2004

The Improv Church : A Qualitative, Theoretical, and Interdisciplinary Explanation of its Appeal to Collegians

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THE IMPROV CHURCH: A QUALITATIVE, THEORETICAL, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPLANATION OF ITS APPEAL TO COLLEGIANS

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

by
Karl Haffner
July 2004
ABSTRACT

THE IMPROV CHURCH: A QUALITATIVE, THEORETICAL, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPLANATION OF ITS APPEAL TO COLLEGIANS

by

Karl Haffner

Chair: Shirley Freed
ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

School of Education

Title: THE IMPROV CHURCH: A QUALITATIVE, THEORETICAL, AND INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPLANATION OF ITS APPEAL TO COLLEGIANS

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Date completed: July 2004

Problem

The college years often represent the time when young people drop out of church. The reasons vary. One of the factors in a decision to abandon church is that college students feel many traditional churches are irrelevant. Conventional methods of pedagogy and communication are typically used. The result is a learning environment that feels stale to many young people.

Some educators are experimenting with new methods of instruction based on advances in learning theories, instructional strategies, and in whole-person learning. The purpose of this study was to consider the Improv Church as a learning
environment where these advances in education might be applied in a church. To this end, two research questions shaped the study:

1. What aspects of the Improv Church make it appealing to collegians?
2. In what ways does the theoretical and practical scholarly literature explain the phenomenon of the Improv Church?

Method

The primary method of research used was qualitative. Through surveys, focus groups, interviews, journals, and videotapes of the Improv Church services, the stories of the participants began to emerge. Through triangulation, a confluence of evidence helped to shape a broader story. These data were then enmeshed in the growing body of knowledge from theories of communication, education, and theology.

Results

Much of the theoretical and practical scholarly literature mirrors the experience of participants at the Improv Church. These participants spoke of the positive impact this ministry had made in their lives. In digging deeper for an understanding of why, three themes emerged as reasons for the appeal and success of the Improv Church. These themes include community, humor, and the promise of spiritual growth.

Conclusion

The Improv Church holds a strong appeal to collegians. It is a place that is rich in community, humor, and spirituality. Consequently, this ministry is making an
impact in the lives of participants. Theories from theology, communication and education help to inform and explain the phenomenon of this interactive learning environment.
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A dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Karl Haffner

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DEDICATION

To God, source of creativity and life,
for Your constant presence.

To everyone involved at the Improv Church,
for your support and participation.

To my College Church family,
for unwavering support
throughout this project.

And to my family,
for your love.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....................................................................................................................viii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ix

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION ..........................................................................................................1
   Background of the Problem ....................................................................................1
   The Limitations of Traditional Approaches ....................................................1
   Teaching as an Art Form to Address the Limitations ...................................5
   The Improv Church: An Experiment in Improvisational Learning ............9
   Statement of the Problem.......................................................................................12
   Purpose of the Study ..............................................................................................13
   Research Questions ................................................................................................13
   Overview of Dissertation .......................................................................................13

2. METHODOLOGY .......................................................................................................15
   Introduction .............................................................................................................15
   Self as Research Instrument ..................................................................................18
      The Investigator’s Position .............................................................................18
      The Genesis of the Improv Church ...............................................................20
      Summary ...........................................................................................................21
   Data Collection .......................................................................................................21
      Surveys ..............................................................................................................21
      Focus Groups ...................................................................................................22
      Interviews .........................................................................................................23
      Journals .............................................................................................................23
      Video Tapes of Improv Church Services .......................................................24
      Personal Journal ...............................................................................................24
      Summary ...........................................................................................................24
   Data Analysis ..........................................................................................................25
      Reliability ............................................................................................................29
      Validity ..................................................................................................................30
      Structural Corroboration and Triangulation .................................................31
      Member Checks and Participatory Modes of Research .........................32
      Consensual Validation ....................................................................................32
      Generalizability ..................................................................................................33
3. A DESCRIPTION OF THE IMPROV CHURCH AS IT FUNCTIONS IN
THE CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH OF ACTS

Introduction .............................................................................................................36
The Improv Church in the Context of a Theological Model of Worship........36
  Fundamental Principles of Worship at the Improv Church .......................38
    Principle 1: Worship Is Centered in God ...............................................38
    Principle 2: Worship Is a Response of Faith .........................................40
    Principle 3: Worship Is a Celebration of the Cross ..............................41
    Principle 4: Worship Is a Sacred Time in Which God Speaks and Acts ...................................................................................42
    Principle 5: Worship Affirms Fellowship—With the Spirit and
      Within the Body of Believers ............................................................43
    Principle 6: Worship Is a Participatory Experience ..............................44
    Principle 7: Worship Must Be Culturally Relevant ..............................45
The Improv Church in the Context of the Church of Acts ...............................47
Programming at the Church of Acts.....................................................................49
  The Improv Church .........................................................................................50
  Improv Praise ...................................................................................................52
  Improv Serve ....................................................................................................54
  Small Groups ...................................................................................................56
  Summary ...........................................................................................................57

4. RESULTS: ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction .............................................................................................................58
Statistical Snapshot ................................................................................................59
The First Theme to Emerge From the Data: Humor .........................................69
  Description of Humor at the Improv Church ...............................................70
  Humor From the Perspective of the Improv Church Participants ................77
  Humor From the Perspective of the Improv Church Leaders ......................80
  Corroborating Research ..................................................................................82
    Humor and the Bible .................................................................................83
    Humor and Learning ...............................................................................85
    Humor and Anxiety .................................................................................87
    Humor and Memory ...............................................................................89
The Second Theme to Emerge From the Data: Spirituality .............................91
  Description of Spirituality at the Improv Church ......................................92
  Spirituality From the Perspective of the Improv Church Participants .........95
  Spirituality From the Perspective of the Improv Church Leaders ..............97
  Corroborating Research ................................................................................99
    James Fowler .........................................................................................102
    Sharon Parks .........................................................................................105
    Steve Garber ..........................................................................................109
    Other Studies on Spirituality and College Students ..............................110
The Third Theme to Emerge From the Data: Community .........................112
### LIST OF TABLES

1. Data Sources That Address the Research Questions .................................................. 25
2. Frequency of Attendance at the Improv Church......................................................... 61
3. Rating of Spiritual Experience.................................................................................... 62
4. Reasons for Attending the Improv Church.................................................................. 64
5. Pearson Correlation Between the Reasons for Attendance and (a) Frequency of
   Attendance and (b) Level of Spiritual Commitment ........................................... 66
6. Pearson Correlation Between Reasons for Attending the Improv Church.................. 68
7. James Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development......................................................... 104
8. Ellen Wagner’s Types of Interactions and Their Relevance to the Improv Church. 132
9. Goleman’s Five Components of Emotional Intelligence......................................... 217
10. Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences................................................................. 222
11. Examples of How MI Theory Is Used at the Improv Church.................................... 226
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation took a team to write it. I thank God for many people who, directly or indirectly, participated in this study. My family endured 6 years of this paper languishing somewhere “in process.” Shirley A. Freed, my dissertation chair, has been an ideal guide through unexplored passages. Delyse Steyn, Joseph Kidder, and Loren Dickinson supported and sharpened my best efforts. Debbie Johnson, Jan West, Julia Gish, and Tina Guldhammer proved cheerful help in all the details. Andra Aaby, Sheila Clark, and Violet Maynard-Reid tracked down any resource on the planet. My regional group, Shelley Bacon, Leslie Bumgardner, Pam Cress, Troy Fitzgerald, Henning Guldhammer, Cleveland Hobdy, and Susan Smith, represent my community of support through the whole adventure. Heather Vonderfecht and Jimmy Kijai helped me survive a bout with statistics. The Macks and Hueys provided a perfect place to concentrate. Carol Castillo was always ready with an answer to keep me on track. Bonnie Proctor weeded a million mistakes out of the paper. The improv players and participants were always gracious in volunteering to help.

I have never been under any delusion that this work represents my efforts alone. I am grateful to be a part of a wonderful community.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

Educational objectives and pedagogies are undergoing change—a metamorphosis from an instructor-based, teaching-centered practice to one that is student-focused and learning-oriented. Barr and Tagg (1995) point out that the emphasis is no longer focused on the instructor presenting an ever-increasing amount of material to students who sit as passive vessels to be filled; rather, the orientation is changing to underscore the importance of the learning process. In a learning scenario, students are not merely exposed to information but are engaged in the learning process. Teaching becomes a "connective activity" (Brookfield, 1995b, p. 42). In exploring these connections, the teacher conducts what Marton (1988) labels a "phenomenography of learning." This describes the process by which teachers attempt to encounter the students’ experiences in order to learn how they feel their way, cognitively and emotionally, through a learning effort. The goal is to challenge students to take responsibility for interpretation and judgment.

The Limitations of Traditional Approaches

This new way of thinking about the learning experience varies from the traditional approach of instructor-based education. Dehler and Welsh (1997) speak to the problem inherent in the conventional approach:
In an instruction-centered environment, responsibilities for instruction belong to teacher; responsibility for learning belongs to student. This separation raises problems. For students, problems arise when the outcome of instruction is not real learning. Students may “know” something without knowing where it comes from, why it is important, or what to do with it. . . . Holding universities accountable for the former, which we have traditionally done because it is easier to measure, only exacerbates the problems. (p. 496)

Richardson and Birge (1995) believe that instructors cling to this instruction-centered format in spite of research that shows how a combination of passive and active methods facilitate improved learning (Herbe, Thielenhouse, & Wykert, 2002). McKeachie (1986) reports: “Our survey of teaching methods suggests that . . . if we want students to become more effective in meaningful learning and thinking, they need to spend more time in active, meaningful learning and thinking—not just sitting and passively receiving information” (as cited in Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991, p. 5:1). Burns (1988) suggests that the more young people become involved in an experience, the more they will learn from it. Edgar Dale’s cone of experiential learning suggests that the average retention for students learning through spoken or written communication is 5-10%. In contrast, the retention rate jumps to 25% with the use of media, 40-60% through role-playing, and 80-90% through direct experience (as cited in Burns, 1988, pp. 183-184; Schultz & Schultz, 1993).

Carvajal, director of the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Dropout Prevention (as cited in Schultz & Schultz, 1993), asserts: “To reach the students of today, the curriculum must actively engage the learners and promote higher-order thinking instead of merely memorization of facts and figures” (p. 11). Stoddard (1992) writes: “We must shift from the traditional role of ‘knowledge dispenser’ to that of model, mentor, and organizer of experiences that help students grow” (p. 61).
In other words, it is not acceptable to teach just facts if genuine learning is not taking place.

This principle applies beyond the boundaries of the traditional school classroom. Whatever the learning context, be it in school or in church, it behooves instructors to teach in a way that maximizes the growth potential of students. Yet, all too often the traditional approach of teaching (as compared to a more experiential learning method) is entrenched in church models.

Some ministers of churches are guilty of teaching spiritual truth in the most ineffective manner possible. By using the lecture format, preaching often makes little impact. Osborn (1975) laments the decline of preaching in theological education. He argues that Christian preaching has historically influenced American life in significant ways. Such influence, however, is endangered if preachers are unable to communicate in a way that connects in life-changing ways. This decline in the life-transforming influence of preaching is disconcerting when “the goal in preaching is a response of the receptor” (McAnlis, 1986, abstract).

A recent report from The Barna Group, suggests that the response in the receptors of faith training is minimal. People’s faith does not make as much of a difference as might be expected—particularly among non-evangelical born again Christians. Barna (2004) reflects on the results of the survey:

The ultimate aim of belief in Jesus is not simply to possess divergent theological ideas but to become a transformed person. These statistics highlight the fact that millions of people who rely on Jesus Christ for their eternal destiny have problems translating their religious beliefs into action beyond Sunday mornings. (p. 3)
Citing related studies among children, Barna (2004) suggests that Christian churches and families would benefit from integrating faith practices at earlier ages.

We have found that unless young children are taught how to tie their beliefs into their daily behavior, the chances of that faith ever influencing their lifestyle in significant ways is slim. Parents and religious teachers must both model such integration for young people while simultaneously working through such behavior and choices with them. Faith perspectives that are not quickly translated into action become mantras that get lip service but have limited affect on lives— theology without hands and feet. (p. 3)

Perhaps the ineffectiveness of preaching to transform lives rests in the communication form that is used. Preachers often use the oral/aural method of communicating, even though our specific cultural context might suggest that different communication forms would prove more effective. McAnlis’s (1986) research suggests that ministry, specifically preaching, is affected by the forces characteristic of our cultural milieu. Traditional preaching is limited in its ability to produce Christian maturation largely due to these forces. Because of the impact of these forces on our lives today, new and creative forms of ministry and models of preaching are required in order to see lives being transformed.

The notion of creativity in the Christian context is nothing new. However, as Massey (1991) observes:

[Creativity in Christian education] has been in conflict with the influences of institutional schooling. With the schooling/instructional model, faith was taught through the memorization of biblical content, creeds, doctrines, and dogmas. The focus of education was content, correct information, and printed curriculum. Faith cannot be equated with correct knowledge of the Bible or doctrines. It seems that, with the schooling/instructional model, it is religion that is being taught as opposed to faith. (p. 8)

Using Massey’s nomenclature, one might equate teaching with religion and learning with faith. Faith then becomes a personal, dynamic response to God’s
presence, while religion is merely an expression of that faith. Westerhoff (1976) explains:

The language of instruction can too easily lead us astray. It encourages us to be concerned for what we want our pupils to be or become. When we think “instruction,” we focus our attention on what we want someone else to know, what we want someone else to feel, or how we want someone else to behave. We establish learning objectives for others, while parents legitimately ask us when we are going to teach their child about the Bible or what Christians believe or what is right and wrong. (p. 85)

Perhaps it is time for church leaders to reconsider the methods of instruction typically used in church. As voices in the field of education are questioning the effectiveness of traditional pedagogical strategies, perhaps church leaders should join the conversation as well. In so doing, maybe future generations of young people in the church could experience a living, dynamic, life-transforming faith, as opposed to simply being repositories of religious knowledge.

Teaching as an Art Form to Address the Limitations

Educators who recognize learning (as opposed to teaching) as the mission of an instructor are addressing these issues. In learning, the primary agent in the educational process is the learner. The instructor’s objective is to assess the knowledge and skills needed. Next, the instructor seeks to connect subject and student in a fashion that facilitates learning. It is a fluid process whereby responsibility for learning is shared between the instructor and student.

According to this paradigm, teaching might be considered an art form. In that context, learning transpires in spite of critics who suggest that improvisational teaching is only an excuse for a lack of preparation on the part of a teacher. An example comes from the school of jazz performance. By
nature, it is highly improvisational. Towell (1998) addresses these negative connotations:

The image of a teacher entering the classroom unprepared, with little idea of what to teach in the lesson or how it will unfold, comes to mind when the words improvisation and teaching are discussed together. Jazz musicians come to improvisational performance with some previous preparation, knowing some of the events that may transpire. They know the compositions that will be performed and have spent long hours practicing the many elements involved in the craft of improvisation. Expert teachers may also approach their teaching in a similar manner. (p. 5)

Elliot (1992) contends that skillful teaching is much closer to improvising over the harmonic alterations of a composition than it is to the linear approach of a pre-planned lesson. In this model, the ideal teacher acts like a jazz musician attacking problems and capitalizing on opportunities as they are encountered “on the fly.”

Could it be possible that the ideal preacher acts like a jazz musician as well? By capitalizing on opportunities that occur on the fly, perhaps the avenue whereby the Holy Spirit can take over is left open. It is a concept that differs from many worship contexts. Churches tend to prop a “sage on the stage” to disseminate truth. In contrast, “artful teaching” where the instructor brings “techniques and strategies that engage students and involve them with the subject matter” (Dehler & Welsh, 1997, p. 497), is often conspicuously diluted in the learning environment of a church. Traditionally, the instruction is fixed and church members “either get it or they don’t” (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 19). There is little, if any, interaction.

This ought to cause concern among those who think about the future of the church. As a pastor, I wonder if the learning context of the church is such that it will attract and keep the next generation. Barna (2001) estimates that about two-thirds of
all American teenagers have some interaction with a church youth program during a typical month. When pressed to identify the most important reason they are drawn to a youth group, most of the respondents identified friendships as the strongest pull.

But Barna warns they will not stick around if the church defaults on the goods. What are these “goods”? Asked another way, what are these young people searching for in a church? Based on five nationwide surveys of over 3,400 individuals ages 13 to 18, Barna (2001) answers:

Substance. Learning practical and credible insights about God was listed twice as often as anything else as the most important reason for returning. The fellowship, the games, the music, the casual and friendly atmosphere—all of those elements are important to getting kids in the door—the first time. Getting them there on subsequent occasions requires those benefits plus solid, personally applicable content. (pp. 135-136)

In short, the future generation of young people attends church in order to learn. Failure to deliver solid content that is both practical and credible may well result in kids who feel inclined to pursue other learning ventures in places outside of the church.

The John Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry (JHCYFM, 2002) reports similar findings within the context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Valuegenesis study of 1987-89 found that one of the key elements in building loyalty related to the warm climate of the local church to manifest love, acceptance, and caring. In the more recent follow-up Valuegenesis study of 1991-1994, researchers found that the “Thinking Church Climate Scale” is an even more important predictor of values and commitment than the “Warm Church Climate Scale.” Researchers (JHCYFM, 2002) warn: “We cannot be content with only 40 per cent of our youth feeling their church is a place where they can think and grow and is open to new ideas.
and encourages questions” (p. 1). When asked about conditions that would prompt young people to leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church, two of the most common answers were “boring sermons” and “worship not meaningful.” These are important factors that cause 48% of teens to drop out of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Dudley, 2000b).

Because the Seventh-day Adventist Church operates 92 post-secondary institutions, almost 1,000 secondary schools and over 4,000 elementary schools and kindergartens, the question arises as to whether or not there is a connection between the opportunities for learning and retention. After all, if any Protestant church takes seriously the call to educate its young people, it arguably would be the Seventh-day Adventist Church. But does this elaborate system of schools help to develop young people who remain loyal to the church? In a longitudinal study where 783 respondents completed surveys spanning the decade of 1987-1997, researchers looked at the issue of Christian education and youth retention. They found that young people who had attended Adventist schools were more inclined to remain members of the denomination at the end of the 10 years.

The teenagers attending the Adventist academies were more positive toward their religion than those in public schools on a whole range of items, such as: the importance of religion in the life, being happy with their religion, intending to remain Adventist in adulthood, not being able to imagine joining another denomination, wanting to marry within the faith, and wanting to send their children to Adventist schools. (Dudley, 2000a, p. 8)

The conclusion:

While this study reveals that Christian education does a better job spiritually than public education, it also shows that it is far from perfect. Remember that of those who are no longer members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 38 percent took all or most of their education in our schools. (Dudley, 2000a, pp. 12-13)
Clearly, the educational component is an important factor in the spiritual life of young people. And yet the church can easily fall short in this respect. Perhaps part of the blame for young people abandoning the church can be traced back to the limitations inherent in the traditional approaches to religious instruction. Because of the church’s emphasis on “knowing” rather than on relevant learning that results in a transformed life, it comes as no surprise that young adults are not always engaged in the life of the church. Simply put, a disturbingly high percentage of young adults are no longer showing up to hear more irrelevant, religious information. The number of disillusioned young people who are abandoning faith is too high; maybe a new approach in pedagogy can help to stop the bleeding.

The Improv Church: An Experiment in Improvisational Learning

Part of the solution to this exodus of young people leaving the church may be in reconsidering the teaching/learning format in worship. To this end, the Improv Church was established. Rather than using a paradigm of teaching to inform of truth, the Improv Church teaches in a way that facilitates both learning and life-changes. Teaching at the Improv Church is more of a participatory art form than an instructor-based dissemination of information.

The term “improv” is an abbreviated form of the word “improvisation.” It refers to the act of making things up on the fly and acting spontaneously based on the immediate context. The notion of improv is an ingrained part of the nomenclature at the Improv Church and needs no definition among those who attend services. The Improv Church meets in a renovated nightclub on Friday evenings in Walla Walla, Washington, at 9:30 p.m. The capacity seating is 350, which occasionally results in
many people being denied access because the seats fill up almost immediately after
opening the doors at 9:00 p.m.. The audience is mostly college students (although all
ages are welcome to attend) who come from the three local colleges—Whitman
College, Walla Walla College, and Walla Walla Community College. Most of the
people attending are Seventh-day Adventists, although there is a wide variety of
religious beliefs and practices among the participants. On any given night the Improv
Church attracts people across the spiritual spectrum from atheists to fully devoted
Christians of several different denominations.

The programming format varies. On any given week we might experiment
with something new in the flow of the service. There is no pedagogical pattern that
the church religiously follows; yet for the sake of providing a picture of how the
educational process unfolds, this is how the experience might happen.

The following format would comprise a typical service at the Improv Church.
For the first half-hour, people enjoy socializing, drinking complimentary (non-
alcoholic) drinks, and listening to a band perform until the church service begins. To
begin the program, a host offers a welcome, an opening prayer, and introduces the
biblical theme for the night. He/she then engages the audience in some type of
interactive exercise where everybody is given an opportunity to participate in a non-
threatening way. This might be a participatory voice choir where sections in the
church offer words that can be associated with the theme. In a voice choir, people
chant their appointed word when the director points to their section. Another
interactive exercise might be a game involving volunteers acting out certain proverbs
from the Bible. There are dozens of ways to involve everybody at the outset. These interactive exercises loosen up the crowd and establish a fun learning environment.

Next, the host introduces the Improv Players. A team of six to eight actors performs several improvisational sketches based on suggestions from the audience. In this way, people gain a sense that everybody can help to create the learning experience. Nobody (including the actors) knows where the sketch will lead or what the experience will be like. In doing the dramas, the actors are simply trying to capture the truth about who we are as people. They do not try to be funny (although the sketches are often hilarious), nor do they try to force the spontaneous script to land on some predetermined moral or Bible text (although the sketches can be profoundly poignant and spiritually challenging). Instead, they simply tell stories through impromptu dramas. In so doing, they capture truths about the human condition and spiritual realities. In this way, they are portraying living parables—much like Jesus did. Christ’s parables were not overtly moralistic, nor were they necessarily “religious”; rather they were stories that effectively communicated the truth about who we are as people. Two thousand years later, His stories continue to engage the listener in deeply emotional and life-transforming ways.

A special music selection bridges the improv dramas to the teaching segment. A teacher—usually a collegian—concludes the improv service with a 10-15-minute talk. This talk connects the Bible with the theme of the night and provides a challenge to respond in a specific way in light of the learning that transpired in the worship service. Thus, it is the teacher who incorporates the shared learning experiences with the biblical knowledge base and the arena of real life. Time is often
allowed toward the end of the service for introspection and reflection on how the truth presented might apply in a personal sense. Following a closing prayer, participants are then dismissed. Typically, many stay for another hour or so to talk with friends. In this way, community is fostered and connections are made.

In light of this new approach to learning in the context of church, questions emerge. The two questions addressed in this study include: (a) What aspects of the Improv Church make it appealing to collegians? (b) In what ways does the theoretical and practical scholarly literature explain the phenomenon of the Improv Church?

**Statement of the Problem**

Schultz and Schultz (1993) claim: “We—the church—have underachieved. Our people don’t know what they should, and their lives are not deeply affected because we’ve clung to the old, passive ways by which we were taught” (p. 110).

Although the research base for active learning in the traditional classroom has dramatically increased over the past two decades, only limited study has been done in terms of applying that knowledge base to the venue of church. Schultz and Schultz (1993) explain:

> Learning methods such as listening to lectures and sermons have their place. And reading the Word is essential. But we’ve tended to place all our hopes in these passive methods. And we’ve almost completely ignored the more potent forms of learning. (p. 111)

The Improv Church is an attempt to tap into the “more potent forms of learning” and apply the latest discoveries about teaching in the context of a collegiate worship experience. While the Improv Church is experimenting with a new form of
learning in the church, there are no studies to date that document this type of improvisational worship service and tie it to broader bodies of research.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to understand why collegians keep coming to the Improv Church; second, to understand better what is going on at the church through the lens of scholarly literature about worship, communication, and learning. This research represents an explorative, qualitative study.

**Research Questions**

This study answers two research questions:

1. What aspects of the Improv Church make it appealing to collegians?
2. In what ways does the theoretical and practical scholarly literature explain the phenomenon of the Improv Church?

**Overview of Dissertation**

This dissertation is structured in the following manner. Chapter 1 presents the problem that can exist in educational settings such as schools and churches of pedagogies employed that may not use the most effective way to teach for life change. This chapter also identifies the purpose of the study and the research questions and offers an overview of this study.

Chapter 2 describes the methodology used in this research. This includes an introduction, a statement about self as the research instrument, data collecting, data analysis, validity, reliability, and generalizability.
Chapter 3 provides a description of the Improv Church as it functions in the context of a theological model of worship and in the context of the Church of Acts. This offers a descriptive piece of the Improv Church, Improv Praise, Improv Serve, and small groups.

Chapter 4 offers an answer to the first research question through an analysis of data. After an introduction and statistical snapshot of the quantitative data, the three themes to emerge from the data are separately addressed by describing what that theme looks like in the context of the Improv Church, how that theme is described by participants and leaders, and how corroborating research mirrors the findings at the Improv Church. A final section in this chapter addresses disconfirming data that did not fit cleanly into one of the three themes.

Chapter 5 begins to answer the second research question by linking my data to the scholarly community of communicators. In this chapter the communication process that relies on improvisation is explored through its connection with communication theories, worship, and the spiritual experience.

Chapter 6 further answers the second research question by connecting the data to the scholarly community of educators. By doing this we see aspects of the Improv Church that mirror the theoretical and practical literature on learning theories, instructional strategies, and whole-person learning.

Finally, chapter 7 offers an overview and conclusion. It also presents recommendations based on the findings of this research. It concludes with a synthesis that offers a summary as to why the Improv Church works.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Since spiritual experience is a process rather than an event, and requires continued study to comprehend what is happening, the chosen method of research is qualitative in nature. Merriam (1998) defines the qualitative case study as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit. They are particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic and rely heavily on inductive reasoning" (p. 27). The nature of qualitative research tends to concern itself with processes rather than products.

There are two driving questions behind this research: (a) What aspects of the Improv Church make it appealing to collegians? (b) In what ways does the theoretical and practical scholarly literature explain the phenomenon of the Improv Church? Both questions speak to the issue of an experiential process rather than a numerical quantification. Therefore, qualitative research seems to be the most appropriate method of inquiry. A brief review of Eisner's summary of qualitative features reinforces the prudence of this approach.

Eisner (1998) offers six features of qualitative study. First, it tends to be field focused. This involves on-site observation. Qualitative researchers typically study situations and objects intact—in their naturalistic setting. In order to critically
examine what is happening at the Improv Church, I will attempt to "observe, interview, record, describe, interpret, and appraise" (Eisner, 1998, p. 33) the improv setting as it is by doing a significant amount of on-site research.

The second characteristic of qualitative studies relates to the self as an instrument. Eisner (1998) explains,

The self is the instrument that engages the situation and makes sense of it. This is done most often without the aid of an observation schedule; it is not a matter of checking behaviors, but rather of perceiving their presences and interpreting their significance. (p. 34)

As the founder and visionary of the Improv Church, my voice seems the natural choice to lend personal insight as a source of meaning.

The third characteristic of qualitative research is its interpretive character. Thus, researchers are interested "in matters of motive and in the quality of the experience undergone by those in the situation studied" (Eisner, 1998, p. 35). The nature of my research calls for an exploration and understanding of both the motives and the experience of participants and leaders at the Improv Church. Clearly, the avenue to answering the research questions requires an interpretive component.

Fourth, qualitative research uses expressive language and the presence of voice in text. Because the Improv Church has been a large part of my life for over 6 years now, my "signature" will not be disguised through the neutralization of voice or the aversion to metaphor. This research will be presented in language that includes the rich texture of personal experience.

A fifth feature of qualitative research is the attention to particulars. Typically data take the form of numbers in order to be treated statistically. "When this transformation occurs the uniqueness of particular features is lost. What emerges
is a description of relationships, almost disconnected from the particulars from which the data were originally secured” (Eisner, 1998, p. 38). It is my desire to preserve the particulars by looking at a focused group of participants and reporting their experiences. Because each person’s experience is unique, the information will be personalized. To get at the heart of what is really happening at the Improv Church the unique spiritual experiences of the participants will be dissected and understood for what they are.

Finally, qualitative research is marked by its coherence, insight, and instrumental utility. In qualitative research there is no statistical test of significance to determine whether or not the data count; in the final analysis what counts is a judgment call. Because one’s spiritual experience can be so subjective, it seems a worthwhile goal to collect the data, then strive to bring some kind of coherence and insight from it.

Based on the preceding rationale, the research method used was qualitative in nature. More specifically, the case-study approach was taken. Because this is a study of specific phenomenon such as a “program, event, group, intervention, or community” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19), this approach opened unique windows of understanding into the experiences of individuals. Sirotnik (1989) explains the advantage of this approach: “Instead of explanations based upon statistical associations between operationally defined constructs, interpretations are drawn directly from actual circumstances, events, behaviors, and expressed sentiments as played out daily by people” (as cited in Freed, 1991, p. 95). Because I wanted to make interpretations based on the events surrounding the Improv Church, the case-
study approach seemed the best way to proceed. After all, who is better suited to report the research than the participants involved? A case study "is done in a way that incorporates the views of the 'actors' in the case under study" (Tellis, 1997, p. 2).

Another advantage in using the case-study method is that it allowed for interpretation within a context. According to Yin (1994), a case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Given that this study examined a process rather than hypothesis testing, this approach allowed me to focus on a single phenomenon (the Improv Church) in a unique context.

**Self as Research Instrument**

This research is affected by my personal experiences and biases. One technique of enhancing internal validity is to examine the researcher’s “worldview” (Merriam, 1998, p. 205). In light of Merriam’s observation, I enrolled in a graduate-level course on worldviews prior to embarking on this research project. In this way I sought to thoroughly examine and understand my personal convictions that would no doubt influence these findings. The result of that study on worldviews was a deeper understanding of my convictions that grow out of the Judeo-Christian worldview. I acknowledge this bias at the outset, before presenting and interpreting the data.

**The Investigator’s Position**

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) suggest that the investigator’s position be clearly explained. This should include “the assumptions and theory behind the study, his or her position vis-à-vis the group being studied, the basis for selecting informants
and description of them, and the social context from which data were collected” (Merriam, 1998, pp. 206-207). To understand the “assumptions and theory” behind this study it is necessary to consider the origin of the Improv Church. The Improv Church grew out of a personal sense that there must be a more effective way to present Christ to a generation of young people who seem so steeled against the church. The genesis of this experiment in doing church is entwined in my personal story. The start of the Improv Church spotlights my own involvement and vision for harnessing an interactive art form to communicate the message of Christ.

This vision was conceived while visiting Vancouver, B.C., when I discovered Theatre Sports--an improvisational comedy club where drama teams competed by performing sketches that were based on input from the audience. The art form was so riveting that I spent the night envisioning a church using this style of communication. I was exposed to an art form that eclipsed anything I had imagined. The dynamic of audience participation, spontaneity, and free-form discovery between the communicator and the audience sparked a sense of magic that would be foundational to a dream of creating a new way to do church.

Over the past 15 years this dream has prompted visits to Theatre Sports around the country and has propelled me into a study of why, in my opinion, the art form is so effective. I observed in my numerous visits to the improvisation clubs that hundreds of collegians flock to the venues, sometimes waiting for hours to get tickets.

Next, I interviewed both the audience members and the improvisers, asking their opinions about the potential use of improvisation in a church setting. Without
exception, the idea was met with enthusiastic responses such as: "Although I don’t go to a church, that is the kind of church I would go to."

Fueled by the encouragement of the interviewees, I set out to create a church based on interactive learning and improvisation. It would provide worshipers an opportunity to create a collective spiritual experience by participating in non-threatening ways. Before going public with my vision, however, I reflected on what the core values of the church would be.

The Genesis of the Improv Church

The Improv Church was launched in February 1999. It was based on four core values: action, community, transformation, and service. These values shape the way church is done. For instance, the core value of “action” is a conviction that everyone should get into the act where worship is concerned. Thus, sermons are “created” with the audience influencing the direction and flavor. Ideally, all worshipers leave with a sense that the service was inherently different because they attended (i.e., they were active participants rather than passive observers). In contrast, it is my observation that most people leave traditional church services feeling that the gift of worship offered to God was not significantly shaped because of their attendance.

Inherent in this programming is the notion that people learn most effectively through experience. For example, I had negative feelings against the system of apartheid based on my reading and news reports. My opinions dramatically changed, however, after I lived in South Africa for a year. Seeing the inequality and injustice while walking through the streets of Soweto and other Black townships transformed...
my opinions and propelled me to fight all racial inequality with an assiduous intensity that would have never been present without experiencing life in that environment. The point is: real-life experiences tend to result in a deeper level of learning and have the capacity to significantly impact a person’s life. This is a foundational principle of the Improv Church. While I have not substantiated this assumption with research, it seems intuitive based on my own life experience with improv. No doubt, this is one of many personal presuppositions that color my research and conclusions.

Summary

In sum, I have a focused desire to impact others through effective forms of communication such that people will experience spiritually defining moments of life transformation. I believe this will require bold vision and strong leadership to navigate the inevitable whitewaters of change. In my opinion it will require a radical new paradigm for church and worship. In the end, however, it will be worth the risk and the investment because it will ultimately be the work of God.

Data Collection

To collect the relevant data I used the following methods: surveys, focus groups, interviews, journals, and personal reflections from my journals. The goal was to unveil the effect the Improv Church had on the spiritual experience of people.

Surveys

The reasoning behind the use of a survey was to get a sense of what it is that makes the Improv Church appealing to collegians. The survey (see Appendix A) offered a variety of reasons that might motivate students to attend the Improv Church
and then asked the respondent to rank each reason. At the end of the survey I included an opportunity for respondents to volunteer to be part of a focus group. The survey also queried respondents about their perceived spiritual condition. This allowed for statistical correlations using SPSS software to be made between groups of participants comprised of identical spiritual rankings; it also allowed for comparisons between groupings. For example, I looked for correlations between respondents who said a strong reason for coming was to be with friends and those who said a strong reason for coming was to grow spiritually. Another example: I considered correlations between those who ranked their spiritual experience as a “top priority” and those who said they came to the Improv Church “to grow spiritually.” These are the types of correlations that were easy to consider through the survey instrument.

Focus Groups

There are three primary types of samples: the convenience sample, the judgment sample, and the random sample (Mugo, 2004). The convenience sample results when the more convenient elementary units are chosen from the population. The judgment sample is chosen per the discretion of someone who is intimately familiar with the population. Finally, the random sample “allows a known probability that each elementary unit will be chosen” (p. 4). For the purposes of this study, convenience sampling was used on each of the three nights (April 19, May 3 and 17, 2002) that focus groups were conducted prior to the start of a session of the Improv Church at the Center for Sharing.

The focus groups provided data that further addressed the first research question. In guided discussions, participants were encouraged to reflect on why they
came to the Improv Church and how their involvement affected their spiritual experience. (For the questions asked in the focus groups along with details on the focus group protocol, see Appendix B.)

Focus groups offer a number of advantages to other types of data collection. For starters, the efficiency of focus groups is ideal. “It is a quick effective way to stimulate new ideas and simultaneously build interest and commitment to the change” (Bader & Rossi, 1999, p. 2). Also, focus group data tend to reveal more information than surveys do. Furthermore, they often provide greater qualitative details than other forms of data collection (Bader & Rossi, 1999).

Interviews

To further answer the first research question, a judgment sample was taken. A judgment sample (i.e., purposive sample) is defined as a non-probability sample selection method where respondents are selected according to a personal and/or subjective judgment about which members of the population would be the most representative. In this case the improv players selected had been involved in the acting troupe for a minimum of 2 years, or in one case had been involved in an administrative and leadership role for over 2 years (see Appendix C). To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms have been used for all the improv players participating in the interviews.

Journals

Another method of data collection involved journals provided by the improv players. The journals were recorded during the 2000-2001 and the 2001-2002 season.
While the journals did yield some reflective data, this proved to be a limited resource as the players did not consistently record in them throughout the year.

Videotapes of Improv Church Services

A voluminous source of data was available by way of the video collection of actual Improv Church services. Most of the church services over the course of 5 years have been videotaped. This resource offered the valuable benefit of being able to return at any time to the actual phenomenon being studied.

Personal Journal

A final source of data came from my personal reflections recorded in my journal. These reflections came as a result of direct observation. Eisner (1994) states that "the richest vein of information is struck through direct observation" (p. 182). The journal is a record of my own observations and critiques of the experience at the Improv Church.

This practice of journaling has served me well in that it has allowed me time to reflect and critique the experiences we have shared at the Improv Church. I believe it has helped to sharpen our focus at the church. Because of the benefits afforded through this discipline, I continue to journal—usually recording after an Improv Church service.

Summary

While collecting the data, I periodically assessed the results as a way of informing the next step of the process. Merriam suggests that this is one of the few facets of qualitative research where there is a right way and a wrong way to do it.
Ongoing analysis, during the collection phase, is in her words, "the right way" (Merriam, 1998, pp. 161-162). Thus I periodically reflected on the data during this stage as a way of both keeping the study focused and curtailing the sheer volume of material collected.

An overview of the data sources as they relate to the research questions is presented in Table 1. The data sources are listed in order of importance in terms of how much the resource weighed into providing an answer to the specific research question.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Data source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What aspects of the Improv Church make it appealing to collegians?</td>
<td>Surveys, focus groups, interviews, journals, personal journal, and video tapes of Improv Church services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In what ways does the theoretical and practical scholarly literature explain the phenomenon of the Improv Church?</td>
<td>Interviews, focus groups, personal journal, surveys, and scholarly literature</td>
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</table>

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the process of collecting, reflecting, collecting, reflecting, etc., I used a mix of manual and computer management to organize the data in a logical fashion. By doing this, a broader perspective of the Improv Church began to emerge. Similar themes and statements appeared from the different sources. By
using a grid (see Appendix F), listing each of the six data sources on one axis and emergent themes on the other axis, a clear pattern began to come into focus of the experience that respondents had at the Improv Church.

For the surveys, I chose “comprehensive sampling” (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, p. 398) and had every attendee respond in order to gain as wide a perspective as possible and also to include any unique or extreme cases. I then analyzed each survey and noted any personal responses the respondent wrote in the space provided for such input. Next, I used SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software to analyze the results. This quantitative approach efficiently packaged the responses for analysis. These data were designed to get a picture of why people attend the Improv Church. In addition, the instrument allowed me to consider the frequency of attendance and the perceived level of spirituality. This opened a window of understanding to see whether there was any correlation between the respondents’ perceived level of spirituality, their frequency of attendance, and the stated reasons for coming. Finally, I searched for any possible correlations between the reasons stated for coming.

For the focus groups, the sessions were taped in audio and video formats, then transcribed. Analysis commenced by reading through the transcripts several times, then listening again to the conversations while making notes in my personal journal. In the margins of the transcripts I coded themes that emerged. “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam, 1998, p.
The designations in this research included code words such as “humor,” “laughter,” “creative evangelism,” and so on.

According to Eisner (1994), “Second in importance to direct observation is the use of the interview” (p. 183). The interviews were conducted one on one, recorded, and transcribed in the same fashion as the focus groups. The interviews took place wherever it was most convenient for the interviewee. My interview questions were formulated after reviewing the counsel from the literature on qualitative research (Merriam, 1998) and in consultation with my dissertation chair, Shirley Freed. While a general structure was followed in the interviews, there was a fluid dynamic to the dialogue. I made it clear at the outset that if the person veered from the topic that I initiated, it was okay. After all, I was not looking for the “right answer”; I was interested in listening as they described their experiences. As a consequence, I observed the truth of Eisner’s (1994) observation, “It is surprising how much people are willing to say to those whom they believe are really willing to listen” (p. 183).

Because I have a close friendship with the improv players whom I interviewed, the conversations were honest, cordial, and candid.

The journals of the improv players provided another source of data. These pages were analyzed for themes and coded accordingly. Because the players did not write much in the journals, there was not a plethora of data in this category to analyze.

Another portion of the data library includes about 35 one-hour-long videotapes of Improv Church services. These tapes include all of the first year of services and span the 5 years of history at the Improv Church. The videos were
viewed a number of times during this project as a way to remain grounded in the experience of the Improv Church. Additionally, the Improv Church has continued to meet throughout the course of this study, so my regular involvement in the goings-on at the church has provided another connection to this material. Also, the videos were occasionally analyzed in other ways. Eisner (1998) suggests: “Videotapes of classrooms in real time can serve as the subject matter for analysis” (p. 232). Although the Improv Church is not a traditional “classroom,” it is a learning environment just the same. In this way the “real time” tapes proved helpful for analysis. For example, after the topic of humor kept surfacing during the interviews and focus groups, I consulted the videos as a way of observing what the interviewees kept referencing. I randomly chose a number of tapes and timed the length of audible laughter during the improv sketches. In this way, the corroborating data from the videos supported the testimonies given in the focus groups and the players’ interviews.

The data from my personal journal might also be labeled “field notes, which are analogous to the interview transcript” (Merriam, 1998, p. 104). Usually I would jot notes during an observation such as an Improv Church service. Later, I recorded the details by way of an email sent to the improv players for learning purposes. These emails then became the nucleus of my journal. Often the nature of this correspondence was a critique of a particular program, but it also included notes and observations about what was transpiring during the service.
All of the data collected underwent the scrutiny of analysis. Thus, the goal of presenting a picture that is accurate and fair was accomplished through recording, transcribing, reviewing, coding, and reflecting on the data received.

**Reliability**

Reliability has to do with the extent to which the findings can be replicated. In the social sciences this is problematic because human behavior is always fluid and changing. Merriam (1998) explains:

Reliability in research design is based on the assumptions that there is a single reality and that studying it repeatedly will yield the same results. This is a central concept of traditional experimental research, which focuses on discovering causal relationships among variables and uncovering laws to explain phenomena. (p. 205)

This fundamental assumption is problematic in this study because the laws of human behavior vary so dramatically. Not only is there great diversity among the participants at the Improv Church, this experiment in interactive church operates in a world that is always in flux and ever changing. Obviously, the repetition of this research in another context or at a different time will yield somewhat different results. There simply cannot be a benchmark by which predictable results will always occur. Consequently, reliability in the traditional sense is impossible to achieve in this study. Bednarz (1985) supports this conclusion:

If the researcher’s self is the prime instrument of inquiry, and the self-in-the-world is the best source of knowledge about the social world, and social reality is held to be an emergent property of interacting selves, and the meanings people live by are malleable as a basic feature of social life, then concern over reliability—in the postpositivist sense—is fanciful. (p. 303)
Based on the assumption that the Improv Church is always in flux, multifarious, and eminently contextual, reliability in the traditional sense is ill-conceived. Qualitative research by nature precludes a priori controls.

Nevertheless, Merriam (1998) concludes: “Replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results. That fact, however, does not discredit the results of the original study” (p. 206). Rather than basing the legitimacy of the study on whether or not the results can be replicated consistently, its reliability should be based on the “dependability” and “consistency” of results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In other words, rather than insisting that independent researchers always get the same results in an identical experiment, they insist that reliability be judged based on outsiders agreeing that the results make sense—that is, that the results are consistent with the data collected.

**Validity**

Merriam (1998) asserts, “All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner. Being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields, such as education, in which practitioners intervene in people’s lives” (p. 198). Qualitative researchers do have at their disposal ways to convince readers that their findings can be trusted (Freed, 1991). For this research to be trustworthy there must be some accounting for its trustworthiness. A number of strategies that Merriam and Eisner discuss have been employed in this study in order to produce findings that are reliable. What follows is a brief description of these strategies.
Structural Corroboration and Triangulation

One question that arises in research is: “Does it hang together?” In other words, can the findings be trusted? Through the technique of triangulation a confluence of evidence comes together to support the interpretation and evaluation of the data. According to Eisner (1998), “In seeking structural corroboration we look for recurrent behaviors or actions, those theme-like features of a situation that inspire confidence that the events interpreted and appraised are not aberrant or exceptional, but rather characteristic of the situation” (p. 110). By using multiple sources of supporting data, multiple methods to confirm the findings and multiple investigators, the credibility of the study is strengthened.

By supporting the conclusions of this study through a variety of resources, the research questions can be answered with an onslaught of compelling evidence. For example, the validity of the research is strengthened by the variety of people sharing their experience at the Improv Church and in a variety of contexts. These human resources include both men and women of varying age, ethnicity, and spiritual commitment.

As mentioned earlier, the data come from a variety of sources which include surveys, focus groups, interviews, journals, videotapes of church services, and my personal journal. Moreover, the method of collecting and analyzing the data was varied. For example, the surveys were collected prior to an Improv Church service at the Center for Sharing. The responses were analyzed quantitatively. In contrast, the interviews were conducted primarily in my office at the Walla Walla College Church. The general themes were identified, assorted, and then analyzed. The focus groups
were handled in a similar fashion, although the sessions were conducted at the Center for Sharing in downtown Walla Walla. The journals came from still another source. For the most part, the journaling grew out of times of solitude in personal spaces. In contrast, the videotapes of the church services represent a data source that was formed in a community marked by raucous and energetic college students.

By comparing the responses and compiling the data from different sources, structural corroboration is one of the methods by which the final conclusions are reinforced. Consequently, the trustworthiness of this research is strengthened.

Member Checks and Participatory Modes of Research

Merriam (1998) describes this strategy as "taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible" (p. 204). Because of my close proximity and relationship to the participants providing the observations, I performed validation checks throughout the study. The students proved very willing to clarify my data and interpretations. The method of member checks is strategically similar to the process of what Merriam (1998) labels "participatory or collaborative modes of research" (p. 205).

Consensual Validation

In order for the study results to be valid there must be agreement among competent others that the descriptions and evaluations offered are correct. This is not to suggest, however, that isomorphism is the standard by which validity is judged. Critics evaluate through their own biases. Nevertheless, the observations must overlap. The goal of consensual validation is to hear the opinions of experts and
factor their voices into the equation in order to strengthen the cohesiveness of the argument. As Eisner (1998) explains,

Consensual validation in the arts and humanities is not secured by seeking consensus among critics, but by considering the reasons critics give, the descriptions they provide, the cogency of their arguments, the incisiveness of their observations, the coherence of the case, and, undoubtedly, the elegance of the language. (pp. 112-113)

Part of my research design involved sharing reports with competent others who provided an evaluation in order to attain a credible and holistic understanding of the data. This process of educational criticism is illuminated by Eisner (1998):

"Criticism is an educational venture. If criticism does not illuminate its subject matter, if it does not bring about more complex and sensitive human perception and understanding, it fails in its primary aim" (p. 113).

**Generalizability**

"The question of generalizability has plagued qualitative investigators for some time" (Merriam, 1998, p. 207). Because of the high degree of "context specificity" (Tasker, 2002, p. 145) in the Improv Church, generalizing is not possible in the sense of its exactness in replication; rather, it is possible in terms of applying the skills, ideas, and images to other studies. After all, "the intent of qualitative research is not to generalize findings, but to form a unique interpretation of events" (Creswell, 1994, pp. 158-159). This unique interpretation can then be applied in a wider, general sense. Given the hundreds of individuals who have converged at a given place and point in time to formulate a ministry that to our knowledge has no precedence anywhere else in the world, it should come as no surprise that the conclusions of this in-depth look at a particular program will proffer a "unique
interpretation.” Of course, this does not preclude the possibility of others using the results in other settings. The conclusions and principles of this study are most certainly transferable to other contexts. “What generalizes is what one learns, and for our purposes these can be regarded as (1) skills, (2) images, and (3) ideas” (Eisner, 1998, p. 199).

In addition, it is possible to use the findings of this study and make what Stake calls “naturalistic generalizations” (Stake, 1978). Based on tacit knowledge and instincts, people search for patterns and similarities in and out of context and discover generalizations through experience. It could be possible to arrive at these sorts of organic generalizations from this study. To this end, I have devoted a significant portion of this study to “rich, thick description.” Merriam (1998) explains how this can prove helpful in applying the results of a qualitative study. She suggests that to enhance the possibility of the results of a qualitative study generalizing in the sense of naturalistic generalization the following technique be used: “Rich, thick description—providing enough description so that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred” (p. 211). In order to help others make generalizations in their unique contexts, I have included large descriptive pieces of what the Improv Church looks like in our setting.

Eisner (1998) elaborates on the notion of generalizability by suggesting that it can also entail “transferring what has been learned from one situation or task to another” (p. 198). He explains that the connotation of “transferring” must be understood as more than merely the “mechanical application of a set of skills, images,
or ideas from one situation to another” (p. 198). If the situations were absolutely identical, then one could just “transfer” what one had learned from one situation to another. But situations are never truly identical. Thus transferring must be seen as a process that “has generalizing features” (p. 198).

Eisner goes on to explain that the content we generalize is ideas couched in skills and images. He argues that “images have a powerful instrumental function. This function is an expression of their generalizing capacity” (p. 199). In the context of the Improv Church, it is the generalizing capacity of the image that leads us to looks for certain qualities of church life, features in communication, principles of worship, or aspects of learning and spirituality. Once these images of excellence are identified, we then apply them to other relevant aspects of life.

It is my desire through this research to advance our understanding of effective teaching in a collegiate church environment. The Improv Church represents one image that might inform other learning environments such as churches and schools. In this way the research can serve a greater purpose. After all, “If we are unable to use what we learn, learning has no instrumental utility” (Eisner, 1998, p. 204).
CHAPTER 3

A DESCRIPTION OF THE IMPROV CHURCH AS IT
FUNCTIONS IN THE CONTEXT
OF THE CHURCH OF ACTS

Introduction

To understand the Improv Church it is imperative to study it in its broader context. This wider framework includes both the theological context out of which the Improv Church comes as well as the history of how the programs have evolved into a multi-faceted approach to spiritual training and worship. First, this chapter presents the Improv Church in the context of a biblical model of worship; next, it outlines an historical perspective of the Improv Church as it functions within the bigger picture of the Church of Acts.

The Improv Church in the Context of a Theological Model of Worship

The original vision of the Improv Church was to develop a spiritual community that emerged from a solid mooring in Scripture. As founders, it was never our intent to move from the contemporary to the biblical; rather, our objective was (and continues to be) to move from the biblical to the contemporary. What happens at the Improv Church is the product of a theological model for worship.
Rutz (1992) argues that what happens at many churches today is disconnected from the picture of church that Scripture paints. For the first 3 centuries, the early Christian church thrived. Rutz (1992) offers this description:

Within thirty years of Christ’s ascension, the gospel was being preached in every outpost of the Roman Empire.
Unencumbered by mortgages, committees, staff salaries, and conflicts between choir rehearsal and church softball team practice, the ‘followers of the Way’ blazed a trail of stunning successes.
Then as the church grew in the first three centuries, it thrived on hard times and persecution... What was their secret? First, the presence of the living God in their hearts. Second, the weekly gathering of the church, an informal and often-boisterous affair with a full-on meal, not just a polite ceremony with an itty bitty breadcrumb and a thimbleful of Welch’s. Church life was a floating party, with everyone eating dinner at each others’ houses and participating 100% in the festivities. (pp. 8-9)

According to Rutz (1992), “All the major problems of the church today—other than sin—can be traced back 1700 years, to when the church became an audience” (p. 11, italics his). By deserting the biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers, the church became less of a revolutionary band and more of a static establishment. Professional clergy replaced impassioned disciples. Bibles were ripped from the hands of believers and handed to priests. People lost direct access to God and approached the Divine only through designated church leaders. While the Reformation restored the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, it did so only theologically, not practically. “In very important ways, our churches remain closed to laymen” (Rutz, 1992, p. 13, italics his). For the most part, the work of the church continues to be carried out by the professional preachers. Consequently, members are too often passive spectators rather than active participants. This runs contrary to the biblical model of church and worship.
Fundamental Principles of Worship at the Improv Church

To counter this trend in churches, the Improv Church was established with a heart to practice some of the participatory components of worship that have been lost. The Improv Church grows out of an understanding of biblical worship. The following seven principles have been foundational in this interactive model of worship.

**Principle 1: Worship Is Centered in God**

It is absolutely essential that the Church keep God as the subject of worship since to be Christian means to believe that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is everything to us—Creator, Provider, and Sustainer; Deliverer, Redeemer, and Lord; Sanctifier, Inspirer, and Empowerer. Friendship, instruction, and other aspects of the gathered community are important, but we lose our reason for being if we do not constantly remember that God has called us to be his people and that our ability to respond to that call in worship and life is totally a gift of God’s grace. (Dawn, 1995, p. 76)

The word “worship” is rooted in the Old English words *weorth*, meaning “worthiness” or “honor,” and *scipe*, signifying “to create.” While we cannot “create” God’s honor, since it belongs to Him inherently, we can participate in ways that bespeak His worthiness.

William Temple (1940) defines worship in this way:

[Worship is] the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of the conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of the mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose—and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable. (p. 68)

White (1980) offers this historical perspective:

[The word “worship”] was and still is used to address various lord mayors in England, and the Anglican wedding service since 1549 has contained that wonderful pledge: “with my body I thee worship.” The sense in this last case is to
respect, esteem, or value another being with one’s body. . . . The basic insight we gain is that worship means attributing value and esteem or ascribing worth to another being. The English words “revere,” “venerate,” and “adore” derive ultimately from Latin words for fear, love, and pray. (p. 25)

In other words, worship is all about God and ascribing glory to Him. Worship is not about the stimulation or enjoyment it might bring to the worshipers, but rather it is centered in God because of His character and worthiness. This beginning place for worship is seen clearly in Scripture. Take, for example, Isaiah’s vision, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3); or the psalmist’s praise, “Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise” (Ps 48:1); or Habakkuk’s demand, “But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (Hab 2:20); or the pronouncement of the angel of Revelation, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water” (Rev 14:7).

The first commandment reminds us of the exclusivity of God in worship. “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:3). In His altercation with Satan, Jesus affirmed the absolute nature of this commandment, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only’” (Matt 4:10). Plainly, authentic worship calls for a total rejection of all other gods that would distract from the primary focus—God, and God alone.

Dawn (1999) speaks to this need for keeping God at the infinite center of our worship. “Our world is desperate for God. In the face of growing postmodern despair and chaos, . . . our world desperately needs worship services where God is encountered in as much of his fullness as possible” (p. 158).
Our worship at the Improv Church attempts to honor God as the focus of our affection. This target sits at the heart of our mission statement, “to connect young adults to Christ.” To help us fulfill this mission, and in keeping with the principle of worship that places God as the center, we launched a companion service to the Improv Church called Improv Praise. Details of this worship service will be explained later.

**Principle 2: Worship Is a Response of Faith**

It is by faith that believers acknowledge God as Creator, Redeemer and Lord. Christian worship is the result of a redemptive experience. An example is found in John 9 when Jesus asked the man he healed of blindness, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (John 9:35). Out of the redemptive experience the healed man responded, “‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him” (John 9:38).

The author of Hebrews observes, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb 11:6). It is this belief in God’s grace that provides the urge and the impetus for worship. “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Heb 9:14).

“The central thing in our religion is not our hold on God but His hold on us, not our choosing Him but His choosing us, not that we should know Him but that we should be known of Him” (Segler, 1967, p. 61).
The Improv Church is a public expression of a private encounter that I have had with Jesus Christ. It is the product that has grown out of my own personal relationship with God. Because of the grace that I have received, I have felt compelled to share the good news of Jesus Christ. The Improv Church is an attempt to package God’s story in a language and format that is intelligible to those who are far from God. It represents my attempt to share with others what God has done for me. It is my response to the command of Jesus, “Go . . . and tell them how much the LORD has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19). At the Improv Church, I have a creative venue through which to tell others of Jesus.

**Principle 3: Worship Is a Celebration of the Cross**

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross is the central, integrating reality of Christian worship. The early Christian church was motivated to worship because of the cross (1 Cor 1:18-31; Acts 2:22-36). “The Lamb, who was slain” is the focus of worship for the 24 elders, the four living creatures, and the angels (Rev 5:9-14). Worship is about ascribing glory to the supreme God who “demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

The only way in which man can meet God redemptively is by an encounter with Jesus Christ. The worship of God is made possible in the person of his Son. Christian worship is more than sentiment or idealistic reverie. . . . It has objective content. Jesus Christ is the object of man’s faith. The primary distinction between Christianity and the other great religions of the world is found in the person of Jesus Christ. When Christ’s finality is gone, Christianity is gone. (Segler, 1967, p. 61)

The Improv Church is unapologetically Christ-centered. To this end we have strategically incorporated the teachings of the cross into our curriculum. For example, one year our theme was, “The Gospel According to . . . ”. At each Improv
Church service then, we used a metaphor to convey the gospel. In addition to our teaching at the Improv Church, the Christological focus pervades our other programs (Improv Praise, Improv Serve, and small groups) as well.

**Principle 4: Worship Is a Sacred Time in Which God Speaks and Acts**

The proclamation and celebration of Christ is attended by divine action. Webber (1992) asserts: “God who spoke will speak through the Word. God who acted will act in our worship” (p. 16). This principle “asks for a restoration of the supernatural, an expectancy that God will be present to us in our worship to touch us, to heal us, and to make us whole” (pp. 16-17).

Webber (1992) points out that according to the Bible, humankind is lost and in need of direction. Throughout history we see incidents in which God gave his people signs to be used in worship of him. In the Garden of Eden God gave Adam and Eve a sign of His love when he clothed their nakedness (Gen 3:21). To Noah He sent a rainbow (Gen 9:11). For Abraham the sign was circumcision (Gen 17:11). The tabernacle and later the temple were filled with signs of God’s presence. God said to Moses, “Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (Exod 25:8; see also 2 Chr 6:7; Ezek 43:7). The sacrificial system was instituted to remind God’s people of their covenant with God (Exod 24:1-8).

In the New Testament, all the signs established by God to remind them of His desire to have a relationship with them, are fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Heb 7-10). New signs of God’s grace were given to the church in the sacrament of bread and wine, water baptism, the oil of healing and the apostolic writings.
All of these signs remind us that God is active in the human story. He will meet us in our need, heal our hurts, and minister to every child who calls upon Him. “Through these signs God is actively attempting to stimulate a response from people to his gift of love and forgiveness” (Webber, 1992, p. 80).

Our model for worship at the Improv Church is built upon this principle that God speaks and acts in worship. As we encourage spontaneity and two-way communication among the participants at the Improv Church, so too do we try to keep the communication channels open to God. In this way we are trying to recapture this interactive worship experience that was a part of the early Christian church (1 Cor 14:26; Acts 13:1-2; Eph 5:19).

**Principle 5: Worship Affirms Fellowship—With the Spirit and Within the Body of Believers**

It is the Spirit that makes the indwelling of Christ possible (John 14:17, 18, 21, 23). It is the Spirit that assures us that the Spirit abides within (1 John 3:24). It is the Spirit that convicts us of truth, bestows upon us spiritual gifts, and calls us to mission (John 14:26; 16:23; Eph 4:11; Acts 1:4, 5, 8). It is also the Spirit who facilitates authentic worship (Acts 2:41-44, 47; 3:8, 9; 4:24-26). Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

Any community of worshipers who wish to follow the biblical model dare not downplay the role of the Spirit in worship. This is what the Bible teaches:

Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. (Rom 8:14-16)
The role of the Spirit in worship transcends the task of connecting us to God. Equally important is the role of the Spirit that connects worshipers with one another.

The Holy Spirit creates not only the vertical fellowship with God, but also the horizontal fellowship of worshipers with each other. The Spirit who brings about regeneration and motivates worship is also the Spirit who reconciles and unites. The barrier between people on account of race, national origin, sex, etc., stands abolished because of the fellowship of the cross and of the Spirit. Christ has reconciled us to God and breached the gulf between us, so that in Him we have become a new creation, a new humanity (Eph. 2:11-16)—with constituents that are different but united, free but dependent, and held together by the “grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:14). (Fowler, 1991, p. 8)

This fellowship comes from the Spirit. It is a gift. “We do not manipulate community; it is God’s initiative to make us one. But we can foster community, work to prevent anything from hindering or disrupting it, and celebrate it” (Dawn, 1999, p. 185).

The leaders at the Improv church work diligently to foster this sense of fellowship. As the data in this study show, the community aspect of worship is a significant piece of the Improv Church experience. Many of the participants at the Improv Church attest to the spiritual blessing that comes in just being together. In other words, there is something inherently spiritual about community. This spirit of togetherness is a gift of the Spirit.

**Principle 6: Worship Is a Participatory Experience**

Passive worship assumes that worship is something that somebody else does to you or for you. But active worship, which grows out of our response to divine action, breaks through the barriers of passive worship and returns worship to the people. (Webber, 1992, p. 17)
Scripture teaches that every Christian has a ministry (1 Cor 12:7, 11, 13, 27).

Every person is called to participate in church life. Nevertheless, few churches even attempt to follow the biblical model and engage everyone in the worship experience. Rutz (1992) shares his experience of attending a friendly, growing church with a pastor that everyone loved.

Though it was a model church in many ways, nothing much ever happened inside me. Their punctual “worship” services were actually a warmhearted lecture series, plus songs and offering. Almost never was I allowed to participate, except as the 387th voice in the singing.

If I’d never shown up, my absence would have been like a missing spoonful of sand from the Arabian desert. Without me, not one syllable would have changed—and that’s about how significant I felt. Fact is, that’s how significant I was. So I drifted away. (p. 21)

The vision from the outset of the Improv Church was that every attendee could leave the worship experience with a sense that their presence helped to shape the corporate offering of worship to God. In early brainstorming sessions before launching the Improv Church, we dreamed of a church where every one left the service saying, “It was different because I was there.”

**Principle 7: Worship Must Be Culturally Relevant**

In the ancient world, transmitting values occurred through oral communication. Communication specialists refer to this form of communicating as “cultural transmission.” Through stories, symbols and images, communities found coherence and meaning. The people of Israel communicated their faith orally. This tradition continued through the first fifteen and a half centuries of the early Christian church. Non-Christians were evangelized and nurtured in the church by immersing themselves “into the stories and images that were passed down in worship. The
Church was a community, and members learned the language and worldview of the community in the same way they learned their mother tongue: through immersed participation” (Webber, 1998, p. 24).

Because of the rise of print media in the 15th century, cultural transmission was dramatically altered. “Christianity shifted its means of communicating faith from a primary emphasis on an immersed participatory experience of worship to an emphasis on learning through reading and listening to the word of God” (Webber, 1998, pp. 25-26).

Now with the advent of electronic media the means of communication has changed again. “The current communication revolution is a shift away from the didactic nature of the print media to a more experiential form of communication based, ironically, largely on participatory experience” (Webber, 1998, p. 26). Webber (1998) adds that “this affective form of communication works best in the experience of a community held together by the mysteries of its stories, events and symbols” (p. 26).

The Improv Church capitalizes on this communication revolution by offering “a more experiential form of communication” through a participatory event. The nature of this event is worship. By using this communication form toward a spiritual end, we are striving to be relevant in culture where many people deem traditional forms of worship as highly irrelevant. Our attempt at relevancy is labeled the Improv Church. While the focus of this research concentrates on the Improv Church, it is imperative to study it in its broader context.
The Improv Church in the Context of the Church of Acts

The “Improv Church” is the label that identifies a specific program that we offer on Friday evenings. The sum of the spiritual experience that is attributed to the “Improv Church,” however, encompasses much more than the one program. It is a piece of a larger strategic initiative. The overarching label that is used to describe the collegiate church plant is the Church of Acts. The following mission statement of the church is included in all of our promotional material: “The Church of Acts seeks to connect young adults to Christ through improvisation and interactive learning.” The founding leaders of the church have never wavered on this primary mission. There has also been consensus among leaders surrounding the core values. Again, the values are clearly articulated in the promotional material as well as in the meetings when participants gather. The acronym “ACTS” captures the church’s core values—Action, Community, Transformation, and Service.

The title, Church of Acts, was intentionally chosen because of three nuances suggested in its name. First, because we dreamed of starting a church that approximates, as closely as possible, the early Christian church described in the book of Acts. A compelling description of this biblically functioning community is found in the book of Acts. Here is the picture that captured our imagination and compelled us to act:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the
Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47, NIV)

The leaders in the Church of Acts readily agreed that our passion was to become a community like the early Christian church. We dreamed of a church where all the believers met regularly in small groups to eat and pray; a place where miraculous signs were the norm, rather than the exception; a place where believers addressed social injustice and served the poor; and a place where the Lord added daily to the number of those who were being saved. To build, and to be a part of that kind of community, we agreed, is worth the investment of our lives.

The second nuance in the name “Church of Acts” that resonated with the founding leaders was the idea that we were building a church that would use the art form of improvisational acts. A study into the early Christian church described in the New Testament reveals a dynamic energy to the movement. For example, Acts 13:1-2 records the story of a worship service where the Holy Spirit showed up to direct the momentum of the meeting. The Holy Spirit interrupted “worship as usual” and commanded, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2). So there was an impromptu missionary dedication service in church that day.

Another example of the fluid nature of the worship experiences in the early Christian church is recorded in 1 Cor 14:26. Consider the account: “What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.” Note that “everyone” was to be a part of the worship experience. We wondered at the outset of the Church of Acts what a
contemporary church might look like if everyone could get involved in the worship experience. What if people came as participants of learning, rather than passive recipients of instruction? What if we intentionally left gaps while planning worship in anticipation of the Holy Spirit shaping the direction of the experience? The Church of Acts is a possible answer to some of our initial wonderments.

The final nuance to the name that we liked was the idea of our experiment being a church that acts. Believing that we learn best by doing, it seemed logical to suggest that the best way to learn about Jesus would be to get involved doing the acts of Jesus. Rather than hearing a sermon on serving the poor, would it not be an enhanced learning venture to act on the commands of Scripture? Rather than parsing the Greek words that give instruction to serve others, why not get into the action by serving others? Again, we see this happening in the early Christian church. Acts 3:34-35 describes the early Christian church in this way:

There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

This emphasis on action seemed logical not only from a biblical perspective but from an educational standpoint. Based on our premonitions that the deepest forms of learning transpire experientially, we established the Church of Acts with a heart to serve in whatever way God led.

Programming at the Church of Acts

Based on the four core values of action, community, transformation, and service, the leadership team crafted a master plan whereby we could engage non-believing collegians in a community where these values would be lived out in
practical ways. After considerable prayer and brainstorming, we then launched the first of four programs.

The Improv Church

The first public venture for the Church of Acts was the Improv Church service on Friday evening in February of 1999. Originally we started at 10 p.m. with a program that went until approximately 11:30 p.m. After the service concluded, however, most students seemed reticent to leave. They wanted to hang out and connect with friends, talk about the funniest improv sketches, and down another drink or two. This translated into a very demanding schedule for those of us involved on the leadership team. In practical terms, it meant mopping floors, cleaning counters, packing chairs, sound equipment and garbage bags until the rented venue was as we had found it. In the early days, rarely did I crawl into bed before 2 a.m.—only to get up early the following morning to preach at the College Church.

The demanding pace of the Improv Church early on was both addictively energizing and purely exhausting. It was energizing because the community that we dreamed about was beginning to take shape. Students who described themselves as “spiritually adrift” or “atheist” or “disinterested in God” started showing up at the Improv Church—and not just showing up, but actively engaging in and enthusiastically endorsing the ministry. After 10 years of working as a pastor in the highly unchurched city of Seattle, I knew this task of connecting with people far from God was neither easy nor insignificant. To finally discover an avenue into the world of nonbelievers with crusty, cynical notions about God was an adrenalin rush to the soul.
But as energizing as the church was, it was also exhausting to sustain. The leadership core was small. A few of us shouldered an inordinate amount of the workload just to keep the ministry afloat. The infrastructure was weak. The program teetered on the backs of the faithful few. So when the improv team decided to take off one weekend a few weeks after launching the church, it decimated the program for the night. We also seemed to have conflicting visions for what we wanted to become. It seemed that some of the improv actors saw the Improv Church as a platform upon which to showcase talents. Consequently, the sketches were seldom Christian in theme and occasionally compromised the Gospel and slandered God. This made it particularly difficult to follow the sketches with a hard-hitting, biblical talk. Early on, the programs felt incongruent, like we were forcing pieces of the program together that meshed like fingernails and chalkboards. Disparate agendas and visions only fueled the fatigue factor. Nevertheless, the Improv Church survived its first season.

The following year we put focused attention on the selection process for the improv players. Since they represented the public face of the Improv Church we insisted that they sign off on the vision and the core values of the Improv Church. Furthermore, each player signed a contract (see Appendix D) and endured a rigorous interview process that promised their lives would be consistent with the values of the church. For the most part, we started the second year with a fresh troupe of improv players. We were much more assiduous in articulating the mission of the Improv Church and putting some teeth into upholding the values. We picked only those students who bought into the bigger mission of the Improv Church. In several cases,
we chose improv actors who were less skilled at improvisation but seemed more committed to the Christian ideals that we stood for as a church. This approach in the selection process has worked well.

The Improv Church continues to be the most notable ministry of the Church of Acts. In fact, when questioned, some attendees were not even aware of the larger organization of the Church of Acts. Their only reference point was the Friday evening ministry called the Improv Church. Functionally speaking, the handle that continues to be used to identify the Church of Acts is simply “Improv Church.” To be consistent, for the purpose of this study, most of my references to the Church of Acts will be identified as simply the “Improv Church.” The church, however, does involve more than just the Friday evening service.

Improv Praise

With the Improv Church gaining momentum, in the spring of 2000 we added a second service at the Church of Acts called Improv Praise. This service was held periodically on Wednesday evenings. While the Improv Church was designed for seekers, Improv Praise targeted fully devoted followers. In other words, the Improv Church was essentially an evangelistic meeting whereas Improv Praise functioned as a worship service. This service expanded the spiritual care we could offer participants by including an opportunity to praise and worship. At the outset Improv Praise consisted primarily of music yet maintained an improvisational component by offering a time for impromptu sharing and praying. This format fit philosophically in that the worship allowed for participatory expression. Improv Praise was also in harmony with our core values, particularly with the first three of action, community,
and transformation. To be specific, it allowed for people to get into the act of worship. The open sharing fostered a sense of community. And we believed the act of corporate worship would result in personal transformation.

Improv Praise, like the Improv Church, continues to evolve. Initially, we struggled to attract critical mass. With low attendance it was difficult to create an environment that felt comfortable. Although the kickoff service attracted an adequate crowd of approximately 75 people, the attendance dwindled in subsequent services. We assumed that one of the big factors causing the low attendance was because we were meeting on Wednesday evenings. Our leadership team surmised that college students were too busy to carve out an hour in midweek to participate at the Improv Praise. Because we felt convicted that offering a worship experience for this fledgling community of believers was essential to our long-term strategy, we changed the meeting time the following year to Friday evenings at 9:30.

By offering Improv Praise and Improv Church at the same time on Friday evenings (alternating the service every other week) we hoped to establish a weekly habit of attendance for participants. The result was a dramatic increase in the attendance at Improv Praise. While the numbers for Improv Praise have never rivaled those of the Improv Church, we did achieve critical mass. We now regularly attract approximately 200 students per night at Improv Praise. In more recent months, we have dramatically reduced the number of Improv Praise services offered due to limitations in availability of the venue that we lease.
Improv Serve

After securely establishing the Improv Church in the first year and the Improv Praise service in the second year, we felt ready to add another component to the Church of Acts for the third season. We called this third service “Improv Serve.” The idea was to meet at the same time on Friday nights and alternate between the Improv Church and Improv Praise by adding a third service. This service had a completely different feel and purpose to it. We orchestrated service projects and sent the volunteers out to “make a difference in our community.” While it proved difficult to find viable service projects for students to do from 9:30 to 11:00 p.m., it was not impossible. Projects included such things as chaperoning community youth events, picking up litter, making hospital visits, tutoring immigrants, and offering hot drinks to passers-by on the streets. Participation ranged from a handful of people to a high of nearly 30 volunteers.

We remain committed to the concept of service learning but have changed what that looks like at the Church of Acts. Rather than pressing participants to show up late on Friday evenings, we have changed the time to Saturday afternoons. As a result, involvement has dramatically increased. Now it is not unusual to have over 60 students show up for Improv Serve. Their work has been primarily with kids—either at the farm labor camp or with children who live in an impoverished section of town.

The Saturday of April 19, 2003, is a snapshot of how Improv Serve functions now. I observed the volunteers working with hundreds of kids at the farm labor camp. Even though they work with immigrant families and the children speak very limited English, they seemed to be communicating just fine.
No sooner did I get out of my car when a girl jumped on my back and insisted we chase her friend who was clutching the neck of another Improv Serve participant. We raced about until I was exhausted. The only Spanish I could understand in that exchange was the girl’s heartfelt expression of thanks. From there the two girls went to the music circle where volunteers were teaching kids the motions to the song “Father Abraham.”

Standing in the shadows I observed many simple yet significant ministries unfolding before me. Some volunteers kept a dozen kids occupied in a game of cricket. Other volunteers were decked out as clowns transforming balloons into wiener dogs and giraffes. Still others were involved in overseeing games like Duck Duck, Goose Goose or Red Rover, Red Rover. Not only were the children thoroughly engaged in the activities, the volunteers were clearly enjoying themselves.

“Why did you give up your Saturday afternoon to come out here?” I asked one volunteer.

“This beats napping all afternoon.”

“I suppose so,” I replied.

She went on. “I have some friends that were heading to the mountains for some four-wheeling this afternoon, but I declined their invitation. I figure this is a lot more important. This makes my religion real.” A smirk smothered her face. “I call it ‘real’igion.”

“But bad,” I mused, thinking she now had a clear picture for the mission of Improv Serve.
Improv Serve helps us to attain our fourth core value of service. To a lesser extent, it also helps us to achieve our other three values. For example, it provides a platform for participants to get into the act. In terms of community, it is an ideal setting in which connections form. It is also likely that, in this context of serving and helping others, transformation occurs.

Small Groups

The fourth and final component of the Church of Acts is small groups. From the outset, our leadership team envisioned a community of believers growing spiritually through small groups. The early Christian church clearly made this kind of fellowship a priority. Acts 2:42, 46 describes it this way:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship. . . . Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

During the school year of 2000-01 we tried to launch a network of small groups. While we did build an infrastructure of approximately 10 groups and 60 students who were participating on a weekly basis, the ongoing viability of the program seemed to be imperiled from the outset. The fatigue factor wore the participants out. Most of the people participating in small groups were leaders who were also involved in the Improv Church, Improv Praise, and Improv Serve. To expect them to attend leader training sessions as well as spend another evening each week to lead or participate in a small group just pressed people to the brink of burnout. Philosophically, the leadership core believes that small groups would help us to see the core values realized in the lives of the participants. Practically, we are finding it difficult to implement and manage.
To a limited extent some small groups function naturally. For example, the improv players currently meet twice a week and begin their practice sessions with worship and prayer. Similarly, the board members, service groups, worship teams for Improv Praise, and so on, meet regularly and do experience spiritual connectedness by working together toward common tasks. Functionally, they are task-oriented groups that meet for a primary purpose other than Bible study and prayer. While the vision of having all participants at the Church of Acts involved in small groups is still a target to shoot for, it remains on the distant horizon. At the present time, it is all we can do as leaders to oversee the three primary programs of the Church of Acts—the Improv Church, Improv Praise, and Improv Serve.

Summary

All in all, the Improv Church operates under the broader ministry of the Church of Acts. While it continues to be the most notable function of the church, it must be seen in its wider context in order to properly understand the impact that it has on the participants. For the purposes of this study, the data gathered were focused on the impact of the Improv Church. References to the other aspects of the Church of Acts were virtually absent in the interviews and surveys. Consequently, this research was narrowed to include only the impact of the Improv Church.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS: ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

To review, the first research question in this study attempts to identify the aspects of the Improv Church that make it appealing to collegians. To assume that the Improv Church is "appealing" seems incontrovertible. After 5 years of offering services at the Improv Church, collegians continue to pack out the venue with standing-room-only crowds. Up to 200 people per night have been denied access due to fire-code limits that restrict the capacity to approximately 350. Why the sustained popularity of this ministry?

To answer this research question I analyzed data from six primary sources: a survey of attendees, focus groups, interviews with Improv Church leaders, journals of the improv players, videotapes of Improv Church services, and personal reflections. From the data, three primary themes clearly emerged.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the themes that represent the primary appeal of this ministry: humor, spirituality, and community. The data support this assertion that these components are an integral part of what makes the ministry work. Before examining each theme on its own, I will present a statistical snapshot of the Improv Church based on the survey instrument.
Statistical Snapshot

On February 1, 2002, every person in attendance at the Improv Church was asked to fill out a survey about motives and reasons for coming that night. It was a typical service with the usual capacity crowd of approximately 350 people. Of those attending, 333 people completed the survey (see Appendix A).

Each respondent was asked to score a variety of possible motives and reasons that influenced them to show up on that night at the Improv Church. The respondent could rank each possible answer from 0 (meaning that it was no part of the decision) to 5 (meaning it was a very strong reason for coming). The reasons for coming that were listed in the survey were as follows:

- To be with friends
- To have something to do
- To laugh and be entertained
- To grow spiritually
- To support a friend who is seeking in his/her spiritual journey
- Because I was invited by a friend
- Out of habit
- Because I am helping in some aspect of the Improv Church
- Because I felt guilty
- Because I was curious.

In addition to the options listed, an open-ended question was included in the survey for respondents to note any other reasons they had for coming. Also included in the survey was a line where respondents were asked to identify how many times
they had attended the Improv Church with four possible answers: First time; 2-5
times; 6-10 times; 11 or more times. One final question in the survey asked
respondents to circle a numerical rating of their spiritual experience with “0” meaning
“Non-existent” and “5” meaning it is “My top priority.” The respondents remained
anonymous unless they indicated an interest in participating in a focus group, in
which case they were required to include contact information.

The survey results provide a numerical snapshot of what was happening at the
Improv Church at one point in time. The following tables represent the outcomes.
Table 2 depicts how often the respondents had attended the Improv Church prior to
that evening. In what can most likely be explained as a survey design flaw, nearly
38% of the respondents failed to answer the first question. In reexamining the
questionnaire it seems plausible that people could hastily overlook the first question
because it was somewhat separated from the remaining portion of the survey. The
126 missing answers aside, we can still get a general idea of how often attendees that
night had been to the Improv Church before. Roughly half of the respondents had
attended the Improv Church 0-5 times while the other half said they had attended 6 or
more times. Thus, the group that night represented a good mix of regular attendees,
infrequent attendees, and first-timers.
Table 2

Frequency of Attendance at the Improv Church

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of times attendees had been to Improv Church</th>
<th>Frequency of responses</th>
<th>Percentage of people who answered the question</th>
<th>Valid percentage of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st time</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5 times</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 times</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 or more times</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Of the 333 surveys taken, 126 of the respondents (37.8%) did not answer the question about how many times they had previously attended the Improv Church.

The other question on the survey—apart from reasons for attending—asked attendees to rank their spiritual experience between 0 and 5. Table 3 portrays the results. Nearly 90% of the respondents circled a number. Over half of the people (56.7%) ranked their spiritual experience as a 4 or 5, indicating that a sizeable portion of attendees saw themselves as committed to God. In contrast, less than 2% of the respondents circled a 0 or a 1, suggesting that very few people with little or no spiritual commitment attended the Improv Church that evening.
Table 3

*Rating of Spiritual Experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating of Spiritual Experience</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Cumulative percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-existent spiritual life</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual life is very low priority</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual life is low priority</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual life is above average priority</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual life is strong priority</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual life is top priority</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Of the 333 surveys taken, 34 of the respondents (10.2%) did not answer the question about their spiritual experience.

The next description shows why people decided to attend the Improv Church on that particular night. Table 4 portrays the percentage of respondents who circled a 4 or a 5, indicating that it was a strong reason for coming. The top three answers include: “Came to laugh/be entertained” (51.9%), “Came to grow spiritually” (51.6%), and “Came to be with friends” (40.7%). These three reasons form an initial response in answering the first research question. To simplify, the reasons are labeled as follows: “Came to laugh/be entertained” is identified as “humor”; “Came to grow
spiritually” is identified as “spirituality”; and “Came to be with friends” is identified as “community.” This chapter builds upon the results of this survey and offers corroborating data from the interviews, focus groups, journals, and videotapes to substantiate these three facets of the Improv Church that make it appealing to collegians.

I was interested in correlations in the data. Table 5 shows that no substantive correlations exist between reasons for attending and two variables: (a) the frequency of attendance and (b) the level of spiritual experience. More specifically, I wondered about things such as the strength of correlation between people who came to be with friends and their perceived level of spiritual commitment. Asked another way: Is somebody who makes spirituality a high priority more likely to attend the Improv Church in order to be with friends as compared to someone who rates spirituality a low priority? I asked similar questions about correlations between the reasons for coming and the number of times respondents had been to the Improv Church.

Using Pearson’s correlation formula, I calculated the degree to which the variables were related, either inversely or directly. Once calculated, the Pearson $r$ ranges from -1.00 to 1.00, with -1.00 meaning that there is a perfect inverse relationship between the variables and 1.00 meaning there is a perfect direct relationship. An $r$ value of 0.00 suggests a complete absence of any relationship between the variables. As the Pearson correlation indicates, there is, at best, a very modest correlation in only a few cases. In each case, simple conjectures offer logical explanations.
Table 4

*Reasons for Attending the Improv Church*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for coming</th>
<th>Number of attendees who responded to the question (out of 333)</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents marking this as a strong or very strong reason for coming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Came to be with friends</td>
<td>332</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came to have something to do</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came to laugh/be entertained</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came to grow spiritually</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came as spiritual support</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came from invitation of a friend</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came out of habit</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came to help at the Improv Church</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came out of guilt</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came out of curiosity</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The highest correlation ($r = .374$) was between attendees who came out of habit and those who said they had attended the Improv Church six or more times. In simple terms, this means that approximately 14% can be predicted on one variable by knowing the value of the other variable. This correlation comes as no surprise as common sense would suggest that frequent attendees would be inclined to report that one of their reasons for attending was “out of habit.” The next highest value for $r$...
(−.366) showed in inverse correlation between those who came from the invitation of a friend and those who had attended six or more times. Again, the explanation seems obvious. It is reasonable to think that frequent attendees would not list as a reason for coming as “Came from an invitation of friend.” Logic would suggest the regular attendees would be the ones probably inviting friends rather than coming on the urging of a friend. The next highest correlation \((r = .324)\) linked frequent attendees with the reason “Came to help at the Improv Church.” Once again, this is no surprise as the regular attendees in general are the same people serving drinks, setting up chairs, and volunteering in other ways around the church. One final correlation that deserves mention is the \(r\) value (.216) that linked level of spiritual commitment with those who said they came in order to “grow spiritually.” While it is not a surprise that this correlation would be strongest in the category of spiritual commitment, what is mildly surprising is that the correlation is not, in fact, higher. In essence, that Pearson correlation simply suggests that only 4.6% of the attendees who rank their spiritual commitment as a high value correlate with those who say a strong reason for coming was “to grow spiritually.”

The final correlations that I considered compared each reason for attending with all of the other reasons listed for attending. Table 6 lists the Pearson correlation scores. The data show very little correlation between the reasons for attending. Only four correlations where \(r > .400\) are even noteworthy.
Table 5

*Pearson Correlation Between the Reasons for Attendance and (a) Frequency of Attendance and (b) Level of Spiritual Commitment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for coming</th>
<th>(a) Frequency of attendance</th>
<th>(b) Level of spiritual commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Came to be with friends</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came to have something to do</td>
<td>-.114</td>
<td>-.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came to laugh/be entertained</td>
<td>.105</td>
<td>.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came to grow spiritually</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>.216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came as spiritual support</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came from invitation of a friend</td>
<td>-.366</td>
<td>.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came out of habit</td>
<td>.374</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came to help at the Improv Church</td>
<td>.324</td>
<td>.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came out of guilt</td>
<td>-.035</td>
<td>-.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Came out of curiosity</td>
<td>-.327</td>
<td>.037</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The highest correlation ($r=.492$) was between the attendees that came to “laugh/be entertained” and those who came “to have something to do.” Speculation might suggest that this seems a natural connection for college students who are looking to laugh and be entertained are also interested in just getting out on a Friday night to do something. While it is a modest correlation, it does suggest that approximately 24% of one of those two factors can be predicted by knowing the
outcome of the other factor. The second highest correlation ($r=0.434$) linked the attendees who came “to help at the Improv Church” and those who “came because of guilt.” One interpretation of this correlation might suggest that roughly 19% of the volunteers who were serving that night at the Improv Church felt compelled to do so out of a sense of guilt. Another moderate correlation ($r=0.418$) came between those who wanted to “laugh/be entertained” and those who “came to grow spiritually.” Speculation as to why these would be linked might best be explained by simply suggesting that these two reasons were both highly motivating factors in getting people to come that night. However, the numbers do not offer any definitive explanations. A final correlation ($r=0.413$) worth mentioning includes those who “came to have something to do” and those who “came to be with friends.” Again, it is speculation as to why these would be connected. It does make sense that a college student looking for something to do might be inclined to do whatever the group of friends is up to that night. If the agenda includes a trip to the Improv Church, the students are likely to do it together.

All in all, the results of the survey begin to paint a picture that offers insights as to what aspects of the Improv Church make it appealing to collegians. The interpretations and correlations of the survey instrument by itself offer no conclusive answers to the first research question. Put this in context with other corroborating data, however, and the picture becomes more focused. The image that emerges depicts three primary reasons that collegians are drawn into the Improv Church: humor, spirituality and community.
Table 6

Pearson Correlation Between Reasons for Attending the Improv Church

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Came to be with friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.413</td>
<td>.359</td>
<td>.184</td>
<td>.116</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>.239</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Came to have something to do</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.492</td>
<td>.191</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.120</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.079</td>
<td>.132</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Came to laugh/be entertained</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.418</td>
<td>.089</td>
<td>-.002</td>
<td>.226</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.062</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Came to grow spiritually</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.273</td>
<td>-.017</td>
<td>.176</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.125</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Came as spiritual support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.221</td>
<td>.287</td>
<td>.285</td>
<td>.310</td>
<td>.148</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Came from invite of a friend</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.079</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.248</td>
<td>.367</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Came out of habit</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.387</td>
<td>.300</td>
<td>.147</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Came to help</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.434</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Came because of guilt</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.395</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Came out of curiosity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The First Theme to Emerge From the Data: Humor

A compelling case can be made positing humor as a major reason for the sustained involvement of people at the Improv Church. Included under the label of humor are descriptors from respondents such as “joy,” “laughter,” “hilarity,” “light-heartedness,” and “fun.”

For centuries, humor has played an important part of the human experience. Socrates was known to use irony. Plato used sarcasm. Aristotle (384 BC -322 BC) quipped, “Humor is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humor; for a subject which will not bear raillery is suspicious, and a jest which will not bear serious examination is false wit” (as cited at http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Aristotle/). Jesus used humor as well (Trueblood, 1964). “Humor is found in all cultures, social strata, and professional disciplines” (Ulloth, 1998, p. 8).

Humor plays an important role in the learning environment. “Humor affects students’ physiology and psychology, stimulates creative and flexible thinking, facilitates learning, and improves interest and attention in the classroom” (Pollak & Freda, 1997).

The use of appropriate instructional humor seems to enhance learning. It does not alienate, subvert, or deride the educational experience, as some would have us believe. Classroom laughter may initiate and liberate thinking, reduce academic anxiety, promote the retention of academic material, and increase learner satisfaction. (Shade, 1996, p. 77)

Glasser (1986) claims that “a good comedian is always a good teacher” (p. 29). Using Bill Cosby as an example he reminds us that the unexpected insights of a comic are so “filled with learning that we cannot fail to laugh” (p. 29).
Description of Humor at the Improv Church

The results of the survey taken at the Improv Church suggest that participants of the Improv Church anticipate a humorous event. The laughter factor proved to be a major reason survey respondents gave for attending the Improv Church. In response to the option “to laugh and be entertained,” 51.9% ranked this as a 4 or 5, meaning it was a strong or very strong reason for coming. Twenty-six percent of the respondents indicated that this was their strongest reason (or equal to their strongest reason) for coming. This stands in stark contrast to the 4.2% who indicated that humor played no part in their decision to attend. The mean score for this option was 3.37 with a standard deviation of 1.41. Based on the mean score, this was the most popular reason stated for attendance.

In an analysis of humor at the Improv Church, I replayed videotapes of nine randomly selected improv sketches and timed the length of each scene as well as the time spent laughing. On average, approximately 10% of the time is spent laughing. Moreover, laughter occurs roughly once every 10 seconds.

As the data suggest, one of the unconventional traits of the Improv Church is that humor plays an integral part of it. Admittedly, humor and laughter are not the typical drawing cards that churches use to attract members. In today’s culture, the church is often labeled with words like “tedious,” “dull,” “irrelevant,” and “boring.” Ortberg (1997) laments, “Joylessness is a serious sin, one that religious people are particularly prone to indulge in. It may be the sin most readily tolerated by the church. It is rarely the object of church discipline” (p. 68).
A scene from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* helps to illustrate. In this tale by James Joyce (1956), the hero, Stephan Dedalus, decides against becoming a priest because of his fear that he might become like the other religious people he knows: “sourfaced and devout, shot with pink tinges of suffocated anger” (p. 161). Whether it is fair or not, the Christian church has long carried the reputation as being hostile to laughter, humor, and joy.

In part, the Improv Church was born out of a desire to counter such notions. Thus from the outset we have used a number of key words in advertising to attack these stereotypes. For example, promotional materials for the Improv Church often include these phrases: “Real—authenticity rules!” “Relevant—useful stuff!” “Relational—done in community!” and “Fun—No dozing!” The Improv Church offers a compelling alternative to snapshots of sleepy saints.

Attendees at the Improv Church heartily embrace the spirit of joy and laughter. A synthesis of my field notes affords the following description of what happens on any given night during the Improv Church.

This place is electric. It feels like there’s enough energy here to light up Las Vegas. The music in the background throbs rhythmically to the laughter of students as they rush for the best seats. “It’s hilarious,” one student tells me when I ask why he came. “It’s really funny,” adds another student.

Eavesdropping on conversations opens a window of understanding as to why the Improv Church continues to draw big crowds. “This is my third time to the Improv Church,” I hear one student inform another, “and I’m hooked. You never know what’s going to happen.”

The final Improv Church service of the 2002-2003 school year held on May 30, 2003, offers an example of how humor is naturally integrated into the learning experience. I served as the facilitator of the learning process that evening.
Following a brief introduction, the improv players performed a sketch that tends to work well as a warm-up exercise. Two players started a sketch based on a suggestion from the audience. After the scene developed, two more players joined them on stage and started a new scene with all four of the players involved. After their scene developed, two more players came on stage and started a new scene with all six actors involved. Following the third scene, the last two actors to join them justified their exit and the scene reverted to the scene that involved the four players. Eventually it got pared down to the two original actors who resume the scene they first started. On this particular evening the warm-up exercise flowed nicely and generated much laughter along the way.

Next, I joined the improv players and introduced the theme and direction of the evening. While the pathway is unpredictable, the concepts to be taught are prayerfully scripted. We are never sure how we might arrive but we do offer a mental map up front that charts a skeletal course. On this specific evening the theme was grace. To learn about grace, I explained how we would contrast the notion of grace with two other ideas—mercy and justice. At the outset then, I provided working definitions of each word. “Justice,” I explained, “is getting exactly what you deserve. Most of us do pretty good at this one. You slap my cheek, I slap you back because that is what you deserve. You treat me well and I reciprocate. You get what you deserve. Mercy, on the other hand, means you get treated better than you deserve. It’s a compromise between justice and grace. We still may taste some of the consequences of our bad choices, but we get treated much better than we should. And then there’s grace.” A long pause with a shaking head lent non-verbal cues that
what was coming was distinctly different from the first two ideas presented. "Grace is scandalous. It's the kind of thing that makes people do a double-take and scoff, 'No way! That could never happen.' Grace is off the scales of reality. It means you're treated so radically different and better than you deserve that people assume it's a fairy tale. So tonight we're going to explore and contrast each of these ideas in an attempt to understand in a richer, deeper way, the idea of grace."

With that mental map of the evening, participants could relax and not have to wonder where we are going. The way we would get there, however, was anybody's guess.

I asked if anybody had a true story they could share of a time when they were treated better than they deserved. A young woman raised her hand and said, "One time I rammed into this old lady's brand new Cadillac. I was shaking and crying but the lady just put her arm around me and said, 'It's okay! Hey, I've got great insurance, you don't worry about a thing. I'll claim it on my insurance.' I was so excited as I got in my car to leave that I accidentally put it in reverse and rammed into her again!"

By this point in her story the audience was in an uproar. The place was rocking with laughter. When the young lady finished by explaining how the elderly woman was just as kind and forgiving the second time around, the audience really came unglued! While the story sparked much laughter, it also launched us nicely into an educational experience together. It gave us a picture of what grace looks like in a contemporary setting. The improv players, then, took the story and reenacted it. Of
course, their rendition of it was spiced with ample exaggeration and unexpected twists, resulting in even more hysterical laughter.

Next, we honed in on the idea of justice. Following a biblical definition of justice and a brief story illustrating it, I asked for a make-believe title of a children’s story that teaches kids about justice. A young man raised his hand and shouted, “What Snipper Learned from the Snail.” With that title the improv players were off and running with an improv game called the pop-up storybook. This sketch uses a storyteller sharing the story with a couple of kids while other improv players act in the pop-up storybook. Throughout the story, the teller will defer to an assistant to turn the page and the players in the book will pop into a new pose while the storyteller justifies their positions, noises, and actions. In the case of Snipper and the Snail, the story caused much laughter and also illustrated the concept of justice.

Next, we considered the idea of mercy. On this particular evening we played an improv game called Proverb Charades, where I read a passage from Scripture that used the word “mercy” three times. One improv player left the room while I read the text to the audience and the players. They acted out the passage with no words for the improv player who had not heard it read. The player then quoted a proverb based on the sketch that seemed to capture the text that he had not heard. In this case, not only was the acting hysterical, but the guess by the player was so far from the original passage that it cracked everyone up in gut-busting amusement.

Following a brief explanation and illustration, I threw in the third concept for consideration—grace. To teach this idea, I facilitated a three-scene sketch. While the same scene was repeated three times, different restrictions were given each time
to assure new and surprising twists to the storyline. I told the players, "The first scene is to illustrate justice. For the second scene, everyone must demonstrate mercy. The final scene then must illustrate grace." Based on a suggestion from the audience, the scene began in a pool hall, included some betting on a pool game, and ended in a brawl. The second time around, the actors were much kinder to one another as to demonstrate mercy. The third and final scene brought the biggest laughs of the night as they did the same scene, only in a western genre (the genre suggested by someone in the audience) and based on grace. In the scene, the good-for-nothing, crooked cowboy who was cantankerous beyond description was elected President and fully supported by all the renegades. While it was clearly over the top as far as reality was concerned, it was quite humorous and definitely captured the idea that grace goes way beyond justice and mercy.

Following that improv sketch, I told a story that contrasted the three ideas of justice, mercy, and grace. I concluded with a challenge to put grace into practice and suggested that the best way to understand grace is to do it. All in all, it was a typical Improv Church service that was liberally laced with humor.

While humor is never the goal of any improv sketch or Improv Church service, it is often the result. The reason for this is that improvisation thrives on telling the truth about the human story. The improv actors are coached and trained to tell a story through their art. Furthermore, they are discouraged from trying to be funny. The funniness comes in capturing reality. Often the funniest jokes come by just telling the truth.
Not surprisingly, some of the heartiest roars at the Improv Church have come in response to snapshots of reality. For example, the audience erupted in laughter at a scene in a Taco Bell. One actor was ordering his meal and said, “Yes, I’ll have a large order of Mexi-nuggets, which are really just greasy tator tots, but Mexi-nuggets does sound less fattening, so . . . make it a supersize.” I wondered why that bit sparked such a response from the crowd. I believe it is because the observation about what Mexi-nuggets really are is quite funny. In ordering his food, the young man captured a truth about the way we are as people. We try to gloss over reality by giving grease bombs an ethnic name. Somehow, just a different name gives us permission to order the largest size.

Another example of the improv players representing reality and triggering uproarious laughter came at a scene from a school reunion. One young woman said to a former classmate in a very enthusiastic, syrupy sweet voice, “Marge, you haven’t changed!” After a beat, she turned away and repeated the phrase so that Marge presumably could not hear her. However, the second time that she said, “Marge, you haven’t changed!” she did so with venom and sarcasm in her voice. The audience roared. Why? I believe it is because in that exchange she presented a truth about how we function as people. The truth is we do not tend to change much after high school. Another truth is that we often say one thing that is warm and fuzzy and politically correct, but we are thinking just the opposite of what we say. I am convinced that the reason people laughed so enthusiastically at that comment had to do with the telling of the human story and the curious wonder of who we are as people—backstabbing flaws and all.
What is clear is that there is lots of laughter at the Improv Church. What is not clear is what difference that makes in the learning experience or how it impacts the spiritual lives of participants.

Humor From the Perspective of the Improv Church Participants

The Improv Church is an atmosphere of hilarity. Although I conducted the interviews in the basement of the Improv Church, the raucous laughter of the students upstairs was somewhat distracting. My personal notes of reflection show this: “The energy seems to permeate the place. People show up expecting to laugh. Several of the interviewees mention the convivial atmosphere as one of the reasons they keep coming back. The participants bubble with enthusiasm as they anxiously wait to add their opinions to the discussion.”

We will now consider the conversations with the participants and leaders as they touched on the topic of humor. One student shared, “I keep coming back because it’s really funny. I can remember it throughout the week. I go home and think about it and I laugh about it again and again. Then I think, Wait a minute! They’re right! The experience is just so funny. That makes it memorable.”

Memorable, indeed! The tangents down memory lane are as common as smiley faces in the 60s. “Remember the time they did the improv sketch with the bucket of water?” Just the mention of it triggers an avalanche of laughter. “I thought somebody was going to drown!” The reference took us back a couple of years to an improv sketch where one of the players put his/her head in a bucket of water for as long as possible. When coming out of the water the person (disoriented at this point!)
was then incorporated into an ongoing scene. The glitch was that the player had no clue what was going on in the sketch and had to scramble to seamlessly blend in.

Another person in the group mentioned an improv sermon. “What about the time Dick did the story about Solomon in the cheese factory?”

A couple of the students chime in, “That was awesome!”

“Yeah, I’ll never forget that one!”

It was memorable for me as well when Dick Duerkson, a skilled storyteller visiting from Florida, wowed the audience with his rendition of improv preaching. He asked the audience for a character from the Bible. “Solomon,” someone shouted. Next, he asked for a place. “A cheese factory,” another participant volunteered. With those two suggestions Dick took off and crafted a wonderfully creative and delightfully humorous story about two moms fighting over a block of cheese, only to have the president of the company, Mr. R. A. Solomon, wisely resolve the conflict. In blending the Bible story with the contemporary context of a cheese factory, Dick led us on a side-splitting journey that taught a Biblical lesson. Although he told his stories nearly 5 years ago, the images he created are still securely lodged in my memory. On that evening he also preached a mini-sermon on Rahab at Daytona Beach, Nebuchadnezzar at Foreman Hall (the girl’s dorm at Walla Walla College), and Nathaniel at Victoria’s Secret. While the stories were rich with comedy, they also included spiritual insights.

Another person in the focus group remembered a sketch where “Nate was doing the ballerina dance on the Space Needle! I laughed so hard it hurt.”
“Oh, oh, oh!” a young man bounced on his seat as if he just figured out the right answer. “I remember the enraged Monkey. Remember that one?”

Several students laughed at the memory.

“My favorite was the bionic umbilical cord!”

“For me,” a young man added, “my most memorable night was the first one I attended. It was 3 years ago and you had some professional improv actors from Seattle. That was probably the most hilarious thing that I had ever seen.”

Another student reflected, “I remember kind of a personal experience. Rhonda was up on stage and she asked for a very strange experience that had happened to someone that day. My hand shot up immediately and I told her that I had herded deer with an airplane that day and she just couldn’t get over that. I’m Canadian and she brought out some funny jokes and she felt bad and later came to me and I was like, ‘No, it was the funniest thing I’ve ever heard!’ It really was. I cried I was laughing so hard.”

Another student piped up with this comment: “Well, I just told a friend ‘This is the coolest religious event that you will ever see, in my opinion. It’s so funny.’”

In my experience, the humor makes the lessons more memorable. This would help to explain why I remember with uncanny detail most of the sketches mentioned by the people in the focus group. Perhaps it is noteworthy to confess that I would be hard-pressed to recollect even hazy highlights spanning 40 years of attending traditional church services.
Not only were several observations made to suggest that the humorous moments were memorable, other comments in the focus group seemed to link to the vein of research that connects humor with stress reduction. Participants spoke often of their experience at the Improv Church as an opportunity to unwind.

As one participant in the focus group said, “I personally like to think of Christ as someone who loved laughter and humor. I think that’s the atmosphere at the Improv Church.”

“For me,” a student added, “I usually have a really stressful week at school. It gives me a chance to just calm down and not focus on school anymore. I can step back, take a deep breath, laugh a lot and say to myself, ‘OK, I can deal with life. Everything is fine. It will all work out.’ It’s a welcome release.”

A similar comment came from another participant in the focus group: “I just really like Improv Church because at the end of the week it’s a chance for you to wind down and laugh off all the stresses you’ve had. And when you have so many assignments due and so many stresses and your friends have been having problems and all of a sudden you can come and kind of laugh it off—that gets you prepped for the weekend.”

Over and over, participants mentioned humor when describing their experience at the Improv Church. Similar themes about humor emerged in the interviews with the leaders.

Humor From the Perspective of the Improv Church Leaders

When asked to reflect on their most memorable moment at the Improv Church, the leaders would often recall and describe funny incidents. For example,
Howard's most memorable Improv Church service was the evening he gave the talk at the service. He recalls, "I remember being absolutely freaked out, sitting in the front row when the improv was doing so well and the people were laughing so hard. Then I realized that I needed to get up there and deliver a message to an audience that was absolutely at climax in terms of humor. I was shaking. I'm usually not nervous before I go on stage but there was so much energy in the place, I couldn't help it. I'd already planned some humor in the beginning and fortunately people clicked with it. So then I connected with them on that level. But there was no doubt the Holy Spirit was in that room; people were just listening."

Rhonda also described her most memorable Improv Church service as the night she was involved. Again, the theme of humor was a part of her story. "The most memorable to me is the first time we performed. We were incredibly nervous. The evening was going okay and we were laughing just as hard as the audience. I remember I was on stage and went to say my line and I started to go into Shakespeare. I said 'Oh, I shall get thine . . .' and all I could think of was a negative line from Shakespeare and it came out 'thine bastard.' The whole place dissolved and I thought Oh no! What evil have I wrought? The crowd erupted. I will always remember that moment because it was like the laugh track just kept going and going. The players and I just stood up there for about 3 minutes and everybody just kept laughing. Everybody went crazy in that moment. I wouldn't say that that was the pinnacle of my improv career, but I will always remember that."

Kelsey's most memorable moment was similar. "It was the skit I was doing with Peter. We were acting out motions while Pat and another person provided the
dialogue—although they could not see what we were doing. It was extremely funny because we’d start to pick berries and Peter had a lot in his bucket when the voice said he had only two berries. So he automatically dropped all the berries then picked up two."

Due restraint must be exercised as not to overstate or misrepresent the scope of this research. Based on the aforementioned conversations there is no proof that humor definitively enhances memory or learning. Neither is there proof, based on this study, that humor reduces the stress that college students feel. While these conclusions might be implied, there is no hard evidence in this study to support such claims. In a more modest representation of the research, it is my opinion that the data do suggest that humor is a prominent reason why students enjoy the Improv Church. Moreover, the humorous experiences seem deeply entrenched in the minds of both participants and leaders. In the end, humor does appear to play some kind of a role in the perceived experience of participants at the Improv Church. Students remember the funny events and tell of how it helps them to cope with stress. Thus, our experience would suggest that appropriate humor can be a useful teaching tool for religious education.

Corroborating Research

Part of this study explored the literature relevant to humor and learning. Because the context for this analysis is a church, the first place that I looked for corroborating research was the Bible. After considering the use of humor by the master teacher, Jesus Christ, I then expanded my research to include pertinent research from an educational perspective.
Humor and the Bible

Rarely do people link church worship and humor. Some critics of Christ have painted him to be a killjoy. For example, Nietzsche, in deploring Christ's early death, wrote, "Would that he had remained in the wilderness and far from the good and just! Perhaps he would have learned to live and to love the earth—and laughter too" (as cited in Trueblood, 1964).

By missing the humor in the Bible, "we do more than miss the laughter; for by viewing a verse of scripture as solemn when it is meant to be humorous, we often get the opposite message than that intended" (Adams, 1997, p. 7). For example, when Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matt 22:21), he was delivering a punchline for a joke on some hyper-religious Pharisees who were exposed later for their impiety. By lifting the statement out of context, it has served as the flagship proof text supporting the separation between church and state. Consequently, the humor of the statement is usually missed and the result of its application is different than originally intended.

By examining the teaching of Christ, one can find that he was not devoid of humor. On the contrary, Jesus employed classic techniques of humor—many of which are still being used generously at the Improv Church. While this is not intended as an exhaustive treatment of the subject, an example might help to illustrate this connection.

Jesus demonstrated a masterful command of humor in using the technique of synectics. (This concept will be addressed in more detail later in the section on whole-person learning and creativity.) By bringing different things together into a
unified connection, Jesus no doubt tickled the funny bone of his listeners. Jesus would take people that we keep separate in our minds, put them together, and then call them the kingdom of God. Such humor is central in the parable of the mustard seed, the lost sheep, the good Samaritan, and many others.

A specific example comes from the parable of the yeast: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Matt 13:33). Adams (1997) offers this commentary:

We do not immediately see the humor, but for a first-century Jew the type of bread symbolizing the kingdom of heaven was the unleavened bread of the Passover Seder service, which the father took and gave to them as they remembered the exodus. One would spend the month before the Passover sweeping out the house symbolically and literally to get rid of any leaven. In the popular mind, yeast—or leaven—had become a symbol of the polluted or immoral life; therefore, one aimed to live the unleavened life. For Jesus to say the kingdom of heaven is like yeast is to say it is like an immoral thing. Perhaps he is going to clean it up? No; for that immoral thing is then taken not by a man but by a woman (who would not even be allowed in a place of worship in first-century Judaism). She then puts it in fifty pounds of pure meal until the whole thing is leavened: that is, until the whole thing is immoral. So the kingdom of heaven is an immoral thing taken by a person not allowed in worship and put into a huge quantity of pure meal until the whole thing is immoral. (pp. 25-26)

A contemporary equivalent might be in saying to a very liberal friend, “The kingdom of heaven is like putting Rush Limbaugh in the White House” or, to a conservative friend, “The kingdom of heaven is like putting Jesse Jackson in the White House.” Or better yet, “The kingdom of heaven is like putting Rush Limbaugh and Jesse Jackson in the White House.” Such a picture is incongruous.

Similar examples could be given to illustrate how Jesus used satire, irony, exaggeration, surprise, and so on, to teach with humor. In doing this, his teachings sparkle with a timeless universality. Trueblood (1964) comments on this universal appeal:
It might be supposed that an appreciation of Christ’s humor would be severely handicapped by the language barrier. Presumably He spoke in Aramaic, while the New Testament was written in Greek, and most of us now read it in a contemporary tongue. . . . We lose in translation some of the intended wit, but it does not follow that we miss the deeper humor when it appears, for Christ’s characteristic humor depends, for the most part, upon a combination of ideas rather than upon a combination of words. This is why the particular language, be it Aramaic or some other, makes no crucial difference. The swelling of the camel is funny in any language. (p. 34)

In sum, Jesus was a master at harnessing the power of humor as a teaching technique. Similarly, humor is used at the Improv Church to teach the timeless truths of God’s Word. The improv sketches transport the biblical concepts to contemporary times and typically use the same components of humor (satire, irony, exaggeration, surprise, etc.) that characterize the teachings of Jesus. It is through this biblical lens that the leaders of the Improv Church view the literature on humor from the field of education.

“Humor has long since been seen as an aid to the instructional process, yet it has only been the subject of serious academic inquiry during the last couple of decades” (Coleman, 1992, abstract). Scholars from a variety of disciplines continue to debate the effects of humor, particularly as it relates to health and education. Some of these discussions within academic circles can elucidate the data of this study. To this end, I will survey the relevant findings on the topic of humor.

Humor and Learning

“Humor can be a powerful tool to help teachers succeed in the classroom” (Wallinger, 1997, abstract). Friedman, Friedman, and Amoo (2002) point out that the technique of using humor to enliven lectures is as ancient as the Babylonian Talmud. For example, 1,700 years ago Rabbah (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbos 30b), a
Talmudic sage, would say something humorous before starting a lecture to the scholars; only after creating an atmosphere of laughter would he would begin his lecture. Another example is the Talmudic sage Rabbi Meir (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38b), who would share fox fables, often devoting a third of his lecture to parables. These teachers recognized the value of humor in education, even in ethical and religious instruction.

There is no definitive evidence to prove that humor is a causal agent in a student’s retention of information; however, students do report that class is a more enjoyable experience when the teacher uses humor (Civikly-Powell, 1999). The conjecture is that humor does improve student attention and comprehension and sparks a mental workout that challenges the mind to discern why something is incongruous or humorous (Civikly, 1992). Another benefit of humor in the learning environment is that it seems to build teacher-student immediacy. The combination of teacher humor and immediacy behaviors increases the probability of student learning (Gorham & Christophel, 1990).

Melvin Helitzer (1986) suggests, “When learning is fun, everybody benefits” (p. 2). “When the mouth is open for laughter,” observes Dr. Virginia Tooper, “you may be able to shove in a little food for thought” (as cited in Helitzer, 1986, p. 2).

Blumenfeld and Alpern (1985) herald the benefits of humor in the classroom and posit 10 reasons that instructors should use it. These reasons include such factors as opening communication and the humanizing effect of humor on image.

Adair and Siegel (1984) studied the role of humor in increasing performance in the classroom. To investigate the effect of appropriately timed humor on
performance of a stressful task, 40 college students performed a mathematics test under one of four experimental conditions (high or moderate stress; presence or absence of humor). Their research showed that humor did not significantly reduce ratings of complexity, time constraint, or ego involvement in high or low stress conditions. However, both the main effect for humor and the humor by stress interactions were statistically significant, indicating that humor improved the level of subsequent task performance.

Humor has been shown to be a helpful tool in classrooms where potentially awkward topics are discussed. For instance, Vogel (1995) examined the suggestion that humor (e.g., verbal incongruities, puns, anecdotes, and comic body language) is an appropriate and useful teaching tool for human sexuality education. This study explored students' perceptions concerning the use of humor in a human sexuality class for sixth-graders. In the end it was purported that students universally expressed discomfort and embarrassment about sexuality. These feelings decreased over time. The acclimation was fostered by nontendentious humor which relieved tension and enhanced memory.

No conclusive study exists that proves humor to guarantee learning in the classroom. However, numerous reports suggest that humor can be an effective tool in an educator's arsenal. Furthermore, humor holds the promise for other benefits that potentially foster an improved learning atmosphere.

**Humor and Anxiety**

Berk (1998) claims that humor can lower students' stress, improve the ability to learn, and enhance self-esteem. This creates a more receptive learning atmosphere.
One researcher discovered that having students watch an episode of Seinfeld helped calm them and reduced their heartbeats when they were later forced to do something stressful like giving an impromptu speech on a subject they knew very little about, in front of a camera. The heart rates of students who had watched the humorous Seinfeld episode rose from an average of 70 to averages of 80 to 85 beats per minute while speaking; the heart rates of students who had not been inoculated with humor rose to a mean of 100 (Burkhart, 1998).

Another study that informs the role and benefits of humor was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience in 2001. Lee Berk, associate professor of health promotion and education at Loma Linda University, reported that simply anticipating a funny event can be beneficial. Berk and his colleagues tested 16 healthy men at Loma Linda University. Only half of the men were told that in 3 days, they would get to watch a video of Gallagher, a comic best known for his watermelon-smashing antics. Blood tests showed that only these men had decreased stress hormones and an increase in chemicals that benefit the immune system. The changes grew more pronounced as it got closer to the anticipated video. Berk concludes: “This study shows that even knowing you will be involved in a positive humorous event, days in advance, reduces levels of stress hormones in the blood and increases levels of chemicals known to aid relaxation” (as cited in Rackl, 2003, p. 68).

Research suggests that humor is an effective way to relieve stress in many different learning environments that cover the gamut of subjects. Ulloth (1998) reports interviews with 31 nursing students and 3 teachers who identified several
benefits from using humor in class: relieving stress, focusing attention, making learning fun, enhancing learning, and strengthening relationships. Based on Ulloth’s study, students overwhelmingly supported the use of appropriate humor.

Flowers (2001) suggests that using humor in the technology education classroom can reduce stress and stimulate cooperative work. He writes:

Humor can be an invaluable tool in technology education, with benefits to the students and the teacher. Some of these benefits are especially suited to the technology education classroom.

One benefit of humor is stress reduction. The medical profession has recently taken advantage of the health benefits of humor-induced stress reduction, but it is important to educators as well. (p. 10)

McLaughlin (2001) focuses on the use of humor to deliver serious messages relating to industrial management in the United States. She cites the following example of using improvisational humor to reduce stress in the workplace:

When Westinghouse terminated its super collider project two years ago, for instance, Ann Cox was brought in to help the company’s stunned employees cope. Her method: improvisation and sketch comedy. “I walked in and told the group I was there to make them laugh and see the lighter side of the situation,” says Cox, dean of fun at Humor University, an Austin, Texas-based provider of corporate “humor training.”

“The attendees responded that they would rather laugh than cry,” Cox continues, “And from there I built a rapport with them. Through the use of improvisational comedy, I helped them with the stress management relative to change and unpredictability.” (p. 48)

Many studies support the claim that humor reduces stress for instructors and students in the learning environment. These studies help us to see why students clamor for a seat to participate in the learning experience at the Improv Church.

**Humor and Memory**

Other studies have explored the link between humor and enhanced memory. Thompson (2000) considered the effects of humor and delayed testing on memory
and metamemory performance. This study concluded that, overall, humor increased memory performance.

Casper (1999) asserts that humor increases arousal and arousal enhances long-term memory, but suggests that research supporting humor's positive effect on adults' memory is lacking. This study proposed that laughter only—because of its arousing quality—would enhance long-term memory. To put this to a test, two Introductory Psychology classes were exposed to four humor manipulations during a class lecture: humor that was relevant to the to-be-learned material, humor that was irrelevant to the to-be-learned material, laughter only, and no laughter. The classes participated in each of the four conditions once. Students were then tested over the information presented in the Relevant and Irrelevant Humor conditions and later over the information presented in the Laughter and No Laughter conditions. Also, students completed measures of need for cognition and attitude toward the class on the first day of the study and a measure of arousal after each lecture. Analyses involved comparing the Relevant Humor condition to the Irrelevant Humor condition and the Laughter condition to the No Laughter condition. The conclusion of the study suggests that the hypothesis that laughter enhances long-term memory was not supported; moreover, significant relationships between learning and arousal were not evidenced in any of the humor conditions.

Edwards and Gibboney (1992) reported that humor is “an important tool for the teacher in college classrooms” (abstract). They did caution teachers, however, that humor can potentially hinder the learning process. For example, humor is not
desirable if the student is the target of a joke. But humor can enhance learning as well and “help students comprehend and retain lecture material” (abstract).

One study put a group of students (from a predominately White, NCAA Division-One University) in a control group where they received material presented in a strict lecture format. A similar group of students received the same material, but delivered with the use of humor. Using a pretest-posttest approach, both groups completed a nine-item survey of the material. As evidenced through key-word selection, a content-analysis of their responses concluded that the humor group retained more of the material than did the lecture group, thus supporting the hypothesis that humor can enhance the educational process by helping students retain the lecture material (Williams, 2001).

Humor continues to be a hot topic of research in educational circles. As the studies continue, the data from this research can be added to the discussion.

The Second Theme to Emerge From the Data: Spirituality

A second theme to emerge from the data highlighted the perceived spiritual benefits of participants at the Improv Church. While humor is one of the primary reasons that people attend, the spiritual benefits account for an equally strong incentive for participation. Included under the label of spirituality are descriptors from respondents such as “focus on God,” “worship God,” “helps me see God in a new way,” “sharing God with others,” and “Gospel-focused.”

Although spirituality may be difficult to quantify and measure, it is nonetheless something that many attendees associate with the Improv Church. The
data assert that students perceive that their spiritual journeys have been impacted at the Improv Church.

This spiritual impact is perhaps more a long-term phenomena; it is not as readily evident as is the presence of humor and community when visiting one of the church services. In other words, matters of the heart and spirit are not as easy to discern and quantify as is laughter or conversations that reflect a sense of community. Nevertheless, the spiritual dimension is still foundational in what happens at the Improv Church.

**Description of Spirituality at the Improv Church**

The spiritual component is a strong draw for people attending the Improv Church. Fifty-one percent of the respondents in the survey indicated that the desire “to grow spiritually” ranked as a strong reason for attending. Only 3.6 percent of the respondents indicated that this played no part in their decision to come. The mean score for this option was 3.44 with a standard deviation of 1.31. Based on the mean score, this was the second most popular reason stated for attendance.

The most obvious spiritual component at an Improv Church service centers on the sermon, typically presented after the improv sketches as the final piece of programming. In more recent months, however, we have experimented with incorporating the spiritual teaching component at different places in the service. For example, rather than having the “sermon” at the end of the improv sketches, we are now placing bite-sized teaching moments throughout the evening and using the improvisational dramas to punctuate the Scripture lesson and teaching. In any event, often the communication style of the talk is fluid and dynamic, open to feedback and
participation. In this sense it is different from a traditional church sermon or classroom lecture. This communication approach provides an improv feel to the learning experience.

Numerous methods have been used at the Improv Church to incorporate an interactive component into the spiritual instruction. For example, one evening I was teaching on the topic of forgiveness. My objective was to use the story in John 8 where the “religious” people dragged an adulterous woman to Jesus. As an introduction to my talk I called for a volunteer. “What kinds of sins have you committed?” I asked him. Under normal circumstances this approach in church might not have been well received. The Improv Church, however, does not aspire to do “normal” church. Consequently the interactive piece in this talk seemed to work well.

“Well,” the volunteer replied, “I stole grapes at Andy’s Market when I was a kid.”

To visually demonstrate his story I put a drop of dark food coloring in a glass pitcher of clean water. “What else?” I probed.

“I gorged myself with pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving,” he said.

“Yes, gluttony,” I quipped. “That’s a big sin.” People laughed as I put in a few extra drops for that one. Then I opened it up for anybody to confess a sin. People shouted out a number of answers while I dripped food coloring into the pitcher of water.

By the time the volunteer and audience members had finished, the pitcher contained very dark liquid. I then poured the dark water into a glass that represented
the cross of Christ. "When we present our sins to the Savior," I explained, "the sins are drowned in the blood of Christ. We are completely forgiven." Using an aid that I purchased at a magic store the water seemed to disappear. Tipping the cup as if to spill it on my volunteer’s head, people gasped and wondered, "What happened to the dark water?"

From there I continued in the spiritual lesson on forgiveness. The purpose in using this approach to teaching was to help students remember the lesson by involving everybody in the group. To varying degrees everyone had a stake in the educational experience.

Another example of interactive teaching at the Improv Church would be the time a speaker asked for volunteers to act out the story as he read it. This is a simple teaching tool that incorporates the audience into the learning process. In this particular case, the facilitator read the parable of the sower and the seeds from Matt 13:24-30. The creative interpretation of a plant being choked by thorns, or the birds coming to eat the seeds, proved to be a hilarious and memorable event. Beyond the amusement, however, volunteers were teaching a timeless story of Jesus.

Naturally the sermon is not the only way in which people are spiritually affected at the Church of Acts. Small groups, service projects at Improv Serve, unfettered worship at Improv Praise, and other regular events at the Improv Church are all opportunities that potentially influence the participants in spiritual ways. Respondents mentioned all of the above when sharing their perceptions of the Improv Church’s impact on their spiritual journey.
Not surprisingly, when dealing with the broad topic of spirituality, it proved difficult for participants to isolate one thing, such as the Improv Church, or even more specifically, one evening at the Improv Church, as the primary impetus for spiritual growth. Moreover, students often blended the theme of spirituality with humor and community. By implication, humor and community at the Improv Church were often perceived as inherently spiritual.

To muddy the picture even more, the link between the Improv Church and spirituality was expressed in a variety of different ways. Many respondents mentioned the church’s evangelistic potential and spoke of sharing one’s spiritual convictions with others through the Improv Church. For others, the spiritual effect of the Improv church was much more personal. In any case, the promise of spiritual growth and the spiritual impact upon participants at the Improv Church emerged as a clear piece in the data.

Spirituality From the Perspective of the Improv Church Participants

The participants in the focus groups spoke of personal spiritual growth and the integration of spirituality in daily life as a result of attending the Improv Church.

"What makes the Improv Church so meaningful to me," one student shared, "is that student speakers share their religious experiences. Usually they are very easy to relate to and often quite amusing. They make a lot of good spiritual points that I can apply to real life."

Another student chimed in, "The Improv Church has taught me that God can relate to me in ways other than in the sanctuary church-type way. I’ve learned at the
Improv Church that it's easy to extend God out into the week and not just keep Him a one-day-a-week thing."

Another student shared this perspective: "I have been affected spiritually by gaining a new outlook. I see life and God differently now. I'm not alone in this. I brought a friend to Improv Church who wasn't really into God stuff. But she actually paid attention. It opened her eyes to what spirituality is about and tomorrow she is getting baptized."

Several other comments were made in the focus groups that connected the theme of spirituality with an evangelistic component. For example, one student recounted the evening that she gave the talk for the service. While speaking, it occurred to her that a significant number of people were not Seventh-day Adventists. She said, "I realized that people were coming who didn't know much about our church or even about God at all. So I tried to gear my words for them. . . . I don't know if we spend enough time as Adventists trying to think about trying to reach non-Christians."

Her story sparked a rush of similar comments in that focus group where others spoke of their spiritual experience at the Improv Church in terms of evangelism. The next person to speak in the group told of seeing people at a recent Improv Church service who were not Seventh-day Adventists. "But one of the kids got called up on stage to help with one of the things and when he sat down, he was so excited. I was struck by the fact that this is actually reaching people that are not involved in our church. I appreciate that."
Still another person in the focus group had something similar to share. "I was here once when there was a young lady wandering around outside. To watch her be drawn in was a neat experience. Someone drew her in and she left and went away for a little while and I prayed that she would come back, and she came back and stayed for the whole service."

Spirituality From the Perspective of the Improv Church Leaders

Observations about the spiritual impact of the Improv Church were more pronounced in the interviews with the improv players. One student, Howard, spoke of the time he shared the talk for the evening. For him, it was an opportunity to feel an "intense connection of the Holy Spirit." Rusty talked about how the Improv Church has been a reminder that "my spirituality is not my own. It's something that I'm sharing with others." Pat talked about the experience of performing improv and how it helped her to depend on God in that process.

Peter, the Improv Troupe leader for 2 years, spoke of how the Improv Church gave him his "niche" in ministry. It provided for him an opportunity whereby he felt comfortable doing outreach ministry. Involvement in ministry also carried with it for Peter a hook of accountability. He said, "Realizing what a visible ministry it is and how recognizable I became was a bit of a wake-up call for me." Later he reflected, "Improv does not belong to us, it belongs to God and He is going to use it as best as He sees fit—no matter what our visions and our goals are. We need to understand that God is going to take it and shape it as He sees fit and not try to force—as good as our intentions are—not try to force it to be something that He doesn't intend for it to be. We haven't baptized 3,000 people at Improv Church, but we have brought many
people closer to Christ. We are reaching a group of people who are toddlers in their spiritual experience.” An interesting postscript to note is that after Peter graduated from Walla Walla College he moved out of town and has since taken the initiative to plant an Improv Church in his new community. Peter’s commitment to the Improv Church is substantial; however, the influence of the Improv Church in his life, according to his own testimony, is equally as substantial.

The role of being an improv player helped Rhonda to trust in God through the difficult moments on stage. “I learned that God is there with you in failure,” she said. “We would always pray ‘Be with us out there tonight to do our best.’ We’d go on stage and sometimes would have off nights, but it wasn’t like we’d come away saying ‘God wasn’t with me tonight.’ There is something we learn out of failures and I think that when you did fail as an improv player on a certain night it would only make you stronger in the future. I prayed often—both personally and with the improv players—to not let this become about us. I never wanted my attitude to be ‘Look at me. I can do all this great acting stuff!’ Because we all knew that we could fail. We were not infallible.” When asked what she would say to a new improv player, Rhonda responded, “The Improv Church will change you. It will change your entire college experience. It will change you for the better; and, depending on how much you put into it, that’s how much you will get out of it.”

In Kelsey’s interview, the spiritual dimension of her improv experience was emphasized. For her, improv was “a spiritual thing because I believed it was blessing people.” She went on to talk about how the improv ministry gave her a purpose in God’s church. “I really think everyone in a church should have a purpose, a role or
something that they feel like it makes the church their own. If you don’t get involved in the ministry, you just sit back and criticize. You’re not working for a goal of making it better. Personally, my relationship with God was strong when I got involved at the Improv Church so I’m not sure that I learned anything profound, but it did provide another link to Him; it was another opportunity to do small things to trust God and be reminded of Him. Improv Church was a good reminder to keep me in tune with God.”

In summary, active involvement in the Improv Church affected the perceived spirituality of the participants. According to their testimonies, participants reported benefiting spiritually at the Improv Church in the following ways: learning to trust God more, developing a heart for evangelism, growing a personal sense of purpose and place in the church, building connectedness in the Body of Christ, and seeing God in new ways.

Corroborating Research

Because the theological context for the Improv Church is positioned primarily in Evangelical Christianity, it is important to consult the studies that clarify evangelical thinking with regard to spiritual formation. This raises a number of questions. What is spirituality? What is spiritual formation? Does the Improv Church make a contribution to the spiritual formation of the participants? If so, how? These are only a few of many questions that seek to make sense of the connection between the Improv Church and spirituality.

There is no agreement on a commonly accepted definition of spirituality. Love and Talbot (1999) note that others have described it as communication with
God (Fox, 1982), a movement towards union with God (McGill & McGreal, 1988), a focus on ultimate concerns and meanings of life (Tillich, 1959), and belief in a force greater than oneself (Booth, 1992). In other attempts to define spirituality, some have used language that centers on a specific outcome or state of being.

Evangelical Christian academics point to the Bible as the authority for doctrine and understanding of spiritual life. Throughout Scripture we find the clarion call to a transformed life of holiness. Such a call is particularly paramount in the writings of the apostle Paul.

Paul spoke of an all-consuming passion for believers to mature in Christ: “It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me” (Col 1:28-29, NRSV). In Eph 4:15, Paul admonishes believers to “grow up in him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” In Gal 4:19 Paul speaks of enduring childbirth pains “until Christ is formed in you.” The apostle tenaciously pursued this process of “being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor 3:18).

Building on these foundational passages from Paul, contemporary Bible scholars have attempted to forge a definition of spiritual formation.

Peterson (1997) speaks of spiritual formation in terms of holiness and the life of Christ being formed within us. He writes:

Holiness is the Christian life mature. It’s gathering all the parts and pieces of your life into obedience and response to God, and living with some energy. Holiness is a blazing thing, an energetic thing. . . . It’s the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. It’s a work in which there is conscious and intentional participation and obedience. (pp. 197-198)
Mulholland (1993) suggests that spiritual formation is simply the “process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others” (p. 14).

The Presbyterian Church (Office of Spiritual Formation, cited in http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/whatis.htm, 2003) has issued this formal definition:

Spiritual formation is the activity of the Holy Spirit which molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the Body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit's touch, disciplines such as Sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence. (p. 1)

Still another attempt at defining spiritual formation offers this characterization:

Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the spirit or will. It is being formed (really transformed) in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ. (Willard, as cited in Anderson, 2002, pp. 54-55)

While there is some variance in the definitions, Evangelical Christian authors tend to agree that spiritual formation has to do with the character of Christ being shaped within us. But how does this change take place? Anderson (2002) answers: “Through the Spirit and through spiritual practices” (p. 62). In this answer we find the intrinsic conflict of Christian transformation. On the one hand, spiritual formation is the act of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the process involves disciplines that can be practiced and choices that must be made in order to facilitate the transformational process. Alexander (1999) describes the dichotomy in this way:
Here we encounter a crucial theological and practical problem in the pursuit of godliness; namely, the tension between God’s role and the believer’s responsibility to walk in holiness. How to synchronize this tension is our central task. If, for example, we place too much emphasis upon human responsibility, do we not then diminish the New Testament’s emphasis that believers are righteous and holy in Christ? On the other hand, if we exclusively stress union with Christ through faith, are we not then, minimizing the biblical admonitions to walk in holiness, righteousness, and love? Failure to harmonize this tension will not only create a distortion in the biblical teaching but also tends to create unrealistic expectations. (pp. 7-8)

It is in the context of this tension that we must consider the role of the Improv Church. While spiritual formation transpires at the will of God, it is also shaped by the choices of the morally free human agent. While there is nothing we can do at the Improv Church to force God’s hand or to secure spiritual formation in the attendees, there is still the promise that what we do can influence and spiritually shape the participants. We understand that we cannot “cause experiences of a spiritual nature to occur”; we can “only create certain conditions in which spiritual experiences are more likely to occur” (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992, p. 169). It is this belief that we can play a vital role in creating an environment that is conducive for the faith development of college students that drives the ministry of the Improv Church. With this promise of life transformation in mind, it is time to consider the dominant theories of spiritual formation among traditional-age college students. For this, we will look at the research of three theorists: James Fowler, Sharon Parks, and Steve Garber.

James Fowler

Fowler (1981) assumes a structuralist approach to faith development. As Jean Piaget did in cognitive development and Lawrence Kohlberg did in moral
development, Fowler has done in spiritual development. He asserts that a person’s way of growing in faith follows predictable and sequential stages. Table 7 outlines Fowler’s six stages.

Fowler’s work contributes valuable insight to the conversation about spiritual formation in collegians. Generally speaking, the majority of students would be growing through stages two and three during their college years. This then presses Anderson’s (2002) question to those of us who seek to minister to collegians: “How do our programs attend to faith development stages in our students?” (p. 77). Fowler’s theory helps the practitioner to address this question. Based on his theory, we see that students develop differently while in college and beyond. Knowing this, campus ministries should focus on the transitional, dynamic nature of the collegians’ faith.
Table 7

*James Fowler’s Stages of Faith Development*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Intuitive-projective</td>
<td>During the first stage of faith, children tend to follow the beliefs of their parents. They tend to see religious figures as characters in fairy tales. This stage is “my parents’ faith.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Mythical-literal</td>
<td>In the second stage of faith, children start responding to religious stories and rituals literally rather than symbolically. As adolescents grow into young adulthood, their beliefs continue to be based on authority outside of themselves. This stage is “my church’s faith.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Synthetic-conventional</td>
<td>In this third stage of faith, individuals tend to conform in their beliefs with little self-reflection. This stage is “my community’s faith.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Individuative-reflective</td>
<td>In the fourth stage, individuals begin a radical shift from dependence on others’ spiritual beliefs to development of their own. Faith becomes uniquely one’s own. This stage is “my own faith.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conjunctive</td>
<td>In the fifth stage of faith, individuals accept the paradoxes in faith, and learn to balance their faith with their questions. This stage is marked by a dynamic, trusting relationship with God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Universalizing faith</td>
<td>Very few people reach this final stage of faith development. At this stage people invest their lives in a cause beyond themselves. They invest themselves in a quest for universal values, such as unconditional love and justice. Self-preservation becomes irrelevant. Mother Theresa and Mahatma Gandhi are examples of people in this form of spiritual development.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The Improv Church seeks to play to the sweet spot of faith development in collegians. Because most of the students are in that dynamic phase of making faith their own, it seems a logical approach to present spiritual truth in a manner whereby students are involved in the process and challenged to contribute to the experience of spiritual development. This is, in fact, what happens regularly at the Improv Church.

Sharon Parks

Parks (2000) builds on the work of Fowler by exploring other theoretical frameworks in faith development. By faith, she means something that goes well beyond religious belief, parochially understood. "Faith is more adequately recognized as the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience" (p. 7). By broadening the definition of faith, Parks uncovers the key to satisfying our culture’s "hunger for a shared language about things 'spiritual'" (p. 7). According to Parks’ paradigm, faith is the avenue through which one composes meaning. It is the shared activity of all humans.

Parks offers a holistic developmental model that suggests that people mature cognitively, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. In each arena the human spirit strives to answer a fundamental question of life. In the cognitive realm, the question is "How does a person develop in thinking?" In the emotional realm, the question is "How does a person feel?" In the relational realm, the question is "How does a person belong?" And in the spiritual realm, the question is "How do we understand and know God?" Parks details the developmental stages in each of these four forms. For the purpose of this study, however, I will focus on her theory with regard to the spiritual development.
Parks explains that as we develop cognitively, emotionally, and relationally, we also develop spiritually. Parks (2000) calls this “forms of faith” (p. 20). She describes a movement from a narrow, Authority-based, dualistic understanding to a wider, self-directed, and committed walk with God. This motion is a “journey from Authority-bound forms of meaning-making anchored in conventional community through the wilderness of counterdependence and unqualified relativism to a committed, inner-dependent mode of composing meaning, affirmed by a self-selected class or group” (Parks, 1986, p. 70).

“The story of human development is framed by the primary metaphor of journey” (Parks, 2000, p. 48). According to Parks’s (1986) model, the first stage (the adolescent/conventional stage) of this spiritual journey begins with God as a parent. Using the story of the Children of Israel being delivered from Egypt, God is portrayed as the rescuer, that is, as the loving parent who understands what needs to be done and possesses the power to do it. This portrait paints God as one who is all-powerful. The only questions of faith that arise in this stage center on issues of identity (p. 71).

The second stage (young adult) is represented metaphorically by the Children of Israel wandering in the wilderness. This is a season of relativism. This part of the journey is filled with dissonance as the student struggles to know God. The primary metaphor used to capture this idea is that of a shipwreck. Parks (2000) writes:

Metaphorical shipwreck may occur with the loss of a relationship, violence to one’s property, collapse of a career venture, physical illness or injury, defeat of a cause, a fateful choice that irrevocably reorders one’s life, betrayal by a community or government, or the discovery that an intellectual construct is inadequate. Sometimes we simply encounter someone, or some new experience or idea, that calls into question things as we have perceived them, or as they were taught to us, or as we had read, heard, or assumed. This kind of experience can
suddenly rip into the fabric of life, or it may slowly yet just as surely unravel the meanings that have served as the home of the soul. (p. 28)

As a consequence of these shipwrecks the spiritual experience is broadened. The student discovers a bigger God and learns of new ways to experience the Almighty.

The third stage (adult) is marked by the “Spirit Within” (Parks, 1986, p. 71). Here, the movement shifts from an external spirituality to an internal understanding of God. Faith is owned and a commitment to God grows out of convictions that are the result of a personal relationship with the Spirit. People become more interdependent, open to each other’s ideas, yet anchored in a relationship with the Spirit within.

The final stage (mature adult) in Parks’s model is described as the Promised Land. This is an interdependent commitment that draws on strong, personal convictions. In this stage there is a strong sense of self and personal responsibility that is intricately woven into the fabric of the larger community of faith. The apostle Paul offers an apt metaphor of this in 1 Cor 12:12, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body.”

The progression then that Parks describes is this: the parent, the wilderness, the Kingdom within, many members/one Body. Her work helps us to think about spiritual development during the college years from a comprehensive viewpoint. Further, she offers a holistic model that reminds practitioners that we do not develop spiritually in isolation; rather, the forms of knowing, dependence, community, and faith all track in parallel movements. This comprehensive perspective is important in light of research about emotional intelligence that suggests how it is possible to
successfully mature into adulthood as functional human beings and yet suffer from a low emotional IQ. Anderson (2002) argues that this dynamic is the consequence of the "split between academics and spirituality in the University" (p. 88). He expands on this:

People "know" a great deal about God as cognitive information but can remain spiritually immature. Academic programs continue to feed information into student's minds without a strongly connective integration with their emotional, and spiritual formation. That remains an enormously important challenge for the Christian college today. (p. 88)

In my opinion, this is where the mentoring community of the Church of Acts can play an important role in the faith development of college students. In creating the learning environment that we have, we seek to offer a "connective integration" between the cognitive, emotional, relational, and spiritual components of development. It represents a safe environment where "shipwrecks" can be portrayed through creative and dramatic art forms, often with humor, and then discussed in an honest fashion.

The conclusions of Sharon Parks parallel the work of Marta Bennett in some intriguing ways. Bennett (1994) questions whether theorists of spirituality are even asking the right questions. She asserts that many seem to emphasize cognitive processes above "faith as affectively experienced and exhibited in behavior" (Bennett, 1994, abstract). Furthermore, she wonders if faith development theories highlight "values of individualism over community, and compartmentalization over holistic orientations towards life" (abstract). After interviewing 36 students equally divided from Nairobi, Kenya, and Seattle, Washington, USA, Bennett identified consistent themes that emerged regarding spirituality. All students stressed that
authentic Christian faith is one that “is evidenced in all aspects of life: cognitive, affective, social and spiritual. One’s maturing relationship with God is to be lived out in words, attitudes, and actions for the good of the human community to the glory of God” (abstract). Through the Improv Church, Improv Praise, Improv Serve, and small groups, this holistic orientation toward spirituality is what the Church of Acts aspires to achieve.

Steve Garber

Garber (1996) wrestles with the question of how collegians integrate what they believe with how they live once they have left the environment of academia. Building on the work of Fowler and Parks, he projects beyond graduation and muses over the direction those students take, either deeper into faith or away from faith. Based on the stories of his students that maintained strong spirituality and modeled faith for at least 20 years after leaving school, Garber discovered three strands intricately woven together in their lives. “These three factors were the major influences, as seen retrospectively, on the construction of their respective visions of what is real and true and right; especially as they live out of and with that vision twenty years later” (p. 37).

The first strand is conviction. Students who successfully connected belief to behavior over the long haul were grounded in a thoughtful worldview. This worldview anchored them through the wilderness of crises that inevitably came with the challenge of modern consciousness and its pull of secularization and pluralization (p. 37).
The second strand is character. These students were influenced by a teacher who incarnated the worldview that would eventually be personalized as their own. Through the influence of this mentoring relationship, the student could see the lifelong benefits of living with a similar character (p. 38).

The final strand is community. These students were all engaged in a community comprised of others sharing a similar worldview. Through this network of fellowship and support the students could see how their shared convictions could be lived out over the span of a lifetime (p. 38).

Garber’s work informs the future direction of the Improv Church by reminding us of the long-term importance of a curriculum that will provide students with a worldview broad enough to deal with the unsavory realities of the world as they discover it. His work also reminds us of the critical role mentors can play in helping students see what it means to live out one’s thoroughly Christian worldview in the public arena. Finally, Garber understands the powerful influence that peers have on one another. By shaping the Improv Church to be consistent with Garber’s guidelines, the impact of our ministry can be heightened. Based on the testimonies of participants and players at the Improv Church, we are—at least to some degree—making an impact during the critical years of spiritual formation.

Other Studies on Spirituality and College Students

Garber’s interest in the marriage of belief and practice, that is, living out spiritual truth in the secular world, tracks with research conducted in the context of the Mormon Church. Naegle (2001) cites the desire to balance secular and spiritual learning as one of the primary motivating factors in the enrollment and retention of
young people in the institute program at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. It is interesting to note that the other reasons participants gave for their involvement were spiritual in nature. It was found that young adults who enrolled and completed an institute class also wanted to study the scriptures, follow the counsel of the Prophet, and prepare for the future. They had strong personal religious beliefs and applied them.

In a Seventh-day Adventist context, which is consistent with the faith persuasion of the Improv Church, Hunt (1996) identified the factors that a prospective parent considers important in determining whether or not their child will attend a Seventh-day Adventist boarding school like Walla Walla College. Of the 13 factors listed on the questionnaire, the most important one was the spiritual environment. Although this study speaks primarily to the motives of parents in determining their child’s involvement in a school, it also implies factors that are important to the students. The interest in spirituality would be consistent with the findings in this study.

Whether it means signing on at a Mormon institute or enrolling a child at an Adventist school, these studies point out that people make their decisions based on a desire to pursue deeper spiritual meaning. A recent survey suggests that this spiritual hunger is prominent on college campuses.

Campuses are alive with student interest in spirituality. The survey, conducted by an ongoing project at the University of California at Los Angeles, found 73 percent of students said their religious or spiritual beliefs helped develop their identity, while 78 percent said they'd discussed religion or spirituality with friends. Seventy-seven percent of students surveyed also said that they pray, with 71 percent saying they found religion helpful. . . . The number of those who said it was important to integrate spirituality into their lives climbed 7 points from a similar 2000 survey. (“The Monitor’s View,” 2003, p. 1)
How spiritual hunger is satisfied is the subject of other bodies of research. For example, Thompson (1993) formulated a spiritual formation program for college students that cuts against the theological ideas and traditions of the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Conventionally, the Wesleyan-Holiness movement upholds spirituality as intrapersonal; namely, reading the Bible and private prayer. Thompson pressed students to view spirituality as more interpersonal. Students were instructed that being spiritual meant feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, and stewarding resources in a way that honors God. Using evaluation instruments to measure students’ spirituality, the results showed that a substantial majority of the students had experienced a paradigm shift in what it means to be spiritual.

Similarly, the Improv Church presses college students to experience interpersonal spirituality. Thus, students are challenged to see spirituality in the context of a community that is learning, praising, and serving together. At the Improv Church and in small groups, attendees gather to explore the Word of God and participate in the learning process. At Improv Praise they are invited to express worship to God in fellowship with other believers. At Improv Serve they are given opportunities to learn the acts of Christ by feeding the hungry and serving the poor. Through this interpersonal approach students report that their spirituality is impacted.

The Third Theme to Emerge From the Data: Community

A third theme that clearly emerged from all of the data sources centered on the theme of community. Responses that were filed in this category included phrases such as “hanging out with friends,” “fellowship,” “being together,” “meeting new people,” and “seeing folks I like.”
This appeal of the Improv Church is not surprising. One of the fiercest hungers of the human heart is to know and be known. The human spirit craves community. We were created in the image of God, who is by nature three in one—Father, Son and Spirit. God is the consummate expression of community. Because we possess His nature, we too cannot live alone. Aristotle once said, “Without friendships no one would choose to live, even if they had all other good things in life” (as cited in Ortberg, 2003, p. 44).

Freed and Roy (2003) suggest that “the idea of community harmonizes with God’s design for human beings—to be intelligent, communicative, moral meaning-makers and decision-makers. In essence, humans are relational beings who do not function optimally unless they are in community” (p. 17). Freed and Roy develop this notion of community by using Dwayne Huebner’s metaphor of “weaving” to capture the idea that people create a “fabric of life” that entwines “ideas, abstractions, memories, biblical metaphors, cultural mores derived from the faith community and the relationships in it” (Freed & Roy, 2003, p. 17).

The apostle Paul uses the analogy of the body of Christ to promote the idea of community in the context of church.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts. (1 Cor 12:27-31)

The Latin root of the word community is communis, meaning “commonly shared.” Scripture captures this fundamental definition of community in the two
foundational passages upon which the Improv Church was established. The first text, which was amplified in the previous chapter, bears repeating here:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

A similar and equally compelling snapshot of community is described in Acts 4:31-33:

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

This kind of religious community plays a vital role in addressing a deep yearning of the human spirit. Unfortunately, contemporary culture suppresses this need for community. Standish (1995) laments the erosion of community in North America by making this observation:

A reader of history will usually discover that the early humans regarded the community as essential. Typically, the ancient individual’s identity was constituted according to her nation, tribe, or family. As history has unfolded, though, life in Western culture has become more and more focused on the individual. The individual seems to be especially exalted in North America. Popular athletes, drama, business, academics, and even religion glorify individual ambition and achievement. (pp. 1-2)

Through his research, Standish (1995) calls for a “movement from an individualistic formative orientation to a more communal one” (p. 381). The context
for this, Standish argues, is often in spiritual communities through commitment, confession, and confirmation.

John Ortberg (2003) summarizes:

The yearning to attach and connect, to love and be loved, is the fiercest longing of the soul. Our need for community with people and the God who made us is to the human spirit what food and air and water are to the human body. That need will not go away. . . . It marks us from the nursery to the convalescent home. (p. 18)

In this light, it comes as no surprise that one of the reasons students keep returning to the Improv Church is to address an innate need to know and to be known.

Description of Community at the Improv Church

The data suggest that being a part of the Improv Church community is a major reason that people attend. Although the desire to be with friends did not score as the highest motive for attending, it did rank in the top three. Over 65% of the respondents circled 3, 4, or 5—indicating that this incentive was higher than average. Nearly 19% of the respondents circled 5—citing this as the primary reason (or one of the primary reasons) for attending. Only 7.2% indicated that being with friends was not a factor at all in their decision to attend. The mean score for this option was 3.00 with a standard deviation of 1.49. Based on the mean score, this was the third most popular reason stated for attendance.

However, cold statistics fail to capture the rich essence of community at the Improv Church. A synthesis of my field notes affords the following description of what happens on any given night at the church.

Students who swarm into the church busily engage in conversations. I eavesdrop and note these discussions. On the one side a student queries a friend
while sipping an Italian soda, “What do you think? Are we going to blast Saddam Hussein this week?” On my other side, I catch snippets of a different exchange. “Have you seen the new James Bond movie?” Whether it is talking about the rain or the latest rap song, conversations are happening.

Such conversations are not left to luck. We are intentional about nurturing this environment of connectedness. We seek to provide an atmosphere that is conducive to community-building. Drinks and refreshments are served. Chairs are arranged in close proximity to help conversations occur naturally. Doors open at least 30 minutes before we start to allow time for people to connect. Occasionally time is allotted during the Improv Church service for connecting to take place. For example, the host may ask people to discuss an issue or offer their opinion on a topic.

My field notes from the Improv Church service held on April 4, 2003, describe in specific terms the way in which this community is fostered. To begin the service, the facilitator invites everyone to get up and stand somewhere on a continuum that expresses their opinion on certain issues. “Go all the way to my left,” the facilitator instructs us, “if you hate beards. Go all the way to my right if you love beards. If your opinion is not that extreme then stand somewhere on the line that reflects your opinion on beards.”

Immediately the place is buzzing with energy and noise. Like a million ants let out of a can, people scramble to position themselves at a point that accurately reflects their opinion on beards. “Okay,” the facilitator attempts to maintain at least some semblance of control, “now turn to the person next to you and share why you’re standing where you’re at.”
“Hi, I’m Jill,” a young lady quips as she turns toward me.

“Hi, I’m Karl. I haven’t seen you before. Is this your first time to the Improv Church?”

“No, I came a couple times last quarter. I work with Erica at Starbucks so I come to support her when she’s doing the improv.”

“Great! So I take it that you don’t care for beards much.”

“No, not really.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“I just think they look nasty. Once in a while a beard might look okay, but in general I just don’t like them.”

Instantly we are bonding—not at a deep or spiritually intimate level—but we are connecting by discussing a safe topic. After sharing one-on-one, the facilitator engages the entire group in a brief discussion about beards.

The conversations go deeper, however, as the facilitator starts to press us to reflect our stand on issues like capital punishment and the meaning of life. After we state our position, we are then invited to share with someone why we opted for that opinion. These discussions help to foster a sense of community. The interactive exercise allows me to meet and get to know people.

An interactive exercise is a regular programming feature at the Improv Church. It varies, of course, in how it is done. For example, on May 9, 2003, we participated in a “group good-bye” and paid tribute to a young woman who had been an improv player for 4 years. As the leader of the improv players for the past 2 years she had served in a highly visible post. Because it was her last time at the Improv
Church before she graduated, we showered her with gifts and applause. On another occasion the interactive exercise involved everybody chanting words that were associated with the theme of the evening. Occasionally we would get everybody involved by having them team up and write out phrases that would be incorporated into the sketches. The point of these crowdbreakers is to build a sense of being together.

Reflecting again on the April 4 service, following the crowdbreaker, the facilitator introduces the improv players. A young man, Will, takes over the facilitator role. “Great to see you here tonight,” his disarming smile screams warmth and fun. “Tonight we’re going to explore together the power of paradox. Take a second and share with the person next to you a paradox that you’ve observed this week.”

A college student dutifully turns my direction and initiates the conversation. “Yea, um, I work at Taco Bell and I see all the time obese people ordering three orders of greasy Mexi-nuggets, four oversized burritos with extra sour cream, a half dozen tacos and then a diet Coke! I can’t help but laugh at the paradox of someone pigging out on a meal big enough to feed a football team then ordering a diet soft drink—presumably to save on the calories. What’s up with that?”

“That’s a good one,” I agree. “I was thinking this week about the paradox of America bombing Iraq because they supposedly have weapons of mass destruction even though we have the same weapons.”
The conversation continues until Will asks for a few examples that were shared in the private conversations. One person volunteers, "We shared oxymorons—which are phrases that capture paradoxes."

"Great!" Will responds. "Any examples?"


"Postal service."

"Jumbo shrimp."

"Cafeteria food."

As a community we were brainstorming together in a learning environment. Together, we were getting to know each other while exploring truth. Good, bad, or ugly—the experience we are creating is something that we are doing together, and that is a bonding venture no matter what happens.

After the improv players perform a number of sketches based on suggestions from the audience, the players facilitate a time of sharing. Everybody has an opportunity to reflect on the sketches and share what they learned from the process. They are then pressed to apply the lessons to life.

Following the closing prayer, students linger to gab and laugh and share. Several people dive in to help close up the equipment, straighten chairs, and clean up the church. Again, this provides an opportunity to connect with people.

The role of community as a significant component of the Improv Church came as an epiphany to me some years ago—long before the data substantiated this conclusion. After my brother, Paul, came to visit at the Improv Church we discussed his observations about the church that night.
“The thing that struck me more than anything else,” Paul said, “was the community.”

“Huh?” This had never occurred to me.

“Oh yes! Clearly people are connecting in significant ways. The people behind me talked through most of the service. Hey, they were building community and that’s okay. I also noticed how many people came early and left late—why? I think it’s because they just want to be together.”

“I have never really thought of that,” I admitted as I grabbed my Improv Church notebook to record his observations.

“It’s just such a creative and unusual experience that it breeds a sense of ‘we’re in this thing together.’ While much of what transpires there would not be labeled ‘churchy’ or even ‘religious,’ it does link people. In my opinion, that experience of relating is inherently spiritual. It also represents the optimal learning environment.”

Paul is not alone in that opinion. The data collected for this study combined with the corroborating research confirm this.

Community From the Perspective of the Improv Church Participants

The corroborating research supports the experience of participants at the Improv Church. That the promise of community draws people into the Improv Church seems irrefutable. Regardless of the question I put before the participants at the focus groups, they often reverted to the theme of community.

When I asked participants how they might encourage a friend to come to the Improv Church, the theme of community surfaced in these answers: “When I invite
people to come I just tell them that the Improv Church is a fun place where they can get to know God and build relationships."

"I tell people it’s a very non-judgmental place."

"It’s a great place of fellowship with Christians and with nonbelievers."

When asked what aspects of the Improv Church influenced them to come back, again the theme of community was emphasized. This first person to respond in one of the focus groups blurted, "Definitely for me it’s the fellowship. It’s great to be with other people who get excited and share similar goals. They want an alternative to Friday night sitting at home, so why not come and hang out with people?"

The next person to respond once again spoke about the draw of community. "I just really like the Improv Church because at the end of the week it’s a chance for you to wind down and laugh off all the stresses you’ve had. You and your friends face these problems all week but then all of a sudden you come and laugh it off. You have a good night and hang out with your friends that you haven’t seen and you finally get a chance to sit down with them and say ‘Hey, how’s it going?’"

Still another person spoke of how nice it was to retreat to a place where "people can all bond together." According to the testimony of attendees, community is a primary reason why they return.

In answering subsequent questions, attendees continued to mention the idea of community. Their answers varied but were thematic nonetheless. For example, one respondent said, "It’s easier now to talk to friends about spiritual issues because you can initiate spiritual conversations by asking, ‘Hey, did you catch the last Improv?’"

A similar comment: "If the speaker addresses a certain problem that humans in
general struggle with, that opens the door for conversations with friends. You don’t always talk to friends like that, but it makes it a lot easier to talk to your peers about whatever is being addressed.” Another peripherally connected comment was: “I’ve met a lot of people who aren’t exactly in my age group that I see every day. People are older than me but I’ve learned to relate to another age group.” One final comment: “As a high-school student, I really don’t see college students that often, but there are a couple that I’ve got a friendship with because of the Improv Church.”

Community From the Perspective of the Improv Church Leaders

While the idea of community was mentioned frequently by the participants in the focus groups, it was even more pronounced in the conversations that I had with the improv players. This is not surprising in light of the sheer time, energy, and nature of the activity that pulls the players together. Before an improv player is accepted on the team, he or she must sign a covenant of commitment (see Appendix D). This commitment requires, among other things, involvement in practice sessions at least every week, attendance at the Improv Church, and involvement in a small group. In short, signing on as an improv player necessitates being involved in activities that tend to facilitate community.

As was the case with the participants in the focus groups, the improv players often reverted to the theme of community—irrespective of the question asked. Often this reference to community was mentioned in the context of references to the other themes that emerged from the data.

For example, Rusty was an improv player for 2 years. In my conversation with him, he spoke of his fellow improv players as a spiritual core group. He recalls
floundering in trying to find a good spiritual base on campus his freshman year. "It
was hard," he said, "because my friends from high school were never going to fulfill
my need for a spiritual core group. I needed to engage in conversations that had a
spiritual emphasis. My Improv Church community filled that void in my life." Later
in our conversation Rusty emphasized a similar point. "My freshman year I was
looking for a spiritual core group that I could relate to on a spiritual level. Well, the
improv players have become that group for me. I remember, especially my
sophomore year, that to have this group that shared similar values and interests was a
comforting thing. In that context I discovered that spirituality is not my own—even
my own spirituality is shared. That accountability from my community is the best
incentive I have to live an authentic life that is grounded in God."

Rusty's reflections illustrate the close association between the themes. As
was often the case, Rusty spoke of two of the themes in the same sentence by
referring to both the first theme (community) and the final theme (spiritual growth)
that emerged from the data. Clearly the themes are connected in a way that show
how the impact of the Improv Church has affected people on different levels; still, it
is the combination of these different aspects that comprise the overall influence that
the improv experience has made.

Other interviews similarly reflected the confluence of themes. Take, for
example, the interview I held with Pat on February 12, 2002. Pat became an improv
player her freshman year, served for 4 years on the Improv Church board and also
served as co-director of the improv troupe her junior and senior years. Having
several years of experience in primary leadership roles, Pat’s reflections were of particular interest to me.

Lounging on a sofa in my office, she sat comfortably in a pose that betrayed the intensity of her personality. “The improv team has been really, really rewarding for me spiritually,” she said. “The team, it’s a really good support team for life.” She continued to develop this sense of community that she experienced in the group. “It’s so fun to be a part of this community of people. You get to know them so well that you could throw a pillow at any one of them and say ‘It’s a Ninja star’ and suddenly you’re connecting through the creation of a story. These shared experiences help shape a tight community.”

In describing this community Pat said this: “These improv players become friends who are there for you. It’s an interesting combination of people that you can be so silly with and yet so honest with as well. This deep friendship happens so quickly with the improv players.”

Peter, another 4-year improv player, board member, and co-director, shared similar musings. When I asked Peter what kept him involved in improv for so long, he immediately launched into a discussion about community. “Through these many years the one thing that has kept me going was the people I was working with. Without a doubt, that’s the biggest reason that I kept coming back.” For Peter, the Improv Church community extended beyond just the improv players. “My Improv Church family included all of you in leadership—you and the other pastors at the College Church, the people setting up chairs, the greeters, the people serving the
drinks—all that sort of thing. Just everyone working together to create the experience was the big thing that kept me coming back.”

While Peter spoke of all the people involved in Improv Church as being a part of his community, it was with the other improv players that he forged the strongest ties. “The people I was working with the most became my primary community. There’s just a huge bond there. You spend a lot of time with them, and a lot of time being emotionally naked together. You’re just really open with people and really honest. Often you gather after going through a tough day and you start creating something together out of nothing and it’s a real bonding experience. That was special.”

Over and over in the interview, Peter emphasized the theme of community. “I came here as a brand-new student and only knew a couple people on campus. Then I was thrust into a very close and intimate context with this group of 16 improv players. Each person in the improv group had different core groups of friends and suddenly we come together to create this new group. Everybody dressed differently and had different personalities and different backgrounds, but somehow everyone meshed just fine. Every year they have become my best friends. Having those friends to go have fun with and goof off with during practices, yet do something that we all believe in deeply, that’s just great.”

As Peter shared, again the major themes melted together. While he talked of the spiritual component in the context of community, he also mixed the other major theme of humor into his discussion about the value of the community. “I can’t tell you how many times,” he said, “that I’ve had a terrible day and the last thing in the
world I wanted to do is go goof off at improv practice, and yet I go and about an hour into it we’re all just running around being elephants or cows or whatever and we’re laughing our heads off! It’s great!”

Peter also braided the spiritual and the community themes together. “Friday night has always been a night to get together with friends to study the Bible. It’s always been a real ‘friend’ time. Improv Church has fit perfectly with that paradigm, in that now I gather with 400 of my closest friends.”

Rhonda, another student leader at the Improv Church, shared similar musings. “I had emotional connections with the people involved,” she reflected. “Spiritually speaking it was nice because everybody could connect together and we’d share worship thoughts and we would discuss things. That spiritual connection would keep us grounded. In that environment at the Improv Church you realized that it isn’t just about you. You saw yourself as part of a bigger picture, a bigger whole. Being connected in the Improv Church was definitely the best experience I had in college.”

Being involved as an improv player not only helped Rhonda to feel connected to the improv family, but made an impact on all of her relationships. “I find myself so much more open with people than I used to be. I’ll meet someone new and I’ll just start telling them details and doing improv kinds of things, because I’m just so used to opening myself up that it’s made me more relationally risky—more willing to be vulnerable with others. The Improv Church did a ton for me socially. I probably would not have had nearly as many friends, not because it made me more desirable, but because it brought me to people’s attention and it gave me the confidence to take the initiative to make friendships.”
Rhonda was not shy about her intentions going into improv. To connect with others on the team was a high priority at the outset. "I wanted to connect with the people working in it," she said. "I wanted to contribute, to help out, and to support the Church of Acts. I wanted to encourage kids to come to it—especially students from Whitman College. When they showed up, that was really big."

Rhonda concluded by saying, "The bottom line for me was that I found the environment at the Improv Church to be addicting. There's that atmosphere of support because when you need volunteers, volunteers are willing to go up there because everyone is supportive. It really is a community of love and support."

No question about it, the Improv Church offers a taste of community in a world that is starving for it. My interview with still another improv player, Kelsey, underscored this point. "I really enjoyed being with the other improv players," Kelsey bubbled in the interview. "It became important to me, not only as a social activity but also as a spiritual thing because I know it was blessing people."

Kelsey offered several specific examples of community at the Improv Church. For example, she said, "One of the guys in our group told us after the church service that he was having some family problems. That was really powerful to me because he opened up to us and felt comfortable enough to share openly. That experience—and many others like it—brought us all closer together. It also connected us to God. We were all connected and I think that shows."

Why did Kelsey join the improv troupe for a second year? As was the case in my other interviews, she brought up the importance of community. "Well," she smiled, "I think it was the combination of friendship and ministry that the Improv
Church set up. We could actually support each other and rely on each other and in that process we all learned something about relying on God as well. All in all, the Improv Church is a great place to get to know other people. It’s a safe place where you belong. For me, I’m not an extrovert, and so I like the feeling that I belong in a place like a church. Normally, I would never be the one to go initiate conversations, but at the Improv Church I found myself doing that because I felt comfortable.”

This idea of the Improv Church as a safe, loving, and nurturing community surfaced over and over. Clearly, whatever else happened at the Improv Church and whatever other reasons people had to be there, one of the strongest draws was to just be with people.

Corroborating Research

Lev Vygotsky

The idea that community plays a significant role in learning is not new. Vygotsky advanced the idea that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Simply stated, full cognitive development requires social interaction.

Vygotsky (1978) writes:

Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (p. 57, italics mine)

A corresponding theme of Vygotsky’s theoretical framework postulates that the potential for cognitive development depends upon the “zone of proximal
development.” By this he referred to a child’s “actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving” and the higher level of “potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). His theory asserts that full development of the “zone of proximal development” depends upon social interaction. In other words, the learning that can be achieved in community with adult guidance or peer collaboration surpasses what can be accomplished alone.

Vygotsky’s flavor of constructivism emphasizes the shared, social construction of knowledge, advocating that the social and cultural context and the interactions of novices with more advanced thinkers scaffold or facilitate the learning process. The educator assumes the role of navigating between the new material to be learned and the learner’s level of readiness, facilitating the child’s growth through the “zone of proximal development.”

More recently, numerous voices have underscored the indelible connection between community and learning (Harada, Lum, & Souza, 2002; Matthews & Menna, 2003). Dede (1995) suggests, “Learning is social as well as intellectual. Individual, isolated attempts to make sense of complex data can easily fail unless the learner is encouraged by some larger group that is constructing shared knowledge” (p. 2).

Learning is a social enterprise that happens through interpersonal interaction within a cooperative environment.

Long-term, persistent efforts to achieve come from the heart, not the head, and the heart is reached through relationships with peers and faculty. Love of learning and love of each other are what inspire students to commit more and more of their energy to their studies. The more difficult and complex the learning, the more important are caring relationships to provide the needed social support. (Johnson et al., 1991, p. 1:11)
Social constructivism focuses on “co-constructed knowledge” that results from interactions (Harapnuik, 1998, p. 4). This requires interactions between learners and educators and among learners themselves in order to co-construct knowledge. Through cooperative learning, students work together to accomplish shared goals and make the most of their own and each other’s learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994).

Ellen Wagner

Ellen Wagner (1997) supports the idea that interactions in online learning communities represent a necessary part of learning. She suggests that interactions should change learners and move them toward an action state of goal attainment. Wagner proposed six types of interactions that affect learning (as cited in Eggers, 1999). These interactions occur quite naturally on a regular basis at the Improv Church. Our community, in effect, is designed as a place in which these interactions flourish (see Table 8).

Socio-cognitive theory maintains the significance of interactions (Lee & Greene, 1999). Eggers (1999) agrees: “Theory translates best into learning when the learner is actively involved with content, the instructor, and other students” (p. 36). Such interactions happen regularly at the Improv Church, making it a place that Tollefson (1990) calls a “collaborative learning community.” His research suggests that collaborative learning communities and the associated processes of developing them help to create conversations which lead to the energizing and empowerment of students. In these learning communities, faculty reported that they observed “more
student involvement in learning, better student performance, improved student retention, [and] an improved teaching and learning environment” (Tollefson, 1990, abstract). These community experiences proved to be more conducive to learning than conventional learning environments. It is the goal, then, of the Improv Church to create this kind of learning environment.

Not only is this kind of environment conducive to learning in an educational sense, it also characterizes the kind of church that holds the promise of attracting young people in the future. Barna (2002) explored the types of churches that are most appealing to young people. His research shows that Christian teens were most interested in the church’s internal culture and the depth of community among congregants. Non-Christian teens expressed different opinions as to what they would look for in a church. There was one commonality between the Christians and the non-Christians, however, and that is that both groups said that friendships and community would rank as a primary reason for choosing a church.
Table 8

*Ellen Wagner’s Types of Interactions and Their Relevance to the Improv Church*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Description of the Improv Church</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Interaction to increase participation</td>
<td>It is active, volitional, and internally mediated, representing a process of discovering and constructing meaning from information and experience.</td>
<td>Learners flock to the Improv Church without any external incentives. They receive no worship credit for attending. Instead, they often stand at the door in adverse weather conditions for half an hour, cough up a cover charge at the door, and often settle for a seat that is not ideal, just for the privilege of entering into our learning environment! In short, their participation is “active, volitional, and internally mediated.” The payoff comes in the joy that participants find in the process of “discovering and constructing meaning.”</td>
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<td>2. Interaction to increase engagement</td>
<td>This type of interaction provides learners with a means of engagement.</td>
<td>Volunteers work tirelessly to engage the attendees in the learning experience. From the point of entrance at the Improv Church, attendees are invited to engage. This engagement includes such things as interacting with each other over drinks at the beginning to sharing suggestions during the program. Moreover, the programming is designed to increase engagement. For example, the opening exercise usually solicits engagement by including everyone in some kind of an interactive exercise. It is also the case that often these kind of engaging exercises are strategically placed throughout the programming.</td>
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<td>3. Interaction to develop communication</td>
<td>It includes clearly articulating expectations, providing opportunities for personal expression, offering the ability to exchange information without fear of being judged or punished, persuading individuals to subscribe to a particular point of view or to recognize the value of making a change.</td>
<td>The culture at the Improv Church tends to foster this type of interaction. Expectations are always articulated in the welcome with boundaries set regarding what types of suggestions will be accepted (anything that steers clear of the bedroom and the bathroom), how to give a suggestion (only by raising a hand and being called on), and so on. These opportunities for personal expression are given throughout the evening. Also, the facilitator often alludes to the fact that no idea is a bad idea. All participants readily identify with the challenge facing the improv players of making up sketches on the fly. Consequently, the audience affords grace to actors on stage. This creates an environment of acceptance, where mistakes are acceptable and people can relax “without fear of being judged or punished.” Finally, the experience leads to an invitation to “subscribe to a particular point of view or to recognize the value of making a change.” This invitation is to accept Christ and/or to live an uncompromising Christian life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Interaction to receive feedback</td>
<td>Learners need to obtain information from a variety of sources (from instructions, from other learners, from their own observations, from information resources) to judge the quality of their own performance.</td>
<td>At the Improv Church access to external information sources includes activities such as consulting the Bible, listening to other learners who volunteer to share their story, telling someone how the lesson personally applies, and by participating in times of quiet reflection.</td>
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### Table 8—Continued.

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<td>5. Interaction to enhance elaboration and retention.</td>
<td>The extra cognitive “practice” that results from generating alternative interpretations makes it easier for learners to integrate new information into their existing cognitive framework for enhanced long-term retention and recall.</td>
<td>That this type of interaction is taking place at the Improv Church is evidenced by the fact that when students where asked to recall their most memorable Improv Church service, the typical answer involved an evening where they participated in a “hands-on” way—either by giving the talk that night, or volunteering to be part of a sketch, or doing the music, etc. This “extra cognitive practice” clearly embedded the experience deeply into the memory.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Interaction to support learner control/self regulation</td>
<td>This interaction is particularly important within the context of preparing individuals to be lifelong learners, since it deals with the ability of a learner to stay on task, to mediate the need for additional information to complete one’s understanding, and to recognize when the learning task has been completed.</td>
<td>This final interaction is more difficult to measure based on the data collected for this project. Some of the participants who were interviewed testified of the impact that the Improv Church had on their spiritual commitment and their desire to seek deeper spiritual realities. Others spoke of meeting God at the Improv Church and seeing the trajectory of their lives changed as a result. Whether or not they will pursue lifelong spiritual learning presents a question that can only be answered by extending the time parameters of this research.</td>
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**Note.** This list of types of interactions is cited from Marilyn Eggers’s dissertation rather than Wagner’s work as it has addressed a typographical error in the original publication. In Wagner’s original work, she incorrectly lists the second type of interaction as the same type as the first interaction. The error was corrected in Egger’s table per directions of the author, Ellen Wagner, personal communication, July 15, 1999. From “Web-based Courses in Higher Education: Creating Active Learning Environments,” by Marilyn Eggers, Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University. Copyright 1999 by Marilyn Eggers. Adapted with permission.
Other Themes: Disconfirming Data

As can be expected with qualitative data, some of the themes and stories shared during the interviews did not fit cleanly into one of the three categories of community, humor, or spirituality. While the subjects mentioned might peripherally connect to one of the three major themes, those comments will instead be filed into a category of their own. In this way we recognize the inimitable nature of these data and seek to preserve the integrity of the research. Consistent with the previous presentation of data, the findings are categorized by first considering the disconfirming comments from participants, followed by the disconfirming comments of the players.

Disconfirming Data From the Improv Church Participants

Several themes emerged in the focus group interviews that did not clearly connect to community, humor, or spirituality. Nevertheless, participants offered some observations about the Improv Church that have not been included in the descriptions analyzed to this point. These random comments still offer some insight in answering the research questions.

In the first focus group a young lady offered a disparate comment when she reflected on the “liberal” nature of the improv experience. In her words, “One of the reasons why I like the Improv Church so much spiritually is because the idea of it is more liberal than orthodox. I’ve always liked the liberal style of praising God. When it’s strict I’ve always found that the kids always fall quicker when it comes to temptations and stuff because they haven’t been exposed to it. They haven’t learned
how to say no.” For this particular student, one of the appealing aspects of the Improv Church had to do with its “liberal” approach to ministry. In this case, she perceived her spiritual experience was affected positively by being in an environment where a wide freedom of expression was honored. In this way she did not feel the need to abuse freedoms when afforded them. She contrasted this to other students trapped in a “strict” and “orthodox” environment where they never learned to say no.

In the second focus group that met on May 5, 2002, all of the comments of any length or substance tied in to at least one of the three major themes. The only minor exception came from the student who remarked, “I learned a lot about closure.” Because he failed to elaborate, it is difficult to conjecture how to understand or file this comment.

The focus group of May 17, 2002, yielded a couple of comments that were unique. One woman, who was about 20 years older than traditional college age, offered the following critique: “I have had difficulty sometimes just watching people and their reactions and thinking, ‘Hmmm, I wonder what they’re getting out of this?’ But I come from a relatively straightforward background. I mean, we weren’t vegans or anything, but we didn’t ride bikes on Sabbath—that kind of thing. So to come to having a part of a sacred day service like the Improv Church—with nothing sacred—is a jump. It’s a leap.” Her comment did fly in the face of reams of other remarks that contradict her perspective on the spiritual value of the Improv Church. I did not include her comment in the wider body of data on the spiritual benefits because she did not qualify as part of the demographic I was researching. Her comment was not tossed because it was dissenting. Rather, it was not included because she was not a
collegian. Furthermore, she was a one-time visitor to the Improv Church who found her way into the focus group more by default than design.

Because my research question is aimed at understanding why the Improv Church is appealing to collegians, I believe her contribution in the focus group should be presented as disconfirming data. Her comment did not contradict the other data with regard to spirituality, but beyond that, she could not inform my query about collegians and their perceptions since she was not one.

Another comment that was mentioned several times related to the music. Traditionally, music has been a minor part of the Improv Church. Usually there will be a special music incorporated into the program. Also there is typically about 30 minutes of music while people get drinks and converse with each other. During that first half-hour, music is used more as background to conversations. Still, a few people in the focus groups made statements like this: “I come back to Improv Church because I enjoy the music. I especially enjoy the Improv Praise. I’m just the audio type of person and I like music.” While music plays a minor part of the Improv Church, it is the major draw at Improv Praise; thus, students such as the one in this focus group always have the option of Improv Praise. The few comments about music did not merit major study since music is not primarily what makes the Improv Church appealing to collegians; thus it does not inform the first research question of this study. It does merit mention, however, since there are a few who would attest that the music at the Improv Church has definitely affected their spiritual experience.

Another disconfirming piece of data came from two students who mentioned that the appeal of the Improv Church for them was that it allowed them the
opportunity to see "different ways that people can worship God." As one student put it, "I appreciate the roundedness of the Improv Church. It makes you appreciate God a lot more." A similar comment came from still another student who said, "I appreciate the chance to look at things through somebody else's binoculars. We need to do that. Different cultures do that. It's like when you go overseas you get a chance to sit in somebody else's seat for a while." This chance to view God and others from a new perspective appeals to at least a handful of participants.

It is important to at least acknowledge that these disconfirming insights partially inform the answers to the research questions of this study. However, because these comments could hardly be seen as thematic, they are presented in the context of disconfirming data rather than as a major theme of the research.

Disconfirming Data From the Improv Church Leaders

As was the case with a few of the comments from Improv Church participants, the leaders made occasional remarks that proved difficult to tidily fit into one of the major themes. The challenge to categorize their comments notwithstanding, their insights still merit acknowledgment.

Howard spoke about the location of the event as one of the factors that made the Improv Church appealing to him. His comments refer to The Center for Sharing, the venue we have used for 4 of the 5 years we have been in operation. In Howard's words, "I think what adds to the experience is the location. I am so bummed that you guys are losing that location because I just can't think of a more conducive atmosphere at all. We don't want to cry over that one though, but the location is key for me." At present, the owners of the building are negotiating its sale.
Consequently, we are uncertain about where we can meet in the future. While the building was mentioned only in passing in this one interview, it does make the church more appealing—at least for some.

Although it was not identified as a major part of the church’s appeal, I do think it lends to the fun atmosphere and is an important piece of disconfirming data that should at least be pointed out. This observation is based both on Howard’s comment and on our experience. During the 2002-03 school year we rented a theatre that had been renovated into a church. The church leaders unanimously agreed that we lost a vital dynamic by the move. Furthermore, our attendance numbers showed a modest decline. While the respondents to the surveys did not overtly identify that the physical building is what makes the Improv Church appealing, the venue is a big part of the whole experience. Thus it partially helps to answer the first research question, but perhaps is a more significant part of why collegians come than was articulated in the interviews. One explanation for this might be that when the data were collected, the only venue the Improv Church congregation knew was the Center for Sharing. Because that was a consistent piece in our history together, it was not separated as an independent focus of conversation.

Other improv leaders hinted at the appeal of the risky nature of the adventure. Several of the leaders mentioned the internal apprehension they felt when auditioning to be an improv player. Many expressed feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure. By taking the risk, however, the players discovered personal reserves and talents that would have been dormant had they not dared to get involved at the Improv Church. As Rusty put it, “I’ve learned of some extra abilities in there that I didn’t really know
about.” While risk may not rank as the biggest hook for involvement, the tantalizing appeal to venture outside of one’s comfort zone does hold a certain charm that is worth mentioning.

Another theme that many of the leaders mentioned had to do with the public recognition that goes along with being an improv player. Most of the players expressed surprise at how often strangers would recognize them as Improv Church actors. For example, Peter talked of how being an improv player “made me a lot more recognizable on campus—an unforeseen side affect, definitely! It’s kind of weird, kind of hard to get used to it, actually. It’s strange because just about 75-80% of the new people that I talk to on campus will say ‘I know who you are.’ Even in the valley, in Wal-Mart or some place like that, someone will walk up and say ‘I’ve seen you at Improv.’ It’s a bit of a wakeup call—realizing how visible a ministry this is.” Other players reported conversations alluding to recognition that transpired on campus, in stores around town, even in other towns! While none of the players mentioned “fame” as part of the draw for involvement, most of them confessed feelings of fame that came as part of being associated with the Improv Church. This resulted in a sense of accountability to the community at large. Players shared stories of feeling responsible to live authentic Christian lives because they knew that strangers recognized them from the Improv Church. Although these data do not directly answer the research question about what draws collegians to the Improv Church, it does illuminate in a limited way our understanding of how players perceived their spiritual journeys were affected in more of a global sense. As several
of the players reported, their spiritual experience became public and that carried with it a responsibility to the wider community.

Another slice of disconfirming data came in way of frustrations that players shared. The general tenor of the comments from the leaders was overwhelmingly positive. Frustrations voiced were clearly anomalies. However, some feelings of frustrations occasionally did surface in the interviews. For example, Pat shared this: “I experienced a lot more frustration with improv last year. It has to do with group dynamics. Sources of frustration would just be when we would hit walls. For me personally, I’d hit walls and feel insecure about it. Other times practices wouldn’t run smoothly. Everyone would be tired and you don’t want to get up for it—but that’s rare, this year especially. The first year there was a lot of frustration in the group because there was not a lot of distinct leadership amongst ourselves.” In a separate interview, Kelsey recounted the same frustration. “The first year was more frustrating because we didn’t have a distinct leader like Peter. So I kind of took on the position but I’m not a natural leader as far as I like to organize things but I don’t like to push people around or take a more aggressive stance and so people would only come half the time and I didn’t quite know how to not be mean or whatever without telling them to come. That got kind of frustrating.” These and similar comments simply serve as a reminder that all things with the Improv Church are not perfect. As is the case in any community, there are issues to work through and inevitable challenges. To be fair in the presentation of this data, it is important to disclose these kinds of comments that portray the Improv Church experience in honest language.
In sum, the full disclosure of the data helps to paint a more detailed picture of the reality of Improv Church. This picture, however, simply supplies context and texture to the major themes of community, humor, and spirituality.
CHAPTER 5

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONNECTIONS TO COMMUNICATION

Introduction

The second research question of this study explores the connection between the experience of the Improv Church and the scholarly literature that might help to inform our understanding of what is going on there. In order to clarify what is happening at the Improv Church, the focus to this point has been largely descriptive in nature. Now we look beyond the walls of the Improv Church to see how the specific experience in Walla Walla can be understood in the context and language of pioneering theories. Of particular interest is the connection between the spiritual experience of participants at the Improv Church and the research in two broad areas of study—communication and education. This chapter attempts to look at the experience of the Improv Church through the lens of communication while the next chapter explores that link with the literature in the field of education.

While there is voluminous research available on peripheral topics, there is scarcely anything available on the topic of improvisational communication and the impact that it has on the spiritual experience of the participants. For example, a keyword search of dissertations displayed over 2,000 hits for "active learning," over

143
600 hits for “improvisation,” over 2,300 hits on “spiritual experience,” and nearly 1,500 hits for “constructivist.” While these categories modestly touch on the focus of this study, they are, for the most part, tangential tracks. In contrast, a search of dissertations using the keywords “church,” “learning” and “improvisation” produced only five references—all of which are studies in music. I got 31 hits for dissertations by searching with the key words “communication” and “improvisation,” again primarily having to do with improvisational music. Searching EBSCO produced similar results. “Improvisation” produced nearly 500 references about improv and music. “Active learning” produced nearly 400 references, none of which were related to active learning in church.

Searches in other databases yielded analogous findings. In sum, both the academic community and the spiritual community have been silent on the topic of improvisational communication as a learning format in the context of a collegiate worship experience. As a result, the literature review of the current knowledge base produces research that is more peripheral than would be ideal, but it does underscore the need for this specific study. The limits notwithstanding, this chapter covers three broad categories: communication theories and the Improv Church, creative communication and worship, and finally, improvisation and spiritual experience.

**Communication Theories and the Improv Church**

Theoretical development of communication theories began in earnest in ancient Greece and Rome. In the fifth century B.C., Corax and Tisias offered works on persuasive communication. As democratic regimes formed in Greece, leaders began to understand that effective communication is power.
About a century later, Aristotle composed the work now titled *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*. This proved to be the most influential book on the topic for the next 2,300 years. To this day, the rhetorical approach to communication is the primary basis for communication theories. However, because these theories were based primarily on observations, they were not considered to be anchored in solid, empirical science.

“Hence, communication scholars argued with great enthusiasm in favor of or against theories that were posited with no real basis for determining the correctness of anyone’s theoretical positions” (Stone, Singletary, & Richmond, 1999, p. 2). It was not until recent years that social scientific methods were used to determine the validity of communication theories. These theories blossomed within four areas of communication study: (a) interpersonal, (b) group, (c) organizational, and (d) mass communication. Stone et al. (1999) identify three types of communication: (a) expressive communication, (b) accidental communication, and (c) rhetorical communication. Expressive communication involves a message that conveys a person’s feelings or emotional state. Accidental communication involves a message that unintentionally sparks meaning in the mind of others. Rhetorical communication is intentional, purposeful and intended to accomplish some goal.

The primary type of communication at the Improv Church is rhetorical in nature. The goal is spiritual transformation. We have a clear rationale and agenda in meeting. Thus, for the purpose of understanding the communication process at the Improv Church, the focus of this section will be on the rhetorical communication in a group setting.
Defining the Communication Process

“Communication is difficult to define. The word is abstract and, like most terms, possesses numerous meanings” (Littlejohn, 1999, p. 6). Nevertheless, a working definition is helpful in understanding the communication process at the Improv Church. For this study, human communication is defined as “a two-way process by which one person stimulates meaning in the mind(s) of another person (or persons) through verbal and/or nonverbal messages” (Stone et al., 1999, p. 48). This definition is useful for any discussion about communication at the Improv Church because it acknowledges that communication is a dynamic, continuing process as compared to a one-way transmission.

As referenced earlier in this study, the traditional model of teaching in churches tends to revert to a “one-way transmission” where some lackluster preacher stands before the congregation and presents information with little feedback. Our working definition, however, recognizes communication as a two-way proposition with an emphasis on meaning, rather than simply a report of information. This dynamic, two-way communication exchange is wired into the DNA of the Improv Church. To use two metaphors from sports, the traditional church might be compared to a pitching machine spitting out balls to a batter. In contrast, the communication style at the Improv Church is more like ping-pong, where a player stands on both ends of the action. There is constant delivery and feedback throughout the cycle. Rather than a preacher spitting out fastballs of knowledge and information, the Improv Church offers a partner (the facilitator) to play with.
McCroskey’s Rhetorical Model of Communication (McCroskey, 1996) helps to explain the give-and-take nature of the communication that transpires at the Improv Church. This model takes into account participants’ thoughts prior to communication, source encoding of information, messages being sent through different channels, receivers decoding the messages, feedback and noise. According to this model, communication is a non-static, continuous process of a person or persons trying to incite meaning in the mind of another person or persons. In this dynamic exchange, participants act as either source or receiver. It shows that through feedback channels, receivers can be active participants. The theory emphasizes the flexible nature of communication in suggesting that both the sender and receiver can adapt and rethink messages. By inviting attendees to be active in the communication process at the Improv Church, a dynamic environment is fostered that is ideal for human interactions and instruction. Simply put, it makes for a good learning environment.

McCroskey’s collaborative work (Baringer & McCroskey, 2000; Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Chory & McCroskey, 1999; McCroskey & Beatty, 2000; Sidelinger & McCroskey, 1997) has been helpful in bridging the disciplines between education and communication. The bifurcation, after all, is a contrived one. McCroskey argues that the discipline of communication has a lot to offer to the scholarship of teaching and learning (McCroskey, McCroskey, & Richmond, 2002). In calling educators to be more attentive to the discipline of communication in instruction, he uses the metaphor of a three-legged stool. Scholars in education have...
always recognized two legs of the stool for effective instruction—namely, subject matter mastery and pedagogical mastery. "The third leg, which is at least as critically important as the other two, is effective communication" (p. 384). The critical difference between knowing and teaching is effective communication in the classroom (Hurt, Scott, & McCroskey, 1978). The Improv Church offers a compelling model in which the distinctions between the disciplines of education and communication are intentionally merged. The result is an environment conducive to persuasion.

Communication and Persuasion

The involvement of participants in the learning environment creates a constructive climate that tends to have a positive influence on everyone attending the church. Johnston (1994) suggests that when it comes to rhetorical communication in a group setting, "audience members may influence each other. Whether it be through formal feedback to the speaker or through interpersonal communication before, during, or after the presentation, audience members have a powerful influence on the acceptance of the message" (p. 19). In the context of public communication, the speaker must maintain an identification with the audience in order to keep them empathetic rather than hostile (Cronkhite & Liska, 1980). If the speaker loses empathy and indentification from the audience they may coalesce in opposition against him/her. Part of what makes the communication process at the Improv Church so magical is the invitation of audience members to share in the responsibilities of the "speaker." There is high empathy and identification toward the facilitators on stage because in a sense everybody is on stage and holds a stake in the
outcome. By using this communication medium, the message being communicated packs a higher degree of persuasive punch.

Johnston (1994) offers a theory of persuasion process that helps to explain the dynamics present at the Improv Church. According to this theory, the process of persuasion involves various components that interact.

Components of persuasion include symbols, the people sending and receiving persuasive messages, message content, the interactants' self-presentations, the situation or context in which persuasion occurs, the channel in which the messages are transmitted (e.g., non-verbal, verbal, via audio or videotape), and the society and culture that influence the interactants' communication expectations and rules. . . .

The components of persuasion are fluid; these changing components shape and are shaped by the persuasion process that unfolds as two or more people interact. (pp. 23-25)

Johnston (1994) uses the metaphor of the rings you see when tossing a rock into a lake. Each component of persuasion produces a wave-like effect on the other components, and consequently, the process and outcome of persuasion changes.

To understand the persuasion procedure at play in the Improv Church, one must take into account the multi-layered barrage of persuasion components that work synergistically in the communication process. Multiple messages (verbal and non-verbal) over multiple channels (audio, visual, kinesthetic, etc.) over time increase the holding power of the experience. Ultimately, these multiple components of persuasion interact to bring about shared meaning among participants.

Johnston (1994) summarizes:

The discussion of persuasive contexts and functions allowed us to paint the situations in which persuasion is likely to occur, and the purposes and outcomes of persuasive communication. Details were added to our portrayal of contexts and functions by filling in the components and the interactions among components. At this point the painting began to reflect the dynamic process of persuasion.
What results is a picture in our minds. An abstract picture. A colorful picture. A picture of a powerful force—but a force that is constrained and managed by the will of the communicators. (p. 25)

Because of the steady stream of persuasion components, the Improv Church represents an ideal environment in which persuasion is likely to occur. The result is a new picture—a colorful, abstract, and powerful picture—of shared meaning about God, the church, and community.

Symbolic Interactionism

Another theory that illuminates our understanding of the communication dynamics at play in the Improv Church is called symbolic interactionism, or simply interactionism. This theory dates back to the work of German sociologist and economist, Max Weber (1864-1920) and the American philosopher, George H. Mead (1863-1931), both of whom stressed the “subjective meaning of human behavior, the social process, and pragmatism” (McClelland, 2000, p. 1). Herbert Blumer coined the phrase, “symbolic interactionism,” and formulated the most well-known version of the theory (Blumer, 1969).

Interactionism focuses on the subjective aspects of social life, rather than on objective, global aspects of social systems. The theoretical perspective of interactionism is rooted in an image of humans, rather than an image of society. Interactionists see humans as pragmatic actors who constantly adapt their behavior to the actions of other actors. This ability to adjust is linked to the human capacity to interpret the actions. This interpretation involves designating symbolic meanings then responding to the actions and those who do them as symbolic objects. This practice of adjustment is possible because of the human ability to imaginatively
rehearse alternative courses of action before responding. Moreover, humans are adept at processing and reacting to their own actions as symbolic objects. “Thus, the interactionist theorist sees humans as active, creative participants who construct their social world, not as passive, conforming objects of socialization” (McClelland, 2000, p. 1).

Interactionists interpret society in terms of patterned interactions among individuals. This concentration on interaction and on the meaning of exchanges to the participants shifts the attention away from unwavering norms toward more changeable, frequently readjusting social processes. In this framework, negotiation among members of society produces transitory, socially constructed relations which are always in flux.

Erving Goffman (1958), a prominent social theorist in this tradition, builds on the emphasis that this theory puts on symbols, negotiated reality and the social construction of society, and highlights the importance of the roles people play. He discusses roles dramaturgically, suggesting that human social behavior be interpreted in theatrical terms, as a loosely scripted plot with humans functioning as role-taking actors. Role-taking serves as the key mechanism of interaction, for it allows for one person to take the other's perspective. McClelland (2000) points out that the type of drama in these human exchanges is improvisational by nature. He claims that “interactionists emphasize the improvisational quality of roles, with human social behavior seen as poorly scripted and with humans as role-making improvisers. Role-making, too, is a key mechanism of interaction, for all situations and roles are
inherently ambiguous, thus requiring us to create those situations and roles to some extent before we can act” (p. 1).

Through the lens of symbolic interactionism we see the subjective and dynamic nature of social life. Humans are active, creative actors who construct meaning through social exchanges. These interactions tend to be improvisational in nature. Thus, from an interactionist perspective, the Improv Church is a microcosm of the broader reality where social meaning is created by actors assuming different roles and communicating through improvisational means.

Symbolic Convergence Theory

Another way to analyze the Improv Church is through the symbolic convergence theory (Bormann, 2001). This communication theory offers a way to look at group interaction and cohesiveness. The symbolic convergence theory is premised in the notion that members in a group must exchange fantasies in order to form a cohesive group.

By fantasy, the reference is not about fictitious stories or erotic desires; rather, “fantasies are stories or jokes that contain or reveal emotion” (Young, 1998, p. 1). Erickson (1998) explains:

Fantasy does not mean that it is all made up with whim and fancy or that it is intended to deceive. Rather, it is grounded in fact, reality, a way in which people both make sense of their experiences and make their social worlds. Fantasy is also a method for the imaginative and creative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need (p. 5).

“A fantasy chain reaction is a positive and energetic response to the initial fantasy” (Young, 1998, p. 1). For example, a group comes together for the Improv Church. As part of the improvisational portion of the program, one person offers
Starbucks Café as a suggestion for a sketch. This suggestion then triggers emotional responses within the group. Some people in the group perhaps came from Starbucks. Perhaps others are planning to lounge around the coffee shop after the program. Still others might remember a significant conversation at a Starbucks. Something as simple as a suggestion sets off a fantasy chain reaction. “Once the fantasy chain reaction begins, common ground is established between group members and a cohesion, no matter how slight, has formed” (Young, 1998, p. 1).

Generally, many fantasies will be expressed during an Improv Church service. Fantasy themes help to create a relaxed environment, because individual members can relate to the group theme.

The Greek root of fantasy is phantaskikos, meaning the ability to show the mind or to make visible. Through a fantasy theme it is possible to present a show to the group mind (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983). Presenters—or in the case of the Improv Church—the improv players and facilitators, make visible (understandable) a common experience and invest it with an emotional tone.

Ideally, all the attendees will find common ground with and relate to the group as a whole somewhere along the line in this communication journey. Young observes:

Cohesion within a group is not an immediate form of action. A single fantasy chain event will not bring about complete cohesion. . . . Creating cohesion within a group takes time, because recognizing similarities and developing a comfortable atmosphere is a gradual and critical process that a group must endure. (1998, p. 1)

“Through symbolic convergence, individuals build a sense of community or a group consciousness” (Griffin, 1997, p. 34). As symbolic convergence unites a group
with cohesive bonds, a feeling of togetherness is formed. Members start using the words "we" instead of "I," and "us" instead of "me."

At the Improv Church, many of the participants expressed the idea of community and belonging. Such sentiments can be explained, at least in part, by the symbolic convergence theory. By sharing fantasies on a routine basis, fantasy chains are triggered. People latch on to these themes and as a consequence, they bond. A tight, cohesive community is the result.

**Creative Communication and Worship**

There is no drought of research on the topic of communication. Using the keyword "communication" yields a plethora of over 50,000 dissertations. A search that includes the keywords "communication" and "process" trims the results to roughly 9,000—still an unwieldy base upon which to build this study. To add the key word "worship" further narrows the dissertations available to 19 hits. Add the key word (emphasis here on "key" as it is the cornerstone piece of the study) "improvisation" or "interactive" and the result is zero. Nevertheless, some of the research to date clearly enlightens this study. Of paramount interest is the study that has been focused on the effect of creative communication such as drama in worship.

There is some consensus among social researchers that the use of drama can enhance the worship experience of participants. Nakhro (2000) argues that heavenly worship as described in the book of Revelation is enhanced by the use of drama. Thus, he concludes that the New Testament validates a dramatic worship experience that can enrich, enhance, and deepen the corporate worship of Christians today. Moore (1998) studied the effectiveness of the homiletical drama in the context of
worship. His hypothesis contends that homiletical dramas positively augment the sermon by helping worshippers to identify in personal ways with an unresolved human issue and thereby prepare them to receive the Word of God when preached directly to that issue. Carroll (1993) asserts: “One basic need of today's church is the portrayal of biblical truth in a manner that involves the congregation and captures their imagination” (abstract). The following conclusion from his research is particularly relevant to this study:

In this local church setting, dramatic monological preaching was proven to be an effective and stimulating tool for enhancing corporate worship. The project affirmed the usefulness of the congregation in the planning and execution of the worship experience, dispelling the myth that worship is simply a 'spectator sport.' As never before the congregation became active participants in the drama of redemption. The pastor was also strengthened in the skills of sermon planning, preparation and execution. Most importantly, the pastor and congregation experienced a transformed working relationship whereby they provided mutual assistance and equipping in the task of worshipful communication. (Carroll, 1993, abstract)

Allinder (1983) studied the responses of worshippers to alterations in the services and learning experiences designed to enhance the use of the right hemisphere of the brain in worship. This portion of the brain has been believed to be the emotional processing center—as is explained in greater detail later in this study. This stands in contrast to the left side of the brain, which is associated with the analytical functions. He concludes that “not only did the enriched worship services and learning experiences reach the right hemisphere, but uncovered a left hemisphered hunger for such enriched experiences as well” (Allinder, 1983, abstract).

Beer (1998) studied the impact of drama on the spiritual experience of the congregation. “The study concluded that drama is a valuable tool to express religious ideas and to teach the history and culture of Jesus’ day” (abstract). Martin (1999)
supports Beer’s conclusion and calls for a more pronounced integration of artistic expression and theological reflection. His research suggests a need in churches today to foster an atmosphere of freedom and inspiration where creative forms of communication are not only accepted but encouraged.

While there seems to be a general consensus regarding the value that drama can have in a worship context, there is little information available to substantiate the use and effectiveness of improvisational drama in a church setting. Massey’s research (1991) informs the improvisation angle of this study by looking at ritual improvisation in the 19th-century African American slave community. She suggests that education in faith involves more than content and curriculum. In her words:

Educating in faith can involve the arts and music, liturgical celebrations, worship, and communal participation. Though such an understanding of educating in faith has existed for thousands of years, it was not until the birth of the Religious Education Association in 1903 that the idea of nurture and creativity in the communal context, as an organized effort, became a primary purpose for Christian education. (p. 8)

She goes on to explain that the notion of creativity in religious education has been in conflict with the influences of institutional schooling. In traditional models, “faith was taught through the memorization of biblical content, creeds, doctrines, and dogmas. The focus of education was content, correct information, and printed curriculum. Faith cannot be equated with correct knowledge of the Bible or doctrines” (p. 8).

Massey (1991) documents the importance of storytelling throughout the history of the African American community. She writes:

When storytelling was a community event, it was often performed in much the same way as the spirituals, by the call-and-response method. The storyteller
would improvise and embellish the story in such a way so as to invite the participation and responses of the listeners. (p. 48)

This historical perspective informs Massey’s (1991) conclusion:

In the nineteenth-century African-American slave culture, children learned beliefs and values not only through the formal meetings and rituals of the community, but through the impromptu gatherings around the campfire, conversations overheard among older slaves, and interactions between slaves and their white masters. Much of what slave children learned about life and the community’s identity occurred spontaneously within the context of living. Likewise, in the contemporary church context, children can learn values and beliefs through informal and spontaneous gatherings of the congregation. There are several informal processes and events that can be identified and implemented to enhance education and nurture in the local church. (p. 146)

Based on Massey’s conclusions, it seems plausible that contemporary spiritual experience might once again be enhanced through “spontaneous,” “impromptu,” and “improvisational” interactions.

**Improvisational Communication and Spiritual Experience**

Another vein of pertinent literature explores the research on improvisation with regard to spiritual experience. A keyword search using the words “improvisation” and “spiritual experience” yields limited results. The related literature seems, at best, vaguely connected to this research. For example, Townsend (1996) studied the musical experience of an African-American Baptist church congregation. The implications from his research suggest that the music and the teaching and learning process found in an African-American church setting can be transferred to school choral classrooms. In addition, some of the stylistic characteristics of African-American religious music—such as the ample use of improvisation—are also transferable. While Townsend’s work informs the knowledge base as to the value and transferability of musical improvisation, it says
virtually nothing about the specific impact that improvisational exercises have on the spiritual experience of the participants. Another pertinent study (Sears, 1998) demonstrated how improvisational practices can help women to actualize themselves in various identities—including, by implication, a woman’s spiritual identity.

The best connection between improvisation and spiritual experience comes from the work of Jacob Levy Moreno, M.D. (1889-1974). He pioneered experiments that at least modestly connect improvisation and spirituality. Moreover, he had a major influence on American theatre in his emphasis on spontaneity in theatre, therapy, and education. He is considered to be the founder of psychodrama—the science which explores the truth by dramatic methods. His theory was built upon Aristotle’s concept of catharsis and Goethe’s therapeutic techniques through drama and spontaneous production. While Moreno focused on psychology and emotional health, his work enlightens our knowledge about the effectiveness of pursuing spiritual truth through spontaneous drama. Scheiffele (1995) credits Moreno with discovering the healing power of drama. This discovery occurred while Moreno directed his Theatre of Spontaneity.

To apply the principles of Moreno’s work as it relates to a college student’s spiritual experience is to get at the heart of this study. Other scholars build upon Moreno’s base and apply the philosophical framework in the context of the church and religious schools. For example, Coe’s crucial question (paraphrased) of 70 years ago is still relevant: Is there an alternative method of discourse for helping the young know how to “assume responsibility”? (as cited in Hinds, 1998). Coe wondered: Is there a way to promote responsible decision-making and participation in the
community’s ministry as a likely outcome of training? If so, what does such training look like? If such a process were to be used, would it not result in a heightened spiritual experience for the participants?

Winings (1999) thinks so. Consider the conclusion of her study on new paradigms for educating religiously:

Campus religious directors can become highly effective religious educators. But this will happen only when they become responsive to the needs of their student constituencies and find new educational opportunities to convey the message. That is why today’s campus religious directors are challenged to develop a new paradigm and model of ministry which understands students’ need (1) to relate to their faith maturely, knowledgeably, and in relationship with other faiths; (2) to practice their faith in a context and manner that engages them completely; and (3) to inherit the wisdom of the past and share the richness of the future. It is possible that programs such as Religious Youth Service can address these needs creatively and faithfully. (p. 345)

The Improv Church represents another such program that seeks to address the needs creatively and thus impact the spiritual experience of the participants. Through the ministry opportunities that the Church of Acts affords, the leaders strive to communicate the Gospel in a manner that invites young people to practice faith in a way that “engages them completely.” This includes engaging them in the experiences to serve others in Christ’s name as an avenue to know Christ personally. It involves engaging them in the worship service by allowing each person the opportunity to help shape the experience. It also entails involvement beyond the large group gatherings and affords life-changing opportunities through small-group interactions.

Summary

There remains a black hole of knowledge to be explored with respect to improvisational communication and spiritual experience. The literature is sparse
when it comes to understanding the spiritual impact of interactive communication on collegians. The limited work that has been done in this area consistently suggests that involving students in the learning process through interactive communication is a positive direction in learning and should be studied further.
CHAPTER 6

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONNECTIONS TO LEARNING

Introduction

In an attempt to capture the essence of the Improv Church, it is important to connect to the theoretical underpinnings that help to explain the experience of the participants and provide answers to the research questions. The data collected in this research suggest that participants see their interaction with the Improv Church as positive. Many collegians testify of being spiritually impacted through the ministry of the Improv Church. They affirm the social benefits of the church. They share affirming stories of the fun and humor associated with the event. They speak reflectively of the spiritually defining moments they have encountered. The large crowd of people jockeying at the door to get a seat in the church speaks to the popularity of the program. The seemingly endless comments from people in the interviews tell us that something significant is happening. The question becomes: What is going on that makes it so popular? Related questions include: What aspects of this learning environment can be explained by landmark theories? How do interdisciplinary studies enlighten our understanding of the data from this research? To get at the answers to these questions, this chapter will bridge the connection
between this research and other theories from the field of education that offer a foundation to explain the practical phenomenon of the Improv Church.

Learning Theories

Adult Learning Theory

Despite a surfeit of books, articles, and research conferences dedicated to adult learning, there is no universal agreement about theories governing or defining adult learning. Based on epistemological, communicative, and critically analytic criteria, theory development on adult learning is anemic and is mired in myths that are entrenched deeply into educators' minds (Brookfield, 1992). Brookfield (1995a) makes this argument:

The attempt to construct an exclusive theory of adult learning—one that is distinguished wholly by its standing in contradiction to what we know about learning at other stages in the lifespan—is a grave error. Indeed, a strong case can be made that as we examine learning across the lifespan the variables of culture, ethnicity, personality and political ethos assume far greater significance in explaining how learning occurs and is experienced than does the variable of chronological age. (p. 1)

Perhaps the best way to present the praxis of adult learning is through the story of one of its staunchest advocates and defenders, Malcolm Knowles. For the past 60 years Knowles has become one of the most widely known and influential voices for adult education. His optimistic belief in individualism, self-help, and the democratic process shaped a theory that is alive and well and being practiced regularly at the Improv Church.

Knowles's story provides a bit of context for his adult learning theory. After receiving a degree from Harvard University and working as director of the work-study program for the National Youth Administration, Knowles agreed to become
director of adult education for the YMCA in Boston. It was there that Knowles had an epiphany that planted the seed that would eventually grow into a complex and controversial theory of andragogy.

The origins of the term, andragogy, can be traced to Dusan Savicevic, a visiting Yugoslav adult educator. Savicevic’s definition of andragogy suggested that it was the practice of an adult accompanying another adult in the learning process. Literally speaking, the word “andragogy” comes from the Greek words anere, for “adult” and agogus, for “the art and science” of helping students learn. It is a term used by adult educators to describe the theory of adult learning. The term offers an alternative to pedagogy—which attempts to explain how children learn. The andragogic model addresses five issues in formal learning: (a) letting learners know why something is important to learn—the need to know; (b) showing learners how to direct themselves through information—the need to be self directing; (c) relating the topic to the learner’s experiences—greater volume and quality of experience; (d) people will not learn until ready and motivated to learn—readiness to learn; and (e) a need to have a life centered, task centered, or problem centered orientation. Often this requires helping adult learners overcome inhibitions, behaviors, and beliefs about learning (Knowles, 1984).

The genesis of Knowles’ development of andragogy began with an astronomy class that Knowles organized at the YMCA. He contacted a professor at Harvard, who recommended a graduate assistant to teach the class. A dozen people came to the first class at the YMCA. The teacher used a lecture format to disseminate information to the students about the stars. Consequently, interest waned. The
following week a much smaller group arrived for class. The number dwindled to the point that Knowles was forced to cancel the class. This frustrated Knowles because he knew that the attendees were still interested in astronomy. Thus he set out to find an astronomer who was not “locked into an academic teaching stance” (as cited in Carlson, 1989, p. 3). He found such an instructor in a retired New England corporate executive who was active in a local association of amateur astronomers.

On the first night of class, the new teacher marched the students to the roof of the YMCA and asked them to look at the sky and reflect on what they saw that aroused their curiosity. The amateur astronomer made a note of their questions. Upon returning to the classroom, he used those things that sparked their curiosity as the curriculum for the class. In a relaxed, no-nonsense manner, avoiding the didacticism that had alienated the former class members, he shared his knowledge of a subject in which the students were deeply interested. For the next class, he invited the class to his home where they could view the stars from the comfort and privacy of his own observatory. By the second meeting attendance had grown from a dozen to 18.

My experience at the Improv Church intersects with the story of Knowles at the point of questioning why people—who presumably have an interest in spiritual matters—avoid going to church. As a theist with a Christian worldview, I am persuaded that human beings were all created in the image of God. Gen 1:27 records, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Because we were created in the image of God—who is the consummate expression of spirituality—every human being is a spiritual being. This
suggests that human beings have spiritual interests at heart. Crafted into our DNA is an attraction toward the spirit. So why the blatant disregard for church in America today? Like Knowles, I have anguished over the dwindling numbers of church attendees when these same "dropouts" still maintain an interest in spiritual matters. Similar to Knowles’s story, I have wondered if the answer in part lies in the pedagogical methods entrenched in most churches. This led me to brainstorm a different model of teaching that might inspire students who have an inherent interest in the subject. When we implemented new teaching methods that were similar to the approach taken by the corporate executive teaching astronomy, we found similar results—a dramatic increase in interest and attendance.

Knowles discovered a model of an effective teacher. Thus, he began shaping his notions of what adult education was all about. For future classes, Knowles bypassed professional teachers, opting instead for passionate laymen who “played with ideas.” Again, this notion aptly describes what goes on at the Improv Church. In essence we convene to “play with ideas.”

In the formation of his theory, Knowles was heavily influenced by scholars such as Carl Rogers, Arthur Shedlin, and Harry Overstreet. From Rogers and Shedlin, Knowles (1990) began to see the role of a teacher as a “designer and manager, which required relationship building, needs assessment, involvement of students in planning, linking students to learning resources, and encouraging student initiative” (p. 181). Knowles put this notion into practice by forming “inquiry units and teams” (p. 181) at George Williams College. These teams were tasked to discover, develop, and discuss the content upon which they decided. “I had never
seen such creative presentations and pride of accomplishment,” Knowles (1990) wrote of that experiment. “By the end of that semester I was a confirmed facilitator of learning” (p. 181). Knowles experienced a paradigm shift in his thinking about teaching. No longer did he view teaching as an exercise in controlling students; rather, teaching became an adventure of releasing students to discover what they were naturally curious to learn.

From Harry Overstreet, Knowles adapted the “maturity concept.” Overstreet, a leading philosopher and practitioner of adult education, challenged adults to mature so that they could practice the wisdom of life that would be unattainable for children and youth. According to Overstreet, the responsibility for this maturity was to be placed on the individual adult. While Knowles was significantly influenced by Overstreet’s ideas, he ventured on his own when he placed the onus for maturity not on the individual, but on adult education. He wrote, “Adult education faces a task of immense proportions in the immediate years ahead, the task of helping millions of grown-up people all over the world to transform themselves into mature adults” (as cited in Carlson, 1989, p. 4). Later, Knowles would change the nomenclature and replace the idea of the mature mind with his unique take on andragogy. Knowles redefined his understanding of andragogy as emerging technology for adult learning.

This technology that Knowles employed put the adult educator as the learning guide. Knowles’s explanation offers a concise snapshot of what happens regularly at the Improv Church.

I make no bones in my own practice with my students about the fact that I am manager of the processes. We have a structure, but it is a process structure. . . . The process structure will get at content. But the content is not yet structured. We’ll structure that together through the process. (as cited in Carlson, 1989, p. 5)
Similarly, as founding pastor of the Improv Church, I could paraphrase Knowles and say, “I make no bones in my own practice with attendees about the fact that I am manager of the processes of spiritual growth and learning. We have a structure at the Improv Church, but it is a process structure. . . . The process structure does get at the content. But the content is not yet structured. We’ll structure that together through the process.”

In *Modern Practice*, Knowles (1970) outlines a comprehensive theory that offers a complete technological direction to adult-education practice. In this book, the technology of adragogy is presented in a seven-step process. These seven steps anchor the practice at the Improv Church into a theoretical framework that gives philosophical rationale as to why it works. According to Knowles, the seven-step process that adult educators are to follow include: (a) set a cooperative learning climate, (b) create mechanisms for mutual planning, (c) arrange for a diagnosis of learner needs and interests, (d) enable the formulation of learning objectives based on the diagnosed needs and interests, (e) design sequential activities for achieving the objectives, (f) execute the design by selecting methods, materials, and resources, and (g) evaluate the quality of the learning experience while rediagnosing needs for further learning.

It can be argued that on any given Friday evening, these seven steps are practiced at the Improv Church. By involving everyone in some sort of improvisational icebreaker, the cooperative learning climate is established immediately. The mechanism for mutual planning comes by way of inviting all the people to participate in helping us to create an educational experience about God.
The learners' needs and interests inevitably find expression in the suggestions that come from the learners. The formulation of learning objectives takes shape as the experience unfolds. Together we arrive at what it is we seek to learn. While the general theme is planned in advance, the specifics are left to the participants at large. As for designing sequential activities for achieving the objectives, at the Improv Church that is typically the primary function of the facilitator. The improv games are usually chosen in advance. However, the pathway of those improv experiences remains anybody's guess. The design of the evening in terms of methods, materials, and resources is as limitless as the creativity of the participants. On the final point of Knowles's seven steps the Improv Church once again strays a bit from his formula. There is no formal evaluation process that solicits the input of the participants at the end of the lesson. This is done in a more traditional sense with the facilitator drawing the experience together by offering a summary and grounding the event in relevant passages of Scripture.

At the two points (numbers five and seven) where the Improv Church strays from the original seven steps, Knowles softened his stance in later years. In a revised edition of Modern Practice (Knowles, 1980), he combines the practices of andragogy and pedagogy, rather than pitting them against one another. This then allows for a blending of the traditional model with his new model. In his words:

I am at the point now of seeing that andragogy is simply another model of assumptions about learners to be used alongside the pedagogical mode of assumptions, thereby providing two alternative models for testing out the assumptions as to their 'fit' with particular situations. (p. 43)
By conceding the legitimacy of both models used in tandem, Knowles embraced a form of teaching that fits more cleanly with the approach used at the Improv Church.

Generally speaking, Knowles’s insistence that the adult educator is to manage the educational process is an idea that lands squarely in the theoretical and pragmatic center of the Improv Church. Based on his work, Knowles would have made a great member of the Improv Church! Ironically, however, Knowles traveled the country preaching his theory of andragogy but he did not really practice what he preached. In his seminars he used a style of teaching that was very traditional. Still, his work has contributed significantly to our understanding of why the Improv Church makes the kind of impact that it does.

Experiential Learning Theory

Another theory that is associated with adult learning involves experiential learning. The literature available on the topic of experiential learning is voluminous. In recent years over a thousand dissertations on the subject have been published. For the purposes of this study, however, I looked at experiential learning both in the context of church and of education. Finally, I considered David Kolb’s theory of experiential learning as it relates to the Church of Acts.

Experiential Learning and Church-based Education

Scholarly works documenting experiential learning in the context of church are dwarfed by the literature available that explores experiential learning in the field of education. The limits notwithstanding, helpful work has been done in this area.
For example, Nugent (1991) reached the conclusion that “experiential learning should play a major role in programs designed for training Christian leaders” (abstract). Gane (1992) reached a similar conclusion in his study that looked at the development of youth leadership in the local church through experiential learning. Fuder (1993) successfully used an experiential learning approach in training students for urban ministry. Blank (1982) looked at seven religious institutions, both undergraduate and graduate, that offer experiential learning programs in religious education. Based on his empirical study, he argues that an experiential learning approach in preparing professional Christian educators will ultimately produce better prepared educators.

Whether it is at the Holy Redeemer Lutheran church in Warren, Michigan (McKinney, 1992), the New Hope Baptist Church (Peek, 1990), the College Misericordia in Dallas, Pennsylvania (McLaughlin, 1990), or the Christ Church in Riverton, New Jersey (Salmon, 1989)—the conclusions overwhelmingly support the value of experiential learning in a ministry context. There appears to be widespread agreement among the published studies that experiential learning is effective in teaching spiritual truth.

**Experiential Learning and Formal Education**

There is a significant amount of research available on the topic of experiential learning in the context of formal education. Of particular interest to me was the scholarly work that had an improvisational component to it. To this end, a number of dissertations and papers informed the thrust of this study.

A keyword search for dissertations using both “experiential learning” and “improvisation” produced four published dissertations. A common element in the
studies was the positive outcomes experienced by all researchers in combining improvisation and experience with learning. Siach-Bar (1998) looked at the benefits of a hands-on exploratory museum environment. The conclusion is compelling: “Children were found significantly to prefer open-ended, free play to adult-initiated (structured) activities. . . . [Through the improvisation] . . . the children were the creators of their learning” (abstract). Colaresi (1997) conducted a qualitative study of a high-school theatre teacher who used improvisation as his main instructional technique. Again, the results of this method were characterized as very positive. Tink (1994) examined the role of disorder in teaching social sciences. He presented the alternative hermeneutic of “harmony” seen through six eschatological biblical images of the city. Harmony was also examined through the “jazz” metaphor, lauding its dissonance, syncopation, spontaneity, and improvisation. Finally, Jacobson (1989) studied movement-based instructional activities for beginning piano students. Using musical examples of suggested improvisations, Jacobson presented a persuasive recommendation that future studies apply these improvisational movements (along with other movement techniques) to The Music Tree series and other beginning piano series.

While the research examining experiential learning and improvisation in the educational context is very positive, Balaisis (1999) points out that the educational system still tends to undervalue experiential learning in all its forms, relegating it to a subordinate role with respect to the mandated “essential” curriculum. Her research, however, supports the value of experiential learning in terms of the transformational process in students. This transformation not only makes an argument for the
inclusion of experiential learning within every curriculum but also extracts the qualities and understandings that can enhance all educational endeavors.

Still others have explored the potential of improvisation and education. Jordan (2000) explored the use of improvisation in relation to learning. His study pointed out that inclusivity and continuity are guiding principles in improvisation. It contributed to the conversation that endorses the improvisational process in a wide range of settings, including the classroom. "Improvisation invites allusion and metaphor, which embrace a life-affirming spiritual dimension" (abstract).

Towell (1998) asserts that the experiential learning element in teaching is analogous to jazz performance. He argues that the communication process of effective teaching (as it is in jazz performance) is improvisational in nature. He identifies similarities between jazz improvisation and teaching. For example, the role of improvisation is similar in both. It is used to create better connections and to maintain the interest of participants in the music or content of the lesson. Also, the nature of improvisation is similar in that, to improvise in jazz and teaching, a planned structure is used as a skeleton in the performance over which the musician draws upon patterns learned from experience; these patterns comprise "the building blocks of improvisation." The patterns remain fluid in order to accommodate alterations in a variety of contexts. Jazz musicians and teachers learn to improvise in much the same way.

First, there is a love of and attraction to the practice which leads to experimentation in the art form. This experimentation is then followed by leaning the structure and vocabulary, ending with true composing and storytelling through complete immersion in improvisational performance. (Towell, 1998, p. 36)
Generally speaking, the literature presents an overwhelmingly positive—albeit incomplete—picture of experiential learning when combined with improvisation in both the context of church and school. These snapshots in both church and school emerge from the theoretical works of David Kolb.

**Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model**

One of the defining features of adult learning is the emphasis on experience as teacher. Lindeman’s (1926) frequently quoted aphorism conveys it well: “Experience is the adult learner’s living textbook” (p. 7). Adult education is therefore a “continuing process of evaluating experiences” (p. 85). This emphasis on experience is essential to the theory of andragogy that has evolved to describe the practice of adult education in societies as diverse as the United States, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia (Savicevic, 1991; Voogt & Marja, 1992).

While the idea of adult learning encapsulates a wide spectrum of ideological hues, one of the foundational beliefs shared by the primary theorists is this: Adult teaching should be grounded in adults’ experiences, and these experiences represent an invaluable resource in learning. Brookfield (1995a) asserts:

Almost every textbook on adult education practice affirms the importance of experiential methods such as games, simulations, case studies, psychodrama, role play and internships and many universities now grant credit for adults’ experiential learning. Not surprisingly, then, the gradual accumulation of experience across the contexts of life is often argued as the chief difference between learning in adulthood and learning at earlier stages in the lifespan. (p. 3)

Kolb’s theoretical model has served as one of the most influential among researchers of adult learning. Kolb presented a model of experience in a scientific form, thus moving educational thought from the locus of the instructor back to the
learner. Consequently, the value of experience has been an important part of conversations about education (Brookfield, 1990; Cross, 1981; Jarvis, 1995; Kemp, Morrison, & Ross, 1996).

Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1984) portrays a process of learning in which information is grasped either through the senses (concrete experience) or through thinking (abstract conceptualization). Learning is processed through reflection (reflective observation) or action (active experimentation). In sum, his theory addresses both the cognitive and affective learning domains, in both reflective and active modes.

The four learning experiences of the Church of Acts seem to mirror Kolb’s learning cycle (see Appendix E), beginning with the opportunity for reflective observation at the Improv Church. This experience invites attendees to watch the scenes unfold while engaging them in the learning process through reflection. Because the scenes are unscripted, the dramas inevitably hook audience members into a process of thinking about what they might do if they were on stage. Based on personal observations and numerous conversations, it seems impossible to passively watch the action transpire on stage without constantly reflecting on how you would respond in the situation. In this way the Improv Church experience becomes an exercise in watching, reflecting, and engaging with the learning process. The next quadrant of Kolb’s cycle is abstract conceptualization. In the Church of Acts, the Improv Serve offers opportunities for participants to put into practice the concepts taught at the Improv Church. In other words Improv Serve bridges the “thinking” and the “doing” in Kolb’s model. The next quadrant is active experimentation. The small
groups address this portion of the cycle by connecting the doing and the sensing. The final quadrant is the concrete experience. The Improv Praise service fits into this portion of the cycle by linking the sensing and the watching.

When both the concrete and abstract modes are used in an experience, and when the learner reflects and acts on that experience, the potential to completely engage in the learning process is expanded (Kolb, 1999). Thayer (1996) points out that the biblical idea of knowledge includes both “hearing” and “doing”; thus it is congruent with Kolb’s experiential learning theory.

From the start of the Church of Acts we have emphasized the importance of both “hearing” and “doing.” Therefore, if a person engages in the four primary ministries (small groups, Improv Church, Improv Praise, and Improv Serve) of the Church of Acts, the experience will encompass the whole of Kolb’s experiential learning process.

Not only does Kolb’s experiential learning theory help our understanding of the educational process for learners, it is a helpful lens through which to comprehend teaching as well. Wheeler and McLeod (2002) use Kolb’s experiential learning model to understand and explain their own response patterns that they use as teachers in the classroom. Experiential learning offers a “systematic way to think about and to develop further flexibility in teaching” (p. 694). Such classroom encounters where “flexibility” comes into play represent times of teacher improvisation when the “crucible in which teaching effectiveness is formed” (p. 694). By teaching effectiveness, they emphasize the importance of responding to changing classroom circumstances (Borich, 1996, 1998; Cooper & McIntyre, 1994, 1995). “Adaptive
skill is especially important in management teaching today where the unexpected is to be expected” (Wheeler & McLeod, 2002, p. 696). In light of the numerous learning styles present in the classroom, it is essential for teachers to “develop a wide and flexible base of techniques and responses” (Wheeler & McLeod, 2002, p. 696).

Kolb (1984) postured learning as a process of adapting to changing circumstances. By having a flexible and assimilating learning style, teachers can effectively adapt to the situation at hand. In this sense, effective teachers must be good improvisers. Wheeler and McLeod (2002) conclude that one important factor in a teacher’s effectiveness includes this skill of improvisation:

To respond to in-the-moment events in ways that preserve the continued integrity of the learning environment. This ability is enhanced by the teacher’s flexibility—choosing responses as appropriate to the circumstances surrounding the particular event, irrespective of one’s learning style. . . . Innovation and creativity in our day-to-day teaching are the ultimate outcomes from being self-confident in our ability to respond to in-the-moment events. (p. 714)

In the end, Kolb’s model informs our understanding of what it means to be an effective teacher and student. By addressing both the affective and cognitive learning domains, the learning environment can be enriched and the potential for learning can be strengthened.

Transformative Learning Theory

Another theoretical framework that might help to explain the experience of the participants at the Improv Church includes is in the area of transformative learning. This theory of transformative learning was shaped by the work of Paulo Freire, Phyllis Cunningham, Laurent Daloz, and Jack Mezirow. These pioneers have addressed the sociocultural and personal dimensions of transformative learning.
Jack Mezirow

Jack Mezirow in particular, has dramatically advanced this theory by attempting to delineate generic dimensions and processes of learning and its implications for educators of adults. His theory has evolved into “a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience” (Cranton, 1994, p. 22). Mezirow’s theory is built on psychoanalytic theory and critical social theory and emphasizes rational discourse, centrality of experience, and critical reflection (Imel, 1998).

For students to change their “meaning schemes (specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions),” they must engage in critical reflection on their experiences, which in turn leads to a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167). He asserts:

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 167)

Perspective transformation describes how meaning structures that learners have developed over a lifetime can be transformed. By “meaning structures” Mezirow is referring to the totality of a person’s experiences, both cultural and contextual, that influence how they act and interpret events (Taylor, 1998). A person’s meaning structure then becomes the belief filters through which he or she behaves. For example, the meaning structures of participants at the Improv Church

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will inevitably influence the suggestions a participant might give for the next sketch or how they will respond to an appeal to serve the community.

In Mezirow’s framework, learning then becomes the process through which meaning schemes (which make up the meaning structures) change as the learner adds or integrates new ideas within an existing scheme. Mezirow asserts that this begins with a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 50). Subsequent phases include such things as self-examination, critique of assumptions, and recognition that others have shared similar transformations (p. 50). In sum, Mezirow describes transformative learning in terms of learners changing their frames of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions, then following through with plans to bring about new ways of defining their worlds. His theory portrays a process that is both rational and cognitive.

While Mezirow’s theory certainly intersects with the learning environment at the Improv Church, it is the subsequent responses to his theory that seem to portray a more accurate picture of the improv experience. In terms of explaining the phenomenon of the Improv Church, most intriguing amongst the adaptations of transformative learning theory is the work of Robert Boyd, J. Gordon Myers, and John Dirkx. Their emphasis on certain nuances of Mezirow’s work seems to best describe the transformative learning that transpires in our context.

**Robert Boyd and J. Gordon Myers**

One of the major criticisms of Mezirow’s theory centers on the primacy that rationality plays in it. To counter this emphasis, a view of transformative education is emerging that stresses the vital role of intuition, creativity, and emotion. Boyd and
Myers highlight the affective component of transformative learning by including the “realm of interior experience” in the equation of learning (Boyd & Myers, 1988, p. 275). In doing this, they do not deny the importance of the rational as expressed through insights, judgments, and decision. They simply stress the significance of the extrarational as expressed through symbols, images, and feelings. It is worth noting that Mezirow has never denied the role of imagination in transformative learning. He believes the imagination triggers the process for critical reflection. His emphasis, however, rests on the rational. Thus, the two views might best be seen not as contradictory, but rather as a different emphasis of the same theory. “Mezirow’s view emphasizes the rational” (Imel, 1998, p. 3) whereas Boyd and Myers stress the imagination and the extrarational.

Imel (1998) suggests that whether transformative learning is approached as a consciously rational process as Mezirow advocates, or through a more intuitive and imaginative process like Boyd and Myers emphasize, fostering a learning environment in which it can occur is crucial. In this, both the role of the teacher and the role of the learner are important. The teacher must facilitate an environment that “builds trust and care and facilitates the development of sensitive relationships among learners” (Imel, 1998, p. 3). This is called a “community of knowers” (Loughlin, 1993) where people are integrated in a shared quest to make sense of their life experience. Furthermore, the student must take responsibility for helping to create this environment that is conducive to transformative learning.
John Dirkx

The voice that perhaps most accurately and succinctly captures the connection between the Improv Church and the theory of transformative learning belongs to John Dirkx. Based on a philosophy of imagination and Jungian psychology, Dirkx revisits transformative learning as a “journey of the soul, in which image and fantasy mediate processes of self-knowing” (Dirkx, 1998, abstract). In Dirkx’s rendition of this theory, the reflection component takes a person back to the soul (i.e., the heart) rather than to the mind, as Mezirow would suggest.

Dirkx (2000) builds on Boyd’s notion of transformative education. This reflects a psyche- or soul-centered psychology that suggests that what matters most in learning is what happens in the deepest part of our being, the psyche or soul. Dirkx suggests that this way of learning comes primarily through images as opposed to theoretical constructs or traditional forms of rationalism. He writes:

Images convey the ways in which we invest or withdraw meaning from the social world. By image, we intend here not mental pictures derived from perception or memories but more in the sense of poetic usage, a kind of psychic representation with no actual correspondence in an outer reality. For this reason, I refer to this perspective as the ‘mytho-poetic’ view of transformative learning. The mytho-poetic view relies on images and symbols, the language of poetry. (Dirkx, 2000, p. 2)

It is this “language of poetry” that I see as the primary contrivance of communication at the Improv Church. Further explanation from Dirkx solidifies this connection.

From the mytho-poetic perspective, transformative learning leads not back to the life of the mind, as we might find with reflection and analysis, but to soul. From this perspective, we focus on images, which are thought to represent powerful motifs that represent, at an unconscious level, deep-seated emotional or spiritual issues and concerns. They represent our imaginative engagement with the world, expressing what is not known or knowable through words alone in the
self-world relationship. They are manifest through dreams, fantasies, myth,
legends, fairy tales, stories, rituals, poetry, and performing arts, such as dance.
But images may also be evoked or activated through emotionally laden aspects of
interactions with others or with the text being studied. (2000, p. 2)

The Improv Church makes ample use of "fantasies," "stories," and
"performing arts." Through this "imaginative engagement" participants are not only
engaged cognitively, but emotionally as well. In the mytho-poetic paradigm of
transformative learning, images are given voice, expression, and amplification.
Dirkx (2000) suggests that "such approaches allow learners to become aware of and
give voice to the images and unconscious dynamics that may be animating their
psychic lives within the context of the subject matter and the learning process" (p. 3).

The term "imaginal method" is used to describe the general collection of
strategies helpful in nurturing learners' insight into facets of self that may be
concealed from conscious awareness. While Dirkx concedes that the imaginal
method varies, the strategies generally employ these four steps: (a) describing the
image; (b) associating the image with other aspects of life; (c) amplifying the image
through use of stories, poetry, fairy tales, or myths that present similar images; and
(d) animating the image by allowing it to talk further through additional fantasy or
imaging work. To understand how this vein of transformative learning is utilized in
the context of the Improv Church, it might prove enlightening to consider a recent
Improv Church service in the framework of Dirkx's four-step process.

As an example we will consider an Improv Church service conducted on
January 10, 2004. The educational/spiritual objective of the lesson was to
communicate the essence of the Christian Gospel. My sermon, or lesson, was entitled
"The Whole Shebang in Three Words." The session began with the first step by
offering a description of the image we wanted the learners to take away from the experience. This image was subtly introduced by leading the congregation in a few songs about the Gospel, and then more overtly introduced through my opening introduction. To construct the image of the Gospel I mapped out our educational journey and promised to share three words that would capture the core of the Gospel. While I did not disclose the three words initially, the improv players and I knew that the words would be guilt, grace, and growth. At the end of the service I reiterated that in these three words we get the Gospel—that is, “the whole shebang.”

Through improvisation we then led the participants through the second step of associating the image of the Gospel with other aspects of life. More specifically, I began by talking about how the Gospel must always commence with a sense of guilt. After sharing a text from the Bible to anchor the teaching in Scripture, I suggested that until we understand our own moral failure and guilt we cannot fully understand or appreciate the Gospel. To associate this image of guilt with other aspects of life we engaged the audience in an improvisational sketch called “Late for Work.” As the drama played out, an employee was tardy for work. Based on a suggestion from the audience, the workplace was a roadside construction crew. The other suggestion that came from the audience dictated that the reason for the employee’s tardiness was due to being “abducted by aliens who forced him to eat a truckload of Little Debbie Snack Cakes.” The employee was not aware of why he was late so his task was to figure out what to tell the boss based on the fellow workers behind the boss who were miming the excuse. Whenever the boss would turn around and see the workers (who would inevitably be in some contorted position trying to tip off their fellow worker as to the
cause of the tardiness), they would have to justify their action to the boss. By the
time the tardy employee actually guessed correctly as to why he was late the audience
was worked up into a frenzy of laughter and applause. By detouring to a worksite
and eavesdropping on a conversation between a guilty worker and his boss, we were
able to associate this image of guilt with another aspect of life.

This format for teaching the Gospel followed a similar pattern after each of
the three words was disclosed. In other words, after I introduced the second word we
then conducted an improv sketch that connected the image of grace with another
aspect of life. In this case it happened to be a family dinner, but if we were to teach
the same lesson at the Improv Church again it might be an African safari or a scene
from the Oscars that we would use. With improv, one never knows how the teaching
will connect to other aspects of life. For the final word, “growth,” the connection
happened with young men painting lines on a basketball court with Martha Stewart.
The connections are inevitably varied, creative, and refreshingly educational!

The next step of this transformative learning cycle was to amplify the image
through the use of story. Following each image that was introduced (guilt, grace, and
growth), we used an improvisational drama and then I followed with a story. Thus I
amplified the image that we used to teach the Gospel. For the first image of guilt, I
told the story of being served with papers which required that I appear in court. At
issue was a traffic accident which I had caused. I was guilty. I reflected on how I
could have tossed the papers into the recycling bin and dismiss the whole episode
from my mind. However, intuitively I knew that such an approach would be
injudicious. After all, everybody knows that justice will be served and wrong-doing
cannot go unrequited. The guilty party has a price to pay. In a similar fashion I amplified the other images of grace and growth with stories.

The final step in Dirkx’s process of imaginal method involves animating the image by allowing it to talk further through additional fantasy or imaging work. Dirkx teaches that this step can be accomplished through a wide variety of methods. In this specific Improv Church service that I have been using as a case study, the final step was realized through storytelling, music, and contemplation. To conclude my talk I shared the story of William Cowper, author of the hymn “There Is a Fountain.” His story allowed me to put skin on the theory of the Gospel. Cowper’s life can be divided into three chapters—guilt, grace, and growth. Toward the end of his life, after a dramatic episode of wrestling with guilt in a mental institution, he met Jesus and experienced grace for the first time. He then began to experience growth. This journey of sanctification for William Cowper culminated in writing the lyrics for the song that has been called “The Hymn of Redemption.” After sharing this illustration of William Cowper, I invited the Improv Church congregation to listen to a masterful musician sing the hymn and to use the time as an opportunity to respond to the Gospel in a personal way. As the soloist then performed the hymn, people had an opportunity to make the experience personal. In concluding the service in this way we completed the final step of Dirkx’s process of transformative learning.

By using this approach we embraced a more mytho-poetic approach to education. We probed emotionally and spiritually in the context of a community in order to give opportunity for participants to connect with the soul. This soul connection occurred, I believe, both with one another in community, and in a personal connection.
sense as participants were challenged and allowed time to confront their own guilt and accept God’s grace.

All in all, the brand of transformative learning that transpires at the Improv Church tends to align most closely with the research of Boyd, Myers, and Dirkx. In this context, learning draws on the intuitive, creative, and emotional facets of the participants, thus incorporating spiritual truth with new patterns of perceiving.

Summary

I have presented three dominant learning theories that help to provide a philosophical framework for understanding the Improv Church. Knowles’s Adult Learning Theory reminds us that the educator is to act as a facilitator of the learning process. It assumes an intrinsic curiosity and desire to learn and sees the process of learning as one in which that natural desire is nurtured. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory addresses both the cognitive and affective learning domains, in both reflective and active modes. His model helps to categorize the four primary ministries of the Church of Acts. Finally, Transformative Learning Theory explains learning in terms of a process through which the learner integrates new ideas within an existing schema. Though the work of Transformative Learning theorists such as Boyd, Myers, and Dirkx, we are reminded of the importance that the extrarational can play in learning through the use of symbols, images, and feelings.

Instructional Strategies

Studies from the field of education represent a rich resource of knowledge with regard to the learning that transpires at Improv Church. While the delivery
system of "knowledge" at the Improv Church is admittedly quite unique and consequently untested, it does represent a teaching model that is burgeoning with possibilities.

The manner in which teaching is done has "a large impact on students’ abilities to educate themselves" (Joyce, Weil, & Showers, 1992, p. 1). Success in teaching transcends a charismatic presenter flawlessly communicating wisdom. Successful teachers "present powerful cognitive and social tasks to their students and teach the students how to make productive use of them" (Joyce et al., 1992, pp. 1-2, italics theirs). Believing this premise, teaching at the Improv Church is conducted in a way that invites participants to actively educate themselves. Also, I believe we are presenting the most powerful cognitive and social task imaginable in that we are attempting to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The models of teaching inform this educational dynamic of the Improv Church. According to these models, teaching strategies are grouped into four categories: The social family; the information processing family; the personal family; and the behavioral systems family. Of the four, the social family and the information processing family seem to be most helpful in understanding what is happening at the Improv Church. To a lesser degree, the personal family offers some limited insights into the Improv Church as well.

The Social Family

The ideas of learning in community and preparing students for citizenship and a fulfilling social role are not new. Such concepts are prevalent in the writings of Aristotle and Plato. Philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius, along with Christian
educators like Thomas Aquinas and John Amos Comenius, advanced some of these ideas. Later Horace Mann and Henry Barnard wrote about the importance of the social component in education (Joyce et al., 1992, p. 28).

The social models capitalize on our nature as social creatures to learn in partnerships. These social models share assumptions about learning and society. The assertion about learning is that cooperative behavior stimulates the learner both socially and intellectually. Therefore, the tasks requiring social connection also stimulate learning. In other words, social and cooperative behavior is more than behavioral; it enhances cognitive growth as well. The assertion about society is that “a central role of education is to prepare citizens to perpetuate a democratic social order” (Mafune, 1992, p. 4). There are many models in this family that range from simple cooperative exercises to elaborate models that teach democratic social organization and the analysis of major social values and challenges.

Joyce et al. (1992) suggest that the social theorists have not only constructed rationales to defend their models, “but have raised serious questions about the adequacy of the current dominant patterns of schooling. In most schools the majority of learning tasks are structured by teachers for individuals” (p. 27). As has been referenced earlier, traditional church and educational paradigms of learning tend to be about recitation—the teacher or pastor disseminates information, asks for a memorized regurgitation from students, then affirms or corrects the response. Many of the social family theorists suggest that this approach of the teacher-dominated recitation can be counter-productive to learning.
Leading researchers in this endeavor to study and document the results of social learning include David and Roger Johnson (Johnson & Johnson, 1974; 1981; Johnson & Others, 1985), Robert Slavin (1983), and Shlomo Sharan (1990). Mafune (1992) summarizes the results of their research:

The evidence is largely affirmative. Classrooms organized so that students work in pairs and larger groups, tutor each other, and share rewards are characterized by greater mastery of material than the common individual-study and recitation pattern. Also, the shared responsibility and interaction produce more positive feelings toward tasks and others, generate better intergroup relations, and result in better self-images for students with histories of poor achievement. In other words, the results generally affirm the assumptions that underlie these models. (p. 5)

Of all the models of teaching, the predominant methods employed at the Improv Church come from the social family models. For instance, many of the improvisational sketches are a variation of the role-playing technique of teaching (Shaftel & Shaftel, 1982). Through dramas that are created by the learning community, people can assume a variety of roles and gain new insights into social issues or theological truth. This pedagogical strategy has roots in the work of Jacob Moreno, who was referenced earlier in chapter 5. Another technique used at the Improv Church that is classified as part of the social model of learning is group investigation. Based on John Dewey’s (1916) insights, this approach encourages cooperative inquiry and group learning (Ngeow, 1998). A related strategy is called group investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1992) or collaborative learning (Barnes, Britton, & Trobe, 1986). However one might label this strategy, the general attributes common to all the different groups are regularly employed at the Improv Church. Some of these shared attributes include principles such as using trust-building exercises, building positive interdependence through mutual goals, and pursuing the
team support concept (Ngeow, 1998). In sum, most of the teaching strategies that have emerged from the philosophical foundation of social models of learning are practiced—at least in a limited way—at the Improv Church.

The Information Processing Family

Although all attempts at education involve information processing, many theories and models are designed to help students acquire and operate on data received. The approaches in the information processing family share a philosophy about how people think and how teachers can most effectively impact the way students deal with that information. Again, the models within this family provide a helpful framework in sorting out the educational model at the Improv Church.

Included in this family is the model of concept attainment, the indirect instructional strategy that uses a structured inquiry process. Concept attainment is designed to clarify ideas and to introduce aspects of content. It engages students in formulating a concept through the use of illustrations, word cards, or specimens called examples. It is based on the work of Jerome Bruner (1961). We will often use a variation of concept attainment at the Improv Church by leading the learners toward a concept through a variety of songs, sketches, and Scripture readings.

Also included in the information processing family is the model of inductive thinking. Evolved from the work of Hilda Taba (1967), inductive thinking assists students in discovering and organizing information, in creating names for concepts, and exploring ways of creating and testing hypotheses that describe relationships among sets of data. The tasks that Taba suggests represent the stages of the inductive thinking process describe the flow of a typical Improv Church service. For example,
the first task is concept formation, or in the context of the Improv Church, the introduction of the theme for the evening. In the next phase, the interpretation of the data, we will explore together through a variety of creative approaches. Finally, at the Improv Church we will close with a challenge to translate the concepts learned into real life, thus addressing Taba’s final stage of applying the principles.

Inquiry training, advance organizers, memorization, the developing intellect, and scientific inquiry—these models are all linked to the family of information processing. What these approaches share in common is the goal of teaching students to think effectively. Strategies represented by these models allow students to absorb more concepts and information.

The Personal Family

Influences from the personal family of learning can also be found in the pedagogical approach used at the Improv Church. The focus here is on the person. “A major thesis of this family of models is that the better-developed, more affirmative, self-actualizing learners have increased learning capabilities. Thus, personal models will increase academic achievement by tending to the learners” (Mafune, 1992, p. 3).

By starting with the perspective of the individual, educators impact the self-awareness of the learners who, in turn, become responsible for their own growth. Ideally, this results in lifelong learning that is intrinsically motivated.

An example from this family model includes is nondirective learning. Carl Rogers has been influential in advocating for teaching that is oriented around the student’s perceptual world. By assuming a counselor’s stance, the teacher assists the
students to understand themselves, clarify their goals, and accept responsibility for their own growth and the trajectory of their lives. As a pedagogical model, it enlists students in a learning-teaching partnership. At the Improv Church, the “feel” of the experience often takes on a nondirective learning model. Generally speaking, our goal on any given night at the Improv Church is to impact the self-awareness of students and to spur them on, in a spiritual sense, toward self-actualization.

Other approaches in the personal family models include synectics, awareness training, and the classroom meeting. These personal models focus on the development of personal identity, thus forming students who possess the capacity for self-education.

Summary

The purpose at this juncture is to identify in broad strokes the big picture of learning theories. Drawing on this overview, we will now proceed to unwrap some of these concepts in much greater detail. Naturally, the methods that will receive our focused attention will be those pedagogical strategies that are the most closely aligned with the strategy and core values of the Improv Church.

Whole-Person Learning

The approach in whole-person learning places the emphasis of learning on the learner rather than on the strategy of the teacher. It takes into account the uniqueness of the learner and addresses the affective dimension of learning (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). Apps (1996) illustrates how whole-person learning includes spiritual,
biological, intellectual, and emotional dimensions. Emerging from this broad knowledge base are several theories that mirror aspects of the Improv Church.

Brain-based Research

One field of study that can provide theoretical insights to the experience of participants at the Improv Church comes from the burgeoning research on brain-based learning. Through a convergence of neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and technology, new information verifies some of the intuitive premonitions associated with the educational and spiritual benefits of the Improv Church.

In the past four decades scientists have learned more about the human brain than in the previous 40 centuries. Because of new technology, scientists have been able to observe the brain while it is learning. Through a variety of techniques such as CAT (computerized axial tomography), fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), and PET (position emission tomography) scans, researchers can get inside the brain and observe the blood flow, electromagnetic fields, and chemical composition of the brain without impeding normal brain functioning. Before these technologies were available, brain research was primarily done using animal brains or with patients who had brain damage.

The quest to understand the brain, however, is nothing new. Brain research dates back to at least the fifth century when philosophers, such as Aristotle and Plato, debated whether the heart or the brain was the seat of the mind. Further research into the function of the brain was documented by several prominent scientific figures—Sir Roger Bacon (1268), Leonardo de Vinci (1500s), Sir Thomas Browne (1648), and Wigans, Horsley, and Jackson (1800s). By the late 1950s the prevailing model of
brain research was based on observable behavior. Hence, the rise of B. F. Skinner's work in operant conditioning; the idea behind his research was to reward the good and punish the bad in order to produce the desired behavior. Consequently, the standard methods of pedagogy reflected this understanding of the brain. Rote memory exercises, direct instruction, teacher lectures, and student regurgitation of facts—these teaching techniques prevailed in many classrooms. Using Skinner's philosophical framework on learning, the brain was likened to a computer—what was programmed in could be retrieved. In simple terms, this meant “garbage in—garbage out.”

By the late 1960s Dr. Roger Sperry advanced Paul Broca's 19th-century theory of hemispheric dominance. Sperry's research pointed to the lateral specialization of the brain. He argued that the left, logical brain controlled the right side of the body and the right, creative brain controlled the left side of the body.

Following Sperry's innovative work, Dr. Paul MacLean (1978) proposed the triune brain theory. He postulated that not only is the mind specialized in hemispheric dominance, but it consists of three brains—the reptilian, mammalian, and neo-cortex—that are superimposed on one another and yet comprise one brain. According to MacLean, the reptilian brain governs muscle movement. The mammalian brain supervises emotions, relationships, and learning. And finally, the neo-cortex brain drives the higher order thinking skills.

More recently, Edelman (1992) proposed the metaphor of a jungle to represent the brain. Rejecting the metaphor of the brain as a computer, he portrays the brain as
a multilayered representation of loops and layers. Thus the systems of the brain interact continuously in a chaotic and free-spirited fashion.

As brain research has developed, educators have suggested ways in which the discoveries should alter pedagogy (Caine & Caine, 1990; Cross, 1999; Springer & Deutsch, 1989; Sylwester, Chall, Wittrock, & Hart, 1981). Robert Sylwester asks, “Can a profession whose charge is defined by the development of an effective and efficient human brain continue to remain uninformed about that brain?” (as cited in Ellis & Fouts, 1997).

Jensen (2000) adds this caution:

Educators should not run schools solely on the basis of the biology of the brain. However, to ignore what we do know about the brain would be irresponsible. . . . Dismissing it as faddish, premature, or opportunistic is not only short-sighted, but also dangerous to our learners. (p. 79)

Not surprisingly, this movement of brain-based education has surged with significant momentum in the last decade. A plethora of books and articles propose varying implications of this medical research for educational purposes.

With regard to education, brain-based research (Caulfield, Kidd, & Thel, 2000; Solomon & Hendren, 2003) offers the following propositions:

1. The brain changes physiologically as a result of experience.
4. The optimal learning environment is low in threat and high in challenge.
5. The most efficient learning transpires when the learners are in an optimal state of emotion, attention, and motivation.
The idea behind these propositions is that as students interact with the world and synthesize data gathered by their senses; neurons receive input from each other. This causes the neurons to change, thus creating new paths between networks of neurons. Solomon and Hendren (2003) explain:

During learning, changes may occur in the way neurons communicate with each other; in the efficiency of connections between neurons; in the number of neurons involved in the network; in the amount of energy required for communication to be initiated; and in how often communication occurs. New neural connections are formed constantly, while others are either strengthened or eliminated. A large body of research confirms that humans exposed to more enriched environments have larger, heavier brains with increased branching and connecting of neurons. (p. 1)

Using this nomenclature of brain-based education, the objective of the Improv Church—and of education in general—is to change the brain. Because all learning is arguably “brain-based,” the quintessence of education is practical neuroscience. This is not to suggest, however, that brain research represents an educational reform movement.

Craig (2003) points out that brain-compatible learning does not prescribe how a teacher ought to run a classroom, or, by implication, how a pastor ought to run a church.

Rather, it provides empirical data about how the brain learns and suggests guidelines to be considered while preparing lessons for your students. These guidelines may be incorporated into every educational setting, with every type of curriculum and every age group. (p. 1)

Caine and Caine's Brain-based Learning Principles

What are these guidelines? The following brain-based learning principles proposed by Caine and Caine (1994) are used as the theoretical foundation for much of the brain-based literature.
Principle 1: The brain is a parallel processor

The brain ceaselessly performs many functions simultaneously (Ornstein & Thompson, 1984). Thoughts, emotions, imagination, and predispositions operate concurrently. Sylwester (as cited in Reardon, 1998) suggests that the brain is like a jazz quartet. Various parts interact to produce an integrated, congruent sound.

The implication for good teaching is that educators should “orchestrate” all the dimensions of parallel processing. No one method or technique can satisfy all the variations of the human brain. Teachers must vary their methods and approaches to learning.

Principle 2: Learning engages the entire physiology

The brain functions according to physiological rules. Caine and Caine (1990) contend that learning is as natural as breathing, and it is possible to either inhibit or facilitate it. Fear, stress, peace, challenge, boredom, happiness, contentment—these along with dozens of other factors affect the brain. In turn, these things impact our capacity to learn. It is with this understanding that brain-based teaching advocates emphasize the importance of using stress management, nutrition, exercise, drug education, and other facets of health education in the learning process. Learning is influenced by the natural development of the body and the brain.

Principle 3: The search for meaning is innate

People are “meaning makers” (Springer & Deutsch, 1989). Our search for meaning seems to be wired into our brains. This quest cannot be stopped, only
channeled and focused. Inevitably, the brain catalogs the familiar while simultaneously searching for and responding to novel stimuli (O'Keefe & Nadel, 1978). This principle for brain-based educators underscores the importance of furnishing a learning environment that provides both familiarity and novelty.

Principle 4: The search for meaning occurs through "patterning"

This principle paints the brain as both scientist and artist. It searches for patterns as they occur but also craves unique and creative patterns of its own (Hart, 1983; Lakoff, 1987; Rosenfield, 1988). Designed to perceive and generate patterns, the brain resists isolated pieces of information that are unrelated to what makes sense to a particular student. Such information is rejected by the brain as meaningless. Caine and Caine (1990) suggest that "when the brain's natural capacity to integrate information is acknowledged and invoked in teaching, vast amounts of initially unrelated or seemingly random information and activities can be presented and assimilated" (p. 67).

The implication is that effective teaching allows the learner to create meaningful and personally relevant patterns. Advocates of the whole-language approach, thematic teaching, and life relevant approaches to learning tend to be the most assertive voices trumpeting this principle (Goodman, 1986).

Principle 5: Emotions are critical to patterning

Emotions and learning are inseparable. All thinking, both creative and logical, is emotional (Lakoff, 1987; Ornstein & Sobel, 1987). Emotions color our experiences, thus resulting in our desire to repeat or resist similar future experiences.
Furthermore, positive emotions increase the brain’s capacity to create better neural maps. Emotions are therefore crucial to memory because they facilitate the storage and recall of information (Rosenfield, 1988).

In light of this understanding of how the brain works, educators should be attentive to students' feelings and attitudes; after all their emotions are entwined in the learning process. Educators should ensure a supportive community in which to learn.

Principle 6: Every brain simultaneously perceives and creates parts and wholes

Dr. Sperry’s work with left and right brain hemispheres was valuable in helping educators to understand the brain’s separate but simultaneous tendencies for organizing information. Subsequent research shows, however, that the left brain/right brain theory is incomplete. Scientists now postulate that the two hemispheres are inextricably interactive, regardless of whether a person is working with words, math, music, or art (Hand, 1984). Technological advances help to explain why the brain can simultaneously perceive parts and wholes. Reardon (1998) explains:

Our brain's energy moves up and down on a vertical axis, stem to cortex and back. Spatial processing, (small pieces of information to large spatial relationships), happen left to right across the brain. Time is processed from back to front, past to future. Movement of biological particles such as blood and neuro-chemical reactions happens throughout the brain. (p. 15)

Caine and Caine (1990) add that it is very difficult for people to learn when either parts or wholes are neglected. Parts and wholes are conceptually interactive. They derive meaning from each other. Consequently, vocabulary and grammar are best learned in the context of whole-language experiences. Similarly, equations and scientific principles are mastered in the framework of living science.
Principle 7: Learning involves both focused attention and peripheral perception

The brain records all information, learning from both traditional focused attention and from the surrounding peripherals. According to Lozanov's theory of Suggestology, the subliminal stimuli from the physical and social environment are absorbed into the subconscious mind before receiving conscious expression. Every stimulus, however, is coded and symbolized by the brain (Lozanov, 1978). This means that the brain responds to the total sensory environment in which teaching occurs (O'Keefe & Nadel, 1978).

Understanding this piece of brain research, an effective educator will pay attention to the materials outside of the learner's focus of attention. Every nuance communicated by a teacher can impact learning. Color, decorations, sounds, and smells, although more subtle, are powerful ingredients in boosting recall. Rosenfield's study (1988) revealed that the retention of focused, consciously learned material decreased from 80% down to 50% over time. When the learning was supported by peripherals such as content-related posters, the retention of material increased from 85% to 91% over the same time period.

Principle 8: Learning always involves conscious and unconscious processes

This principle reinforces the preceding principle by suggesting that learning includes the entire experience, not just what is consciously registered. The scope of learning encompasses much more than what is knowingly understood. To optimize the learning experience, brain-based researchers stress the importance of giving
students time to review how and what they learned. By doing this they can be proactive in their learning and reorganize the material in personally meaningful and valuable ways.

Principle 9: We have a spatial memory system and a set of systems for rote learning

This principle suggests that we have two types of memory. First, we have a natural spatial memory system which does not need rehearsal and allows for instantaneous memory of experiences. This memory system is designed for registering our experiences in ordinary three-dimensional space (O'Keefe & Nadel, 1978). This system is always engaged and is unlimited. As our experiences add up, so does the capacity of this memory system. It is motivated by novelty.

Facts and skills that are dealt with in isolation are ordered differently by the brain and need much more rehearsal. The counterpart of the spatial memory system is a set of systems specifically designed for storing relatively unrelated information (O'Keefe & Nadel, 1978). These systems function according to the information processing model of memory which requires that new information be processed before it is stored.

In order to encourage the most efficient use of the brain, teachers should be careful not to ignore the personal world of the learner. If the memory systems can work synergistically, the educational experience will be enriched.
Principle 10: The brain understands and remembers best when facts and skills are embedded in natural spatial memory.

"Embedding is the single most important element that the new brain-based theories of learning have in common" (Caine & Caine, 1990, p. 70). The brain sorts and stores information either based on context or content. If it is stored by context then it is filed in relationship with location, circumstances, and associations. This type of memory is easily retrievable and is based on a natural spatial design in time and space.

Spatial memory is best summoned through experiential learning. This approach uses "real-life" activities such as projects, field trips, stories, metaphor, and drama. In this way, educators can capitalize on the brain’s natural propensity to learn. This is not to suggest that lectures and analysis should be omitted in the learning environment; rather they should be incorporated into a larger experience.

Principle 11: Learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat.

Based on Dr. MacLean’s triune brain theory and pictures from PET and CAT scans, researchers can track how the brain responds to challenge or threat. On the one hand, the brain “downshifts” when threatened (Hart, 1983). During such times of threat we focus the perceptual field and revert to instinctive and primitive behaviors. On the other hand, the brain flourishes when operating under high challenge and low stress. In this environment the brain utilizes more of its neural networks. Thus, the higher-order thinking of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, creativity, and application occurs more readily when challenged but not threatened.
Effective educators should strive to provide an atmosphere that is low in threat and high in challenge. In so doing it is possible to build a better brain through sensory-rich, challenging conditions in a safe environment of risk-taking.

Principle 12: Each brain is unique

Genetics, nature, and experiences render every person’s brain unique. Although everyone has the same set of systems, they are integrated distinctively in each and every brain. Furthermore, because learning actually changes the structure of the brain, the more we learn, the more unique we become.

This principle reminds educators of the importance of offering a multifaceted approach to learning. Allowance should be made for students to express visual, tactile, emotional, or auditory preferences.

Brain-based Education and the Improv Church

This overview of the 12 brain-based learning principles provides a panoramic perspective from which to view the Improv Church. Clearly, many of the discoveries made in brain-based learning describe the phenomenon at the Improv Church. The brain-based research provides a helpful lens of understanding through which we can examine and understand the cognitive experience of the Improv Church participants.

Emerging from the brain-based literature are three concepts that clearly intersect with the stories that Improv Church participants shared in telling of their experience in the church. These concepts do not encompass all the themes or even the most important ones from the brain-based literature; rather, the ideas have been targeted for emphasis in this research because they align most directly with the story
of the Improv Church. These three concepts include novelty, emotion, and environment. What follows is a closer look at each of these notions as they connect to data garnered from the Improv Church.

Novelty

A recurring theme in the brain-based literature is the notion of novelty. A core proposition from the literature states simply, "Enriched environments and novel experiences promote learning" (Solomon & Hendren, 2003, p. 1). Restak writes,

Learning is not primarily dependent on a reward. In fact, rats—as well as humans—will consistently seek new experiences and behaviors with no perceivable reward or impetus. Experimental rats respond positively to simple novelty. Studies confirm that the mere pursuit of information can be valuable by itself and that humans are just as happy to seek novelty. (as cited in Weiss, 2000a, p. 25)

Fishback (1998) highlights the importance of novelty in the context of adult education. She contends, "Novel experiences and stimuli that are enjoyable cause the brain to continue building neural networks throughout old age. Remaining flexible, improvising and trying unorthodox approaches is good for the aging brain" (p. 22).

Perry (2000) makes a similar speech while emphasizing the importance of novelty in the context of education for children. He writes:

When a child is in a familiar and safe situation, as in most of our classrooms, his or her brain will seek novelty. So, if this child hears only factual information, she will fatigue within minutes. Only four to eight minutes of pure factual lecture can be tolerated before the brain seeks other stimuli, either internal (e.g., daydreaming) or external (Who is that walking down the hall?). If the teacher is not providing that novelty, the brain will go elsewhere. Continuous presentation of facts or concepts in isolation or in a nonstop series of anecdotes will all have the same fatiguing effect—and the child will not learn as much, nor will she come to anticipate and enjoy learning. . . .

Human beings are storytelling primates. We are curious, and we love to learn. The challenge for each teacher is to find ways to engage the child and take
advantage of the novelty-seeking property of the human brain to facilitate learning. (p. 35)

Brain researchers agree that for both children and adults novelty is a vital link in learning. It comes as no surprise, then, that Caine and Caine (1990) offer this counsel to educators:

Brain-based education . . . should be able to satisfy the brain's enormous curiosity and hunger for novelty, discovery, and challenge. Programs for gifted children already combine a rich environment with complex and meaningful challenges. Most of the creative methods used for teaching gifted students should be applied to all students. (p. 67)

Brain-based research reminds us of this insatiable hunger in the human spirit for “novelty, discovery, and challenge.” Based on the data compiled for this study, it seems that this appetite for novelty is being satisfied for participants at the Improv Church. The improvisational component in the Improv Church saturates the experience with novelty. Caine and Caine (1995) imply that the learning environment at the Improv Church is not too different from what an effective teacher ought to do in a traditional classroom. “In a sense, brain-based learning is improvisational; no two ‘lessons’ are ever the same. Teachers find connections among everything from prepackaged math and science materials to music, art, and computers” (p. 45).

It is definitely the case that any two “lessons” at the Improv Church are never the same. The connections made are as varied and unpredictable as a kaleidoscope. The result is a learning environment that is ripe with novelty. The following comments from the interviews with participants at the Improv Church attest to the novelty of the experience.
"The first thing I noticed when I came to the Improv Church was the atmosphere. I walked in here and I was expecting a church—you know, white walls, just the regular stage and congregation. But it’s just this coffee shop thing that it just hits you. Wow! That’s cool!” (Sharlene).

Indeed the “Church” part of our name “Improv Church” can be a bit misleading. After all, the Improv Church does not have the look or feel of a traditional church. As one young woman who had not been to a church in over a decade told me recently, “This ain’t like the church I remember from my childhood!” (Emma).

Another focus group participant added this perspective: “I’ve learned that God can relate to you in more than just the normal sanctuary church-type way. A lot of people can’t relate to the tired and predictable church scene. You know, you go to this stuffy building. Everybody’s just sitting there staring like they’re comatose or something. It’s all so predictable. But at the Improv Church it’s all different from that. You can wear jeans or just regular clothes. You don’t have to feel uncomfortable. You don’t have to worry about your parents expecting you to stay inside this religious little box” (Megan).

“The Improv Church has affected me spiritually by giving me a new outlook on how I see life. It has given me a different picture of God because the way I grew up. My parents gave me a very conservative spiritual upbringing and it wasn’t until recently that I noticed all these different ways of being able to connect to God. The Improv Church has helped me to open my eyes spiritually” (Lief).
This notion of the Improv Church offering a new way to look at church was a common theme among respondents. The comment came repeatedly that the Improv Church offers a new paradigm of church. “It’s really open and fun. You just get to see things from a different point of view,” bubbled still another focus group participant.

“It’s not your traditional Adventist type of service. It’s a place for people to come and not get freaked out by all the traditions—all the stand ups and sit downs and so on. People can find God without worrying about being looked down on or being judged at all” (Robert).

This new format for church results in a learning environment where the attentiveness of participants is heightened. “My experience at the Improv Church was full of surprises. It was totally unexpected and it kept you on the edge of your seat. It got my attention totally” (Chris).

Similar comments alluding to the novelty of the Improv Church experience surfaced time and time again in the interviews with improv players. Clearly, one of the reasons students flock to this learning environment is because it promises an experience that is novel. People come expecting the unexpected. They anticipate surprise. The method that churches traditionally use to instruct and communicate the Gospel is modified at the Improv Church. While the Gospel that we are communicating remains unchanged, the approach in teaching is a novel one.

Emotion

The second theme that emerges from the brain-based literature explores the connection between emotion and learning. This connection is the topic of much

Sylwester and Brandt (1997) make this claim:

The best teachers know that kids learn more readily when they are emotionally involved in the lesson because emotion drives attention, which drives learning and memory. It's biologically impossible to learn anything that you're not paying attention to; the attentional mechanism drives the whole learning and memory process. Teachers know that emotion is important; they just don't always know what to do about it. (p. 17)

In emphasizing the need to treat emotion as an important part of cognition, Sylwester (1995) reasons: "By separating emotion from logic and reason in the classroom . . . we've separated two sides of one coin—and lost something important in the process. It's impossible to separate emotion from the important activities of life. Don't even try" (p. 75).

Pert (1997) adds:

We know that the immune system, like the central nervous system, has memory and the capacity to learn. Thus, it could be said that intelligence is located not only in the brain but in cells that are distributed throughout the body, and that the traditional separation of mental processes, including emotions, from the body is no longer valid. (p. 187)

Solomon and Hendren (2003) offer this synopsis:

Emotion plays an important role in memory encoding and retrieval, and can have both positive and negative effects on learning. On the one hand, emotionally meaningful and salient information tends to be learned and remembered better. On the other hand, emotional reactions such as depression, anxiety, and stress can have a very negative impact on learning. (p. 2)
Studies that explore the effects of attitudes and emotions on learning suggest that stress and fear tend to circumvent the brain's normal circuits. The physical and emotional well-being of a person affects their ability to think and to learn.

Daniel Goleman (1995) concurs with the idea that emotions play a defining role in learning through the concept of emotional intelligence. Citing research on the brain and emotion, he claims that individual success can be predicted better by emotional health than by standardized IQ tests. He suggests that every person has not one, but two minds—one that thinks and one that feels.

Caine (as cited in Weiss, 2000a) contends that “good learning engages feelings. Rather than viewing them as an add-on, emotions are a form of learning” (p. 4).

Simply put, experts in the field of education suggest that an ideal learning environment takes into account the emotional well-being of the learners. For optimal learning to transpire, the emotional climate of the setting must be monitored.

The importance of creating a positive emotional climate for learners is not lost on the leaders at the Improv Church. Significant thought has been invested in providing a place for participants to learn in a space that is inviting, fun, affirming, upbeat, warm, and safe. Simply stated, it is an environment that is conducive to learning. It is emotionally positive.

While this emotional dynamic of participants was not overtly mentioned in the interviews, numerous nuances were made that would suggest the vital role that emotions play at the Improv Church. The following excerpts from interviews serve to illustrate.
Pat said, “I remember my first year as an improv player it would be lots of fun to be a part of it. It was really rewarding. But after being on stage I would be 100% emotionally drained. I couldn’t converse with anybody. Now after a church service I am totally emotionally charged. I am revved up beyond words.” A similar comment came from Peter: “The energy of [the Improv Church] lifts you up and makes you forget what was troubling you.”

“The Improv Church has helped me to be more open,” still another improv player said. “I am now better able to express what I’m feeling. I’m much more comfortable now sharing my emotions. The Improv Church helped me to feel a part of this wonderful community. It was always a rush going to the Improv Church. There was energy in the place. I loved coming to the Center for Sharing and seeing everyone get ready. Megan would be in one part of the building training the small group leaders. People were in the back fixing drinks. Others were setting up the chairs. It was emotionally very comforting. It was like a home place to come to—it gave me that sense of community” (Rhonda).

This emotional attachment to the Improv Church community seems to draw people in. It gives people a sense that they are needed and wanted. Kelsey’s comments reflect similar sentiments: “I really felt like God wanted me to be a part of the Improv Church. It definitely helped me to be a more stable person. When I got involved with the Improv Church my life was changing a lot and everything seemed to be changing with my friends. So, emotionally it was good to have the Improv Church—a reason for living, a cause, something to do for God” (Kelsey).
Respondents often alluded to the emotional component while talking about community. Clearly, this human connection fortifies the strong emotional attachment that people experience at the Improv Church. This corresponds with the first theme to emerge from the data.

The second theme to emerge from the data was humor. In chapter 4 I shared the stories of participants who spoke of the strong appeal that humor had for them. This element of humor is often incorporated in the brain-based literature as a key ingredient to creating an emotionally positive learning environment. Craig (2003) advises educators to “incorporate a degree of emotion when teaching novel concepts or elicit emotion from your students around the novel concept. Often, connecting the concept to their personal lives accomplishes this. Laughter is great for engaging emotion and, importantly, reducing stress” (p. 12, italics mine).

Caviness (2000) adds, “Brain research data support the use of humor in learning environments because of the effect light-hearted emotion has on releasing neurotransmitters which lessen stress and promote more optimal conditions for learning” (p. 66).

Perry (2000) suggests that teachers “bob and weave” between facts, concept, and narrative as a way of lacing lectures with the important emotional piece of education.

In teaching, it is most effective to work one neural area and then move on to another. Engage your students with a story to provide the context. Make sure this vignette can touch the emotional parts of their brains. This will activate and prepare the cognitive parts of the brain for storing information. Information is easiest to digest when there is emotional “seasoning”—humor, empathy, sadness, and fear all make “dry” facts easier to swallow. (p. 35)
At the Improv Church the educational experience is seasoned with liberal doses of humor. According to the voices championing brain-based education, this is an effective strategy to ratchet up the learning for participants. Based on the research of educators and the testimonies of participants at the Improv Church, there does seem to be a connection between emotion and learning.

Environment

The final theme that is prevalent in brain-based literature centers on the importance of environment to learning. Again, this theme informs the experience of participants at the Improv Church.

The phrase touted by Caine and Caine (1995) to capture the ideal learning environment is “relaxed alertness” (p. 46). The goal is to create a place for students that is challenging, yet non-threatening. Since brain-based learning calls for various forms of active processing, students must feel free to explore ideas in an environment that is safe. Such an environment thwarts “downshifting,” that is, the penchant under stress to assume a defensive mode and become less flexible and open to new information and ideas.

The triune brain theory coupled with studies using PET and CAT scans informs our understanding of how our brains up-shift and downshift, that is, maximize or minimize, based on the presence of challenge or threat. In an environment of high challenge and low threat the brain maximizes or uses more of the neural networks from a variety of locations. Thus, the higher-order thinking of analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application is accomplished. Creativity is heightened. Conversely, when stress, anxiety, and/or threat taint the environment,
“learner helplessness” (Paterno, 2001; Qian & Alvermann, 1995; Reardon, 1998) is induced and the brain is minimized. This means the brain downshifts in order to find a state of homeostasis. In this situation creativity is squelched and learners tend to revert to rote, knee-jerk reactions. Such responses are predictable when students are under intellectual, emotional, or social threats or physical harm.

Dwyer (2002) observes:

Recent brain research has provided opportunities to see how the brain functions and learns. Applying this research, trainers are more able to effectively orchestrate the learning environment to achieve optimum learning conditions. It is interesting and reassuring to note that some of the findings from brain research confirm good training strategies and common sense methods that have been developed over time.

One of the qualities of a good learning environment, as mentioned, is that it has to be emotionally safe. This means that it is necessary to establish an environment that is free from intimidation and rejection, high in acceptable challenge, and where the learner experiences active participation and relaxed alertness. . . .

Setting the appropriate emotional climate is essential for learning. When the appropriate emotional level is reached learning is more meaningful, enjoyable and lasting. (p. 266)

Revisiting Edelman’s metaphor of the brain as a jungle, we are reminded that learners thrive in the right environment (Edelman, 1987, 1988). In the jungle, systems interact continuously in a chaotic fashion. Similarly, students flourish in an environment that provides many sensory, cultural, and challenging layers. The implication is that students have a natural inclination to learn, understand, and grow. Put students in the right environment with an arsenal of cognitive opportunities and they will make the connections for learning.

Reardon (1998) points out that it is possible to “build a better brain through sensory rich, challenging situations in a safe environment of risk-taking” (p. 17). In other words, as the challenge is heightened, the learning improves. Based on this
understanding, Reardon recommends specific ways to create safe, yet challenging environments in which learners can excel. For example, one of his recommendations is to “introduce surprise, suspense, and disorder in the midst of routine and ritual” (p. 17).

This is precisely what happens routinely at the Improv Church. It is the kind of environment we seek to nurture. Based on the shared perceptions of many of the participants, we are successful in this endeavor. The following excerpts from the interviews substantiate the claim that the environment at the Improv Church is not only safe and fun, but conducive to learning.

“It’s been really cool for me seeing that there are a lot of kids from the community that come. They aren’t dressed like they usually come to church or anything like that. They are just hanging around outside, but they get drawn in. They actually come in a lot of the time and they’re actually sitting there in church. You see them and they are obviously listening” (Megan).

Why are these outsiders drawn into the learning environment? According to the testimony of participants, the light-hearted, winsome, inviting atmosphere has a magnetic effect on potential attendees. Again, this offers a refreshingly different feel from traditional church.

“I have to say that usually my church has vespers and we all get together and then we do things, but nobody really feels that they get involved and that they can relate to things. So I invite them to the Improv Church and once they come here they enjoy it. They enjoy the atmosphere and how people can all bond together. They
actually get something out of it. It's just a different atmosphere than you find in other religious programs” (Adam).

This upbeat atmosphere hits you straight away when you enter the Center for Sharing. As one student put it, “The first thing I noticed at the Improv Church was the atmosphere. I walked in here and said ‘Wow!’” (Charity). Still another adds, “The first thing I thought when I came to the Improv Church is that I now have a safe place to invite non-Christians. You never have to worry about what is going to happen that might embarrass them. The minute you walk in you realize this” (Lauren).

This inviting atmosphere also tends to serve as a stress reliever. Henry put it this way: “I usually have a real stressful week. The Improv Church gives me an opportunity to calm down, take a step back and say, ‘Okay, I can deal with this. Everything’s fine. It will all work out. It’s a release-type thing.’”

A couple of final comments along this theme offer a nice summary: “I love the whole environment of the Improv Church. It is very inviting” (George). “The Improv Church promises a good time and good fellowship, all in a comfortable atmosphere. It is an atmosphere that is conducive to people opening up and learning about God” (Howard).

In the end, these three themes of novelty, emotion, and environment overlap and mesh in the stories that participants shared. Obviously the participants do not categorize their experiences into compartments that cleanly coincide with the brain-based literature. Still, participants at the Improv Church highlight these themes. In so doing, they endorse the validity of some of the findings from the field of brain-
based literature. Moreover, they help us to understand their experience at the Improv Church from a brain-based perspective.

**Emotional Intelligence**

An avenue of thought emerging from brain-based research is the construct of emotional intelligence. Two thousand years ago, Plato suggested that "all learning has an emotional base" (as cited in Freedman, 1999, p. 1). Since then, scientists, educators, and philosophers have debated the link between emotion and intelligence. Payne (1985) first used the term "emotional intelligence" (a.k.a. EI) in the title of his dissertation. In 1990, two American professors, John Mayer and Peter Salovey, published two academic papers in a quest to scientifically measure the difference between people's emotions. They discovered that some people demonstrated a superior capacity to solve emotional hardships and identify personal feelings and feelings of others. Their work, however, was confined primarily to the academic community.


But what is emotional intelligence? And does it have something to say that helps us understand the goings-on at the Improv Church? Goleman and O'Neil (1996) explain what he means by the term:

Emotional intelligence is a different way of being smart. It includes knowing what your feelings are and using your feelings to make good decisions in life. It's being able to manage distressing moods well and control impulses. It's being
motivated and remaining hopeful and optimistic when you have setbacks in working toward goals. It's empathy; knowing what the people around you are feeling. And it's social skill—getting along well with other people, managing emotions in relationships, being able to persuade or lead others. (p. 6)

According to Goleman (2004), emotional intelligence consists of five components as outlined in Table 9. Goleman argues that schools have historically focused on the cognitive development of students, but developing students' emotional smarts is equally as important. He suggests that emotional circuits are formed by experiences that we have growing up; to leave these experiences to chance is an invitation for disaster. Effective learning environments, then, should address the emotional education of students.

*TIME* (Ratnesar, Mitchell, & Sachs, 1997) magazine reports that as many as 700 school districts in the United States have instituted programs that address the emotional quotient of students. Rutgers psychologist Maurice Elias (1997) claims, “There is credibility now given to taking time in the school day to carry out this kind of work” (as cited in Ratnesar et al., 1997, p. 62).

Liff (2003) argues that the importance of emotional learning is equally important in the context of postsecondary education. She suggests that “sensitivities and learning within the affective domain are strongly linked to the efficacy of a successful collegiate experience for all students” (Liff, 2003, p. 28). The best pedagogy in postsecondary education is imbued with sensitivities for the social and emotional factors that connect student behavior and learning.
Table 9

Goleman’s Five Components of Emotional Intelligence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of intelligence</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-Awareness</td>
<td>The ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Self-Regulation</td>
<td>The ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods; the propensity to suspend judgment—to think before acting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Motivation</td>
<td>The propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence; a passion to work for reasons that transcend status or material reward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Empathy</td>
<td>The ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people; interacting with people according to their emotional reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Social Skill</td>
<td>Proficiency in managing relationships and building networks; an ability to find common ground and build rapport</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The key question for Liff (2003) then becomes: “Where can college students go to enhance social and emotional growth?” (p. 29). She answers:

They can go to class! College faculties, in both developmental and general education, do indeed have the capacity to make a difference for students everyday in their classrooms. Being aware of the social and emotional elements relevant to students’ needs, a professor can establish a learning environment which nurtures and fosters affective development and concomitant academic success. By including interactions, responses, and lesson-design and management strategies that are sensitive to and inclusive of objectives in the social and emotional domains, faculty can make a significant and meaningful difference in the overall college experience of their students. (p. 29)
The stories shared by both focus group participants and the leaders affirm that the Improv Church qualifies as "a learning environment which nurtures and fosters affective development." It is an atmosphere that is rich with "interactions" and "responses." Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the students testify to the "significant and meaningful difference" the Improv Church made to their college experience.

A recurrent theme in the interviews of players and participants at the Improv Church has to do with the inviting and convivial environment. Students spoke of the atmosphere as one that fostered healthy emotional connections. These conversations would affirm the findings in an experiment conducted at Yale University by Sigdal Barsade. In it, a group of volunteers played the role of managers who assemble to allocate bonuses to their subordinates. Planted in the group was a professional actor. The actor was always the first to speak. In some groups the actor was cheerful and enthusiastic, in other groups relaxed and warm, in other groups depressed and sluggish, and in still other groups hostile and irritable. The results indicated that the actor could infect the group with his emotion. Good feelings led to improved cooperation, fairness, and overall group performance (as cited by Cherniss, 2000).

Similarly, it is typically the case that the improv players will set an emotionally electric mood at the Improv Church. This jovial ambiance tends to feed on itself. As a result, the environment is such that it is conducive to the emotional well-being of participants. The connections between the emotional climate of the Improv Church and the impact the church has made on the participants merit further study. At this juncture, it can at least be mentioned in brief that the work of EI
researchers hints at explanations as to why and how the environment of the Improv Church is so well-received. The church remains a safe environment where emotionally healthy interactions can occur.

**Multiple Intelligences**

Another important field of research that can inform our understanding of the Improv Church comes in the area of intelligence. In the past few decades, considerable discussion has been given to the idea of intelligence as something that can be taught and enhanced, rather than something a person is born with and cannot change. Moreover, the idea of a person possessing numerous intelligences was advanced.

The new paradigm of multiple intelligences is primarily the work of Howard Gardner. His theory differed from the prevailing views that postured intelligence as a single construct. In his seminal book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1993), Gardner forcefully argues that intelligence is composed of a number of factors uniquely different from each other. Drawing on experimental studies in anthropology, neurobiology, cognitive psychology, and other disciplines (Viadero, 2003), Gardner advanced seven different intelligences that form a person’s intellectual repertoire. More recently he has added naturalist as an eighth intelligence (Checkley, 1997; Roper & Davis, 2000). For an overview of Gardner’s multiple intelligences, see Table 10.

Gardner’s theory grew out of a sense of unrest that he felt when observing the narrow ways a person’s intelligence is usually measured. Traditionally, the measurements come through examinations that tend to test linguistic and
logical/mathematical skills but say nothing of other intelligences the student may possess. Gardner (1993) describes a scenario of a girl standing before an examiner to regurgitate some facts in order to give her an IQ score that will brand her for life. He grapples with this in *Frames of Mind*:

There must be more to intelligence than short answers to short questions—answers that predict academic success; and yet, in the absence of a better way of thinking about intelligence, and of better ways to assess an individual’s capabilities, this scenario is destined to be repeated universally for the foreseeable future. (Gardner, 1993, p. 4)

Thanks in part to Gardner’s work, educators are thinking about intelligence in a “better way.” Eisner (1994) offers this salient assessment:

What is most important, in my view, about Gardner’s work is that it provides a compelling corrective to the intellectually constipated conception of human ability that has characterized both public schools and, perhaps especially, universities. Schools and universities have historically operated on the assumption that skills in mathematics and in the discursive use of language are the primary manifestations of human intellectual ability. . . . The absence of attention to and even acknowledgement of the variety of ways in which people can make genuinely significant contributions to the culture is not only an important form of cultural neglect; it is an important source of educational inequity. . . . Gardner’s work has captured attention and has called into question some of the practices that have been employed in schools and universities for decades. (p. 556)

Ironically, Gardner did not initially advance his theory as an attack on inept pedagogical practices in schools. It was aimed at psychologists like himself, rather than educators. Surprisingly, multiple intelligences quickly charged into the lexicon of education—this, in spite of the fact that the theory came with no program or model for teachers to replicate. Nevertheless, in the name of his theory, teachers radically revamped classroom techniques. Entire schools were established around Gardner’s theory. Like it or not, the theory has made an indelible mark on contemporary education (Viadero, 2003).
Although the theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) was not intended as an educational end in itself, it can certainly help educators make sense of the way individuals learn. For Gardner, it is an effective tool that can assist teachers in achieving educational goals (Hopper & Hurry, 2000). Gardner's thrust is to help educators address certain questions: "Why are we teaching people what we are teaching in the way we are teaching?" (Hopper & Hurry, 2000, p. 26) A related question is: "Why do we value our current system of educating human beings as the best, and as the most wholesome, accurate way of assessing the intelligence of a human being?" (Hopper & Hurry, 2000, p. 26). Gardner explains, "The best possibility is when teachers use MI theory as a way of looking at kids more carefully. . . . I'm interested in whether it helps people notice differences they haven't seen before" (as cited in Hopper & Hurry, 2000, p. 26).

Multiple Intelligences theory might best be described as a "philosophy of education" or an "attitude toward learning" (Stanford, 2003). It centers more on the ideas of progressive education (Dewey, 1916, 1938) than on a rigid regiment of techniques and strategies. "As such, it offers educators a broad opportunity to creatively adapt its fundamental principles to any number of educational settings" (Stanford, 2003, p. 2).
Table 10

Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of intelligence</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Linguistic intelligence</td>
<td>The use of the mind to understand language, the meaning of words, their order and syntax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Musical intelligence</td>
<td>The intelligence that involves sensitivities to rhythm, pitch, and timbre; this includes an emotional component that allows a student to feel the music, and not just the reasoning capacity to grasp the linguistic elements of musical patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Logical-mathematical intelligence</td>
<td>The ability to perform actions on objects, understand interactions among actions, make statements about the actions, and understand the relations among those statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Spatial intelligence</td>
<td>The ability to perceive the physical world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence</td>
<td>The capacity of the body for problem-solving, expression and goal-directed purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Intrapersonal intelligence</td>
<td>The understanding of oneself by knowing one’s strengths, weaknesses, moods, temperaments and emotions in order to understand behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Interpersonal intelligence</td>
<td>The accurate perceptions of other people in terms of work, leadership and cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Naturalist intelligence</td>
<td>The ability to use features from the natural world for problem solving</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hopper and Hurry (2000) examined numerous approaches to how teachers adopted Multiple Intelligences in the classroom and concluded that the most successful teachers used “Gardner’s theory as a legitimate framework by which to offer students a variety of learning activities” (p. 27). Put another way, the greatest contribution that MI theory makes to learning is in the suggestion that educators
expand their portfolio of techniques, tools, and strategies beyond the usual linguistic and logical ones that dominate U. S. classrooms (L. Campbell, 1997).

Goodlad's (1984) "A Study of Schooling" project suggests that educators have ample room to grow with regard to expanding their teaching techniques to address intelligences beyond the logistical and logical ones. After observing over 1,000 classrooms nationwide, researchers reported that almost 70% of classroom time was devoted to a teacher lecturing and giving directions. The second most common activity was students working on written assignments. Goodlad (1984) adds, "Much of this work was in the form of responding to directives in workbooks or on worksheets" (p. 230). In light of what is going on in the typical classroom in America, MI theory holds the promise of addressing the one-sidedness in teaching, thus providing a wider array of stimulating curricula to awaken the snoozing brains that inhabit our country's classrooms.

Stanford (2003) asserts that MI theory makes a way for good teachers to do what good teachers have always done—namely, stretch beyond the textbook and give varied opportunities for students to learn. Viadero (2003) supports this notion that MI theory simply gives a theoretical foundation to what successful teachers have always intuitively known. L. Campbell (1997) suggests, "Educators, it appears, readily embrace the theory because it affirms what they already know and do" (p. 19). Patricia Albjerg Graham, a research professor of the history of education and a former dean of the Harvard graduate school of education, observes, "Howard gave us an explanation of what every sentient human being knows—mainly, that individuals
come with different kinds of skills in understanding themselves and the world around them” (as cited in Viadero, 2003, p. 2).

Gardner articulated a theory that gave voice to intuitions that many educators already held. Similarly, his theory helps to explain the gut instincts shared by the founding leaders of the Improv Church. At the outset when we were brainstorming pedagogical approaches that might work for spiritual instruction, the early visionaries shared the belief that innovative teaching strategies might help some disengaged students connect with spiritual truth. We resonated with this counsel of Plato when he warned educators not to train “youths to learning by force and harshness, but direct them to it by what amuses their minds so that you may be better able to discover with accuracy the peculiar bent of the genius of each” (as cited in L. Campbell, 1997, p. 14). Intuitively we believed that no single set of teaching strategies would work best for all people at all times. By looking at pedagogy through the MI lens, we have since come to understand that Improv Church participants have unique predispositions in at least eight different intelligences, so any one approach is likely to connect better with some students than with others. This understanding provides a theoretical framework for us to continue in our pedagogical approach. Only now, we proceed with a more focused intentionality.

The teaching strategy employed at a typical Improv Church service seeks to address a variety of different intelligences. Specific examples of how we do this are listed in Table 11.

Granted, our curricular interpretation of Gardner’s theory at the Improv Church is unique to our setting. No other learning environment replicates what we
do. It is good to realize that, “In actuality, there may be as many models of multiple intelligences teaching as there are teachers!” (L. Campbell, 1997, p. 19). In the end, the MI theory gives us a framework for enhancing spiritual instruction at the Improv Church. In addition, it provides a language that helps us to understand from an educational and psychological perspective what we are doing. Therefore, we plan to continue to use the theory to inform our pedagogical strategy.
Table 11

*Examples of How MI Theory Is Used at the Improv Church*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of intelligence</th>
<th>Examples of addressing this intelligence at the Improv Church</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Linguistic intelligence</td>
<td>As people enter the Improv Church, have them write suggestions the players can use in their dramas. Examples of what they might be asked to write include: “Write one line of a poem about love,” or “Finish this sentence: The one question I most want to ask God is . . .” Use an improv sketch such as “Story book” where an audience member will sit on the lap of an improv player and fill in blanks of the improvised story when cued by the actor. Share a testimony or sermon either during or at the conclusion of the improv dramas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Musical intelligence</td>
<td>Divide the congregation into sections and assign each section a word that is relevant to the theme of the evening. When the conductor points to that section everybody chants the word using a certain rhythm. Provide music as people enter the church and mingle for the first 25-35 minutes of the program. Also a special music or two is typically a part of the program. Play an improv game such as “Kick it” where the actors perform parts of the drama in a rap genre. There are many variations of musical improv games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Logical-mathematical intelligence</td>
<td>Have audience members organize disparate pieces of improv sketches into some kind of a logical order. Have people craft a syllogism based on an improv sketch that was performed. One at a time, disclose different objects on stage. Next, ask audience members to make up an analogy to explain the theological concept that will be the focus of the teaching based on the object.</td>
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Table 11—Continued.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of intelligence</th>
<th>Examples of addressing this intelligence at the Improv Church</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Visual-spatial intelligence</td>
<td>Project flowcharts on the screen to visually depict the theme. Invite people to stand somewhere along a line to represent their opinion on a suggested topic. Play an improv game such as quadrants where one section of the stage is designated as “grace,” another section designated as “justice,” etc. When the actors are in the corresponding section on stage they must portray the theological concept through their character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence</td>
<td>Bring volunteers on stage and instruct them to cooperate together and position their bodies however they can and build a monument to forgiveness, or joy, or whatever the theme is for that evening. Read a parable of Jesus as people act out the story. Play an improv game where volunteers from the audience shape the actors. The actors are restricted from any movement except for how the volunteers mold them. The scene then unfolds as the actors justify the gestures given them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Intrapersonal intelligence</td>
<td>Provide a time of meditation to allow people to personally reflect on the topic of the evening. Play an improv game such as “family dinner.” In this sketch a volunteer is asked to reflect on the dynamics of his/her family. As the actors portray the volunteer’s family at dinner, the volunteer is tasked with interrupting anytime the story line veers away from the reality of his/her real family. One way to encourage people to relate to the sketch personally would be to have each person snap their fingers (or raise a hand or do some other similar gesture) when the scene contradicts their own family situation. In this way every person can play along. Give an assignment at the conclusion of the service to put into practice the theological concept discussed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type of intelligence</td>
<td>Examples of addressing this intelligence at the Improv Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Interpersonal intelligence</td>
<td>Allow time in the service for everyone to discuss with someone a personal anecdote that relates to the topic of the evening. Play an improv game such as three-headed expert where three people talk at the same time, only they speak together as one person. This game forces interpersonal connection in that players have to listen intently to each other in order to speak as one. Divide the congregation into small groups and invite them to creatively solve some world problem or theological enigma. Then have the groups share with the congregation-at-large the results of their brainstorm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Naturalist intelligence</td>
<td>Project a video of nature scenes during the music. Play an improv game such as &quot;animalistics.&quot; In this sketch, audience members assign each actor with an animal. Players play a scene, in which the characters are based on these animals. The players do not become the animal; they simply take on the characteristics of the animal. Give an assignment where you challenge the congregation to connect with God through nature in the upcoming week.</td>
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Creativity

Creativity is a hazy and elusive subject. "For all the words that have been put to it over the centuries, creativity remains a profound mystery. Few people agree even on how to define it" (Wittman, 1995, p. 1). Many have attempted to define creativity in the language of landmark theories. In a paper presented at the Creativity in Question conference at Edinburgh University Conference Centre, March 23, 2002,
it was been suggested that creative thinking can be based on the following perspectives:

*Gestalt theory:* The structuring of composition is how to understand creativity; consciousness recognizes restructuring as (what Fritz Perls called) the 'aha!' experience.

*Emerging systems theory:* Understanding of an artist in a real-life studio context.

*Information processing theory:* Understanding novelty, newness, and the difficulty of definitions. (Collins, 2002)

Understanding theories of creativity is one thing. Actually practicing creativity presents a whole new set of challenges. Daisaku Ikeda says, “Creativity means to push open the heavy, groaning doorway to life. This is not an easy struggle. Indeed, it may be the most difficult task in the world” (2004, p. 1). Still there are others who argue that creativity is not a complicated endeavor at all. Foy suggests that “creativity is not serious and it’s not difficult. Everyone can be creative. It’s just looking at things with a different perspective and seeing patterns that might not have been there at first glance” (as cited in Wittman, 1995, p. 1).

Someone once said, “Being creative is like being German—either you are, or you aren’t.” Such an assertion seems to turn a blind eye to children. Take for example, 6-year-old Shannon who gapes at the starry sky and exclaims, “I'd like to eat a vanilla-chip cookie that big!” I recall as a child sprawled out on the grassy carpet gazing at the clouds overhead.

“What's that cloud?” Dad quizzed.

“That's a John Deere tractor,” I confidently answered. My answers were always right.

“And how about that big cloud?”
"That's an explosion in a snow factory!"

How do we lose that fresh spirit? Why does rigor mortis of the brain begin at the end of childhood? Or, to paraphrase Marilyn Ferguson (1987), why do human beings start out as butterflies and end up in cocoons?

Part of the answer might lie in the educational system. Since the first grade, we have been programmed to hone in on a single "right" answer.

Often teachers drilled us to *converge* on one answer rather than to *diverge* and explore the infinite possibilities. Thus we become convergent rather than divergent thinkers. Research has indicated that 84% of 5-year-olds' thinking is divergent. By second grade, the divergent thinkers number only 10%. By age 45, a scant 2% remains (O'Toole, 1983).

Picasso battled convergent thinking. "I used to draw like Raphael," he said, "but it has taken me a whole lifetime to learn to draw like a child." Paul MacCready, the prize-winning inventor of human and solar-powered aircraft, once shared with an audience at Yale University: "My secret weapon was complete naïveté. The experts' extra knowledge made them have blinders on" (as cited in O'Toole, 1983, p. 148).

Kids aren't afraid to ask dumb—or what we might think as dumb—questions. "Daddy, can I see the picture you just took of me?"

"No, Sweetie, I have to take it to the store to have the film developed."

"But I want to see it now. Why can't you show me now?"

"Because."

"Because why?"
These “dumb” questions led this girl’s father, Edwin Land, to invent the Polaroid camera.

Jung (1976) believed creative growth to be a process of reconciling opposites. Creativity combines these opposites. It replaces “either-or” with “and.” It is divergent and considers all options. Indeed, creativity seems to flourish in an environment of dichotomy and tension.

Jesus loved to speak of paradoxes. “Blessed are they which are persecuted . . .” (Matt 5:10, KJV). “He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt 10:39, KJV). Indeed, salvation itself is a paradox. Jesus said, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matt 5:48, KJV). Such statements make salvation feel unattainable. Then Jesus said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31, KJV). Other statements make salvation feel within reach. It was Jesus who said, “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3, KJV). In His theology, there is a little boy or girl inside of everyone.

Tapping into that creative core that resides within every human spirit is the objective of educators who are advocates for the theory of synectics. This school of thought emerges from the work of William Gordon (1961; Gordon & Poze, 1976), who believes that creativity can be enhanced by various group exercises. These exercises are designed to help students grasp the process of creativity and to use new metaphors and analogies, to “break set” and generate new alternatives.
The term "synectics," from the Greek word *synectikos*, means "bringing forth together" or "bringing different things into unified connection." Since creativity involves the coordination of things into new structures, every creative thought or action requires synectic thinking. Torrance (2004) suggests, "Creative behavior occurs in the process of becoming aware of problems, deficiencies, gaps in knowledge, missing elements, disharmonies, bringing together in new relationships available information; identifying the missing elements; searching for solutions, making guesses, or formulating hypotheses" (p. 1). In Synectics, all things—regardless of their dissimilarity—can somehow be linked together, either in a physical, psychological or symbolic way. Synectic thinking is the process of discovering the links that unite seemingly disconnected elements. It is a way of mentally dismantling concepts then reconstructing them to offer new insights for all types of problems.

Synectics accurately describe the improvisational experience that we incorporate into the Improv Church service. We are constantly inviting the players and the audience members alike to link incoherent ideas and objects. In fact, most improv games are built on this notion of linking things that at first glance appear to be entirely independent of each other. For example, often the audience members will be asked to write random sentences when they arrive at the Improv Church. During the improv sketches an improv player will occasionally pull a piece of paper from the hat and be forced to use that sentence in the scene. It is often humorous to hear this jarring sentence come from nowhere. Even more humorous is the ingenious scrambling and the logistical acrobatics that the improv players do in order to fit the
pieces they were dealt into a drama that makes sense. It is this accommodating to
make the pieces fit that makes the learning experience both educationally rich and yet
entertaining at the same time.

Gordon’s model of synectics includes four ideas that challenge conventional views about creativity (as cited in Joyce et al., 1992). These nonconforming ideas square with the practice of synectics in the context of the Improv Church. First, Gordon suggests that creativity is important in everyday activities. This counters the notion that creativity is limited to great works of art or music. Gordon insists that creativity is an integral part of everyday life. He stresses that “the meanings of ideas can be enhanced through creative activity by helping us see things more richly” (as cited in Joyce et al., 1992, p. 219). This idea of making creativity accessible to the common person is fundamental in the process of learning at the Improv Church. Participants arrive with an expectation of being involved—at least peripherally—in the creative process. Everyone is included, thus downplaying the notion that creativity is reserved for a select few.

Second, Gordon clashes with conventional wisdom on creativity by suggesting that the creative process is not at all mysterious. Popular myths prevail that creativity is a mystifying and personal process that cannot be dissected for analysis. Gordon counters such notions by demystifying the phenomenon; moreover, he suggests that creativity is enhanced by conscious analysis. This assumption led him to create training procedures to nurture it. At the Improv Church we have built on Gordon’s assertions and have established systems whereby the creative process is
learned and honed. These training procedures help the improv players to understand the creative process—both why and how it works.

Third, Gordon breaks with traditional notions about creativity by suggesting that creative invention is similar in all fields—the arts, the sciences, engineering—and is characterized by the same underlying intellectual processes. In suggesting this, Gordon breaks with the school of thought that confines creativity to the arts. Gordon maintains that it is the same mental process that transpires—irrespective of the arena in which it is practiced. Thus he links the generative thinking in the arts to that in the sciences. By moving the creative process from the arts to any and all arenas of learning, Gordon’s model broadens the role of creativity beyond conventional boundaries. Again, this is similar to what is happening in the Improv Church. We have put the process of creativity at the heart of the learning experience. We have transferred the creative process from the typical context of the arts and placed it in the all-too-often-unfamiliar environment of church.

Fourth, Gordon connects creative thinking between individual and group invention. This contradicts the traditional thought that postures creativity as an intensely personal experience. Based on Gordon’s model, individuals and groups generate ideas and products in the same fashion. Assuming this hypothesis is correct, the Improv Church is basically a laboratory of creativity where the same process that fuels artists and musicians is operative in the group context of spiritual learning.

Gordon’s Synectics Model can be summarized in this way:

The method of synectics has been explicitly designed to improve the creativity of individuals and of groups. However, the implicit learning from this model is equally vivid. Participation in a synectics group invariably creates a unique shared experience that fosters interpersonal understanding and a sense of
community. Members learn about one another as each person reacts to the common event in his or her unique way. Individuals become acutely aware of their dependence on the various perceptions of other group members. Each thought, no matter how prosaic, is valued for its potential catalytic effect on one’s own thoughts. Simply having a thought is the sole basis for status in this community, and the playfulness of synectics activities encourages even the most timid participant. (as cited in Joyce et al., 1992, pp. 236-237)

This summary describes the quintessence of the Improv Church. The Friday evening services can be defined as a “synectics group.” It becomes a “unique shared experience that fosters interpersonal understanding and a sense of community.” The interdependence factor is evident and all attendees—including the most timid participants—are valued for the “potential catalytic effect” they might play in the overall experience.

Summary

Whole-Person Learning centers the focus of learning on the learner. The theory is built upon the constructivist premise that the learner constructs all knowledge, personally, socially, and in combination. Research that has emerged under the general label of “whole-person learning” includes such theories as Emotional Intelligence, Multiple Intelligences, Brain-based Theory, and Synectics.

We have examined ways that aspects of the Improv Church intersect with theories about the way we learn. Hidden within these theories are keys to interpreting and making sense of the experience of participants at the Improv Church. In many respects, the Improv Church highlights the premise of Whole-Person Learning that no two people construct knowledge in the same way. Learning transpires in many different ways. The pathways to knowledge are as varied and wonderful and wacky as the improvised sketches that are the regular fare at the Improv Church.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter we have looked at the theoretical and practical connections between the Improv Church and learning. Various learning theories such as adult learning theory, experiential learning theory, and transformative learning theory help to explain why the participatory component of the Improv Church holds an appeal for attendees. Instructional strategies such as theories from the social family, the information processing family, and the personal family offer theoretical explanations as to why the pedagogical methods used at the Improv Church are effective. Finally, in whole-person learning theories, which are grounded in brain-based research as well as research in emotional intelligence, multiple intelligences, and creativity, we find helpful explanations that tie in observations made by participants at the Improv Church with the theoretical explanations of the unique way in which people learn.

All in all, there are numerous connections between the academic literature on education and the practical experience of learners at the Improv Church. While the founders of the Improv Church have always held an intuitive sense that what we are doing has educational merit, this research shows the connections in a more systematic way. By teasing out the relevant aspects of the theories and tying them to our learning context, it becomes plain that there are plausible explanations for the success that we have seen.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of the Improv Church and the Church of Acts

While the bulk of this research has focused on the Improv Church, it might be helpful at the conclusion to revisit the role of the Improv Church as it functions in the broader context of the Church of Acts. The references to the Improv Church refer to the seeker services conducted on Friday evenings. At these services, there is typically music, improvised dramas, and some sort of instruction or teaching. The function of the Improv Church is to open a spiritual dialogue with collegians who are far from God. It is user-friendly by design and does not feel stuffy or intimidating to participate.

To complement the Friday evening service, we initiated Improv Praise. This program is considered the worship service for the Church of Acts and typically runs on alternating Friday nights with the Improv Church. It is an hour-long program that consists primarily of singing songs of worship. Spontaneous prayers, scripture readings, and spiritual sharing comprise the other parts of Improv Praise. While the Improv Church has an evangelistic function and targets unbelievers, Improv Praise has an edification function and targets believers. The strategic design on the part of the leaders at the Church of Acts is that unbelievers will become involved in the
Church of Acts through the Improv Church. Next, they will progress spiritually to the point of involvement at Improv Praise.

Another place for involvement at the Church of Acts is Improv Serve. This program, usually held on Saturday afternoons for a couple hours, offers participants the opportunity to participate in service learning. The idea is that we learn best about the acts of Christ by actually doing the work of Christ through serving others.

The final program of the Church of Acts includes small groups. By encouraging participants at the Church of Acts to meet in small groups for support, Bible study, and prayer, community is nurtured and significant bonding transpires.

To speak of the Church of Acts as a biblical model of worship requires that all of its programs—not just the Improv Church—be included in the conversation. Christ clearly called his church to evangelize the world (Matt 28:19-20); however, the concern to reach lost people does not comprise the totality of the Christian mission. The Gospel commission states:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

The Improv Church is designed to address the part of the commission that calls us to baptize nonbelievers—i.e., we are attempting to reach people who are far from God with the message of the Gospel. However, there is more to this challenge. Central to the work that Christ called his church to do is the task of making disciples and teaching them to obey all of Christ’s commands. To address this part of the challenge we offer small group fellowships and Improv Praise. Through these programs participants can grow in grace. Through Improv Serve, we are attempting
to offer a holistic model of church and answer the calling of Christ to become servants. Through all of these efforts, our mission remains: to connect young adults to Christ through improvisation and interactive learning.

**Overview of the Core Values**

What began as a desire to create a community based on the biblical descriptions of the early Christian church has since blossomed into a community called the Church of Acts. This church model is built on four core values: action, community, transformation, and service. These values grow out of a biblical foundation and are reinforced by more contemporary theories from education and communication.

The idea behind the core value of action at the Church of Acts is that one’s experience plays a prominent role in the process. The spiritual and educational value is premised in doing, rather than just hearing. Scripture teaches the importance of actively doing one’s faith:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (Jas 1:22-27)

In addition to being an important biblical principle, this notion of the importance of doing also dominates many discussions among educators and communicators. The whole constructivist movement in education has its philosophical underpinnings in
this value. From the field of communication, McCroskey's work suggests the importance of the receiver's active participation in order to encourage a two-way process between sender and receiver.

By the core value "community," the Church of Acts acknowledges that humans are inherently social beings. The importance of fellowship is evident from the beginning of mankind. In the creation story recorded in Genesis, a refrain keeps recurring: "And God said . . . and it was so . . . and God saw that it was good." This theme is repeated throughout the week of creation until the final act. When God creates man, he declares that "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). Ortberg (2003) adds, "Community is what you were created for. It is God's desire for your life. It is the one indispensable condition for human flourishing" (p. 32).

Influential voices such as Vygotsky (1978) and Bandura (1977) speak as experts in the field of education and suggest that learning occurs in a social context. From a communication perspective, the importance of community cannot be underestimated. Dominant theories such as symbolic interactionism suggest that human beings are actors who construct meaning through social exchanges. Other theories, such as the symbolic convergence theory, explore the manner in which "cohesion," i.e., community, is shaped within a group.

By "transformation," the Church of Acts identifies the primary reason for its existence—to see the participants transformed into the character of Christ. The apostle Paul spoke to the Galatians of how he labored "until Christ is formed in you" (Gal 4:19). Efforts at the Improv Church attempt to accomplish this same purpose of Christ being shaped within participants. Again, from the other disciplines of this
study, this value is of paramount interest. Arguably, one of the primarily goals in the education/communication process is to bring about change in the student/receiver. This assumes a global perspective from both disciplines. After all, in the big picture, educators hope to educate, communicators seek to communicate, but to what end? Ultimately, is it not to bring about change in people?

The final core value of the Church of Acts is service. The teaching of Christ shapes this desire to serve. "Whoever wants to become great among you" Jesus said, "must be a servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt 20:26-28). Because of this and many similar texts in the bible, the leaders at the Church of Acts include service as a value that defines our fellowship. In the field of education, the concept of service learning emerged from the Progressive Education Movement in the early 1900s. Based on the work of educational philosophers such as John Dewey (1938), service learning "is a teaching/learning method that connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility" (Duckenfield & Swanson, 1995, p. 1). The philosophy from this branch of educational theory supports the underlying contention at the Church of Acts that students learn best by doing. From the outset, the leaders at the Church of Acts have often expressed the mantra, "The best way to communicate the love of Jesus is to serve." The idea behind this statement suggests that communication is multi-faceted. In other words, we can communicate orally of the love of Jesus, but when we demonstrate the love of Jesus through acts of service, we are no longer simply "telling" but "showing" this
love. Theories of persuasion from the field of communication would support this approach. For example, in Johnston’s (1994) model of persuasion, service would be one more “ring” that strengthens the persuasiveness of a message such as “God loves you and wants to serve you.”

These values that drive the Church of Acts have compelling connections that span the disciplines of theology, education and communication. Admittedly, this research does not dig exhaustively into any one discipline. The value of this study is not in its comprehensive treatment based on one discipline, rather, the unique connection that it makes between disciplines. To use a metaphor, the value is not in the depth of each well that is dug per discipline, but in the trenches that are dug between the wells. Similar to what Wheatley (1994) does in using the discipline of quantum physics to inform the knowledge of organizational theory, I have used different disciplines to inform the phenomenon of the Church of Acts. In this respect, the Church of Acts offers a unique contribution to the literature.

Conclusions

As the aforementioned bias of a Judeo-Christian worldview would suggest, it is my opinion that the work of spiritual transformation is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit. This work unfolds corporately in church communities as well as personally in individuals. To the extent that the Improv Church has been used as an instrument to advance the work of God, I believe that it has been and continues to be, a worthwhile endeavor.

To reduce the workings of the Spirit to some formula is not only misguided, but impossible. While educational theories might enlighten and explain the goings-on
in a spiritual context, these human conjectures can only partially illuminate the work of the Divine. How, when, why, in what context and through whom God chooses to work remains a profound mystery. The conclusions and recommendations of this study then, reflect the reality of the finite venturing into the realm of the infinite.

This study brings out a number of conclusions about the way we teach spiritual truth and package church for traditional college-age students. The data offer a window into the mind and motivation of collegians with regard to their engagement with church. In a culture where collegians are often disengaged with church, the Improv Church offers a new way to think about how to spiritually connect with people in this demographic. Because collegians are involved at the Improv Church and show a steady, 5-year record of consistent attendance, it offers an ideal laboratory for studying their preferences and motivations regarding church. The following conclusions grow out of the reflections and memories shared by participants at the Improv Church. These conclusions also offer a concise answer to the first research question: What aspects of the Improv Church make it appealing to collegians?

Conclusions Emerging From the First Research Question

The first research question in this study asked why collegians found the Improv Church to be appealing. The data offered three primary conclusions.

The first conclusion highlights humor as a major draw for collegians to the Improv Church. In general terms, the environment is important in church attendance and learning (Caine & Caine, 1995; Dwyer, 2002; Paterno, 2001; Qian & Alvermann, 1995; Reardon, 1998). More specifically, when participants were asked what aspects of the Improv Church made it appealing for them, they spoke of the convivial
environment and focused on themes such as humor, joy, and laughter. When asked to recount memories from the Improv Church, participants often recalled humorous incidents. This study adds to the growing body of research that links humor to a positive learning environment (Adair & Siegel, 1984; Berk, 1996; Burkhart, 1998; Civikly-Powell, 1999; Edwards & Gibboney, 1992; Flowers, 2001; Friedman et al., 2002; McLaughlin, 2001; Pollak & Freda, 1997; Ulloth, 1998; Vogel, 1995; Wallinger, 1997). The conclusion suggests that a happy and fun environment can be a major draw for churches that seek to attract traditional-aged collegians. Once again, the surveys, focus groups, personal interviews, journals, and videos all attest to the importance that humor played in drawing people to the Improv Church.

The second conclusion proposes that collegians aspire to spiritual actualization. The participants at the Improv Church spoke of a spiritual hunger that they felt. Their stories attest to the fact that spiritual growth is important. Evangelism and sharing one’s personal faith is also important. A consistent theme emerging from all the data sources emphasized this quest for spirituality as a primary reason for attending the Improv Church. This research suggests that collegians do not tend to evade or drop out of church because they feel no need or have no interest in spiritual things; on the contrary, they are interested in spiritual matters. It is just that spiritual truth should be presented in a way as to arrest attention and engage the learner—something that the Improv Church seems to do quite well. Thus our experience fits with the wider body of literature (Fowler, 1981; Garber, 1996; Parks, 1986, 2000) concerned with faith development.
The third conclusion suggests that collegians are drawn to a church that offers community. This promise of connection presents a strong and compelling incentive for young people to attend church. This study supports the findings of other studies that would the pursuit of community as a major draw for collegians attending church. The Improv Church is a safe place where discussions take place and participants come to know one another and to be known by one another. The surveys, focus groups, personal interviews, journals—all the streams of data feeding into this study—underscore the importance of this “connection factor.” This social component not only plays an important role in church involvement but also factors into the learning equation. This study supports a wide breadth of research that links learning and community. Scholars such as Vygotsky (1978), Wagner (1997), Tollefson (1990), and many others (Barnes et al., 1986; Johnson & Johnson, 1974; Johnson & Others, 1985; Mafune, 1992; Ngeow, 1998; Sharan & Sharan, 1992; Slavin, 1983) assert that learning transpires in social contexts. This research affirms such conclusions.

Conclusions Emerging From the Second Research Question

Further conclusions grow out of the second research question: In what ways do aspects of the Improv Church mirror the theoretical and practical scholarly literature? The Improv Church puts into practice a number of theoretical constructs that inform the educational process. While ours is primarily a spiritual process, a large piece of that process is the learning that occurs. In this way, the Improv Church mirrors the theoretical and practical concerns of scholarly literature. The three broad
areas of connection include the following: learning theories, instructional strategies, and whole-person learning.

In learning theories, scholars attempt to explain what learning is and why it works as it does. The learning theories operative at the Improv Church include adult learning theory (Knowles, 1970, 1980, 1990), experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984, 1999) and transformative learning theory (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 1998, 2000; Mezirow, 1991, 1995). In light of these theories, the Improv Church offers this conclusion: The learner manages his/her own educational process and is transformed through the accumulation of experiences across the contexts of life. This phenomenon is happening at the Improv Church. The participants play a key role in the educational process and help to shape their own learning experience. Moreover, participants are invited to participate actively in order to learn from their experiences. The objective, as is articulated by the third core value of the church, is transformation. That is to say, the ultimate goal of learning in our context is to see lives that are transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

The second body of theoretical constructs offers instructional strategies. Here, the emphasis is on the techniques employed by the teacher. The primary models relevant to the Improv Church include the social family, the information processing family, and the personal family (Joyce et al., 1992). With the help of these theoretical paradigms, another conclusion of this study affirms that learning does transpire in a social context, information is processed through creative teaching strategies, and the net result is spiritual impact on the individual seeker. Based on this theoretical framework, the Improv Church is demonstrating that using multiple instructional
strategies plays an important role not only in the educational process but in worship as well.

The role of the learner is also of great importance in this educational process. Relevant theories fall under the umbrella of Whole-Person Learning. This school contains theories such as Brain-based Theory (Caine & Caine, 1991; Caine & Caine, 1990, 1994, 1995; Caviness, 2000; Craig, 2003; Dwyer, 2002; Fishback, 1998; Qian & Alvermann, 1995; Reardon, 1998; Sylwester, 1994, 1995; Sylwester & Brandt, 1997; Sylwester et al., 1981), Emotional Intelligence (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003; Goleman, 1995, 2004; Goleman & O'Neil, 1996; Latour & Hosmer, 2002), Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1993; Hopper & Hurry, 2000; Nolen, 2003; Schmidt, 1994; Stanford, 2003; Sternberg, 1994; Thompson & Thornton, 2002), and Synectics (Gordon, 1961; Gordon & Poze, 1976). Using the ideas popularized by these theories, the Improv Church helps to demonstrate the unique and holistic nature of learning. Thus, a final conclusion that can be offered in this study suggests that the learning experience should encapsulate a wide array of techniques in order to address the unique learner. This approach takes into account the emotions and unique multiple intelligences of the learner. It also offers an invitation to learners to join in the creative discovery of deeper knowledge and spiritual truth.

Based on these conclusions, certain recommendations are in order. Such recommendations come in full awareness of Tasker's (2002) point:

Spirituality cannot be legislated or manufactured, since it has more to do with recognizing who God is and allowing Him to be God. . . . Spiritual formation is not a program to be implemented, but a life to be lived in the presence of God. (p. 344)
Although spiritual formation is indeed the work of the Spirit and not the result of clever church or educational wrappings, there are still theories and methods that might help to facilitate an environment in which God intersects powerfully in seekers’ lives. It is in this spirit that these recommendations are addressed to persons who are in positions to experiment with unconventional methods and to implement changes.

**Recommendations**

The recommendations are tailored to the following groups: church leaders, educators, communicators, and spiritual seekers. By using this approach, the principles gleaned from this study can be applied in the various contexts of concern.

**To Church Leaders**

1. Church leaders need to recognize the trend of young people sliding away from church life and formulate an intentional response to arrest this drift.

2. Adequate resources must be allocated for experimental projects to be viable. The Improv Church experiment has always required significant financial and human resources. A significant portion of financial resources has come from church administrators who were willing to allot conference evangelism monies to try this approach instead of a traditional series of evangelistic meetings. Leaders must be willing to explore beyond the traditional boundaries of evangelism and allocate resources accordingly—in spite of the risky possibility that it may not produce the desired results.

3. Variations of the Improv Church should be tried. Because of the fluid and dynamic nature of church life, there is no formula for this type of church that
guarantees optimum results. What works in Walla Walla in 2004 may not work in a
different part of the country with different personalities in a different era. Therefore,
church leaders should be willing to contextualize this interactive model to their
unique setting.

4. Pastors in training should be exposed to innovative methods such as the
Improv Church. The purpose behind this recommendation is not to suggest that
Improv Church look-alikes be planted around the world. Rather, the exposure to this
approach of church planting might stimulate creative thinking by new pastors and
spark a vision for innovative and more effective ways of doing church for the next
generation.

5. Future innovations in church life should be approached through significant
prayer. Since God is the power behind all goings-on in the church, and we are at His
mercy for success or failure, any follow-through from this study should be done in
humble dependence upon God.

To Educators

1. Educators should explore ways to create a safe classroom environment that
fosters community. The development of authentic relationships should be
encouraged by teachers acting as role models.

2. Educators should also seek ways to make the learning process fun.
Through novelty, surprise, humor, and a host of other tools used at the Improv
Church, students can engage in a fresh and fun culture of education. Learning need
not be monotonous.
3. The ongoing experimentation of interactive learning should be encouraged by incorporating interactive methods into the classroom. In order to hone the approach and increase its effectiveness, training, reflection and evaluation should be a part of this process.

4. A curriculum that assists educators in using improvisational techniques in the classroom needs to be developed. Resources that help teachers to incorporate improvisation into the learning process are practically non-existent.

To Communicators

1. Communicators should be trained in the art form of improvisation. In this way, communicators will be prepared and comfortable when the inevitable surprises occur.

2. More experimentation needs to be done that analyzes the link between improvisational communication and spiritual experience. Research in this area of study is virtually non-existent.

3. There is a need for communicators to share resources and fortify understanding of how the art form of improvisation can enhance interactive worship and experiential learning. Knowledge in this area is very limited.

4. More venues are needed in which to experiment with improvisational communication. These venues might include, but are not limited to, churches, schools, and performing arts theatres.

5. Avenues for sharing reflections and discoveries about improvisational communication are needed. Through websites, forums, classes, books, etc., the knowledge base can be expanded. Currently there is a drought in this area of study.
Recommendations for Further Study

This field of improvisation as it relates to spiritual experience, learning, and communication is wide open for further study. Academic inquiry is needed in the following areas:

1. Conduct longitudinal studies to examine the impact that non-conventional churches such as the Improv Church have on participants. Such studies might also look at a variety of creative approaches and compare the effectiveness of the different churches.

2. Develop and implement a strategic approach that harnesses the potential of improvisation in the classroom. While some research is being done in peripheral areas such as improvisation in music and teaching strategies from the discipline of jazz, very limited efforts have been made that offer a carefully designed pedagogy based on the principles that make improvisation work.

3. Develop and implement a strategic approach that harnesses the potential of improvisation in the church setting. While studies in this regard are minimal in the area of education, they are even more nominal in churches.

4. Research the extent to which improvisation can be used as a language for evangelism. Future study could inform church leaders on how to effectively connect with a segment of society that currently avoids church settings. Attention might also be given to the evangelistic impact the Improv Church has made in our community.

5. Look deeper into the perceived spiritual impact the Improv Church has had on the leaders and the participants of the Improv Church. A researcher might explore possible links between Improv Church experiences and significant spiritual decisions.
6. Survey the kinds of methods instructors are using that incorporate elements of improvisation.

7. Determine if there is any correlation between humorous events, memory, and learning. Contrast learning environments such as the Improv Church to other contexts that are devoid of humor and laughter.

8. Study the differences that seem to exist between the sexes with regard to improvisation. This research could examine the diversity in how men and women do improvisational acting, and the way in which the sexes respond differently to it.

9. Look at the fastest-growing churches in America today and tease out the extent to which community, humor, and spirituality play a role in the growth.

10. Develop a learning theory that is based on an improvisational model.

This study has only begun a discussion that is ripe for further dialogue and study. The list for recommendations for further study feels like it could stretch beyond limits. Virtually no serious academic work has been done that informs our understanding of improvisation and how it relates to a wide variety of disciplines such as learning, church growth, communication, evangelism, church member retention, community, spirituality, memory, and transformation.

In my opinion significant advances in all of these disciplines are in fact happening at the Improv Church. In terms of young people enthusiastically getting switched on to a dynamic, vibrant church and being fully engaged in an exciting learning community, there is little question but that it is happening at the Improv Church. But what is the potential of this model? How will the Improv Church evolve
from here? How can our experience make a further contribution to the wider academic community? These are but a few of the questions that remain unanswered.

In the end, the landscape of learning is littered with questions and curiosities that remain elusive. Spiritual mysteries loom cloudy in our epistemological constructs. So our search continues in a quest to know and learn and grow. In a sense, all of life becomes an improvisational dance of discovery.

May this dance never end.

Summary

So what is the conclusion? In the final analysis, what makes the Improv Church click?

A broad answer resides in the holistic approach that the Improv Church takes toward the learning experience. This experience is best explained through different disciplines such as education, communication, and spiritual transformation. No one discipline captures the full story. Furthermore, the package that the Improv Church offers has a holistic impact on learners in multi-faceted ways.

The data suggest that people are dialed in at an emotional level. From an emotional perspective, learners are drawn into a fun and inviting environment. They laugh easily. They cry occasionally. They cheer. They sing. They listen. They experience a wide spectrum of emotions. The pedagogical model is structured in such a way as to engage participants on a variety of different emotional levels.

Another aspect of the Improv Church that makes it work involves the social benefits that participants enjoy. It is a ripe context for social learning. All the data suggest that the appeal of community at the Improv Church is a strong draw for
participants. The experience of learning is enhanced because of the social bonds that naturally form.

The Improv Church addresses the cognitive component as well. Not only is the environment emotionally charged, nor is it simply a place to hang out with friends, it is a learning environment as well. The intellect of participants is stimulated on a number of different levels. Participants attest to the inevitable mental gymnastics that occur when watching the improv sketches and thinking about what they might do or say should they be on stage. Moreover, a limited slice of traditional instruction is usually offered at the Improv Church. In this way participants are challenged in their thinking about biblical truths.

From a physical perspective, the Improv Church is more active and hands-on than most traditional church services. Occasionally, participants are invited to get up, move around, act out a scene, or in some other way engage in the learning process through physical involvement. The way in which participants primarily engage at the Improv Church at this level, however, is through the Improv Serve. By doing acts of service, participants are challenged to learn through hands-on experiences.

The Improv Church is impacting participants on a spiritual level as well. Many of the people interviewed during the course of this research testified to the spiritual impact the Improv Church has made. At the core of this whole experiment of doing church in a new way is the desire to see people transformed into the character of Christ. The Improv Church offers a non-threatening environment where spiritual discussions can transpire and ultimately eternal decisions can be made.
Over 100 years ago Ellen White (1903) envisioned this holistic approach to education.

Our ideas of education take too narrow and too low a range. There is need of a broader scope, a higher aim. True education means more than the perusal of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come. (p. 13)

The Improv Church seeks to fulfill this vision of a “broader scope, a higher aim.”

Our experience tells us that something significant is happening on a number of different levels.

On the one hand, our experience at the Improv Church has helped us to better understand the complex workings of education, communication, and spiritual transformation. On the other hand, the theories from these disciplines give language and help to make sense of the Improv Church. In the final analysis this quest to understand more fully will be unending.
APPENDIX A

SURVEY COMPLETED BY ATTENDEES AT THE

IMPROV CHURCH ON FEBRUARY 1, 2002
WE NEED YOU! Please volunteer two minutes to complete this survey. This data will be evaluated as part of Karl Haffner’s Ph.D. dissertation. In order to assure validity and reliability of the research, it is imperative that every person attending the Improv Church on Feb. 1, 2002, complete it. THIS IS YOUR TICKET FOR ADMISSION TONIGHT. Thanks mucho for your help. By carefully studying what is going on at the Improv Church, we hope to serve you better.

**How often have you attended the Improv Church? (Circle one)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First time</th>
<th>2-5 times</th>
<th>6-10 times</th>
<th>11+times</th>
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</table>

*Rank the following reasons why you came tonight (0=it had nothing to do with your decision to come; 5=it was a very strong reason for your attendance tonight).*

I came tonight:

- To be with friends.
  (No part of decision) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (Strong reason)
- To have something to do.
  (No part of decision) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (Strong reason)
- To laugh and be entertained.
  (No part of decision) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (Strong reason)
- To grow spiritually.
  (No part of decision) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (Strong reason)
- To support a friend who is seeking in his/her spiritual journey.
  (No part of decision) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (Strong reason)
- Because I was invited by a friend.
  (No part of decision) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (Strong reason)
- Out of habit
  (No part of decision) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (Strong reason)
- Because I am helping in some aspect of the Improv Church.
  (No part of decision) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (Strong reason)
- Because I felt guilty.
  (No part of decision) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (Strong reason)
- Because I was curious.
  (No part of decision) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (Strong reason)

Other reasons for coming:

Currently, my spiritual experience is:

(Non-existent) 0 1 2 3 4 5 (My top priority)

Check if you are willing to share further:
Yes! I am willing to participate in a focus group to discuss my experience with the Improv Church.

Name: ___________________________________  Email: _______________________________

Phone: ___________________________________

Most convenient time from the following choices:
Monday 5:00 PM    Monday 7:00 PM    Tuesday 5:00 PM    Tuesday 7:00 PM
Wednesday 4:00 PM Wednesday 7:00 PM  Friday 5:00 PM    Friday 8:00 PM

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Description of Focus Groups Protocol

While several survey respondents expressed a willingness to participate in a focus group, as it turned out no one showed up at the scheduled meetings. Consequently, on three different evenings I chose attendees prior to the Improv Church service and questioned the people in those groups. Since they were already there with time to kill before the service began it was easier to solicit participation. Also, this approach assured greater impartiality in that I was talking with people more randomly selected than would have been the case had I only used those participants who overtly expressed a desire to be a part of the focus group.

Respondents were selected as a group that happened to be together in line, although this did not necessarily mean that they all knew each prior to the focus group. An element of randomness was introduced in the survey by approaching participants from different parts of the line of people waiting to get into the church. The first night I asked people at the front of the line; the second evening I approached the middle part of the line; the third night the participants were standing at the end of the line. Of the 28 respondents that I approached with the request, all of them agreed to participate. No one declined the invitation.

Three different focus groups comprised of 7-10 people participated in the session that lasted 30-45 minutes. Participants were selected by the
Focus Group Interview Form and Questions

Thanks for participating in this focus group. Please provide the following information before we get started.

Name: Email:
Age: Gender:
Year in school: Denomination:
Spiritual background:
How long have you been attending the Improv Church?
How often do you attend?

Focus group questions:

1. Suppose you were trying to encourage a friend to attend the Improv Church, what would you say?
2. What aspects of the Improv Church influenced you to continue coming back? Why?
3. What is your most memorable Improv Church service and why?
4. What have you learned about yourself as a result of your involvement with the Improv Church? What have you learned about God?
5. How has your involvement with the Improv Church affected you socially?
6. How has your involvement with the Improv Church affected you emotionally?
7. *How has your involvement with the Improv Church affected you spiritually?*

8. *Before you started attending the Improv Church what kinds of things did you do on Friday nights?*

*Respondents will be given the italicized questions on a sheet of paper during the interview.*
APPENDIX C

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING THE JUDGMENT SAMPLE OF IMPROV PLAYERS AND THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Criteria for Selecting Improv Players to Be Interviewed

The criteria used in the selection process of this judgment sample limited the people interviewed to those improv actors who had been involved in the Improv Church for a minimum of two years. In this way, I was talking with leaders at the Improv Church who had a thorough, working knowledge of the Church of Acts. Each person would have invested a minimum of 3 hours a week throughout the prior two school years (1999-2000 and 2000-2001). Each interviewee would have been involved in a small group at the church, and would have participated to some degree at the Improv Praise and the Improv Serve. Furthermore, each person had a comprehensive understanding of the mission of the Improv Church.

At the time this data was collected only five people met the criteria. A sixth person was included in this judgment sample because of his heavy involvement at the Improv Church—even though he was not an improv player. He was involved in a leadership and teaching role at the church. Because this was a purposive sample, it was my judgment that his insights could make a valuable contribution to the insights offered by the improv players. Each person was interviewed separately, one on one, in a session that lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded using both a digital camera and a cassette recorder.
The interviews followed a basic outline of questions. Nevertheless, every interview was different. Because I allowed for each improv player to tell his/her unique story every conversation had a fluid, dynamic feel.

The interviews were recorded using both a digital camera and a cassette recorder. The conversations were then transcribed and catalogued.
Interview Questions for the Improv Players at the Improv Church

Form to fill out before the interview:

Name: ___________________________ Email: ___________________________

Age: ___________ Gender: ___________

Year in school: ___________________________ Denomination: ___________________________

Spiritual background: ___________________________

How long have you been an improv player?

Focus group questions:

1. What kept you involved as an improv player?

2. What is your most memorable Improv Church service and why?

3. What aspects of the Improv Church influenced you to continue coming back? Why?

4. What have you learned about yourself as a result of your involvement with the Improv Church? What have you learned about God?

5. How has your involvement with the Improv Church affected you socially?

6. How has your involvement with the Improv Church affected you emotionally?

7. How has your involvement with the Improv Church affected you spiritually?
8. *Before becoming an Improv Player, what kinds of things did you do on Saturday night?*

9. What goals did you have when you got involved with the Improv Church?

10. Suppose you were trying to persuade a friend to be an improv player, what would you say?

11. What counsel would you have to an improv player just starting out?

12. What contribution have you made through the Improv Church?

* Respondents will be given the italicized questions on a sheet of paper during the interview.
A Covenant for the Improv Actors

Thanks for your willingness to volunteer as one of the improv players for the Church of Acts. Because the Church of Acts involves much more than simply the Friday evening Improv Church, we want to be right up front with our expectations for all the Improv players. Please read this carefully. Should you not be willing to make this level of commitment, we understand. This is, however, what we feel is needed in order for the Improv players and the Improv Church to be successful. By signing this covenant, you acknowledge your intention to live consistent with these expectations. Compromising in any of the following areas will jeopardize your continued involvement as an improv player.

Requirements:
• Participate in regular improv training events throughout the school year.
• Watch a video that paints the big picture for The Church of Acts.
• Participate in a weekly small group meeting and/or the Improv Praise on selected Wednesday evenings.
• Punctual participation at weekly practice sessions with the improv team.
• Be involved in some kind of service ministry that is personal, practical and provable.
• Perform improv once a month at the Improv Church
• Required reading: Truth in Comedy by Charna Halpern
• Regularly reflect on your spiritual journey this year. (This is to help provide required research for a Ph.D. dissertation project).

Other expectations:

Because the improv players are very public witnesses for the Church of Acts, we expect their lifestyle to be consistent with the values that we are trying to teach. If people in the audience are aware of private compromises by those on stage, our integrity and our ability to share Christ is destroyed. Consequently, we will only accept those improv players who practice the lifestyle of fully devoted followers Christ. This would include—but is not limited to—refraining from drinking, drugs, premarital sex, illegal activities, etc. While we are specifically trying to reach people who are far from God and perhaps engaged in these at-risk behaviors, we will not tolerate these things from people in our leadership core.
We also expect full compliance from all who are involved in leadership positions to the core values of the Church of Acts (action, community, transformation and service). We simply believe the best way to communicate these values is to live them.

**What we’re looking for in the audition process:**
- Improvisers who can convey the honest truth. We’re not looking for people who can go for the joke or who try to be funny.
- Team players—this should be evident in the improv sketches
- Fully committed Christians
- People who can commit to the time requirements outlined above
- Improvisers who come across well on stage
- People who are punctual and dependable

**I have read the following expectations and agree to comply fully should I be accepted on the Improv Team. You are welcome to contact the following person for a character reference (list a teacher, pastor, mentor or friend).**

**Person to contact for a personal reference:**

**Phone**

Your signature:  
Phone:

**Address:**  
**Email:**
APPENDIX E

KOLB’S EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

AND THE CHURCH OF ACTS
Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and the Church of Acts
APPENDIX F

GRID OF DATA SOURCES AND EMERGENT THEMES
### Grid of Data Sources and Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Surveys</th>
<th>Focus Groups</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Journals</th>
<th>Video Tapes</th>
<th>Personal Journal</th>
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<td>Personal Journal</td>
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**Themes**

- Fun, open atmosphere full of laughter, humor and joy
- Spiritual experience, getting to know God
- Evangelistic potential
- Music, praise, atmosphere
- Community, new people involved
- Programming, speakers, personal involvement

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Note: A check indicates that it was a dominant, reoccurring theme in the data source.
REFERENCE LIST


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