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Guided Thesis:

Toward Holistic Teen Health (in the Local Church)

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Essay One: Contextualization

I still remember when I first learned about the importance of context in the course of my undergraduate studies, during my first Intercultural Studies class. This one English word and all the depths of meaning behind it changed my entire approach to my vocation and relationships. As I continued learning about contextualization, I saw it's evidence everywhere. This was a similar experience to when I first learned about the field of community development, connecting many different elements of who I am, my experiences, and the things I am most interested in. Later, when I learned how intertwined contextualization and community development are, I realized that contextualization is as vital to community development as breathing is to the human body. Without contextualization, working towards "transformational development" is impossible (Myers 16). In every aspect of my personal and professional life, I try to align myself with the model of transformational development, believing that the gospel of Christ points towards "the best of human futures" as designed and desired by God (Myers 17). Transformational development embodies holistic development with specific attention to the spiritual work of God transforming lives to the degree only he can. Our human effort only gets us so far, we need reliance on God's presence and how He reveals himself to that community. No matter the approach, efforts to enact positive change for the well-being of any community must involve contextualization. This paper will describe, and provide examples for why practitioners must clearly understand the importance of contextualization, how to utilize creativity, and the practical implications of contextualization.

At its most basic definition, contextualization is "to place (something, such as a word or activity) in a context" ("Contextualize"). To clarify this statement, context is

defined as "the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs" ("Context"). Within the field of community development, it can then be said that by paying attention to and learning about the interrelated conditions that make up the culture and worldview of a given community, community development processes can be placed in the appropriate context. However, contextualization is not something to be leveraged only for the sake of success or to impose one's own cultural values upon another. Rather, it must always be used for the sake of honoring and centering the culture of the specific context. By so doing, other key elements of community development, such as co-powerment (mutual learning and empowerment), collaboration, and local knowledge, are allowed to flourish.

Contextualization is essential to community development because it is the foundation that undergirds, supplies, and sustains all active processes within the field. Whatever the setting, a community's well-being is often pursued by way of a project, initiative, program, group work, etc. As such, contextualization must be present from the start, influencing every part of that process: Identification, Set Up, Planning, Implementation, and Closure (*Project Management* 34). This is critical because, at each phase of the program, contextualization allows for every interaction, procedure, communication, and relationship to be conducted from a place of "cultural integrity" (Salter 25). A deep understanding of specific contextualization will result in an awareness of the culture practitioners are engaging with. Without this awareness programs will not effectively serve the communities they engage with. Contextualization takes cultural realities and convictions seriously working to center the community's history, traditions, language, beliefs, communication, and values in every decision.

Community development efforts must embody contextualization because it is both a practical tool and a practitioner's number one trait. At a programmatic level, every activity or initiative should utilize contextualization as a means of making the program applicable, meaningful, effective, and culturally respectful to the stakeholders in that context. This ensures that every decision, and the resulting outputs, focus on the people and culture that the program hopes to positively impact. While development can be approached from many angles and has a long history of failed approaches, contextualization works to continue "the deconstruction of 'development' and a 'one size fits all' concept and process" (Willis 155). Through her extensive development experience, Professor Katie Willis of the University of London, effectively sheds light on the varied and complex historical and political realities of development, as there is much to learn from its troubled past. Nevertheless, contextualization remains a transcending value and necessary tool for the sake of improving the lived experiences of communities. It is a common thread that should assist all practitioners in doing better than they have done in the past, allowing them to take the full cultural context of their communities seriously.

One way contextualization should be used as a practical tool is through macrocultural application, especially when the development effort is coming from an "outsider" perspective (Vogl 33). When entering from the outside, a strong understanding of the cultural context is required before any other work begins. This understanding should be built on local knowledge, observation, and a cultural index such as "Hofstead's Six Dimensions of Culture" ("6 Dimensions"). A cultural index such as Hofstead's is often the best place to begin when seeking to understanding a culture at large. For example, Hofstead's tool examines six of the most distinctive cultural markers

and identifies where every country falls on each marker. For any development work to achieve meaningful change, it is vital to understand the basic framework of the society: whether it is more individual or collective, more masculine or feminine, long term or short term oriented, etc. (“6 Dimensions”). These underlying cultural traits must be understood by practitioners working in that context, and the program must reflect these values and work with the traits of the culture rather than against them.

During the summer of 2021, I conducted qualitative research at an American Protestant church in my hometown, in the same youth group I attended during High School. However, even with my prior knowledge of the church, I still approached the task by suspending my preconceived notions of this specific group’s culture. This allowed me to have observational awareness of the realities of the subculture, as I needed to be aware of the macrocultural traits of these students before I could dive into the nuances of the group. Despite originating from the same general culture, I still approached the youth group with fresh eyes. This openness revealed critical cultural understandings that informed my time spent with this group of young people. Based on cultural indexes, the United States has one of the highest rankings of individualism in the world, 91 out of 100 (“Country Comparison”). This is incredibly important to understand when thinking about the formation and development of young people in the USA, particularly when considering their mental health and engagement in church. In one conversation with a student, I could feel her fighting for individualism and a desire to be seen for who she is rather than being forced into a particular cultural mold by youth leaders (Hilt). This was only one of the many insights I gleaned from engagement with this youth group. It demonstrates the fact that practitioners have to understand

cultural realities in order to develop programs that will serve the community in their understanding of reality, not in the context we wish upon them.

Furthermore, applying contextual understanding needs to be a skill that a practitioner possess as well. This type of contextualization is a learned adeptness that can assist practitioners in every interaction and relationship. Without a healthy understanding of the importance of contextualization, unconscious biases and ethnocentrism can cloud their vision of the people they seek to serve. Due to their history of ineffective development, Western practitioners must be particularly aware of these biases and feelings of cultural superiority. Only with a high level of awareness of these obstacles can the practitioner actively work towards a new way of being. Contextualization is foundational to all community development because it can confront ethnocentric beliefs and tendencies and begin to dismantle what can become “the most divisive and potentially bellicose of all human traits” (Acosta 312). While development work isn’t intentionally malicious, even the smallest seeds of ethnocentrism can be highly destructive due to uneven power structures and social inequalities. By utilizing the knowledge and awareness that contextualization offers, a practitioner can work to root out this trait and avoid these dangers.

There are many reasons contextualization is vitally important in development work, and many situations in which it can be effectively utilized. However, in its very nature, contextualization must be used creatively. Designing a program that is unique and specifically tailored to the local context necessitates innovation and creative ways of executing activities and practices. In their book *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All*, Tom and David Kelley contend for their definition of “creative confidence” as “a way of experiencing the world that generates new approaches

and solutions" (7). This also describes the process of effective contextualization, wherein practitioners experience a specific context and use that knowledge to find new ways forward.

I made sure to take this perspective with me into my fieldwork, as well as when I evaluated all I had learned afterwards. I followed what I would describe as a creative process to draw out insights and reveal new aspects of my fieldwork site to spark new ideas. As I reflected on the context I had experienced, I thought of the different opportunities and constraints that existed within the youth group. In particular, I looked at the most pressing and unmet need expressed by the students: their mental health. As someone who grew up in youth group, I was never taught that spirituality, mental, and physical health were connected, and the idea of holistic ministry was not something I learned about until much later. This deficit is causing youth ministry to underserve their students, as young people are concerned with and severely affected by mental health issues.

Based on my observations, this need was felt by nearly all students in the group, as they would speak about mounting levels of toxic stress in their lives almost every week. One week, during our small group time, a student opened up about her struggle with depression and her mental health during middle school. It was an emotional moment for her, but she ended by expressing that she had gotten over it and was fine now. It seemed like she felt she needed to add that caveat to placate those of us hearing her story. However, we know this is not how mental health works, but there is this obvious message being expressed that we need to get over it. Conversations like this occurred often, and as a youth group we didn't do anything to help the students learn about mental health and how to experience it in a healthier way. I began to think

creatively about how healthy practices of holistic care could be contextualized directly to this group. I wanted to be able to give them honest help with this struggle so they could know they are not wrong for experiencing it and not alone. Will Hutcherson and Dr. Chinwé Williams propose that, from a neurological perspective, the key to "healing despair and anxiety" is "the power of connection," both with other people and within one's own mind (xii). Thinking further about how to connect with young people and help them learn how their minds work, God's desires for them, the importance of whole-person care, etc., I eventually chose a digital application that allows for daily connection and interaction as the primary platform for this task (See Appendix I). This application will take this knowledge directly to them and provide a space in their digital landscape for personal growth and healing. From that decision, the entire process of designing the app was creatively driven, as every step had to be informed by both creativity and contextualization to be effective.

Outside of my fieldwork, contextualization has become an integral part of my everyday life, as I use this skill of looking for context knowledge of situations and people to better inform my actions and decisions. This approach helps me be more empathetic and open to those around me, especially in my work with young people. My current and future vocation involves working with youth, and my time spent researching Generation Z has taught me so much. However, the single greatest lesson I learned was that I need to constantly keep learning and contextualizing. The societal and technological landscape of the world is now changing at such an accelerated pace that adaptation is no longer negotiable (Friedman 29). This became highly evident during my fieldwork, especially when local knowledge of what was going on in the lives of the students illuminated the reality of their context.

While it was tempting to keep interactions with students on a surface level, when I began to find opportunities to dive deeper into their lives, it opened up a vulnerability and great depth of relationship. What surprised me most was how simple this was to accomplish with some students, as it was sometimes as easy as asking them to go into more depth about a small issue they were having. This basic question opened the conversation for them to vent and let their experience and feelings out without judgement. After this conversation, our connection was clearly stronger, and every time we spoke, I was able to tap into more of their knowledge and experience. These discussions gave me clear insights into how their lives and relationships change and evolve in real time. Though my experience of high school is still fairly recent, I had not realized how different life is for high schoolers now, as the ramifications of the digital world change the shape of their lives, relationships, and worldview. As someone who wants to deeply care for young people and help them find whole person health and wellness, I need to be keenly aware of these realities.

Through this experience of close relationships and honest conversations, I learned that even in a culturally familiar setting, local knowledge is invaluable to achieving further understanding and empathy for those I serve. This is a principle I apply directly to my work with young people, recognizing that every year brings new realities that shape the development and lived experiences of others. As such, practitioners' effort to support, care for, and connect with young people for the sake of their holistic well-being must take on that same adaptive nature, making use of constant contextualization and innovation. This approach will influence my vocational work as I strive to create a co-powering environment in every interaction with young people, learning and growing with them into better, healthier human beings. Furthermore, it

influences every decision that goes into designing and maintaining the mobile application (See Appendix I). The app is meant to adapt and change with the students, bringing fresh insights and innovation constantly.

If the telos of community development is “transformational communities” that embrace holistic human well-being and flourishing, then contextualization must be the necessary first step and sustaining principle of every development effort. As the history of development clearly demonstrates, this work will not be effective if local culture, knowledge, traditions, values, beliefs, language, and society are not respected in every decision. While this is a direct step towards a better development approach, it is only one piece of a complex and nuanced endeavor. Nothing in community development is simple, and many more principles and practices are needed to achieve positive change. However, contextualization is vital as both a practical tool and a personal characteristic of the practitioner, and to be truly effective that contextualization must embrace creativity and innovation.

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Essay Two: Qualitative Inquiry

While contextualization is often proclaimed as a foundational pillar of community development, qualitative methods must also be mentioned in the same breath. If the telos of social change is human flourishing as defined, created, and sustained by the local context, then qualitative inquiry must be utilized as the key research method. It is an indispensable principle of transformative community development. Distinguished professors of qualitative research methods Sharan Merriam and Elizabeth Tisdell describe this search for knowledge as "understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (6). Pioneer in qualitative research John Van Maanen clarifies this definition further by saying that qualitative methods seek to "come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (520; emphasis added). In this manner, practitioners also seek to learn how people are intrinsically shaped by the specific social issues being studied, both immediately and historically. Qualitative research methods offer much to the field of community development, but for the sake of this essay I will limit my discussion to the resonating values of qualitative inquiry, what characterizes it as particularly useful to the field, and why it is especially useful for engagement with high school students, using data gleaned from my own qualitative study to demonstrate its utility.

While there exists within qualitative inquiry many unique approaches and methodologies to conducting research, its general understanding and foundational values remain constant. Qualitative research is often the primary method used in community development because of these shared values. Qualitative research can be an

effective tool for practitioners to discover an "appropriate solution for the particular dynamics at work in a local situation" describes action researcher Ernest Stringer (6). The results of such studies often resonate with practitioners because of the invaluable contextualization information they reveal. Two critical values of qualitative research, and the general practice of community development, worth highlighting are cultural integrity and the philosophy of critical realism. While these two values may not be the ones cited most often and may not seem to follow from qualitative research, I believe that these values deeply influence the research and effective practice of community development.

Whether qualitative inquiry is ethnographic in nature or follows the principles of Grounded Theory, the starting place must always be cultural awareness and appreciation (Straus). Valuing cultures and the unique experiences, strengths, understandings, and opportunities that exist within them is critical to the entire process of qualitative work. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil, leading expert on reconciliation theory and racial justice, proposes that even "intercultural competence" is not enough to undertake this work, and that such efforts require additional layers of perspective and understanding to reach "intercultural integrity" (25). At this level, individuals from differing backgrounds can engage in an honest and respectful manner most effectively. In the vast majority of qualitative studies, the researcher is an outsider (etic) to those being studied, and as such, must consistently use the value of intercultural integrity not only as their starting point, but as the sustaining principle in every interaction and relationship undertaken throughout the process. Essentially, all qualitative inquiry is an attempt to move towards "understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's" (Merriam and Tisdell 16). It is not about

trying to ensure an unknown situation makes sense within my (the researcher's) personal perspective, but rather understanding how it is seen by those experiencing it firsthand. As such, it is the task of the researcher "to convey the perspective of the people in the culture you study," as expressed by ethnographers Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (14). The value of intercultural integrity also extends to the way such findings are *voiced* in the "written products of their work" (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 4). Methods that are qualitative in nature better preserve the cultural identity of the stakeholders than a method that looks purely at quantifiable data.

Another enduring value that influences the fieldwork process, specifically the experiences and actions of researchers in the field, is critical realism. While this concept can be applied in a variety of ways, it is applicable here because of its philosophy of knowledge (epistemology). Critical realism argues "that much of what is real exists independently of human awareness, but it is possible to learn and understand what is real if this fact is recognized and accounted for" (Leroyal). This theory undergirds the search for meaning as defined by those who experience the phenomena. Researchers must be open to the reality of what constitutes actual understanding for those they are studying is possible to learn. In the context of research, religion sociologist Christian Smith writes that, "critical realism tells us to think of all science as learning about what exists and how and why it works" (7). While not all researchers or community developers are aware of or actively engage with this theory, I highlight it in this context because it does influence the perspectives and actions of all those involved with this kind of work. Within development work, there can be a specific kind of learning and shared experience that transcends and transforms people on a deep level, whether they are aware of it or not. For example, as I engaged in fieldwork at an aging church seeking to

address an unmet desire to relate to younger generations, I witnessed this theory at work. While the cultural realities of Generation Z students and their unique experiences of the world can be learned, people must be convinced to have an open heart towards learning it.

In this regard, I had the opportunity to engage with a group of retired church members at a shared care facility about this very topic, and I witnessed a change in understanding and heart posture due to the impact of honest learning about a different perspective. At its core, critical realism supports the "fundamental task of research" through "the explanation of social phenomena by revealing the causal mechanisms which produce them" (Danermark 1). Thus, in this setting, I gave a very basic overview of the cultural characteristics of Gen Z and why it was important to take these realities seriously, because it has shaped them into the kind of people they are, rather than writing them off or getting frustrated by them. This was surprisingly well received, and some members had clarifying and difficult follow-up questions that we worked through together. I saw in their eyes, posture, tone of voice, and words that this new perspective made sense and changed the way they thought about the young people in their lives, and the ways they may be able to engage with and care for them (Van Winkle).

Research that seeks to explore the qualitative nature of a given social context can powerfully capture the human spirit and diversity of lived experiences. It takes these realities seriously and forces the researcher to reflect, learn, and adjust their actions according to this new understanding. This value resonates deeply with community development, as such adaptation should be the goal and core value of a community developer whether they are implementing a new project or building relationships with local people.

Qualitative research has at its center the search for human experience in a given context or phenomenon. It is unlike quantitative data, which reports collected numbers, statistics, and measurable outcomes from research informed by scientific process and study. Qualitative methods, conversely, approach the process from an inductive form of learning, constantly suspending preconceived assumptions. This method primarily "uses *words* as data" (Merriam and Tisdell 5). These words form stories, and these stories reveal experiences. During one of her speaking engagements, renown author Brené Brown opened by saying that "I'm a qualitative researcher, I collect stories, that's what I do" (00:00:53). This method is unique in many ways and offers much to the field of community development. Most notably, it addresses the tension between insider versus outsider perspectives and influences the equally important participant observation method.

Qualitative methods take both the researcher and the subject to a deeper level of behavioral awareness and interpretation of one another. In qualitative research and in community development, there is often a dynamic of someone from the outside entering the group. This dynamic can take many forms, but no matter where the researcher falls on the spectrum, there is always difficulty in trying to reconcile one's own experience with the experience of those being observed. As researchers, practitioners are seen as the "key instruments of the research process" (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 111). As such, we must be keenly aware that we are the means by which this research will be interpreted and translated into the great body of collective knowledge. In order to do this effectively, the researcher must be able "to stand in several places and see-through multiple sets of eyes" (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 63). This inherently places the researcher in the etic perspective, standing at a distance from the insider perspective. As

such, the aim is to be aware of being on the outside, and to honestly engage with the inside regardless and strive for a holistic understanding of the experience.

Qualitative inquiry requires being honest with oneself and the assumptions one brings with them whenever they enter a research situation. At a conscious level, introspection is required to set aside any assumptions and biases the researcher may have. Only to the extent that we can "temporarily set aside" or "bracket" our own prejudices can we begin to examine others (Merriam and Tisdell 27). This interplay of tension can make space for intentional observation, as the act of qualitative research often involves heightened awareness and taking on a different perspective on the world, utilizing all the senses to understand the people and the places they inhabit. By opening their senses of sight, taste, smell, hearing, touch, and movement, the researcher can tap into the symbolism, context clues, and truer experience of the context. This type of observation, paired with active participation in cultural events, helps to move the researcher closer to an insider experience, as much as it is possible. As a result, qualitative inquiry can yield an understanding that is nearer to a natural insider perspective. Even so, it is still the responsibility of the researcher to interpret and translate the participated observations into a form that is understandable to outsiders, but also honest to the experience of the insider.

The distinct qualities of quantitative inquiry make it particularly relevant and necessary for effective community development. Whether an official research project is being conducted or not, the same approaches and tools of qualitative research should be utilized in each interaction and relationship within community development work. If practitioners can use the same kind of intentional sight in all their observations and participations, then they can continue to learn exponentially more about their context,

which fosters deeper relationships and opportunities for better contextualization. No matter the stage of a project or community movement, ongoing shared learning, and openness to others helps to break down barriers and increase the capacity for social change.

Any research with the goal of social change must take the perspectives of those being researched seriously. This can be more complicated than it initially seems, even in a context where the researchers have some insider knowledge. For my own fieldwork, I found the values and distinct nature of qualitative research challenging in execution but powerful in results. As I engaged with the very same youth group I grew up in, I was constantly forced to address my own biases and experiences alongside the experiences of the current students. I had to take my search for understanding of what it is like to endure high school during a global pandemic seriously. Internally, I could form a picture of the high school I attended and remember the feelings that I had during that time, but I had to consistently remind myself that this context is very different now. The cultural moment I grew up with has shifted, resulting in a new and different experience. I wanted to be aware of this reality, as it needs to inform and change our response as youth leaders, changing what we talk about and how we talk about it. The result of embracing this method was a deeper understanding of the students' perspectives. This is especially important within this context, as the normal practice of youth ministry is to create a prescriptive curriculum for its students. This creates an atmosphere of expectation and pressure students must live up to, regardless of their actual experience or feelings.

During the seven months I spent working alongside students and other leaders and church staff, I observed and participated in many elements of church life. Following

the methods of qualitative inquiry, I picked up on and eventually pulled out major themes I would not have been able to otherwise discover. However, the most challenging part by far was keeping my target group, the students, central to my efforts and observations. As much as I wanted to keep Appreciative Inquiry central to my observations, it was challenging to “look for what works…[and] appreciate it” (Hammond 5). Fixating on the problems and what wasn’t working had become normal, and as Sue Hammond, Change Management professional, puts it, “by paying attention to problems, we emphasize them and amplify them” (5). Throughout interviews and time spent with youth pastors and leaders, it became evident their work with students was fixated on the problems with youth students today. While I am not far removed from that phase of life, it was sometimes hard for me to suspend my own assumptions and take their experiences seriously. To me, this indicates the beginning of a more significant problem for youth ministry. We cannot hope to embrace a holistic approach unless we care for students as whole people, and to do that, we must take their whole person seriously. We must lean into their experiences, feelings, thought processes, and contexts to fully embrace and relate to their true selves. Otherwise, youth ministry will remain on the surface and only ever reach their superficial selves.

Qualitative research offers both a theoretical framework of unique values and distinct characteristics, as well as a practical path for measurable research and program outcomes. In my future work with Gen Z, I will be sure to make these themes central and build effective assessments for measuring impact. These themes make qualitative inquiry compatible with community development, while also pushing the field towards improvement, seeking more genuine awareness and learned knowledge of the lived experiences of others. From such a place, community development can begin to explore

contextualized and locally generated solutions to experiences of struggle, from both a grassroots and systemic perspective.

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Essay Three: International Community Development Values

While I feel as though I have only just started to learn what it means to engage in the work of International Community Development (ICD) and the values it holds, I also feel like I have known them my entire life. In many ways, finding this program was familiar and rejuvenating, like reuniting with an old friend. It was everything I did not realize I needed to reconcile my theology of Kingdom work and my conviction for social justice. This field is a place where both values can find a home. I have gone on a journey with this area of study, learning different perspectives, methods, and best practices over the past 18 months. This field applies in a vast array of contexts that seek to alleviate human suffering. Through critical examination of history and the stories of heartbreaking hurt caused by former practitioners, I have grieved and grown in my humility and understanding. However, I believe that if the core values of ICD are truly upheld and intentionally walked out every day, then positive change can be enacted for the well-being of any given community. In this reflective discourse, I will unpack my personal transformation with the topic of social justice, the value of copowerment, and my theology of service. I am confident this transformation will continue to lead me towards “the life that wants to live in me” that higher education leader and activist Parker J Palmer describes (2).

To begin, my understanding of social justice is based in the value of contextualization, as described at length in Essay One. Contextualization serves as both a practical and theoretical baseline. This type of contextualization requires cultural awareness in all that is being performed, while also preserving the mindset of sensitivity and empathy to individual and group understanding of how the world operates. With this definition in mind, my concept of social justice has been specifically shaped by the

practice of inner work and a constantly growing understanding of structural evil. The transformative moments of the last 18 months have been an awakening of the inner life, as Palmer describes (2). Through these studies, I have become aware of how deeply I am compelled to engage in this work, as it matters intensely to who I truly am. While I do not believe this inner journey is ever over on this side of eternity, I feel like I am making progress down the path I want to walk. The voices I have had the privilege of learning from and the stories I have heard have made these concepts and theories come alive, changing my understanding in deep and lasting ways. It is incredible to realize just how much the beginning of a journey impacts all that follows, and as time goes on how much more impactful that beginning becomes, as I am still drawn to the initial material which established my understanding of social justice.

This program started with us looking at ourselves, as self-awareness is critical work for practitioners. Daily reflection on our heart's posture is a crucial way to remove some of the biggest obstacles to effective development, such as ethnocentrism or historical trauma. Before we can jump into the fight for social justice, we need to take an honest look at our own place in the social equation. This takes ongoing, reflective work to examine our cultural identity, unconscious biases, and ethnocentric proclivities, among many other factors. I was especially struck by psychologist and theologian Richard Beck and his book *Unclean*. This exposition offered keen insight into my own inner work through the boundary psychology of disgust (2). Throughout the book, he draws practical connections between the triggers of multilevel disgust reactions (food, sociomoral, gore) and the implications each has on the human capacity for relationships. This conditioned behavior often dictates our most foundational, unconscious reactions to people and situations around us. It is often the root cause of

our choices to either love and embrace or reject others. Croatian Theologian Professor Miroslav Volf explains this phenomenon of moving from exclusion to embrace by saying, “the will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity” (34). This willful process to embrace rather than exclude one another is what forms relationships that make way for communities and even societies. The work must begin with the relationship closest to us: our relationship with ourselves, then it can move outward to embrace others.

It is only once we have started down this road of inner work that we can begin to have eyes which see the depths of human depravity. Self-awareness illuminates our innately selfish ego as individuals, which in turn leads the powerful to create self-serving systems which grow into structural evils over time. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, a professor of theology and sociology, describes structural evil as the:

> Forces that bind our power to live in ways that “love neighbor as self” and to protect Earth’s well-being. These forces include intricate webs of interrelated power arrangements, ideologies, values, practices, policies, and ways of perceiving reality that span generations and have unintended snowballing consequences. (2)

Through the course of this inner work, my understanding of social justice has expanded to include a life posture that is actively working against these realities in whatever sphere of influence to which I have access. Social justice transcends all areas of society and includes every human struggle and social problem, and thus is an integral concept to ICD. However, the role of a practitioner is in part to know their inner self and let it find expression in whatever specific vocation they find. Palmer describes this by saying

“the great community asks us to do only what we are able and trust the rest to other hands” (89). My own transformation has led me to a place where I can be content to hold onto the dialectic between the sheer scale of structural evils and my own small but significant calling.

This transformation continued into the subsequent instruction on the leading methodology that supports my understanding of and actions towards social justice. One could say the overarching ethos of ICD is collective well-being, understood as a holistic flourishing in every aspect of life for all. Charles Vogl, a scholar and teacher of community development methods, holds fast to the belief that “communities are created when at least two people begin to feel concern for each other’s welfare. If others join this tiny caring flame, the community fire grows” (16). As such, the initial groundwork of developing a sense of belonging by “creating spaces where we can learn to be connected, defeat loneliness, and enrich lives by understanding where and how we belong” is vital (Vogl 16). From this foundation, a strong community can overcome challenges and grow to flourish both individually and communally. Using copowerment as the leading value set and practical tool, communities can reach a place of mutual empathy and respect for all persons around them and work to overcome the challenges they face collectively.

As active catalysts of community building, practitioners must be transformed by the value of copowerment. By prioritizing the agency and value of stakeholders, this value directly pushes back against the structures, pride, and historically hurtful practices of past development work. Copowerment requires collaboration, local knowledge, contextualization, and active participation of stakeholders, and as such, does not leave room for leaders who are selfish, ethnocentric, or stuck in old patterns. Instead, a holistic understanding of wellbeing forces practitioners to take seriously every

part of their program, analyzing both the long and short term effects of their work. Gone are the days of "one size fits all" solutions which try to fit a round peg into a square hole, though some older approaches that do not take cultural context, local experience, or sustainability seriously still remain. In contrast, copowerment does take all of these factors incredibly seriously. The "Post-2015 Development Agenda" conducted by the United Nation's Secretary-General's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons concluded that moving forward, development work must be earmarked by "five big, transformative shifts" (8). These shifts include "leave no one behind…put sustainable development at the core…transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth…build peace and effective, open, and accountable institutions for all" and "forge a new global partnership" ("a New Global Perspective" 8-9). In light of everything I have discussed, copowerment has the capacity to bring all of these substantial goals together into a single approach.

The nature of copowerment requires a deeply personal posture of reflection alongside an external approach to development work. This is what most compels me as a white, American female practitioner to understand my position in the historical landscape of development and shape my inner life accordingly. I must combat the "long and crippling legacy of believing in the power of external realities much more deeply than [I] believe in the power of the inner life" (Palmer 77). Dr. Petra Kuenkel, a visionary and transformation expert, expresses the importance of inner awareness as she writes, "our deeper values, our dreams, and our aspirations are gateways to our vitality in this world, our ability to lead and co-create" (40). Leading from this place allows others to unite around this vision of copowerment and experience the depth of connection and mutual learning it offers.

Of all the approaches I have learned and studied, copowerment comes the closest to giving the realities of a globalized world and the forces of structural evil the weight of concern they deserve. It dismantles the perpetuation of harmful practices by centering stakeholders and the local context over practitioner's personal and cultural beliefs. Due to copowerment's intentional concern for cultural awareness, contextualization, collaboration, innovation, dignity, equity, and sustainability, it does not allow complacency to grow into unhealthy approaches. Development, in the simplest terms, is defined by Christian practitioner Bryant Myers as "efforts to improve the well-being of the poor" (26). However, historical and social progress have led the field to a greater collective understanding of poverty and the challenges of globalization. This deeper perspective also embraces the importance of religious experience in social change. After all, it is only possible for Christian developers to speak into the space if we are "willing to take our development practice and thinking into the larger development community" (Myers 45). Only with this larger perspective can a true embrace of transformational change enact a positive difference in any given context.

Copowerment, in my understanding, takes a holistic approach to the complex realities of poverty, suffering, and social injustice while also recognizing that engagement must be equally holistic to prioritize the physical, mental, and spiritual spaces that collectively make up a person and a community. As such, faith-based, transformational development holds this space and leads with copowerment for the sake of thriving communities. Bob Mitchell, a priest and community developer, took on the task of contending for this approach. While he recognizes that theological positions "influence development in both positive and negative ways," he offers that "the best faith-based development organizations aspire to a highly consultative, community-

based, and long-term view of development, and they set up local structures to ensure the ongoing participation of churches" (ch. 13). Within these organizations, their theology deeply influences their approach, such that it becomes an asset which supports a copowerment model.

My reflection on how life in development work makes sense in the light of my faith leads me to believe in a model that embraces copowerment, sustainability, and transformational change. The mid-20th century theologian Carl Henry writes that "the bible calls for personal holiness and for sweeping societal changes; it refuses to substitute private religion for social responsibility or social engagement for personal commitment to God" (107). This sentiment has rippled through Christianity ever since, yet contemporary Christians still struggle with the contention between evangelism and social action as their primary cause. Why we still come up against the issue of how Christianity is to engage in social action, I do not know. However, my own theology of service embraces the perspective that Professor Howard Snyder offers as a third option apart from these two "poles" which he describes as "cosmic purpose" (25). In short, it is the idea that "God in Christ is reconciling the whole creation to himself, and his action through the church is central to his plan" (Snyder 25). This kind of worldview opens practitioners up to the fullness of life in Christ and life in development work. It sets the heart's posture of service on actively working for the flourishing of every community, person, and part of creation.

Not only does this approach require a specific theological perspective, it also requires practitioners to become leaders who serve with a copowerment perspective. Leadership visionary Simon Sinek expresses that this kind of deep conviction is what makes good leaders, as "what you do simply serves as the proof of what you believe

(2:48). Such leaders understand "leadership is a choice…not a rank" and that "there are leaders, and there are those that lead" (Sinek 1:54; 00:40). I believe that ICD requires these kinds of people in every stage of the process and that their humility and respect for human dignity makes them invaluable in the work of copowerment, as they move towards greater well-being in the contexts which they serve.

Furthermore, my theology of service takes the work of humility even further, awakening to the great mystery that is God's redemptive plan. While I will never have all the answers, I am called to be honest about the deep complexities that exist in humankind and the natural world, all of which lead me to a clearer understanding of my finite self. Activist and writer Berry Wendall names this "The Great Economy," which:

> like the Tao or the Kingdom of God, is both known and unknown, visible and invisible, comprehensible and mysterious. It is, thus, the ultimate condition of our experience and of the practical questions rising from our experience, and it imposes on our consideration of those questions an extremity of seriousness and an extremity of humility." (221)

These forces shape how we understand our relationship with ourselves, with God, with others, and with the rest of creation. A posture that accepts this mode is open to a world full of wonder and pain, embrace and struggle, and the contradiction between a desire to see lasting change and refusing to impose preconceived expectations and models onto anyone.

Drawing all these strands together, I look towards my future ICD work, which seems to be opening towards a lasting engagement with young people. This posture towards social justice, the value of a copowering approach, and a theology of service that holds fast to a prophetic vision of the kingdom build an ethos that will serve me well in

my vocation. I currently have an advantage due to my proximity to youth culture, but as I get further away from that life stage, this mindset will prioritize centering the voices of young people, marked by mutual learning and respect for the complete and incredible humans they are. As culture continues to accelerate, I want to remain amongst young people and understand how their hearts and minds are shaped by the cultural moment. The practical nature of this approach makes it clear that continued authentic contextualization and genuine connections open the door for building the influence that makes community change possible. As such, innovative tools like the one proposed in Appendix I can act as a means of catalytic change on both a personal and community-wide level. Such tools strive to meet young people in their daily lives with transformational knowledge that can begin to change their bodies and souls in practical ways, moving towards a vision of the reconciliation all of creation.

As I go forward in life, the rest of my days will be spent trying to realize this vision more fully in my own soul, as well as sharing the transformation it has produced in my own life with others. This program has opened my heart and mind more than I ever thought possible. Along with applied methods for how this philosophy of development should be acted out, the character it requires has been cultivated within me for a lifelong journey of vocation. The values that have been grown and solidified in my heart and mind throughout this program have produced a body of knowledge I hope will continually inspire new ways of thinking, being, and doing in the realm of International Community Development.

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Appendix

Introduction

Neurologically, the human person is shaped by the experiences they observe, engage in, and process throughout their lives. The human brain is constantly making connections and learning as we grow, and the content of these experience and the age at which we experience them largely defines the extent of their impact. This human function shapes our perception of ourselves, others, and God (Burdett et al.). This is especially true at a collective, generational level, as "the age at which one is exposed to a political shift, technological change or social marker determines how embedded it becomes in one's psyche and worldview" (McCrindle 3). While the COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone, the unique way in which teens experience, process, and make sense of their lives during this period has had a profound effect on their development. If Westminster Presbyterian Church is to respond to the growing mental health crisis facing young people, it must equip them for continued growth through whole-person care and development. As there are a myriad of dynamics affecting the mental health of young people today, this is only one of many opportunities to positively impact this generation. The mental health crisis has been growing exponentially across the past few decades, and while society as a whole continues to face challenges, the profound struggles and needs of young people often go unaddressed. Westminster Presbyterian Church must adopt a model of holistic care in order to foster a transformational community where students are equipped with the knowledge and tools they need to nurture their inner lives. Drawing on the combined knowledge of theology, neuroscience, developmental psychology, and sociology, the solutions to these deep

issues become clear, empowering young people on a journey towards wholeness and health.

Enduring these tumultuous events and undergoing sustained toxic stress has only heightened the ongoing mental health crisis affecting the current generation of young people, negatively impacting the future leaders and innovators of society in major ways (A.G. Setko et al., Charles et al.). However, Generation Z is still full of brilliant, creative, and caring young people with a unique set of cultural markers, and a level of cultural competency must be realized by the American church to effectively reach and engage with them. After spending the summer of 2021 with a group of approximately 20 high school students at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Medford, Oregon, I was left with the daunting impression that these students were not learning and growing in the ways they needed most. My experience reflects the trends that have been growing for the past "seventy years," resulting in a "juvenilization of the American Christianity [that] has both revitalized the church and fostered spiritual immaturity" (Bergler 7).

This pattern has left the American church stuck in a rut of its own making, and while teens and young adults are leaving the faith in greater numbers than any other time in living memory, practitioners are not thinking outside the box or looking for new possibilities ("Church Dropout"). Many of the students I spoke with expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of meaningful experiences within the church. While they still attended youth group because of the relationships they had with other students and leaders, they clearly hungered for more. This is not about passing blame or discrediting the hard work of youth leaders, but rather listening to the students' voices, gaining cultural understanding, and embracing missional ministry to push beyond the boundaries of the box that student ministry is stuck in. In a world where the "pace of

change has accelerated… our adaptive systems must keep pace" (Bornstein 12). The church cannot pretend to exist outside of this reality, and student ministry needs to adopt the continual practice of innovation fueled by empathy as "a gateway to better" modes of being (Kelly and Kelly 85).

If student ministry is to positively impact this generation, it must embrace holistic ministry with the goal of fostering a transformational community that "seek[s] restoration of relationships within oneself, with others, with the environment" (Bryant 65). For many this will feel like "swimming upstream against an innate and ingrained psychology," but it is worth it for breaking through those barriers and embracing young people (Beck 89) The cultural dissonance that surrounds young people today is often overwhelming. If church spaces such as youth groups are not doing all they can to alleviate this dissonance and the resulting anxiety, then they are not serving the young people of today. I witnessed this disconnect in the words and behaviors of the students I observed. As I watched, listened, empathized with, and embraced the students, I did all that I could I elevated their voices and experiences. Over the course of my time with them, the clear decline in their mental health and the lack of understanding and aid from youth ministry emerged as a central theme. This problem must be addressed through the lens of social change, and the solution will have to "overcome apathy, habit, incomprehension, and disbelief" through the application of "creative confidence…that generates new approaches and solutions" (Bornstein 21, Kelly and Kelly 7). The following project is one such solution, approaching the issue with the hope of stirring creative solutions for engaging young people in the journey of well-being and wholeness in relationships.

This proposal is for the development of an experiential whole-person health care mobile application (Whole) planned and designed with young people as its target audience. Both the application's functionality and content will be created for the clear purpose of guiding students through a journey of spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional health that seeks transformation of their relationship with themselves, with God, and with one another. This app will represent the contextualization of transformational ministry into the cultural reality of young people in the 2020's. The following Request for Proposal is built on the assumption that Whole is an established company backed by Westminster Presbyterian Church and other funding sources with the purpose of soliciting services from Basil Tech (creators of the Read Scripture app) to create an app of the caliber needed to appeal to and function well for the target audience. Anyone working with youth throughout middle school and beyond will be able to utilize this app directly as a resource for their students, as well as giving their leadership teams a better understand and ability to care for young people.

Mobile Application RFD Proposal

Executive Summary

The sole purpose of Whole is to accompany young people along the journey towards finding well-being in the relationship with themselves, with God, and with other. The cultural divide that exists between generations is leaving a void in the fundamental development of personhood in young people. They desire to make sense of the world around them and their experiences within it but have no guidance or empirical knowledge to do so. With the vision of being part of the solution, Whole is an app-based wellness company that seeks to meet young people in a space they know to deliver knowledge and practices needed for living life and making sense of the world around them in the light of God.

The Problem

The past few years have been called historic for many reasons. Our culture is being shaped by an abundance of conflicting factors, resulting in consequences for the future we are still unaware of. However, one major consequence is the countless negative impacts on the mental health of young people today and the resulting fallout of these issues in their lives ("Stress in America", Charles). This generation is being uniquely shaped in ways the world has never seen before, and thus the culture that emerges from this generation will be uniquely shaped. While positive outcomes can emerge from tumultuous times, the cost of that good may be too high for many young people. Whole aspires to be part of alleviating and healing these fractured minds, bodies, and souls within their current struggles. The technological realities of the 21st century represent a landscape of opportunity that is simultaneously accessible, familiar, and vulnerable to harm. Young people are not learning the practices needed to weather

the kind of life this world offers, as the accelerating rate of change has "outpace[ed] the capacity of the average human being and our societal structures to adapt and absorb them" (Friedman 32). This cultural phenomenon of rapid change demands that "one must be a changemaker to play" in an ever changing world (Dayton). Young people carry many of the solutions and abilities the world needs to adapt and grow, but they also need essential knowledge and ways of living that will foster them into healthy, emotionally whole people in their later years.

The Project

The development of Whole emerged out of a qualitative study of a group of Christian high school students during the enduring months of a global COVID-19 pandemic. Out of this time came an observed and expressed need for a deeper experience both with God and with themselves. It was clear that these students desired a depth of experience that they did not know how to find, and no one in their lives was showing them how to achieve it. One student even spoke about how he had started a small group at his home to try and foster what he was not getting at youth group. When I talked with several youth pastors in town, all of them spoke about staying true to students and creating a safe space for development. However, when asked about what such care looks like practically within a changing culture, none of them were able to offer any new or creative solutions. While this problem could be addressed in many ways, it is clear that new methods and tools are needed that go beyond the once-a-week meeting model, especially when considering the exponential decline in adolescent mental health. Whole is not meant to devalue or take the place of clinical psychology and diagnostics, but rather as a tool and daily companion on a journey of whole person

health, delivered in a medium that is accessible, comfortable, and pleasing to use. It is also not meant to take the place of impactful, loving relationships. Instead, Whole is meant to provide another level of direct support around existing support systems, bringing additional knowledge and awareness that challenges young people to live in the knowledge of their mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health.

Objective

The objective of Whole is to deliver a platform that effectively communicates with this generation why whole person health is critical and how to pursue it daily, utilizing whatever form, medium, language, method, or means necessary to contextualize whole person health in relation to young people.

Vision

Whole will be a place of safety, comfort, and vulnerability for the weary soul: a digital respite, enjoyable to use and helping to changing the narrative around mental health. Innovation, learning, cultural awareness, and vulnerability are core values to the vision of Whole, as we seek to go beyond the barriers and structures of institutions to radically impact the mental health of young people, ultimately improving their whole person health and experience of life.

Target Users

The primary target group of Whole is Generation Z, with the understanding that continual innovation will keep the platform and its content effective and meaningful in the next cultural moment. This generation and Generation Alpha are culturally unique

and diverse in many ways, and an innovative and experiential application has the ability to grow and change alongside its users. This will be an entirely user-centric app, and all aspects of development will be informed by the needs of the target users.

Primary User Persona:

Name: Luna Age: 17 Grade: Junior

Luna is a highly motivated, loving teenager. She is motivated to do well in school and please her parents. However, she has been noticing a much higher level of stress and anxiety then she did before the pandemic. Coming back to school after a year of virtual classes is harder than she thought. She feels like she is the only one experiencing these feelings and has not received much empathy from her teachers. She feels like no one talks about how they are really doing or how this last year affected them personally. Instead, she is expected to return immediately to her normal level of achievement in school, sports, hobbies, and church. This pressure to return to normal is not easy for her, and an overwhelming sense of dread fills her mind, body, and soul daily.

Motivations: Pursing mental health and self-care, relationship with God, acceptance of friends, and a deeper way to connect with herself and the world around her.

Frustrations: She does not know how to care for herself on top of other responsibilities, lacks empathy and help from the adults around her, and does not know how to make sense of the last year or how to relate to God in it.

Entry point: Heard about Whole at youth group as a tool to check-in with herself and get insight into how to manage her daily mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional needs.

Goal: Wants a comfortable space with an enjoyable experience that will help with her stress and anxiety, as well as connect her to a deeper part of her soul.

Users are challenged by the overwhelming number of options and varying experiences within the mobile app world, especially when it comes to mental health. Too many options leave them paralyzed, and they backtrack to the spaces they know are comfortable and enjoyable. Users may stray away from the apps they know, trying out another app only to be disappointed. They may think there is no more room in their life for a new app.

However, there is the potential to attach this app to a larger project for student ministry purposes. This could be the launchpad for innovating a new way of doing ministry that centers the student experience and does whatever is necessary to contextualize the gospel to students. The content created for the app could be adapted and used in group settings as well.

Success Criteria

Whole will continually track the following analytics for success criteria:

Number of overall user accounts

Daily active users

Session length and interval

Retention, cohort analysis

Lifetime value

The success of the app will depend heavily upon daily active users and retention, as the main user goal is to see continued, daily usage of the app. This will inform whether the app is effective in offering a meaningful experience and helpful in the users'

growth and health. Since it will be simplistic in nature, continued use will show that the simple message and activities are captivating and having a positive effect on the user. Additionally, the app will prompt the user to answer baseline questions about their health during their first session, then again after a month, three months, eight months, and finally a year.

Functionality

Whole will be a user's dream. From the moment they open the app, they will be greeted with an experience that satisfies the young person's needs for aesthetic presentation and authentic connection, treading the line between excellence of quality and not being too flashy or overbearing. Simplistic in form, it will offer an experience that reduces anxiety rather than inducing it in the user's mind. Through embracing simplicity and calmness, Whole will be desirable for its entire design and functionality.

App Function

The app will provide a yearly track of short daily reflections, with easy-to-use interactions for each reflection. It will avoid overwhelming the user with content right away, walking them through a journey of mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health over an extended period of time. Daily reflections will be followed by a suggested practice that is simple and easy to accommodate into the daily life of a young person. Lastly, the app will provide a space for users to reflect on how the practice went. In addition, the app will provide the option to receive friendly text notifications throughout the day that encourage and gently remind users of the practice. The app will also include a separate page where users can go back and access previous reflections and practices.

Necessary Features

The app will have a primary home page that is highly interactive. This page will not just be user-friendly, but user-enjoyable. This page will need a greeting, a reflection, and a practice test with questions throughout to start the user interacting with the content. It will also need the function of saving past reflections in a separate space off the main page. Once the user has completed the years' worth of reflections, all of their past activities will be accessible to them. The app will not skip reflections if the user skips a day, so they can stay on track at whatever pace they choose. Once the track is completed, the app will continue to present daily reflections in a new order. There will also be consistent updates and new reflections added to the program, as well as special reflections germane to current events (i.e. holidays, disrupting events, etc.). Lastly, the app will need the ability to send users text notifications.

Prioritized List of Features:

Beautiful and smoothly functioning home page

Easy to use and enjoyable interactive options

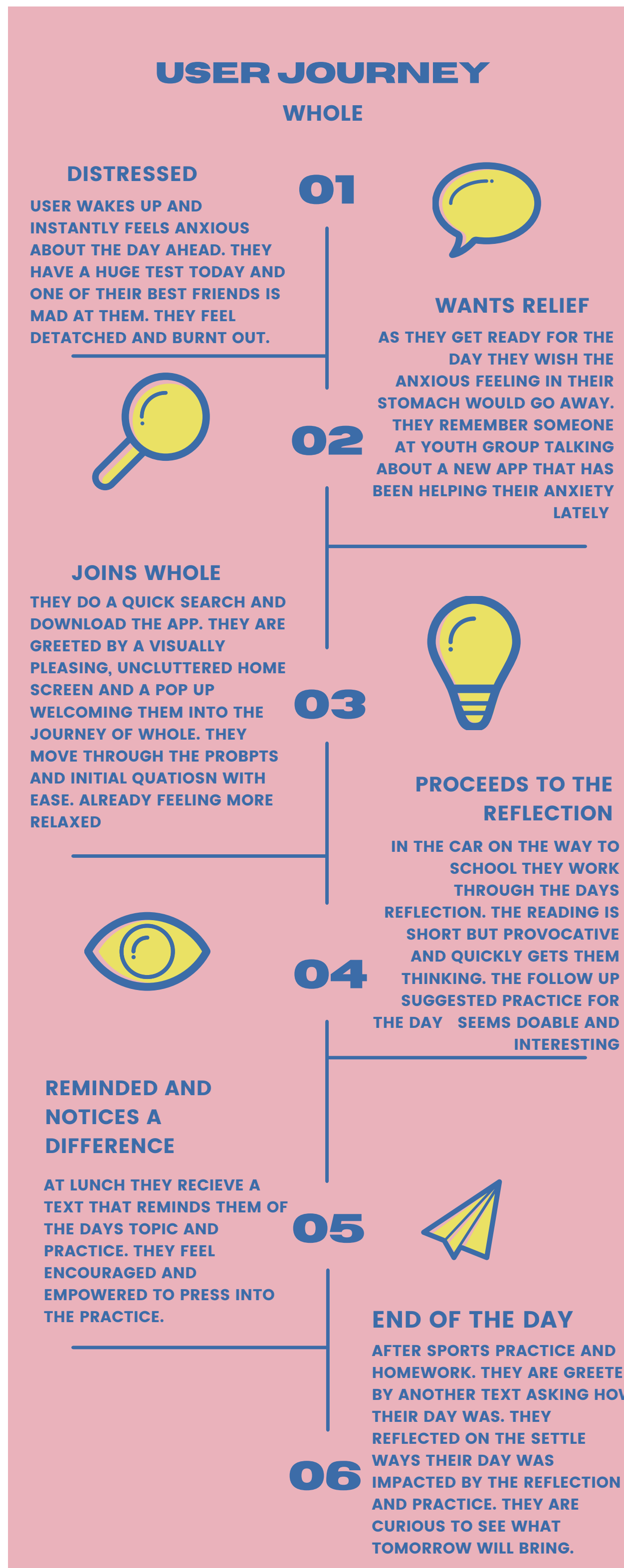
Storage and randomization of reflections

Text notifications

Ability to deliver special one-off reflections to all users

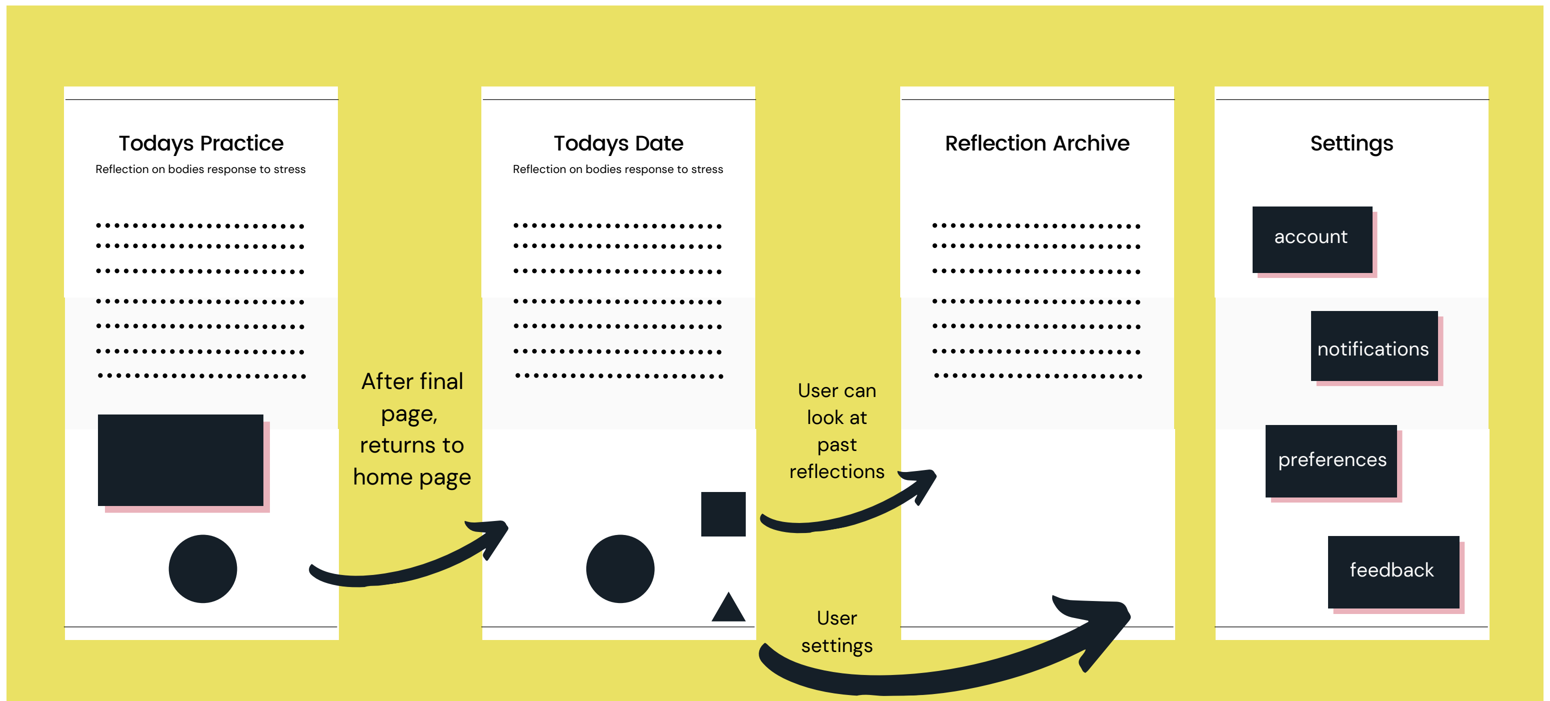
User Journey

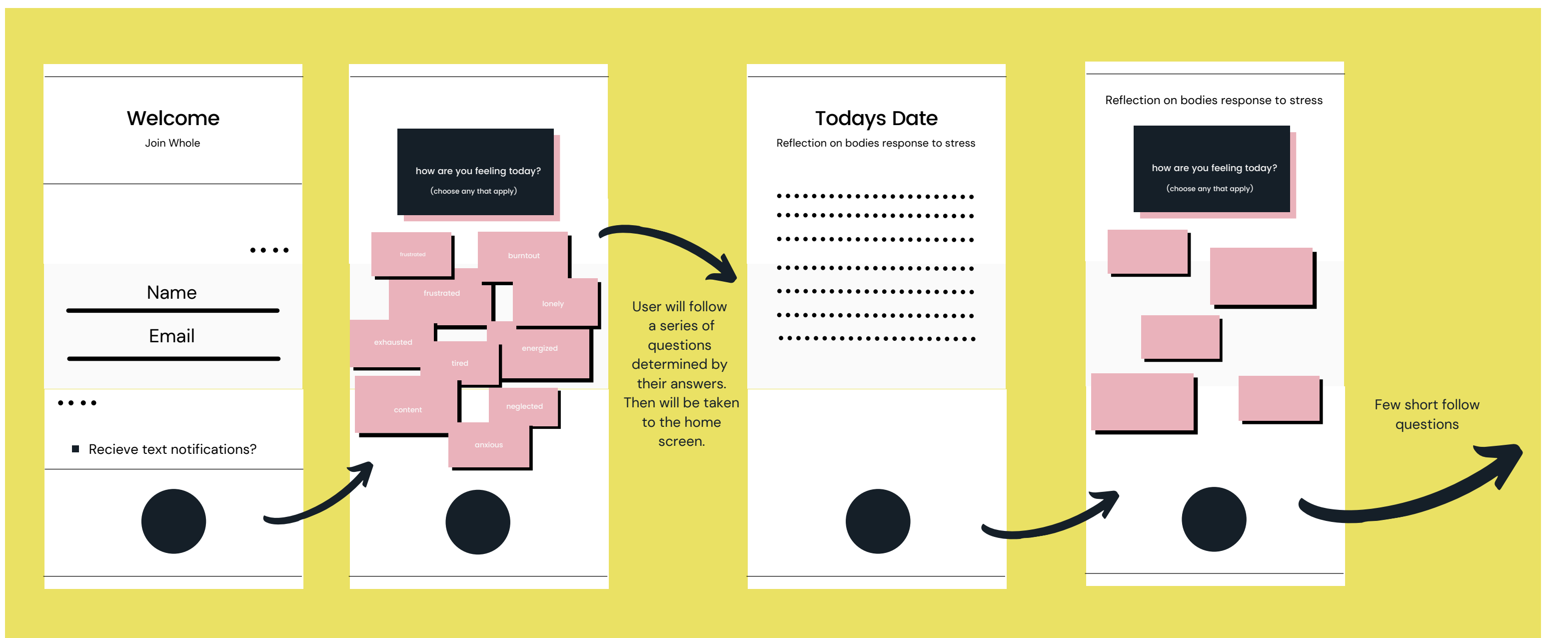
A typical user journey of Whole would encompass the following. The hope is the user would come to the app in need of a space to find rest, knowledge, and healing. The experience would be captivating and they would daily use the app.



Mockup

The initial concept themes of the app are simplicity, authentic, aesthetic, seamless to use, and personal. The following illustrates this simplicity and the basics of what the app needs to entail.





Stakeholders

The project stakeholders will include the writing and content creation team. This app will be a collaborative effort that draws on the expertise of a psychologist, doctor, pastor, and cultural sociologist (with an emphasis in Generation Z studies). This group is responsible for collaboratively creating holistic content that draws from all areas of study and practice. Development will be led by the lead researcher who started the process for the sake of facilitating effective collaboration and a health team dynamic.

However, the main stakeholders will consist of a consulting group of young people who will weigh in on all decisions and offer feedback on their experience of the content. The goal is for the development behind Whole to take place in a copowering environment with an equal sharing of knowledge, resources, and respect for one another's experiences.

Services

Whole requires services for the development of digital infrastructure for the platform and online management, in addition to creative design services that continually update the app for an aesthetically fresh feeling.

Marketing

Whole will be marketed through social media, church and student ministry resource websites, and print publications. Whole's social media platforms will post content and generate interest in the platform to drive users to the full app experience.

Platforms

Whole will be available only on mobile iOS and Android platforms.

Backend

This is a ground-up project, and creation of the backend will be a part of the development process.

Budget

The project will be backed and funded through church partners and various funding sources. The following is the costs associated with the development and maintenance of the mobile app platform.

Planning – $4000

Design – $5500

Features – $7000

Infrastructure – $11000

App Administration – $6000

Testing – $5000

Deployment – $1500

Total: $40,000

App Maintenance – $6,000 (15%) annually

Project Timeline

The problem of worsening mental health needed solutions last year in the middle of the pandemic, and the problem only worsens with each passing week. However, while urgency is paramount, quality development of the app is just as important, as it needs to make a positive impression and captivate users upon first launch. The following timeline is proposed with those parameters in mind.

Projected timeline is 20 weeks, per the following timeline:

Planning – 2 weeks

UX Design – 2 weeks

UI Design – 2 weeks

Back-End Development – 6 weeks

Front-End Development – 6 weeks

Testing and Launch – 2 Weeks

Conclusion

The mental health of young people during this critical moment in history is not receiving nearly the attention and the support it deserves. Like no other generation in recent memory, young people are being shaped by the prolonged effects of stress and trauma. Neither society nor the church can afford to simply assume they will be okay. Instead, they must come together to support and guide this generation in the ways they need most. Whole seeks to be a place where the best of medicine, psychology, and theology come together to support young people in their whole person health. The necessary knowledge and expertise are out there, and young people are more than

willing to work towards whole person wellness. All that is needed is creative solutions to bridge the gap.

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