not necessarily sufficient as a means of generating spiritual development and change.

**Recommendations for Research**

Given my recommendation for small group processes within congregations, the need for competent facilitators to lead those groups is paramount. In the Chapter 2 literature review, ten authors were referenced on the topic of leadership as critical to learning from a STM experience. Even with the safe space, access to the affective learning domain, spirit of inquiry by way of good questions, and consistent peer support advocated previously as components of a productive small group, leadership is necessary to model and teach those components. As evidenced in the dialogues from each group, there were moments of “possibility” when assumptions were explored and new ideas took root, or where the discomfort of that exploration became a barrier to learning. How does one hold open the disconnect between religious narrative and the current reality long enough so that new understanding can emerge? How does the church prepare lay leaders to facilitate a conversation that links lived theology with the formal belief system that the group espouses?

Studies to explore principles and practices in various faith traditions, specific to enabling STM participants to learn from their experience, might inform the selection, training, and support of small group leaders. Following Corbett & Fikkert’s (2012) injunction for a year of focused discipleship after returning from a STM trip, a longitudinal study would provide important data regarding the leadership of the group and their collective progress exploring and integrating their learning.

Broadly connected to this recommendation, a research project is currently in development to extend the trajectory of this dissertation project. Based on case studies of several
congregations that have re-tooled their STM program toward a more situated, missional approach, I plan to construct an interdisciplinary, conceptual map that is theologically sound, grounded in adult learning theory, and based on the research that will be conducted. The initial section on theory would be followed by a section on practice, where a multi-month curriculum of small group sessions would be outlined for use by churches of any Christian faith tradition. From my view, this subsequent research project would complete my inquiry into learning from the experience of crossing cultures on a STM trip.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In the end, learning from experience is not an isolated practice, but a complex, ongoing endeavor that is embedded in a historical and cultural context. Critical inquiry- the ability to assess one’s assumptions, beliefs and actions- is a fundamental component of adult education that cannot be separated from the use of that insight to inform action. As I’ve engaged in short-term missions over the last decade, and absorbed the academic and popular literature that has informed its practice, I understand “learning from experience” as a critical element in a much larger exploration of culture, theology and personal epistemology. For a white Westerner to explore their experience in a less developed, materially poor environment necessarily- in my view- ultimately involves an exploration of much larger socio-political issues. The exploration begins in the individual soul, but extends outward toward the “other,” whether that person is across the street or across the globe. As Cardinal Suenens of Belgium unfortunately summarizes, “In our century, man has discovered interplanetary space, and yet we have only begun to explore that space which separates us from one another” (as cited in Dunson & Dunson, 2013). It is my hope that STM travel evolves into an experience from which we learn more about that “space
which separates us from another,” and in so doing transform not only our individual lives but the world which we all share.
References


Friedman, V., & Rogers, T. (2009). There is nothing so theoretical as good action research, *Action Research, 7*(1), 31-47.


Appendix A

Research Session Design

SESSION 1: Welcome and Setting the Stage

The first thirty minutes participants will have coffee and snack as they are getting to know each other and transitioning from the work day.

1. Opening question to the group: share your expectations when you signed up for this short-term mission trip. How was the trip advertised? Why did you choose to go? What did you expect to find? What did you hope to learn/do/receive?

2. View a slide show of photos from the trip to reconnect to the people, sights, smells, and sounds of the location. Share with your neighbor the most memorable events of the experience. What were you thinking? How did you feel? We’ll hear a brief response from everyone.

3. How did you explain your experience to friends and family after you returned? What was the story you told most often? How did you feel during that process?

4. Do you have any symbols, photographs, mementos displayed in your home/office?

4. A brief overview of the research process:
   a. Action Research format: cycles of dialogue, reflection, and action
   b. My role as participant researcher
   c. Recording, transcribing and reporting
   d. The group process

5. Until the Next Session:
Potentially transformative experiences can fade if they are not honored, explored, nurtured and integrated in our lives. A sudden shift in the way you view the world can take a lifetime to grow into- it’s a process of understanding yourself and the work God has planned for you to do. We typically prefer instant change- insight and application all at once like fireworks- and can get attached to recreating peak moments of inspiration instead of settling into the more subtle, less glamorous work of integrating insight from a new experience into our daily lives.

Think about how you did/do make sense of what you saw, felt, and did on your short-term trip. Articulate the emotions, the questions, the concerns, and the desires that are present as a result of your experience. What seems different now? How do you know? Invest a few minutes to write it all down to share at our next meeting.
SESSION 2: Poverty

1. Check in: Share the work you did during the week. Reframe the key issues as questions and list on chart paper.

2. Choose a question card from those provided and discuss with your neighbor. (Each card has a typical question regarding poverty with information and a relevant scripture on the back). We’ll hear a brief report from every pair. How do these questions integrate with our compiled list?

3. What are the emotions attached to this topic? Are we more cognitive about the whole process or tapping into our affective domain? Why or why not?

4. Create a “Found Poem” using words from the chart, question cards or conversation.

Until the Next Session:
Choose a conversation thread to pursue in your thinking, bible study and actions. Take note of the outcome, and also the process of being intentional about a new pursuit during your normal week.

SESSION 3: The Mission Trip

1. Check in: Share your experience since the last meeting.

2. What do you mean when you talk about being on a “mission” trip? How is a mission trip different from a working vacation or volunteer service trip? What is the mission? Whose mission is it? What is the goal?

3. Individually read and mark the handout on American Christianity and Missio Deo. Share with your neighbor the sections that you marked and why you choose to mark them.

You will always have the poor among you (John 12:8)
   a. so don’t worry about it (no one is responsible)
   b. always try to fix it (overwhelming sense of needing to save the world)
   c. it’s systemic- only governments, NGOs, or community organizations will make a significant difference
   d. fill in the blank _____________________________________________

Which of these responses speaks to your view? Have you changed over time? How? Why?

Until the Next Session:
Read the handout on relief, rehabilitation and development as responses to poverty. How does the current practice of short-term missions fit within these parameters? How does your experience confirm or disconfirm this information? What do you need to think about/do this week?
SESSION 4: What Can One Person Do?

Check in: Share your experiences since the last session.

1. Share your response to the “Save the World” cartoon.
2. Use the Dreams/Responsibilities/Resources worksheet to take a personal inventory and determine a focused and specific step toward integrating your understanding into your daily life.
3. Share your idea with your neighbor or the group

Until the Next Session:
Try out your new behavior/idea from the worksheet.

SESSION 5: Short-Term Missions and the Sending Church

1. Check in: Share the experience of putting your idea into practice.
2. Group Discussion:
How are short-term mission trips situated in the overall mission of the church? Is the messaging clear? Where does the message originate?

What do you see as outcomes that are beneficial? To whom are they beneficial? How do you know?

If you were in charge of short-term mission trips, what would you do differently? Why? How would you enact your ideas?
3. What is your personal action plan for this week based on this conversation? Write it down.
4. What is our collective plan for the use of the final session?

Until the Next Session:
Utilize your action plan.

SESSION 6: Going Forward: What Can We do?

This session will be designed by the group.
Appendix B
Research Session Materials

SESSION 1

Potentially transformative experiences can fade if they are not honored, explored, nurtured and integrated in our lives. A sudden shift in the way you view the world can take a lifetime to grow into— it’s a process of understanding yourself and the work God has planned for you to do. We typically prefer instant change—insight and application all at once like fireworks—and can get attached to recreating peak moments of inspiration instead of settling into the more subtle, less glamorous work of integrating insight from a new experience into our daily lives.

Think about how you did/do make sense of what you saw, felt, and did on your short-term trip. Articulate the emotions, the questions, the concerns, and the desires that are present as a result of your experience. Does anything seem different now? How do you know? Invest a few minutes to write it all down to share at our next meeting.

SESSION 2 POVERTY

Jesus said “you will always have the poor among you” (John 12:8)

A. So don’t worry about it (no one is responsible)

American concept of fate and destiny:
  - You can be whatever you want to be
  - Where there's a will, there's a way
  - The American dream is rags-to-riches

The concept of self-determination negates much of the influence of fate and destiny. Parents tell their children they can be whatever they want to be when they grow up. There are few givens in life, and people have little sense of external limits. Lack of success is your own fault. So we work hard for our success and are not responsible for those who do not have as much.

B. Live with an overwhelming sense of needing to save the world. This can be paralyzing, because the emotional reality of suffering and pain, injustice and violence seems unbearable.

American concept of suffering and misfortune:
  - People rush to cheer up a friend who is depressed
  - If you're unhappy take a pill or see a psychiatrist
  - Being happy is a sign of success and well being

Because we are ultimately in control of our lives and destiny, we have no excuse for unhappiness or misfortune. If you are suffering or unhappy, then just do whatever it takes to be happy again.
However, Coralis Salvador, a Kenyan slum aid worker says, “Suffering surrounds us. It seems to be a partner in life, like day and night, up and down, and high and low. Demonizing suffering does not help.”

Boniface Lele, the local archbishop adds, “We believe that Jesus gave a new meaning to human suffering; that God accompanies the one who suffers especially if that one who suffers believes that God is with him or her and that it [the suffering] is not punishment… in suffering we have a tendency to feel that we are alone, that we are rejected. As a man Jesus experienced this, but because Jesus trusted in God he had the courage to feel pain. Accompaniment by God does not lessen the pain but gives it meaning.”

“It is so Kenyan!” agrees Coralis, “they see things so differently. They view suffering as a part of life that someday will pass. Their hope never diminishes; this is their blessing.”

C. It’s systemic, political- only governments or NGOs will have an impact (One person isn’t going to make a significant difference).

In 2005, the US gave more than $27.5 billion in foreign aid, more than any other nation. The money was distributed through a number of different institutions, although the primary agency is USAID- the United States Agency for International Development- which partners with humanitarian organizations, local governments, and businesses.

If you look at the amount given as a percentage of the entire national budget, other countries are more generous. In fact, measured this way, the US is not even in the top 20 countries in terms of generosity. In addition, only a percentage of the foreign assistance budget goes to fighting poverty. Nearly 40 percent of the State Department’s foreign aid budget goes to supporting strategic political allies and the war on drugs.

Despite an estimated $2.3 trillion in foreign aid dispensed from Western nations during the post-World War II era, more than 2.5 billion people, approximately 40 percent of the world’s population, still live on less than two dollars a day.

Watch the film *Life and Debt*, S. Black (Producer) 2001

D. My personal response

______________________________________________________

______________________________________________________

______________________________________________________

______________________________________________________

Cardinal John Dearden “We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way and an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest.”

* * * * * * * * *
If you *spend yourselves* on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. Isaiah 58:10

*What does that mean, in your life, to “spend yourself?”*

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy. Proverbs 31:8-9

“*destitute*” means without means of subsistence; lacking food, clothing and shelter

*What are the rights of the destitute, poor and needy?*
*How do the words “judge” and “defend” apply to you?*
*This proverb was spoken by King Lemuel of Masa, as “an oracle his mother taught him.”*
*What do you think is significant about that information?*

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen believes that it is a lack of freedom to be able to make meaningful choices- to have an ability to affect one’s situation- that is the distinguishing feature of poverty.

For example, most parents, in any country, would like their children to have an education. In the United States K-12 classes are free, books are free, lunch can be free or reduced, transportation is free, and supplies can be provided by local organizations looking to serve the community. There are multiple options for post-secondary education. In Tennessee a two-year community college education is free for state high school graduates, and in Georgia the Hope Scholarship pays tuition at a four year institution if the student maintains a B average. You can apply for Pell Grants, scholarships, and so on. You can participate in a work study program. You can borrow money from the College Foundation.

*What are the resources, options, freedoms in the United States that we utilize to make our lives better? How does that compare to the situation you experienced on your short-term mission trip?*

“*Poverty is not just a lack of cash, medicine or technology*” writes Ash Barker in *Make Poverty Personal*, “It is also about the confidence, skills and belief that people can use what they have for the community’s good. Surely poverty is as much about identity, meaning and belonging as material goods. The point of our faith is not to have bigger and better lives or churches, but to transform the world. The body of Christ has the answer to poverty in both developing and
Western worlds. Too often the response is reduced to the cliché ‘We are blessed to be a blessing.’ For Western Christians the ‘blessing’ is often understood as material wealth. God’s blessing is in the presence of the risen savior (Ephesians 1:13)… [and] Jesus’s presence is longing to intervene through his body, the church.”

Shane Claiborne, in his book *The Irresistible Revolution*, conducted a survey, probing Christians about their (mis)conceptions of Jesus, and he said, “I learned a striking thing from the survey. I asked participants who claimed to be “strong followers of Jesus” whether Jesus spent time with the poor. Nearly 80% said yes. Later in the survey I sneaked in another question. I asked this same group of strong followers whether they spent time with the poor, and less than 2% said that they did. I learned a powerful lesson: we can admire and worship Jesus without doing what he did. We can applaud what he preached and stood for without caring about the same things. We can adore his cross without taking up ours. I had come to see that the great tragedy in the church is not that rich Christians do not care about the poor but that rich Christians do not know the poor.”

*What relationships do you have outside your socioeconomic circle? How do you see yourself being the “hands” and “feet” of Jesus?*

During the sermon on the mount, Jesus said “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:5).

*What did he mean by that?*

A few examples of David’s conversation with God in the Psalms:

“I sought the Lord, and he answered me… this poor man called and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.” 34:6

“As for me, I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me.” 40:17

“But you, Sovereign Lord, help me for your name’s sake; out of the goodness of your love, deliver me. For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me.” 109:21-22

*What kind of poverty is this? How can you relate to this in your own life?*
God says to Isaiah, “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear”

*What was “healing” about your experience on the short-term mission trip? What warmed your heart, challenged your thinking, motivated you to do more? Why did you feel those emotions there? When have you felt them here?*

Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered. Proverbs 21:13

*How did you hear the cry of the poor (by any definition) during your short-term mission trip? What did it sound like? How did you feel?*

*How do you hear the cry of the poor (by any definition) in the other 52 weeks of the year?*
SESSION 3 MAKING IT PERSONAL

In our early conversation we talked about significant experiences from your short-term mission trip that impacted you and which you most often shared upon returning. List a few of them in the box below. Then ask yourself what God was teaching you through each experience. What did you learn? What does it mean?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Experience</th>
<th>Lesson or Thoughts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One motivation for participating in a short-term mission trip, among many, is the desire to be helpful, to make a difference in the world. What does it mean to you to “make a difference?” Why do you have that feeling and where does it come from?
The Quiet Power of Compassion

Not long ago I attended a memorial service for a well-known business leader. In a subdued atmosphere of mourning, various friends paid tribute to him. Near the end, a young black man arose. The other speakers had been assured and eloquent, but this one, under great emotional distress, could barely speak at all. A deep hush fell as he struggled for words.

Finally, with tears streaming down his face, he told the gathering that when he was just an office boy, the industrialist had noticed him, helped him, encouraged him, paid for his education. “For a long time,” the young man said, “I was no good to him or anyone else. I just failed and kept on failing. But he never gave up on me- and he never let me give up on myself.”

He went on to say that anyone could support a success, but only a rare, wonderful person could continue to have faith in a failure. Now that person was gone, and he had lost his best friend. When at last his voice faltered to a halt and he sat down, people everywhere were weeping, not just for the leader who was gone but for the sorrow of the follower who had revealed so much of himself. When the service ended, I had the strange conviction that somehow all of us had been changed for the better, that a tiny part of each of us would never be the same again.

Later I spoke of this to a friend, a psychiatrist, who had also been there. “Yes,” he said thoughtfully, “it was amazing, wasn’t it? But that’s what compassion can do. It’s the most healing of all human emotions. If we’d just let it in, it could transform the world.”

The truth is this quality of compassion- and the word means “to suffer with,” has been transforming the world. But the most remarkable thing about it is what it can do to- and for- the person who feels it deeply.

Or even for the person who feels it suddenly and momentarily. Years ago, with two other college students, I was traveling one spring vacation in Spain. In Malaga we stayed in a pension that was comfortable enough but strangely somber. The owner, who spoke English, had little to say. His wife, a tall, tragic looking woman, always wore black and never smiled. In the living room an enormous grand piano stood silent. The little Spanish maid told us that the Senora had been a concert pianist, but that two years ago her only child had died. She hadn’t touched the piano since.

One afternoon we three American youngsters visited a bodega, a wine cellar where sherry was stored. The affable proprietor urged us to sample various vintages, which we were not at all reluctant to do, and we sang and danced all the way home. Back at the house, full of thoughtless gaiety, one of my friends sat down at the great piano, flung back the dusty keyboard cover, and began to play, very badly, while we supported him at the top of our lungs.

Suddenly the maid rushed into the room, looking appalled. Behind her came the owner, hands outstretched in a pleading gesture. “No, no,” he cried, “you mustn’t!” At the same instant another door opened, and there stood the Senora herself, dark, tragic eyes fixed on us. The music died. For an endless moment, all of us were frozen with dismay and embarrassment. Then suddenly this woman saw how miserable we were. She smiled, and great warmth and beauty came into her face. She walked forward, pushed my friend aside, sat down and began to play. I remember how the maid hid her face in her hands, how the husband looked as if he wanted to burst into tears. The Senora kept playing, magnificent, soaring music that filled the whole house, driving grief and shadows away. And young though I was, I knew that she was free-free because she had felt pity for us, and the warmth of compassion had melted the ice around her heart.
Look around and you can see that healing force at work in all sorts of situations, large and small. Where does it come from — this capacity to share another’s grief or feel another’s pain? I remember once asking a wise old minister about the most famous of all compassion stories: the Parable of the Good Samaritan. How did the Samaritan get that way, I wanted to know; what made him sensitive and responsive to the needs of the wounded man when the other travelers who saw that crumpled figure on the road to Jericho simply “pass by on the other side?”

“I think,” the old clergyman replied, “there were three things that made him the way he was — qualities latent in all of us if only we’d work harder to develop and strengthen them. The first was empathy — the imaginative projection of one’s own consciousness into another being. When the Samaritan saw the bandits’ victim lying there, he didn’t merely observe him, he identified with him; he became part of him. This identification was so strong that you might almost say that when he went to help the man, he was helping the compassionate part of himself.

The second thing he had was courage, and he needed it because it takes courage to care — and to translate caring into action. The ones who passed by on the other side were afraid, afraid of anything strange or challenging, afraid of getting involved, afraid the robbers might come back. The Samaritan had the courage to push those fears aside.

The third thing I’m sure he had was the habit of helping. Going to the aid of the man on the Jericho road was no isolated incident in the Samaritan’s life. He did what he did because he was the kind of man he was — and he didn’t get that way overnight. Through the years he had trained himself to respond affirmatively to other people’s needs. How? In the same way that any of us can do it, not so much by drastic self-discipline or heroic sacrifice as by the endless repetition of small effort. By going the extra mile — occasionally. By giving someone in trouble a hand — if you can. By taking a fair share of civic responsibility — when you can manage it. These things may not seem to add up to much. But one day you may look around and discover that to an astonishing degree self has been pushed off its lonely and arrogant throne and — almost without knowing it — you have become a Samaritan yourself.”

Empathy, courage and the habit of helping — perhaps the old minister was right. And perhaps there are still other qualities in the deep tenderness that we call compassion. Whatever they are, we would do well to seek them in ourselves and encourage them in others — because without this quiet power there would be little hope for tomorrow.

Arthur Gordon, A Touch of Wonder
What are your thoughts…..?

Empathy

Courage

The Habit of Helping
“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do.” Ephesians 2:10

Consider your gifts, your talents, your vocation, and your circumstances as a special trust from God with which to serve him by serving others. As Peter says, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1Peter 4:10). Remember that you are responsible not for doing all the good that needs to be done in the world, but for doing what God has planned for you.

Remember also that most opportunities for doing good come across the ordinary path of our day. Don’t look for the spectacular; few people ever have the opportunity to pull a victim from the wreckage of a flaming automobile. All of us have the opportunity to administer the kind or encouraging word, to do the little, perhaps unseen deed that makes life more pleasant for someone else.

Consider the cost of good deeds in time, thought and effort. But remember that opportunities for doing good are not interruptions in God’s plan for us, but part of that plan. We always have time to do what God wants us to do.

Jerry Bridges, The Practice of Godliness

When have you felt as though you were doing the work God had planned for you to do? What was the situation, and how exactly did you feel?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Men and women have different gifts, but it is the same Spirit who gives them. There are different ways of serving God, but it is the same Lord who is served. God works through different people in different ways, but its the same God who achieves his purposes through them. The Spirit openly makes his gift to each person, so that they may use it for the common good. I Corinthians 12:4-6 JB Phillips

It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for… part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone. Ephesians 1:11 The Message

Typically learning is all about answers- the more answers you have the more likely you will live well. Our confidence can be built on the security of personal knowledge, because in our culture knowledge equals power, and power brings security. We can bring that mentality into our Christian walk, and look for answers or solutions above all else. Instead of asking “Who am I?” and looking for a singular answer, we might ask, “In how many ways can I be myself?” It’s actually the questioning that gives you the power to live well, not the answers. We are always in the presence of mystery, and being aware of that can give us a sense of aliveness- a sense of engagement with life and God, a sense that something may happen that has never happened before. Once you let go and listen to your heart, and create space to hear from God, you will begin to see how to align your most authentic self with the purposes of your creator.
But what does that really mean in practical terms? Here is one way to begin:

Take a minute to name your current responsibilities:

Choose a lesson/thought you listed on the first page, something that is on your heart or that you want to do:

List your resources, such as skill, time, relationships, attitude, schedule, money, etc.
Now start brainstorming…opportunities, ideas, connections… mix and match in the box below, weaving together several combinations of items from the three geometric lists you just made: responsibilities, lessons learned and resources.

Choose one idea that you want to pursue and name it here:
It might be helpful to choose a “thinking partner” who can ask you these questions and note your response. If you reflect on your own instead, write down your thoughts.

Is there a particular place/situation/role where I would like to begin?

What would I do differently? How would that look?

Do I have habitual thinking patterns that hinder me?

How am I shaped by my environment?

What circumstances might hinder my progress?

How could I approach those circumstances?

Who can help me?

What relationships could hinder my progress?

How could I approach those relationships?

What do I need?

How can I create a safe time and place to continue this personal reflection?

What scriptures apply to my situation?

Who else would benefit from my actions?
Maybe, after all this, something that you hoped would be clear, isn’t clear at all; a direction you were looking for didn’t materialize, the “where do I go from here?” question looms as large as it ever did. If you’re tempted to be impatient, I’d suggest looking for what is being called for in the world around you, because sometimes what we need is a little nudge to step out or stretch. Maybe it’s not your life’s calling as much as it is your time to contribute in a particular way. Circumstances, resources, and dreams change as you go through your life, and often, if you at least start walking down a path where you are needed (“Oh, they need someone to deliver food? Well, I can at least do that!”) you will find yourself directed by the Holy Spirit toward something you never considered, but which in retrospect is exactly what you felt you were meant to do.

Put your ear down close to your soul and listen for inspiration. Be still and let the thoughts and feelings bubble up so that God has the space to work. And remember, even with the clarity we are striving to produce, creating and maintaining an authentic lifestyle of giving means making realigning decisions on a daily basis. Jesus modeled the graceful walk of meeting needs and teaching about what was really important in the world as he followed the direction of the Holy Spirit.

The early disciples understood this principle of acting within the dynamic settings of God’s purposes. For example, remember their question about circumcising the Gentiles? After much discussion they decided, at the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) to send out a summary of their momentous decision, which began “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us….” It seemed good?? Wouldn’t you and I prefer something more conclusive?

But keeping in step with the Spirit is a fluid movement; we study, reflect, pray, discuss, and take action the best we can. We learn, we adjust, we continue. It’s as simple, and as difficult, as that.