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DENOMINATIONAL INFLUENCE IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION

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DENOMINATIONAL INFLUENCE IN CHURCH REVITALIZATION

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THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

DONALD J. IMMEL

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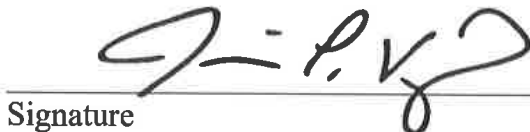
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ABSTRACT

Many churches and denominations in North America have been experiencing plateau or decline for the past sixty years. In recent years, the Assemblies of God has experienced trends of plateau or decline in a majority of their churches. The PennDel Ministry Network, one of sixty-four districts within the Assemblies of God USA, has also observed that a majority of its churches are also in a state of plateau or decline. The primary intent of this dissertation is to explore denominational influence in revitalizing churches. Specific attention is given to the church's participation in the *missio Dei* as well as the development of ecclesial structures throughout the biblical record and into the first centuries of the church's existence. A literature review of church and organizational revitalization provides a conceptual framework for denominations to resource their constituent churches toward organizational and missional revitalization.

The dissertation project focused on a sample of four plateaued and four declining Assembly of God churches within the PennDel Ministry Network. Each church's pastor and board were interviewed using a "guided self-assessment questionnaire." The questionnaire focused on four topics regarding the church's present need for revitalization: the church leadership's perception regarding their church's present state of plateau or decline, contributing factors of plateau or decline, needs for change, and future partnerships between the PennDel Ministry Network and the sample churches.

Key words: revitalization, *missio Dei*, denomination, plateau, decline, strategic, stagnation, renewal.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the Lord, to his Church, to our Assemblies of God movement, and to the PennDel Ministry Network. The research and processes herein are a small contribution to a necessary task that we must see forward – the task of church renewal.

Acknowledgment

Throughout the course of my walk with the Lord I have been graced with many mentors. Dr. David Hardt, the pastor under whose ministry I was saved and called into ministry, has had an indescribable impact on my spiritual and pastoral formation. Pastor Hardt modeled an impeccable work ethic, a penchant for administrative detail, and despite his seemingly rigid self-discipline, he was passionately progressive in utilizing every means available for introducing people to Jesus and growing His church. Norm Beetler was a role model for me while I was a seminary student in Ashland, Ohio. Norm's love for the Word inspired my passion, and his unique demonstration of the Spirit-filled life impacted my ministry. Lewis Clifton was the first senior pastor that I served with in a full-time capacity. Pastor Clifton demonstrated a genuine shepherd's heart in his authentic love and care for the flock and community under his charge. To these pastor-mentors I am eternally grateful.

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input toward me in this wonderful DMin growth process. Thank you, Dr. Andrew Permenter, for your constant encouragement and guidance as my mentor and friend. Thank you, Dr. Robert Crosby, for your insight into church organizational health. And thank you to each of the professors who have taught, processed, and challenged us throughout this wonderful journey.

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A volume would be required to express my love and appreciation to my wife, Robin, for her love, support, encouragement, assistance, and enduring patience as I incessantly processed ideas, dreams, content, and vision during this DMin journey. As has been the case throughout our years together, you are an indispensable part of who I am, what we do, and how we serve.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROJECT INTRODUCED

Introduction

Although the problem of church decline and stagnation has been the focus of scholars for the past fifty years, the church's need to reverse course and do a turnaround is as old as the New Testament scriptures. Jesus made a church health assessment of the churches in Asia as recounted in Revelation chapters two and three. Five of the seven churches were warned to take corrective action or risk the consequence of discipline or closure. Horton observed:

Each letter begins with a revelation of Jesus and a commendation, usually followed by a warning and a challenge. However, Jesus commends the churches' virtues even more than He warns them of their faults. He knows exactly what is going on in each church. He knows their successes, their failures, their victories, their problems, their difficulties. More than that, He knows exactly what each one needs. It is important to see as well that each letter has words of encouragement and warning for every dedicated believer who desires to live and work for God.¹

Although five of the seven churches had lost a sense of vitality, the church of Sardis serves as one example of a church that needs revitalization. The words of Jesus regarding the church of Sardis were recorded in Revelation 3:1-2 (NKJV): "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God.'"

There are observable parallels between the Sardis church of the first century and the plateaued or declining churches of the twenty-first century. In *Turnaround Pastor* Donald Ross draws a personal parallel between the church of Sardis and the church that he led in revitalization

¹ Stanly M. Horton, *The Ultimate Victory: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 2016), 31, accessed November 18, 2017, ProQuest Ebrary.

(Creekside Church, Seattle, WA). “In the early years, when someone in the church reminded me of our past history, and how large we had been, I would have to remind him or her ...our church was no longer that way. It was my way of reminding our church that we had ‘a reputation of being alive, but we were dead’ in mission.”² Maintaining a physical presence in the community gives the appearance of life, but a casual assessment may quickly reveal spiritual pathology rather than vitality, strength and health.

Another important observation in the letters to the seven churches is to whom they are directed. Each letter starts out with the same addressee: “To the angel of the church in...” The Greek word *angelos* (angel) is defined as a messenger,³ and is commonly interpreted to mean the pastor or leader of the church which is referenced.⁴ Horton commented, “Like a watchman walking among them, He [Jesus] subjects them to rigid inspection. His purpose, however, is to encourage, preserve, and challenge them.”⁵ By implication, the leaders of each church identified by Jesus bear the message and the responsibility for communicating it to the church at large. One may also conclude that church leaders bear some responsibility in facilitating the necessary corrective measures issued by the Lord Jesus who is dictating the communication to the Apostle John.

Of course, the churches of the first century lacked facilities and corporate structure in the modern and legal sense of the concept, but the risk that they were facing as an ecclesial body was no less severe than dissolving an incorporated entity, selling its assets, and ceasing to exist. The vital concerns of the twenty-first century churches are not considered (property, membership,

² Donald Ross, *Turnaround Pastor: Pathways to Save, Revive, and Build Your Church* (Montlake, WA: Turnaround Church Coaching Network, 2013), 6.

³ W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words: With Topical Index* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), Laridian ebook.

⁴ Horton, *The Ultimate Victory*, 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*

conversions, etc.) in Jesus' first century message. Instead, Jesus focused on matters of spiritual vitality and health. Churches that were found by Jesus in various states of atrophy were issued warnings that ranged from a strong rebuke to closure. Notably, two of the seven churches were commended and encouraged with no corrective orders issued. The other five churches were issued a combination of correction and commendation, with only Laodicea receiving no commendation.⁶ Thus, church revitalization, whether in a spiritual or organizational context, has been a challenge throughout the New Testament era. This challenge has become increasingly persistent in the twenty-first century.

Contemporary Context: Plateau and Decline Among Mainline, Evangelical, and Assemblies of God Churches

Experts in the field of church growth and revitalization commonly agree that both mainline and evangelical churches, and thus denominations, are in a state of plateau or decline. According to Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, churches that have recorded an increase of 10.1 percent in their average attendance at their primary weekly worship service over a five-year period are considered to be growing. Likewise, a church which has experienced decline of 10.1 percent at their primary weekly worship service over a five-year period was accepted to be in decline. Those churches which report less than 10.1 percent increase or decrease during a five year period at their primary weekly worship service are considered to be plateaued.⁷ Thom Rainer of the Rainer Research Group states, "Eight out of ten of the approximately 400,000 churches in the United States are declining or have plateaued. Of the churches for which we have

⁶ Donald J. Immel, "Exploring and Engaging Leadership Motivation Plateaued and Declining Assembly of God Churches," submitted to Dr. Alan Ehler, PMIN 6013 Theory and Practice of Ministry, Southeastern University, December 14, 2017.

⁷ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2007), 25.

data, 84 percent are declining or experiencing a growth rate below the population growth rate for their communities. The latter is defined as a plateaued church.”⁸ Similar findings are expressed by Kara Powell who reported that mainline denominational churches declined by approximately 5 million members between 2007 and 2014.⁹ Powell further identified that

Adults in evangelical denominations (such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, Churches of Christ, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and the Presbyterian Church in America), as well as adults in nondenominational churches with evangelical leanings, grew from 60 million to 62 million. While that might seem like something to celebrate, we should hold our kudos. Although the total number of evangelicals has increased, the percentage of Americans who identify as evangelicals has actually decreased almost 1 percent from just over 26 percent to just over 25 percent.¹⁰

Powell’s findings corroborate those of the Rainer Research Group, demonstrating that the moderate growth occurring in some evangelical denominations is not keeping pace with the growing population in the United States.¹¹ Although the number of those attending the aforementioned evangelical churches has grown, the percentage based upon population has declined. David T. Olson has posited that the church in America is in a state of crisis. “In 1990, 52 million people attended worship each week - in 2006 the number remained unchanged. However, because of the sizable population growth, the percentage of Americans who attend church is declining.”¹² Olson further contends that if current church attendance trends continue in the present trajectory, “by 2050 the percentage of Americans attending church will be half of the

⁸ Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2005), 245.

⁹ Kara Powell, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2016), chap.1, “Church Attendance Is Declining,” Kindle.

¹⁰ Powell, *Growing Young*, chap.1, “Religious Affiliation in America,” Kindle.

¹¹ Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, chap. 4, “Evangelistic Apathy,” Kindle.

¹² David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), chap. 2, “Is the American Church Keeping Up with Population Growth?” Kindle.

1990 figure.”¹³ More specifically, Olson projects that the percentage of Americans attending church in 2050 will decline from 20.4 percent to 10.2 percent.¹⁴

In his 2017 report to the Assemblies of God General Presbytery, General Assistant Superintendent Alton Garrison reported that approximately two-thirds of Assemblies of God churches are either plateaued or in decline.¹⁵ In 2019, Garrison reported that there had been a measurable increase in the number of plateaued and declining churches, with 70 percent now reported as plateaued and declining. “The percentage of plateaued and declining churches has been rising since the early 1990s and is currently at its highest level in nearly four decades.”¹⁶ Furthermore, Garrison reported that the median size of the Assemblies of God congregation had decreased from seventy to sixty-seven attendees during their major weekly worship service.¹⁷ These reports indicate that although positive results are being seen from the Acts 2 Journey (the Assemblies of God revitalization initiative), the reality exists that nearly three-quarters of AG churches are experiencing difficulty with missional vitality.

Local Context: Plateau and Decline Among PennDel Ministry Network Churches

The Annual Church Ministries Reports in the Pennsylvania-Delaware District of the Assemblies of God revealed that 72 percent of its churches have stagnated, with 45.5% of these churches showing decline and 26.5% plateaued between 2012 and 2016.¹⁸ In a recent update of ACMR comparisons for 2014-2018, PennDel Ministry Network churches showed a similar

¹³ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, “Introduction: Why Examine the American Church, “Is the American Church Booming?” Kindle.

¹⁴ Olson, *American Church in Crisis*, chap. 2, “Is the American Church Keeping Up with Population Growth?”, Kindle.

¹⁵ Alton Garrison, *Report of the Assistant General Superintendent* (Springfield, MO: General Council of the Assemblies of God General Presbytery Report, 2017), 7-9.

¹⁶ Alton Garrison, “How to Begin Recalibrating Your Church,” *Influence Magazine*, July-August 2019, 39.

¹⁷ Garrison, *Report of the Assistant General Superintendent*.

¹⁸ This information is taken from the author’s compilation of the ACMRs sent to him from the national office of the Assemblies of God from 2012 to 2016. The data represent statistics of 332 Assemblies of God churches.

decline in performance as the Assemblies of God national report noted earlier. The updated report identified that only 22.4% of PennDel Ministry Network churches showed growth during the past five years, and 50.4 percent reporting decline. Only plateaued churches remained virtually the same as the previous reporting period with 27.2 percent in that category.

Additionally, The Annual Church Ministries Reports revealed that the PennDel Ministry Network has closed an average of ten churches per year over the past five years.¹⁹ Church closures are the inevitable outcome of unmitigated decline. Without an intentional, strategic, and well-resourced effort for church revitalization, this trend of church closures is unlikely to abate.

The consistency of these findings reveals a weakness and a challenge for the church in the twenty-first century. The church must engage in revitalization efforts to live out effectively the missional mandate issued by Jesus Christ in Matthew's gospel:

And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age." Amen. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Denominations and other ecclesial organizations are uniquely postured with influence and resources to assist their affiliate churches with revitalization strategies. If such organizations take seriously the *missio Dei* and their responsibility to provide support, encouragement, and mutual accountability in seeing the mission of the church forward, a strategic, relational, and effective revitalization method will be prayerfully developed and offered to churches that have plateaued or are in decline. Nevertheless, cultural challenges must be acknowledged before these resources and strategies may be welcomed by the local church.

¹⁹ This information is taken from the author's compilation of the ACMRs sent to him from the national office of the Assemblies of God from 2014 to 2018. The data represent statistics of 332 Assemblies of God churches.

The Assemblies of God: Development and Subsequent Cultural Implications Impacting Stagnation

The Assemblies of God was founded on missional ideals. Formative Pentecostal experiences and subsequent pneumatological teaching reveal a strong missional trajectory for the Pentecostal movement. At the Topeka revival of 1901, Charles Parham believed that the tongues experienced was *xenolalia* (foreign languages). He believed that this gift of tongues was given for the purpose of preaching the gospel in foreign lands without having to learn the language.²⁰ This belief was also shared by the leaders of the Azusa revival in Los Angeles between 1906 - 1908 when the *Apostolic Faith* newspaper published claims that “God is solving the missionary problem by sending out new-tongues missionaries.”²¹ Although the Assemblies of God had not yet been formed, the roots of the fellowship are imbedded in the soil of these early Pentecostal outpourings.

According to some of its early doctrinal statements, the Assemblies of God has self-identified as a missions movement. Edith Blumhofer cited one instance of this self-identification which occurred at the 1914 General Council in Chicago, IL when “Lemuel C. Hall framed a resolution by which the delegates committed themselves to ‘the greatest evangelism the world has ever known.’”²² As the Assemblies of God grew and developed, a missional core continued to be expressed by leaders and members alike. Edith Blumhofer noted that “Assemblies of God leaders believed that evangelism was the Fellowship’s reason for being. This conviction determined their priorities in mobilizing adherents to address the task. Gospel Publishing House

²⁰ Stanley M. Burgess, Gary B. McGee, and Patrick H. Alexander. *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1988), 611.

²¹ Burgess, McGee, and Alexander, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, 611.

²² Edith Waldvogel Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God: A Chapter in the Story of American Pentecostalism* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1989), 289.

developed as an agency to facilitate evangelism.”²³ Because of this deeply held conviction that missional values be urgently expressed in evangelism and missions, the doctrinal framework of the Assemblies of God includes evangelism as one of the churches’ “priority reasons for being.”²⁴ Although the early participants and leaders of the Pentecostal movement may have been misguided in their immediate understanding of the applicability of glossolalia, Pentecostals were firmly established on scriptural evidence that *dunamis* (power) would accompany the Holy Spirit’s outpouring for the purpose of witness and mission.²⁵ The conviction that the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is available to empower believers for witness and service, although historically sporadic in occurrence, has experienced a thread of continuity through the centuries. Stanley Horton commented:

God wants a community that, like Jesus, gets caught up in the transformation of the world. There was a marvelous, rapid spread of the gospel in the first century. The tremendous spread of the Pentecostal revival around the world in the twentieth century is evidence that the power of the Spirit is still working today, evangelizing the world and building the body.²⁶

Despite these deep roots of missional identity, purpose, and activity, the Assemblies of God has joined the ranks of decline evident in the mainline denominational churches. A study conducted by James Lewis and funded by the Lilly Endowment explored claims that mainline Protestantism was in a severe state of decline between 1965-1990. His findings corroborated the impressions reported by scholars funded by the Lilly Foundation stating that conservative Evangelical denominations, including the Assemblies of God, grew during the same period.²⁷

²³ Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God*, 279.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Stanley M. Horton, *Acts: A Logion Press Commentary* (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 1981), chap. 1, sec. 4, “Jesus Promises Power for Witness 1:6-8,” Kindle.

²⁶ Horton, *Acts*, Kindle Locations 854-857.

²⁷ James W. Lewis, “American Denominational Studies: A Critical Assessment,” November 15, 2004, accessed February 17, 2019, http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/sites/default/files/transcripts/research_article/JamesLewis_American_Denominational_Studies_Essay.pdf.

Although the Assemblies of God enjoyed a season of strength and growth while other denominations declined, the once burgeoning movement has recently slowed in growth to an overall plateau. With half of Network churches in decline and less than one quarter of Assemblies of God (AG) churches experiencing growth, many AG churches have experienced missional drift.²⁸

Mark Merrill identified three key features that are systemic to Assemblies of God culture that he believes are contributing factors to the widespread plateau and decline in a majority of its churches. Merrill said, “Among the more notable mindsets/theological axioms that undermine church revitalization is the distrust of organization, a misunderstanding of revival in the local church, and the acceptance of decline as a validation of holiness.”²⁹

The distrust among clergy of organizational structure is clearly revealed in many of the early publications, starting with the announcement in the *Word and Witness* periodical inviting interested persons to attend what would now be considered the first General Council of the Assemblies of God, conducted in Hot Springs, Arkansas in 1914. A documentary produced by the Assemblies of God which chronicled the early development of the General Council emphasized the decidedly independent nature that would become part of the ecclesial DNA of the fellowship. General Superintendent Dr. George Wood stated,

The notice called for a convention for Pentecostal saints from Churches of God in Christ and in fact the notice carried this refrain: “no deadbeats allowed.” They were a fiercely independent group and in fact they were that way because many of them had been expelled from established churches. Many of them that came to Hot Springs were opposed to organization of any kind.³⁰

²⁸ Donald J. Immel, *Missional Drift*, submitted to Dr. Leonard Sweet, DMIN 8143 Culture, Context, and Mission, Southeastern University, April 26, 2019.

²⁹ Mark Merrill, “Revitalization of Assemblies of God Churches in Stagnation or Decline” (Doctor of Ministry diss., George Fox University, 2017), 17, accessed November 22, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/223>.

³⁰ George Wood, “Heritage of the Assemblies of God,” (video), accessed December 12, 2017, <https://ifphc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=videoStream.featuredVideo1>.

The very structure and governance model adopted by the Assemblies of God in its constitution and bylaws reveals this independent spirit. Any assembly upon reaching a minimum number of twenty voting members becomes General Council affiliated and is therefore sovereign in its governance.³¹ Furthermore, the ministers within the fellowship are bound by a “voluntary cooperative” agreement which is a further departure from the structures set in place by more rigid denominations and their hierarchical forms of governance. This point is further articulated in *The Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*:

Pentecostals tended to distrust organization, claiming that the New Testament offered no precedent for anything beyond local church order. Most Pentecostals had distanced themselves from the denominations before embracing Pentecostal teaching; some had been forced to break denominational ties when they had begun espousing glossolalia (tongues speech) and divine healing. Most were convinced that organization stifled the Holy Spirit.³²

Although many of the early leaders within the Assemblies of God were adequately trained and educated, the movement and their zeal to distance themselves from mainline denominational structures led to a general suspicion of formal educational institutions.³³ This trend was exemplified on both the General Council and District Council levels. For example, according to minutes of a council meeting in 1948 in the Eastern District (now the PennDel District Council of the Assemblies of God), a resolution to seek accreditation to offer degrees at the Eastern Bible Institute was strongly opposed. Additionally, a motion to lodge a protest with the General Council for their endorsement of the resolution seeking accreditation to offer degrees at EBI was proposed. Furthermore, when the matter finally passed in 1962, Herbert M. Bunney, one of the district ministers, started his own non-accredited Bible institute. Although the reasons

³¹ General Council Constitution & Bylaws, Article XI, a. (3) and c., 104.

³² Stanley M. Burgess, *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 334.

³³ Burgess, *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, 335.

have shifted primarily to financial considerations, many of the credentialed ministers within the Assemblies of God continue to meet educational requirements through non-accredited learning experiences.³⁴ Thus, the distancing of the fellowship is evidenced by the relationship of the local church to the General Council (sovereignty), by the relationship of the ministers to the General Council (voluntary cooperative), and in the historical training of ministers for service.

Merrill identified that revivalism also demotivates churches in seeking methodological measures for revitalization. Some churches simply believe that revival will produce revitalization. Because the Assemblies of God was birthed in a revivalist culture, this statement resonates with those who believe that what is truly needed is getting back to our Pentecostal roots – in other words, a revival. George Wood recalled in the days of his youth the many prayer requests for a revival. Wood recalled hearing prayers for revival when he was a youth and confessing the cynicism that he felt toward the people who offered those prayers. Wood stated that if the Lord had sent revival to the church, the results would evaporate due to the unwillingness of the people to support revival with the necessary work that would accompany it. Woods identified his conviction that “God typically does not work independently of our work.”³⁵ Mark Merrill accurately observed,

Certainly, a case can be made that revival is longed for and needed in today’s church; however, an overdependence upon the sovereignty of God has left many churches waiting on God to do “everything,” while God is waiting on them to do “something.” This problematic posture portends that revival is ‘normative’ instead of ‘seasonal.’ The historical record is replete with revivals that began and ended – a seasonal epoch where God visited His Church in supernatural dimensions. When revival is believed to be normative, then there is an overdependence on the sovereignty of God.³⁶

³⁴ A. Reuben Hartwick and J. Clayton Sheridan, “Musing on the Minutes and Memories of Seventy-Five Years of the Penn-Del District of the Assemblies of God,” 14-18. (Self-Published, PennDel Archives, n.d.)

³⁵ George Wood, “Eight Principles to Revitalizing Your Church,” *Enrichment Journal* (2017): http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201001/201001_024_8_principles.cfm, accessed December 12, 2017.

³⁶ Merrill, “Revitalization,” 18-19.

Merrill's final point identified the viewpoint adopted by some that presumes that others are in a state of compromise, and that is the reason behind their growth. Proponents of this position indicate that if the church is holding onto a true form of holiness, then their decline is actually a badge of honor rather than a symptom of ineffectiveness. "The acceptance of the 'rejection paradigm' fosters a 'martyr complex' by which the inability to reach the surrounding community is interpreted as a loyalty to heritage and an uncompromising stance for holiness."³⁷ Distrust of organizational structure, misunderstanding the nature and function of revival, and accepting decline as an indication of true holiness can be observed in the literature trail of these congregations, and is carried forward through popular books and music. The adopting or embracing of these beliefs can be demotivating for revitalization needs.

An additional challenge presented to denominational leaders emerges from the limitations inherent in ecclesial structures. As identified earlier, the Assemblies of God is a voluntary cooperative fellowship. The ecclesial structure that exists within the Assemblies of God limits the authority of national, district, and sectional leadership. These ecclesial structures could otherwise be exercised to mandate change or revitalization. With the restrictions imposed on leaders due to the governance structure of the Assemblies of God, methods that encourage and foster confidence in plateaued or declining churches to participate in proven revitalization programs that are available and affordable must be explored. Engaging stagnated churches in revitalization processes is not an easy task since many Assemblies of God churches display behaviors that indicate they are either oblivious to the inevitable outcomes of decline, or they are content with simply keeping the doors of the church open. Additionally, the culture within the

³⁷ Merrill, "Revitalization," 20.

Assemblies of God fellowship demands that revitalization efforts be accompanied by a strong relational component.³⁸

Primary Research Question

Given the voluntary cooperative nature of Assemblies of God churches, which highly values the sovereignty of the local church, what revitalization methods will effectively engage churches that are experiencing plateau or decline?

A Case for Ecclesial Structures and their Potential Benefit to Stagnated Churches

Denominational Structures

Although a wide variety of structures are represented in Protestantism, there are three major expressions of church governance that exist. These forms of church governance include the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational models of church structure. These three models represent a hierarchical structure, an elder-board structure, and a grass roots or democracy model, respectively. K. Peter Takayama asserted that all Protestant denominations are basically voluntary associations in the way that they functionally organize and operate.³⁹ “Although the patterns of ecclesiastical organizations vary in form from the popular democracy of the Disciples of Christ to the representative democracy of Presbyterians, the principle of internal democracy is fundamental to the political systems of virtually all Protestant denominations.”⁴⁰

The voluntary nature of the ecclesial structure provides enough room for the local congregation to make decisions that it understands to be in its best contextual interest, while the governing structure provides a source of accountability that oversees matters of doctrinal purity

³⁸ Donald J. Immel, “Qualifying Hypothesis of Motivation and Demotivation in Church Revitalization,” submitted to Dr. Andrew Permenter, PMIN 8013 Contextual Engagement, Southeastern University, April 27, 2018, 6-10.

³⁹ K. Peter Takayama, “Administrative Structures and Political Processes in Protestant Denominations,” *Publius* 4, no. 2 (1974): <http://www.jstor.org.seu.idm.oclc.org/stable/3329358>

⁴⁰ Takayama, “Administrative Structures and Political Processes,” 5.

and a functional polity that safeguards general unity. Some denominations, such as the American Baptist Churches, contend that influence is used in governance rather than authority.⁴¹ The Assemblies of God, initially feigning association with formal denominational identification, has described itself as a voluntary cooperative fellowship.⁴² This term of self-identification established both an entrepreneurial and a decentralized form of governance that has become a deeply imbedded part of the nature and culture of the churches that comprise the fellowship.⁴³

Denominational Weaknesses

Two extremes that can debilitate an ecclesial structure's effectiveness exist. The first extreme structure may become controlling and bureaucratic, potentially impinging upon the autonomy of the local church and stifling its ability to represent the gospel in ways that are effective in its particular context. Conversely, the second extreme structure is evidenced in a local church whereby its autonomy creates a context from which a highly dysfunctional church presence emerges. Here the church becomes incapable of representing the gospel to the community in an effective manner. If the ecclesial structure has neither influence nor authority to intervene when a church becomes unhealthy in its autonomy, the denomination is labeled ineffective and unhealthy.

In his overview of the Lilly Endowment's funding for research on mainline denominational decline, James Lewis noted that "discerning and implementing the internal institutional strategies that can revitalize congregations and denominations in this cultural

⁴¹ Paul D. Borden, *Hit the Bullseye*, 28.

⁴² Gary B. McGee, *People of the Spirit: The Assemblies of God* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2004), chap. 6, "The First General Council," Kindle.

⁴³ McGee, *People of the Spirit*, Afterword, "Shifts in Philosophy of the U.S. Assemblies of God," Kindle.

context is, of course, the task of creative and resourceful religious leaders.”⁴⁴ Therefore, although church governance models are significantly relational and therefore operate from a platform of influence, it is nevertheless a responsibility of overseeing structures to discover, develop, and implement strategies for both congregational and denominational health.

Two challenges seem to exist. First, some denominations become focused upon themselves, and invariably the institution becomes the priority reason for being. Congregations may then be viewed as necessary to keep the denomination in existence. This reversal of priority is likely unsustainable. Andrew Thompson, as cited in Leonard Sweet’s book *So Beautiful*, noted “People today simply aren’t willing to support an institution whose sole reason for existence is the maintenance of the institution.”⁴⁵ Conversely, when denominations perceive themselves as having little influence to assist churches in decline, they may become marginalized and forfeit the potential assistance which they can provide to struggling churches.

Denominations’ Unique Posture to Assist Struggling Churches

Denominations, fellowships, associations, or other ecclesial organizations are uniquely positioned to be a significant influence in assisting local congregations with the recalibration of their values and priorities for mission. Ed Stetzer stated that churches that need to be revitalized often require assistance and resources. “Revitalization is hard work. Support from a local church’s denomination could help that church flourish during the revitalization process. There is value in not standing by and doing nothing as our congregations die, especially if they could

⁴⁴ Lewis, “American Denominational Studies,” 23.

⁴⁵ Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (David C. Cook: Colorado Springs, 2009), 80.

benefit from our assistance.”⁴⁶ The overseeing body has several potential advantages that could situate them for a unique role in assisting a church in decline. First, the overseeing organization shares the same general values of the local church’s mission. Secondly, the denomination has a relationship with the local church that provides a basis for trust and confidence. Thirdly, the denomination may have financial and personnel resources that can be made available for qualified churches.

Unfortunately, some denominations inadvertently contribute to the problem of stagnation rather than effectively offering assistance to reverse the congregation’s trajectory of decline. Some pastors report that they feel abandoned by their denomination’s leadership instead of being supported by it.⁴⁷ Additionally, some overseeing structures communicate that the local church exists to support and resource the denominational institution and its agenda. Paul Borden, an executive officer for the American Baptist Churches in Northern California, stated “there is far more time and effort in keeping the institution going than in focusing resources on the local congregation as the major unit of mission.”⁴⁸ Allegiance to denominational structures has waned over the last several decades. This decline may be attributed to a general trend among Americans who distrust political and organizational entities.⁴⁹ Additionally, a trend has been identified wherein those who are affiliated with Christian churches are not concerned about the denominational attachments of the church of their choice.⁵⁰ This lack of attachment potentially

⁴⁶ Ed Stetzer, “Four Steps for Denominations to Resource Church Revitalization,” November 4, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2018/november/how-should-denominations-resource-church-revitalization.html>

⁴⁷ Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr. *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey*, Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series, chap. 1, “Feedback from the Front Lines,” Kindle.

⁴⁸ Borden, *Hit the Bullseye*, 15.

⁴⁹ Lewis, “American Denominational Studies,” 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

marginalizes both the relationship with an overseeing body and the supportive influence that the denomination could provide.⁵¹

Topic Relationship to the Ministry of the Student

In 2015, I was elected to fill the role of Secretary-Treasurer for the PennDel Ministry Network (AKA, Pennsylvania-Delaware District Council of the Assemblies of God). During the first two years of my five-year tenure as Secretary-Treasurer, I became familiar with the Annual Church Ministries Reports for the Network's 400 churches. I was concerned that, although the number of churches being planted continued to climb, a majority of our churches were not growing. Additionally, primary indicators of church missional vibrancy were also showing a decline. Under my oversight, our Network enlisted the services of the Acts 2 Journey to offer a proven model of church revitalization to our Network churches. Dr. Mike Clarensau, one of the presenters for the Acts 2 Journey, gave an inspiring and well-received presentation to several hundred of our ministers at our annual minister's retreat in 2014. Despite the appreciation expressed for Dr. Clarensau's messages on church revitalization, only twelve churches enrolled in the first PennDel Acts 2 Journey in 2015. The second Journey saw only half the previous year's participation, and the third Acts 2 Journey was canceled due to lack of interest. Statistics derived from recent Annual Church Ministries Reports are unambiguous regarding the missional vitality of a majority of PennDel Ministry Network churches. With 50.4 percent of our Network churches in decline, and 27.2 percent of our churches plateaued, Network leadership must give significant attention to engaging pastors, church leadership teams, and congregations in a great missional awakening. As the recently elected Network Superintendent, I feel a responsibility and

⁵¹ Donald J. Immel, "Influence and Strategy for Revitalizing Declining Churches in the Pennsylvania-Delaware Ministry Network," submitted to Dr. Andrew Permenter, PMIN 8023 Contextual Engagement, Southeastern University, April 19, 2019, 4-8.

an urgent desire to discover and employ relational methodology that will serve as a catalyst to engage declining and plateaued churches in necessary change, transformation, and, ultimately, revitalization.

This dissertation project will be designed to explore hindrances to revitalization and encourage the engagement of congregations and their leaders in a robust missional expression. It is my hope that our ecclesial structure will play a key role in a partnership that is instrumental in revitalizing PennDel Ministry Network churches and may be used as a model for other ecclesial organizations to utilize or adapt for their revitalization needs.

Contextual Scope and Limitations

Gathering information from all denominations may result in the development of a robust understanding of church revitalization. Benefits can be obtained from cross-cultural research, although information received from cultures that are Western in their orientation would likely be most applicable. A historical perspective on church revitalization would also potentially yield helpful insights on the subject. Additionally, research from secular organizations that have faced the need for restructuring could provide significant parallels that may be deemed beneficial for this research project.

The objective of this project was to create an evaluation tool that can assist pastors and church leaders develop an understanding of changes that may be necessary for altering their condition of plateau or decline. Once the evaluation tool was developed, it was assessed by a sample group for its viability for use in a Network-wide effort for engaging pastors and church boards in revitalization strategies. This sample group was comprised of Assemblies of God churches in Pennsylvania and Delaware and included churches of various sizes based upon average primary worship service attendance. Also, churches were selected from a variety of

settings such as urban, suburban, and rural contexts. Because the governing structure of Parent Affiliated Churches and District Council Affiliated churches tend to differ significantly from General Council Affiliated churches, the sample group was limited to General Council Affiliated churches.⁵²

Although the eventual objective of the evaluation tool was to offer options to churches and their leaders for creating a revitalized and missionally effective congregation, it was not within the scope of this project to develop revitalization programs. It is therefore assumed that models of church revitalization which are already in existence would be utilized or adapted as revitalization options. This project identified these options and their developmental sources.

Project Goals and Objectives

The overall goal of this dissertation project was to engage plateaued and declining churches in a guided self-assessment regarding their stagnated condition to arrive at a consensus among leadership regarding methods and strategies to which they will commit in order to improve their missional effectiveness. The project's objectives were threefold. The first objective was to gain an adequate understanding of church behaviors and the underlying rationale embraced by pastors and their primary leadership team that kept them busy with activities that do not produce missional results that translate to a long-term, sustainable model of church vitality. The second objective was to help church leaders identify unbiased data that indicate that without making changes, and thus revitalizing their church's ministry, their church cannot survive. A third objective was to build strong, trusting relationships between the PennDel Ministry Network

⁵² A General Council Affiliated (GCA) church is sovereign in its governance, whereas a District Council Affiliated (DCA) church may be under the oversight of its geographic district or sectional leadership. A Parent Affiliated Church (PAC) is usually governed by a sponsoring, or mother, church.

leaders and local church leadership, thus developing confidence from the pastor and church leaders in the Network and its resourcing abilities.⁵³

A second goal of this dissertation project was concerned with local church sustainability. This goal was accomplished by creating an assessment to potentially heighten awareness among the leadership of the church regarding conditions and behaviors that predispose the congregation to further decline and eventual closure. The specific goal of this objective was to stop decline and to align the church with a strategy that predisposes it to growth through evangelistic and discipleship vitality.

A third goal of this dissertation project was directed toward the PennDel Ministry Network. The outcomes of this goal were for the Network to see a positive change in churches experiencing plateau and decline, thus reducing the statistic of 50.4 percent of its churches experiencing decline, and 27.2 percent of its churches experiencing plateau. To meet this goal, the researcher enlisted eight sample churches to engage in the research project. The researcher interviewed the pastor and primary leadership of each enlisted church using the guided self-assessment tool, with the objective of arriving at a consensus for engaging in a strategy that will predispose the church to changing its state of plateau or decline.

⁵³ Borden, *Hit the Bullseye*, 15.

CHAPTER TWO
THE PROJECT IN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

In order to understand and appreciate the need for church renewal or revitalization, a thoroughly informed perspective of the church's mission from the biblical record and church history is necessary. The theological construct of *missio Dei* will provide both the theological and philosophical underpinnings for the assertion that church revitalization is missionally essential apart from the necessity of organizational survival. The church must be on mission to be vital. Defining the church's mission from a theological, historical, and biblical point of view is therefore foundational for determining what constitutes a truly revitalized church. This research project seeks to establish the benefits of denominational assistance in church revitalization. To this end the history and development of ecclesial structures through the biblical narrative and the early church are explored. Understanding the formation of ecclesial structures, their development, and their role in the oversight of the mission of the church will provide guidance for today's denominations in determining the appropriate level of involvement in church revitalization.

Missio Dei

Although the concept of God being on a mission throughout the history of humankind has long been a part of theological focus, the term *missio Dei* is relatively new to the vernacular of missiology and ecclesiology. D. J. Konz stated that

missio Dei, as a theological framework for mission, emerged in the ecumenical mission discourse of the mid-twentieth century. While the idea had its roots in the theological milieu of the preceding decades, the understanding that the church's mission was

grounded in the divine missio is well known to have gained currency after the 1952 International Missionary Council (IMC) gathering at Willingen, Germany.¹

This terminology (missio Dei) has now gained significant attention and usage among theologians and scholars.² The missio Dei is viewed as a centerpiece to theology. Missio Dei is proposed to be the primary expression of the trinity in relationship to humanity.³ Additionally, the mission of God is proposed to be the dominant hermeneutical lens for interpreting the Bible, since God's mission is the continuous, unifying story line in the biblical narrative.⁴ Christopher Wright has stated that “a strong theology of the mission of God provides a fruitful hermeneutical framework within which to read the whole Bible.”⁵ If the missio Dei is established as the trinity's impetus in relating to humanity, the framework for interpreting the scriptures, and the reference point for the establishment and commissioning of the church, then it stands to reason that the mission of God is key to understanding how a vital church should function.

Although David Bosch posited that the concept of missio Dei has been embraced by most Christian persuasions, not all scholars agree with the concept, much less the details of the scope and expressions that emerged from the Willingen conference. Most contentious is the claim from the conference that “Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission.”⁶ John Flett rejects this definition of mission, arguing that the missio Dei concept from the Willingen conference has a deficient trinitarianism which

¹ D J. Konz, “The Even Greater Commission: Relating the Great Commission to the Missio Dei, and Human Agency to Divine Activity, in Mission,” *Missiology* 46, no. 4 (2018): 336, accessed October 26, 2019, doi:10.1177/0091829618794507.

² For the use of missio Dei in theological studies, see Anderson, Bosch, Konz, Wright, York, etc.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Christian J. Anderson, “Beginning at the Beginning: Reading Missio Dei from the Start of the Bible,” *Missiology* 45, no. 4 (2017): 414, accessed October 25, 2019, doi:10.1177/0091829617728533.

⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 26, Kindle Edition.

⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, chap. 12, under “Mission as Missio Dei, Kindle.

flaws the missiological proposition.⁷ Flett's objections regarding the present understanding of *missio Dei* center on God's essential being, and the mission that proceeds from his being, in contrast to his act of mission in history. Flett stated "the problem of *missio Dei* is, first, that of a fateful dichotomy, present at the concept's inception, between God's being and act, and, second, that this dichotomy is disguised by a trinitarian façade."⁸ Overall, Flett's objections seemed to represent that the *missio Dei* as developed from the Willingen conference impinged upon God's self-sufficiency, making the *missio Dei* contingent upon the church and human participation.⁹ Although Flett's concerns may have had a basis for consideration, missiologists such as Christopher Wright have addressed potential misalignment of missional priority and prerogative when he stated that "it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world."¹⁰

The *Missio Dei*: A Collective Understanding

The coinage of the term *missio Dei* has been attributed to German missiologist Karl Hartenstein.¹¹ Although the term *missio Dei* is ascribed to Hartenstein, it emerged from the theology of Karl Barth.¹² A robust dialogue has ensued throughout theological literature regarding what God's mission actually encompasses since Georg Vicedom developed the *missio Dei* concept after the 1952 Willingen International Missionary Council Conference. David J. Bosch gave a working definition of *missio Dei* in relation to the concept of mission as "God's

⁷ John Flett, *Missio Dei: A Trinitarian Envisioning of a Non-Trinitarian Theme*, *Missiology* 37, no. 1 (2009): 5, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://search-ebscohost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001751780&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Mark Laing, *Missio Dei: Some Implications for the Church*, *Missiology: An International Review* 37, no.1 (2009): 90, <https://search-ebscohost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0001751883&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate.”¹³ John York extends Bosch’s thought on church participation in the *missio Dei* when he described the process of God’s mission as “providing redemption, finding the lost, and then using them [the redeemed lost] to mediate kingdom blessings to those yet lost.”¹⁴ Wright ultimately concurs with York when he asserts that “the Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation.”¹⁵ The following comprehensive and succinct understanding of God’s mission and man’s participation in that mission is found in *The New Dictionary of Theology*:

Biblical study investigates the basis and rationale for the expansion of the Christian community in the *missio Dei*, highlighted in the calling of Abraham to be a blessing for all peoples (Gen. 12:1–3), the election of Israel to be a light to the nations (Isa. 49:6), Jesus’ commission to his disciples to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth and the end of time (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8), the work of the Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7–11), the universal offer of salvation (1 Tim. 2:3–4), the new community of the reign of God (Matt. 11:11) and the promise of new heavens and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:13, Rev. 21).¹⁶

David Bosch reported that a consensus of perspective was achieved at the Willingen conference in 1952 regarding the theology of the *missio Dei*.

Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the

¹³ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), chap.2, under “Mission: An Interim Definition”, Kindle.

¹⁴ John York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit* (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 2012), accessed November 6, 2019, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/seu/detail.action?docID=2065462>.

¹⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 17.

¹⁶ *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, 2nd ed., (IVP, 2016), accessed November 10, 2019, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/seu/detail.action?docID=4787017>.

Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.¹⁷

Dialogue regarding the scope of the *missio Dei* necessarily includes a starting point for the mission. Some writers, like Henry Rowold, seem to begin the mission with the Garden of Eden and mankind’s fall to sin. Rowold indicated that the question “where are you?” from Genesis 3:9 was the beginning point for understanding the entire flow of scripture and God’s “relentless outreach to ‘seek and save the lost.’”¹⁸ Unlike most theologies of the *missio Dei* that seem to pursue the mission of God after sin entered the world, Christian Anderson proposed an earlier beginning as the basis for God’s mission; accordingly, he explored the mission of God before the fall. Anderson suggested that “we have a theology of God’s mission arising from the Triune God’s cosmic purposes and loving initiative, yet we have a narrative hermeneutic of God’s mission arising as a response to the entry of sin.”¹⁹ Anderson thus seems to create a distinction between God’s original creative mission expressed in Genesis 1:26 (*imago Dei* or image of God) and God’s subsequent mission of redemption after the fall. York agreed with the inclusion of the *imago Dei* as a basis for understanding the *missio Dei* when he stated that the view of mankind being created in the image of God provides the foundation for understanding the Great Commission.²⁰ York asserted, “Since God has made everyone in His image, then His Son means to include everyone when He mandates making disciples ‘of all nations.’”²¹ Thus the *imago Dei*

¹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, chap. 12, under “Mission as *Missio Dei*,” Kindle.

¹⁸ Henry Rowold, “Where Are You? The Question That Drives the Scriptures,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 25, no. 2 (2017): 244, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAI FZK180131001745&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

¹⁹ Christian J. Anderson, “Beginning at the Beginning: Reading *Missio Dei* from the Start of the Bible,” *Missiology* 45, no. 4 (2017): 415, accessed October 25, 2019, doi:10.1177/0091829617728533.

²⁰ York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*

and God's unhindered presence with man as stated in Genesis 1-2 provide the point of return of a redemption initiative.

Although the restoration of fallen humanity to the image of God and into communion with God is a partial explanation of the *missio Dei*, restoration of individuals does not address the full scope of the mission. The phrases, "all the families of the earth" (Gen 12:3) and "all nations" (Mat 28:19) begin to specify the scope of God's mission on earth. Jerry Hwang identified God's mission as God's "cosmic rule" in contrast to those who would limit the *missio Dei* to the Great Commission.²² Thus, the *missio Dei*, although concerned with and inclusive of redeeming individuals, is a global initiative. Additionally, although the nation of Israel was the preferred and chosen vehicle through whom the redemptive plan would be carried forward, the scope of the *missio Dei* was never intended to be confined to one nation or people group. As will be identified in the following section, the *missio Dei* is articulated in every section of the scriptures.

In summary, the *missio Dei* is God's mission evidenced in creation and expressed throughout the scriptures. The *missio Dei* can be detected in God's creation of the cosmos, and God's assignment to humankind for caring for that which was created.²³ The mission of God is also evidenced in the *imago Dei*, that is, God expressing his mission through humanity created in his image found in Genesis 1:26-28.²⁴ Taking dominion over creation, procreating offspring, and stewarding the earth in which they were placed provide a general overview and foundation for humankind's participation in God's original mission. Humanity's fall into sin recorded in Genesis 3 interrupted humanity's participation in the *missio Dei* and marred the *imago Dei* and

²² Jerry Hwang, "'My Name Will Be Great Among the Nations': The *Missio Dei* in the Book of the Twelve," *Tyndale Bulletin* 65 (2014):164.

²³ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 65.

²⁴ York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit*, 21-22.

necessitated an added dimension of mission; namely, the redemption of all that was impacted by sin. A divine-human mission is found in Genesis 3:15 in which God stated, “And I will put enmity, between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” Although the earlier expression of mission found in Genesis 1:26 presented the original *missio Dei*, the latter expression indicated in Genesis 3:15 became the dominant theme of God’s mission that guides the biblical narrative to its conclusion in Revelation 21:3.

Old Testament Expressions of the *Missio Dei*

As previously noted, the *missio Dei* is firmly embedded at the beginning of the biblical record. It has been proposed that Genesis 1:26 and the *imago Dei* provided the initial revelation of God’s intention in the world in conjunction with humanity. Additionally, subsequent to humanity’s fall into sin recorded in Genesis 3, the mission of God became intrinsically inclusive of God’s desire to redeem and thereby restore His creation to a state commensurate to its original relationship to himself. Whereas Genesis 3:15 gives an initial hint at this mission, Genesis 12:1-3 identifies the particular “seed” or lineage through whom this redemption will come:

Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen. 12:1-3)

Wright commented that the Genesis 12:1-3 passage is pivotal in the Old Testament because, as the Apostle Paul stated in Galatians 3:8, the Abrahamic covenant is the gospel foreseen and proclaimed in advance.²⁵ Wright stated that “from the great promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 we know this God to be totally, covenantally and eternally

²⁵ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 63.

committed to the mission of blessing the nations through the agency of the people of Abraham.”²⁶ The intent and determination of God to establish and fulfill this covenant of blessing the nations can be deduced from the repetition of the covenant. Wright noted that the Abrahamic covenant is repeated to the Patriarchs (with minor variations) five times.²⁷ According to Lenski, the blessing referred to in Genesis 12:3 is identified by Paul as the Gentiles being justified by faith in Christ, which is “the central blessing without which no spiritual blessings other than this come to anybody.”²⁸ Genesis 3-11 reveals a progression of humanity continually moving away from God. The fall of man (Genesis 3), the first murder (Genesis 4), the great flood narrative (Genesis 6-10), and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) describe humanity’s drift from communion with God. Genesis 12:1-3, however, reveals that God was proceeding with the mission introduced in Genesis 3:15. Abraham is identified as the individual through whom a nation would emerge to bless all nations. John York proposed that the circumstances surrounding the Tower of Babel became the starting point for God’s covenant to bless the nations through Abraham. York stated:

Unveiling the promise to bless all nations, God clarifies His mission as being the fiery center for the rest of Scripture. God will move redemptively to establish His kingdom in which all nations will be blessed through the promised seed. Genesis 1 to 12, therefore, provides the foundational statement of the *missio Dei*, thereafter developed diachronically throughout the remainder of both Old and New Testaments.²⁹

Wright posited that the Genesis account of God’s promise to Abraham revealed God’s election of Abraham for the *missio Dei*.³⁰ Subsequently, the redeemed nation of Israel as the

²⁶ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 63.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1943), 138.

²⁹ York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit*, 25.

³⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 189.

elect nation of priests is recorded in Exodus. Israel demonstrated through experience and by election that they were the nation through whom all nations would be blessed.

Moving along the pathway of the Bible's grand narrative we come to the exodus. Theologically we move from election to redemption. Missiologically we move from the man for all nations (Abraham) to the people redeemed to be God's priesthood in the midst of the nations (Israel). The exodus stands as the primary model of God's redemption in history...³¹

Henry Rowold described Israel's place in God's mission as a people redeemed for the purpose of bringing other nations to a place of redemption.³² Rowold posited that the context of the declaration in Exodus 19:5, which states that "all the earth is mine," should be linked to the unique designation of Israel in the next verse that revealed that they were "a kingdom of priests." Rowold concluded that "Israel's role among the nations was to be a kingdom of priests through whom all people on earth would be blessed. That's what was at stake in God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt."³³ Thus the mission of God is previewed in Genesis 3:15, introduced through Abraham, and developed through Israel. It can be posited, therefore, that the Old Testament became the foundation for the hermeneutical framework of God's mission that will culminate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³⁴ York and Wright built a thorough case for interpreting the Bible through the lens of the *missio Dei*, and cited examples and passages from every section of both Testaments. Jerry Hwang focused on the minor prophets as an expression of the *missio Dei*. Hwang stated:

the judgements anticipated in pre-exilic prophetic books such as Hosea eventually culminate in the salvation of all nations which is envisioned in postexilic books such as Malachi...the Book of the Twelve culminates with YHWH's eschatological assertion that "my name will be great among the nations (Mal. 1:11)."³⁵

³¹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 189.

³² Rowold, "Where Are You?"

³³ *Ibid.*, 246.

³⁴ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 67-70.

³⁵ Hwang, 163.

Although a strong case may be made for the missional intentions of God in the earliest Old Testament passages, David Bosch pointed out that overt missional activity from the nation of Israel is arguably non-existent. Bosch stated that “there is, in the Old Testament, no indication of the believers of the old covenant being sent by God to cross geographical, religious, and social frontiers in order to win others to faith in Yahweh.”³⁶ Although Bosch made a salient observation regarding Israel’s overt evangelistic activity, the Old Testament is replete with references of strangers and foreigners being admitted to the community of Israel. Additionally, the entire book of Jonah is directed toward the redemption of non-Israelites. John York noted that the book of Jonah was a unique Old Testament expression of the *missio Dei* whereby a Jewish prophet had an exclusive mission to a Gentile people who respond favorably to God’s call to repentance.³⁷ York concluded, “The love of God for Gentile peoples outside the covenant is strongly stated in this book [Jonah]. No wonder Jesus appealed to Jonah as the sign for His sufferings and subsequent resurrection (Matt. 12: 39– 41).”³⁸ Hwang recommended that Jonah be read missiologically, along with the other minor prophets comprising The Book of Twelve, as an interwoven tapestry of the *missio Dei*. “The missional message of Jonah contributes only part of a larger tapestry of themes which envisions the ultimate restoration of Israel, the nations, and creation.”³⁹

The *missio Dei* is certainly not limited to the book of the twelve, or to any section of the Old Testament for that matter. The *missio Dei* is interwoven through every section of the Old

³⁶ David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Kindle locations 660-661.

³⁷ York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit*, chap. 2, Jonah, Kindle.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Hwang, 162.

Testament, including the Pentateuch, historical books, wisdom literature, and the prophets. From this First Testament foundation, the *missio Dei* proceeds forward in the New Testament writings.

New Testament Expressions of the *Missio Dei*

The mission of God is prominently demonstrated throughout the New Testament within a Trinitarian relationship; the Father sends his Son into the world for redemptive purpose, and the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit to empower the church, through whom the mission of God is advanced in the work of global redemption. The mission of God is clearly expressed through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The announcement of Christ's birth by the angels declared "good tidings of great joy...to all people" (Luke 2:10). This theme was repeated in Simeon's prophecy at Jesus' circumcision eight days later (Luke 2:32). Redemption was made available to all people in and through Abraham's seed, Israel, and, more specifically, in the person of Jesus Christ. As Wright stated:

God's mission determined his mission. In Jesus the radically theocentric nature of biblical mission is most clearly focused and modeled. In the obedience of Jesus, even to death, the mission of God reached its climax. For "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ (2 Cor 5:19)."⁴⁰

The *missio Dei* as established in the Old Testament is reinforced and expanded upon throughout the New Testament. Throughout the gospels, the language articulating the global scope of God's redemptive mission (Luke 2:30-32 and John 1:9), and Christ's ultimate reign (Luke 1:33, Matthew 25:31) are clearly referenced by the gospel writers. York identified that Matthew 1:1 can be viewed as an advanced organizer, intentionally merging the Abrahamic missional expression which was promised to occur through the people of Israel and the Davidic messianic reign promised to King David.⁴¹ York asserted that

⁴⁰ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 65.

⁴¹ York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit*, chap. 3, under "Royal Passages," Kindle.

The rest of Matthew, and indeed the rest of the Gospels, builds upon this dual anticipation. First, the long-awaited kingdom has come in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of David. Second, the long-awaited blessing of the nations is about to be realized through the authority and power of Jesus the Davidic King. Understanding this is the key to reading the Gospels as disclosures of the mission of God.⁴²

There are two essential church revitalization postulates advanced within the framework of God’s mission as described thus far. First, Jesus’s assertion that he would build his church (Matthew 16:18). Secondly, that the church thus established and developed would participate in the *missio Dei*. Henry Theissen asserted that among the various functions and purposes for which the church has been established, bringing glory to God, disciple making, and evangelism are among the core responsibilities that have been assigned to the collective followers of Christ. Theissen asserted that “the great commission directs the church to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:8)...the church is under obligation to give the whole world an opportunity to hear the gospel and to accept Christ.”⁴³ Theissen thus expressed that the Great Commission is foundational to the mission and purpose of the church. It should be noted that the Great Commission is expressed in each of the Gospels and Acts. Bosch asserted that Luke-Acts are by intention written as a two-volume expression from Luke.⁴⁴

Table 2. The Great Commission statements in the Gospels and Acts

Matthew 28:18-20	Mark 16:15-16	Luke 24:46-48	John 20:21-23	Acts 1:8
[18] And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. [19] “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations,	[15] And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. [16] “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not	[46] Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, [47] “and that	[21] So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” [22] And when He had said this, He breathed on	[8] “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in

⁴² York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit*, chap. 3, under “Royal Passages,” Kindle.

⁴³ Henry C. Thiessen. *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), chap. 38, under “The Mission of the Church”, Kindle.

⁴⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, chap. 1, under “Were There Any Alternatives?”, Kindle.

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, <i>even</i> to the end of the age.” Amen.	believe will be condemned.”	repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. [48] “And you are witnesses of these things.	<i>them</i> , and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. [23] “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the <i>sins</i> of any, they are retained.”	Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
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Although the supposition that the Great Commission is foundational to the church’s mission and defines how a vital church functions, there are those who assert that the Great Commission is an inadequate and limited expression of the *missio Dei*. D.J. Konz noted that a division in perspective regarding the mission of God, and hence the mission of the church, exists between evangelical Pentecostal churches and those churches which are aligned with the World Council of Churches.⁴⁵ Konz’s objections were based upon the concern that that most common text for the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20 contained a weak trinitarian basis for mission. Additionally, Konz posited that using the Matthean text could pose a model that was based upon an over-reliance on human agency in carrying the *missio Dei* forward.⁴⁶ Konz thus argued for the Great Commission contextualized as a “second-order frame of mission, to be understood as located within the prior and primary framework of a chastened understanding of the *missio Dei*.”⁴⁷ Konz further clarified the order of volition between first and second order missional theology:

⁴⁵ D.J. Konz, “The Even Greater Commission: Relating the Great Commission to the *Missio Dei*, and Human Agency to Divine Activity, in Mission,” *Missiology* 46, no 4 (2018): 334, accessed October 26, 2019, doi:10.1177/0091829618794507

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 334-336.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 337.

The Great Commission might be understood as a secondary framework for mission, subject to and located within the primary and precedent activity of God in the missions of Son and Spirit. As noted, *missio Dei* better recognizes that it is not the Christian, the missionary, the missionary organization, or the Christian church which is fundamentally the active Subject and Agent of mission. Rather, God is the precedent Subject, Agent, and Lord of God's mission, specifically, in the Son and Spirit by the will of the Father; human agency, and the sending of the church, therefore, remains secondary and subsequent to the divine mission.⁴⁸

Although Konz made a salient point regarding the priority of a trinitarian prerogative for initiating and sustaining the *missio Dei*, an equal or greater risk can be identified if human agency in the *missio Dei* is marginalized. Mark Laing asserted that “since mission is integral to the very nature of the church, the church is missional wherever it is located.”⁴⁹ Laing's assertion oversimplifies the missional expression to which the church is commissioned, and can serve as an example of a perspective that reduces motivation for the church to intentionally and passionately participate in the mission of God.

The New Testament can be viewed as extending and expanding upon the *missio Dei* begun in the Old Testament, with a trinitarian basis of the Father sending the Son, and the Father and Son sending the Holy Spirit to resource the church for participation in God's mission.⁵⁰ With the gospels providing both the example demonstrated and mandate given by the Son, the book of Acts recorded the robust missional partnership between the Trinity and the called out ones (*ekklesia*) for witness through words and deeds. York observed that Christ's prophetic missional declaration (i.e., “I will build my church”) was fulfilled when he sent his church out among all people. York accurately paired first- and second-order frame of mission:

Note their commission and responsibility: It was God who acted first, sending Jesus into the world and raising Him from the dead, thereby proclaiming the universal dimensions of His kingdom. Then it was God the Holy Spirit directing the drama of worldwide

⁴⁸ D.J. Konz, “The Even Greater Commission,” 338.

⁴⁹ Laing, *Missio Dei*, 91.

⁵⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, chap. 12, under “Mission as *Missio Dei*,” Kindle.

witness. For their part, the apostles were to move obediently among the nations of the world as witnesses to all peoples.⁵¹

The Book of Acts, framed in pneumatological empowerment, gives unmistakable expression to the *missio Dei* with partnership between the Trinity and first-generation believers. Acts 2 is the quintessential blending of the prophetic promise for missional empowerment through followers of Jesus Christ (Joel 2:28-32). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the 120 believers who then witnessed to visitors from a geographically diverse audience was also the fulfillment of Jesus's mandate to be empowered for witness (Luke 24:49). The resulting community and culture among the growing adherents to the Gospel perpetuated a witness that produced missional effectiveness. Of note, The New King James Version of the Bible titled the sub-section of Acts 2:40-48 "A Vital Church Grows." The vital church concept is embedded in the *missio Dei* lived out through believers. Although this model of church health reported by Luke was difficult for believers to sustain, the mission of the church, and thus its vitality, continued through subsequent generations of Christ followers.

As cited earlier, reading the Bible missionally has been advocated by scholars such as Christopher Wright, Christian Anderson, and John York. Michael Gorman contributed to the thesis of reading the scriptures missionally as he examined the Pauline epistles. Gorman suggested that two assumptions accompany the position that the Pauline epistles should be read from a missional point of view. The first assumption proposed "that Paul believed God had a mission in the world and, [secondly] that not only he and his colleagues, but also the churches he founded and/ or 'pastored,' were supposed to participate in that mission."⁵² Gorman proposed that Paul

⁵¹ York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit*, chap. 4, under "Witness," Kindle.

⁵² Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), chap. 1, under Paul and the Mission of God, Kindle.

expected the salvation of God to spread throughout the world not only by means of his own gospel ministry (and that of his close colleagues), but also by means of the participation of his converts in the various house churches. They were, in essence, to become the gospel, not merely playing a supportive role by praying for and underwriting Paul's work, but participating in the advance of the gospel through proclamation, praxis, and persecution (i.e., suffering). In a word, through witness: witness in word, in deed, and in the unpleasant consequences that often attend faithful witness.⁵³

Gorman contended throughout his work that Paul's writings were, essentially, a guide to instruct the followers of Jesus into a robust, transformational experience whereby they embodied the gospel, and therefore lived out the gospel in a missional lifestyle.⁵⁴

Establishing the assumption that the Bible is to be read from a missional point of view has enormous implications for the way that the church should function, not only among the first generation of Christ-followers, but also among the post-apostolic church. Moreover, if the assumption that the churches founded by the apostles were to function missionally, that assumption should be adopted by all believers and hence all churches for all generations. The church as an expression and extension of the *missio Dei* would therefore form a core assumption for the church's understanding of its identity and function in and among the world. This understanding is not only based on the Apostle Paul's writings, but indeed all the scripture if the Bible is to be read missionally.

Second Generation Expressions of the *Missio Dei*

The early church comprised the second and subsequent generations through the eighth century. This was also known as the patristic period of church history. During the first three centuries, the early church exemplified a highly effective missional presence throughout the Roman Empire. Some writers postulate that the church grew to six million adherents (or to approximately ten to

⁵³ Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, chap. 2, under "Conclusion", Kindle.

⁵⁴ Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, under "Final Reflections – the Gospel and the *Missio Dei*," Kindle.

fifteen percent of the population).⁵⁵ Others estimate that there were as many as thirty-one million believers (or nearly fifty percent of the empire's population) by AD 350.⁵⁶ Throughout much of the first three centuries following the ascension of Christ, the church faced a hostile environment where active evangelism was suppressed because of direct and indirect forms of persecution. Active persecution came in the form of empire-wide waves of hostility resulting in pogroms and mass-martyrdoms. Indirect persecution could be identified as a variety of treatments imposed upon Christians by pagans whereby believers were marginalized and suffered relationally and economically. Alan Kreider stated, "The early Christians did not engage in public preaching; it was too dangerous. There are practically no evangelists or missionaries whose names we know. Missionaries are not listed among the church's clergy or functionaries."⁵⁷ The oppositional and hostile culture in which the church was tasked to be a witness and make disciples presented a monumental hindrance to the mission. Nevertheless, the church grew substantially in its context. Using the figure of six million believers for the church's adherents, Rodney Stark postulated that the church grew at a rate of forty percent per decade, or 3.4 percent per year between 40 AD and 300 AD. With this formula, Stark posited that the church grew from 1000 to 6.3 million believers in the aforementioned time period.⁵⁸ Stark stated that it was commonly believed among historians and scholars that the church grew to such a large portion of the population in a relatively short period of time due to mass conversions. Stark asserted, however, that the position

⁵⁵ Marcellino D'Ambrosia, *When the Church Was Young: Voices of the Early Fathers*, (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2014), 140, Kindle.

⁵⁶ Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, chap. 2, under "How Did the Church in the First Three Centuries Respond to Its Growth Challenge", Kindle.

⁵⁷ Alan Kreider, "They Alone Know the Right Way to Live: The Early Church and Evangelism," in *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future*, ed. Mark Husbands and Jeffery P. Greenman, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), chap. 9.

⁵⁸ Rodney Stark, "Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women," *Sociology of Religion* 56, no. 3 (1995): 230, accessed December 17, 2019, <https://search-ebscohost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000900848&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

of growth by mass conversions existed because “no one bothered to do the actual arithmetic.”⁵⁹ Stark did the math, thereby revealing that steady, sustained missional activity could account for the advancement of Christianity during the first three centuries following the Great Commission.

How then did the church grow significantly amidst a hostile cultural context? Scholars posit several activities of the early church that gave witness to the gospel. First, the martyrdom of believers gave witness to the gospel, thereby participating in the *missio Dei*. In 110 A.D., Ignatius was captured in one of the persecution pogroms, and was led to Rome to face martyrdom by wild beasts in the coliseum.⁶⁰ Marcellino D’Ambrosia posited that Ignatius revealed in his own words his heartfelt commitment to face the wild beasts and both emulate the sufferings of Christ as well as give witness for his savior.⁶¹ D’Ambrosia quotes Ignatius’s words in one of seven surviving letters written by the martyr (letter of Ignatius to the Romans 4:1-2):

I am voluntarily dying for God—if, that is, you do not interfere. I plead with you, do not do me an unseasonable kindness. Let me be fodder for wild beasts—that is how I can get to God. I am God’s wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts to make a pure loaf for Christ.⁶²

Perhaps the missional effectiveness of martyrdom was best expressed by Tertullian in his *Apology*: “Nothing whatever is accomplished by your cruelties, each more exquisite than the last. It is the bait which wins men for our school. We multiply whenever we are mowed down by you; the blood of Christians is seed.”⁶³ From this statement comes one of the most often quoted sayings of the church Fathers: “the blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the church.”⁶⁴

Kreider identified additional expressions of witness and mission from the early church, included caring for believers and non-believers during times of famine, plague, and death by

⁵⁹ Stark, “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity,” 230.

⁶⁰ D’Ambrosia, *When the Church Was Young*, 19.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 104-5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

giving dignified burials for those who could not otherwise afford such accommodations. Kreider stated that the church also demonstrated compassion by rescuing babies discarded by pagan believers and raising these children as members of their own families. Finally, a powerful spirituality, including effective prayer and even casting out demons, provided an attraction to the Christian faith.⁶⁵

The spread of the Christian faith during the first three centuries, culminating with Constantine's legalization of the faith in the Roman Empire, indicates that the early church maintained a missional praxis.

When considering church revitalization, understanding how a vital church functions becomes an essential basis for reestablishing church health and effectiveness. The people of God reflecting God's image (*imago Dei*) and participating in God's redemptive mission (*missio Dei*) provide a theological framework for expressing vitality and fulfilling their divine purpose. When a church diminishes or ceases to participate in the *missio Dei*, ecclesial assistance may be beneficial. The next section will identify a theological framework for ecclesial guidance in regaining missional vitality when vitality is compromised.

Ecclesial Organization and Development

When Jesus asserted that He would build His church, He did not mandate a specific plan on how that church would be organized. Organizational structure could therefore be viewed as fluid and contextual. The absence of establishing specific leadership structures for the church certainly indicates that polity was not at the forefront of Jesus's *missio Dei*. Nevertheless, Jesus certainly implied that structural and organizational development would inevitably emerge from the disciples, as can be detected in His appointment of the apostles (Luke 6:13) and instructing them

⁶⁵ Mark Husbands, *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future*, chap. 9, Kindle.

to be servant leaders, as opposed to following Gentile models of leadership, which utilized a self-aggrandizing sense of lordship and authority (Mark 10:41-45).

Although Paul contributed significantly to the emerging organizational structure of the church through the Pastoral Epistles, there is nevertheless an absence of direct scriptural teaching on which organizational model the church must follow (Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Congregational), and what specific functions organizational structures would perform. Several opinions have surfaced that evaluate ecclesial organizational structures and their scriptural legitimacy. Some writers have stated that all church polity and structure are human arrangements. Paul Schrieber expressed that church government is “done without divine mandate and also without human authority.”⁶⁶ Other writers have insisted that there are clear mandates from biblical texts that must form both local church structure and denominational organization.⁶⁷ The functional, organizational structure and church polity are of utmost importance in the life and mission of the body of Christ. As Peter Toon noted, “Disagreements over matters of ecclesiology, including forms of church government, have been the source of numerous schisms in church history.”⁶⁸ Such schisms have occurred in both local and denominational contexts. While many authors have made a strong case for a casual approach to church government models, others have made a forceful and passionate case for adopting a more thoughtful and theologically formed ecclesiology and church polity. Toon asserted that “the issue of church government may not be a doctrine crucial to the *being* of the church, it is a doctrine crucial to the

⁶⁶ Paul L. Schrieber, "Church Polity and the Assumption of Authority," *Concordia Journal* 26, no. 4 (2000): 326, accessed July 20, 2018, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost.

⁶⁷ Daniel L. Akin, Chad Brand, and R. Stanton Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2004), x.

⁶⁸ Peter Toon and Steven B Cowan, *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2004), 8.

well-being of the church, vital to its spiritual health.”⁶⁹ Indeed ecclesiology not only impacts the internal health of the church but also potentially affects the missional effectiveness of the church.

The purpose of this section is to explore the development of organizational structure in the early church in order to better understand how and why that structure developed, thus giving theological perspective on how ecclesial structures were employed to assist local churches in a vital participation in the *missio Dei*.

Structural and Organization Development in Acts: An Overview

As the fledgling church grew in size and function, organizational structure emerged. Before the day of Pentecost and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the apostles found it necessary to retain their original number of twelve before any attempt to carry out the *missio Dei*. During the mandatory waiting period in Jerusalem (Luke 24:49), a conclusion was drawn that an individual needed to replace Judas’s vacated apostolic position. Peter assumes the place of leadership and addresses the group of one hundred twenty participants (Acts 1:15-26). Peter references the outcome of Judas’s betrayal, and correlates Judas’s death with Psalms 69:25 (NKJV) and 109:8 stating, “Let their dwelling place be desolate; Let no one live in their tents” and “Let his days be few, *And* let another take his office” respectively (Acts 1:20).

The latter verse is used by Peter as a mandate to fill the vacant office. Thus, the inauguration of leadership, decision making, and the recognition of a needful, authoritative structure was implemented for the church to move forward with its purpose and mission “to become a witness...of His resurrection” (Acts 1:22). Although specific detail is not given, it appears that a deliberative process ensued, and two names were presented for consideration: Joseph and Matthias. At this point a conclusion was not reached between the two candidates, so

⁶⁹ Peter Toon and Steven B Cowan, *Who Runs the Church*, 11.

the group resorted to casting lots as promoted in Leviticus 16:8 and referenced in Proverbs 16:13. Interestingly, this would be the only recorded time when lots were utilized in New Testament decision making, and the last time that apostolic succession was found to be needed to keep the number at twelve.⁷⁰

Although a corporate structure is not alluded to until Acts 4, a seed form of apostolic authority is evidenced in the early church culture and described in Acts 2:42. Luke reports that the early church, now numbering somewhere between 3120 and 3620, “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42). Thus, the formation of soteriology, pneumatology, and eschatology referenced in Peter’s message following the Pentecostal outpouring may have contributed to a doctrinal expression that was enthusiastically embraced by these first-generation believers. God’s redemptive mission had impacted fifteen nationalities of Jews and proselytes (Acts 2:9-11).

In Acts 4 Luke recorded twice that the proceeds from “things sold” were brought and “laid at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4:35, 37). The phrase “laid at the apostles’ feet” indicates that a corporate structure had developed, with the apostles assuming an authoritative, fiduciary responsibility in receiving contributions and disbursing the same as needs were made known.⁷¹ Thus, the *missio Dei* included both appropriating salvation and expressing compassionate care to those redeemed.

In Acts 6 additional structures are implied by the phrase “widows were neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6:1). Although a specific structure is not described in this benevolent expression of ministry to widows, the regularity (i.e., daily) of the care given to widows

⁷⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1977), 52.

⁷¹ Robert A. Tourville, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Verse-By-Verse Commentary From The Classical Pentecostal Point of View*, (New Wilmington, Pa., House of BonGiovanni, 1983), 95.

presupposes an organized methodology for accomplishing the task. Raymond Brown observed, “In the NT only the Pastoral Epistles are ex professo concerned with church structure, and undoubtedly there was more supervision and supervisory structure than we know about.”⁷² It is apparent that Hebrew believers were enlisted to distribute food supplies to “those that were in need” (Acts 2:45, 4:35), including widows (Acts 6:1).⁷³ Brown identified that “By the mid-30s there has already developed some structure for handling the common goods and also a deliberative assembly.”⁷⁴ An inequity was detected by Greek-speaking Jews who observed that Greek speaking widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. This contention necessitated the development of the first structural layer in church governance and administration functioning under the leadership of the apostles. Seven candidates were presented by the church, and the apostles finalized the appointment of the seven men as deacons. Thus, the deacons came from the church body but functioned under the authority and blessing of the apostles.⁷⁵

As the church continued to grow, an implicit yet unexplained structure continued to be referenced throughout the Book of Acts. In Acts 8:14, Peter and John are sent by the other apostles to pray for new believers in Samaria who had been baptized in water but had not yet “received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:16). The act of “sending” implies some form of ecclesial structure and authority, whether the structure is hierarchical, congregational, or voluntarily cooperative in nature. Although Lenski sees nothing hierarchical in this verse,⁷⁶ Tourville⁷⁷ and

⁷² Raymond Edward Brown, “Episkopē and episkopos: the New Testament evidence.” *Theological Studies* 41, no. 2 (June 1980): 323. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost (accessed July 14, 2018).

⁷³ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of The Acts of The Apostles*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1943), 241.

⁷⁴ Brown, “Episkopē and Episkopos,” 323.

⁷⁵ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 130.

⁷⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of The Acts of The Apostles*, 323.

⁷⁷ Tourville, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 158.

Bruce⁷⁸ both agree that some form of loose supervision is evident. The act of sending is repeated in Acts 11:22 when Barnabas was sent out by the church in Jerusalem to go as far as Antioch. The *missio Dei* and participation by an ecclesial structure are demonstrated by this commissioning, though the ecclesial structure is not formally defined. David Bosch observed the unavoidable reality that a movement must organize and thus become institutionalized if it is going to be sustained.

We have to ask whether it is fair to expect a movement to survive only as movement. Either the movement disintegrates, or it becomes an institution—this is simply a sociological law. Every religious group that started out as a movement and managed to survive, [*sic*] did so because it was gradually institutionalized.⁷⁹

Ecclesial accountability can be observed in Acts 11 when the Apostle Peter was forced to give an explanation to a segment of the church for entering the home of Cornelius and thus eating a meal with Gentiles (Acts 11:3). The *missio Dei* itself was now under scrutiny by “those of the circumcision” (Acts 11:2), and the proposition that the gospel should be available to all people and all nations was being challenged. Once again, although the structure is not detailed, an ecclesial framework is implied when Peter was required to offer an explanation for his actions in taking the mission of God to the Gentiles. This structure was also evidenced in Acts 15 within the council that was held in Jerusalem. At least three levels of structure were evident in Acts 15:4—namely, the church, elders, and apostles. The elders and apostles were identified in verse 6 as being a deliberative body functioning to consider the doctrinal and ecclesial issues related to law-keeping among Gentile converts:

Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: “Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe (Acts 15:6).

⁷⁸ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 180.

⁷⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, chap. 1, under “Were There Any Alternatives?”, Kindle.

Peter, Barnabas, Paul, and James addressed the church body and the leaders identified in Acts 15:6. All three layers of structure were referenced throughout the deliberative process observed throughout Acts 15, with a solution offered by James, the brother of Jesus, recorded in verses 13-21. This counsel offered by James to “not trouble the Gentiles” (v.18) with keeping the law was then ratified by those who were involved in the deliberative process. Each layer of organizational structure (the church, elders, and apostles) was in agreement with the decision to release Gentile believers from law-keeping. Finally, the decision from the elders and apostles was communicated to the Gentile believers through a letter.

In addition to the ecclesial structure observed in Jerusalem, the possibility of another structure can be detected in Antioch in Acts 13:

Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent *them* away (Acts 13:1-3).

The author of Acts 13 recounts one event of an ecclesial body comprised of prophets and teachers sending out workers to do God’s work. Although the act of sending Barnabas and Saul has been borrowed by ministers for modern day ordination services, the act of laying on of hands is not considered an ordination or appointment in the biblical account because Paul and Barnabas had already demonstrated their aptitude and calling to ministry. Instead, the laying on of hands by the Antiochian leadership was an expression of “its fellowship with Barnabas and Paul and recognized them as its delegates or ‘apostles.’”⁸⁰ The missionary initiative comes full circle in Acts 14:26-27 when Saul and Barnabas return to Antioch and give a report on the ministry for which they were sent. Of special note in this identification of church leadership is the prominent

⁸⁰ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 261.

role that comes in the form of prophets and teachers. This identification introduces the possibility of an entirely unique form of leadership that differs from deacons, elders, and bishops and flows more naturally with the ministry gifts identified by Paul in Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:28. These leadership gifts may, however, be framed in a different context of functionality from the offices previously identified:

The different spiritual gifts are all for the purpose of building up the church; the community is like a body in which the functions proper to the different members work together for the good of the whole. In 12,28 these charisms are spelled out: God has placed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then working of miracles, then gifts of healing, helpfulness, administration, speaking in various tongues.⁸¹

Although most of the major events that contributed to the development of church polity in the early church and recorded by Luke in Acts have been identified, there remains an additional verse that requires consideration. Luke reports, almost incidentally, that Paul and Barnabas instituted a form of church structure in Derbe before they returned to Antioch: “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” (Acts 14:23) This verse became a hub of ecclesiological conversation regarding terminology and methodology for church polity. For example, Henry Theissen identified three distinct forms of church government (episcopal, presbyterial, and congregational) that used the term elder with a variety of different meanings and applications.⁸²

It can also be argued that this verse provides a gateway between the Luke-Acts historical development of church polity and the Pauline ecclesiology of the pastoral epistles. Although the argument can be made that the phrase stating that Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every

⁸¹ Myles M. Bourke, "Reflections on Church Order in the New Testament." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (October 1968): 495. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost (accessed July 14, 2018).

⁸² Henry Theissen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, chap. XXXVI, sec. III C. Government of the Church, Kindle.

city” may be more anachronistic than literal, it is evident that they made it a practice to develop local leadership in the areas where they evangelized.⁸³

Two prominent topics of interest and debate are Luke’s use of the terms κηροτονηο (appointed) and πρεσβυτερος (elders). The term κηροτονηο is defined as “to vote by show of hands.”⁸⁴ Lenski rightly identified a central issue in ecclesiology and leadership structures:

The question at issue is whether Paul and Barnabas chose these elders without congregational participation or whether they conducted a congregational meeting in which a vote was taken by show of hands, the congregation choosing with participation of the apostles and under their guidance.⁸⁵

Thus, the debate ensues between theologians as to whether the form of polity exemplified by Paul and Barnabas is reflective of the hierarchical Episcopal model or is more closely aligned with the representative or participatory model demonstrated by the Presbyterian and Congregational styles of church government. Lenski leaves no ambiguity regarding his interpretation when he said, “The apostles presented the matter, had the eligible men named, took the vote, and thus appointed those chosen and ordained them as the elders.”⁸⁶ Tourville adds that the Apostles were not dictatorial in their approach to ensuring that adequate spiritual leadership was in place. Instead, they guided a more democratic electoral process that they would sanction or confirm.⁸⁷ This model from Acts 14:23 is closely aligned with the election-appointment combination of selecting deacons that is found in Acts 6:2.

In summary, as the New Testament church grew in fulfillment of the *missio Dei*, organizational structure also developed. Details regarding the functional structures are not identified in an organizational flow chart, but insight can be obtained by considering the

⁸³ Brown, “Episkopē and Episkopos,” 329.

⁸⁴ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in The New Testament*, Vol 3: Acts, Electronic Edition STEP Files, 1997, Parsons Technology, Inc.

⁸⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of The Acts of The Apostles*, 585-586.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 586

⁸⁷ Tourville, *The Acts of The Apostles*, 264.

terminology and context from which these governmental structures may have been embraced by the early church.

New Testament Structural Terms and Their Historic Roots

Although organizational structure in the early church may seem to have evolved as missional necessity demanded, ecclesial polity did not grow in a structural vacuum. A case may be posited that the early church developed polity from both structural terms and structural concepts that were familiar to the church in its cultural context. Furthermore, the early church may have utilized organizational structure from both its Hebrew background as well as its Hellenistic context. Harold Mare notes that New Testament functionaries, i.e., officials, found their developmental setting not only in their Hellenistic culture, but also having developed through the Old Testament economy.⁸⁸ Three functional terms which are introduced to the churches' structures in the book of Acts are deacon (διακονος), elder (πρεσβυτερος), and overseer (επισκοπος). The term deacon (Acts 6:2) can be traced to Greek usage in the context of a temple servant and, interestingly, is always paired with food service.⁸⁹ It would have therefore seemed quite natural in the Hellenistic vernacular to ascribe this term to those who would initially manage the food distribution to widows in the early church administration.

The term elder, first used of an ecclesiological office in Acts 11:30, can be traced back many centuries in biblical history. Moses references elders early in Exodus (3:16)—probably referencing men advanced in age and therefore indicating their ranking in families or clans. The term “elder” was utilized in Israel’s history from the rebuilding of the temple in Ezra 5:5, until

⁸⁸ Harold W. Mare, "Church Functionaries : the Witness in the Literature and Archaeology of the New Testament and Church Periods." *Journal Of The Evangelical Theological Society* (Fall 1970) Christian Periodical Index, EBSCOhost (accessed July 14, 2018), 229.

⁸⁹ Mare, “Church Functionaries”, 235.

the time of Christ. By this time, the use of the term had evolved to represent men of social distinction and political prominence rather than chronological advancement.⁹⁰ Mare states that the term *πρεσβυτερος*, first used in Judaism, was adopted for use in Christianity. This term was also utilized in the Septuagint as well as intertestamental materials.⁹¹ Burtchaell reported that

Jewish inscriptions likewise show usage of *presbuteroi* in official religious life in the first century A.D. in the Theodotus Jerusalem synagogue inscription dated before A.D. 70 which gives a fitting picture of elders, the archisynagogos and priest being responsible for the building of a synagogue as well as for the reading of the law and teaching of the commandments. The term *presbuteros* was a fitting word for Judaism to retain and for the New Testament church to adopt to indicate general leadership over their respective areas of worship.⁹²

The belief that the early church adopted some of the structural concepts from its Jewish heritage and institutions is broadly referenced by New Testament scholars. Robertson posits with relative certainty that the elders of the early church generally corresponded with the elders of the Jewish synagogue.⁹³ Brown offers additional detail:

The synagogues of Pharisaic Judaism had a group of *zēqēnîm*, "elders," the Hebrew equivalent of *oi presbyteroi*, forming a council whose members set policy but were not pastors responsible for the spiritual care of individuals. In addition to such *zēqēnîm*, the Dead Sea Scrolls community of the New Covenant had officials who bore the title *mēbaqqēr* or *pāqîd*, synonymous words meaning "supervisor, overseer," the Hebrew equivalent of *episkopos*.⁹⁴

The term elder also had common usage in the Graeco-Roman municipalities, thus providing an ecclesiastical model that could be adapted and adopted by the church as it encountered the need for structural development. Frank Senn stated:

The system of elders and assistants in the Jewish synagogue probably influenced the emergence of presbyters and deacons in the Church. But it was the Graeco-Roman city

⁹⁰ James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 276.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 276.

⁹³ Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Acts 14:23.

⁹⁴ Brown, "Episkopē and Episkopos," 333-334.

(civitas) which provided an organizational model for the ecclesia, "its ordo (clergy) and plebs (laity) corresponding respectively to the curia and populus of the municipality."⁹⁵

Although the term elder can easily be identified as a title shared between Judaism, the Greco-Roman culture, and the church, some contend that the word overseer (ἐπισκοπος) bears a distinction and is used somewhat uniquely by the church for organizational and structural purposes. Mare stated:

The mainstream of Judaism of this period shows no episkopos in its religious leadership, the term becomes a part of New Testament church language for a functionary coming into use after the adoption of the Jewish presbuteros and employed in the New Testament as an equivalent of presbuteros (cf. Acts 20:17, 28; I Timothy 3:1-7— Titus 1:5-7), with emphasis on the overseeing activity (Acts 20:28) implied in the office of presbuteros (Acts 20:17).⁹⁶

In summary, it can be concluded that there is a high probability that historical and cultural structures likely influenced the evolution and development of ecclesial structures among the New Testament believers. Language that was common to the contemporary vernacular and that was historically familiar to the early church members can be detected from both biblical and extra-biblical sources. However, it must also be acknowledged that deductive forms of reasoning have led to this assumption. As David Horrell indicated, evidence of the exact nature of the early church's polity is scarce.⁹⁷ The initial purpose of these structures for the New Testament church seems to be for keeping the church on task for accomplishing the mission that God was performing through his redeemed people.

⁹⁵ Frank C Senn, "Liturgy and Polity in the Ancient and Medieval Church: Lessons from History for a Church Renewed." *Currents In Theology And Mission* 12, no. 4: 220. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost (accessed July 20, 2018).

⁹⁶ Mare, "Church Functionaries", 235.

⁹⁷ David G. Horrell, 1997. "Leadership Patterns and the Development of Ideology in Early Christianity." *Sociology Of Religion* 58, no. 4: 325. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost (accessed July 20, 2018).

When adopting the missional hermeneutic that Wright, York, and others advocate, the underlying missional value of organizational structure can be detected as polity and praxis were being developed.⁹⁸ Wright commented on the Jerusalem Council: “the issue in dispute was not the legitimacy of the Gentile mission per se. The question was not whether it was right to take the gospel to the Gentiles but on what conditions and criteria converting Gentiles could be admitted into the new fellowship of God’s people.”⁹⁹ Thus church praxis was being formed by the church, elders, and apostles at the Jerusalem council with a missional context.

Ecclesial Structures During the Early Centuries

As the church grew numerically and with more diversity among adherents, a growing structure was needed to sustain the Christian movement that was expanding as foretold by Christ (Matthew 16:16). Polity and praxis would eventually compete for missional priority, as can be observed in Acts 11 and 15. The pastoral epistles were written in part to accommodate the need for pastoral leadership in the wake of the *missio Dei* being effectively lived out during the Apostolic period. Other epistles were written to correct inaccurate teachings and unsanctified patterns of behavior. Although still true to a missional hermeneutic, a different trajectory can be detected in the Apostolic writings which would later become canonized.

Moving from the Apostolic era to the Patristic era of early church history, the missional priority of the church can still be observed as the dominant driving force in the life of the church. As early as 110 AD, formal ecclesial structure can be detected from the writings of Ignatius.

And we see that universally, each local church addressed in Ignatius’s letters has the very same structure: It is led by one bishop who alone appears to have the fullness of pastoral authority, assisted by a group of elders or presbyters (from which comes the English word “priests”) together with a group of deacons.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 17.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 517.

¹⁰⁰ D’Ambrosia, *When the Church Was Young*, 2

However, there were several forces challenging the church to remain missionally focused. Internally, the church was confronted by doctrinal heresies such as Gnosticism and Ebionism, which emerged from the church's cultural contacts.¹⁰¹ The church had to be doctrinally accurate in order to be missionally effective. Thus, the writings of the apostles and the early church fathers can be viewed as missional to the extent that the church would remain true to the *imago Dei* and *missio Dei*. Externally, the church faced waves of persecution. The persecution imposed upon early believers involved both violence and marginalization. Instead of the church capitulating to intense pressure to cease and desist from spreading the gospel, the church seemed to flourish in the face of adversity. While living out their redeemed life in the image of God, the early believers displayed unusual kindness by caring for the sick during plagues, feeding the hungry during famines, rescuing unwanted babies discarded by unbelievers within the surrounding pagan culture, and caring for the dignity of deceased individuals who needed to be buried. This hospitality was demonstrated not only within the community of believers, but also toward the unbelieving culture in which they were immersed.¹⁰²

Oddly, the greatest challenge to the missional church came after the Edict of Milan, whereby Christianity was legalized and eventually became the religion of the Roman Empire. York posited that once the church was no longer under threat, the eschatological urgency abated, and the church started on a trajectory of becoming politically focused.¹⁰³ Praxis became the priority of the church leadership, with polity becoming the second-most important focus of

¹⁰¹ York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit*, chap. 7, under "Internal Challenge," Kindle.

¹⁰² Mark Husbands, *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future*, chap. 9, Kindle.

¹⁰³ York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit*, chap. 8, under "Legalizing Christianity," Kindle.

attention, and the mission of God found a new, albeit unbiblical expression-conversion by force.¹⁰⁴

Summary

The *missio Dei* has been the preeminent feature of the biblical narrative. The mission of God is both the lens through which the scriptures may be read, and a thread of continuity that creates a unified narrative though both Testaments. The mission of God is revealed through each member of the Trinity. Furthermore, the Trinity engages in the *missio Dei* with God's chosen, redeemed people.

As the church grew and developed, ecclesial structure correspondingly developed to clarify and assist the body of Christ in embodying the *imago Dei* and fully participating in the *missio Dei*. To the extent that the church begins to falter in embodying the image of God and participating in the mission of God, the church ceases to be a vital expression of God's redemptive plan on earth. When the church decreases in vitality, it must be revitalized.

Contemporary Perspectives on Church Revitalization: A Literature Review

As stated in chapter one, the church in the United States is not growing at the same pace as the population. In his book *The American Church in Crisis*, John Osborn provides one of the most robust evaluations of data regarding church attendance patterns in America. Osborn observed:

When you start to do the math, the vision of a booming American church unravels. As we will see, the actual attendance is less than half of what polls suggest. In reality the church in America is not booming. It is in crisis. On any given Sunday, the vast majority of Americans are absent from church. Even more troublesome, as the American population continues to grow, the church falls further and further behind. If trends continue, by 2050 the percentage of Americans attending church will be half the 1990 figure.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Mark Husbands, *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future*, chap. 9, Kindle.

¹⁰⁵ Osborn, *The American Church in Crisis*, Introduction, under "Is the American Church Booming?", Kindle.

Osborn asserted that before meaningful revitalization can occur within the church in America, both churches and leaders need to have an accurate and informed understanding of both the church and the culture in which the church finds itself.

Osborn advocated a four-stage assessment process whereby observation would lead to

an understanding on the basis of evaluating the trends of church plateau and decline, which in

turn should cause introspection leading to necessary action (see figure 1). As Jim Collins

indicated in *Good to Great*, unless an organization is willing to confront the brutal facts, that organization is unlikely to make good decisions.¹⁰⁶ Those functioning at all levels of church

leadership must consider the sociological and ecclesial trends that are impacting the health of the twenty-first century church. If leaders do not engage in an assessment process in their church, mediocrity and stagnation will likely continue to dominate the future impact of the church at large.

The vast majority of churches in America, weather mainline, Catholic, or evangelical, are either plateaued or declining in average weekly attendance. In contrast to these trends among other church organizations, seventy percent of Assemblies of God churches are plateaued or declining. According to a five-year study of the Annual Church Ministry Reports between 2014 to 2018 in the PennDel Ministry Network, 27.5 percent of AG churches have plateaued, and 50.5

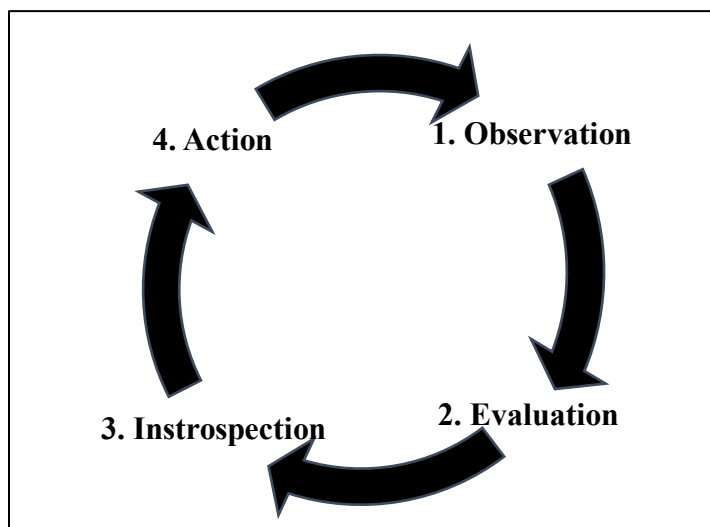


Figure 1 Osborn's Four Stages Assessment Process. John Osborn, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), Part 1: Observation, Kindle.

¹⁰⁶ Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, chap. 4, under "Facts are Better Than Dreams," Kindle.

percent are experiencing decline. In this final section of chapter two, literature will be reviewed according to the following categories: (a) recognizing the process and condition of church stagnation, (b) organizational strategies for revitalization, (c) key elements necessary for revitalizing a church, and (d) the role of ecclesial structures in assisting stagnated churches.

Recognizing the Process and Condition of Church Stagnation

Understanding the context of individual churches and the processes of growth and decline that they experience throughout their history is helpful in giving perspective to the state of stagnation that many churches have encountered. In his book *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation*, George Bullard Jr. insightfully illustrates the life cycle of a congregation.¹⁰⁷ Using the imagery of human physical development, Bullard identifies ten developmental stages of the human life cycle beginning with birth and ending with death.¹⁰⁸ (see figure 2.) These developmental stages are analogous to the life cycle of a congregation. These stages are subdivided into five phases, from early growth through late aging, with corresponding organizational foci (vision, relationships, programs, and management) during each developmental stage.¹⁰⁹ Using a capital letter to identify a strong focus or combination of foci, Bullard illustrates the tendency of churches to grow, develop, and eventually decline in missional and organizational vitality. Bullard introduces a caveat to the inevitable decline in the life cycle. At stage three, when a church is experiencing a wonderful season of prime functionality, or as the church begins its descent in post-prime functionality, the church may engage in redevelopment. This engagement will delay the inevitable descent into the phases of aging and

¹⁰⁷ George W. Bullard Jr., *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 77-85.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

death. Additionally, the process of redevelopment may be reengaged time and again, extending the church's life cycle and giving it long seasons of vitality.¹¹⁰

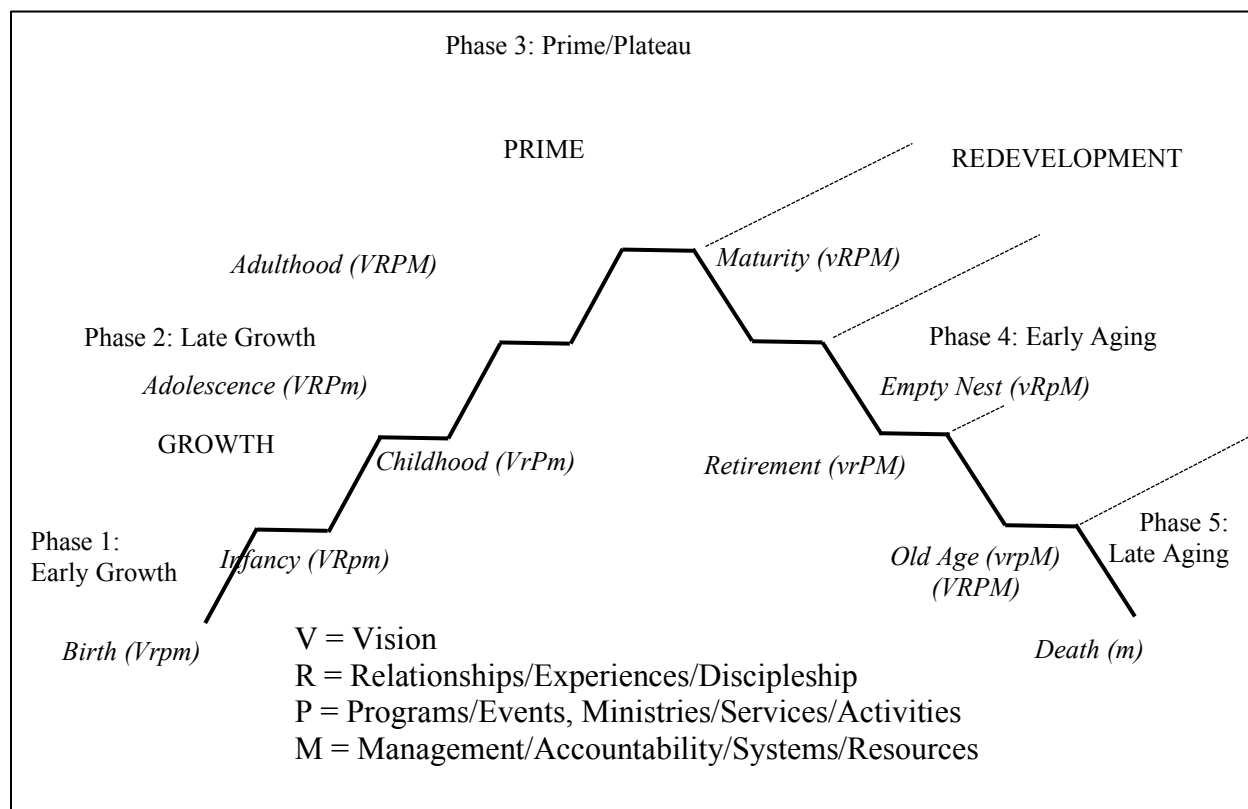


Figure 2 Bullard's Life Cycle and Stages of Congregational Development. George W. Bullard Jr., *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 95.

Although Bullard's church life cycle stages are distinctly applicable in the church context, they are very similar to Ichak Adizes' "Corporate Lifecycle Model."¹¹¹ Both illustrations with their accompanying theoretical models demonstrate that most (if not *all*) organizations have a predictable cycle, and without proper attention to organizational improvements, the second law of thermodynamics tends to prevail (i.e., entropy or death).¹¹² The processes of growth,

¹¹⁰ Bullard, *Kingdom Potential*, 86.

¹¹¹ Adizes Ichak, *Adizes "Institute Worldwide,"* accessed November 26, 2017, <http://adizes.com/lifecycle/>.

¹¹² Portions of this literature review were derived from Donald J. Immel, "Qualifying Hypothesis of Motivation and Demotivation in Church Revitalization," submitted to Dr. Andrew Permenter, PMIN 8013 Contextual Engagement, Southeastern University, April 27, 2018.

maturity, and decline are common and foreseeable organizational events which must be acknowledged and anticipated in order to avoid the decline and death of a church. Anticipating the lifecycle provides a basis for spiritual and organizational preparation that can help churches avoid reaching a tipping point when the church is no longer sustainable.

An approach to ministry that embraces an ongoing need of continual evaluation and adjustment is an appropriate response to lifecycle realities. In his book *Recalibrate Your Church: How Your Church Can Reach Its Full Kingdom Impact*, Troy Jones asserted that all leaders and churches will eventually need to recalibrate their methodology and culture.¹¹³ Jones, the founder and director of The Recalibrate Group, stated, “I have formulated one core transferable principle about churches and organizations of all sizes and styles: You either create a culture of continuous recalibration, or your church will slowly and steadily drift off mission.” Jones’s conviction of an ongoing culture that embraces and practices continual adjustments is in agreement with George Bullard’s hypothesis that church revitalization is a continuous journey that never comes to the place where the church can claim that it has arrived at a final organizational destination that needs no further improvement.¹¹⁴ The full Kingdom potential of a congregation is a journey—a spiritual and strategic journey. Church revitalization is therefore not a destination at which a group arrives and declares itself revitalized with no further need of improvement.. Revitalization is an ongoing process for the vast majority of congregations.¹¹⁵ Thus, Bullard advocated for a seven to nine-year revitalization relevancy period,¹¹⁶ while Jones posited that a church should anticipate a holistic recalibration every three to five years, with continuous recalibration

¹¹³ Troy Jones, *Recalibrate Your Church: How Your Church Can Reach Its Full Kingdom Impact* (Seattle: Recalibrate Group, 2016), 29.

¹¹⁴ Bullard, *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation*, 15.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

occurring within the context of “specific ministries, practices, and systems within the church.”¹¹⁷ Society and culture are in a constant state of flux, with significant changes taking place at an ever-increasing pace.¹¹⁸ The church cannot afford to be static when the culture in which it functions is dynamic.

The core issue of church stagnation is missional drift. A church’s values, and hence its decisions, budget, and activities, flow from its mission. Once the mission of the church becomes unclear or takes a back seat to another value, missional compromise and mediocrity will dominate the culture of the church or ecclesial organization. Peter Greer and Chris Horst identified a somber reality in the opening sentence of their book *Mission Drift*: “Without careful attention, faith-based organizations will inevitably drift from their founding mission. It’s that simple. It will happen.”¹¹⁹ Although their book is focused primarily on faith-based non-profit organizations, the observations given by Greer and Horst are also applicable to churches and denominations.¹²⁰ Greer and Horst identified that contributions and financial issues often disrupt organizations from their mission. Mission drift occurs when significant benefactors become uncomfortable with the overt value of the faith-based organization partnering in the *missio Dei*. When the organization is enticed to pursue finances and place the mission of God as a lower priority, missional drift occurs.¹²¹ Greer reported, “as we read and heard stories of mission drift, we were surprised how often corporate, government, and foundation donors drove the drift. Organizations compromised on their core values to woo these institutional funders.”¹²² For a

¹¹⁷ Jones, *Recalibrate Your Church*, 32.

¹¹⁸ Kevin Kelly, *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 2-5.

¹¹⁹ Peter Greer and Chris Horst, *Mission Drift* (Minneapolis: Baker Publishing Group), 15, Kindle.

¹²⁰ Greer and Horst, *Mission Drift*, 19.

¹²¹ Greer and Horst, *Mission Drift*, 15-19.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 115.

church to maintain its vitality, it must understand its primary mission and tenaciously guard that missional purpose from all competing values, including the need for more finances.

Unfortunately, the church often loses its primary missional reference point and replaces it with an array of activity that emphasizes secondary and tertiary interests over the *missio Dei*. Maintaining a Sunday school program becomes the primary value rather than engaging in newer and more effective discipleship practices. Pastors feel forced to give their time and attention to placating congregants rather than developing effective leaders and appealing to the unchurched. In *Transformational Churches* Thom Rainer noted that “God calls us to make a transformational impact on the world, not provide a carnival of frenetic activity for ourselves...pastors and church leaders must move beyond entertaining consumers and into engaging Christ’s mission.”¹²³

Missional drift can occur for a variety of reasons and at a deceptively slow pace, evading detection due to a reverse-transformation whereby missional expressions are converted to traditions that have lost their original missional value. Water baptism moves from a symbol of conversion to an adolescent rite of passage. Speaking in tongues is recontextualized, moving from an experience leading to an empowering witness to an experiential benchmark. A host of activities that once effectively served a missional purpose for evangelism and discipleship can become distractions to a truly missional expression, including revival and missionary services. When effective missional living is replaced by traditionalism or pragmatic, interest-based programs, the church will eventually stagnate.¹²⁴ When describing churches that are beginning to stagnate, Tony Morgan observed, “the ministries begin to focus more on the people who are already connected to the church than the people they are trying to reach. The focus scale tips

¹²³ Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 3-4.

¹²⁴ Donald J. Immel, “Missional Drift,” submitted to Dr. Leonard Sweet, PMIN 8143 Culture, Context, and Mission, Southeastern University, April 26, 2018.

toward sustaining systems and structure rather than staying focused on the vision. Methods begin to supersede mission.”¹²⁵ Mark DeYmaz noted, “Where passion and purpose are lost, preservation becomes the goal.”¹²⁶ Maintenance and preservation, to the exclusion of mission and growth, tend to be typical foci of declining organizations.

Creating a praxis framework of a church that is missional in its ministry, identity, and culture is necessary to achieve clarity for the ecclesial church model that is desired. Jesus said that he would build his church (Matt. 18:16). The Apostle Paul also used a building metaphor for the church and indicated that the framework is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building [is] fit together...(Eph.2:20).” In *Comeback Churches*, Stetzer and Dodson began their study of churches that achieved a change from plateau or decline to growth by defining, from a biblical point of view, what the church should represent.¹²⁷ Stetzer and Dodson presented the trends facing most evangelical and mainline churches over the past several decades, stating that between 70 and 80 percent of churches are in decline, with 3,500 to 4,000 churches closing each year.¹²⁸ Stetzer and Dodson posited that the criteria for a biblical church includes embracing the Bible as the authoritative rule for the life of the church. Additionally, they proposed that a biblically based church pursues biblical forms of leadership, values biblical preaching and teaching, and observes the biblical ordinances of communion and baptism. Finally, Stetzer and Dodson advocated that a biblically driven mission and scripturally defined covenant-community are marks of the church that Jesus had in view when He said that he would build his church.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Morgan, *The Unstuck Church*, 9.

¹²⁶ DeYmaz, *Disruption*, 12.

¹²⁷ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*.

¹²⁸ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 18.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

Stetzer and Dodson proposed that churches that have made a comeback and reversed their trend from plateau or decline to growth and health, are missional churches. To clarify what they mean by missional, the authors stated that if a church does “what missionaries do—study and learn language, become part of culture, proclaim the Good News, be the presence of Christ, and contextualize biblical life and church for that culture—they are missional churches.”¹³⁰ The proposition of learning our own culture and language is counterintuitive for those who are native to that culture. However, the longer believers are affiliated with a church community, the more likely they are to separate from a secular culture in thought, practice, and affiliation. When a cultural divide exists between people in the church community and people in society, learning the community culture becomes increasingly imperative.

Throughout the entirety of *Comeback Churches*, Stetzer and Dodson identify missional mindsets and practices that have been exemplified by churches that have made the transformation from stagnation to revitalization. The authors also identified church practices, such as entrenchment in the past or maintenance models, that hinder them from making necessary adjustments and changes, thus perpetuating their state of mediocrity.¹³¹ Although patterns of entrenchment and gravitation to mediocrity can be readily identified in churches, the behavior can also be identified in other types of organizations. Recognizing challenges common to both churches and non-religious organizations may potentially enhance some of the solutions that are available to revitalization.

¹³⁰ Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 4.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 19-23.

Organizational Strategies for Revitalization

The church is not alone in facing stagnation and decline. Great works exploring organizational revitalization have been produced within both the marketplace and the faith community. Some principles of organizational vitality are equally applicable between the two contexts. Other organizational principles are largely specific to the context of a business or church. This section will identify those principles of revitalization that are applicable to both businesses and church organizations.

Jim Collin's book *Good to Great*¹³² provided a tremendous foundation for studying organizations that have distinguished themselves by outperforming both the stock market and their competitors. The elite companies that met Collin's criteria as breakout companies outpaced the market by 6.9 times, sustained over a minimum of fifteen years. Furthermore, these companies of extraordinary distinction were very ordinary prior to rapid growth.¹³³ These companies made a significant transformation by following a set of common practices. Collins asserted, "We believe that almost any organization can substantially improve its stature and performance, perhaps even become great, if it conscientiously applies the framework of ideas we've uncovered."¹³⁴ Since the church is an organization and embraces business parallels such as being incorporated, holding business meetings, utilizing marketing strategies, functioning as an organization, etc., it is reasonable to assume that if Collin's assertion is accurate, the principles found in *Good to Great* may have applications for the church. The church undoubtedly operates with a different set of values and objectives than that of a business. Concepts of fiscal

¹³² Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

¹³³ Ibid., 94, Kindle Location.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 126-128, Kindle Location.

profitability would necessarily be replaced with gospel effectiveness, while becoming great might be reframed with bringing God maximum glory. Nevertheless, the shared objective of being the best one can possibly be and achieving maximum effectiveness at one's stated purposes is common ground that can be appreciated by both the business paradigm that pursues profitability and the church paradigm that seeks to participate in the *missio dei*.

Collins established that the practices of good to great companies can be categorized by three general expressions of discipline; namely: disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action.¹³⁵ These three categories are further delineated into two subcategories which emerge from each area of discipline (Figure 3).¹³⁶ High functioning transformative leadership and personnel alignment rest on disciplined people. Collins asserted that *disciplined thought* is demonstrated by embracing reality with brutal honesty, without “losing faith” in being able to achieve ultimate objectives. The second expression of this disciplined thinking is arriving at a fundamental purpose, referred to by Collins as a *hedgehog concept*, and not permitting the company or institution to become distracted by lesser or alternate foci. *Disciplined action* naturally flows from the previous two disciplines. Collins noted that a religious-like zeal for an organization's central purposes is adopted by an organization's leaders and employees.¹³⁷ Collins further identified that good to great companies were innovative, using technology as accelerators in this disciplined action instead of a novel attempt to create forward movement.¹³⁸ Finally, Collins used the metaphor of pushing on a flywheel to communicate that companies which went from good to great consistently employed these processes.¹³⁹ Like a flywheel, there came a point

¹³⁵ Collins, *Good to Great*, 231, Kindle Location.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Collins, *Good to Great*, 2418, Kindle Location.

¹³⁸ Ibid., chap. 7, under “Technology as an Accelerator, Not a Creator, of Momentum, Kindle.

¹³⁹ Ibid., chap. 8, under “The Flywheel and the Doom Loop”, Kindle.

when the momentum achieved by undistracted, consistent effort moved the organization forward with seemingly little effort. With this they achieved a “breakout.”

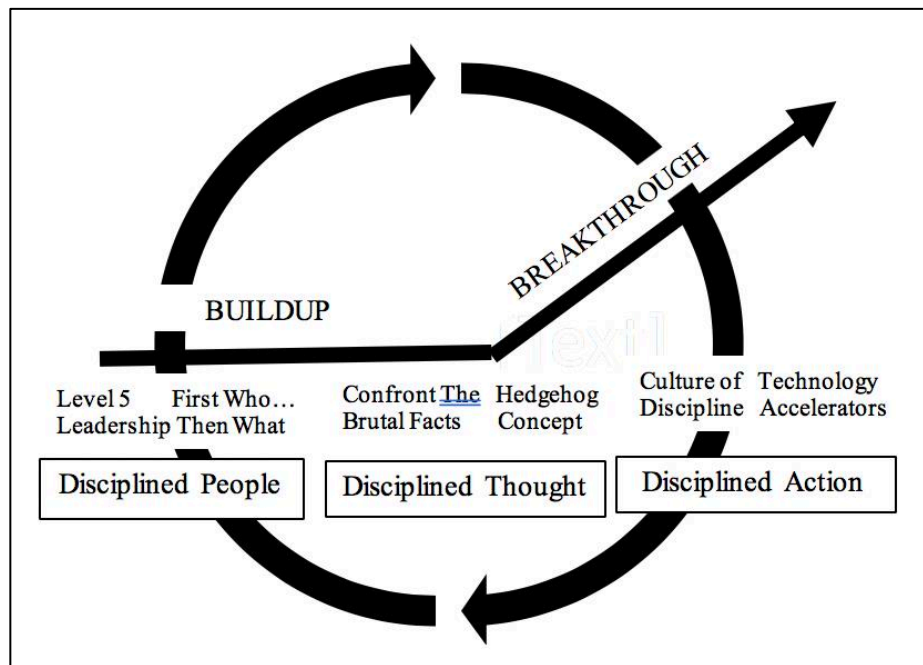


Figure 3. Jim Collins Build up – Breakthrough Model. *Jim Collins, Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), chap. 1, under "Phase 4: Chaos to Concept", Kindle.*

The principles elucidated by Collins can easily serve as a framework for churches desiring to increase their missional effectiveness. Thom Rainer adopted these principles and reframed them in his book *Breakout Churches*.¹⁴⁰ Rainer unabashedly borrows the general concepts from *Good to Great* and applies them to thirteen churches that reversed their trend of decline. Rainer stated that “Nearly all of the principles [of *Breakout Churches*] are very similar at times to Jim Collins’s *Good to Great*... the breakout framework [was] adapted from page 12 of *Good to Great*.”¹⁴¹

Like Collins, Rainer established a stringent matrix of criteria to qualify a church as a “breakout church.” Similarities between the two works are evidenced with Rainer’s use of “Acts

¹⁴⁰ Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2005), under “Acknowledgements”, Kindle.

¹⁴¹ Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, chap. 1, under “Stage Five: Apply What We Learned”, Kindle.

6/7 Leadership” which is similar to Collins’ “Level 5 Leadership.”¹⁴² Collins’ concept of “confronting the brutal facts” can be seen in Rainer’s “A-B-C (awareness/belief/crisis) Moment.”¹⁴³ Rainer also utilizes Collin’s bus metaphor (getting “the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats”), reframing it the “who/what simultrack.”¹⁴⁴ Rainer stated that Great churches were, in our study, churches that had broken out of the mediocrity of losing as many people as they were reaching. They were churches that had become outwardly focused, more intentional about evangelism than before.¹⁴⁵

The interaction between Rainer’s *Breakout Churches* and Collin’s *Good to Great* serves as an example that secular and religious organizations face similar needs for restructuring and revitalization. Additionally, both works display that there are common principles that may be found in an interdisciplinary approach to resolving issues of plateau and decline.

Having a healthy organizational structure is imperative for achieving church health. When a church becomes deficient with its structure and systems, the resulting impact can marginalize its missional effectiveness. Patrick Lencioni’s *The Advantage* identifies the benefits and necessity of organizational health. Lencioni emphatically states that “The single greatest advantage any company can achieve is organizational health. Yet it is ignored by most leaders even though it is simple, free, and available to anyone who wants it.”¹⁴⁶ Lencioni outlines his concept of a healthy organization in the framework of four essential disciplines; namely, building a cohesive leadership team, creating clarity regarding the organization’s purpose, overcommunicating that clarity through a variety of dialogue strategies, and reinforcing that

¹⁴² Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, chap. 1, under “The Six Major Components of the Chrysalis Factor”, Kindle.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., chap. 5, Kindle.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., chap. 10, under “What is Greatness?”, Kindle.

¹⁴⁶ Patrick M. Lencioni, *The Advantage, Enhanced Edition: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* (J-B Lencioni Series), 1, Kindle.

clarity through the organization's personnel practices.¹⁴⁷ These four essential disciplines are the focus of the book, and become a standard for evaluating an organization's health status. While all four disciplines are of great importance, achieving clarity (discipline two) is of particular interest in understanding both organizational and church health. Lencioni states that "creating clarity of purpose is all about achieving alignment, and alignment is about creating so much clarity that there is as little room as possible for confusion, disorder, and infighting to set in."¹⁴⁸ Confusion, disorder, and infighting are terms which, unfortunately, describe the state of some churches which have stagnated. When churches forget their purpose or mission, competing values become the basis for confusion and conflict.

Churches that have plateaued or are in decline may be viewed as having lost a sense of missional clarity and unity and are unhealthy. Bullard observed that

Congregations that focus more passion on Vision and Relationships are growing younger and more proactive every day. Younger does not necessarily mean the age demographics of the congregation are growing younger, but that may be a by-product. It means that, as a representation of the body of Christ, they appear younger or more vital. They are proactive in their actions and regularly seize the opportunities God is placing before them. Congregations that focus more passion on Programs and Management are growing older and more passive every day. As a representation of the body of Christ they daily appear older and less vital.¹⁴⁹

As noted earlier, Bullard illustrated church lifecycles with a bell curve, describing their state of health in terms of an aging process (see figure 1). Once the church was no longer functioning with missional priority and clarity, the church began its descent toward old age and ultimately death. Troy Jones observed that some churches are unhealthy without showing immediate symptoms. Jones said:

Deceptively healthy churches have slowly and steadily drifted off mission, and either no one notices, or no one will willingly admit it. By all "normal" standards, we may appear

¹⁴⁷ Patrick M. Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 15-17, Kindle.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 73, Kindle.

¹⁴⁹ Bullard, *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation*, 77, Kindle.

healthy: Attendance is fine. Finances are okay. Building remains standing. Christians are still showing up. But deep down, the leader knows that all of these things merely mask the reality that the church has wandered off mission.¹⁵⁰

Lencioni advocated for clarity and alignment regarding an organization's purpose.

Furthermore, he gave a six-point evaluation tool for assessing how clear leaders are regarding the organizations purpose. These six questions are: "1. Why do we exist? 2. How do we behave? 3. What do we do? 4. How will we succeed? 5. What is most important, right now? 6. Who must do what?"¹⁵¹ Lencioni posits that without clarity and alignment around the answers to these six questions, an organization will fail to achieve health and maximum effectiveness. As noted earlier, and exemplified in Bullard and Jones's statements, these marketplace principles are equally salient to a church context. Since the church is an organization, organizational principles, such as Collin's *Hedgehog Concept* or Lencioni's four disciplines, can enhance the missional effectiveness of an ecclesial body. Conversely, when these best practices are ignored or neglected, the disappointing outcomes of frustration, conflict, and mediocrity will likely result.

Key Elements Necessary for Revitalizing a Church

Although there are many approaches to church revitalization, the intent in this section is to examine those elements that are commonly identified in contemporary literature as playing a significant role in renewing a church's health and effectiveness.

Transformation and Change

The terms transformation and change represent concepts that are integral to church and organizational revitalization. Almost every book about revitalization will reference these

¹⁵⁰ Jones, *Recalibrate Your Church*, 45, Kindle.

¹⁵¹ Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 77.

concepts, with many giving at least a chapter to both the necessity for systemic change as well as the inherent challenges with change.

Transformational Church is both the book title and the focus given by Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer.¹⁵² The authors conducted research of churches deemed to be transformational. Rainer and Stetzer sought to discover quantifiable and qualifiable elements in churches that had moved from plateau or decline to 10 percent growth over a six-year period between 2003 and 2008.¹⁵³ “As we studied churches across North America, we saw a repeating pattern of elements and practices that created a framework.”¹⁵⁴ This framework included a transformation loop (see Figure 4) which included discerning the context of the community, embracing the right values, and engaging the right actions.¹⁵⁵ Within this transformation loop were seven elements that connected actionable behaviors with the three broader categories. “Discern” was paired with having a missionary mentality. “Embrace” was connected to three values, namely vibrant leadership, relational connectedness, and prayerful dependence on God as the transformative agent. “Engage” was tethered to the actionable values of worship, community, and mission.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), Kindle Edition.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵⁵ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 33-36

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-36.

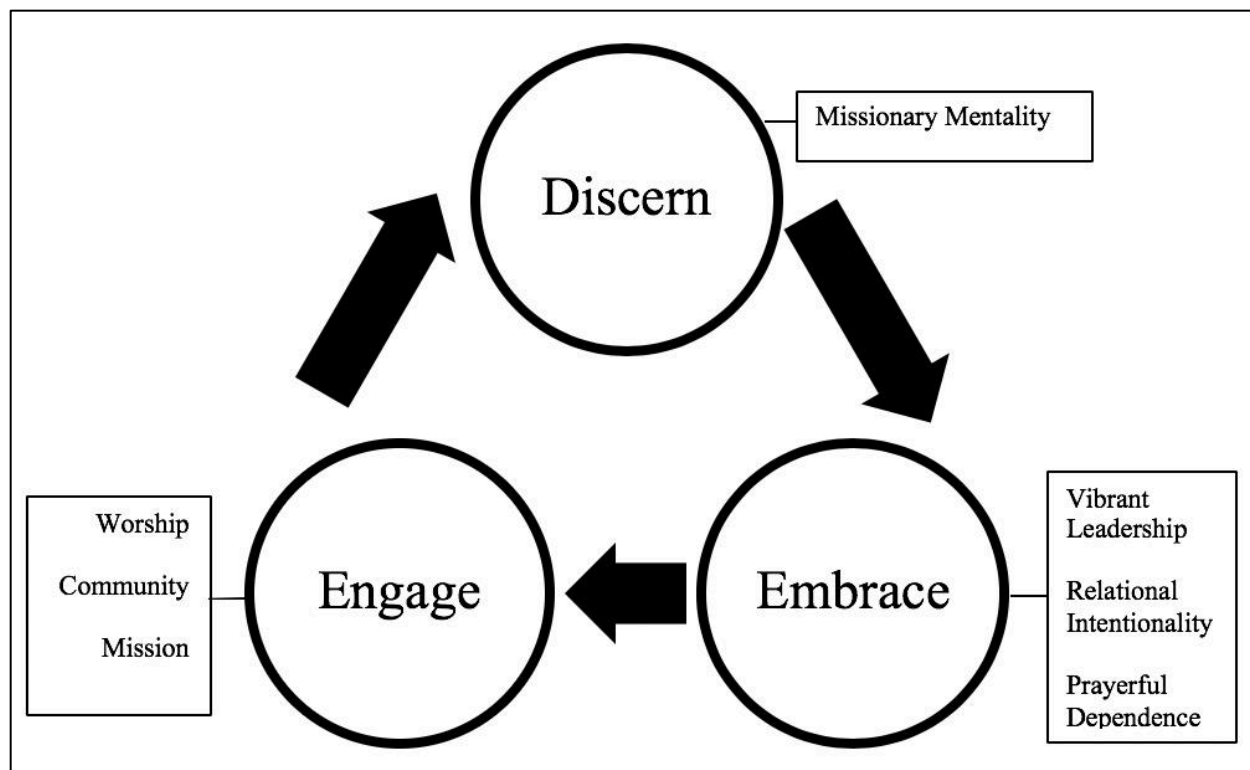


Figure 4. Transformational Loop. Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church*, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 33.

The framework described three elements of “how a church connects to the loop, the cathartic experience, and convergence of elements.”¹⁵⁷

According to Rainer, it is not critical where a church enters the loop. What is important in the author’s view is that a congregation has a deep cathartic experience realizing their need to change. Thus, change is an integral activity in a transformation. An organization cannot be transformed without change. If leaders and congregants want to experience a new vitality in reaching their communities or renewing their churches, they must explore making necessary changes. According the Rainer, entering the transformation loop and engaging the elements in

¹⁵⁷ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 37-38.

convergence will yield the best results.¹⁵⁸ This is more of a framework than a successive process typical of a programmed methodology.¹⁵⁹

There is an abundance of writing and experience which notes the correlation between change and pain. This pain from change may be felt by those leading change, by those being led into change, or both.¹⁶⁰ George Barna noted in his study of *Turnaround Churches* that pastors who led church revitalization tended to be young due to the energy that was required in effecting the necessary change for renewing a churches vitality. Barna stated that “the consensus [among turnaround pastors] was that the task was so spiritually demanding, so emotionally and physically draining and so taxing on one’s family and relationships that only a person of relative youth could succeed.”¹⁶¹ Barna further stated that pastors tended to engage in only one or two revitalization projects in their ministerial career for the reasons previously identified.¹⁶²

The pain of change was also identified by Rainer in *Breakout Churches*. Rainer reported that

We quickly discerned that many of the pastors of our comparison churches did not want to face reality. They, by their own volition, were avoiding the first step of awareness. Why? In their more candid moments, many of the pastors admitted they knew that if they faced reality, they would feel compelled to lead their churches to make changes. But many had already been burned in ministry, and they did not want to face the inevitable conflict change brings. The pain was just too great for potential gain, some told us.¹⁶³

Leading change in any organization can predictably lead to resistance or opposition from those who prefer the status quo. In their book *Leading Congregational Change*, Herrington, Bonem, and Furr observed that “over time and through hundreds of conversations we came to

¹⁵⁸ Stetzer and Rainer, *Transformational Church*, 38-41.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁶⁰ In *Who Moved My Pulpit?* Thom Rainer gives a perspective on the pain of change from a pastoral point of view. Conversely, Gordon McDonald wrote *Who Moved My Pew?* to reflect a congregant’s uncomfortable experience regarding the pain experienced as a result of church-change.

¹⁶¹ George Barna, *Turnaround Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), 67.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶³ Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, chap. 4, under “Awareness: Waking Up To Reality”, Kindle.

recognize that change does not happen without conflict.”¹⁶⁴ Thus, those who lead change must be mentally, emotionally, and spiritually prepared to endure negative responses from those whom they lead.

There are strategies that have been discovered for avoiding unnecessary conflict that accompanies efforts to institute change. John Kotter’s *Leading Change* focused exclusively on what it takes to successfully implement change in a large corporate context. Kotter identifies an eight-stage process for executing sustainable change (see figure 5).¹⁶⁵ A postulate which underpins *Leading Change* indicated that both people and companies tend to protect the status quo. In a church context, this may occur because congregants adhere to an affection for traditions. There is a religious romanticism for the past and the perceived stability that tradition encapsulates. In a corporate context, positions are protected and the pain of learning, risk taking, and sacrificing are avoided. Of course, there are commonalities between both secular corporations and religious organizations.

¹⁶⁴ Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 7.

¹⁶⁵ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 22.

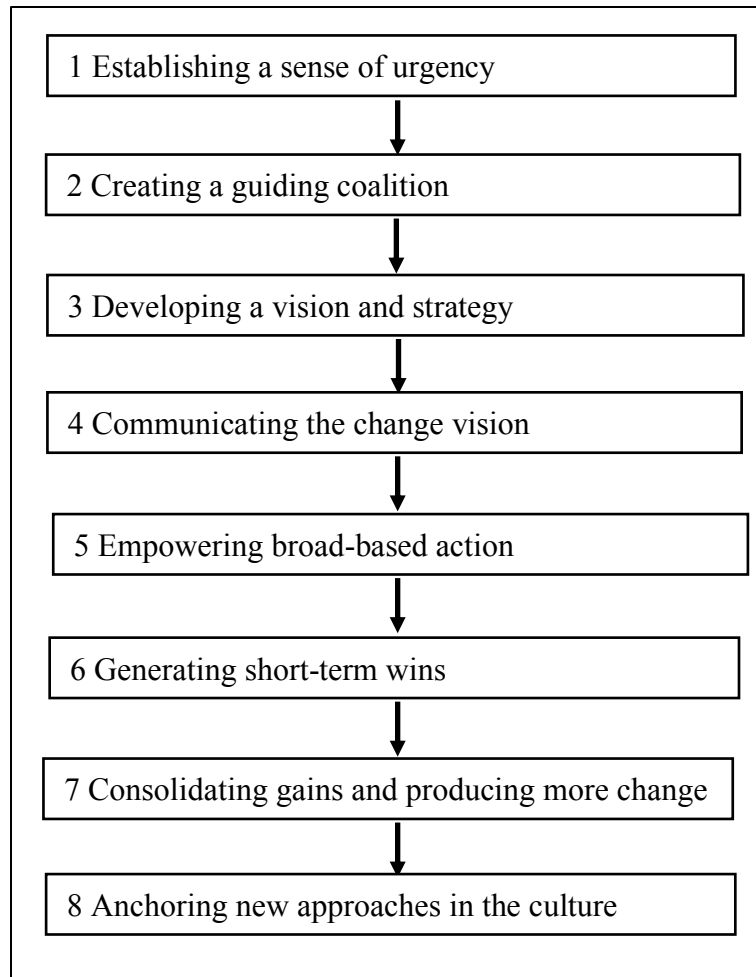


Figure 5. John Kotter's Eight-Stage Process of Creating Major Change. John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 21.

Because of these parallels, Kotter's eight-stage model can be applicable in both business and church contexts. One example is the first stage of establishing a sense of urgency in order to create energy for change. Kotter states, "Establishing a sense of urgency is crucial to gaining needed cooperation. With complacency high, transformations usually go nowhere because few people are even interested in working on the change problem."¹⁶⁶ Kotter identified that corporations, like religious organizations, can be highly resistant to change. Stetzer noted "Since 3,500 to 4,000 churches close each year, it is obvious that most churches won't make the

¹⁶⁶ John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, 36, Kindle.

turnaround. There are probably two main reasons for this. First, most churches will not admit how bad it is. Second, most churches will not make the needed changes.”¹⁶⁷ The eighth stage is anchoring new approaches within a corporate culture. This easily correlates with Lewis and Cordeiro’s thesis of creating a culture shift in order to create sustainable change in a church.¹⁶⁸

Culture

The importance of cultural considerations is expressed in the cliché “culture eats strategy for breakfast.”¹⁶⁹ Leading change and transformation in a revitalization initiative necessarily implies making deep, systemic alterations, not only in methodology, but also in the culture of the church or organization. Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro identified in *Culture Shift* that “to make any kind of transition as a church, your church’s culture can’t be ignored.”¹⁷⁰ *Culture Shift* considers church transformation from a perspective of cultivating community health and spiritual vibrancy in the church. The fundamental and often overlooked topic of church culture is extremely relevant to church revitalization. Lewis and Cordeiro reported that “God has birthed an authentic, life-giving culture at each (of their) church, and it has drawn people one by one, then tens, then by hundreds and then thousands each year. More important, the people who come are finding the kind of help they seek. They’re getting better, finding Christ, and maturing in every way.”¹⁷¹ Developing a healthy environment that is welcoming, hospitable, flexible, relational, and exemplifies the fruit of the Spirit, with a high value placed on evangelism is far likelier to be missionally effective than a church whose atmosphere is filled with the tension which often accompanies a general resistance to change. Although culture includes the

¹⁶⁷ Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, 23, Kindle

¹⁶⁸ Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church from the Inside Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 62-64.

¹⁶⁹ Peter Drucker is commonly given credit for this quote, although there is no documentation corroborating the claim. See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/05/23/culture-eats/>

¹⁷⁰ Lewis and Cordeiro, *Culture Shift*, 3.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

geographic, ethnic, and demographic nuances of a church's social community, the culture referred to by Lewis and Cordeiro focuses on the values, attitudes, beliefs, and customs of a local congregation.

The authors posit that the lead pastor can be the primary agents shaping culture as he becomes aware of his unique role in leadership. The authors state that, "Culture shapes the church, and leaders make the culture."¹⁷² For many, before revitalization can become a reality, a "culture shift" must take place. Many churches in plateau and decline tenaciously hold onto a culture that was immensely effective in a past generation but have not embraced the changes of the culture at large. They have failed to differentiate values from preferences and tradition. Lewis and Cordeiro emphasized that "the first step in transformation is to identify your current culture. Doing so defines your starting point."¹⁷³ Lewis and Cordeiro methodically presented a step-by-step process for identifying the present culture of a church.¹⁷⁴ Additionally, the authors offered a coaching strategy that focused on the need for fresh approaches to leadership and obtaining "broad congregational commitment."¹⁷⁵

As noted earlier, Troy Jones asserted that unless a culture of continuous recalibration is developed in a church, that church will eventually and inevitably drift off mission.¹⁷⁶ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr identified that a culture that is open to constant change is counterintuitive to most organizations:

As long as God calls us to transformation and our world changes rapidly, congregations will have to change continually as well... The need for continuous change goes against the grain of the organizational culture. Those congregations that willingly or even enthusiastically enter into the transformation process inevitably ask, "How long will this

¹⁷² Lewis and Cordeiro, *Culture Shift*, 28.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-52.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁷⁶ Jones, *Recalibrate Your Church*, 29.

process last?" or "When will things get back to normal?" It can be discouraging to learn that a state of ongoing change needs to become the norm.¹⁷⁷

There is a common correlation experienced by churches that have plateaued or are in a state of decline: a lack of young people in attendance. With the population growth outpacing almost any gains realized in the church, it becomes apparent that this trend will grow worse due to aging and the inevitable attrition that comes with church adherents deceasing, coupled with the reality that young people are not being attracted to participate in the Christian community. The focus of *Growing Young* is a salient and essential message for the church to remain vital as it moves into the future. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin make a powerful statement when processing the status of more than two-thirds of churches today when they assert "If you're wondering why your congregation is aging, shrinking, or plateauing, you're not alone."¹⁷⁸ Six strategies impacting our world and its cultures were presented by Powell, Mudler, Griffin and provide a basic framework for churches that are serious about an intentional approach to creating an environment where youth and emerging adults can experience the Christian faith in authentic and affirming relationships.¹⁷⁹

The concept of *Keychain Leadership* uses the metaphor on entrusting your keys (trust, authority, leadership participation) to young people that are being mentored and valued.¹⁸⁰ Powell, Mudler, and Griffin describe four different approaches to managing the keys of leadership and authority within a church (key-less leaders, key-hoarding leaders, key-loaning

¹⁷⁷ Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, 85.

¹⁷⁸ Kara Powell, Jake Mudler, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, 2016), chap. 1, under "The Alarming Realities of Congregations in America", Kindle.

¹⁷⁹ The six strategies presented were Keychain Leadership, embodying Jesus's message, fueling a warm community, prioritizing young people and families, be the best neighbors by positively and growing young in your context.

¹⁸⁰ Powell, Mudler, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, chap. 2, under "Sharing Power with the Right People at the Right Time", Kindle.

leaders, and keychain leaders).¹⁸¹ Extending the metaphor, those with influence and authority within the church community steward that influence well when they act upon opportunities to develop the potential of young people in the church community through mentoring and leadership inclusion.

Powell, Mudler, and Griffin noted in “Growing Young in Your Context” (chapter 8) that they were advocating for an adaptive approach to change based on active listening rather than immediately hiring a young staff pastor or investing large amounts of finances in attractional gadgetry. Powell observed that

Churches that grow young move past such reductionist categories; they take time to understand and respond to the needs of their own young people. In fact, when pastors were asked, “What are the three biggest challenges your church faces when it comes to ministering to young people?” nearly half (45 percent) of respondents highlighted young people’s general busyness or transience. Recognizing this, those churches that began listening well revamped their ministries to adapt to teenagers’ and emerging adults’ unique schedules.¹⁸²

Powell researched an area of church revitalization that many church leaders and members intuitively understand and discuss; namely, that if the church continues to grow old without integrating younger people, the church will surely die. Powell identified that “a failure to prioritize young people typically sends churches on a trajectory toward growing old. Often this is because surface-level changes are made without deeper shifts in church culture.”¹⁸³ Affecting change that will result in a revitalized church will require an approach that is more thoughtful than simply introducing youth-oriented gimmicks. The youth will not likely embrace superficial gestures, and the older adults will likely object to a worship expression which is foreign to their

¹⁸¹ Powell, Mudler, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, chap. 1, under “What Makes Keychain Leadership Unique?”, Kindle.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, chap. 8, under “Leadership Begins with Listening”, Kindle.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, chap. 6, under “Myth: Good Leaders and Programs Automatically Lead to Priority”, Kindle.

preferences and perceived values. For a church to see a change in the internal age demographic, there must be genuine attitudinal and cultural adjustments that embrace generational diversity.

Although having a missional foundation has been already been discussed, it is beneficial to introduce having a missional priority imbedded in the culture of a vital church. In *Breakout Churches*, Thom Rainer described one breakout church that practiced excellence in evangelism as an integral part of their culture. The church reportedly experienced significant growth as a result of prioritizing a culture of excellence in ministry and evangelism.¹⁸⁴

The culture that is created inside the community of believers will inevitably affect the impact that the church has within its sociological cultural context. Linda Bergquist discussed the need for the church to reach its culture simultaneously as a team of insiders (indigenously) and as outsiders (missionaries).¹⁸⁵

Thus, although cultural expressions of style and methodology may be important, a culture that prioritizes mission and values flexibility and change will be postured for maximum effectiveness. Bullard rightly identified that transformation is not a static destination at which a church arrives. Bullard noted that transformation is an “ongoing spiritual strategic journey.”¹⁸⁶ Jim Collins stated firmly that “to be built to last, you must be built to change.”¹⁸⁷ This concept is necessarily a cultural attitude which will give greater potential to the church and its future effectiveness if developed and embraced by leadership and congregants.

¹⁸⁴ Thom Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, chap. 7, under “A Story of Excellence in Evangelism”, Kindle.

¹⁸⁵ Linda Bergquist, *Church Turned Inside Out: A Guide for Designers, Refiners, and Re-Aligners* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 103-109, Kindle.

¹⁸⁶ Bullard, *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation*, 101.

¹⁸⁷ Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porris, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, Read by Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porris, New York: Harper Audio, 2019, Audible audio ed., chap. 2, 12:18.

Leadership

The importance of leadership in the church revitalization process cannot be overstated. Ed Stetzer identified that “leadership was rated as the number one factor by the churches that experienced revitalization. Leadership and vision are major keys to any type of turnaround in churches.”¹⁸⁸ Tony Morgan asserted that churches need pastors who lead well more than they need pastors who preach well.¹⁸⁹ Every article and book written on the subject of organizational vitality or revitalization identifies that leadership is an integral factor for developing a healthy, sustainable organization. Therefore, all of the key elements necessary for church revitalization are connected to a pastor’s ability to lead a staff, board, volunteer teams, and congregants in a unified direction toward a preferred future.

In *Learning Leadership*, Kouzes and Posner advocate that leadership can be a learned trait, and that the existence of a variety of myths discourage effective development of effective leadership. Underdeveloped leadership, in turn, creates the circumstances whereby mediocrity and stagnation flourish.¹⁹⁰ Kouzes and Posner noted:

The key empirical takeaway from our research is that effective leaders demonstrate exemplary leader behaviors more frequently than their less effective colleagues do. Although people can differ in how they demonstrate each behavior, leaders must express them more frequently to increase the engagement and performance of their constituents.

In summary, Kouzes and Posner propose five leadership practices of exemplary leadership: “Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart.”¹⁹¹ The authors asserted that effective leaders not only practice these leadership skills with excellence, but they also practice them continuously. According to

¹⁸⁸ Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, 34.

¹⁸⁹ Morgan, *The Unstuck Church*, 16.

¹⁹⁰ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Learning Leadership: The Five Fundamentals of Becoming an Exemplary Leader* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2016), 19, Kindle Edition.

¹⁹¹ Kouzes and Posner, *Learning Leadership*, 26.

Kouzes and Posner, the frequency of leaders engaging in leadership makes a substantial difference in the outcomes of their organization.

The leadership practice of enabling others to act as identified by Kouzes and Posner is expanded upon by Robert Crosby in *The Teaming Church*.¹⁹² Crosby describes the leadership skill of collaboration within the context of ministry team development. Much revitalization literature focuses on the need to engage and develop teams for identifying church values, changing culture, and initiating renewal.¹⁹³ Crosby identifies that the concept of working as an honoring team is included in the theological concept of the trinity.¹⁹⁴ Crosby proposed that “to become a great team your group must have a deeply challenging goal, a creatively empowering leader, and a collaborative, biblically honoring community.”¹⁹⁵ A reality that every organization must acknowledge is that organizational missional effectiveness is contingent upon the premise that success is almost always a team effort. Crosby noted “the old saying goes, ‘You cannot expect what you do not inspect.’ If that is true, and I believe it is, a hierarchical model of leadership is a problem. One person cannot adequately observe and monitor the effectiveness of several, much less dozens, of people at once.”¹⁹⁶ Beyond monitoring or managing others, creativity and finding best solutions and strategies are distinct benefits that result from collaboration and teams. Crosby quoted Ken Blanchard’s astute observation: “Today, as never before in history, organizational leaders are realizing that, in order to maximize performance, people need to be organized in teams. No longer can we depend upon a few peak performers to

¹⁹² Robert Crosby, *The Teaming Church: Ministry in The Age Of Collaboration*, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2012.

¹⁹³ A few examples are *Leading Congregational Change*, chapter 9 “Enabling Team Learning”; *Comeback Churches*, chapter 7 “Motivating and Mobilizing People Out of the Pews, and *The Advantage*, Build a Cohesive Leadership Team, 17-71.

¹⁹⁴ Crosby, *The Teaming Church*, 13.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

make the difference. The mantra today is ‘none of us is as smart as all of us.’”¹⁹⁷ Leaders recognize the inherent value of hearing a variety of perspectives, benefiting from the strengths and skills of other team members, and ultimately developing approaches to ministry that have broader participation and commitment than might be possible if team collaboration had been absent.

Effective leadership not only develops and empowers teams for collaboration, but effective leadership also takes the initiative to collaboratively develop a compelling vision. A compelling vision can provide a sense of urgency, and therefore motivation, to institute change. Furthermore, a compelling vision articulates the direction or preferred future toward which the church is moving.¹⁹⁸ When a church is faced with accepting mediocrity and stagnation, or developing a strategy for revitalization, the task of assessing the church’s present state of plateau or decline and turning the church around through instituting change will require a leader. That leader must be the pastor.

The Role of Ecclesial Structures in Offering Assistance to Stagnated Churches

A review of literature that addresses the topic of church revitalization reveals that there is a significant amount of written resources available to churches needing revitalization. In addition to the written resources, several authors like Thom Rainer, Troy Jones, Tony Morgan, and George Bullard also offer consultancy services. In addition to these consultancy services are denominational initiatives which encourage robust, systemic approaches to the need of church revitalization. In *Hit The Bullseye*, Paul Borden recounts an approach to church revitalization

¹⁹⁷ Crosby, *The Teaming Church*, 41. From the foreword by Ken Blanchard in Laurie Beth Jones *Teach Your Team to Fish* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002), ix.

¹⁹⁸ Tony Morgan, *The Unstuck Church*, 122.

that he led among the American Baptist Churches in Northern California.¹⁹⁹ Leith Anderson states in the foreword of Borden's book, "the American Baptist Churches of the West have demonstrated that a plateaued and declining region of mainline congregations can become a model of healthy and growing congregations."²⁰⁰ Before detailing the approach taken by the American Baptist Church (ABC), Borden offers hope to congregations and denominational leaders in moving toward an optimistic future. Borden states, "This book offers hope to judicatories and the congregations that comprise them. It suggests the means of transformation and growth for judicatories and congregations."²⁰¹ Paul Borden distinctly and emphatically presented a viewpoint that focused on denominational influence in leveraging influence for American Baptist churches to experience revitalization. Borden firmly stated that two realities were necessary for the American Baptist churches in their judiciary to change their declining trajectories. First, the denomination must value the local church above itself, and willingly invest its energy and resources in activities that will influence the local church toward health and strength.²⁰² Secondly, the local church must trust that the denominational leaders are competent and trustworthy to lead them toward health and strength.²⁰³ The leadership in the American Baptist model provided paid, trained consultants who were tasked with a uniform system of consultation, accompanied by clear expectations for improvement among the churches consulted, and an accountability system for the consultants based on specific outcomes. Borden informed consultants that "their future employment with the region would depend not upon how well they serviced their respective congregations but whether the seven to ten congregations they would

¹⁹⁹ Paul D. Borden, *Hit the Bullseye: How Denominations Can Aim at the Mission Field* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 15.

work with intensely for a year grew in average worship attendance by a minimum of five percent.”²⁰⁴

Borden stated clearly that the American Baptist organization ought to demand nothing of its constituent churches, but rather sees their denominational role as an equipping agency for resourcing the local church in accomplishing their mission:

Our regional mission is that we exist for the purpose of "Growing Healthy Churches". For such a mission to be accomplished we understand that we must be distinctive in structure and purpose from local congregations while becoming additive to the missions of local congregations, aiding them to become all God would call them to be and do.²⁰⁵

The results from Borden’s approach to growing healthy churches are impressive. The judicatory in which Borden led revitalization efforts experienced missional effectiveness improvements, with baptisms going from eight hundred to two thousand per year among their 227 churches. Additionally, congregational growth was observed, going from an average of one hundred to one hundred eighty in average Sunday morning attendance.²⁰⁶

Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James Furr led a similar effort as Paul Borden among Southern Baptists in Houston, Texas, with the book *Leading Congregational Change* resulting from their unified efforts. Herrington, Bonem, and Furr engaged churches in the Houston area in a widespread revitalization effort that experienced significant success. The churches of the Union Baptist Association (Southern Baptist Convention) experienced growth that outpaced the population growth of the Houston metro area by 6.3 percent between 1990 and 1995.²⁰⁷ The authors state that their book is not about *denominational* revitalization per se. Nevertheless, they do advocate that leaders can learn and draw support from one another as they navigate the waters

²⁰⁴ Borden, *Hit the Bullseye*, 35.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁰⁷ Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 2.

of change successfully.²⁰⁸ Thus, Herrington presents findings on congregational change and revitalization in a context of partnership between congregations and their denominational context.

Herrington, Bonem, and Furr reported in *Leading Congregational Change* that the Union Baptist Association also employed consultants and used denominational resources to produce revitalization in the Houston Metropolitan area.²⁰⁹ Additionally, after conducting a robust research program exploring the characteristics of transformational churches, the UBA initiated a pilot program whereby consultants, evaluation tools, and training programs were offered to the ten churches in the first cohort.²¹⁰ Herrington's team developed a complex model that was used to guide churches through the transformational process. The book *Leading Congregational Change* and an accompanying workbook were also used to assist churches in the transformation journey. Within their transformational model, the Herrington, Bonem and Furr discussed the common transformational needs of leadership, vision, change, relationships, navigating conflict, et al. A unique expression developed by Herrington, Bonem, and Furr is found in their use of "mental models."²¹¹ The authors identified that "mental models are the images, assumptions, and stories we use to interpret our world and guide our actions."²¹² Understanding the mental models that have been developed will help leaders and congregations identify the assumptions that form their perspectives on how they function as a church. Furthermore, through a process of evaluating mental models, assessing their applicability to the present culture, and potentially discovering new mental models, an openness to change may be achieved.²¹³

²⁰⁸ Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, 2.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 10-11.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹¹ Ibid., 113.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid., 117-124.

Both Borden and Herrington demonstrated that denominational resources and leadership can be valuable to churches that have stagnated. Borden referenced that, in his judicatory, congregations were asked to suspend their constitution and bylaws during the revitalization effort.²¹⁴ This action removed obstructions caused by antiquated governance systems. James Calaway identified that church governance could pose significant challenges to church health.²¹⁵ Calaway described the challenges that leaders face because of both written (governing) rules and unwritten (influencers) rules.²¹⁶ In his dissertation, Calaway noted that

The perception that church governance does affect church leadership and growth was confirmed in the data. The revelation that church attendance, volunteerism, and financial contribution will not increase due to church governance in and of itself was unexpected. However, church governance can and does limit or stop growth according to the lived experiences of the survey participants²¹⁷

Borden exemplified that denominational leaders can be of assistance in removing power structures which become unnecessary barriers to revitalization.

Besides denominations, educational institutions such as denominational universities and seminaries can also participate in addressing the needs of church revitalization. In “Critical Issues in Church Revitalization,” after describing five critical issues for church revitalization, Dr. Reggie Ogea advocated for the development of a Doctor of Ministry degree program at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Ogea proposed that “the Doctor of Ministry program offered by seminaries can have a profound impact on church revitalization.”²¹⁸ Ogea described the fundamental elements of curriculum design, the development of critical thinking and

²¹⁴ Borden, *Hit the Bullseye*, 94.

²¹⁵ James A. Calaway, “A Qualitative Phenomenological Study: The Perceived Effects Of Church Governance On Church Leadership And Growth,” (Doctor of Management in Organizational Leadership diss., University of Phoenix, 2015), 5, accessed November 22, 2017, ProQuest.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Calaway, “A Qualitative Phenomenological Study: The Perceived Effects Of Church Governance On Church Leadership And Growth,” 110.

²¹⁸ Reggie Ogea, “Critical Issues in Church Revitalization,” *The Journal of Christian Ministry*, no. 1 (2009): 28, accessed December 31, 2019, <http://journalofchristianministry.org/article/view/4010>

decision-making skills, the involvement of peer and faculty, and a DMin project as all contributing to a new level of excellence among pastors, staff, and denominational leaders.²¹⁹

Conclusion

Reggie Ogea stated well that “churches and denominations must revitalize or face death.”

Ogea further provided a biblical framework for contextualizing the necessity for church revitalization:

Jesus promised to build his church and to protect it from being overcome and overpowered by even the gates of hell (Mat. 16:18). The Great Commission to go into the world and make disciples was both personal and corporate (Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8). In *The Acts of the Apostles*, the early church was birthed and in less than a century turned its world upside down. The Epistles of Paul and Peter imply vibrant, growing congregations. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* concludes the New Testament with a message of encouragement and victory for the church (Revelation 1:19-20)! From a biblical vantage point, church plateau and decline are unacceptable!²²⁰

The literature from the field of church and organizational revitalization establishes a common set of influences that lead to stagnation, as well as common elements in turning churches and organizations from plateau and decline to growth and vitality.

George Bullard identified a predictable lifecycle that churches experience. This lifecycle begins with the birth and early growth, extends through adulthood and maturity in the prime of life, and ends with late aging and death. Every church will face the realities represented in Bullard’s model, and will either make the necessary adjustments to sustain longevity or will succumb to diminishing organizational health and a conclusion to their sustainability. Thus, revitalization or recalibration is a need that all churches face periodically throughout the course of their ministry.

²¹⁹ Ogea, “Critical Issues in Church Revitalization,” 24-28.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

Missional drift lies at the center of those factors which contribute to stagnation and decline. Churches face mission drift when competing values rise in importance to the *missio Dei*. According to Greer, missional drift is inevitable if a church does not tenaciously attend to its core mission.²²¹ In many church settings, mission drift eventually expresses itself as maintenance of the status quo rather than passionately pursuing participation in the mission of God. Eventually, preserving the organization becomes the focus of the church. For a church to begin a revitalization process, it must reengage its missional values in its culture and its systems. Engaging this fundamental adjustment requires leadership, and this leadership must come from the pastor and a collaborative team effort. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that change will be required to move the church from a maintenance model to a missional model of church life. This change will likely cause discomfort, even pain, within the congregation and perhaps the leadership of the church. Breakthrough, moving from status quo to missional vitality, is made possible through disciplined people, disciplined foci, and disciplined action. This general paradigm is largely dependent on leadership and alignment within the church. When the disciplined response to stagnation is coupled with alignment in mission and subsequent efforts and actions, momentum can become the resulting experience. Jim Collins refers to this as pushing on the flywheel.²²²

The organizational desire to change a church's status from plateau or decline to growth requires transformation. Transformation requires change, change requires leadership, and leading change requires, among other things, a tolerance for pain. Organizational transformation will result in a shift of culture. Primarily, this cultural shift will move participants from an inward focus to an outward focus. Churches that have instituted transformational change have

²²¹ Greer, *Mission Drift*, 155.

²²² Collins, *Good to Great*, chap. 8, "The Flywheel and the Doom Loop."

experienced a resurgence in engaging young people and families, adding life to dying congregations.

Finally, some congregations have benefitted significantly by receiving assistance through ecclesial bodies such as denominations or other parenting structures which provide resources such as consultation services, revitalization initiatives, and coaching or mentoring.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PROJECT NARRATIVE & FIELD WORK

This study was designed to discover the means by which the Pennsylvania Delaware Ministry Network (PDMN or PennDel) can effectively engage churches in strategic revitalization processes. An analysis of the Annual Church Ministries Reports (ACMRs) of participating Assemblies of God churches from 2012 through 2016 revealed that seventy-two percent of PDMN churches had plateaued or were in a state of decline. The same type of analysis was conducted from the ACMRs for a five-year period between 2014 through 2018. During this time period, PennDel Assemblies of God churches were experiencing a more significant rate of stagnation, with 27.2 percent of the churches experiencing plateau, and 50.4 percent showing decline, for a total of 77.6 percent having stagnated. Only 22.4 percent of the churches participating in the ACMR recorded growth for the time period. The most alarming feature of these realities is that there is no sense of urgency either from an organizational point of view or from a local church point of view. Either mediocrity has become the norm, ecclesial bodies are in denial of the inevitable outcomes associated with declining trends among local churches, or churches and their leaders are at a loss in finding effective solutions to stagnation.

Methodology: Engaging Stagnated Churches in a Guided Self-Assessment

This project explored an engagement process in which the researcher initiated a conversation with plateaued or declining churches utilizing a guided self-assessment consisting of twenty questions. A letter was read to the pastor in a phone conversation (see Appendix A) to ascertain interest in participating in the research project. The pastor was informed that their church was identified as fitting the necessary parameters of the research project (either plateau or decline over a five-year period). The pastor was asked if they would consider being a part of the

research, understanding that the research process would also include a separate conversation with board members who were interested in participating. Without exception, all of the pastors who were contacted agreed to participate in the study. None of the pastors expressed offense when presented with the reality that their church fit the parameters of the study, thus identifying that their church was in a state of plateau or decline. Introducing the subject that the church was not growing seemed to be filled with potential for an awkward conversation, or possibly even a terse or angry expression of denial or deflection. Nevertheless, each pastor simply responded to the invitation rather than arguing over the designation of plateau and decline. Most pastors expressed appreciation for being included in a project that could possibly provide solutions to their church, as well as bringing benefit to other churches within the PennDel Ministry Network. The only challenges encountered in the invitation process were related to the logistics of scheduling.

Each interview began with reviewing the consent form (see Appendix B) which communicated that the results of the interview were confidential, and that no church or participants would be identified in the published results. After signing the consent form, the interview began, using the guided self-assessment questionnaire (see Appendix C).

In each interview, the researcher gave a brief overview of statistical trends regarding church plateau and decline in the Assemblies of God, in the PennDel Ministry Network, and among mainline and evangelical churches in the United States (see Appendix D). The questionnaire was administered by the researcher who noted answers and verbatim responses given by the interviewee.

Composition of the Sample Group

The sample group was comprised of eight churches. Four of the churches were identified as plateaued churches, and four churches were in a state of decline. The churches were selected to

represent a variety of sizes based on average Sunday morning attendance from the 2018 ACMR. Additionally, churches were selected to represent urban, suburban, and rural geographic contexts. Finding an authoritative definition of urban, suburban, and rural proved to be problematic. Annie Gianotti and others stated “there is little consistency in methods used to define urban, suburban, and rural.”¹ The U.S. Census bureau defines *Urban Areas* as those areas with a population of fifty thousand or more. *Urban Clusters* have a population between 2500 to fifty thousand. *Rural Areas* were by default any community of less than 2500.² For the purposes of this research, the following simple definitions will be utilized: Urban is understood to be cities of fifty thousand or more, suburban as an outlying part of a city, and rural as being a sparsely populated area of 2500 or fewer residents.

Each church and pastor in the following research narratives is identified with a reference code in order to protect their identity and reinforce confidentiality.

Narrative from Guided Self-Assessments with Sample Churches

AG1

AG1 is a church worshipping in an urban community just outside of the city limits of a large, metropolitan city in Pennsylvania. The church is averaging sixty in Sunday morning attendance and is led by a bi-vocational pastor. There was a pastoral transition three years ago, thus the current pastor has been leading the congregation for the past three years. AG1 is classified as a plateaued church, although the conversation between the interviewer and the church board and pastor suggest that the average attendance figures for the period of time when the former pastor

¹ Anne, G. Short Gianotti, Jackie M. Getson, Lucy R. Hutyra, and David B. Kittredge. "Defining Urban, Suburban, and Rural: A Method to Link Perceptual Definitions with Geospatial Measures of Urbanization in Central and Eastern Massachusetts." *Urban Ecosystems* 19, no. 2 (06, 2016): 823-33, <https://seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/docview/1798626711?accountid=43912>.

² <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>

led the congregation may have been inflated, and thus inaccurate. Using the ACMRs during the current pastor's three-year tenure of leadership would place the church in a plateaued condition.

During the beginning of the guided self-assessment, the interviewer gave an overview of the process of the meeting. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent form was reviewed, giving assurance of anonymity to the participants. Also, the standard of determining growth, plateau, and decline were described in each interview.³ Additionally, the potential benefits of the research to the PennDel Ministry Network leadership and its churches were described. Finally, an overview of church revitalization development in the network was described, identifying mentoring, consulting, and the Acts 2 Journey as resources available to churches desiring to engage in revitalization.

Both the pastor and the board members began by describing the church as growing. The ACMRs for 2014-2018 identified a significant decrease in average Sunday morning attendance. Both the pastor and, in their separate interview, the board concurred that the first two years of reporting (2014-2015) were greatly exaggerated. We therefore agreed to use the attendance figures from 2016 to 2018 as determining the status of the church, since the current pastor had completed the ACMRs for those years. The ACMRs for 2016-2018 showed that the church was not declining as the five-year study indicated, but in a state of plateau. After agreeing on this state of reality, both the pastor and the board posited that the church was nevertheless growing. Both the pastor and the board described the church in glowing terms of being spiritually vibrant, family oriented, and growing in all respects. All participants in the interview agreed that the church was experiencing new converts, increased participation in ministry service from its

³ The standard for determining growth, plateau, and decline can be found on page 3.

members, and worship services extending in engagement beyond the expected time of dismissal. The word revival was used by both pastor and board to describe the current state of the church.

When asked what they felt the future looked like if they continued with the same trends as they had experienced in the last five years, both the pastor and the board expressed optimism, and reported that they felt that this perspective was shared throughout the congregation.

Additionally, both the pastor and the board members indicated that the church culture was healthy, and that the congregation was generally cooperative and had positive relationships.

When asked about factors that should change to bring improvement to the church, the board retained their optimistic stance, stating that they would not change anything other than the physical condition of the facilities. The pastor articulated that he would like to see more signs and wonders, deeper involvement by those on the periphery, and a stronger financial position so that he could engage in ministry on a full-time basis. The pastor posited that the location of the church was inhibiting growth. He described the urban community with drug problems and a problematic reputation as being a key detractor for church growth.

Although the pastor politely expressed a favorable response to considering the Acts 2 Journey as a revitalization option for AG1, there was not any interest with strategic revitalization efforts offered by the PDMN. Both the pastor and the board expressed that the key to revitalization is revival. One board member expressed that she felt that revitalization strategy would seem manipulative, and that they should simply depend upon the work of the Holy Spirit for revitalization. The pastor identified a need for his pastoral leadership to be more strategic with discipleship, networking with other like-minded churches, and internal ministry development.

Summary of AG1

Although the pastor and board expressed disagreement with the ACMRs for the past five years, the researcher has familiarity with the trends of the church and feels that plateau is the best designation for the church's present status. The church seems to be experiencing an upswing in attendance and worship participation. The atmosphere of revival is adding energy to the plateaued church, and there is a general feeling of goodwill between the congregation, leadership team, and pastor. Finally, there appeared to be no felt need for a strategic approach to revitalization.

AG2

AG2 is a church averaging 140 in Sunday morning attendance and is in an urban neighborhood of a large, metropolitan city in Pennsylvania. The church is led by its founding pastor of twenty-one years. The church's five-year ACMR statistics (2014-2018) reveal that the church is in a state of plateau.

The interviews with both Pastor2 and the board began with a review of the release form, an overview of the dissertation project, and informing the board of statistical trends regarding plateau, decline and growth within the Assemblies of God, the church in the United States, and PDMN churches. Both the pastor and the board seemed interested and surprised at the rate of plateau and decline among a majority of churches in America, and especially among Assemblies of God churches.

When asked to describe the state of AG2 church, both the pastor and the church board described the church in glowing, positive terms. The pastor stated that AG2 church was both impactful and influential in the community due to its many outreaches, especially its ministry to children in the community. The board, in their separate interview, concurred with the pastor's

perspective, describing AG2 as a very influential part of their community. When the board was asked how they gauged their church's influence, one board member stated that "we never have trouble getting permits for outreach events." Additionally, the board member noted that community businesses financially supported the events, even though the businesses were not faith-based in their orientation. Pastor2 posited that "if you asked people in our community, they would say that we as a church are involved. People would say that we are 'kids focused.'"

The pastor and the board shared a similar perspective regarding the church's current state of plateau. The pastor observed that the church has difficulty retaining those who visit or otherwise come to faith in Christ. The board used the word "intermittent" when describing the state of the congregation. One board member observed that "we see a lot of new faces come and go. We have a core that stays; then there are others who come and go. We have people who show up on a Sunday morning and say that they used to come here."

When asked where the church will be in five to ten years if the present trend continues, the board and the pastor expressed different viewpoints. The pastor stated that he needed to change his leadership style from "doing to leading." Pastor2's expressions acknowledged a need to lead differently; otherwise, he stated that circumstances of plateau would remain the same. The board expressed a greater sense of optimism regarding their perceived future. This optimism was based on two primary factors: first, the church had recently celebrated their twentieth anniversary. As a result, the church had an outstanding weekend with an elevated attendance and an equally elevated optimism among the congregants and leaders. This seemed to prove to the board that the potential of the church was filled with possibilities for growth. Secondly, the board communicated a significant sense of confidence in their pastor's leadership and vision for the church and community.

When asked about the AG2 church culture and their perceptions of the current realities of plateau, the pastor and board communicated perspectives that differed in several areas. The pastor felt that the church congregation was mostly unaware or unconcerned about plateau. Those who had been attending the church might wonder why the church had not grown, but the newer people probably did not give much attention to the condition of numerical stagnation. The board stated that there was some concern among certain congregants regarding adult ministries. These concerned congregants had expressed a desire to see more adult ministries developed in contrast to the aggressive outreach toward children. Overall, the board felt that the perception of the congregation was more positive than negative. Both the pastor and board reflected that the congregation created a relational culture that was loving, welcoming, and joyful.

When asked about changes that might be necessary to help AG2 experience greater numeric vitality, the pastor and board identified similar improvements that they felt would be helpful for moving the church toward greater missional effectiveness. The pastor stated that a better equipping process for developing leaders was most necessary for the church's effectiveness. Additionally, the pastor stated that a better assimilation system for transitioning visitors into the life of the church was an important improvement. Finally, the pastor identified that hiring competent staff was a past difficulty that needed to be overcome. The board identified that the people in the church needed to be more passionate about service. This paired well with the pastor's desire to equip leaders. The board then identified that a greater sense of effective spiritual engagement would be beneficial, as reflected in the statements "people more in tune with the Spirit; not emotion, but passionate about the gifts of the Spirit." The board also expressed that the community culture affected congregants, giving church members a "victims'

mentality.” The board posited that this perspective needed to change for the church to move forward.

When further asked about the cause of AG2’s state of plateau, the board and pastor differed in their expression. The pastor viewed the cause of plateau to be a functional result of issues relating to relational disconnectedness among some of the congregants. The board cited spiritual matters such as a lack of zeal and passion for Christ, as well as the general spiritual climate of the community, as primary factors contributing to the church’s state of plateau.

Three models of church revitalization were described to the participants of the survey: the Acts 2 Journey, a consultation model, and mentoring for the pastor. The interviewer then asked both the pastor and board members how they felt about revitalization, what methods may have been tried, and how hopeful they felt that one of the PDMN models might be in their context. Both the pastor and the board described revitalization efforts that had been explored in the past. According to the respondents, the past efforts of revitalization produced no measurable results. The failure was reported to be based on two factors: first, there was a lack of follow through and implementation. Second, it seemed like the revitalization strategy being presented was new to the presenter and was more informational than action based. Nevertheless, both the pastor and the board expressed optimism that a revitalization strategy like the Acts 2 Journey would be potentially effective in their church context.

Summary of AG2

The pastor and board of AG2 church presented similar perspectives on the church and its present state of plateau. Both the pastor and the board described the church as having a good reputation in the community due to their many outreaches to families and children. Despite the success of these large community outreaches, the efforts to reach the community were not

translating to sustained internal growth and spiritual vibrancy. The pastor consistently articulated that he needed to improve his methods of training others to both lead and serve in ministry. The board consistently concurred with the pastor's expressions, and also articulated concern for the health and ministerial sustainability of the pastor and his wife. The pastor's expressions for improvement tended to be more functional and organizational, while the board's expressions skewed toward spiritual development. Both perspectives were compatible and complimentary.

The pastor and the board communicated a sense of optimism that a revitalization initiative offered by the PDMN would be welcomed and effective for helping to change the state of plateau at AG2 church. Appreciation was also expressed toward the PDMN for their care and concern for the church and its leadership.

AG3

AG3 is a church with an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 274. The church is located in the suburbs of a large, metropolitan city in Pennsylvania. The church experienced a difficult lead pastor transition and had been in a state of plateau between 2014-2018. Pastor3 described the church as being in transition. The pastor believed that the identity of the church among its congregants was still being reformed. Additionally, the church's identity was changing within the community, going from an internally focused church to a community-engaged identity. The board expressed that the church was in recovery due to the pastoral transition, and was in a state of general complacency.

When asked about AG3's past five-year (2014-2018) attendance trends, the pastor felt that the ACMR's did not accurately reflect the actual attendance trends before the leadership transition. The pastor felt that the attendance figures before his arrival were inflated, and that the condition of the church was actually worse than what was reported to him when he accepted the

pastorate. However, he did concede that attendance had declined by around 80 people soon after he had arrived. The board indicated that they were not aware of anything related to ACMRs. Both the pastor and the board shared the impression that the church was now growing at a slow rate.

When asked about projecting past attendance trends into the future, the pastor felt optimistic that the church was growing younger, and with the present spiritual climate, leadership development, the church's presence within the community, and community outreach, the church will move forward. The board did not express the same level of optimism. The board expressed concern over the disconnectedness of the members from the current organizational realities, such as the financial difficulties that were of great concern to the leadership. The board identified that new people are visiting the church, and that there seems to be the possibility of a turnaround from plateau to growth. A consensus was expressed from the board members that there was a slow upswing in average attendance, with a friendlier atmosphere among congregants, due in part to the pastor's messages.

Both the pastor and the board expressed interest in the Acts 2 Journey or a similar revitalization strategy. The pastor reported that he had initiated a revitalization strategy that he had developed when he first arrived. Although the church had determined values and methods for moving the church toward a productive future, neither the pastor nor the board members were able to articulate those values and strategies. Both the pastor and the board expressed appreciation for the PDMN's interest in their state of plateau and seemed to have an openness to receiving resources that would assist them in revitalization.

Summary of AG3

The pastor seemed to express a perspective of AG3's status as he wished it to be. Although the ACMR clearly presented a state of plateau over the five-year measurement standard, the pastor referenced attendance trends over the past two months. Conversely, the board members presented a clear understanding that the church had declined prior to the pastoral transition, and that although the church seemed to have stabilize over the past two years, the church was in a tenuous position considering their debt load, building maintenance needs, and limited income. Both the pastor and the board shared a concern for greater missional effectiveness, but this concern was not connected to a plan or strategy that could be implemented into meaningful action. The statistical reports for AG3 seem to indicate that the perception of stability shared by the pastor and board is the church's present reality. This state of stability is a comforting reality to the participants of the interview because stability is better than decline. However, both the pastor and the board recognize that the church is in a financially weakened condition and experiences budgetary pressure as a result.

The pastor and board expressed appreciation for the Network's interest in their church and concern for its recent decline and plateau. Both stated that they would strongly consider Network revitalization resources, especially the Acts 2 Journey.

AG4

AG4 church is located in a small city of approximately 9500 in a rural farming area. The church experienced a sudden transition due to the lead pastor's unexpected death several years prior to this study. The church's average Sunday morning worship attendance reported in the ACMR indicates that the church had plateaued at 100.

When asked about the present state of the church, Pastor4 described the AG4 church as having an atmosphere of excitement. The pastor expressed that he perceived a sense of urgency to grow among the congregation, with the leadership getting excited about becoming a healthier church body. Although the pastor identified that the church has recently experienced a significant decline, his comments were predominantly optimistic, reflective of congregational stabilization and turnaround. Pastor4 did agree, however, that the ACMR reports for the five-year study period (2014-2018) were accurate, and that the church was in a state of plateau. The board was represented by one member who participated in the interview process. The board member presented an opinion that communicated a present condition of decline. He stated, "I feel like we are seeing a decline. Over the past couple of years, it seems that we have gone from one hundred to about sixty. Our pastor is encouraging growth. We are praying and fasting about it; the pastor called for a month of fasting and prayer regarding our church's finances." When asked where they thought the church would be in five to ten years if the present attendance trends remained on the same trajectory, the pastor and board member tended to express very different predictions. The pastor stated that he felt that the church would be on an incline of growth, while the board member stated that unless the Lord intervened, they would likely experience continued decline and possibly closure. When asked how each of them felt about these five to ten year projections, the pastor reported that he was excited at the prospects of growth, while the board member expressed that he was very uncomfortable.

When asked what changes could benefit the church, the pastor identified that becoming more missional in reaching out to the community, as well as closing the gap between those who are attending the church but not really experiencing the community of the church. Developing a vibrant youth ministry was also an important change that could be implemented. The board

member identified that finding a worship leader, a youth pastor, and perhaps purchasing new playground equipment would help the church move forward.

Both the pastor and the board member expressed optimism and a willingness to participate in a strategic revitalization effort. The pastor was clear that casting a missional vision, creating a plan to implement a vision, and celebrating victories that occurred as the plan was effectively instituted were steps that he felt were necessary to changing AG4's present state of plateau. The board member shared that his wife felt that "if you see people healed, filled with the Holy Spirit – that people would be attracted to the church." He also identified prayer meetings and evangelism through inviting friends were good steps for changing from plateau to growth. Both the pastor and the board member were very open to PDMN assistance for revitalization, especially the Acts 2 Journey.

Summary of AG4

The pastor and board member often expressed a very different perspective regarding the present state of the church. The pastor tended to view the current status of the church as he wished it to be, while the board member expressed a perspective of the churches state of plateau and possibly decline that was more in keeping with the realities represented in the five-year ACMRs.

The pastor seemed very informed about the need for the church to be missionally oriented, and articulated principles of revitalization that are in alignment with current literature in the field of church revitalization. Although the board member's expressions did not reflect the same level of information as the pastor's, the views that he shared were compatible and complimentary with the pastor's observations. Both the pastor and the board member stated that they were receptive to PDMN assistance for revitalization.

AG5

AG5 church is located in a small suburban city with a population of approximately 9,000 residents. The church averages 90 in attendance on Sunday morning and has been in a state of decline for the five-year study period (2014-2018). The present pastor has been leading the church for the past nine years (2012-2020).

The pastor described the church as friendly, passionate, and caring; but this would be the casual perspective of an outsider who is visiting. From a leadership perspective, the pastor described the church as having no momentum and numerically challenged. Additionally, the pastor identified that the church is entering into a season of financial stress due to a lease agreement that will soon be expiring, thus eliminating a revenue stream for the church. The board described the church as declining in both membership and attendance. They agreed with one another that the church was also in a state of transition from long-term members who are being replaced with newer congregants. Because of this transition, the board expressed that they were a church in search of an identity. One board member observed that when new visitors started attending their church in the past, the visitor would have to adopt the church's identity. However, the church is now tasked with adopting the newcomer's preferences. This creates a challenge because the church finds itself in a constant state of change. Both the pastor and the board agreed that the church was in a state of decline, concurring with the ACMRs from 2014-2018. The board believed that the present average Sunday morning worship attendance was lower than the 90 reported in the 2018 ACMR.

When asked where they projected the church will be in five to ten years if the present trend continues, both the pastor and the leadership team agreed that the present trajectory will be disastrous if continued that far into the future. The board stated that the church will not be in

existence. The pastor stated that he would no longer be leading the church. The board described that they were aware that change needed to occur in their church in order for the church to grow. However, they expressed concern regarding the sustainability of the church if the change does not produce an increase in attendance and financial income. The pastor articulated that changes have been made in key leadership positions, including the children's ministry of the church. Pastor5 stated that he believed that these changes would eventually produce missional effectiveness, but he was not certain if the changes would produce the growth needed before financial sacrifices would be necessary.

Both the pastor and the board expressed a cautious optimism. The board had a heightened awareness that the church was financially vulnerable due to the impending income loss that will result from the terminated lease agreement mentioned earlier. However, despite these realities, they expressed hope that if the church had a vibrant spiritual encounter, coupled with their church's advantageous location, that the church had an abundance of potential to grow. The pastor added an interesting perspective regarding some of the decline experienced at AG5. The pastor stated that the departure of some of the members was good for the health of the church, and would ultimately contribute to a growth trend.

Although the pastor cited various reasons that the church could turn around, he also expressed concern that his tenure of ministry was in question until the church conducted their annual business meeting. The pastor communicated an awareness that his leadership may come to an end based upon the outcomes of upcoming board meetings and the church's annual business meeting.

When asked to describe the relational culture of the congregation, both the pastor and board shared the perspective that the people at AG5 church are friendly on a superficial level, but

disconnected and lacking community on a deeper level. Both pastor and board agreed that congregants were generally uninvolved in service opportunities and lacked spiritual depth. Both the pastor and the board identified similar steps that they felt were necessary to move the church forward toward future sustainability; namely, greater spiritual depth, a passionate, fully committed relationship with the Lord, and a missional value of evangelism among the congregation.

Discussing the causality of the present trend of decline gave rise to a variance in perspectives between the pastor and board. The pastor described an attitude among the congregants that was resistant to engaging in revitalization plans and strategies. The board posited that the pastor did not listen to the input from the congregation, and thus the congregation was not inclined to participate in actions that could lead to revitalization. The pastor expressed that the congregation would begin to engage in the efforts for renewal that he introduced, but they would eventually lose interest. One expression that was particularly important to the pastor was communicated by a member who stated that “we’ve tried this before and it didn’t work.” The pastor identified at least two revitalization efforts and two consultants that have been engaged to try to change the decline of the church. Both the pastor and the board articulated that such efforts soon wane as people lose interest in them.

Summary of AG5

The pastor and the board shared many of the same perspectives regarding AG5’s present state of decline, and the factors that may be contributing to the decline. Additionally, both the pastor and the leadership of the church understood that the present trajectory that the church is taking is unsustainable. Both groups tended to express similar core actions that they felt would create greater missional effectiveness, thus generating much needed growth. Both groups lacked a

strategic plan that they were willing to invest themselves into in order to produce the missional effectiveness that they desire.

When asked if they were willing to engage in PDMN revitalization initiatives, each group expressed a tentative willingness, but also expressed a lack of substantial hope that an initiative would be effective in turning the church around. Both the pastor and the board were focused on the impending financial challenges and how those financial realities were going to affect the church's ability to support a pastor.

AG6

AG6 is a church located in a small town of 5,500 in a rural area of Pennsylvania. The church had recently transitioned leadership at the time of this study due their pastor's retirement; thus the current pastor has not been serving the church for any of the five-year period (2014-2018) that determines their status as plateaued or declined. The church reported that they have an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 80-85 between 2014-2018. Therefore, AG6 church is in a state of plateau. However, during the pastoral transition period, the church experienced significant conflict, which created substantial membership losses to the congregation. The board believed that the average Sunday morning worship attendance is now averaging approximately 50 each week.

The new pastor of AG6 church described the church body as active, devoted and growing. The board described the church as unified and caring, with a sweet and loving atmosphere. The board was enthusiastic in reporting that they are seeing "new faces" regularly at church services. After the researcher explained the five-year study period for assessing a churches status as growing, plateaued, or declining, both the pastor and board agreed that the church was plateaued and would continue on a declining trajectory if change was not instituted.

The board expressed that decline would eventually result in closure if this trend continued over a ten-year period. However, the board expressed much optimism with their new pastor and the renewed energy that he brings to the congregation. One board member stated, “I am electrified right now. We are Spirit-filled and moving forward.” The board identified two factors that have contributed to the significant turnaround that has occurred in the church’s culture. First, the new pastor has been well received along with the missional initiatives that he is introducing. Secondly, the board identified that a few families that were creating conflict had transitioned just prior to the new pastor being elected.

When asked what changes need to be introduced to AG6, the pastor identified that the church needs to be involved in the community. Additionally, the pastor felt that an intentional effort to have ethnic diversity represented in the church would be a welcome change. The board members tended to identify changes in facilities and programs as necessary to reverse the trend of plateau for their church.

When asked what led to the state of long-term plateau at AG6, the pastor identified the recent conflict as well as the inward focus of the congregation. The board cautiously expressed that leadership had been an issue that contributed to the church’s inability to be more missionally effective. Both the pastor and the board expressed that the church needed to re-establish spiritual vibrancy to the church’s rhythms through prayer and attendance at bible studies. The pastor also identified that the church needed to be effective in demonstrating their faith by “living out the transformation that we claim to have experienced.”

Both the pastor and the board were asked to express their desire to explore the possibility of a strategized revitalization effort in their church. The pastor was interested in pursuing the Acts 2 Journey for the church, but was cautious about believing that a strategy would be fruitful.

Pastor6 simply stated that he had not been in the church long enough to accurately assess if a revitalization effort would work. The board was hopeful that a PDMN initiative would be beneficial in revitalizing the church, but each of the three participants expressed that they would not likely be involved in carrying such an initiative forward. Each of the board members expressed that they felt that their tenure of leadership was coming to an end, largely due to their age, and that younger members of the church should be sought for the future good of the church.

Summary of AG6

AG6 has had a difficult season of transition due to some personal needs of their former pastor. They are now enjoying the newness of the succeeding pastor who brings energy and a welcomed change to the church. The board is optimistic and supportive, but also understands that due to the limitations of their age, new leadership is necessary for instituting the changes which are required to move the church from decline and plateau to growth and missional effectiveness.

Both the pastor and the board expressed gratitude for the resources and support offered by the PDMN during their internal conflicts and pastoral transition. The pastor verbalized a desire to be resourced with a mentor to assist him in implementing the needed changes within the church.

AG7

AG7 church is located in a small Pennsylvania borough with a population of 4,600. Although the community setting is considered an urban cluster by U.S. Census bureau standards, and it is a suburb of a neighboring city of twenty-eight thousand. Both communities are situated in a rural area consisting largely of farms and forests. The church has been in a state of decline during the five-year study period (2014-2018), going from 44 in average Sunday morning attendance in 2014 to 39 in 2018. This represents an 11.4 percent decline. The current pastor succeeded a long-

term pastor whose ministry spanned several decades. The present pastor has been leading the church for approximately three years. AG7 is the first church that Pastor7 has served as a lead pastor.

Pastor7 describes the present congregation as a very kind group of people who have been very cooperative with his leadership. Although, in the pastor's viewpoint, the congregation tends to be cliquish, they are described as mostly "agreeable" in their relationship to the pastor. The board identified the church as plateaued numerically. The board also noted that the congregation was aging, but they were described as a loving and caring group of believers. Both the pastor and the board agreed that the ACMR accurately reflected the attendance trend over the past five years (2014-2018), although both seemed to prefer a designation of plateau over the technically accurate designation of decline. The pastor seemed to be discouraged at the present state of the church. He stated that a few new families recently began attending the church, but he expressed doubt regarding their longevity. "If they do stick," the pastor said, "it will be a miracle."

When asked to project what the church's future might look like if the present trend continued into the next five to ten years, the pastor predicted that the church will continue to decline and eventually close due to the natural attrition associated with an older congregation. The board concurred with this point of view, noting that young people do not stay in the church or community. Despite this perception, the board also expressed hope due to the confidence that they have in their pastor. "The pastor is working pretty hard," one board member said, "so we believe that things can change." Throughout the conversation, it was apparent that board members also worked hard, contributing to the ongoing maintenance of the pristine church facilities. Both the board and the pastor agreed that the church congregation was well aware of their present state of vulnerability, and furthermore, were not comfortable with these realities. As

an older congregation, the board expressed disappointment that their own children attended AG7 in the past, but when they had their own children, they transferred to other churches with vibrant children and youth ministries.

When asked what it would take to turn the direction of the church around, the board cited attracting more young people and younger families with programs geared to that age demographic. However, they recognized that this would be difficult due to the age of the congregation and the limitations of their church facilities. The pastor cited evangelism and developing an external focus as primary needs to change from decline to growth.

When asked about their openness to engage in a strategic revitalization initiative, the energy of the respondents, both the board and the pastor, seemed to decrease. The board expressed that they had “poked at” revitalization, but when changes were recommended then implemented under the former pastor, the church went from bad to worse. They also communicated that the congregation was willing to serve at some community outreach events like an Easter egg hunt, but were uninterested in presenting the gospel in more aggressive efforts like door-to-door evangelism. At this point in the interview, one board member advocated for reviving evangelistic efforts that were predominant in the 1970’s. The pastor explained that he felt that the congregation was at a place where they would have to see results in order to invest themselves in any revitalization effort. The pastor explained that he had not tried any revitalization efforts in the church because he was still getting to know the congregation and getting acclimated to the community.

Although the board and the pastor were amenable to the idea of revitalization, they did not express a significant level of hope that a revitalization strategy would be effective in their context. The pastor did acknowledge his need for a mentor. The pastor had tried to utilize a

coach, but expressed that he didn't have the internal substance to engage the coaching process effectively.

Summary of AG7

AG7 seems to be hovering at the brink of unsustainability. The board works hard to keep the facilities in good repair, but they can see the limitations of not having a well-rounded family ministry. Furthermore, both the pastor and the board are aware that as the congregation ages, their future prospects of sustainability diminish. The pastor seems to be accepted as the leader of the church, but seems to need assistance for both personal leadership development as well as discovering a plan for reaching out to his community and their larger neighboring community. Both the pastor and the members of the board expressed appreciation toward the PDMN, and an openness to receive assistance in discovering a process whereby the church could be revitalized.

AG8

AG8 is located in a small rural community with a population of just over 1,500. The church has struggled since its inception and has recently experienced significant decline since the departure of its founding, long term pastor. AG8 has experienced a 37 percent decline over the past five years (2014-2018) and reported an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 27 in 2018. The current pastor has been leading the congregation for approximately three years (2018-2020). The pastor and two board members participated in the guided self-assessment interview.

The pastor described the AG8 church was being stagnant with no growth and no volunteers. He communicated that receiving help from the congregation was practically non-existent in the week-to-week ministries of the church. With this level of participation from the congregants, there were very few ministry expressions taking place at the church besides the Sunday morning worship service that had declined to between 12-16 people. Conversely, the

pastor reported that the church was able to execute a couple of major outreaches each year. These outreaches, which included a community Easter egg hunt and a fall Halloween event, garnered the participation of approximately 300 community residents. However, the pastor reported that these events produced no converts, and no visits to the major worship service held the following Sunday. The pastor also noted that no gospel presentation was conducted at the events.

The board reported similar impressions regarding AG8s present state of health. One board member stated that “we are struggling, and I hate to say it, but our church is also dying. We were plateaued, but now we are declining.” Both the pastor and the board agreed that the ACMRs for the reporting period of 2014 through 2018 were an accurate reflection of the church’s attendance trends. They also noted that during the past year (2019-2020) the church had declined further than the 27 reported during the study period.

When asked where they thought the church would be in five to ten years if this trend continued, both the pastor and board members agreed that the church was not sustainable for five years if the present trend of decline continued. The board members stated that they were very uncomfortable with the prospects of closing the church, and stated that the church congregants were very disheartened because of the loss of most of the younger people who had once attended the church. Unsurprisingly, both the pastor and the board members also reflected a very flat emotional tone throughout the interview process. The emotionless expression presenting during the interview process indicated that the leadership of the church was equally discouraged, lacking much expression of hope or plans to change the trajectory of the church.

The pastor and board reflected significantly different perspectives regarding the relational culture of AG8 church. The pastor reported that the congregants were disconnected, cliquish, and

unwelcoming. The board members stated that the church members were closely knit, friendly, and cooperative. One board member reported that the congregants “will pray for each other at the drop of a hat.” The board members did not seem to understand that “tightly knit” and caring for one another may not be reflective of a welcoming atmosphere to outsiders. The pastor described that he tried to encourage engagement from both the congregation and the board, but his efforts to cultivate friendliness was fruitless, noting that everyone leaves immediately after the close of service. The board members observed that the pastor was difficult to engage, stating that he either attended to equipment on the platform following the worship service, or engaged one person in conversation, thus ignoring any other congregants.

When asked what led to the church’s process of decline, both the pastor and the board referenced the abrupt departure of the founding pastor. The pastor indicated that this sudden departure created a “woundedness” among the church body. Some members left the church, while others developed a distrustful attitude so that they will not allow themselves to be vulnerable to future relational pain.

The pastor cited recruiting enthusiastic volunteers, increasing income, and implementing a worship team as the three most desired changes that he would like to see happen in the immediate future. The board members were not able to give specific changes that might improve their church’s position of health. One board member cited restoration of the decline in moral values in America as a possibility for improvement, as well as returning to a blended worship style for Sunday mornings.

When asked what three steps might be implemented to change the AG8’s state of decline, the pastor referenced missional activities such as trying “unconventional evangelism methods.” By this the pastor meant rather than trying to go door-to-door, the congregation might try to

engage people in conversations about their lives in coffee shops and other public spaces. Since the pastor is bi-vocational, he also focused again on increasing church finances which would ultimately result in being fully supported, thus enabling him to dedicate more time to the ministry and evangelism. The board felt that prayer would be a necessary first step toward revitalization. Secondly, the board expressed concern that the pastor didn't engage people in the church well, citing an instance where a board member's wife had to corner the pastor in order to greet him and give him a hug.

Both the pastor and the board expressed interest in utilizing a revitalization initiative offered by the PDMN. However, all responses were qualified with limitations that exist for the potential leaders. The pastor noted that he would be interested, but that leading would be very difficult because of his bi-vocational status, having a family, and the pastoral duties of the church. One of the board members stated that his wife has cancer, and that his attention needs to be directed toward her physical needs while battling this disease. When asked what initiative seemed most applicable, the answers were more explorative than decisive. The consensus of both interviews seemed to indicate that a consultant would be most helpful. A consultation was advocated because it seemed that the church leaders could not imagine engaging in the demands of a full-year process. Additionally, although the board said that they believed a consultant would be a good fit for their context, they described the role of a mentor for their pastor, whom they had identified as a novice earlier in the conversation, suggesting that he needed to develop more as a lead pastor. The pastor described attempting to engage a mentor during his tenure of ministry at AG8, but without appreciable benefits. Pastor8 recounted that the mentoring relationship only lasted a few weeks because both he and the mentor were busy and did not follow up on scheduling continued meetings.

Summary of AG8

AG8 is in a precipitous position and is on the verge of closure. This church may have reached a tipping point where decline has created a reduction in enough members to carry the church's mission forward. The corresponding outcome of reduced finances creates difficulty in keeping the financial obligations of the church current. Additionally, the pastor and board, seemed to have little hope that revitalization efforts would be fruitful.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROJECT EVALUATED

Observations from the Guided Self-Assessments

A guided self-assessment questionnaire was designed for this dissertation project to initiate a conversation between a PennDel Ministry Network (PDMN) representative (in this case the researcher) and the primary leadership team of a church that has experienced a plateau or decline in their average Sunday morning attendance. The purpose of the assessment was to (1) explore the perception of church leadership regarding their state of plateau or decline; (2) assess the similarities and dissimilarities of the pastor's and board's perception and perspectives on the present state of their church, including the church's relational culture and other factors which may have contributed to the church's stagnation over the five-year study period; (3) identify the church leadership's past revitalization efforts and assumptions of future missional changes that need to take place to move the church from a state of stagnation to growth; and (4) assess the relationship between the churches involved in the research and the PDMN, giving attention to the probability of the PDMN assisting the church with resources to change the present condition of stagnation to a trajectory of missional effectiveness and growth.

A primary objective of the research was to begin a conversation regarding the brutal facts of a church's plateau or decline and where that trajectory will place the church in five to ten years, while offering hope that with a spiritually engaged, strategic process, the church could experience a turnaround.¹

¹ Collins, *Good to Great*, chap. 4, "The Stockdale Paradox."

Analysis of the Research Process

In each of the sixteen interviews, the conversation that emerged from the guided self-assessment was pleasant and congenial. Developing a positive, trusting relationship between a church's primary leadership team and denominational leaders was believed to be essential before offering solutions to revitalize a church. The importance of developing a healthy relationship between the PennDel Ministry Network and the church leadership team before offering assistance was founded upon factors discovered in the review of literature from the field of church revitalization. Mark Merrill, for example, established that Assemblies of God churches have been historically suspicious of ecclesial structures.² Assuaging any latent concerns of the church leadership by engaging in an open dialogue could therefore possibly remove this barrier of suspicion. Additionally, church leadership resistance could be diminished by demonstrating the church's value by making the church a priority over the denomination's interests and demonstrating denominational competency in resourcing churches in revitalization efforts.³ Thirdly, denominational attachments are generally declining in perceived value.⁴ Having a PDMN official visiting with a church leadership team in a small group context potentially builds confidence and an appreciation among the leaders for the inherent relational values of both fellowship and demonstrating interest and concern for their weakened organizational state. On numerous occasions a statement was made by board members that the interview was the first time they had ever met anyone from the PDMN office. Such statements reveal a disconnect between PDMN leadership and those they are trying to influence and assist.

² Mark Merrill, "Revitalization of Assemblies of God Churches in Stagnation or Decline" (DMin diss., George Fox University, Portland, 2016) 17.

³ Borden, *Hit the Bullseye*, 15.

⁴ Eric Patterson and Edmund Rybarczyk, ed., *The Future of Pentecostalism in the United States*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 97, ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/seu/detail.action?docID=1351145>. Created from seu on 2020-02-09 09:47:54.

Finally, there is an inherent value in asking questions to discover felt needs and possible options for church revitalization as compared to telling a group of leaders what they need to start doing to change their church's trajectory. In his book *Humble Inquiry*, Edgar Schein asserted that higher-ranking leaders "must become better at asking and do less telling in a culture that overvalues telling."⁵ Denomination leaders and revitalization experts may know that certain church activities will yield fruitful missional results, while others will generally fail at effectively producing transformational results. However, many leaders cannot predict which specific changes will bring about the best missional results in a particular church. The guided self-assessment provides a conversational framework that explores church and leadership culture, accuracy of perception, and revitalization options, while developing the necessary relationship to further explore the most viable pathway toward a healthier future for the church. Schein proposed that "ultimately the purpose of Humble Inquiry is to build relationships that lead to trust which, in turn, leads to better communication and collaboration."⁶ Building collaborative relationships between the PDMN and a church's primary leadership team will likely yield the most productive missional results for a church which has stagnated. Thus, both the process of discussing the guided self-assessment questionnaire, as well as the personal visit with the leadership team, proved to be of immense value in discussing the difficult position of the church along with possible revitalization strategies.

Perception of Present State of Stagnation

Questions 1-7 on the guided self-assessment questionnaire were designed to explore the church leadership's perception of the present state of plateau or decline in their church. Additionally, the

⁵ Edgar H. Schein, *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013), 3. Kindle Edition.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

perceived accuracy of past reporting was explored. Finally, the research questions were intended to create open dialogue regarding the probable outcomes for the church if the present trends continued into the future.

Inaccurate data on the ACMRs was discovered in two of the churches responding in this section of the interview. The pastors of AG1 and AG3 reported that the ACMR data on the primary average worship attendance was inflated when reported under their predecessor's administration. These were the only two of the eight pastors who reported discrepancies in the data. The board from AG1 concurred with their pastor that the data was grossly exaggerated. The board from AG3 had no knowledge of the ACMR, and therefore could not give an opinion regarding the accuracy of the data or the pastor's claim that the data was inflated. All of the other six churches interviewed agreed with the five-year ACMR reports concerning their church's primary worship attendance. The perspective articulated by the pastor and board of AG1 corroborated the research of Mark Merrill's dissertation "Revitalization of Assemblies of God Churches in Stagnation or Decline." Merrill observed that some leaders in Assemblies of God churches adhere to a belief that revival will address their revitalization needs.⁷ This belief was expressed by both the pastor and board in AG1.

Although leadership teams were given the standards by which growth, plateau, and decline are established, and although each board was presented with their church's statistical trends over the past five years, some pastors or leadership teams were unable to accept the reality of their church's status of plateau or decline. For example, the researcher adjusted the study period for AG1 from a five-year perspective to a three-year perspective to accommodate the lead pastor's tenure of ministry, thus factoring out the two prior years with the grossly exaggerated

⁷ Mark Merrill, "Revitalization of Assemblies of God Churches in Stagnation or Decline," 18-19.

attendance figures. The data clearly indicated that the church had declined according to the objective standards utilized and explained for the research. Nevertheless, both the pastor and the leadership team stated that the church is growing due to a recent upsurge in attendance and revivalistic atmosphere in their worship services. Similarly, the pastor from AG4 church stated that his church was growing despite the data reported and even a recent decline due to a small exodus created by disgruntled congregants. Thom Rainer, in *Breakout Churches*, accurately identified that many churches lack the capacity to confront the realities of church stagnation and its causes.⁸ Rainer proposed that a church must have an ABC moment when awareness, belief, and crisis converge to create a wake-up call that keeps them from continuing to accept mediocrity or “business as usual.”⁹

When asking the church leadership to project where this trajectory of plateau or decline would take them in a five to ten-year period, most leaders expressed concern for what the future held. As might be expected, churches experiencing decline expressed a deeper concern and a greater sense of urgency than those churches that were plateaued. Both the pastor and the board of AG7 demonstrated a clear understanding that if the trajectory of the church does not change, the church will close in five to ten years. Asking questions regarding the church’s probable outcome if the same trajectory is maintained creates a sense of urgency which is beneficial to engaging leaders in church revitalization. Herrington, Bonem, and Furr pointed out that “urgency is the fuel that launches the change process.”¹⁰ Pointing out that the church will eventually experience an outcome from the process of plateau or decline had a noticeable effect in the research conversation. Both the board and the pastor at AG5 were sensitized to their issues of

⁸ Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, 69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, 40.

decline due to an impending negative change in their income stream. Discussing the outcomes of their present trends seemed to provide greater clarity that status quo was unsustainable. Troy Jones asserted that churches whose leaders accept status quo are faced with a death sentence.¹¹ Several of the pastors and church boards expressed a keen understanding that unless their church's trajectory changes, they cannot exist very far into the future.

Both the pastor and the leadership team of AG2 articulated that the pastor's leadership style could not remain at status quo. The pastor admitted that he needed to change his style of carrying the workload of the whole church to developing leaders to whom he could delegate more responsibility. When asked where the plateaued church would be in five years, the pastor stated that if things did not change, he would be burned out. The board members of AG2 expressed concern that their pastor and his wife seem to hold onto too much of the workload. They expressed appreciation for how hard the pastor and his wife work but acknowledged that the ministry couple could not sustain their effort while remaining personally healthy. Paul Bordon noted that leader development should be a top priority of ecclesial organizations.¹² The pastor of AG2 and his leadership team corroborated Borden's assertion that there is a need within plateaued and declining churches for greater effectiveness in training both pastors and their board to lead well.¹³

Similarities/Dissimilarities of Understanding Regarding Contributing Factors of Plateau/Decline

Questions 8-11 on the guided self-assessment questionnaire were designed to obtain an understanding of the church's relational culture, and the impact that the church culture may have on its condition of stagnation. Perspectives on cultural and organizational change within the

¹¹ Jones, *Recalibrate Your Church*, 65.

¹² Borden, *Hit the Bullseye*, 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 132.

church were also explored in this section of the questionnaire, especially as those changes were aligned with the missional values of the congregation and its leadership team. Finally, a broad question about the core cause of the church's plateau or decline was posed to the interview participants.

Recent conflict dominated the discussion of the relational culture of AG6. The board reported, and the new pastor concurred, that there was a leadership weakness in the previous pastor for navigating through the difficulties that several families had created. The literature review in the field of church revitalization identified that both leadership and conflict are major issues in churches that have experienced plateau or decline. Tony Morgan identified the necessary combination of leadership and conflict resolution when he posited that the maintenance of unity and the ruthless elimination of division were important factors in working toward church health and growth.¹⁴

The pastor of AG3 also identified a variety of conflicts that had to be mitigated in order for the church to begin experiencing missional vitality. The board and the pastor articulated that there was unity among the leadership team regarding the management of the conflicts, but the conflicts nevertheless drained emotional and financial resources from the pastor and church. The conflicts experienced by AG6 and AG3 had nothing to do with the predictable conflict that inevitably accompanies the introduction of change in church revitalization. Herrington, Bonem, and Furr observed that "the change process, by its very nature, creates conflict."¹⁵ One change instituted out of necessity in AG3 involved the closure of a Christian school that was requiring a substantial percentage of the church's annual budget but did not contribute commensurately to the fundamental mission of the church. The emotional impact on the pastor from the decision to

¹⁴ Morgan, *The Unstuck Church*, 103.

¹⁵ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, 9.

close the school was substantial. This type of personal emotional liability experienced by a pastor of a revitalization effort gives credence to Barna's assertion that pastors who engage in a revitalization are likely to engage in only one such effort.¹⁶

Examining the church relational culture from the board's and the lead pastor's point of view provided interesting contrasts in the perspectives of the participants. In some instances, the perspectives expressed in these separate interviews were compatible and in agreement. For example, the pastor at AG5 described the congregation as friendly on a superficial level, but disconnected on deeper levels of relationship, leadership, and service. The board expressed the same perspective, using the terms friendly and disconnected to describe the congregation's relational culture. Both the pastor and board described congregants who attended the primary worship service or fellowship events but did not engage in deeper levels of participation and community. Despite the pastor's emphasis on building community, the interview participants described a lack of cohesiveness among congregants and a lack of participation in the mission of the church. Both the pastor and the board identified a culture of apathy among the congregants. Both groups stated that the pastor was trying to shift the culture, but without measurable success.¹⁷ Lewis and Cordeiro aptly identified that church culture can unwittingly block missional effectiveness. The authors asserted that transforming a stagnated church into a missionally effective church requires examining the church's culture.¹⁸

Both the pastor and the board identified that spiritual and relational transformation were key changes that need to occur to stop the church's decline. Similarly, both the pastor and the

¹⁶ Barna, *Turnaround Churches*, 68.

¹⁷ On the day of the interview, the researcher attended the primary worship service before meeting with the board for the guided self-assessment. Of notable interest, the researcher was not greeted by anyone from the congregation and was turned away from several seating options without assistance to find a place to sit.

¹⁸ Lewis and Cordeiro, *Culture Shift*, 3.

board expressed concern that the pastor's leadership may not be effective in this church setting to effect this change. The pastor of AG5 noted that members of the congregation intimated that his leadership lacked the necessary elements to bring cultural change to the church. The pastor recalled one such incident:

We have tried revitalization "boot camp" in times past and felt that we were really on track. A woman stood up in a meeting and said, "Pastor, we've been through all of this before and it never goes anywhere." I determined that this would go somewhere, but in the end, it fizzled out.

Stetzer and Dodd observed that pastoral change occurred in sixty percent of the *comeback churches* that comprised their research.¹⁹ The authors did not propose that changing pastoral leadership was the key to changing a church's state of plateau or decline. Changing the mindset of a congregation from maintenance (programs) to mission (outreach) was proposed as the change that needed to occur in stagnated churches. "Too many churches are focused on maintenance and not strategic growth—and a new pastor or a changed pastor can make the difference, if they can change to strategic thinking."²⁰ It was obvious from the interview that both the pastor and the board were considering whether leadership change was needed to change the church's trajectory of decline.

While AG5 was an example of both the pastor and board struggling to find solutions to problems which they agreed upon, churches like AG8 have significantly divergent perspectives regarding the relational culture of the church. The pastor of AG8 identified without hesitation that the congregants were cliquish and disconnected, noting that the congregants typically left the church immediately after the worship service had concluded. Conversely, the board reflected that the congregants were friendly and relationally engaged. Additionally, the leadership team viewed

¹⁹ Stetzer and Dodd, *Comeback Churches*, 179.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

the pastor as being aloof and disinterested in engaging with the congregants on Sunday mornings. Lewis and Cordeiro noted that “culture shapes the church, and leaders make the culture.”²¹ When the culture of the church was represented with positive expressions in the research interview, the leaders tended to be more optimistic regarding the church’s future. Conversely, when the relational culture was described in negative terms, the energy level in discussing the church’s future was low.

Asking church leaders about the primary cause of their church’s state of plateau or decline, along with the changes that they felt were necessary to reverse the present condition of stagnation, brought a wide variety of opinions by the participants in the guided self-assessment. Some of the responses were biblically germane and organizationally sound. Proposing prayer, becoming more outreach and service oriented, or having a greater community presence were offered by several of the leadership teams. Other expressions were extremely disconnected from a realistic correlation between the proposed changes and an outcome of a revitalized church. One board member commented that “we have to stop this attack on Christian moral values.” Another board member asserted that we need to boldly go back out on the streets and pass out tracts or go door to door witnessing. Sometimes the changes focused on income and improving facilities as being of priority in changes that would bring revitalization to the church.

Two conclusions could be drawn from the conversations from this section of the guided self-assessment: First, there are some leaders or leadership teams who are largely unaware of the factors that have contributed to their stagnation or decline. Secondly, there are some leadership teams who have an adequate understanding of factors that have led to plateau or decline, but they

²¹ Lewis and Cordeiro, *Culture Shift*, 28.

do not have a clear understanding of what changes should be implemented to bring a meaningful redirection of their church's trajectory.

Past Revitalization Efforts and Future Aspirations for Change

Questions 12-16 on the guided self-assessment questionnaire comprised the third section of the questionnaire and explored strategies that the leadership team believed would create a turnaround for their church. A Likert scale (1-5) was employed to measure the interest level of the leadership for participating in a revitalization effort in their church. A Likert scale was also utilized to gauge the leadership team's level of optimism or hope that a revitalization strategy would be effective for changing the trajectory of the congregation's state of plateau or decline. Finally, barriers to revitalization and past revitalization efforts were explored to give the research a perspective on factors which may be impeding engagement in revitalization, or what efforts may have been attempted but did not yield positive results. Conversely, if revitalization efforts were temporarily effective, the factors which contributed to the eventual deterioration of strategy were explored.

In most interviews there was no evidence of a clear, methodical, sequential strategy for creating the circumstances in which positive change would be the anticipated outcome. Some leadership teams wanted to see more people come to the church but had no plan for affecting that change. AG7's board wanted to see more young people come into the church. They realized that the congregation was aging, and that having younger congregants was necessary for the strength of the church. However, there was no optimistic plan to see that wish come true. The pastor of AG3 posited that being true to their identity would bring revitalization. The boards of AG2, AG3, AG4, AG6, and AG8 expressed that holding prayer meetings was an integral part of revitalizing their church. However, the boards then referenced having t-shirts printed or letting

the community know what the church stands for as turnaround steps to revitalization. In six of the eight churches whose leadership teams were interviewed, only two reported that they had explored a strategic plan to revitalize their church.

The Likert scale questions on the guided self-assessment were designed to measure interest (question 13) and optimism (question 14) for the leadership team to engage in revitalization efforts for their church. Interestingly, the average of board responses demonstrating willingness to participate in revitalization was 4.2 on a scale of 1-5 (1 = not interested; 5 = very interested.) One church responded with a 1 and was the low expression, and 5 was the highest response. The average of pastor responses to being interested in engaging in revitalization was 4.75, with 4 as the low expression and 5 as the highest response.

When asked how hopeful they were that a revitalization effort would be effective in their church, the average response of board members was 4, on a scale of 1-5 (1 = not hopeful; 5 = very hopeful). 1 was the low expression and 5 as the highest response. The average response of pastors to being hopeful that a revitalization effort would be effective for their church was 3.75, with 1 as the low expression and 5 as the highest response. In summary, the pastors expressed more interest in participating in church revitalization than did the church boards, but the church boards expressed more optimism that revitalization efforts would be effective than did the pastors. Up to this point in the guided self-assessment, the present state of plateau or decline and the factors which had contributed to this condition in each church were explored. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins advocated that companies which had a breakthrough were able to “confront the brutal facts without losing faith.”²² Some of the pastors who were interviewed demonstrated that although they were willing to try something to change the stagnated state of their church,

²² Collins, *Good to Great*, chap. 4 “Confront the Brutal Facts (Yet Never Lose Faith).”

they were not optimistic that the effort would produce meaningful results. They had, to some extent, lost faith.

Conversely, some church leaders were energized by the prospects that there were strategies and resources available for church revitalization, and were enthusiastic and optimistic in their desire to participate in a revitalization engagement.

Relational Confidence Between Church Leadership and PDMN

The last section of the questionnaire (questions 17-20) explored the relationship between the PennDel Ministry Network and the church's leadership team. The leadership team was given a verbal description of three revitalization strategies offered by the PDMN. These strategies are comprised of mentoring for the pastor, an evaluation of the church by a trained consultant, and the Acts 2 Journey (see Appendix E). A Likert scaled question (1-5) was also included to explore the openness of the leadership team to being assisted by the PennDel Ministry Network in church revitalization using one of the three revitalization initiatives currently under development. Finally, the open-ended, all-inclusive question "How can the PennDel Network assist you?" was asked in order to encourage dialogue, build relationship, and discover any concerns that might exist within the leadership team.

When responding to the question regarding which of the three Network initiatives seemed most applicable to their context, the Acts 2 Journey seemed to resonate with the largest percentage of pastors and boards. 50 percent of the pastors identified the Acts 2 Journey as having the greatest potential benefit, and 63 percent of the board members agreed that the Acts 2 Journey would be most beneficial to their church. Two pastors felt strongly that having a mentor would be most beneficial to helping them grow personally or in identifying why their leadership was ineffective in creating a missionally effective culture in their church. In each of these

instances, the leadership teams corroborated that their pastor would benefit from having a mentor. One pastor's answer on relevant revitalization resourcing had little to do with church revitalization, but instead focused on teaching boards how to care for the emotional and financial needs of their pastor. One board also chose none of the three options but continued to propose that revival would adequately address any needs for church revitalization.

Almost all of the participants expressed an openness to being involved with Network revitalization resources. On the five-point Likert scale, pastors averaged 4.75 in being interested in PDMN assistance for their church's revitalization efforts. The leadership team response averaged slightly less with 4.5 being the average of all expressions.

Evaluation of the Guided Self-Assessment Process and Interview

Throughout the guided self-assessment interviews, the relational tone between those being interviewed and the researcher (who is a Network official), was warm, engaging, and congenial. There seemed to be no resistance, defensiveness, or any expressions of animosity toward either the research process, or toward the PDMN in general. The final question in the guided self-assessment was "how can the PennDel Ministry Network assist you?" This broad question was included to give opportunity to both pastors and leadership teams to articulate unmet needs, relational disconnections, or appeal for resources not included in the scope of the assessment. In Paul Borden's book *Hit the Bullseye*, the author stated that the local church is the primary missional agent that God has chosen to use in offering redemption to the world.²³ Therefore, Borden strongly asserted, ecclesial organizations exist to enhance or otherwise resource the local church for its mission.²⁴ Borden's assumptions greatly influenced the intentional use of a Network official in the assessment process. The use of the guided self-assessment questionnaire

²³ Borden, *Hit the Bullseye*, 14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

was designed to be personal and present for an unfiltered conversation regarding the state of plateau or decline in the sample group of churches.

The responses given by the pastors and the leadership teams were encouraging and affirming, indicating that the focus of the research project was an appreciated gesture. The participants expressed appreciation that their plight was of concern to the PDMN. The personal visit to the church, and the accompanying conversations with church leaders was identified as welcome event. One board member expressed that he had never met a PDMN official. Another board member identified a past conflict that he had with a former superintendent and was glad that he was now engaged in a conversation that did not involve conflict or controversy. Another board identified in the interview that they were not aware that they were part of a larger church organization. One board member expressed that she had come to the meeting hoping to find solutions to their churches state of plateau. Although some boards communicated their deep concern for the future of their church, and this level of concern created a somber emotional tone of the research interview, the board was nevertheless congenial and engaged in the process. In “Revitalization of Assemblies of God Churches in Stagnation or Decline,” Mark Merrill identified that historically, Assemblies of God church culture reflected suspicion toward organizational structure and leadership.²⁵ Archived minutes from the Eastern District Council (now the PennDel Ministry Network) certainly reflect these sentiments.²⁶ The engagement between the researcher and the leadership of the churches that participated in the guided self-assessment project were distinctly pleasant and cordial, reflecting a very different engagement than what may have been culturally prevalent in the past.

²⁵ Mark Merrill, *Revitalization of Assemblies of God Churches in Stagnation or Decline*, 17.

²⁶ Eastern District Council Minutes, May 1962, District Secretary-Treasurer Records, Year Book Supplement, PennDel Ministry Network Archives, Mechanicsburg, PA.

The responses of the pastors in the research interview were also congenial and thoughtful. A pastor from a bi-vocational ministry context expressed a need for scheduling considerations due to his personal life-circumstances. Additionally, the pastor (along with several other pastors) requested that we explore providing financial supplements or resources to assist pastors whose churches did not have the resources to compensate the pastor adequately. Mentoring was requested by several pastors, along with creative networking opportunities for churches that need resourcing. Another pastor asked for help from the Network to say things to the church that he would be relationally vulnerable for suggesting. Health care needs were also discussed, along with growth opportunities in leadership skill training.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

Jesus said, “I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18) Ultimately, Jesus invited and commissioned his followers to join him in the mission of building his kingdom of redeemed people (Matthew 28:18-20). It may be posited that the church is not the mission of God, but the church has been founded to participate in the *missio Dei*. As Christopher Wright states, “it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God’s mission.”¹ From the Day of Pentecost until the legalization of Christianity by the emperor Constantine, the church flourished in the midst of opposition and adversity in carrying out the *missio Dei*. Estimates indicate that the church grew by 3.4 percent during the first three centuries until approximately 6.3 million people were followers of Jesus Christ.² The church was not without internal conflict and challenges of doctrine and praxis, as can be seen by the corrective letters written to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2-3. Despite persecution and cultural opposition from without and conflict from within, the church nevertheless continued to be missionally effective, as can be perceived by its numerical growth over the span of three centuries.

Ecclesial organization and oversight developed from the earliest days of Christianity’s expansion. Although Christ did not dictate a specific ecclesial framework from which church leaders would give oversight to the corporate church, Jesus did indicate that authority structures would exist (Matthew 20:25-28). These ecclesial structures served to establish doctrinal purity and to guide believers in living out the Christ-life in a manner that was consistent with the

¹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 62.

² Rodney Stark, “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women,” 230.

scriptures. In the early years of the church, its leaders, including the apostles, gave their lives through martyrdom in demonstration of a discipleship fully committed to the *missio Dei*. Some early church fathers such as Irenaeus also celebrated discipleship through martyrdom. The blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church, and the church effectively gave witness to God's redemptive plan. It may therefore be posited that ecclesial organization contributed to the missional vitality of the church during the early centuries of the church's existence.

Today ecclesial organizations, often referred to as denominations, fellowships, or associations, are uniquely postured to influence affiliated churches toward missional vitality. Influencing churches toward greater missional effectiveness is both an opportunity and responsibility of the organizations whose task is to give oversight to their affiliated churches. The historic roots of ecclesial offices such as elder (*presbuteros*) and overseer (*episkopos*) give not only the impression that internal religious practices were being guided or supervised, but also the outward reach of the church into the world (Acts 11 and 15). Ecclesial organizations which claim to give spiritual oversight through mature ministers must also view themselves as stewards to whom the *missio Dei* through their churches has been entrusted. Paul Borden proposed that "the church as a body of Christ is about mission to all peoples, not institutional survival or even care for the membership, and the congregation is the primary unit of that expanding mission."³ With the assumption of the priority of mission in view, Borden further proposed that ecclesial organizations must see their primary role as resourcing the local church through revitalization to fulfill its primary missional commission.⁴ Effectively fulfilling the Great Commission, articulated in all of the gospels and the book of Acts, became a biblical basis for viewing vitality in the local church in this research project. The theological concept of *missio Dei* was explored

³ Borden, *Hit the Bullseye*, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

to give greater understanding of the primary purpose of the church. Although a missionally effective church may benefit from organizational revitalization, the church as a partner with God in mission becomes a first level metric for determining vitality.⁵ Although church size and attendance are arguably not the primary measurement for missional effectiveness, these observable patterns of church life reflect a level of engagement that is important for considering church vitality. Tony Morgan asserted that church vitality is “not all about attendance, but attendance is certainly a factor when assessing health.”⁶ Luke’s practices of identifying conversion results and church size in the book of Acts support Morgan’s statement.⁷ Thus, this research project explored denominational influence in church revitalization, using a five-year perspective from 2014-2018 of average Sunday morning worship attendance as the basis for identifying churches in the PennDel Ministry Network that were growing, plateaued, or declining. A sample group of four plateaued churches and four declining churches were engaged in the research project. A conversation tool was developed to focus attention on the church’s state of plateau or decline. This conversation tool was entitled a “guided self-assessment questionnaire,” with the researcher guiding the conversation to identify: (1) the perception of church leadership regarding their state of plateau or decline; (2) the similarities and dissimilarities of the pastor’s and board’s perception and perspectives on the present state of their church, including the church’s relational culture and other factors which may have contributed to the church’s stagnation over the five-year study period; (3) the church leadership’s past revitalization efforts and assumptions of future missional changes that need to take place to move the church from a state of stagnation to growth; and (4) the relationship between the churches

⁵ Konz, “The Even Greater Commission: Relating the Great Commission to the Missio Dei, and Human Agency to Divine Activity, in Mission,” 334.

⁶ Morgan, *The Unstuck Church*, 120.

⁷ See Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:7.

involved in the research and the PennDel Ministry Network, giving attention to the probability of the PDMN assisting the church with resources to change the present condition of stagnation to a trajectory of missional effectiveness and growth.

What the Guided Self-Assessment Process Revealed

The statistics provided by local churches on the Annual Church Ministries Report may not be an accurate reflection of the church's reality.

Although six of the eight churches agreed that the ACMRs fairly reported their average Sunday morning attendance between 2014-2018, two pastors disagreed with the reports in the years before they assumed the pastoral leadership of their churches. The board of AG1 agreed with their pastor's opinion that the attendance figures from 2014-2015 were greatly exaggerated. The board of AG3 stated that they were unaware of the existence of an ACMR, and therefore had no reference point from which to express an opinion.

Each year Assemblies of God churches are asked to fill out the ACMR by the end of January. The experience of the PennDel Ministry Network is that only about fifty to sixty percent of Network churches participate in this annual reporting exercise. It may be hypothesized that ministers, or their reporting designees, either do not keep records on vital statistics, or they do not keep accurate records, or they are somehow embarrassed by what the records reflect, and therefore inflate records to appease their ego.

Some leaders are not ready to confront the brutal facts of plateau or decline in their church.

AG1, AG3, and AG4 each displayed a level of resistance to embracing the reality of their state of plateau or decline. Literature from both the field of church revitalization and from the business world identified that facing the brutal facts of stagnation will be difficult, if not impossible, for

some leaders.⁸ Ed Stetzer reported that “Leadership Journal studied 761 respondents from thirty-one churches to analyze the factors leading to church revitalization. They found five key factors, the first of which was helping the church get honest about its condition.”⁹ The guided self-assessment conversation identified the brutal facts and through the interview process endeavored to engage leadership in a non-threatening conversation about the state and processes of plateau and decline, along with their eventual outcomes. Engaging in this conversation was a positive step toward offering revitalization resources to the pastors and primary leadership teams of the church sample group.

Congregation members may be out of touch with the organizational and institutional challenges that their church leaders must manage.

When asked how the congregation may feel about the church’s plateau or declining state (question number 7), several church boards expressed that the average congregants probably were not aware or concerned with these realities. Additionally, several board members from AG3 described their congregations as disconnected from the church’s precarious financial position, and the pastor of AG2 described the congregation as being largely unaware of the state of plateau in his church. The pastor of AG7 described his congregation as functionally apathetic. The organizational and institutional challenges with which the leaders are faced include reduced income, fewer volunteers engaged in serving, burnout and diminished emotional and physical resources by those who are serving (including and especially the leadership team), and the eventual deterioration of facilities and programs.

⁸ See chapter 4 in Jim Collins *Good to Great*, and Rainer *Breakout Churches*, 76, and Stetzer in *Comeback Churches*, 23.

⁹ Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, 35.

Most church leaders, both pastors and boards, do not have a strategic, methodological plan for revitalizing their church either missionally or organizationally.

A combination of a compelling vision and a spiritually-toned strategic plan seemed to be absent in all the churches which participated in the research. AG1 was certainly spiritually-toned, but there was not a strategic plan in place for revitalization. AG5 had engaged in several church revitalization processes but seemed to lack the leadership to move the effort toward meaningful results. AG7 had a committed board, but there was little hope for engaging the aging congregation in an initiative that would foster change and produce missional results.

When asked to identify changes and methodological steps that would be helpful for the church to change its state of plateau or decline, the ideas listed by the research participants were often disconnected and unrelated to a compelling vision for transformation. Alton Garrison identified that vision “unites people, helps them focus on a destination, and dares them to push against status quo.”¹⁰ Assisting churches to challenge the status quo by providing a spiritually-toned strategic process has the potential of revitalizing churches that are open to receiving such help. Engaging the leadership of plateaued churches in evaluative dialogue seemed to create the circumstances in which a revitalization partnership between the Network and the local church could be fostered. In seven of the eight churches interviewed, the leadership team expressed interest in participating in a future revitalization engagement. This interest was confirmed and reinforced in the follow-up survey in which 67% of the respondents indicated a high likelihood of engaging in revitalization initiatives offered by the PDMN (see appendix F, question 5).

Many church leaders are well aware that the condition of plateau or decline in their church is unsustainable and are open to assistance that will change their trajectory.

¹⁰ Alton Garrison, *A Spirit-Empowered Church*, (Springfield, MO: Influence Resources, 2015), 107.

Many pastors and most boards interviewed expressed an awareness that the status quo of plateau or decline would not produce favorable results over a five- to ten-year period. Although one of the eight churches was decidedly disinterested in revitalization initiatives and rather favored revival as the pathway toward a vital church culture, most pastors and boards expressed an openness toward one or more of the three initiatives offered by the PennDel Ministry Network.

Obtaining a mentor is a felt need among many ministers

In a follow up survey distributed to enlist the impressions of those involved in this research project, some participants expressed a preference to receive mentoring as a measure for revitalization (see appendix F question 4). Kenley Hall proposed that many ministers have not had the benefit of pastoral mentoring with an experienced, mature mentor. Without this integral influence in a minister's pastoral formation, inexperienced ministers are left to "learn to swim on their own or drown."¹¹ Unfortunately, many pastors of plateaued or declining churches are drowning by the overwhelming circumstances of their church's present challenges. The pastor of AG7 reported that he was involved in a coaching relationship but confessed that he felt that he did not have the personal or professional substance to adequately engage in the coaching process. He stated that "the coach would ask me what I wanted to work on today, and I had to say, 'I honestly don't know.'" The pastor stated that he would benefit most from a mentor. Two other pastors (AG3 and AG5) also stated that they were desirous of having a mentor. In *Leading Turnaround Churches*, Gene Wood posits that some pastors settle for plateau and decline because of four factors, one of which is an unwillingness to accept coaching.¹² Although Wood chooses the word coach over mentor, he describes the role of a mentor using the metaphor of an

¹¹ Kenley Hall, 2017, "The Critical Role of Mentoring for Pastoral Formation," *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 11 (1), 43.

¹² Gene Woods, *Leading Turnaround Churches*, (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2001), 158.

athletic coach. The pastors of the stagnated churches mentioned above expressed a desire and a willingness to have a mentor. This openness to having a mature, experienced person actively involved in the church revitalization demonstrates a positive attribute in the pastor's character and leadership style. This openness to mentoring is reflective of Proverbs 13:10 which states, "He who walks with wise men will be wise."

Ecclesial organizations have an opportunity to be instrumental in revitalizing churches.

Throughout the research project, pastors and their primary leadership teams (or more specifically, their church governing boards) were invited to participate in a research project entitled "Denominational Influence in Churches That Have Plateaued or are in Decline." Two factors identified in this title could have demotivated potential participants: first, the concept of "denominational influence." Secondly, identifying that their church had met the parameters of plateau and decline to participate in the research project could have demotivated the pastors and leaders from engaging in the study. The eight participating churches were intentionally selected because of their state of plateau or decline over the five-year study period between 2014-2018. These eight churches were the first churches to be invited into the research, and all eight accepted the invitation. Despite the potential awkwardness of inclusion in the study group or resistance due to the study being conducted by the overseeing ecclesial organization (denomination), all invitees chose to participate and agreed to ask their board to participate in a separate interview. These two factors demonstrate that potential resistance or animosity are possibly circumvented by the necessities of the church needing solutions to their present trajectory or by their positive perspective of their overseeing body, or a combination of both.

James Lewis stated that it is the responsibility and task of denominational leaders to develop and implement strategies for revitalization.¹³ Ed Stetzer agreed with the premise advanced by Lewis that denominations should be involved in church revitalization. Stetzer wrote:

There's a great need for revitalization among our churches, but revitalization is hard work. It's difficult to do it on your own. Support from a local church's denomination could help that church flourish during the revitalization process. There is value in not standing by and doing nothing as our congregations die, especially if they could benefit from our assistance. So ultimately, yes, denominations *should* resource church revitalization.¹⁴

Mark Merrill identified several cultural barriers within the Assemblies of God fellowship which may prohibit some churches from engaging in denominationally developed and offered revitalization strategies.¹⁵ In a study conducted in 2017, this researcher explored these AG cultural considerations which were posited by Merrill to potentially demotivate AG churches from participating in revitalization efforts offered by the PennDel Ministry Network. The findings of that research project indicated that the influence of these cultural barriers was nominal in the PennDel Ministry Network. Although the PDMN experienced setbacks when attempting to engage churches in the AG developed and facilitated "Acts 2 Journey" revitalization initiative, churches are now participating in each annual rotation of the initiative. The Network has a responsibility to not only offer revitalization initiatives, but to also measure

¹³ James W Lewis, "American Denominational Studies: A Critical Assessment," November 15, 2004, 23, accessed February 17, 2019, http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/sites/default/files/transcripts/research_article/JamesLewis_American_Denominational_Studies_Essay.pdf

¹⁴ Ed Stetzer, Four Steps for Denominations to Resource Church Revitalization, Christianity Today, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2018/november/how-should-denominations-resource-church-revitalization.html>

¹⁵ The three factors identified by Merrill are distrust of organization, a misunderstanding of revival in the local church, and the acceptance of decline as a validation of holiness. Mark Merrill, "Revitalization of Assemblies of God Churches in Stagnation or Decline," 17.

the results of churches which have engaged in these initiatives and seek to modify and improve them until quantifiable results are experienced in participating churches.

What Could Have Been Improved in the Research Methodology

Including conversion and baptism statistics found in the ACMRs during the five-year research period would have added substantial discussion material for further investigating the missional efforts and effectiveness of the participating churches. Although this would have contributed to a more robust exploration of the state of plateau or decline, the researcher was concerned that introducing the material could have been viewed as confrontational or accusatory. Nevertheless, the conversion and baptism data were germane to the research, and would have been a valid topic for consideration.

An additional point of interest that could have been included in the “Guided Self-Assessment Questionnaire” would have included questions regarding the church’s missional values. For example, questions could have been devised to explore what areas the church invested most of their time, energy, and financial resourcing.

A third consideration for an improved research process may have included sending the questions and statistics to the participants ahead of time so that they could verify statistics and be more thoughtful in their responses. The questionnaire was designed to capture unfiltered, spontaneous responses. The desire of the researcher was to factor out participants overthinking the questions or padding their answers with perceived appropriateness; thus, it was hoped that the questionnaire in its present form would elicit a more genuine reflection of the participants attitudes and beliefs.

A fourth possible improvement to the research process could have included offering a prepared literature piece to participants outlining the three initiatives (Acts 2 Journey,

consultants, and mentors) offered by the Network. This may have given the participants an immediate reference point for the initiatives or a referral to the initiatives for future reference.

Significant Observations from Interview Process and Data

Some pastors or leadership teams were unable to accept the reality of their church's status of plateau or decline.

In *Breakout Churches*, Thom Rainer accurately identified that many churches lack the capacity to confront the (brutal) realities of church stagnation and its causes.¹⁶ Rainer proposed that a church must have an ABC moment when awareness, belief, and crisis converge to create a wake-up call that keeps them from continuing to accept mediocrity or “business as usual.”

Asking questions regarding the church's probable outcome if the same trajectory is maintained creates a sense of urgency which is beneficial to engaging leaders in church revitalization.

Herrington, Bonem, and Furr pointed out that “urgency is the fuel that launches the change process.”¹⁷ Discussing the outcomes of their church's present stagnated trend seemed to provide greater clarity for pastors and boards that status quo was unsustainable. Troy Jones asserted that churches whose leaders accept status quo are faced with a death sentence.¹⁸ Several of the pastors and church boards expressed a keen understanding that unless their church's trajectory changes, they cannot exist very far into the future.

*Leadership is integral to changing the trajectory of a church.*¹⁹

Several pastors and their boards (AG2, AG3, AG5, AG7) identified the leadership style or capabilities of the pastor as an essential consideration for the church making progress in missional effectiveness.

¹⁶ Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, 69.

¹⁷ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, *Leading Congregational Change*, 40.

¹⁸ Jones, *Recalibrate Your Church*, 65.

¹⁹ Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, 2.

Plateaued/declining churches are often mired in unresolved conflict (A3, AG4, AG 5, AG6, AG8)

The literature review in the field of church revitalization identified that both leadership and conflict mitigation are major issues in churches that have experienced plateau or decline.²⁰

Tony Morgan identified the necessary combination of leadership and conflict resolution when he posited that the maintenance of unity and the ruthless elimination of division were important factors in working toward church health and growth.²¹

Change is essential to transformation and revitalization. Change also creates conflict (as experienced by AG3, AG4, AG5).

Some boards were extremely disconnected with strategic change that would lead to appreciable transformation, thus making the church more missionally effective. Others had the right idea for including a robust spiritual activity (prayer) but could not imagine a strategy that would produce fruitful outcomes. In the words of Mark Merrill, they were “waiting for God to do everything, while God was waiting for them to do something.”²²

Church culture will either make or break revitalization efforts.

Some churches expressed disagreement over perceptions of their church’s culture and how it impacted the health of the church (AG8), while other churches agreed that the culture needed to change but didn’t seem to know where to begin with leading change (AG5&7).

Perhaps this is one of the greatest leadership challenges for churches: identifying church culture that is counterproductive to missional effectiveness, and then prayerfully plotting a strategy and a strategic pace to influence healthy change.

²⁰ Bullard, *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation*, 23.

²¹ Morgan, *The Unstuck Church*, 103.

²² Merrill, “Revitalization of Assemblies of God Churches in Stagnation or Decline,” 18.

Leadership's willingness or ability to lead change cannot be presumed.

The pastors expressed more interest in participating in church revitalization than did the church boards, but the church boards expressed more optimism that revitalization efforts would be effective than did the pastors. Barna, Rainer, and Kotter all identified that hardships of leading revitalization initiatives and the change within the church which will be required. Pastors instinctively understand the personal costs (emotional, physical, spiritual, mental, social) attached to leading change, and hence leading revitalization. An interesting insight derived from the GSA indicated that pastors were reserved in anticipating optimistic results from a revitalization process in their church. They may have heard, read, or experienced the conflict experienced in revitalization efforts. Like Jesus who would entrust himself to men because he knew what was in men (John 2:24-25), pastors are wary of the prospects of revitalization and change. Also, the board at AG6 were ready to turn in their resignation because they were "old." They stated leading change would be someone else's opportunity.

Openness to partnerships between the local church and the PennDel Ministry Network was discovered among most participants.

Because of the culture of independence within the AG, it was a pleasant surprise to experience the warmth, appreciation, and openness of pastors and boards toward the Network and the revitalization resources offered by PDMN leaders.

Although the Acts 2 Journey resonated broadly among both boards and pastors, the need for mentorship was expressed frequently by pastors and perceived by the researcher.

The high demands of being multi-disciplined in a diverse field of professional skills, along with both implied and stated expectations from congregations, stretch ministers to a breaking point. Compassionate and directive mentoring was a stated need from some of the pastors who were interviewed.

Although revitalization tends to skew toward organizational strategies, the spiritual disciplines of prayer and evangelism are integral to the process.

Bullard and Garrison urged a strategic prayer initiative to accompany the Journeys that they lead.²³ Regardless of any methodology developed or employed, the mission is God's. The resources come from Father, Son & Holy Spirit. AG1 reported a spiritually robust initiative in their church but had not developed a manner to sustain the momentum or results of their revivalist aspirations. Among the seven remaining churches, there was no correlation observed that paired strategy and prayer.

Additional Research and Project Opportunities in Church Revitalization

At the outset of this dissertation, the researcher sought to answer the question, "given the voluntary cooperative nature of Assemblies of God churches, which highly values the sovereignty of the local church, what revitalization methods will effectively engage churches that are experiencing plateau or decline?" Although a variety of revitalization methodologies were identified and explored throughout the research process, a more fundamental consideration became apparent when seeking to resource churches which have plateaued or in a state of decline. This fundamental consideration is the relational basis between the Network offering resources and the local leadership of the local church. Without trust and confidence between the two ecclesial entities, resourcing, it may be posited, can be met with limited interest. Relationship, built upon the premise that the Network has the church's interests in mind, seems to contribute toward removing barriers of independence and offers assistance from a servant-caring-resourcing paradigm.

²³ Bullard, *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation*, 28. See also resources on prayer from the Acts 2 Journey (<https://acts2journey.com/en/Articles/Worship/13-Weeks-of-Prayer>).

The field of church revitalization will always be an area in need of development. Church history would support the assertion that every church ever planted has or will be confronted with plateau and the eventual prospects of decline. With the expansion of the global population and the corresponding reality that more churches are needed to participate in the *missio Dei* in order to fulfill the Great Commission, church revitalization needs more research and coordination among denominations and ecclesial organizations. Qualifying and quantifying essential leadership skills for church revitalization is a topic in need of further research. Additionally, a robust research project would be useful to quantifying the results of revitalization initiatives like the Acts 2 Journey, the Congregational Transformation Model of Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, or Bullard's Spiritual Strategic Journey Model. There are many revitalization initiatives that have become the foundation for books. Exploring the results of revitalization models and qualifying their strengths and weaknesses would be a significant contribution to the field of revitalization.

The culture within which the church participates in mission is changing rapidly. These rapid changes necessitate adaptation for churches seeking to effectively live out the *missio Dei*. There are numerous books, blogs, and other online resources available through leaders in the field of revitalization, but there seems to be a void in coordinating the insights and research findings between researchers and across denominational lines. Therefore, a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to church revitalization would seem beneficial to the effort of extending the missional vitality of churches and ecclesial organizations. Additionally, a symposium which gathers those whose passion is seeing the church achieve extended life and missional vitality could be useful for collaboration and mutual edification. Having a live, dynamic conversation from revitalization leaders would seem to prove beneficial as a research project leaning not only on research but including the personal insights and experiences of those involved.

Summary

The overall goal of this dissertation project was to engage plateaued and declining churches in a guided self-assessment regarding their stagnated condition to arrive at a consensus among leadership regarding methods and strategies to which they will commit in order to improve their missional effectiveness. A tertiary goal was to personally engage in a conversation between the PDMN and the local church regarding the church's state of plateau or decline, and build a healthy relationship whereby confidence from the church leadership would be obtained, thus opening the door for future possibilities of Network resourcing.

Assisting churches with revitalization resources, combined with accompanying coaching or mentorships, is a valid and valuable strategy for ecclesial bodies concerned and motivated to improve the condition of their constituent churches. The research engagement was perceived to be a positive experience for both the pastor and the primary leadership team that participated. Additionally, the research project initiated several valuable revitalization initiatives from the PennDel Ministry Network. First, the PennDel Ministry Network hired an experienced minister to lead church revitalization among the churches that are plateaued or experiencing decline. Two departments have been created with church recalibration as a primary goal: the Church Recalibration Department and the Minister Care Department. Although minister care expands beyond the scope of church revitalization, this department is nevertheless viewed as integral to church renewal. The three revitalization initiatives of mentoring, consulting, and providing the Acts 2 Journey have emerged through the process of both this dissertation and enlisting the Church Recalibration Director.

Secondly, the PDMN has created a significant revenue stream in order to fund the Church Recalibration Department. Although the leadership team of the Network (PDMN Presbytery)

understands that indiscriminate funding for financially burdened churches will not solve the problem, the Presbytery and leadership believe that financial resources are required for churches that have reached a state of stagnation. A strategic framework for resourcing qualified churches has been created to invest financial support, and a commensurate level of supervision and accountability, in stagnated churches.

Thirdly, the PDMN has developed a partnership with the University of Valley Forge to create a Master's Degree program in Organizational Leadership with a concentration in church revitalization (see Appendix G). The objective of this graduate program is to give an advanced level of training to pastors who are presently leading a church that needs revitalization. The academic training, combined with a project focused on a spiritual strategic plan for revitalizing the church the student is pastoring, is designed to create both a living laboratory and a group from which future consultants and mentors will be enlisted for Network recalibration leaders.

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APPENDICES

THE PROJECT DATA

APPENDIX A

Guided Self-Assessment Materials

Pastor Invitation Letter

Dear Pastor,

This purpose of this letter is to request your participation in a Doctor of Ministry research project conducted through Southeastern University, Lakeland, Florida. The title of the project is Denominational Influence in Church Revitalization. The purpose of this research is to explore the potential benefits and challenges of church revitalization in the Assemblies of God fellowship. Your participation in this project is voluntary. If you agree to participate, we will ask you approximately twenty question in an interview format. The guided self-assessment will take approximately one to two hours. Additionally, we would like to interview members from your board who are willing and available to participate. We will ask the same set of questions to your board in a separate interview in order to hear his or her perspectives and contrast the similarities and differences which might exist between lead pastors and their leadership teams. You or your board may withdraw from the interview at any time. Your participation would be greatly appreciated, and I am confident that that data received will be potentially beneficial to both our fellowship, your church, and the kingdom of God. Thank you for your consideration.

Please find enclosed a form that will give additional details regarding the study, as well as seek to obtain your consent should you agree to participate.

If you have any questions about this research process or project, you may contact me at 717-418-1437 or don@penndel.org.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Donald J. Immel

APPENDIX B

Institutional Review Board Consent Form

Title: Denominational Influence in Church Revitalization

Investigator(s): Donald Immel, Dr. Andrew Permenter

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to explore the potential benefits and challenges of church revitalization in the Assemblies of God fellowship.

What to Expect: This research study is administered in person by researcher Don Immel. Participation in this research will involve an oral interview using a guided self-assessment tool consisting of twenty questions. You may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. You will be expected to complete the assessment once. It should take you about one to two hours to complete.

Risks: There are no risks associated with this project which are expected to be greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you. However, you may gain an appreciation and understanding of how research is conducted. The final outcome of this research will indirectly serve the District's ministers and its churches in its approach to strengthening plateaued and/or declining churches.

Compensation: No compensation is available.

Your Rights and Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time.

Confidentiality: In order to protect privacy and confidentiality, the names of churches and participants will not be disclosed in this research or otherwise published. The records of this study will be kept private. Any written results will discuss group findings and will not include information that will identify you. Research records will be stored on a password protected computer in a locked office and only researchers and individuals responsible for research oversight will have access to the records. Data will be destroyed five years after the study has been completed.

Contacts: You may contact any of the researchers at the following addresses and phone numbers, should you desire to discuss your participation in the study and/or request information about the results of the study:

- Rev. Donald Immel: 717-418-1437 | don@penndel.org.
Dr. Andrew Permenter: 863-667-5078 | ahpermenter@seu.edu

- If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact the Southeastern University IRB Office: IRB@seu.edu

CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:

I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements:

I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older.

I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. I understand that if I wish to withdraw from the assessment I may do so at any time. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

Signature of Researcher

Date

APPENDIX C

Guided Self-Assessment Questionnaire

1. Describe the present state of your church and its ministries in 3-5 words
2. As pertaining to your average Sunday worship attendance, would you categorize your church attendance as growing, plateauing, or decreasing?
3. What are the annual attendance trends over the past 5 years? (Use ACMR or equivalent if possible)
 _____ 2018 _____ 2017 _____ 2016 _____ 2015 _____ 2014
4. Where do you perceive your church will be in 5 years if this trend continues?
5. Where do you perceive your church will be in 10 years if this trend continues?
6. On a scale of 1 – 5, how comfortable are you with these realities? (1 being very uncomfortable; 5 being very comfortable)
7. Describe how you believe the people in your church perceive these realities.
8. Using the following adjectives, describe the relational culture of your church

Friendly	Tightly knit	Angry	Cliquish	Cooperative
Pleasant	Disconnected	Energetic	Joyful	Caring
Welcoming	Aloof	Engaged	Stubborn	Cantankerous

 Other: _____
9. If you could change 3 things in your church, what would they be?

10. Rank these changes in order of missional importance.
11. If you have described your church as plateaued or declining, what do you see as the primary cause of that trend?

12. What do you believe are the first three steps to reversing the present trend of plateau or decline?

Rank these changes in order of importance

13. On a scale of 1 – 5, 1 with being not interested and 5 being very interested, how open are you to leading a revitalization effort in your church?
14. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not hopeful and 5 being very hopeful, how hopeful are you that a revitalization will be effective in your church?
15. Have you tried a revitalization strategy in your present church? _____. If yes, describe the strategy and the results of your efforts.
16. If no, what barriers have kept you from attempting a strategic revitalization initiative?
17. The PennDel Ministry Network is developing three revitalization initiatives through mentors, consultants, and the Acts 2 Journey. Which of the three initiatives may be most beneficial to your context?
- a. Mentors
 - b. Consultants
 - c. Acts 2 Journey
 - d. None
18. If no, what alternative seems promising?
19. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being not interested and 5 being highly interested, how open are you to the Network working with you to implement one of the three approaches to revitalization?
20. How can the PennDel Network assist you?

APPENDIX D

Trends of Plateau and Decline in North American Churches

Introductory comments For the Guided Self-Assessment Interview

Summary

When discussing growth, plateau, and decline with the pastors and boards interviewed for this research project, the following information was introduced in order to give those being interviewed some context regarding the trends that they as a leadership team were facing:

- 8 out of 10 churches in North America are either plateaued or declining.
- Decline is established by 10.1 percent decrease over a five-year period. Growth is established as a 10.1 percent increase over a five-year period. Everything in between is considered plateaued.
- Although there are more people attending church than in previous decades, church growth has not kept up with the population growth. Thus, a smaller percentage of the population is attending church on any given Sunday.
- In the Assemblies of God (U.S.), ACMRs reveal that 70 percent of churches are plateaued or declining.
- In the PennDel Ministry Network, 78 percent of AG churches have plateaued or are in decline, with 22 percent experiencing growth.

This summary was established from the following current literature about church revitalization. The researcher observed that those being interviewed seemed to relax as the information was communicated. Comfort that the church being assessed was not alone in their struggle to grow seemed to be established as an unintended outcome of communicating this information.

Thom Rainer of the Rainer Research Group states, “Eight out of ten of the approximately 400,000 churches in the United States are declining or have plateaued. Of the churches for which we have data, 84 percent are declining or experiencing a growth rate below the population growth rate for their communities. The latter is defined as a plateaued church.”¹ Growth and decline are established as 10.1 percent over a five-year period, with all others considered as plateaued.²

David T. Olson has posited that the church in America is in a state of crisis. “In 1990, 52 million people attended worship each week - in 2006 the number remained unchanged. However, because of the sizable population growth, the percentage of Americans who attend church is

¹ Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2005), 245.

² Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, 25.

declining.”³ Olson further contends that if current church attendance trends continue in the present trajectory, “by 2050 the percentage of Americans attending church will be half of the 1990 figure.”⁴ More specifically, Olson projects that the percentage of Americans attending church in 2050 will decline from 20.4 percent to 10.2 percent.⁵

In his 2017 report to the Assemblies of God General Presbytery, General Assistant Superintendent Alton Garrison reported that approximately two-thirds of Assemblies of God churches are either plateaued or in decline.⁶ In 2019, Garrison reported that there had been a measurable increase in the number of plateaued and declining churches, with 70 percent now reported as plateaued and declining.

In a recent update of ACMR comparisons for 2014-2018, PennDel Ministry Network churches showed a similar decline in performance as the Assemblies of God national report noted earlier. The updated report identified that only 22.4% of PennDel Ministry Network churches showed growth during the past five years, and 50.4 percent reporting decline. Only plateaued churches remained virtually the same as the previous reporting period with 27.2 percent in that category.

³ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), chap. 2, “Is the American Church Keeping Up with Population Growth?” Kindle.

⁴ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis*, “Introduction: Why Examine the American Church, “Is the American Church Booming?” Kindle.

⁵ *Ibid.*, chap. 2, “Is the American Church Keeping Up with Population Growth?”, Kindle.

⁶ Alton Garrison, *Report of the Assistant General Superintendent* (Springfield, MO: General Council of the Assemblies of God General Presbytery Report, 2017), 7

APPENDIX E

PennDel Ministry Network Revitalization Initiatives

The PennDel Ministry Network is offers three revitalization initiatives for churches that are plateaued or experiencing decline.

Acts 2 Journey

The Acts 2 Journey is a strategic, spiritually toned revitalization initiative developed by the Assemblies of God. This initiative utilizes a pastor-led vision team to discover God's path for the church in moving forward with ministry that is missionally effective. The Acts 2 Journey is a one-year process comprised of four quarterly retreats held on Fridays and Saturdays. Friday sessions include a teaching/training/coaching session for lead pastors and their spouse. Saturday sessions include an all-day meeting for each church's visionary leadership team and pastor.

The Acts 2 Journey is not a "one-size-fits-all" solution for churches to adopt. Instead, it is a prayerful journey in which each church seeks to discover God's path toward God's preferred future for their congregation. The teaching material used for the Acts 2 Journey is derived from leading experts in the field of organizational and church revitalization. The Journey focuses on mission (why we exist), vision (where we are going), values (how we should behave), strategic planning (how we get to where we need to go), and going (how to engage new people with the gospel).⁷

Recalibration Consultants

A second initiative presently being developed by the PDMN is a consultancy model for assisting churches needing revitalized. This model will involve a consultant who will visit with the pastor and leadership, visit the church at a Sunday primary worship service, and meet with ministry leaders and their teams, observing, when possible, their primary meeting. Evaluations and guided self-evaluations will be employed to assess leadership structures, organizational systems, primary worship services, facilities, and church culture. The consultant and the church leadership teams will work together to develop a spiritual strategic plan to move the church forward toward greater missional and organizational effectiveness.⁸ Darren Cronshaw explained that "The essential elements in a revitalization consultancy are to resource spiritual depth, reconnect with Biblical and congregational stories, facilitate congregational conversations, provide leadership in change, and foster creative dreaming."⁹

⁷ <https://acts2journey.com/Template>

⁸ See Paul Bordan, *Hit the Bullseye*, 82-97 for an example of a consultancy model.

⁹ Darren Cronshaw, 2015. "Revitalization Consultancy Models: Australian Church Case Studies." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 19 (2): 317, Accessed June 5, 2019. doi:10.1515/ijpt-2014-0011.

Next Level Mentors

A third revitalization method focuses on the use of a mentor for the pastor. This revitalization method will be preferred when the church or the pastor is not culturally or developmentally in a position to initiate a revitalization strategy for the church. Experienced pastors who have led turnaround initiatives in their churches or ministries will be made available to focus on the pastor and their leadership. Paul Borden states that “we have observed that the biggest human factor in the process of transforming a dysfunctional congregation to a healthy one is the leadership ability of the pastor.”¹⁰ Because leadership is essential to the process of revitalization, the mentoring track will focus on the pastor, the pastor’s leadership style and skills, and the pastor’s personal, ministry, and spiritual development. Hall stated that “mentoring for pastoral formation is not optional; it is essential.”¹¹ We would add to Hall’s premise that for a pastor to lead transformationally, he or she would benefit from an experienced transformational mentor.

¹⁰ Borden, *Hit the Bullseye*, 17.

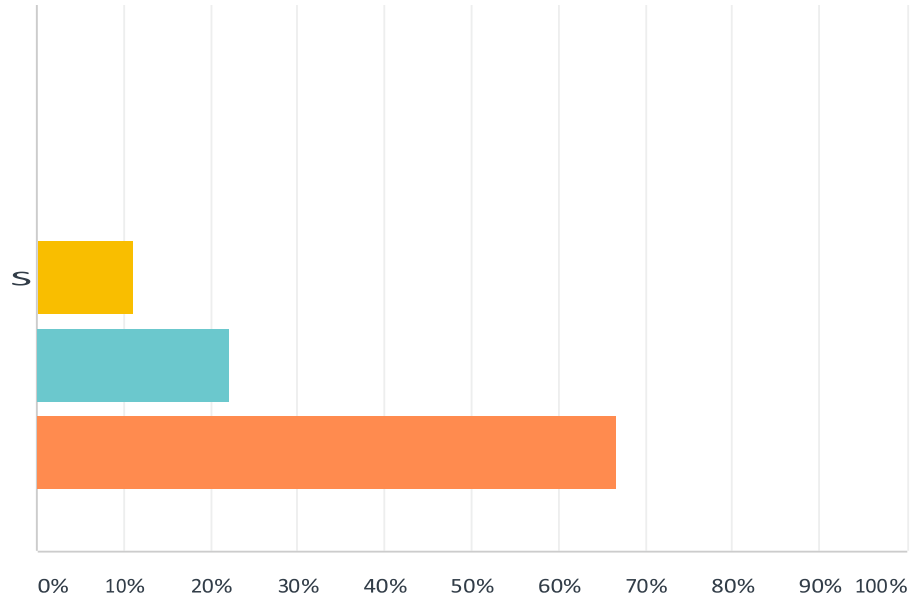
¹¹ Kenley D Hall, 2017. “The Critical Role of Mentoring for Pastoral Formation.” *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 11 (1): 42–53, Accessed February 12, 2020. <https://search-ebscohost-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIg0V191216000860&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

APPENDIX F

Follow-Up Survey

Q1 On a scale of 1-5. was the guided self-assessment interview a positive or negative experience?

Answered: 9 Skipped: 0



■ Negative
 ■ (no label)
 ■ (no label)
 ■ (no label)
 ■ Positive

	NEGATIVE	(NO LABEL)	(NO LABEL)	(NO LABEL)	POSITIVE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
S	0.00%	0.00%	11.11%	22.22%	66.67%	9	4.56
	0	0	1	2	6		

Q2 What word best describes the questions asked during the assessment:

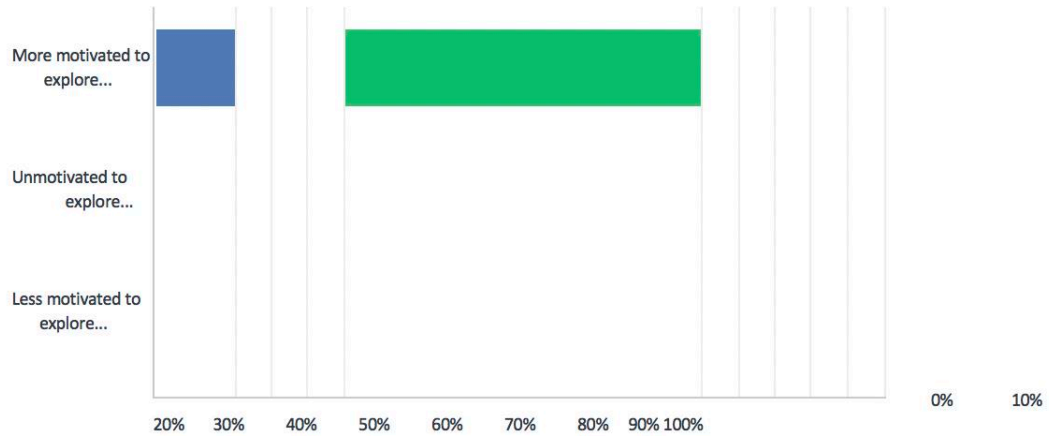
Answered: 9 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Thought-provoking	88.89%	8
Intrusive	0.00%	0
Confusing	0.00%	0
Clarifying	11.11%	1
TOTAL		9

Q3 Select one of the following motivational statements that best describes the response of your leadership team after the guided self-assessment:

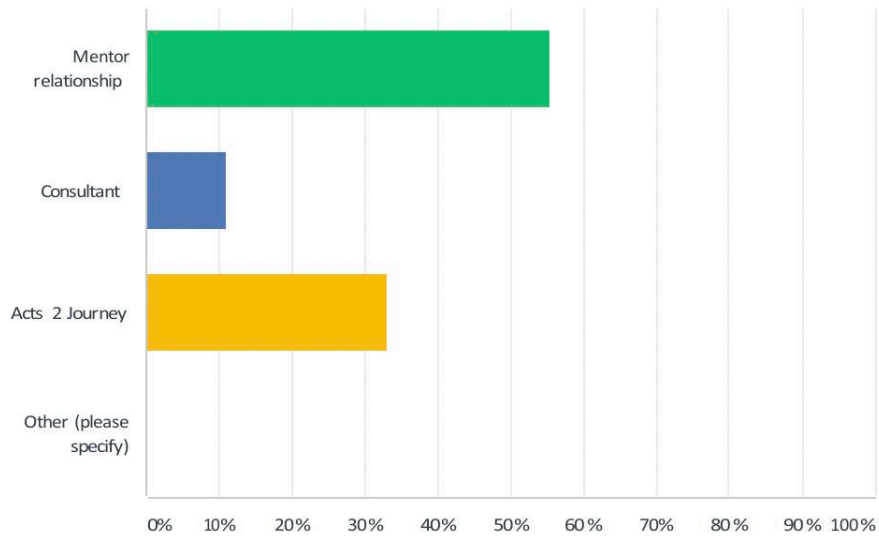
Answered: 9 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
More motivated to explore revitalization strategies	88.89%	8
Unmotivated to explore revitalization strategies	11.11%	1
Less motivated to explore revitalization strategies	0.00%	0
TOTAL		9

Q4 Which of the following options is most attractive and thus potentially beneficial to assisting your church in changing from plateau/decline to growth:

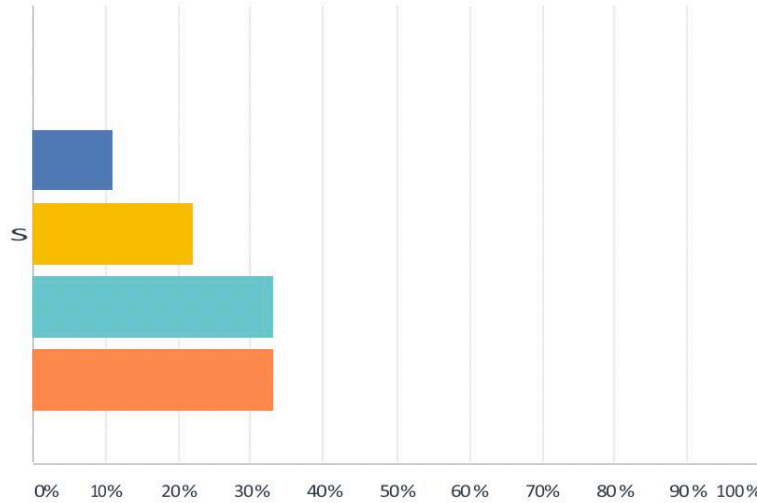
Answered: 9 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Mentor relationship	55.56% 5
Consultant	11.11% 1
Acts 2 Journey	33.33% 3
Other (please specify)	0.00% 0
TOTAL	9

Q5 On a scale of 1-5, how likely are you to engage in one of the Network church revitalization opportunities?

Answered: 9 Skipped: 0



	VERY UNLIKELY	(NO LABEL)	(NO LABEL)	(NO LABEL)	VERY LIKELY	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
S	0.00%	11.11%	22.22%	33.33%	33.33%	9	3.89
	0	1	2	3	3		

APPENDIX G

University of Valley Forge

Masters of Arts in Organizational Leadership – Church Revitalization Track (33 credits)

Core Courses (21 credits)

MOL 500 The Effective Organization
 MOL 501 Foundations in Leadership
 MOL 502 Organizational Leadership Research Methods
 MOL 505 Human Resource Leadership
 MOL 506 Conflict Resolution and Negotiation
 MOL 620 Communications, Marketing, and Community Relations
 MOL 625 Finance for the Executive Leader

Church Revitalization Track Courses (12 credits)

MOL 630 Strategic Leadership and Organizational Change
 MOL 650 Leading Change in Church Revitalization
 MOL 651 Discipleship and Equipping Ministry
 MOL 690 Capstone Project

Course Descriptions

MOL 500 The Effective Organization

This course focuses on understanding organizational dynamics Christian leaders use to mobilize their people and other resources to achieve desired ministry/business results. Students will examine organizational effectiveness focusing upon the important roles of organizational design, organizational change, and leadership communication.

MOL 501 Foundations in Leadership

This course will provide an overview of leadership theories and examine leadership from three perspectives: the personal side of leadership, leading others, and leading organizations. Particular attention will be given to personal leadership development strategies, servant leadership, and leading with a biblical worldview.

MOL 502 Organizational Leadership Research Methods

This course examines the various research methods including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Students will be introduced to tools and resources such as the academic research journal database used to conduct research. Graduate writing techniques including the use of the APA writing style will also be addressed.

MOL 505 Human Resource Leadership

This course examines the organizational human resource function and contemporary techniques for managing human resources, giving particular attention to the manager/leader as strategic partner, employee champion, administrative expert, and change agent. Case Studies will be utilized to discuss such topics as discrimination, diversity, gender issues, generational differences, and maximizing the potential of employees.

MOL 506 Conflict Resolution and Negotiation

This course examines the leader's role in resolving conflict as well as the negotiation skills required for organizational leaders as they relate to professional workplace settings. Students will learn negotiation skills for resolving conflict by examining research, theory and best practices.

MOL 620 Communications, Marketing, and Community Relations

This course discusses the role of public relations in customer relations, stakeholder communications, and business development. Two key areas receive special focus: 1) Emphasis on an integrated approach with other marketing tools and the importance of ethics and integrity in public communication about the organization and its products and services, and 2) Exploration of concepts that are essential and adaptable to organizations of any size or type, including nonprofits, government, small businesses, and corporations.

MOL 625 Finance for the Executive Leader

This course examines the requirements of an effective financial accounting and reporting system and the interpretation of financial reports for proprietary, non-profit, and governmental organizations. Explores decision processes and models for evaluating finance-related options, investing and managing cash, managing and preventing risk, and allocating financial, human, and capital resources. Explores the use of focus groups decision matrices, control charts, and other tools to investigate problems, analyze data and information, and identify potential solutions.

MOL 630 Strategic Leadership and Organizational Change

This course explores the role of leadership in leading organizational change through strategic thinking and strategic planning. Vision, mission, values, organizational culture, are emphasized. Students will also learn the reasons for resistance to change and to successfully overcome them and navigate the organization through the process of change. Various kinds of strategies and controls used to develop the organization's direction to achieve success are also addressed.

MOL 650 Leading Change in Church Revitalization

This course focuses upon the important role of people in the church during the revitalization process. Topics addressed include people-focused leadership, team development and team dynamics, servant leadership, and the important role of leaders in mentoring individuals to become effective followers and leaders.

MOL 651 Discipleship and Equipping Ministry

A biblical foundation for understanding Christian discipleship through both academic study and a community lab experience. Attention is given to both personal development and the discipleship of others.

MOL 690 Capstone Project

This capstone course offers students an opportunity to think critically and reflectively about what they have learned in the program. Utilizing online discussions, independent research materials, and peer and faculty feedback, students will be guided through a process to develop a final project demonstrating a mastery of program content.

