**Background**

As a candidate pursuing an action research project I will narrow my focus of study to an organization in which, as a member and Director, I have full access: the Bear Valley Community Hospital Foundation––a small, all-volunteer nonprofit organization whose sole purpose and mission are to raise funds for the hospital. Action research represents a collaborative approach to organizational improvement, in which members work alongside researchers in a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on an issue or a problem, aiming to solve it and improve organizational performance (Burnes, 2021). The scope of the Hospital Foundation’s action research project is twofold:

1) To review and evaluate the current scholarly and philosophical literature, interpreting and weighing these strategies to ascertain which of them best align with our organization’s volunteers’ needs for social connectivity and sense of purpose.

2) To conduct an internal action research project within the Hospital Foundation, utilizing group observation and documented in a journal. Efforts that fall short of desired goals will be reflected upon, and a revised assessment approach would then be utilized with the intention of improving outcomes.

**Sociological Theory**

The social theory that most closely aligns with our project is *Structural Functionalism*, as pioneered by French sociologist and key social theorist Emile Durkheim (Malik, 2022). Malik writes that Durkheim developed the concepts of *structuralism*, which relates to a social order, and *functionalism*, which “refers to societal desires” (p. 8). Durkheim “discovered the process by which individuals socially integrate into society and developed various models to describe the interaction between people and society” (p. 9).

Society is a complex system whose sum is greater than its parts and can easily fall out of equilibrium; this directly impacts social stability and can disrupt social order, creating dysfunction. It is the Structural-Functional interaction between elements that has applications when conducting an action research project on the Hospital Foundation. The Foundation is comprised of individual volunteer members (parts) who together represent the organization (sum). This organization, in turn, is part of a larger community. Therefore, the Hospital Foundation represents Durkheim’s structuralist model of individuals integrating into society. The functionalist aspect of Durkheim’s theory––centering on societal desires––dovetails with N.T. Wright’s seven universal human longings (2020), which will be explored in detail later in this paper.

The Hospital Foundation’s mission and purpose are to support the Bear Valley Community Healthcare District by raising funds for needed equipment for direct patient care. Zooming out from the smallest micro components (individual volunteers), the Foundation is part of a community, which is the macro sum of the societal sphere. This project will study the relationship between individual volunteers, the structure of the Hospital Foundation, and its functionality in terms of increased member retention, satisfaction, and improved quality for all involved.

Due to the Foundation’s entrenchment within a secular public agency, action research project must refrain from direct Christian references despite the fact that charity and healthcare have solid roots in Christian thought (Schmidt, 2004).

Reichard (2024) argues that “there is an opportunity for mutual critical-constructive dialog across secular public and religious private contexts” (p. 374). Thus, from an applied and clinical sociology standpoint, the movement from the theoretical into the practical offers an opportunity for the Foundation’s research project to “facilitate trust across a secular–sacred divide” (p. 374).

**Faith-Based Analysis**

In his groundbreaking book *Broken Signposts* (2020), Bible scholar, Anglican bishop and acclaimed author N.T. Wright uses the Gospel of John to reveal how Christianity presents a compelling and relevant explanation for our world. Wright argues that every worldview must consider seven “signposts” inherent to humanity: Justice, Love, Spirituality, Beauty, Freedom, Truth, and Power.

If we do not live up to these ideals, our societies and individual lives become unbalanced, creating anger and frustration—negative emotions that divide us from ourselves and from God, he contends. Wright shows how Christianity defines each signpost and illuminates why we so often see them as being "broken" and unattainable.

Drawing on the wisdom of the Gospels, Wright explains why these signposts are fractured and damaged and how Christianity provides the vision, guidance, and hope for making them whole once again, ultimately healing ourselves and our world.

**Justice**

Wright’s seven human longings or ‘signposts,’ while having applicability to the world at large, are also relevant to the recent challenges faced by our Hospital Foundation. The longing for justice, which Wright defines as “the satisfaction of seeing everything put right” (p.3) means that we humans seek resolutions to perceived injustices.  However, I will expand this desire for resolution further to include the resolution of problems in general. In the case of our organization, pandemic-related attrition affected the Foundation’s ability to fulfill its purpose of aiding the hospital exactly at the time when supplemental equipment was needed the most. Remaining member volunteers experienced a desperate desire to resolve the problem of serving the community despite low numbers of members.

**Love**

Wright’s second human longing is for love––a relationship with someone or something, whether short term or long term, human or not. Wright views love as “being drawn out of myself toward something or someone else” (p. 33).

The Hospital Foundation’s work reflects two kinds of love: Love of our community, and love of one another as we interact for the common good. Powerful interpersonal relationships are forged while carrying out Foundation tasks, along with a greater love for the community that our goals ultimately support. With a smaller post-pandemic member numbers, and its resulting stress, the Foundation generates less loving interaction––interpersonal and community; hence our longing to grow our member base.

**Spirituality**, according to Wright, is another human longing. And yet, “Western culture has largely relegated ‘religion’ to the private sphere. This has allowed many aspects of social, public, and political life to proceed on the basis of a ‘functional atheism’” (p. 55).

Our Hospital Foundation is controlled by a public agency; no form of supernatural belief is permitted within our organization’s public discourse. Thus, although individual Foundation members may have their own personal longings for spiritual/religious meaning, we are expressly forbidden from espousing such longings to others within the context of our volunteer work for the agency.

This research project is a form of personal ministry because improving healthcare is consistent with the Christian establishment of hospitals, as addressed by Alvin J. Schmidt in his seminal book, *How Christianity Changed the World* (2004). While spiritual thought or doctrine cannot be overtly incorporated into this project’s intervention, its ultimate community objective is to improve conditions for tending the sick.

**Beauty**

According to Wright, the human longing for beauty represents a “searching for a deeper and richer meaning in a world that sometimes seems to overflow with delight but at other times feels dreadful and cold “ (p. 76).

The Hospital Foundation presents an annual fundraising event, the *Tree of Lights* ceremony. It could be argued that this event, in which community members gather on the hospital grounds in December, fulfills a human longing for beauty through symbolic meaning. At this event, a living pine tree at the hospital site is decorated with lights, and attendees hold candles while the names of loved ones are honored or memorialized. While the main purpose of the *Tree of Lights* is to raise money for our hospital, its intention is broader––to fill a dark, cold night with the warm beauty of deep, rich meaning. During the pandemic, the Foundation was able to adapt to social gathering restrictions by hosting the event online while also allowing guests to attend while parked in their cars. However, the following year, after restrictions were lifted, the beauty of the *Tree of Lights* ceremony was chaotic because task delegation became burdensome to our small post-pandemic member base.

**Freedom**

Wright initially finds the third longing, freedom, challenging to define because “we all know freedom is important for human flourishing, but we all find it harder than we thought to see what it might mean or how to attain it” (p. 95).

With regard to this project’s problem statement, it can be stated that the Foundation was not free to flourish in the wake of the pandemic, with volunteer retention and recruitment as the keys to restoring freedom to fully flourish.

**Truth**

Wright asserts that, “All truth is ‘somebody’s truth’” (p. 114). However, for the purposes of the assigned faith analysis and its relation to the Hospital Foundation action research project, the concept of *truth* is difficult to apply to the problem of volunteer retention and recruitment.

**Power**

Wright recounts a correspondence regarding power. He states, “imagine there is a great crisis: a nuclear attack, a *global pandemic* [emphasis added], or a massive natural disaster. Someone goes to the prime minister, the president, or whoever is supposed to be running the country and says, ‘What are you going to do about this?’ and back comes the answer, ‘It’s all right—you see, God’s in charge now’” (p. 132).

Relating the human longing for power to our Hospital Foundation’s post-pandemic volunteer retention/recruitment challenges…as stated by Wright: “Things have to be done” (p. 133). During and after the pandemic, our Foundation members’ power has been limited not only by our humanness but by governmental restrictions, supply chain disruptions, uncertainty, and fear.

At the height of the pandemic, those Foundation members who remained active were temporarily empowered by getting to work, focusing on special fundraising appeals to the community, which resulted in purchases of respiratory equipment and much-needed personal protection equipment for hospital staff. As pandemic-related restrictions eased, the organization remained short-handed––and members were emotionally and mentally exhausted. At that point, four key members left the organization, citing ‘burnout’.

The purpose of this action research project is to utilize an intervention that sustain existing members and entices new members. As was learned from the aforementioned crisis, the Foundation only possesses power when devoting its mission of helping the hospital. Yet this requires a robust membership; hence the need to study ways of retaining and regaining our human “power base.”