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## PROVIDING EFFECTIVE PASTORAL LEADERSHIP THROUGH DIFFICULT SEASONS: OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO BECOMING A REVITALIZED CHURCH

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PROVIDING EFFECTIVE PASTORAL LEADERSHIP THROUGH DIFFICULT SEASONS:  
OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO BECOMING A REVITALIZED CHURCH

A PROJECT DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF DIVINITY  
IN THE BARNETT COLLEGE OF MINISTRY AND THEOLOGY  
AT SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY  
JOSEPH LEE  
SPRING 2023

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE SIGNATURE PAGE

*This dissertation, written by*

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*under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Committee and approved by all members of the Committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the Barnett College of Ministry and Theology of Southeastern University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry.*

Date

February 22, 2023

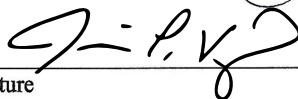
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## ABSTRACT

Leading churches in revitalization is challenging. Church plateau, decline, and revitalization have been issues for major denominations for years. Revitalization efforts have produced positive results for some churches, but the overall trend of decline in church attendance and participation in North America persists. One complicating factor in engaging church revitalization is the contextual nature of barriers contributing to plateau and decline. Some barriers may be specific to the churches' time, location, and culture. A second complicating factor impacting church revitalization is the COVID-19 pandemic that began early in 2020. This project explores church leadership dynamics during challenges seasons by focusing on the question, "How has COVID-19 impacted the contextual barriers contributing to church plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, Alabama?" This qualitative phenomenological study involving pastors and leaders of churches in Mobile, AL answers the research question. This study identified leadership and a proportionate external focus as essential elements for assisting churches in growing out of plateau and decline in the COVID-19 era. Leaders must re-orient churches to the necessity of an external focus as the first and primary focus to enable the church to align its identity as a witnessing and inviting community with its mission of fulfilling the Great Commission.

### *Dedication*

To Jesus, the Architect and Champion of your Church. Thank you for calling me to serve your people when I had no Christian background. Thank you for the encouragement and enablement to continue in your calling.

To my wife Angela, you have always been my greatest cheerleader and supporter. Your faithfulness, encouragement, and love are invaluable. You serve Jesus with authenticity and grace.

To my children, Seth and Chloe, you have always been an inspiration for me to serve the Lord the best that I could. You are my true treasures and greatest legacy.

To my staff at Knollwood Church and all the pastors and leaders who love, serve, guide, and champion the church, may you be encouraged to continue in your callings.

### *Acknowledgment*

Thank you, Dr. Jim Vigil, for reaching out and accepting me into the Doctor of Ministry program. Your expertise, encouragement, and patience as the DMin Director have helped me complete this journey.

Thank you, Dr. Jamie Stewart, for serving as my Dissertation Chair. Your experience, perspective, and guidance throughout the dissertation process have been essential.

Thank you, Dr. Kenneth Draughon, for being my friend, District Superintendent, and Content Specialist. Your encouragement and expertise have been valuable to my ministry and doctoral journey.

Thank you, Dr. Scott Bowman, for being my friend and a voice of clarity in my project.

Thank you, Dr. David Williams, for being my friend, a listener, and an encourager.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PROJECT INTRODUCED

#### *Introduction*

Providing effective leadership is difficult in the best of times. However, leading a church to health and revitalization during difficult seasons, like through the COVID-19 pandemic, can be challenging and complex. Church attendance has declined in the United States since the late 1970s, and the rate of decline was increasing before the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 has further impacted and continues to impact church attendance in the United States as Barna reports, “It is more likely for a Christian to have stopped attending church altogether during the pandemic; in fact, 32 percent of practicing Christians have done just that.”<sup>2</sup> There have been differing levels of decline and even small rises among different time frames and people groups. Additionally, church attendance decline seems to be a worldwide phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

Ed Stetzer,<sup>4</sup> a professor and dean at Wheaton College who has a practical and academic understanding of church health, begins *Comeback Churches* with the statement “Over time, most

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<sup>1</sup> “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” Gallup, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> “One in Three Practicing Christians Has Stopped Attending Church During COVID-19,” Barna Group, accessed July 19, 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>.

<sup>3</sup> Alasdair Crockett and David Voas, “Generations of Decline: Religious Change in 20th-Century Britain,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45, no. 4 (December 2006): 567–584, *Alta Religion*; David Millard Haskell, Kevin N. Flatt, and Stephanie Burgoyne, “Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy,” *Review of Religious Research* 58, no. 4 (2016): 515–541, <http://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-016-0255-4>. Britain and Canada have experienced decades of church decline.

<sup>4</sup> “About Ed Stetzer,” Ed Stetzer, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://edstetzer.com/about>. Ed Stetzer also serves as Executive Director of the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center. He holds a D.Min. from Beeson Divinity School and a Ph.D. from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has practical experience in church planting, revitalization, pastoral ministry, and training pastors and church planters.



churches plateau, and most eventually decline.”<sup>5</sup> Earlier research reported in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, indicates a period of church attendance plateau in the United States from 1990 – 2006.<sup>6</sup> Further study indicates that any such plateau was a brief period in a larger context of church attendance in the United States, as church attendance moved from plateau to overall decline.<sup>7</sup> James Emery White<sup>8</sup>, adjunct professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and leader of a ministry focusing on the intersection of church and culture, summarizes the statistics as “the vast majority of American churches membership numbers have either plateaued or are declining.”<sup>9</sup> Of note, although decline is the overall picture of church attendance in the United States over the last four decades, there has been a rise in mega-churches that have grown significantly. Although important to note for transparency in the conversation of church decline and growth, the rise of mega-churches will not be the focus of this research. In the organizational life cycles of churches, the process of declining attendance follows plateauing of attendance, even if the plateau is only a brief period.<sup>10</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact churches globally.

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<sup>5</sup> Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Stanley Presser and Mark Chaves, “Is Religious Service Attendance Declining?,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 3 (September 2007): 417–423, *Alta Religion*.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Brauer, “The Surprising Predictable Decline of Religion in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 4 (2018): 654–675, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12551>.

<sup>8</sup> “James Emery White,” Church & Culture, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://www.churchandculture.org/jamesemerywhite>. James Emery White is the founding and senior pastor of Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, NC. He also serves as professor of pastoral ministry at Anderson University. He has led the church to an average attendance of 10,000 weekly and has authored more than twenty books.

<sup>9</sup> James White, *Rethinking the Church: A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Information drawn from Joseph Lee, “Church Plateau and Decline in Assemblies of God Churches in Mobile, Alabama: Factors that Hinder Growth” (DMIN 6013 Paper, Southeastern University, 2019).

### *Rationale for the Project*

Church growth, plateau, and decline have been studied extensively, yet the trend continues.

William McKinney, former president and professor of American Religion at Pacific School of Religion who has researched congregational dynamics, and Dean Hoge, an American sociologist and former assistant professor at Princeton Theological Seminary who has studied religious life extensively, note studying the growth, plateau, and decline of churches is complex.<sup>11</sup> The complexity of this issue is affirmed by the reality that a suitable model of revitalization that works in every church (universal application) has not been produced. A key factor that contributes to the complexity of the issue is the contextual nature that arises from the communal aspect of churches. McKinney and Hoge point out the need for considering institutional factors within national situations and contextual factors within local situations.<sup>12</sup> The contextual nature of churches is the basic premise of this research: contextual barriers contributing to plateau and decline can exist in some churches that may not exist in all churches. Due to the potential for different contexts to produce multiple barriers related to the contexts, it is difficult to identify specific barriers for universal application as actual causes of church attendance plateau and decline in multiple churches.

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<sup>11</sup> William McKinney and Dean R. Hoge, "Community and Congregational Factors in the Growth and Decline of Protestant Churches," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22, no. 1 (March 1983): 51–66, Alta Religion.

<sup>12</sup> McKinney and Hoge, "Community and Congregational Factors," 51.

In addition to the overall trend of church plateau and decline, COVID-19 has continued to impact churches. The long-term impacts of the pandemic will be measured for years to come, but there is a need to evaluate its current impacts on churches. The specific focus of this qualitative study is evaluating the impact of COVID-19 on the contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, Alabama.

This study engages leaders serving churches in Mobile, Alabama. This research builds on research conducted pre-COVID-19, in 2019, which produced four contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, Alabama. The identified barriers include previous leadership, leadership style change, church worship style change, and a disproportionate internal focus.<sup>13</sup> Further research, conducted mid-COVID-19, evaluates the impact of COVID-19 on these identified barriers to determine if the impact has been positive, negative, or neutral. The intent is to produce potential recommendations to assist leaders in addressing their contextual barriers.

### *Relationship of the Project to the Researcher's Ministry*

Church revitalization has been the primary focus of my pastoral ministry over the past twenty-five years, having pastored five churches and led four of the churches in revitalization efforts. The most recent church, Knollwood Church, is currently taking steps toward revitalization. Other churches in the city are also seeking to grow out of plateau and decline.

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<sup>13</sup> Lee, "Church Plateau and Decline in Assemblies of God Churches in Mobile, Alabama: Factors That Hinder Growth," 3.

It has been observed that pastors and leaders of churches often search for a universal application approach to church revitalization. The communal nature of a local church requires that leaders seek to evaluate their situation to identify barriers specific to their context. Additionally, an evaluation of the impact of COVID-19 on contextual barriers causing plateau and decline is needed. This research aims to develop greater insight into church revitalization and to assist Knollwood Church and other churches in Mobile, Alabama, to grow out of plateau and decline.

### *Limitations of the Project*

The research and literature reviewed in this study will not establish recommendations for global church revitalization. The context of this study is specific to churches in the city of Mobile, Alabama. The scope of the research is limited by the sampling group and size. For this project, all research will be conducted among leaders of churches in the same city, and predominantly among leaders of Assembly of God churches. The format limits the potential geographical reach of this project by researching in one city. It also limits the potential denominational reach of this project due to the limited number of participants from denominations other than the Assemblies of God. The participants will be leaders serving in a lead pastor, staff pastor (including executive, associate, worship, youth, children, and family pastor), presbyter, and evangelist roles. Due to the response (acceptance and rejection) of those invited to participate, the study will be limited to thirty participants.

This project is not exploring the causes of plateau and decline in all churches. Instead, this project is seeking to determine how COVID-19 has impacted and is impacting contextual

barriers that are specific to the churches in the city of Mobile, Alabama, and draw insights from the data to provide recommendations for addressing the contextual barriers. This research intends to focus specifically on the contextual nature of barriers, which resists a universal application approach to revitalization. Barriers contributing to plateau and decline vary from congregation to congregation and potentially from region to region, due to cultural impacts. The reality that some barriers may be common to churches in different locations does not equate to all churches facing the same barriers; therefore, the scope is narrowly focused on a select group of churches.

This project is limited due to the continuing impact of COVID-19 on churches. The original research for this project was conducted pre-COVID-19 in 2019. The main focus of this research project is now to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on the contextual barriers identified in the pre-COVID-19 research. Analysis of this data will yield current results, but the full and lasting effects of COVID-19 will remain to be determined.

This project is limited due to the relationship and involvement of the researcher with the participants. This relationship dynamic includes being a lead pastor of an Assemblies of God church in Mobile, Alabama and interacting with the leaders of the churches in the research as a fellow pastor attempting to lead Knollwood Church in revitalization. It also includes the oversight of some of the participants who serve on the staff of Knollwood Church. These leaders provide their answers and input anonymously to avoid any potential conflict or retaliation, as per the directive of the IRB.

### *Research Question and Anticipated Results*

How has COVID-19 impacted the contextual barriers contributing to church plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, Alabama?

It is the expectation that the biblical and theological research will reveal the necessity of an external focus as the first and primary focus to enable the church to align its identity, as a witnessing and inviting community, with its mission of fulfilling the Great Commission and accomplishing its role in the mission. In addition, it is expected that the literature review will support the concern that universal application models of church revitalization are insufficient and, therefore, will support a contextual-based approach to helping churches identify and address the barriers contributing to plateau and decline in their immediate situations. Finally, it is anticipated that the research of human subjects will reveal the impact of COVID-19 on churches has reinforced some of the contextual barriers, removed some of the contextual barriers, and potentially created new contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, Alabama.

### *Goals and Objectives*

The overall intention of this project is to help pastors and leaders of churches in Mobile, Alabama lead their churches to grow out of plateau and decline. The project will be broken down into three goals, with objectives for each goal. The first goal is to reorient pastors and leaders of churches attempting to grow out of plateau and decline in Mobile, Alabama to a proper identity and mission of the church. The second goal is to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline of the same churches. The third goal is to provide

recommendations for pastors so they can strategically lead the churches out of plateau and decline by addressing the barriers specific to growth in their context.

The first goal of reorienting pastors and leaders to a proper identity and mission of the church has three objectives. The first objective is to create a definition for key terms relating to church identity, mission, growth and health, plateau, and decline. The second objective is to clarify, through a theology of the church as a witnessing and inviting community, the identity and mission of the church, as designed by God and revealed in the Bible. The purpose of this objective is to establish the church was created by God and can only qualify as a church based on God's design. If a local church does not understand its identity as designed by God, it may struggle to correctly function in its mission. The third objective is to establish, from the Bible, specifically the Great Commission,<sup>14</sup> the total mission of the church is dependent on the primary element of an external (outward) focus as the first in order, and primary in essence, element of the church's mission. Although an internal focus is necessary as a subsequent focus, if the primary element of an external focus is rearranged into any place other than first in the order of priority, misalignment of a church's identity and mission will result. The primary mission of the church is revealed in the Great Commission. Both objectives require a theology of the church as a witnessing and inviting community as primary within the broader theology of the church as a witnessing, inviting, forming, and sending community. When the church understands its identity and mission are inseparable, it can accomplish the Great Commission.

The second goal of evaluating the impact of COVID-19 on barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in Mobile, Alabama has two objectives. The first objective is to focus on a

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<sup>14</sup> Mark 16:15-18 and Matt 28:18-20 (English Standard Version). Jesus, having all authority, declares the mission of the church. The primary element is an external focus because people outside of the family of God must be reached before they can be discipled. As part of the discipleship process, Christians should contribute toward reaching others, thus external focus remains primary.

particular group of churches in Mobile, Alabama. The goal of identifying contextual barriers requires a specific location instead of a broad perspective; therefore, the point of this objective is to look deeply into a narrow group of churches in the same city to identify barriers that may only apply to a specific group. This objective has been accomplished in the pre-COVID-19 research. The second objective is to determine if and how COVID-19 has impacted any previously identified contextual barriers; therefore, this objective requires analysis of the data collected in the research to determine the impact of COVID-19.

The third goal of providing recommendations for pastors so they can strategically lead the churches out of plateau and decline has two objectives. The first objective is to provide recommendations that are grounded in the identity and mission of the church as a witnessing and inviting community so that pastors and leaders maintain proper alignment with identity and the primary external focus of the Great Commission. The second objective is to provide recommendations that are specific to the identified contextual barriers.

### *Definition of Key Terms*

Some terms may be used with a broad scope of meaning related to the identity, mission, and organizational life cycles of churches. The following are how some key terms are defined for clarity:

- Church Growth: Church growth means a church is numerically growing in worship service attendance, conversions, small group engagement, event participation, and water baptisms.



- Church Plateau: Church plateau means a church is simply maintaining a certain level of worship service attendance, conversions, small group engagement, event participation, and water baptisms, and is neither growing nor declining.
- Church Decline: Church decline means a church is declining numerically in worship service attendance, conversions, small group engagement, event participation, and water baptisms.
- Witnessing and Inviting Community: A phrase used to describe the inseparability of the church's identity, as the body of Christ, and its mission of fulfilling the Great Commission in the world.
- Disproportionate Internal Focus: A disproportionate internal focus can be understood as churches having an internal focus (greater explanation will be provided in a later section), to the neglect or even opposition of external focus.
- COVID-19: Coronavirus, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, was declared to be a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>15</sup>

### *Summary*

The speed of decline, combined with the rapidly changing landscape of church culture in North America, continues to generate concern. Gary McIntosh, a church growth expert and a professor of Christian ministry and leadership, and R. Daniel Reeves, a missiologist, note the church world in North America needs to take heed and work to adapt or prepare for further consequences of

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<sup>15</sup> "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic," World Health Organization, accessed July 19, 2022, <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>.

greater church decline and possible closure for many.<sup>16</sup> Adapting and changing to better reach a culture with the gospel message is not an easy task for churches. Stetzer notes the nature of a plateaued or declining church is a major issue because many pastors, leaders, and members do not want to tackle the job of helping churches grow out of plateau due to the difficulty of the leadership process.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus promised to build his church in an important context. In response to Peter's confession that Jesus was the Son of God, Jesus said "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."<sup>18</sup> Leading up to Peter's confession and Jesus' declaration, Jesus had been met with rejection from Israel's religious leaders and he posed the question of his identity. One answer was given that he was a former godly leader or prophet.<sup>19</sup> This answer was inadequate, and Peter's confession reveals Jesus as the fully Divine Son of God. This confession of, and allegiance to Jesus' identity and power is the foundation on which Jesus would build his church. The view brings in all who share the confession that Jesus is the Son of God as participants in building the church. Participation in this mission is the work Christians and church leaders are called to, and why the issue of church attendance plateau and decline matters.

Although many key factors for church attendance plateau and decline have been researched, there remain gaps in this research. The reality is churches continue to plateau and decline and further research is needed. In addition to factors prior to 2020, COVID-19 is an

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<sup>16</sup> Gary L. McIntosh and R. Daniel Reeves, *Thriving Churches in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> Matt 16:18, English Standard Version.

<sup>19</sup> Matt 16:14, English Standard Version.

additional and ongoing issue that continues to impact churches. The purpose of this project is to add to the existing research on leading churches in revitalization with a focus on contextual factors that contribute to church attendance plateau and decline through an evaluation of the impact of COVID-19 on the barriers affecting churches in Mobile, Alabama. The following chapter will provide theological dimensions and a review of historical theology, as well as a literature review. The theological dimensions will focus on the New Testament church's identity and mission. The historical theology will explore how churches were impacted by socioeconomic factors, including pandemics and disasters in the past. The literature review will examine how church growth, plateau, and decline have been addressed by others and consideration of the current resources regarding the continuing impact of COVID-19 on churches.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE PROJECT IN PERSPECTIVE

#### *Introduction*

The final instructions of Jesus to his disciples, as recorded in scripture, are captured in two main passages. Matthew records Jesus' commands for his followers to go, make disciples, baptize them, and teach them his ways. Jesus said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

<sup>1</sup> Luke records Jesus' instructions for his followers to receive the Holy Spirit and witness of him throughout the world as "Jesus said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.'" <sup>2</sup>

The first-century church, as recorded in the book of Acts, is the earliest example of the New Testament (NT) church carrying out the commands and instructions of Jesus. One clear result is the growth of the church. Luke records the first numerical addition to the church in Acts, following Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, as "about three thousand souls."<sup>3</sup> He also

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 28:19-20. All scripture references will be from the English Standard Version unless specified otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:7-8

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:41

notes that, as the church obeyed the commands of Jesus, the new community experienced steady growth: “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”<sup>4</sup> As the message of Jesus spread throughout the world, the church grew exponentially. By the year 2010, there were an estimated 2.2 billion Christians in the world.<sup>5</sup> After two thousand years of church history, many churches have been established. Many of these churches have plateaued, and many have declined.<sup>6</sup> The decline is cause for concern for Christians and church leaders. This reality produces questions regarding why churches plateau and decline and why they struggle to grow through plateau and decline.

Based on the commands of Jesus to go, preach, teach, baptize, and make disciples in the Great Commission, it is the basis of this research that healthy churches should grow as people convert to Christianity through the church’s involvement and influence in culture.<sup>7</sup> Clarensau’s report presented to the Assemblies of God Superintendent’s Forum in 2012 supports the evaluation of church growth as an indicator of health.<sup>8</sup> Due to the reality that many churches in Mobile, Alabama are not growing, there is a need to identify the barriers that contribute to plateau and decline and evaluate the impact of COVID-19.

The overall consideration of the project relates to church plateau, decline, and the leadership challenges involved in church revitalization. The narrower focus relates to the impact

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:47

<sup>5</sup> “Christian Population and Statistics | GRF,” Pew Research Center, accessed July 21, 2022, <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/religions/christians>.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel A. Cox, “The Decline of Church Membership,” *American Enterprise Institute - AEI*, April 19, 2019, <https://www.aei.org/politics-and-public-opinion/the-decline-of-church-membership/>.

<sup>7</sup> Rick Warren, “Forget Church Growth, Aim for Church Health,” *Pastors.Com*, May 20, 2016. <https://pastors.com/health-not-growth/>.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Clarensau, “Available Metrics for Measuring Church Health,” 2012. Used with permission from Kenneth Draughton, District Superintendent, Alabama District Assemblies of God. See Appendix A.

of COVID-19 on barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL.

Before barriers are investigated and before the impacts of COVID-19 are evaluated, a theology of the NT Church is necessary for the benchmark of church health. Therefore, the goals of this chapter are threefold.

First, the theological and biblical dimensions section will present the NT church through a Christological-missiological-ecclesiological lens as a witnessing and inviting community with an external focus first and primary, committed to fulfilling the Great Commission, with consideration of pertinent factors, including the presence of contextual factors in the first-century church. Second, the literature review section will consider contemporary voices on the issue of church plateau, decline, and revitalization before the COVID-19 era for evaluation purposes, then explore current data concerning the impacts of COVID-19. The purpose is to gain perspective on the condition of the church before COVID-19 and evaluate the impact based on current data. Third, the historical review section will provide a brief consideration of how the church has been affected and how it has adapted to pandemics historically. The purpose is singular, to show the church has historically adapted in times of pandemic impact to reorient its identity, mission, and focus as a witnessing inviting community with an external focus first and primary, committed to fulfilling the Great Commission.

## *Theological and Biblical Dimensions*

### Christology

Christology is the starting point because both the identity and mission of the church center on Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> Christology provides the foundation of the Christology-missiology-ecclesiology development of the NT church's identity and mission. The point is to locate the church's identity and mission in Jesus Christ and his activity. The person of Christ (Christology) and the work of Christ (soteriology) are intrinsically linked. Considering the work of Immanuel Kant, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher of religion, and that of Albrecht Benjamin Ritschl, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century prominent German Lutheran theologian, Alister McGrath shares that Jesus' person is known through his work.<sup>10</sup> The work of Jesus is multifaceted with each facet unified toward God's full cosmic scope of redemption. Jesus is the mediator between God and humanity as Paul noted in 1 Tim 2:5.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the unity of Christ's person and work, as the Mediator, he is not only acting in unity within himself but the Trinity. Frank Boyd notes that the presence of the Mediator is extending God's grace and saving purpose to all people through the "unlimited scope of the gospel."<sup>12</sup> God's presence, in Christ, mediates between a holy God and fallen humanity. The identity and work of Christ are the core of the church's identity as a witnessing and inviting community and its mission in that the church exists to share the message of reconciliation as God's agents.

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<sup>9</sup> The section on Christology is adapted in part from Joseph Lee's, "The Person and Work of Jesus Christ: An Essay on Christology," (THEO5533 Systematic Theology I Paper, Southeastern University, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction.*, 6th ed. (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2017), 225-226.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Tim 2:5, For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Boyd, *The Pauline Epistles*, Revised (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1991), 280.

Amos Yong concludes that the revelation of God is "fundamentally personal and about Jesus Christ,"<sup>13</sup> as Jesus is the way, truth, and life, that is the only way to know God. William Dyrness and Oscar Garcia-Johnson shares that God works toward revelation in all cultures of the world, but such revelation is incomplete until it is interpreted through one's tradition, teaching, and contextual interpretation of scripture to the full knowledge of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup> As the Mediator and member of the Godhead, Jesus is also the perfect example and model of life for Christians to follow as members of the witnessing and inviting community, the church.

Jesus is the Savior of the world. His birth, sinless life, crucifixion, and resurrection from the dead provide the means for humanity and creation to be restored to God. Christ's salvific work encompasses the restoration of all of creation in God's cosmic scope of redemption. The work of Christ is Trinitarian and empowered by the Spirit to grant forgiveness to provide entry of sinners into the family of God. Christ's saving work is "Christological, pneumatological, eschatological, and performative, each being intricately related to the others."<sup>15</sup>

The purpose of beginning with Christology is to provide a coherent portrait of Jesus Christ and his saving work as a Trinitarian to orient the identity of the church as the people of Jesus Christ, a witnessing and inviting community, empowered by the Holy Spirit to accomplish his mission on earth. Jesus' embodiment of the Godhead, harmonious membership in the Trinity, and the entire life and work of redemption is the model for the identity and mission of the NT church as a witnessing and inviting community participating in the mission of God on earth.

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<sup>13</sup> Amos Yong, *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 337-338.

<sup>14</sup> William Dyrness and Oscar Garcia-Johnson, *Theology Without Borders: An Introduction to Global Conversations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 99-100.

<sup>15</sup> Yong, *Renewing Christian Theology*, 252.



Wayne Neely, in his dissertation on church growth, sums up this concept as "Christ is the most complete expression of God concerning His will and the Church is a continuing expression of Christ's mission. Thus, Jesus gives both content and direction to the Church in its ministry."<sup>16</sup>

Christology is the starting point because the church exists with its identity in Christ and to fulfill its mission as the continuing work of Christ.

## Missiology

*Biblical identity and mission of the Church.* Was the church created to fulfill God's mission or was a mission created for the church to fulfill? This question frames the issue concerning the order of the Christological-missiological-ecclesiological pattern of the identity and mission of the church. Eddie Arthur notes that the concept of *Missio Dei* has covered a broad range of applications and has evolved throughout church history.<sup>17</sup> The overall mission and plan of God encompass the doctrines of creation, the fall, the Kingdom of God, redemption, sanctification, and glorification. The church currently exists and functions within the scope of God's redemption of humanity. It will continue throughout the entirety of God's mission, but the immediate identity and mission of the church are within its current scope of sharing God's message of redemption.

From this theological perspective, the identity and mission of the church are considered Christocentric within the cosmic plan of the Trinity. The church is comprised of people who

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<sup>16</sup> Wayne Neeley, "Theology of Ministry and Church Growth Principles" (DMin diss., Asbury Seminary, 1981), <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/ecommonsatsdissertations/757/>.

<sup>17</sup> Eddie Arthur, "Missio Dei and the Mission of the Church," *Wycliffe Global Alliance*, accessed August 18, 2022, <https://www.wycliffe.net/more-about-what-we-do/papers-and-articles/missio-dei-and-the-mission-of-the-church/>.

have been redeemed, who live in the time of the church age, and who are called to participate in the specific part of God's overall mission through participation in sharing God's redeeming mission in this present age. Because the church was created in God's mission, and to participate in God's mission, the church exists because of the mission.

Johannes Reimer writes "the triune God is a missionary God," and notes the NT writers wrote from this perspective to capture the essence of the heart of God.<sup>18</sup> The *Missio Dei* is a Trinitarian mission in that the Father is the sender of the Son, Christ is the sender of the Holy Spirit and the sender of the church, and the Holy Spirit is the enabler of the church.<sup>19</sup>

The plateaued and declining church in North America must reorient its identity as a witnessing and inviting community. This reorientation must be based on its identity as described by its Architect in the Bible. At its purest, the church is a living organism: the body of Christ. Patrick Lencioni focuses predominately on organizations, but his core thought that organizational health trumps all other organizational characteristics has merit regarding the church, which he includes in his scope of focus in his book *The Advantage*.<sup>20</sup> At the practical level, a local church has organizational characteristics, and the church requires organizational health to successfully fulfill its design and purpose in the way that organizational health means alignment and synergy between identity and purpose. Organizational health requires that church health, in the context of identity and purpose, be defined and clarified. The church was not created by people; it was

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<sup>18</sup> Johannes Reimer, "Trinitarian Spirituality: Relational and Missional," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 75, no. 1 (January 2019): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5348>.

<sup>19</sup> Andreas Kostenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel's Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 192.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business, Kindle Edition* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

designed, created, and birthed by God. Because the church is created by God, it requires the purpose of the church to be defined by its Creator, not the people involved in it. God has done so, and it is revealed in the Bible.

The mission of the church is inseparable from its identity as soteriology is inseparable from Christology. The inseparability is revealed in the communication of Jesus after his Resurrection. Jesus appeared to the disciples and breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> Matthew adds more detail on the instructions of Jesus after the Resurrection in what is known as the Great Commission.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>22</sup>

This overall mandate of the New Testament church, to carry the message of the gospel to those who have not heard so that people can be saved and discipled, was commanded by Jesus with the promise of his presence and empowerment. Christopher Wright sums up the basis of the command well: “the identity and the authority of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, is the cosmic indicative on which the mission imperative stands authorized.”<sup>23</sup> The church’s mission is inseparable from its identity, and it is non-negotiable.

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to his followers to enable them to accomplish something beyond their abilities. The promise of enablement was connected to the overarching mandate of

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<sup>21</sup> John 20:22, And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>22</sup> Matt 28:16-20

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 60.

the church, the Great Commission. The church was born with the promise of God's Spirit to empower them to fulfill the Great Commission.<sup>24</sup>

To accomplish the mandate of the Great Commission, the church was designed by God to embody five core activities that constitute the purpose of the church. These purpose-fulfilling activities do not change for different churches, they are what the church, designed by God, accomplishes. These activities are throughout the Bible but are identified in the narrative of the New Testament church in the book of Acts 2:42-27 as worship, discipleship, community, ministry, and evangelism.

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.<sup>25</sup>

Alton Garrison, former assistant general superintendent of the Assemblies of God and current director of the Acts 2 Journey Initiative, affirms the activities saying: "Now we return to the five biblical functions of the first-century church. Described in detail in Acts 2:42–47, these functions form the pathway from values to vision."<sup>26</sup> Garrison's use of the word "function" is synonymous with "purpose" as he describes the universal church sharing the same five functions toward accomplishing the plan of God, the Great Commission. He says: "God established a plan for his Spirit-empowered church, and we can read about it in Acts 2:42-47, which clarifies the

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<sup>24</sup> Acts 2:1-4

<sup>25</sup> Acts 2:42-47

<sup>26</sup> Alton Garrison, *A Spirit-Empowered Church: An Acts 2 Ministry Model* (Springfield, MO: Influence Resources, 2015), 116.

functions or activities of the newly formed church. The plan hinged on fellowship, discipleship, gift-oriented ministry, evangelism, and worship.”<sup>27</sup> James White affirms the permanence of these five activities, not as something that select churches do, but as that which constitutes the purpose of the church, “It is what a biblically functioning community looks like ... it is what the church does.”<sup>28</sup> The New Testament church is a witnessing and inviting community engaging in the five purpose-fulfilling activities toward accomplishing the Great Commission. White sees the Great Commission as the singular mission of the church, which the church engaging the five purpose-fulfilling activities "are intending to accomplish."<sup>29</sup>

God designed the five purpose-fulfilling activities that constitute the purpose of the church, but he calls churches to partner in determining specific contextual strategies for their cultures because different cultures may require different strategies. Garrison notes that individual churches operate by designing "a strategic plan around the functions of the church: connect, grow, serve, go, and worship."<sup>30</sup> Designing contextual strategies is contextualization in that each local church or group is to effectively embody the purpose-fulfilling activities of God’s model for the church in its context. The point for clarification here is that although churches design strategies, God the Architect, alone, has the authority to define the purpose-fulfilling activities of the church. The commitment of the early believers was to this model set forth by the Apostles.

There are unchanging purpose-fulfilling activities, contextual strategies, and resulting phenomena in this early glimpse of the early New Testament church. The disciples were devoted

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<sup>27</sup> Garrison, *A Spirit-Empowered Church*, 120.

<sup>28</sup> White, *Rethinking the Church: A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition*, Rev. Ed, 31.

<sup>29</sup> White, *Rethinking the Church*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Garrison, *A Spirit-Empowered Church*, 120. Garrison uses the words connect, grow, serve, and go as synonyms for fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism.

to the Apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers as a model for all churches. They were also engaging a contextual strategy of combining their possessions and distributing them equally that may or may not apply to other churches although the core principle of generosity applies universally. Miracles were resulting, and an awe of God was among the new church, as well as signs, wonders, and growth.

When churches embody the five purpose-fulfilling activities of the New Testament church's design, the leadership, body, and culture align to accomplish the Great Commission. If a church fails to embody all five purpose-fulfilling activities, it is unhealthy, based on the definition of organizational health as all systems operating simultaneously toward the same goal. This lack of health can contribute to a loss of synergy toward the church accomplishing its mission. It is weakened overall by the underperforming area of activity, contributing to less effectiveness in the overall mission. White notes that successful engagement of all five purpose-fulfilling activities of the church results in fully devoted followers of Christ working together toward accomplishing the Great Commission.<sup>31</sup> Alawode notes that the nature of the five purpose-fulfilling activities is cyclical in that new people are reached, developed, and expected to participate in reaching new people, saying: "the Great Commission and church planting operate in the form of a cycle, in which new believers gathered, and disciples trained to be leaders for replication and multiplication in their context. It is a process that should not end until we reach the world for Christ."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> White, *Rethinking the Church*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Akinyemi Oluwafemi Alawode, "Paul's Biblical Patterns of Church Planting: An Effective Method to Achieve the Great Commission," *HTS Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.5579>.

Alawode further notes this process is like human procreation in that it both results in and requires reproduction, stating: “The image of a healthy church is illustrated through human development, which begins with birth, growth, and development to the point of maturity and then reproduction after their kind. Thus, a healthy church must be able to reproduce after its kind.”<sup>33</sup> This cycle is affected if churches fail to embody all five purpose-fulfilling activities.

Understanding and embodying all five activities of the purpose of the church is critical to being and doing what God designed for the church as a witnessing and inviting community. For an organization, including a church, to lose purpose is to lose its soul.<sup>34</sup> Ronald Sider, in his views of the church being the church instead of conforming to culture, held this conviction which provided his motive for critiquing the modern church. The church must reorient to its biblical identity to accomplish its role in culture. The goal is not to conform to culture, but to be the church in culture.<sup>35</sup>

*External focus as first and primary in identity and mission.* A disproportionate internal focus within a local church is a theological issue as it contributes to a dysfunctional view of the church’s identity and mission because it creates a barrier to the external focus component of the

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<sup>33</sup> Alawode, “Paul’s Biblical Patterns of Church Planting: An Effective Method to Achieve the Great Commission,” 2.

<sup>34</sup> Allan Cox and Julie Liesse, *Redefining Corporate Soul: Linking Purpose and People* (Chicago, IL: Irwin, 1996), 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ronald Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 85.

prime directive of the Great Commission.<sup>36</sup> A healthy church identity “implies that the growth and development of a church must not only be internal but also equally external through reproduction via new forms and structures.”<sup>37</sup> The necessity of an external focus to the identity and mission of the is critical to the theology presented in this chapter. Toward support of the necessity of an external focus, consideration of the scope of the mission of the New Testament church, based on the Great Commission passages and other passages, is needed.<sup>38</sup> There are five main Great Commission passages in the New Testament: Matt 28:16-20, Mark 16:15-16, Luke 24:45-49, John 20:19-23, and Acts 1:6-8.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of the Great Commission passages to the mission of the church and an emphasis on the external focus is important for priority and order. Draughon writes: “The Great Commission given in Matthew 28:19-20 provides the impetus to carry out His plan in one’s community and in cultures near and far to reach those separated from God.”<sup>39</sup> All four of the recorded gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, culminate with a focus on aspects of the Great Commission, going, sending, making disciples, et cetera. Acts, often considered a sequel to Luke, opens with an imperative, based on the Great Commission, as the main thrust for the ministry highlighted throughout the book. Acts is an early record of the

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<sup>36</sup> The section on disproportionate internal focus is adapted in part from Joseph Lee’s, “A Contextual Study of Disproportionate Internal Focus as a Contextual Barrier Contributing to Plateau and Decline in Local Churches in Mobile, Alabama,” (DMIN8023 Contextual Engagement II Paper, Southeastern University, 2022).

<sup>37</sup> Alawode, “Paul’s Biblical Patterns of Church Planting,” 2.

<sup>38</sup> Mark 16:14-20, Matt 28:16-20

<sup>39</sup> Kenneth W. Draughon, “Church Priorities Reset: Resetting Alabama Assembly of God Churches to the New Testament Paradigm of Engaging Culture” (DMin diss., Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2022), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.



Apostles and followers of Jesus engaging their identity as a witnessing and inviting community engaging the mission of the church.

*Challenging the necessity of an external focus.* In stating the importance of the Great Commission to the mission of the church, it is also important to note an external focus as a critical component of the Great Commission. Doing so does not detract from the importance of the other components of the Great Commission. Some have noted a key focus of the Great Commission is on “making” disciples more than “going” to the world. Concerning the command of Matt 28:19, Walter Klaiber notes some exegetes take a stand “that there is only one imperative in the sentence and the other verbs are participles; therefore, it is really no commandment to “go.”<sup>40</sup> Klaiber also notes, however, considering Greek grammar helps, how participles relate to the imperative, providing how disciple-making has to be accomplished, which is why most English translations begin with the command to go.<sup>41</sup> It is apparent that an external focus is implied first.<sup>42</sup>

Similar to Klaiber’s view, Preston Nix notes the imperative verb to make disciples is accompanied by three participles: going, baptizing, and teaching, which makes up the four-action process that flows in chronological order, beginning with going.<sup>43</sup> The idea that going is not a

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<sup>40</sup> Walter Klaiber, “The Great Commission of Matthew 28:16-20,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2018): 111-112, Alta Religion.

<sup>41</sup> Klaiber, “The Great Commission,” 112.

<sup>42</sup> Preston Nix, “Commentary on Article 10: The Great Commission,” *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 10, no. 1 (2013): 36–46.

<sup>43</sup> Nix, “Commentary on Article 10, 39.”

key emphasis is a further stretch because of the parallel between Jesus' command to preach the gospel to those who have not heard and the Great Commission as the same mission.<sup>44</sup> People who have not heard must be reached before they can be discipled. Alawode, referencing Ellis and Rogers,<sup>45</sup> notes that churches that do not consider reproduction the natural and necessary result of maturity end up sterile and lacking in the Great Commission.<sup>46</sup>

In his dissertation, Sparrow focuses on the Great Commission, specifically the command to make disciples.<sup>47</sup> Although this approach is to focus on discipleship as the main goal of the passage, two of his arguments support the necessity of an external focus. Sparrow notes that "it is clear that evangelism is the natural outflow of the life of a maturing disciple."<sup>48</sup> He also shares concerning disciples being active participants in evangelism adding, "This activism is especially outward focused on the evangelistic mission of the church, which is to go and make disciples."<sup>49</sup> Without an external focus to reach those outside of the faith, there are no candidates for discipleship, and mature discipleship (in a cyclical process) results in an external focus. Clarence Rempel, in his dissertation on missional transformation, sums this cycle up well: "God deeply desires that every person would enter into the reign of God that is 'righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 14:17 NIV). To that end God sends Jesus, and Jesus willingly offers

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<sup>44</sup> Mark 1:38

<sup>45</sup> Roger Ellis and Roger Mitchell, *Radical Church Planting*, (Cambridge: Crossway Books, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> Alawode, "Paul's Biblical Patterns of Church Planting," 2.

<sup>47</sup> Anthony Sparrow, "From Infancy to Maturity: Effective Discipleship Practices of Nazarene Churches" (DMin diss., Asbury Seminary, 2017), <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/ecommonsatsdissertations/1127>.

<sup>48</sup> Sparrow, "From Infancy to Maturity: Effective Discipleship Practices of Nazarene Churches," 41-42.

<sup>49</sup> Sparrow, "From Infancy to Maturity: Effective Discipleship Practices of Nazarene Churches," 42.

himself. Then God and Jesus send the Holy Spirit. Finally, the perichoretic Trinity teams up to send the church.”<sup>50</sup>

The goal of going to those who are not yet Christians is implied first because one cannot disciple someone who has not first been reached with the gospel message. The command to make disciples of all nations requires at a foundational level, an external focus first and primary, because people must be reached before they can be discipled. Draughon captures the necessity of an external focus well when he states: “The New Testament Church understood the command to share this good news with anyone who needed it. This remains the central desire of God for every congregation and every believer.”<sup>51</sup> External focus will be examined in Acts’ record of the Great Commission instructions.

*External focus in Acts.* Acts reveals the progression and enlargement of the external scope of the Great Commission’s work through the early church. Not everyone affirms Luke as the author of Acts, though it is widely accepted that he is.<sup>52</sup> As a continuation of the gospel attributed to him, Luke begins Acts by reiterating the necessity and centrality of the Great Commission to the mission of the New Testament Church.

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit

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<sup>50</sup> Clarence Rempel, “Missional Transformation: A Congregational Change Process for Making New Disciples” (DMin diss., Asbury Seminary, 2004), <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/ecommonsatsdissertations/205>.

<sup>51</sup> Draughon, “Church Priorities Reset: Resetting Alabama Assembly of God Churches to the New Testament Paradigm of Engaging Culture,” 25.

<sup>52</sup> For more information on the authorship of Luke, see Richard I Pervo, “When in Rome: The Authorship of Acts in the Late Second Century,” *Biblical Research* 60 (2015): 15–31, Alta Religion.

has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.<sup>53</sup>

Luke provides the externally focused strategy as being witnesses in their immediate locale, then expansion to the nearby areas, followed by expansion to distant areas, and eventually to the end of the earth. The trajectory of the strategy is “outward” or externally focused. Stanley Horton noted that Acts provides a witnessing program that serves as a table of contents for the book.<sup>54</sup> The promise of power is for a purpose, to empower the witness of Jesus Christ through the disciples. The purpose of witnessing implies an intended hearer(s). The intended hearers of the witnessing about Jesus are those outside of the family of God. The promise of power to witness to the intended hearers has the goal of conversion of those who are not yet Christians, toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission. An external focus is a key component of the foundational framework for the Great Commission to be carried out by followers of Jesus as individuals, but also within the context of spiritual community or local churches.

*Purpose-fulfilling activities of the New Testament Church.* External focus is critical to the local church fulfilling its mission because it is part of the identity of Christians. Horton notes that the body of Christ must understand that the desire of God is for his people to be his witnesses in the power he provides for effectiveness.<sup>55</sup> To accomplish the Great Commission, the church was designed by God to embody five core activities that constitute the purpose of the church. These

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<sup>53</sup> Acts 1:6-8

<sup>54</sup> Stanley Horton, *The Book of Acts*, 5th ed. (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1994), 21.

<sup>55</sup> Horton, *The Book of Acts*, 21.

purpose-fulfilling activities do not change for different churches, because they are what the church, designed by God, accomplishes.

These activities are woven throughout the Bible but are identified in the narrative life of the earliest New Testament church in Acts as worship, discipleship, community, ministry, and evangelism.<sup>56</sup> White affirms the permanence of these five activities: “It is what a biblically functioning community looks like ... it is what the church does.”<sup>57</sup> An external focus is a responsibility that the church cannot forfeit, to which Horton, speaking of Acts 1:8 says, “this put a great responsibility to be Christ’s witnesses on all who are filled with the Spirit.”<sup>58</sup> The core framework for the church fulfilling the Great Commission is others-focused. Acts chapter one captures a concept key to the heart of the Great Commission, to live in daily witness for the good of others.”<sup>59</sup> Forfeiting the external focus causes churches to turn inward.

To be clear, God calls churches to determine strategies to accomplish the purpose of the church in their respective cultures because different cultures may require different strategies. Contextual strategy design is contextualization and is necessary for each local church or group to effectively embody the purposes in their context. The point for clarification here is that although churches design and define strategies, God, the Architect of the church, alone has the authority to define the purpose of the church. The key point regarding the connectedness of the church’s identity with its mission is churches do not have the right to choose to do other things that

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<sup>56</sup> Acts 2:42-47

<sup>57</sup> White, *Rethinking the Church*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Horton, *The Book of Acts*, 22.

<sup>59</sup> “An Orienting Vocation for the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:8),” Theology of Work, accessed August 25, 2022, <https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/acts/the-beginning-of-gods-new-world-acts-1-4/an-orienting-vocation-for-the-kingdom-of-god-acts-18>.

partially constitute it being a church while neglecting the external focus of the Great Commission as first and primary in order of focus.

*Entering culture to communicate the gospel.* The church must view the current culture as a place and time in which Jesus wants to reveal himself through the church (context). Culture is not an enemy; it is an opportunity for sacred spaces when Jesus comes into it. One way in which COVID-19 has impacted some churches is new freedom (permission) to experiment more with how to reach outsiders.<sup>60</sup> The area of sacred space is shifting, which creates an opportunity for the church to enter culture to communicate the gospel. Phyllis Tickle, an author and popular lecturer on religion in America, noted that gatherings outside of the traditional church building, in pubs, houses, and bars, have been happening for several decades.<sup>61</sup> Sacred space is no longer viewed only as a temple or sanctuary. The shifting of sacred space is an opportunity for the church to enter culture, as a witnessing and inviting culture because it allows the church to use different avenues with the firm belief that anywhere that God is present and lives are touched, is a sacred space. This conviction gives way to creativity for so many ways the church can enter culture, but the core thinking is the church being in the world as disciples who live and serve as the embodiment of Christ within the culture to witness of Christ and invite outsiders into the church.

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<sup>60</sup> Lene Kühle and Tina Langholm Larsen, "'Forced' Online Religion: Religious Minority and Majority Communities' Media Usage during the COVID-19 Lockdown," *Religions* 12, no. 7 (July 2021): 1–19, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/7/496>.

<sup>61</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 59.

Mark Tidsworth, a consultant on the subject of the intersection of church and culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, calls this mental paradigm shift moving from consumer-minded Christianity to sacred partner Christianity.<sup>62</sup> It is entering culture with the conviction that God is already present and at work, and the church's role is to partner in that work.<sup>63</sup> The church partners with God in his activity in the world, and the church partners with others in relationships with others toward fostering relational intimacy so that Christ may be incarnated among the people. The opportunities are endless, as people today are open to broader views of spirituality, especially those that do not appear as traditional religious forms. God is already in the world working and calling the church to join in sacred partnerships, revealing him to people within the broader culture. The church can claim any space for sacred space if Christ is manifested. Entering culture to communicate the gospel requires the mindset that redefining sacred space is any space Christ is incarnated.

Tidsworth notes that engaging in sacred partnerships hinges on intentional engagement and participation in entering culture to communicate the gospel. He notes that relational intimacy is a seedbed for the level of connectedness that often leads people to encounter Christ through another person's life. This type of connectedness requires entering another person's story and rarely happens without intentionality.<sup>64</sup> Relational holiness is love in action; it is entering culture with sacrificial love. Christians must learn to focus on the collective life and needs of the community and intentionally engage in ways to intersect with those relationships and needs. The

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<sup>62</sup> "Our Team," Pinnacle Leadership Associates, accessed September 6, 2022, <https://www.pinnlead.com/ourteam>.

<sup>63</sup> Mark Tidsworth, *Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church* (Chapin, SC: Pinnacle Leadership Press, 2015), 188.

<sup>64</sup> Tidsworth, *Shift*, 190.

Book of Acts highlights a similar occurrence in the early NT church: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.”<sup>65</sup> Jacques Beukes shares that the church, at this moment, should serve outsiders by entering the culture and forming transformational relationships.<sup>66</sup> One relevant example of entering today's North American culture to communicate the gospel is engaging in social action. In this culture predominantly split between two major political party lines regarding social initiatives, Sweet offers the better choice of the Third Way of Jesus.<sup>67</sup> The church must engage, not with social activist allegiances, but with the people in need of social action through the way of Jesus.

John Stott speaks to this issue as well and notes that “the world can be won for Christ by evangelism and made more pleasing to Christ by social action.”<sup>68</sup> This statement captures the essence of the interrelatedness of evangelism and social action as well as the inseparableness of the church's identity as a witnessing and inviting community. Stott is emphasizing the necessity of social action for the church to fulfill its role by meeting both the spiritual and physical needs of others. He shares the Christian perspective as one of always including the need for spiritual transformation but notes that it cannot be separated from social needs, which greatly impact each

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<sup>65</sup> Acts 2:44-45

<sup>66</sup> Jacques W. Beukes, “To Be or Not to Be? A Missional and Practical Theological Perspective on Being Church without Walls amidst Coronavirus Disease 2019: A Challenge or an Opportunity?” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 76, no. 1 (January 2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6115>.

<sup>67</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2019), 224.

<sup>68</sup> John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, ed. Roy McClelloughry, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 489.



other. Stott received criticism from some who felt the church's role was gospel proclamation only.<sup>69</sup>

A gospel proclamation without entering the human condition is not sufficient gospel proclamation. To be clear, the proclamation of the gospel, so that Christ is incarnated in a particular locale is the main objective above social action. Yet, often social action is needed to enter culture to embody Christ in a contextualized way. A key to understanding the tandem nature of evangelism and social action is that social action requires interaction with others, both partners and recipients, and cannot be done in isolation.<sup>70</sup> Engaging social action to contextualize the gospel is entering culture to communicate the gospel as a witnessing and inviting community. With the rise of the focus on social action in the current culture, the church must leverage opportunities to partner with God and others toward helping people's daily lives to reveal Jesus to them. The church must enter culture, as a community in Christ, to witness to those outside of the church, to witness of Christ intentionally and incarnationally, in words and actions inviting them into the church. Entering and engaging culture in this way is a great description of the church as a witnessing and inviting community entering culture to communicate the gospel and embody Christ in its midst.

*Semiotic contextualization to enter culture.* Entering a culture to communicate the gospel requires contextualizing the gospel well so that the context encounters the true content of the

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<sup>69</sup> Pavel Černý, "John Stott (1921-2011): Radical Disciple of Christ: On the Centenary of His Birth and the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," *European Journal of Theology* 30, no. 1 (March 2021): 7–17, Alta Religion.

<sup>70</sup> Dhyanchand Carr, "Social Action and Communicating Christ," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 15, no. 3 (July 1991): 29–40, Alta Religion.

person of Jesus. “God is so intent on redeeming humanity that he takes the ultimate step of contextualization by becoming human. God not only enters human culture, but he enters a particular culture.”<sup>71</sup> Jackson Wu presents his view that Christians can use contemporary culture to interpret the scripture and good interpretation is necessary for good contextualization. Because no Christians today were alive in the context of the original text, it is impossible to know exactly what the cultural context was. One can embrace today’s multicultural lens of interpretation to get a more holistic interpretation through a broader understanding of the human condition as all people share in some aspect of ancient histories.<sup>72</sup> The human condition may experience specific changes surrounding humanity, but the condition of being apart from God and needing to be in a relationship with Christ does not change.

Entering culture to communicate the gospel is entering into the human condition, understanding scripture (content), and intersecting it with culture (context) so that Jesus is incarnated in its midst. The reality that the human condition remains in every culture, time, and location means God is present and working in every culture, time, and location. The church must enter its culture, time, and location to understand and identify the intersection of human need and understanding with the activity of Christ at work in the specific locale. Wu calls this contextual theology “biblically faithful and culturally meaningful.”<sup>73</sup>

The struggle for the church in North America, in the work of contextualizing the gospel, has too often been the draw of polarization between running away from the culture in isolation (internal focus) or becoming the same as the culture (syncretization) in misguided attempts to

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<sup>71</sup> Rempel, “Missional Transformation,” 32.

<sup>72</sup> Jackson Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), sec. 4, chap. 11, Kindle.

<sup>73</sup> Wu, *One Gospel*, sec. 4, chap. 11, Kindle.

enter it. Leonard Sweet provides an excellent motif as an answer for entering culture to communicate the gospel and embody Christ well, as “in but not of but not out of it.”<sup>74</sup> To be “in,” the church must enter culture to intersect the lives of those outside of the faith, but to be “not of,” the church enters as people of another kingdom within a kingdom. The more delicate part of this motif is “but not out of it,” meaning the church makes attempts but is irrelevant to the culture. Sweet clarifies this approach as being “in touch but not in tune”<sup>75</sup> as the church’s primary purpose of intersecting with people is for Christ to be incarnated and those who meet him changed into his image.

The church in today’s culture requires a fresh approach to contextualization. Sweet and Beck offer a semiotic interpretation of contextual intelligent communication. Semiotics is the ability to read culture through its signs and symbols.<sup>76</sup> Contextual intelligence is the ability to make decisions on what to do based on the correct interpretation of reading between the lines of a context.<sup>77</sup> Sweet and Beck propose the incarnation of Christ as the ultimate contextualization and the pattern of unlearning, immersion, minding the gaps, disorientation, discovery, and embodiment.<sup>78</sup>

Unlearning is approaching culture with fresh eyes for fresh challenges. Immersion is entering into a culture deeply. Minding the gaps is identifying the fragmented broken voids in culture necessary to build relational bridges around. Disorientation is embracing the chaos of the

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<sup>74</sup> Sweet, *Rings of Fire*, 134.

<sup>75</sup> Sweet, *Rings of Fire*, 135.

<sup>76</sup> Leonard Sweet and Michael Beck, *Contextual Intelligence: Unlocking the Ancient Secret to Mission on the Front Lines* (Oviedo, FL: HigherLife Development Services, Inc., 2020), 116.

<sup>77</sup> Sweet and Beck, *Contextual Intelligence*, 18.

<sup>78</sup> Sweet and Beck, *Contextual Intelligence*, 83.

need for innovation toward meeting the challenges. Discovering is the process of innovating how to meet needs in new ways. Embodiment is embodying Jesus in culture through innovative ways that people encounter him.<sup>79</sup> Sweet and Beck's creative approach to discerning the times and knowing what to do provides great insight to help the church enter culture to communicate the gospel through semiotic contextualization.

*Missionary approach to enter culture.* Semiotic contextualization is very similar to a modern missionary approach to entering a culture. Missionaries study the areas they are called to reach. They search out their customs, beliefs, and preferences in music, art, and style. They try to create ways to enter the important areas of people's lives with genuine concern to build relationships. They create ways to present their message through venues and styles that the people can understand so that the message is not lost in translation. David Hesselgrave notes that the challenge and task of the missionary are predominantly issues of communication.<sup>80</sup>

Sweet's insights on semiotics align and reveal the church's hurdles in trying to communicate with a visual, digital, symbolic culture using the past methods of words alone. He notes that "a screen culture needs an ethic of images as much as a print culture needed an ethic of words."<sup>81</sup> The church must read culture to strategize communication techniques. Missionaries view the method as a tool and the message of the gospel as fundamental. Methods can and do change, but the message remains the same.

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<sup>79</sup> Sweet and Beck, *Contextual Intelligence*, 86-92

<sup>80</sup> David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 95.

<sup>81</sup> Sweet, *Rings of Fire*, 151.

*Exile as a motif for the Church.* Looking back, in this sense, can help the church see forward.

Lee Beach notes the time the nation of Israel spent in exile under the Babylonians was an experience that helped define the nation as the people of God.<sup>82</sup> He notes that it helped shape Israel's vision as they formulated a theological view of their circumstances. They lived in exile, and it helped define their mission as God's people in that context. In offering exile as a motif for the church today, he says, "the way forward is to look around and understand our context, to look back and gather the resources that our Christian faith offers us, and then to look forward with a clear vision of how the church ought to and can function as God's people in contemporary exile."<sup>83</sup> This perspective is a great help and insight for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Today's church faces a culture that may look as foreign to its traditional members as the land and culture of Babylon did to exiled Israelites. For Israel, they had to learn how to go deeper into their religious identity in a foreign culture land and enter, as God's people, into that foreign culture toward fulfilling the mission of blessing all the world. The reality is that God was at work in Babylon, and Israel had to locate themselves in both the geography of the new land and their role in God's activity in it. Sweet and Beck use the story of the Issacharians to describe the necessity for the church to locate itself in today's new cultural landscape and the church's role in God's activity within it. They say, "this book calls for a new Order of Issachar-students of the Word in connection with the world, and strategists for the future."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Lee Beach, *The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

<sup>83</sup> Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 27.

<sup>84</sup> Sweet and Beck, *Contextual Intelligence*, 29.

The church must reorient itself as citizens of God's Kingdom to change its posture from against and withdrawing from culture to a people called to enter culture as a way of communicating the gospel and aligning its trajectory with incarnating Jesus in the locale in which the local church exists. Sweet and Beck build on the three-circle pattern producing the mandorla ring as locating the incarnating of Christ in culture. Churches must be unequivocally committed to the content of the gospel of Jesus Christ but must also locate themselves in their local context. It is in the intersection of content and context that Sweet and Beck call the “sweet spot of contextual ministry,”<sup>85</sup> where Christ is incarnated in the present place and time. Essentially, Jesus comes into the intersection of content and context, through the Body of Christ (content) as they enter their local mission field (context) as a witnessing and inviting community. This approach is an exile motif in that the church is never at home in this world but is also present in the Kingdom of God and can present the Kingdom of God in all places and times.

Considering “exile”<sup>86</sup> and “in but not of but not out of”<sup>87</sup> motifs can give today's church hope and promise that God is with them and will empower them to enter the culture. In Israel's exile, the church can see God's presence remained with them on foreign soil and their mission was not destroyed; the context was different, but the mission continued. The missionary approach aligns well with a church in a foreign space of exile. Today's church, as a community in exile, is a missionary to the surrounding culture, as the church has been to every culture it has been a part of since its beginning.

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<sup>85</sup> Sweet and Beck, *Contextual Intelligence*, 51.

<sup>86</sup> Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 27.

<sup>87</sup> Sweet, *Rings of Fire*, 134.

The story of Esther reveals a few key points of God's interaction in exilic situations that can help the 21<sup>st</sup>-century church with a model for ministry in its current context. Esther's story is unique in scripture because God is not specifically mentioned in the book but is present and at work in the culture. Esther lived in a foreign land and culture. She was part of a minority and lived under the rule and influence of the Persians who held different values than hers. She was threatened, marginalized, and forced into the public eye for her convictions. The scripture says, "Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known."<sup>88</sup> God did not leave her or his people but through them worked his plan.

The abiding presence of God in Esther's times is encouragement for the church today. Today's culture is increasingly antagonistic toward the church. Lifestyle choices that are contrary to the fundamental teachings of scripture are now often accepted and popular. Gay marriage, abortion, sex-change surgeries, gender identification choices without a physical change, and gender-neutral restrooms are just a few. Like Esther's story, God is present and moving in today's church as well as in today's culture.

The church can also learn how to live a life of holiness without complete withdrawal and avoidance of the culture from Esther. She was in her culture but not of her culture yet not out of her culture. She did the things necessary to be a part of the culture she was in without violating her convictions. Today's church can enter culture by being present and participating without compromising God's word.

Through Esther and her cousin Mordecai, God shows that if his people live for him and follow his principles, he can bless cultures and nations that do not acknowledge him. Persia benefited because of Esther in that a great evil was purged from the land and God's presence was

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<sup>88</sup> Esth 2:10

recognized. Beach notes that this idea that God wanted to bless the world through Israel instead of just blessing Israel is a missional implication. He notes that the Israelites were not to isolate and segregate themselves but to be a part of the larger culture.<sup>89</sup> The book of Esther shows that God calls his people to be missional by entering their cultures regardless of their circumstances.

For today's church, the book of Esther provides great encouragement for the church to enter its culture to communicate the gospel. God has proven to accomplish many things for his people and his plan in exilic situations and foreign spaces. His progressive revelation of himself as a deliverer laid the foundation for Jesus who delivers from the slavery and bondage of sin and restores people to God. The church today can live missional lives through God's presence and power in every culture.

*The model of Jesus.* The greatest missiology is found in Jesus entering the culture, into the human condition, through the incarnation to communicate the gospel message. As Sweet and Viola note: “everything in the Bible points to Jesus-either His person, His work, or His character.”<sup>90</sup> Draughon adds, “The narratives of Jesus’s ministry recorded in the Gospels provides the template for fulfilling this mandate. In bringing the good news to the lost, Jesus engaged the culture as He walked the countryside in and around Galilee and Jerusalem.”<sup>91</sup> Jesus and his story are the basis for the church’s identity as a witnessing and inviting people. The goal of entering a culture to communicate the gospel is not that people will learn about Jesus, but that

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<sup>89</sup> Beach, *The Church in Exile*, 69-80.

<sup>90</sup> Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus: A Theography* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 1.

<sup>91</sup> Draughon, “Church Priorities Reset,” 15.



they will encounter Jesus. As Sweet and Viola note, though the resurrected Christ is not bound to this world, he has contact with and for this world so that others can become part of the family of God. As the church enters culture as the embodiment of Christ, he is incarnated in the midst, and heaven and earth come together.<sup>92</sup> Sweet notes Jesus reframed community to invite everyone into it.<sup>93</sup> This insight offers a great picture of the inseparableness of the church's identity and mission, as a witnessing and inviting community.

Another great picture of identity and mission manifesting together in unison is found in the teachings of Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus shared this parable to teach the concept of the greatest commandment. He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."<sup>94</sup> Jesus was speaking to show them how to truly love God and others.

This teaching is still the foundational message and model for today's church. Keep the priorities of love in order and clarify the communication to those who will hear. Jesus acknowledges the ruthlessness of sin and the helpless state of mankind in the fallen state using the story of the one who was robbed and beaten. He enters the reality of the lost culture around him. He enters the ungodliness of the moment with compassion for the hurting by highlighting that the connection and healing came from the Samaritan who chose to enter the victim's condition. Hesselgrave encourages his readers to remember that the purpose of communicating the gospel, which requires entering the human condition and contextualizing the gospel through

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<sup>92</sup> Sweet and Viola, *Jesus*, 27.

<sup>93</sup> Sweet, *Rings of Fire*, 142.

<sup>94</sup> Luke 10:27

culture, toward communicating it to another culture, is to see others changed by encountering Jesus.<sup>95</sup>

Jesus also shows it is a sin for religious people not to care for those who are hurting and in need. The priest and the Levite chose not to assist the helpless man. Their actions show how the church can be in culture without embodying Christ. Jesus showed that true love and compassion for God results in love and compassion for people. This love in action is only felt when the church enters the human condition as the body of Christ. The Good Samaritan came to help the person in need and did so sacrificially. To minister to people where they are is to create sacred space by entering the space as the body of Christ. It is love that produces action and embraces sacrifice to not only create impact in the name of Jesus but to manifest Jesus in their midst. Love is the foundation, actions are the vehicle, humanity is the Christian's "neighbor," and the surrounding culture is the recipient. Every day those who are in the church encounter their "neighbors"; to honor God is to follow the example of the Good Samaritan taught by Jesus and refuse the tendency to hide within a worthless religious façade. James Breckenridge and Lillian Breckenridge caution the church to not build and hide in its own culturally irrelevant fortress by neglecting the culture around it.<sup>96</sup> The way Jesus, the perfect leader, entered culture to communicate the gospel provides the foundation for the exploration of a component critical for the success of the church in its mission, leadership.

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<sup>95</sup> Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 143-144.

<sup>96</sup> James Breckenridge and Lillian Breckenridge, *What Color Is Your God: Multicultural Education in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 12-17.

## Ecclesiology

*Spirit-empowered leadership.* Because the NT church finds its identity and mission in Jesus, it also finds its relationship to Jesus and its role in Jesus' work. A key factor in ecclesiology is leadership. Leadership in modern times is a broad subject that includes biblical leadership principles and modern leadership theory. An exploration of how biblical leadership and modern leadership theory intersect, align, and differ in today's church follows in the literature review. For this section on theological and biblical dimensions, leadership will be explored as Spirit-empowered leadership in the scriptures. Integral to understanding Spirit-empowered leadership is the importance of clarifying a biblical view of leadership. A very broad view of leadership can simply mean one who gives direction and guidance.<sup>97</sup> This view is not sufficient for a biblical concept of leadership. Biblical leadership is based on the parameters of Christian principles. Todd Engstrom captures the essence of biblical leadership when he states, "biblical leadership is meeting someone where they are and taking them where Jesus wants them to go."<sup>98</sup>

Biblical leadership involves influence to move people toward God's will. The key to Spirit-empowered leadership is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, as part of the Triune Godhead, will always move and work within the perfect will and character of God. John said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."<sup>99</sup> Spirit-empowered leadership influences people in the direction the Lord wills.

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<sup>97</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "Definition of Leadership," accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/leadership>.

<sup>98</sup> Todd Engstrom, "What Is Biblical Leadership?," *Todd Engstrom* (blog), November 11, 2013, <http://toddengstrom.com/2013/11/11/what-is-biblical-leadership/>.

<sup>99</sup> John 16:13

The Holy Spirit's leadership is found in the New Testament in two ways of note for this focus. He is specifically mentioned, and his leadership is visible in and through people even though he is not mentioned specifically. The biblical account of Spirit-empowered leadership in the life of Jesus, the Apostles, and the epistles' instructions affirm the presence of the Holy Spirit as noted. Some examples of the Holy Spirit's leadership mentioned in the life of Jesus include the announcement of his birth, his being identified as the Baptizer in fire, the Spirit descending on Jesus at his water baptism, and the Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted of the devil.<sup>100</sup>

The Spirit's leadership is also visible in the life of Jesus even when not specifically mentioned. The actions of Jesus, as the perfect Spirit-empowered leader, reveal at least seven characteristics of Spirit-empowered leadership that he modeled. Authority, compassion, revelatory teaching, humble service, forward-looking, commitment, and self-sacrificial love mark New Testament Spirit-empowered leadership.<sup>101</sup> These characteristics were modeled by the perfect Spirit-empowered leader: Jesus. They were practiced by the Spirit-empowered Apostles, disciples, and leaders in Acts. They were taught by the Spirit-empowered leaders and authors of the New Testament epistles. These seven characteristics offer a template for today's leaders attempting to navigate churches out of plateau and decline into a healthy identity and mission as a witnessing and inviting community with an external focus as first and primary, toward fulfillment of the Great Commission.

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<sup>100</sup> Matt 1:18, Luke 3:16, Matt 3:16, and Luke 4:1

<sup>101</sup> For a detailed look into leadership in the life of Jesus, Acts, and the Epistles, see Joseph Lee's, "Spirit-empowered Leadership: In the Life of Jesus, the Book of Acts and the New Testament Epistles," (DMIN6023 Spirit-empowered Leadership Paper, Southeastern University, 2019).

Further, Spirit-empowered leaders today can develop, cultivate, and implement these characteristics in greater measure in their lives as they seek to lead like the ultimate and perfect Spirit-empowered leader, Jesus. No leader will ever match Jesus because he perfectly embodied Spirit-empowered leadership and was filled with the Holy Spirit without measure.<sup>102</sup> However, today's leaders working toward church revitalization can model these seven characteristics by living out the example of Jesus and becoming like him through the Holy Spirit and faith. The embodiment of spirit-filled leadership is key to churches embodying the life of Christ as the community of faith. The church is not just an organization utilizing leadership principles; it is a body of believers infilled with the Holy Spirit incarnating Christ to the world. Speaking of John Wesley's whole theological vision, Gregory Clapper said: "the concept that shaped his whole theological enterprise is best conceived of as the renewal of the human heart."<sup>103</sup> This renewal of the human heart, through faith, makes it possible for humans to grow spiritually and develop as Spirit-empowered leaders.

The Holy Spirit is the source of Spirit-empowered leadership, but leaders must also be willing to learn, cultivate, implement, develop, practice, and continually improve the skills, traits, and characteristics identified as valuable to leadership. Leadership experts affirm this claim. "We are confident that you can become an even better leader than you are today. And when you use those skills to make extraordinary things happen, you will bring a lot more hope to those you lead. Your neighborhood, organization, and community and the world need this to be true,"<sup>104</sup> write Kouzes and Posner.

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<sup>102</sup> John 3:34

<sup>103</sup> Gregory Clapper, *The Renewal of the Heart Is the Mission of the Church: Wesley's Heart Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 27.

<sup>104</sup> James Kouzes and Barry Posner, *Learning Leadership: The Five Fundamentals of Becoming an Exemplary Leader* (San Francisco, CA: The Leadership Challenge, 2016), 212.

The thoughts of the authors sound very familiar to what occurred in the lives of the early church leaders even though the authors did not write *Learning Leadership*, from which the above quote was taken, as a religious text. Their teaching on leadership aligns with the view that leadership principles originate from God, the ultimate leader. J. Stewart Black notes that leadership is about helping people change and grow individually so they can help the organization grow.<sup>105</sup> The seven characteristics work toward personal growth in the leader's life and help others develop a growth mindset. The early church was impacted by Spirit-empowered leaders, but its reach was the development of Christians who changed the world everywhere the message of the gospel spread. These seven characteristics can be intentionally developed in the lives of Spirit-filled people seeking to help churches grow out of plateau and decline as Sider notes, "The Holy Spirit is still alive and powerful today, radically remaking broken people who unconditionally open their hearts and lives to his might presence."<sup>106</sup>

*Contextual issues in the Church.* There are some universal challenges and barriers to the church's mission present in most locations and times such as the fallen nature of humanity, resistance to the message of repentance, spiritual adversity, and mission drift. Universal barriers may be answered with universal strategies, but the reality of contextual barriers presents the need for contextual strategies. The purpose of this section is to identify churches in the New Testament that had contextual issues specific to their location, time, and culture. The intent of

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<sup>105</sup> J. Stewart Black, *It Starts with One: Changing Individual Changes Organization*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2014), 191.

<sup>106</sup> Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 130.

this project is not a deep exploration of each issue, only the reality that contextual issues, which required contextual strategies, were present in the early churches.

The churches in Antioch and the surrounding areas faced a barrier the church in Jerusalem did not: specifically, the teaching that required Gentiles to be circumcised for salvation.<sup>107</sup> This barrier was not a small issue, as “Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them.”<sup>108</sup> Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to meet with the Apostles. After consultation during the Jerusalem Council, the leaders advised the Gentile believers in those churches to reject some of the Jewish ceremonial requirements as necessary for salvation. This example presents a contextual barrier to Gentile Christians in the area and a contextual strategy for Gentile converts.

The believers in Ephesus experienced a contextual barrier over the economic impact of the gospel being preached. The tradesmen of the city started a riot because people were being converted and discarding the idols they purchased from the tradesmen.<sup>109</sup> In this case, Paul was unable to make a defense as he did in Athens, due to the disciples restraining him, and the local authorities dismissed the assembly.

The believers in the Corinthian church were filing lawsuits against each other in secular judicial systems.<sup>110</sup> C.K. Barrett proposes Paul was not suggesting the pagan courts were unjust, but that Christians should not sue one another, and disputes should be solved internally.<sup>111</sup> Paul

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<sup>107</sup> Acts 15:1

<sup>108</sup> Acts 15:2

<sup>109</sup> Acts 19:23-41

<sup>110</sup> 1 Cor 6:1-11

<sup>111</sup> C. K. Barrett, *Black's New Testament Commentaries: The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Henry Chadwick (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 2006), 135.

commands people in the church, who have greater authority in such matters than outsiders, to settle disputes.<sup>112</sup> This situation is another example of contextual issues in a local body of believers and a contextual strategy.

## Summary

The NT church, presented through a Christological-missiological-ecclesiological lens, is a witnessing and inviting community with an external focus first and primary, committed to fulfilling the Great Commission. Christology is the starting point because the NT church finds its identity in Jesus Christ, its Architect. Christology shapes and defines the NT church's missiology because the church exists to fulfill the mission of God on earth. Christology and missiology shape and define the NT church's ecclesiology as the embodiment of Jesus in the world and the continuation of his work. Leadership is a key factor in church ecclesiology as the Apostles, early church leaders, and NT epistle authors sought to follow the leadership of Jesus.

The church is not a perfect entity in its current form. Acts and the NT epistles reveal issues in the early churches as they encountered opposition, false teaching, challenges due to growth, and cultural conflicts. The Holy Spirit empowered leaders to develop strategies for their issues as they lived and practiced the characteristics modeled by Jesus. Through challenges, adversities, issues, and circumstances, the NT church remained externally focused to reach those outside of the faith as they worked to fulfill the Great Commission. This Christological-missiological-ecclesiological theology of the NT church should remain the model and pattern for the church and its leaders today, even with the challenging faced during a pandemic.

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<sup>112</sup> Barrett, *Black's New Testament Commentaries*, 136.



### *Literature Review*

Numerous reasons have been explored as potential causes for the plateau and decline of church attendance. Though it is impossible to explore contemporary voices on all factors, pertinent factors that relate to the Christological-missiological-ecclesiological theology of the NT Church as a witnessing and inviting community with an external focus first and primary, committed to fulfilling the Great Commission are considered. These factors are leadership, the rise of emergence Christianity, church culture, and organizational health.<sup>113</sup> Additionally, COVID-19 has impacted churches and revitalization efforts. This section includes consideration of current research on the impact of COVID-19.

### *Leadership*

Leadership is a core component of the Christological-missiological-ecclesiological theology of the NT church presented in the previous section; therefore, robust consideration of leadership in relation to church health and revitalization is needed in this literature review. Leadership has been studied for a potential correlation with church attendance. The existence of a leadership

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<sup>113</sup> Portions of this section are drawn from Joseph Lee, "Church Plateau and Decline in Assemblies of God Churches in Mobile, Alabama: Factors that Hinder Growth," (DMIN6013 Theory and Practice of Ministry Paper, Southeastern University, 2019).

crisis in the church is thought to affect Protestant churches<sup>114</sup> and Catholic churches.<sup>115</sup> Stetzer and Dodson believe that effective leadership is one of the main keys to helping churches grow out of plateau and decline.<sup>116</sup> Rainer found the same correlation with church leaders<sup>117</sup> that Collins found with business leaders regarding leading out of decline, which is that effective leadership is critical to growth.<sup>118</sup> In Rainer and Collins' research, effective leadership was noted as critical but was found in a diversity of leadership styles. These insights suggest a distinction that effective leadership is critical to growth, but multiple leadership styles can be effective. Keita evaluated the leadership styles of pastors of the Pentecostal churches in comparison to Bass' full-range leadership theory<sup>119</sup> and Greenleaf's servant leadership theory.<sup>120</sup> He found that leadership that aligns with these theories is one important factor for churches to grow out of decline.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Robert W. Lynn, "The Crisis of Leadership in Oldline Protestant Churches: 9th Peter Ainslie Lecture on Christian Unity," *Mid-Stream* 31, no. 2 (April 1992): 112–122, Alta Religion.

<sup>115</sup> Brian Roewe, "Leadership Roundtable Releases Recommendations: New Report Addresses Church's 'twin Crises' of Sex Abuse, Leadership Failure," *National Catholic Reporter* 55, no. 12 (March 22, 2019): 10–10, Alta Religion.

<sup>116</sup> Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 35.

<sup>117</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 40.

<sup>118</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2001), 17.

<sup>119</sup> The Full Range Leadership Model combines transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire styles, for more see, Bernard M. Bass, "The Future of Leadership in Learning Organizations," *Journal of Leadership Studies* 7, no. 3 (September 2000): 18–40, accessed October 12, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2184542192/abstract/9E1626BC28F64E2BPQ/1>.

<sup>120</sup> The Servant Leadership Model begins with a desire to serve and develops into an aspiration to lead, for more, see Jan Brinn, "Leadership Styles Part 4: Servant," MSU Extension, September 16, 2014, [https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/leadership\\_styles\\_part\\_4\\_servant](https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/leadership_styles_part_4_servant).

<sup>121</sup> Yera Keita, "Leadership Styles and Their Impact on Church Growth in Alexandria and Springfield, Virginia" (PhD diss., Walden University, 2019), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

### Challenging leadership

The subject of leadership styles and effectiveness as a reason for church attendance decline in the United States is not shared by all. Some researchers have found no correlation between leadership styles and declining church attendance. Hines sought to determine if churches led by pastors with graduate degrees grew more than churches led by pastors without graduate degrees, and the result showed no statistical difference.<sup>122</sup> Christopher Wilson focused his study on leadership styles and practices of urban Church of God pastors in Alabama and concluded that no leadership practice or style contributed to church growth in the Church of God churches studied in Alabama.<sup>123</sup> William Burton researched the relationship between leadership and church growth among pastors in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Missionary Church denominations and came to the same conclusion. He concluded there was no significant relationship between the leadership practices of senior pastors and church growth in the churches of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and Missionary Churches studied.<sup>124</sup> Robert Brooks studied the leadership of Assemblies of God churches in Tennessee and concluded that there was no significant connection between transformational leadership and church growth or

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<sup>122</sup> Cory D. Hines, "A Study of Pastors, Their Leadership and the Results of Their Churches" (PhD diss., Dallas Baptist University, 2012), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>123</sup> Christopher Jordan Wilson, "Clergy Leadership Styles: The Effects of Leadership Practices on Growth in Urban Church of God Churches in Alabama" (DMin diss., South University, 2018), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>124</sup> William H. Burton, "Examining the Relationship between Leadership Behaviors of Senior Pastors and Church Growth" (PhD diss., Northcentral University, 2010), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

non-growth among the churches studied.<sup>125</sup> These results offer congruence among a broad range of denominations but do not provide a conclusion based on exhaustive research.

### Modern leadership theories and biblical leadership

As presented in the theological and biblical dimensions section, leadership was a key factor in the church in Acts and remains so today. The previous inconclusive research on the impact of leadership styles does not negate the importance and potential impact leadership has on churches. Today's church leadership culture often combines biblical leadership and modern leadership theory; for this reason, further consideration of the intersection of modern leadership theory and biblical leadership is necessary. A key question to frame this consideration is "Is modern leadership theory contradictory or complementary to biblical leadership?" The answer to this question is important because if such leadership principles are contradictory, the possibility exists that the practices may contribute to further plateau and decline. If the principles are complementary, the possibility exists that the practices may assist churches toward organizational health.<sup>126</sup>

Leadership is studied and practiced widely today in non-Christian circles with a broad range of leadership theories being practiced. These theories are used in business, management, education, and church leadership in differing capacities. The intertwining of modern leadership

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<sup>125</sup> Robert Allen Brooks, "The Relationship between Transformational Leadership Practices of Pastors and Church Growth in Assembly of God Churches in Tennessee" (PhD diss., Northcentral University, 2018), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>126</sup> Portions of this section are drawn from Joseph Lee, "Leadership: Comparing Biblical Leadership with Modern Leadership Theory," (DMIN6023 Spirit-empowered Leadership Paper, Southeastern University, 2019).

theories and biblical leadership in many churches requires consideration of these main theories. This project proposes that modern leadership theory, as a broad concept, is complementary to biblical leadership. To provide support, an identification of the main modern leadership theories that collectively form modern leadership theory and scriptural support for modern leadership theory as being complementary to biblical leadership is provided.

### Modern leadership theories

Numerous leadership theories fall under the broad category of modern leadership theory. Modern leadership theory, as a broad singular concept, is the category of leadership formed by combining the main individual leadership theories accepted in business and management culture. There is overlap among some of these theories and some differences among them. It is not an easy task to align the different theories into a single comprehensive view.<sup>127</sup> It is also not feasible, due to the number of theories, to discuss every leadership theory in existence. For this research, seven individual leadership theories, which form the bulk of collective modern leadership theory, are considered. These theories include the Great Man, Trait, Behavioral, Contingency, Transactional, Transformational,<sup>128</sup> and Servant Leadership Theories. The focus is on how they intersect with and are complementary to biblical leadership.

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<sup>127</sup> Marc H. Anderson, "'Why Are There so Many Theories?' A Classroom Exercise to Help Students Appreciate the Need for Multiple Theories of a Management Domain," *Journal of Management Education* 31, no. 6 (December 2007): 757-765, 767, 769-776, <http://www.proquest.com/docview/195710488/abstract/19DBEE85476B4FF2PQ/1>.

<sup>128</sup> "Leadership Theories - In Chronological Order," Leadership-Central.com, accessed November 25, 2019, <https://www.leadership-central.com/leadership-theories.html>.

*The Great Man Theory.* Early efforts to identify leadership theory centered around people who were great leaders. This theory centers on the innate ability of certain people to lead. It is the view that leadership characteristics are intrinsic; or in other words, some people are born leaders and not made into leaders.<sup>129</sup> This view holds that those who are born leaders will rise when faced with challenges requiring leadership.

This theory finds support in scripture. Noah and Abraham met aspects of this theory in that they possessed leadership abilities and rose to the challenges, but they also learned as they obeyed God's instructions.<sup>130</sup> It is impossible to determine that they were born with all the characteristics necessary, so they partially fulfill the Great Man Theory. Jesus, as the perfect leader embodies the Great Man Theory. The Great Man Theory finds support in scripture but only as an aspect of biblical leadership and not as the whole concept of biblical leadership. Therefore, it is complementary to biblical leadership.

*The Trait Theory.* Trait theory focuses on the traits or characteristics of leaders. It views the traits as innate, as did the Great Man Theory, but focuses on the traits as the critical component to qualifying a person as a leader.<sup>131</sup> This theory finds support in scripture as Noah and Abraham possessed identifiable leadership traits such as possessing the ability to have and cast the vision

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<sup>129</sup> Zakeer Ahmed Khan, Allah Nawaz, and Irfan Khan, "Leadership Theories and Styles: A Literature Review," *Journal of Resources Development and Management* 16 (January 1, 2016), 1.

<sup>130</sup> Heb 11:7; 11:8-12

<sup>131</sup> Khan, Nawaz and Khan, "Leadership Theories and Styles," 2.

of an intended future as they understood God's instructions. They also possessed persistence, commitment, and the ability to follow through.

Critiques of both the Great Man Theory and the Trait Theory regard the traits as innate rather than developed.<sup>132</sup> One critique, against both theories, is that traits emerge from personality because humans are autonomous creatures with the ability to adapt, develop and grow. The traits in Noah and Abraham's lives appear to be innate, but it is probable that they also learned new traits or learned more about the innate traits they possessed as they obeyed God and practiced leadership. Acceptance of this critique shifted the focus from innate traits to behavior. Trait Theory finds support in scripture, but as the Great Man Theory, only as an aspect of biblical leadership, as is therefore complementary with biblical leadership.

*Behavioral leadership theories.* Behavioral theories are based on the view that people can identify leadership behaviors and learn them.<sup>133</sup> This thought process is the third step in the progression from the view that leaders are made, to the view that a leader's traits can be measured, and to the view that leader's behaviors can be learned. The focus is the idea that leaders are made, not born, and leaders can develop by learning the appropriate responses to situations.

These theories find support in scripture as they focus on leadership behaviors that are identifiable, adaptable, and learnable. Moses and Gideon are examples of leaders who do not appear to have been born as great leaders with exceptional innate leadership traits but who

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<sup>132</sup> Ralph Stogdill, *Handbook of Leadership: A Survey of the Literature* (Free Press, 1974).

<sup>133</sup> Khan, Nawaz, and Khan, "Leadership Theories and Styles," 2.

learned how to lead.<sup>134</sup> These examples provide support to the behavior leadership theories being complementary to biblical leadership.

*Contingency leadership theories.* Contingency theories are based on the view that no single method of leadership is always best and that situational contexts affect or determine the best method.<sup>135</sup> This theory is a broad category with overlapping views among different contingency theories. One of the proposed strengths of this theory is that leaders can hypothetically apply the best leadership style or method based on the situation, possessing the ability to be effective in many situations.<sup>136</sup>

These theories find support in scripture as they focus on the best leadership methods being determined by the situation or context. Moses, at the advice of his father-in-law, empowered other leaders to share his workload.<sup>137</sup> The Apostles appointed leaders to help serve others in the growing demands of the early church.<sup>138</sup> These leaders enacted leadership structures to effectively meet the situational needs giving support for contingency theories of leadership as complementary to biblical leadership.

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<sup>134</sup> Exod 3 and Judg 6-8

<sup>135</sup> Khan, Nawaz, and Khan, "Leadership Theories and Styles," 2.

<sup>136</sup> Lawrence H. Peters, Darrell D. Hartke, and John T. Pohlmann, "Fiedler's Contingency Theory of Leadership: An Application of the Meta-Analysis Procedures of Schmidt and Hunter," *Psychological Bulletin* 97 (1985): 274–285, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.97.2.274>.

<sup>137</sup> Exod 18

<sup>138</sup> Acts 6



*Transactional leadership theories.* Transactional leadership theories, also referred to as exchange theories, are based on the transactions between leaders and followers.<sup>139</sup> These transactions may be mutually positive for all leaders and followers. Effectiveness is achieved when leaders can align proper rewards or consequences with the tasks they assign to followers. This approach accomplishes the goals of the organization and positively affects the people performing the tasks, moving everyone toward success. Transactional leadership theories hold the general view that people prefer to do more of what they find rewarding and less of what they do not find rewarding.<sup>140</sup>

Transactional theories find support in scripture as they focus on creating mutually beneficial transactions between leaders and followers. Although these theories can lead to favoritism and corruption, these negative outcomes can be avoided if the leader is ethical. One example of a transactional leader is Abigail, who negotiated a win-win option between her family and David. Her actions resulted in saving lives and bringing wisdom to all involved.<sup>141</sup> In this instance, transactional leadership can be viewed as complementary to biblical leadership.

*Transformational leadership theories.* Transformational leadership theories are based on the view that leaders transform followers personally through inspiration and close relationships.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Khan, Nawaz, and Khan, "Leadership Theories and Styles," 3.

<sup>140</sup> Keita, "Leadership Styles and Their Impact on Church Growth in Alexandria and Springfield, Virginia," 35.

<sup>141</sup> 1 Sam 25

<sup>142</sup> Khan, Nawaz, and Khan, "Leadership Theories and Styles," 3.

Because these strong relationships exist on a personal level, the framework of rules and guidelines can be flexible, while effective results are achieved due to the trust and motivation of followers. Followers feel that they belong with the leader and the leader's mission and work from an internal drive instead of an external one.

One notable transformational leadership theory is the Burns Transformational Leadership Theory.<sup>143</sup> In contrast to the focus of many leadership theories on gaining power and maintaining it, this theory focuses first on the "why" or the ethical framework of the leader. These leaders lead from a noble conviction that they are bringing people into truth and good, and so lead from internal values and convictions. Followers are not just led through transactional agreements but are transformed in their values, which become the internal underpinning for their actions. Transactional leadership, according to Burns, occurs when leaders and followers lift each other to higher levels of morality and can be elevated as better people.<sup>144</sup>

Transformational leadership and servant leadership (discussed in the next section) have the strongest support in scripture. Most pastors and Christian leaders would hold to the conviction that Jesus Christ is the greatest example of a leader embodying transformational leadership characteristics as part of his leadership model. Jesus called his followers into proximity and personal relationship with him. He poured into them his ideals, values, convictions, teachings, and mission. The earliest followers of Jesus included fishermen, a physician, a tax collector, zealots, and many common people. Many of these followers were transformed by Jesus into leaders who changed the world.<sup>145</sup> In the compounding effect, many of

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<sup>143</sup> James Burns, *Leadership* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1978).

<sup>144</sup> Khan, Nawaz, and Khan, "Leadership Theories and Styles," 3.

<sup>145</sup> Acts 4:13-22

those transformed leaders became transformational leaders who transformed others.

Transformational leadership is complementary to biblical leadership and is a close model of biblical leadership, yet it lacks the emphasis on spirituality and serving others as a stand-alone model.

*Servant Leadership Theory.* Servant Leadership Theory shares components of Transactional and Transformational Leadership Theories in that mutual agreements, relationships, rewards, and personal transformation are part of the theory. Servant Leadership Theory is distinguished from the others by the strong concepts of being “other-focused” and “serving” as a model of leading. Additionally, this leadership theory has ethical and spiritual foundations as deep or deeper than any other leadership theory. Janice Tanno’s study confirmed the critical nature of the high value of ethical decision-making in Servant Leadership Theory.<sup>146</sup>

Robert Greenleaf is considered the first to use the phrase “servant leadership” in his original work in 1970. He proposed that servant leaders are servants first, as opposed to leaders first.<sup>147</sup> The primary focus is the well-being of the people the leader serves instead of the organization's benefit overshadowing people’s needs. The goal is to focus on moving people forward through opportunity and capacity to serve, which results in their benefit and benefit for the organization. Servant leaders put others first while also helping them be the best they can be.

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<sup>146</sup> Janice Tanno, “Servant Leadership: What Makes It an Effective Leadership Model” (PhD diss., Walden University, 2017), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>147</sup> “What is Servant Leadership?,” Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.greenleaf.org/what-is-servant-leadership/>.

As noted above, servant leadership, along with transformational leadership, has the strongest support in scripture. As with transformational leadership, Jesus Christ is the greatest example of servant leadership in history. Jesus, the Son of God, chose to leave the perfect unity of the Trinity to take on human form to save humanity as the Suffering Servant. He lowered himself on behalf of others. He led by serving, teaching his followers the path to greatness is the path of submission and servitude as he modeled the way.<sup>148</sup> Jesus Christ is the model of the perfect servant leader. Servant leadership as an individual theory is complementary to biblical leadership. Servant Leadership Theory, combined with Transformational Leadership Theory, provides a close model of biblical leadership.

*Modern leadership theory is complementary with biblical leadership.* Modern leadership theory is comprised of many individual leadership theories. All seven modern leadership theories considered in this project have some scriptural support, and although they are incomplete as stand-alone theories, collectively, modern leadership theory is complementary to biblical leadership in most aspects. Therefore, modern leadership theory can contribute toward church revitalization as it aligns with biblical leadership principles.

#### The Rise of Emergence Christianity

Times have changed and are changing. As culture has changed rapidly in the Western world, the ways in which people understand themselves, culture, and faith have changed producing

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<sup>148</sup> Mark 10:43-45

questions and differing views of theology and the role of the church. The way the church relates to the changes and the way people view, relate, and connect to God are key concerns. The church must adapt and adjust as necessary to continue to fulfill its mission. These challenges are the focus of what is referred to as Emergence Christianity.<sup>149</sup> This subject was explored minimally in the theological review.

Phyllis Tickle has written about the changing landscape of North American Christianity since 1994. In 2012, Tickle wrote the fourth volume about the subject: *Emergence Christianity*.<sup>150</sup> Tickle notes that history proves that approximately every five hundred years, Western Culture, along with areas of the world that have been colonized by it, goes through a season of major changes that results in reconfiguration of the major structures and beliefs.<sup>151</sup> Religion and Christianity are major factors involved in this repeating pattern. Tickle notes that it is easy for those in the Westernized Christianity story to look back five hundred years to the Reformation and see a clear example of this upheaval.<sup>152</sup> She notes that Luther's posting of his Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg resulted in a time of "wrenching, deconstructing, liberating, anxiety-producing, world-rending change."<sup>153</sup> The result of this type of shift is a massive change.

In the Great Reformation, a new stream of Christianity emerged and the old ways of doing church were challenged and changed at every level. Tickle notes that Western Christianity has been in another five-hundred-year shift during the last few decades and that the same results

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<sup>149</sup> Tim Hartman, "The Depth and Breadth of Emergence Christianity: A Theological and International Perspective," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 42, no. 2 (April 2015): 97–104, Alta Religion.

<sup>150</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*.

<sup>151</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 17.

<sup>152</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 17.

<sup>153</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 17.

are happening: a major change in Christianity and churches. Though Tickle goes to great lengths to detail the process of change through recent times, she gives special attention to the shift that began, or at least accelerated, in Western Christianity in the 1960s. She credits the concept of the Age of Aquarius<sup>154</sup> as the precursor to the rise of the growing group of people who identify as “spiritual but not religious.”<sup>155</sup> These people consider themselves spiritual, many even Christians, but who do not associate with the institutional church. Tickle believes that this group originally consisted of people who left the church in pursuit of greater opportunities to pursue spirituality beyond the confines of the institution,<sup>156</sup> which led to a decline in church attendance.

Tickle offers much more on the subject regarding the effect Emergence Christianity has had and is having on Western Christianity today. She summarizes that the key characteristic of these five-hundred-year change cycles is the disestablishment of whatever or whoever has been the source of authority.<sup>157</sup> In Tickle’s view, the Christian Church has been the authority for a long time, but that is changing today. She notes the disestablishment of Rome’s authority by the Reformation, to the authority of scripture, *sola scriptura*, *scriptura sola*, as affirmed by Luther, which led to the Protestant inerrancy view of scripture.<sup>158</sup> In this recent and current five-hundred-year shift, Tickle believes the authority of *sola scriptura* has been disestablished in many parts of Christendom, especially in North America, and is being relocated, perhaps in conjunction with

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<sup>154</sup> *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “The Age of Aquarius,” accessed December 7, 2022, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/age-of-aquarius>.

<sup>155</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 77.

<sup>156</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 78.

<sup>157</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 191.

<sup>158</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 192.

religion and ecclesiology.<sup>159</sup> In short, the disestablishment of the authority of the church has contributed to the rise of those who are spiritual but not religious, resulting in many of these people departing from the affiliation with the institutional church and contributing to church decline.

In *Meet Generation Z*, White shares similar views as Tickle's with his view that the church is in another age of crisis that comes every three or four generations, in which the church's position in culture shifts.<sup>160</sup> White believes the rise of the "nones" has moved many Christians, who were already on the fringe of the church, even further away.<sup>161</sup> Emily Bosscher, in a review of White's work, believes his conclusions about the current times of shifting in Christendom resulting in more people leaving the church as a suitable material for Christian colleges and universities.<sup>162</sup> White's views are consistent with Tickle's on Emergence Christianity relating to the movement of people away from the church.

## Church Culture

*Biblical church culture.* Another key issue related to church plateau and decline is church contextual (used in this project synonymously with organizational) culture. Biblical church culture is one in which churches are committed to the five purpose-fulfilling activities of worship,

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<sup>159</sup> Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, 193.

<sup>160</sup> James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 17.

<sup>161</sup> White, *Meet Generation Z*, 30-31.

<sup>162</sup> Emily S. Bosscher, "Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian 201 World," *Christian Scholar's Review* 48, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 201-203, <http://www.proquest.com/docview/2167697569/abstract/60B3CF0590074C34PQ/1>.

evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, and ministry. God designed the five purpose-fulfilling activities that constitute the purpose of the church, and these activities remain the same for all churches. However, he calls churches to determine specific contextual strategies for their local cultures, because different cultures may require different strategies. Local churches create contextually specific sub-cultures within their churches through various strategies toward accomplishing the five purpose-fulfilling activities that constitute the larger biblical church culture.

As recognized, the five purpose-fulfilling activities of the church form the foundational framework ministry culture every local church should work toward. But how do local churches accomplish these purpose-fulfilling activities in their specific contexts that are different from the first-century context and different from other contemporary churches in different locations and situations? Local churches must develop contextually specific strategies to accomplish the purpose-fulfilling activities of the larger biblical church culture. Churches should develop these specific strategies based on core values, which are formed through the intersection and synthesis of the passions, gifts, talents, and abilities of the believers of each local church. Garrison says, “Core values are what set us apart-as an individual or as a church. For a body of believers, core values are like DNA: they’re the unique combination of ingredients that give a church its identity. They also provide boundaries and parameters for how a church behaves.”<sup>163</sup>

The formulation of strategies based on core values, and designed to accomplish the purpose-fulfilling activities of the church, creates the contextual ministry model and the contextual culture of that local church. Garrison notes further, “We build a strategic plan around

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<sup>163</sup> Garrison, *A Spirit-Empowered Church: An Acts 2 Ministry Model*, 101.



the functions of the church.”<sup>164</sup> Phillip Sell, modifying an analytical model for the philosophy of education,<sup>165</sup> offers a path for ministry strategy development that follows a similar flow as presented in this project.<sup>166</sup> Working from mission to strategy, Sell explains the necessity of identity, mission, a theological framework, acceptable methodology, and, most importantly for this project, *contextual* strategy creation, stating: “Each cultural ministry setting is unique in its history, human resources, challenges, and opportunities. Thus, strategy cannot be borrowed from another ministry context although there will be greater commonality with the cultural contexts of some ministries than with others.”<sup>167</sup> This view affirms one of two fundamental considerations regarding contextual strategy: it must be contextual to a specific time, location, and place.

The second fundamental consideration is contextual strategies are to be designed within the intersection of the identity and mission of the New Testament Church as a witnessing and inviting community and the core values (DNA) of local churches in specific places and times. Sell notes, “It is taking all that is known from the other boxes and implementing it in a particular place in a particular time with a particular people with all the opportunities and limitations entailed in that concrete cultural setting.”<sup>168</sup> God, the Architect of the church, defines the church’s identity and mission and calls the church leaders to develop contextual strategies to

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<sup>164</sup> Garrison, *A Spirit-Empowered Church: An Acts 2 Ministry Model*, 120. Garrison uses synonyms for four of the five purpose-fulfilling activities (that he calls functions) that constitute the purpose of the church as *connect* (fellowship), *grow* (discipleship), *serve* (ministry), *go* (evangelism), and worship.

<sup>165</sup> William Frankena. *Three Historical Philosophies of Education: Aristotle, Kant, Dewey* (Chicago, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1965).

<sup>166</sup> Phillip Sell, “A Map for Ministry: Constructing a Philosophy and Strategy of Ministry,” *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 1 (2003): 67–85, Alta Religion.

<sup>167</sup> Sell, “A Map for Ministry: Constructing a Philosophy and Strategy of Ministry,” 83.

<sup>168</sup> Sell, “A Map for Ministry: Constructing a Philosophy and Strategy of Ministry,” 83.

accomplish the five purpose-fulfilling activities that constitute the purpose of the church toward fulfilling the Great Commission.

### Organizational health

Mel Ming and Steve Mills formed Leadership Development Resources Church Development Process (LDR) in the early 2000s to help churches pursue organizational health, specifically developing healthy growth strategies.<sup>169</sup> Through training, coaching, and cohort models of engagement, LDR sought to lead church leadership teams to discover their biblical identities, core values, functions (purpose), and develop growth strategies. Ming shared that out of one-hundred churches that participated in 2003-2004, 85% grew due to the LDR process.

Ming noted the high rate of success may have been due to the churches being early adopters and larger churches. Of the 15% that did not grow, Ming cited “1) Congregation was unwilling to change, 2) The pastors lacked the skill to lead the church through change, 3) in a few there were contextual factors.”<sup>170</sup> These results are indicative of three things that intersect with this research project. One, churches need a proper understanding of their mission and identity to be successful in fulfilling the Great Commission. Two, leadership matters. Three, contextual issues can have major impacts on churches working to grow out of plateau and decline.

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<sup>169</sup> "About LDR," Leadership Development Resources, accessed September 27, 2022, <https://www.ldrteam.com/>.

<sup>170</sup> Mel Ming, Facebook direct message to author, September 23, 2019.

Two reports (included in appendices) are pertinent to this project. These reports are from Mike Clarensau, research coordinator for the Acts 2 Journey (A2J), a national church revitalization process endorsed by the Assemblies of God.<sup>171</sup> The first report provides a national overview of the organizational health of Assemblies of God churches participating in the Acts 2 Journey.<sup>172</sup> In this report submitted to the Assemblies of God national leadership in 2019, Clarensau provided insight into the organizational health (church health) of the national churches that participated in the Acts 2 Journey. The status of churches at the beginning of the process was 29.9% growing and 59% plateaued or declining. Additionally, only 36% of the churches reported attendance growth in the year before beginning the Acts 2 Journey.<sup>173</sup>

Two statements provide a summary of the report that intersects with this research. The report states, “Of the 308 ‘declining’ churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2018), 41% are currently at a higher level of attendance than their pre-A2J levels, and fewer than half (47.6%) have continued to decline. Of the 158 ‘plateaued’ churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2018), 1/3 are currently at a higher level of attendance than their pre-A2J levels.”<sup>174</sup> The Acts 2 Journey has positively impacted church revitalization for a significant number of congregations; however, with less than 50% rates of increased attendance, many of the participating plateaued or declining churches did not experience revitalization progress.

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<sup>171</sup> The Acts 2 Journey is a church health and revitalization process endorsed by the General Council of the Assemblies of God. See “Acts 2 Journey | Home,” accessed September 26, 2022, <https://acts2journey.com/>.

<sup>172</sup> Mike Clarensau, “Acts 2 Journey Team Report 2018 Acts 2 Journey Churches,” 2019. Used with permission from Mike Clarensau and Kenneth Draughon. See Appendix A.

<sup>173</sup> Clarensau, “Acts 2 Journey Team Report 2018 Acts 2 Journey Churches,” 2019, 2. See Appendix B.

<sup>174</sup> See Clarensau, “Acts 2 Journey Team Report 2018 Acts 2 Journey Churches,” 2019, 6. Summary observations #11 and #12. See Appendix B.

The second report provides an overview of the organizational health of Assemblies of God churches in the Alabama district specifically, with metrics ranging from 1980 through 2021, including a brief overview of the changes to the metrics during COVID-19.<sup>175</sup> The table below provides metrics for churches in the Alabama District, Southeast Region, and nationally, at the end of 2018.<sup>176</sup>

Churches at the end of 2018	Alabama District	Southeast Region	National
Growing	14%	18.4%	18.6%
Plateaued	36%	24.8%	22.8%
Declining	50%	56.9%	58.6%

Table 2.1 GPD Status of A/G Churches at the end of 2018

The church metrics report for Alabama includes five measurements of ministry effectiveness: 1) missional effectiveness, 2) assimilation, 3) growth, 4) discipleship and mobilization, and 5) reproduction.<sup>177</sup> This report indicates Assemblies of God churches in Alabama are more effective than southeast regional and national averages in some areas and less effective in others.<sup>178</sup> In missional effectiveness, discipleship and mobilization, and reproduction,

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<sup>175</sup> Mike Clarensau, “Church Health Metrics & Growth-Plateau-Decline (GPD) - District Report, Alabama,” 2022. Used with permission from Kenneth Draughon, District Superintendent, Alabama District Assemblies of God. See Appendix C.

<sup>176</sup> Clarensau, “Church Health Metrics & Growth-Plateau-Decline (GPD) - District Report, Alabama,” 2022, 2. See Appendix C.

<sup>177</sup> For details on each measurement, see Clarensau, “Church Health Metrics & Growth-Plateau-Decline (GPD) - District Report, Alabama,” 2022, in Appendix C.

<sup>178</sup> For details on scores and percentages, see Clarensau, “Church Health Metrics & Growth-Plateau-Decline (GPD) - District Report, Alabama,” 2022, in Appendix C.

Alabama churches are outside of the healthy church ratios. With Alabama churches being in the healthy church ratios in only two of five categories, assimilation and growth, the results put them below overall health status as determined by the report provided to the Assemblies of God General Council.<sup>179</sup>

With healthy ratios in growth and assimilation and unhealthy ratios in reproduction, discipleship, and missional effectiveness, the status of Alabama churches indicates a lack of continuity through the process of new converts becoming fully devoted followers of Christ. People in Alabama churches are being reached and baptized, but they are not following through the discipleship process to participate in missional outreaches to others. At some point, the commitment to discipleship which results in missional ministry participation with an external focus (reproduction cycle) is failing. This insight also indicates further research and experimentation are needed.

### Impacts of COVID-19

The previously referenced report on health metrics for Assemblies of God churches in Alabama offers additional insight into Alabama churches during the COVID-19 impact and during the COVID-19 recovery.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> This report on Alabama was provided by Mike Clarensau as part of the report to the Assemblies of God National Leadership at General Council.

<sup>180</sup> See Clarensau, “Church Health Metrics & Growth-Plateau-Dcline (GPD) - District Report, Alabama,” 2022, in Appendix C.

Alabama A/G Churches	COVID-19 Impact Period 2019-2021	COVID19 Recovery Period 2020-2021
Increased	11.2%	20.3%
Unchanged	48.7%	59.0%
Decreased	40.1%	20.6%

Table 2.2 COVID-19 Impact of Alabama A/G Churches

Based on this data, Alabama churches have increased at a greater percentage during COVID-19 recovery than during COVID-19 impact. The largest percentage of churches during COVID-19 impact and recovery, however, remained unchanged.

Information on the impact of COVID-19 on churches is limited due to the recent nature of the pandemic, but the impact reaches beyond churches in Alabama and the Assemblies of God. Due to limited resources on the impacts of COVID-19 on churches, the following are insights gained from a wide variety of churches to provide additional information regarding Alabama and Assemblies of God national data shared earlier.

A study on church participation in North America comparing attendance before the pandemic and after churches were allowed to reopen reveals a 40% decline in those attending in-person services.<sup>181</sup> In a study on rural fragile churches in the Church of England in the UK, the impact has been noted in two main areas: financial resources and human resources.<sup>182</sup> “The data from the rural fragile churches study show that one in three clergy serving rural parishes fear that

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<sup>181</sup> Allison Bailey, “Changes to Worship and Perceptions of the COVID-19 Pandemic by Religion in the Us” (master's thesis, Yale University, 2021), 17, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<sup>182</sup> Leslie J. Francis, Andrew Village, and S. Anne Lawson, “Impact of Covid-19 on Fragile Churches: Is the Rural Situation Really Different?,” *Rural Theology* 18, no. 2 (November 2020): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14704994.2020.1818391>.

their church buildings will not be financially viable as they attempt to rebuild after Covid-19 (34%).”<sup>183</sup> As noted previously, one-third of the clergy in this movement feel they will lack finances necessary to maintain their facilities due to the impacts of COVID-19. The human resources impact is felt as well among those churches: “The data also show nearly one in three clergy serving rural parishes fear that key lay people will step down and will be difficult to replace as a consequence of Covid-19.”<sup>184</sup>

Beukes notes that the pandemic caused the closure of public religious gatherings in South Africa, creating a paradoxical situation: “I call it a paradoxical context because whilst the church is asked to be a church outside her walls, the citizens of the country are asked to be inside their buildings to either go in social distancing or go in self-isolation. For many, this is a congregational or church crisis.”<sup>185</sup> Although Beukes notes positive impacts overall, the impacts of COVID-19 created challenges for the South African church.

Manchala, former Program Executive for the World Council of Churches, believes it important to note that COVID-19 created negative impacts beyond the inner working of church organizations, yet impactful for Christians called to engage the world for good.<sup>186</sup> Although Manchala is from India, his insights are applicable around the world. The first of three negative impacts of COVID-19 is as he describes: “the manifest assertion of power and privilege amid sharp systemic inequalities.”<sup>187</sup> Manchala notes both the lack of resources for the poor (vaccine

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<sup>183</sup> Francis, Village, and Lawson, “Impact of Covid-19 on Fragile Churches,” 75.

<sup>184</sup> Francis, Village, and Lawson, “Impact of Covid-19 on Fragile Churches,” 75.

<sup>185</sup> Beukes, “To Be or Not to Be?,” 3.

<sup>186</sup> Deenabandhu Manchala, “Christian Faith Affirmation and Action in a Pandemic World: Pondering While on Pause,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 56, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2021.0036>.

<sup>187</sup> Manchala, “Christian Faith Affirmation and Action in a Pandemic World,” 3.

distribution and hospital access) and the attitude of the wealthy not to sacrifice the comfort of their lives (quarantine and social distancing) to prevent the spread.<sup>188</sup> The second of three impacts Manchala notes is: “the obsessive prioritization of economic growth and military might over the earth and people’s concerns.”<sup>189</sup> In this regard, he considers the budgeting and spending of government money lacking toward healthcare.

The third impact Manchala describes is that “the pandemic has not subdued the devious schemes of certain repressive regimes and their supremacist ideologies. It has turned out to be an opportunity to accelerate their processes of exclusion and victimization of religious and ethnic minorities.”<sup>190</sup> He gives examples in Israel, China, the Philippines, the U.S., and India to show the broad global impact. Manchala’s views that COVID-19 exasperated the abuse of privilege, prioritization of economic over health issues, and supremacist ideologies around the world offer a far-reaching and broad reality of the pandemic’s negative impacts.

Noting atypical responses, Stoddart shares three responses by church leaders to COVID-19 and the governmental restrictions resulting from it that pose threat to the global public health.<sup>191</sup> The first is excessive demand for religious liberties to be exempted from closure and distancing demands.<sup>192</sup> The second is teaching and promises that COVID-19 is demonic, and God will protect Christians from it.<sup>193</sup> The third is the propagating of conspiracy theories by

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<sup>188</sup> Manchala, "Christian Faith Affirmation and Action in a Pandemic World," 4.

<sup>189</sup> Manchala, "Christian Faith Affirmation and Action in a Pandemic World," 5.

<sup>190</sup> Manchala, "Christian Faith Affirmation and Action in a Pandemic World," 6.

<sup>191</sup> Eric Stoddart, “Retreat, Rebuke, Recite: Outliers in Church Responses to the Current COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Practical Theology* 14, no. 1–2 (March 4, 2021): 8–2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2020.1860549>.

<sup>192</sup> Stoddart, “Retreat, Rebuke, Recite,” 10.

<sup>193</sup> Stoddart, “Retreat, Rebuke, Recite,” 12.



Christian leaders concerning the pandemic.<sup>194</sup> In her research with Roma Pentecostal Christians in England during the pandemic, Doležalová found similar beliefs about the pandemic: beliefs that it was created by the devil and his followers, the vaccine was the mark of the beast, and the vaccine swabs actually infected people with the virus.<sup>195</sup> Derek Tovey also notes the tendency of some Christians to reject the science of vaccines in the name of faith.<sup>196</sup> Again, these responses were atypical, but the potential negative impacts from these three are numerous, but specifically the unnecessary spread of COVID-19 and false teaching leading to distrust of government.

Research from a medical perspective conducted during the pandemic acknowledges the tension between the potential harms and potential benefits religious practice can bring during COVID-19.<sup>197</sup> The potential harms of religious practice include mainly the spread of the virus and additional challenges to mitigating the spread of the virus due to in-person gatherings and religious beliefs.<sup>198</sup> The potential benefits of religious practice include the value of communal care, decreased mortality rates, and better coping with stress among many others. Noting the numerous potential benefits, the authors say, “it is plain to see that there can be great benefit to religion at a critical time, such as during a pandemic.”<sup>199</sup> The consensus of their research is that joint effort is critical between the medical and religious communities and any deepening of the

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<sup>194</sup> Stoddart, “Retreat, Rebuke, Recite,” 13.

<sup>195</sup> Markéta Doležalová, “Praying through the Pandemic: Religion, Uncertainty, and Care,” *Romani Studies* 31, no. 2 (December 2021): 292, <https://doi.org/10.3828/rs.2021.14>.

<sup>196</sup> Derek Tovey, “How Might the Bible Inform Christian Responses to Covid-19?,” *Stimulus* 28, no. 2 (2021): 12–17, Alta Religion.

<sup>197</sup> Dacre Knight, Daniel V. Dudenkov, and William P. Cheshire, “Religion in the US during the Time of a Pandemic: A Medical Perspective,” *Journal of Religion & Health* 60, no. 5 (October 2021): 3177–3192, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01366-8>.

<sup>198</sup> Knight, Dudenkov, and Cheshire, “Religion in the US during the Time of a Pandemic,” 3183.

<sup>199</sup> Knight, Dudenkov, and Cheshire, “Religion in the US during the Time of a Pandemic,” 3184.

rift between religion and science is dangerous for all.<sup>200</sup> Commitment to such a joint effort is not shared by all, yet the authors recommend medical professionals respect the religious beliefs of patients. Concerning this tension between the medical and religious communities, Madera notes that governments aligning too strongly with the medical community “risks emphasizing the polarization and radicalization of religion and undermining social cohesion.”<sup>201</sup> She suggests as above, that the medical and religious communities work together toward shared goals.<sup>202</sup>

Pierre Berthoud pushes against the idea of churches blindly, or too fully accepting, governmental decrees restricting religious activity. He is clear not to suggest churches should not use caution but probes the question of the government going too far with such actions.

Let us be clear: we do not mean that transmission precautions of the coronavirus should not have been taken, but did our sanitary and political authorities take the time to evaluate not only the political turmoil and the economic hardships but also the spiritual, human, and cultural consequences of such radical measures and their impact on the freedom of conscience, religion, enterprise, and movement?<sup>203</sup>

He goes further to note the temptation is present in post-Christian cultural environments for governments to encroach too far on churches’ freedoms and rights as determined by law.<sup>204</sup>

Berthoud delves into the parallel of the potential of COVID-19 to cause death with the reality that all die in this world and that Christians, considering mortality, should pray for wisdom and seek to communicate hope in such times.<sup>205</sup> Rimmer and Mungure provide a good vantage point

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<sup>200</sup> Knight, Dudenkov, and Cheshire, “Religion in the US during the Time of a Pandemic,” 3186.

<sup>201</sup> Adelaide Madera, “The Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Religious Exercise: Preliminary Remarks,” *Laws* 10, no. 2 (2021): 44, <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws10020044>.

<sup>202</sup> Madera, “The Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 8.

<sup>203</sup> Pierre Berthoud, “The Church in the Midst of the Enduring Pandemic,” *Unio cum Christo* 7, no. 1 (April 2021): 159, *Alta Religion*.

<sup>204</sup> Berthoud, “The Church in the Midst of the Enduring Pandemic,” 160.

<sup>205</sup> Berthoud, “The Church in the Midst of the Enduring Pandemic,” 161-162.

for Christians seeking the balance between wisdom and faith, and obedience to government and obedience to God, as adapted from Martin Luther's teaching: "A Christian is perfectly free, subject to none, and yet perfectly bound to serve all."<sup>206</sup>

Early in the pandemic, N.T. Wright summarized the impacts in a way that joins human emotion and theological reflection. He stated:

Tears, locked doors and doubt seem to go together. Different ways of saying similar things. Together they sum up a lot of where we are globally at the time I'm writing this. Tears in plenty, of course: so many lives cut short. Locked doors: well, precisely. The fear isn't just certain people who may have it in for us; it's a larger, more nebulous fear that every stranger in the street might, without knowing it, give me a sickness which could kill me within a week.<sup>207</sup>

Tears are a natural product of human emotions of fear, doubt, and pain. The pandemic has brought these impacts to an intersection with Christian faith in God's sovereignty and ability to protect his people. It is not a journey Christians, or non-Christians, are taking alone: it is all peoples as Wright noted in the necessity of considering the impacts of just a stranger's presence. Ruth Haley Barton reflects on the impacts of the pandemic and notes that "COVID-19 has demonstrated the reality of our interconnectedness and how we are navigating that reality is a life and death issue, impacting every aspect of our existence together on this planet."<sup>208</sup> The pandemic has brought common conditions of humanness, the ability to contract the virus, become ill, and even potentially face death, to Christians and non-Christians.

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<sup>206</sup> Chad Rimmer and Elieshi Ayo Mungure, "The Global Church and COVID-19: Perspectives on Being Church Together," *Word & World* 41, no. 2 (2021): 175, Alta Religion.

<sup>207</sup> N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 60.

<sup>208</sup> Steven L Porter et al., "Teach Me What I Do Not See: Lessons for the Church From a Global Pandemic," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 14, no. 1 (May 2021): 28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790921992604>.

This realization poses that opportunities for the church exist due to the pandemic. O'Loughlin notes that even in the tension of the church trying to navigate such times, "clergy are called to recognize the journey of the pandemic for what it represents, an opportunity to help others to find peace in patience, trust, and hope."<sup>209</sup> Using wisdom literature as a base framework, Murrihy offers the view of pastors as poets in these times of disorientation due to the pandemic, who can shape the cultural view that God is present and hope remains.<sup>210</sup> Murrihy notes that the role of pastors is one of being in specific locations with real people amid real situations to affect hope in a God who is present, not just abstract and theoretical.<sup>211</sup> This view affirms the identity of the church as a witnessing and inviting community located in specific times and locations.

The church is a community of witnesses, and the call to offer hope is for more than just clergy, it is for all of God's people. Tovey notes the importance of a community response to a communal threat and offers the biblical framework of the church as a collective or communal group with directives to care for others as the best path to offer love and hope.<sup>212</sup> Tovey argues for Christians to trust science, be considerate of how their actions affect others, and have faith that, although the virus is real, people can overcome fear in the faith that God cares for

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<sup>209</sup> Imelda O'Loughlin, "The COVID-19 Pandemic and Being Church," *St Mark's Review* 255 (March 2021): 19, *Alta Religion*.

<sup>210</sup> Sebastian Murrihy, "Pastor as Poet in the Time of the Pandemic: Exploring a Pastoral Image through Amy Plantinga Pauw's Wisdom Ecclesiology," *Stimulus* 28, no. 2 (2021): 18–26. *Alta Religion*.

<sup>211</sup> Murrihy, "Pastor as Poet in the Time of the Pandemic," 22.

<sup>212</sup> Tovey, "How Might the Bible Inform Christian Responses to Covid-19?," 14.

humanity.<sup>213</sup> Regardless of where churches stand on the science of the pandemic, they can engage the community with hope and care.

Doležalová noted that, although the Roma Pentecostal Christians in her research took a risk by meeting during the pandemic, including some of them being hospitalized, “Participating in the meetings throughout the pandemic was a form of care.”<sup>214</sup> She expressed this care as a way of making life more bearable for people living in isolation, fear, and the unknown.<sup>215</sup> Although not advocating disobeying social distancing guidelines, these views reinforce the need for the church to offer hope in difficult times as a witnessing and inviting community. Beukes suggests the pandemic offers churches opportunities to be present, on the mission, and relevant in their communities.<sup>216</sup> Manchala affirms the pandemic offers churches the opportunities to stand with and care for the marginalized in a world growing more polarized, abusive, and divisive, suggesting the potential to leverage the need for co-responsibility and interconnectedness that reveals God’s goodness in spiritual community.<sup>217</sup>

### *Historical Review*

As noted previously, the recent unusual impact that intersects with the theology presented here and that has impacted the church in the world today is the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is

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<sup>213</sup> Tovey, “How Might the Bible Inform Christian Responses to Covid-19?,” 16.

<sup>214</sup> Doležalová, “Praying through the Pandemic, 292.”

<sup>215</sup> Doležalová, “Praying through the Pandemic, 293-294.”

<sup>216</sup> Beukes, “To Be or Not to Be?,” 6.

<sup>217</sup> Manchala, “Christian Faith Affirmation and Action in a Pandemic World,” 11.

unusual in modern times, it is not unprecedented in history. The church has faced similar impacts in the past. This section explores how such historical events impacted the church, how the church responded, and how such impacts affect the theology presented. It is important to consider any historical impacts on the research question in this project: “How has COVID-19 impacted the contextual barriers contributing to church plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, Alabama?” This section will consider three historical impacts: the plague of Cyprian in third-century Rome; the Bubonic Plague in fourteenth-century Europe and Martin Luther’s response; and the Spanish Flu of 1918, which quickly had a global impact.

### The Plague of Cyprian

A deadly outbreak impacted third-century Rome, leaving up to 5,000 people dead in Rome daily. The plague’s name is attributed to St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (200-258 CE), because of his writings about the plague and its impact on Rome.<sup>218</sup> The events surrounding the plague of Cyprian differ from those of the Spanish Flu of 1918 and COVID-19, primarily in governmental response. During the plague of Cyprian, there were no hospitals, governmental medical processes, or even social responsibility expectations on the government or individuals to care for sick masses.<sup>219</sup> The sick typically died without care beyond immediate loved ones, often lying in

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<sup>218</sup> John Horgan, “Plague of Cyprian, 250-270 CE,” World History Encyclopedia, December 13, 2016, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/992/plague-of-cyprian-250-270-ce/>.

<sup>219</sup> Bryan Just, “Historic Plagues and Christian Responses: Lessons for the Church Today?,” *Christian Journal for Global Health* 7, no. 1 (2020): 7–8, Alta Religion.

the streets, as most people feared to go near them out of fear of contracting the disease. This reality meant the plague had devastating consequences.<sup>220</sup>

Cyprian and the church leaders responded to the plague by providing care for the sick, which became a Christian custom, and eventually that of the hospital system according to Bryan Just, the Event and Executive Services Manager, Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity.<sup>221</sup> Williams shares Cyprian and the church leaders' responses to the pandemic were counter-cultural as they cared for the sick at great peril to themselves.<sup>222</sup> Just also notes that Cyprian required the church to give care to all people, including those outside of the faith and those actively persecuting the church.<sup>223</sup> This type of care for the sick is attributed to Cyprian and the leaders of the Carthaginian Church but Just, referencing Dionysius from Alexander and the church historian Eusebius later in a different plague, reveals it became central to the identity and mission of the church.<sup>224</sup>

Williams notes that the role of Cyprian's leadership helped affirm and direct the church's responsibility to its neighbors in the world and the impact it could produce. Referencing Rodney Stark's thoughts in *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*,<sup>225</sup> Williams says: "Christians' behavior towards their pagan neighbors, particularly during the plagues of the second and third centuries, was a significant factor in changing societal perception of the

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<sup>220</sup> Just, "Historic Plagues and Christian Responses," 8.

<sup>221</sup> Just, "Historic Plagues and Christian Responses," 9.

<sup>222</sup> Nadya Williams, "Pastoring Through a Pandemic: Cyprian and the Carthaginian Church in the Mid-Third Century," *Fides et historia* 53, no. 1 (2021): 1–14, *Alta Religion*.

<sup>223</sup> Just, "Historic Plagues and Christian Responses," 8.

<sup>224</sup> Just, "Historic Plagues and Christian Responses," 8.

<sup>225</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Christians, and brought about conversions that resulted in exponential growth for the movement.”<sup>226</sup> The attitude of caring for others in the name of Christ is an external focus core to the identity and mission of the church and provides a fundamental conviction for churches experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic.

### The Bubonic Plague in Europe

The Bubonic Plague, also known as the Black Death, ravaged Europe in the mid-fourteenth century, killing an estimated twenty-five million people.<sup>227</sup> Butler notes that subsequent outbreaks continued to impact lives into the time of Martin Luther and specifically notes the outbreak that closed the University at Wittenberg in 1527.<sup>228</sup> Many students and faculty fled while Luther remained to care for the sick. One of the major issues the church faced was whether Christians should flee to avoid the plague or remain in faith and continue to reach out in ministry and provide care for the sick. In the scope of the theology of the church for this project, the church is a witnessing and inviting community committed to an external focus, as first and primarily, toward fulfilling the Great Commission. Therefore, the situation Luther and the church faced intersects with the church today facing COVID-19. Does the church retreat or does it remain externally focused?

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<sup>226</sup> Williams, “Pastoring Through a Pandemic,” 14.

<sup>227</sup> “The Black Death: The Plague, 1331-1770,” John Martin Rare Book Room, Hardin Library for the Health Sciences, 2017, <http://hosted.lib.uiowa.edu/histmed/plague/>.

<sup>228</sup> Geoffrey Butler, “Plague, Pentecostalism, and Pastoral Guidance: Luther’s Wisdom for the Contemporary Church,” *Pneuma* 43, no. 1 (March 24, 2021): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700747-bja10030>.



Butler believes Luther grappled with some of the same issues facing today's church and offers a response to the plague as a good pattern for the church to follow today in the COVID-19 era. Concerning times of widespread sickness, Butler states, "Luther is poised to offer a theologically robust yet pastorally considerate corrective, given his theology of the cross, the place of lament in his theology, and his navigation of the 1527 Black Death outbreak."<sup>229</sup> Butler offers multiple valuable insights about Luther's leadership.

One insight is Luther's insistence on viewing life in the theology of God's revelation through the suffering of Jesus; therefore, Christians must not consider suffering as foreign and recognize God as present in suffering.<sup>230</sup> Another insight Butler offers is Luther's view that neighbor love in scripture teaches Christians to be aware of and concerned for how their actions might impact others, leading Butler to believe it would be difficult to think Luther would affirm those who do not take pandemic guidelines seriously.<sup>231</sup>

The insight Butler shares most specific to this project is Luther's approach to the issue of avoidance (withdrawing from people) or ministry (going to and caring for people). Butler feels Luther focused on the choice being a matter of conscience for the believer noting, "while Luther commends those who have faith in God during the plague, he is sympathetic to those who flee to safety."<sup>232</sup> Butler's view seems a rational interpretation of Luther's position based on some of the comments Luther made in "Whether One May Flee a Deadly Plague."<sup>233</sup> One such statement

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<sup>229</sup> Butler, "Plague, Pentecostalism, and Pastoral Guidance," 17.

<sup>230</sup> Butler, "Plague, Pentecostalism, and Pastoral Guidance," 12.

<sup>231</sup> Butler, "Plague, Pentecostalism, and Pastoral Guidance," 14.

<sup>232</sup> Butler, "Plague, Pentecostalism, and Pastoral Guidance," 13.

<sup>233</sup> Nathanael Gentilhomme, "Whether One May Flee from A Deadly Plague," The Lutheran Witness, accessed September 20, 2022, [https://www.academia.edu/42236069/Whether\\_One\\_May\\_Flee\\_From\\_A\\_Deadly\\_Plague](https://www.academia.edu/42236069/Whether_One_May_Flee_From_A_Deadly_Plague).

regarding Christians fleeing or staying reads: “Since it is generally true of Christians that few are strong and many are weak, one simply cannot place the same burden upon everyone.”<sup>234</sup>

However, of another method from Luther, he said:

I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above.<sup>235</sup>

Luther showed compassion on believers who felt the need to flee from others in attempts to avoid the plague, yet he felt compelled to continue to reach out to those in need and held his highest expectation of ministers and leaders to do likewise.<sup>236</sup> Anderson, an article contributor for Luther Seminary, suggests an important point in that Luther acted to the best of his knowledge in his belief system and his understanding of how plagues came and spread.<sup>237</sup> This advice is good for church leaders facing COVID-19 to embrace caution and modern medicinal knowledge. It does not however negate the necessity of churches remaining externally focused as a witnessing and inviting community committed to an external focus first and primarily toward fulfilling the Great Commission. Commitment to this posture requires church leaders in a pandemic to consider how to remain externally focused while also using wisdom and considering the safety of others.

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<sup>234</sup> Gentilhomme, “Whether One May Flee from A Deadly Plague,” 6.

<sup>235</sup> Mary Jane Haemig et al., eds., *The Annotated Luther: Pastoral Writings*, vol. 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 404.

<sup>236</sup> Butler, “Plague, Pentecostalism, and Pastoral Guidance,” 13”

<sup>237</sup> Per M Anderson, “Reading Luther on Plague in a Technological Age,” *Word & World* 13, no. 3 (1993): 277–283, *Alta Religion*.

## The Spanish Flu of 1918

The Spanish Flu outbreak of 1918 resulted in an estimated fifty million deaths globally, of which an estimated 675,000 were in the United States.<sup>238</sup> The exact origin of the flu has not been determined as cases were being experienced simultaneously in the United States and France, and large-scale military troop transports quickly spread the flu globally.<sup>239</sup> The response of the world's governments, particularly that of the United States, has been similar during the two pandemics. Methods used to combat the spread of both diseases included isolation; quarantine; social distancing; limitations; and closure of public gatherings; and personal protective equipment such as facial coverings, gloves, and respirators, and community lockdowns.<sup>240</sup> The impacts on churches were also similar in both outbreaks.

The life of John R. Mott provides insight into the impact of the Spanish Flu on Christian leadership and mission, and into the actions of this leader during the outbreak. Mott is commonly associated with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and was an influential leader in his time.<sup>241</sup> Mott dealt with postponed and canceled meetings, suffered the loss of loved ones, and fell ill with the flu himself.<sup>242</sup> Amid those challenges, like those faced by many Christian

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<sup>238</sup> "1918 Pandemic (H1N1 Virus)," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed June 16, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>.

<sup>239</sup> "1918 Pandemic (H1N1 Virus)," 1.

<sup>240</sup> Sampada Tambolkar et al., "Comparison of Public Health Measures Taken during Spanish Flu and COVID-19 Pandemics: A Narrative Review," *Journal of Family Medicine & Primary Care* 11, no. 5 (May 2022): 1642–1647, [https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmpe.jfmpe\\_1612\\_21](https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmpe.jfmpe_1612_21).

<sup>241</sup> Benjamin L Hartley, Robert A Danielson, and James R Krabill, "COVID-19 in Missiological and Historical Perspective," *Missiology* 49, no. 1 (January 2021): 15–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829620972386>.

<sup>242</sup> Hartley, Danielson, and Krabill, "COVID-19 in Missiological and Historical Perspective," 16.

leaders today during COVID-19, Mott found a way to remain focused on the mission of Christ. Hospitalized due to the flu, he used the time to write, correspond, and meet with others for the ministry and wrote to his wife in a letter that his time in the hospital was busy and profitable.<sup>243</sup>

Jeff Kildea offers clear insight into the parallels of the impact of the Spanish Flu and COVID-19 outbreaks on churches in Australia.<sup>244</sup> Although this research project focuses on churches in Mobile, Alabama, the historical account and the parallel of Australia's responses to those of the United States make this account's insights comparable. During the Spanish Flu outbreak, Australia utilized the same measures of isolation, quarantine, social distancing, limitations and closure of public gatherings, personal protective equipment, and community lockdowns as the United States. One of the most noticeable impacts on the church during the Spanish Flu outbreak, according to Kildea, was the prohibition of church gatherings, including open-air gatherings.<sup>245</sup> Initially the churches cooperated, but soon pushed back against authorities for prohibiting open-air meetings, and a lengthy struggle ensued resulting in re-openings and re-closures with each new wave of the outbreak.<sup>246</sup>

One important note to this research is the church leadership's ingenuity in finding ways to continue to reach out during the restrictions. One such example is the leadership's decision to allow nuns, who were relieved of teaching due to school closures, to enter the hospitals and homes to minister to people.<sup>247</sup> Similar to Mott's efforts, this effort shows the church's

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<sup>243</sup> Hartley, Danielson, and Krabill, "COVID-19 in Missiological and Historical Perspective," 16.

<sup>244</sup> Jeff Kildea, "A Tale of Two Pandemics: The Impact of Spanish Flu and COVID-19 on Religious Observance," *The Australasian Catholic Record* 98, no. 1 (January 2021): 3–16, Alta Religion.

<sup>245</sup> Kildea, "A Tale of Two Pandemics," 4-6.

<sup>246</sup> Kildea, "A Tale of Two Pandemics," 10-13.

<sup>247</sup> Kildea, "A Tale of Two Pandemics," 12.

commitment to continuing ministry during pandemic restrictions through innovation and adjustment. In comparison to the church's response during COVID-19, Kildea notes similar restrictions and responses from the church to those during the Spanish Flu, including the commitment to continue to reach out using innovative methods, namely technology.<sup>248</sup>

This brief historical review and comparison to the impact of COVID-19 today reveal similar impacts on churches during the Bubonic Plague and the Spanish Flu outbreaks. Restrictions by governments and reactions from the church have been similar. The church, while attempting to obey governmental leaders, found ways to continue the mission of reaching out to others even when adjustments of methods were required. Additionally, the church historically has found a way to keep an external focus on those outside of the church toward fulfilling the Great Commission. These insights provide encouragement and challenge to the church today during COVID-19 to consider others, seek to use wisdom, and cooperate with governmental leaders, while remaining committed to its identity as a witnessing and inviting community, and finding ways to continue in an external focus as first and primary to fulfill the Great Commission.

### *Summary*

The New Testament church, presented through a Christological-missiological-ecclesiological lens, is a witnessing and inviting community with an external focus first and primary, committed to fulfilling the Great Commission. The NT scriptures reveal the early churches dealt with the tension of multiple issues. Spirit-empowered leaders developed strategies for their issues.

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<sup>248</sup> Kildea, "A Tale of Two Pandemics," 14-16.

Leadership was a key factor in church ecclesiology in the early church and it remains so today. The NT church remained externally focused to reach those outside of the faith toward fulfilling the Great Commission. This Christological-missiological-ecclesiological theology of the NT church remains the model and pattern for the church today, even in a pandemic world.

Church plateau and decline have been a long continuing trend in North America. Key factors related to this research include leadership, the rise of Emergence Christianity, culture, and COVID-19. Leadership is the most developed in this section due to its foundational role in the theology of the NT church presented in this project. The impact of COVID-19 continues, and data are limited due to the recent and continuing nature of the pandemic. A historical review reveals the church has found ways, during such times, to retain or reorient to its biblical identity and mission, to retain or refocus externally on those outside of the faith, and continue working toward fulfilling the Great Commission, even when setbacks and obstacles were experienced. These ideas should be considered today by leaders seeking to revitalize churches as they adjust to the impacts of challenging seasons and events, like COVID-19.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE PROJECT NARRATIVE & FIELD WORK

#### *Introduction*

Many church revitalization efforts have been led by different denominations and organizations. The approaches have varied based on denomination, tradition, leadership styles, and values. These revitalization efforts have resulted in varying degrees of success. Overall, the trend of the church in North America continues toward plateau and decline.

Church leaders have experienced a myriad of barriers contributing to the church's plateau and decline and creating resistance to revitalization. A lack of understanding of the church's identity and mission, inward organizational drift resulting in a lack of external focus, and leadership dynamics are common issues. Church revitalization efforts need to consider the context of churches to identify barriers and develop contextualized strategies. The data on how the impact of COVID-19 has affected barriers contributing to church plateau and decline are limited due to how recently the pandemic began and due to the reality that congregations' barriers may be impacted differently.

Chapter two identified a theology of the NT Church as a witnessing and inviting community with an external focus first and primary, committed to fulfilling the Great Commission. The church must remain true to the mission regardless of contextual barriers or difficult times such as pandemic eras. This research is designed to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL. The research will identify themes of impact with the hopes that its efforts will yield leadership

suggestions to reorient churches to their identity and mission and create contextualized strategies for revitalization.

### *Research Methodology*

#### Research context

The broad consideration of this research relates to church plateau, decline, and revitalization.

Uniquely, this project explores the narrower focus of the impact of COVID-19 on barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL. This perspective is important because the contextual nature of barriers contributing to plateau and decline may generate different barriers and impacts in different locations and times. This research explores how COVID-19 has impacted contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in these churches.

The research method used for this study is the qualitative method. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat state the following:

The task of qualitative research is not to seek to explain the world in ways that will make sense across cultures to all reasonable people at any moment in history. Rather the task of qualitative research is to describe the lived realities of individuals and groups in particular settings and to give the reader theoretical comparisons and explanations that can be used elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

This research utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the direct experiences of pastors and leaders of churches in Mobile, AL. This research project sought to evaluate how COVID-19 has impacted the pre-COVID-19 contextual barriers and to additionally identify any new barriers arising in the COVID-19 era.

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<sup>1</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: SCM Press, 2016), 54.



## Research participants

The research participants for this research project consisted of pastors and leaders of churches in Mobile, AL. The Alabama District Assemblies of God Mobile Section Presbyter encouraged all Assemblies of God pastors in the section to attend. The research invitation was also extended to pastors and leaders of other denominational churches in the city of Mobile. In total, twenty-eight pastors and church leaders attended between three focus groups, and four of those twenty-eight additionally participated in interviews. Of this participant group, one was a Church of God pastor, one was a Baptist pastor, one was a Methodist pastor, and the rest were affiliated with the Assemblies of God. The participant group consisted of lead pastors and staff pastors. Ministry tenures ranged from less than one year to more than twenty-five years. Education levels consisted of no formal education, non-degree ministry certifications, bachelor's, and master's degrees.

## Instruments used in data collection

Originally the research for this study began pre-COVID in 2019, identifying four contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL.<sup>2</sup> Due to issues resulting from the pandemic, the researcher paused work for one year in 2020 and resumed in 2021. A request was made to the IRB of SEU to utilize the pre-COVID research for comparison and evaluation purposes with new mid-COVID-19 research. The request was granted, and the research question was revised to: How has COVID-19 impacted the contextual barriers

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<sup>2</sup> These barriers are previous leadership, leadership style change, worship style change, and disproportionate internal focus. For more see, Joseph Lee, "Church Plateau and Decline in Assemblies of God Churches in Mobile, Alabama: Factors That Hinder Growth," (DMIN6013 Theory and Practice of Ministry Paper, Southeastern University,) 2019, 3.

contributing to church plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, Alabama? Therefore, the new research for this project evaluated the impacts of COVID-19 on the previously identified contextual barriers.

The design used in-depth, semi-structured focus groups and interviews. This semi-structured design offered a framework for the focus groups and interviews with a margin to engage participants and explore for deeper insights. This structure also provided the flexibility to navigate fluidly between prepared questions and feedback from the participants in real-time. This approach allowed for a deeper investigation of key themes arising in the discussions. Three focus groups and four interviews were conducted using two sets of questions.

#### Semi-structured focus group and interview questions

Two sets of questions were used in this research project. One set of questions related to COVID-19's impact on the four pre-COVID-19 barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in Mobile, AL.

1. Has COVID impacted the pre-COVID contextual barriers?
  - a. Previous leadership?
  - b. Leadership style change?
  - c. Church worship style change?
  - d. A disproportionate internal focus?
2. How are the barriers more or less impactful now, during mid-covid?
3. Have you been successful in addressing this barrier?
4. Have new barriers arisen due to COVID that were not present pre-COVID?

A second set of questions related specifically to COVID-19's impact on the contextual barrier of internal focus.

1. How has COVID impacted the contextual barrier of a disproportionate internal focus as compared to its impact pre-COVID?
2. How is this barrier more or less impacting during COVID?
3. How is this barrier affecting your church now?
4. Have you been successful in addressing this barrier? If so, how?

### *Narrative Description of Project Execution*

The mid-COVID-19 research questions were designed to evaluate COVID-19's impact on the previously identified pre-COVID-19 barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL. Most participants in the research had previously participated in the pre-COVID-19 research and were familiar with the results consisting of the four contextual barriers. This mid-COVID-19 research intended to determine if COVID-19's impacts were positive, negative, or neutral on the barriers and to determine if COVID-19's impacts had created new contextual barriers not previously identified.

The first focus group used the first set of questions. The format consisted of the researcher giving instructions for the consent forms to be signed by all participants if they chose of their own free will to participate. Each participant was given a document including instructions regarding the nature of the evaluation of COVID-19's impact on previously identified pre-COVID-19 barriers and the questions.<sup>3</sup> After asking each question and giving time for participants to respond, all responses were carefully noted. The discussion was also recorded and transcribed for review and comparison with the research notes. In the first group, the ninety-minute time allotment was insufficient for full discussion; therefore, a second focus group was

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<sup>3</sup> Instructions and questions are provided in Appendix D.

conducted later using the same set of questions. It was conducted in the same format as the first group.

The third focus group used the second set of questions relating to the pre-COVID-19 contextual barrier of a disproportionate internal focus. The format was the same as the first two focus groups. Instructions were given for the consent forms to be signed by each interviewee if they chose of their own free will to participate. Each participant was provided the document including instructions and the second set of questions.<sup>4</sup> This group focused in-depth on one of the pre-COVID-19 four contextual barriers, internal focus. The discussion was conducted in the same manner as the first two groups, taking notes on all responses. The discussion was also recorded and transcribed. The ninety-minute time allotment was sufficient for a full discussion and the meeting concluded.

Four interviews were conducted using the same questions (second set of questions) as the third focus group. Instructions were given for the consent forms to be signed by each interviewee if they chose of their own free will to participate. Each interviewee was provided the document including instructions and the second set of questions.<sup>5</sup> All responses were carefully noted. The interview discussion was recorded and transcribed for review.

### *Summary*

After the focus groups and interviews were concluded, the data were coded manually. Each participant was assigned a letter according to the chronological order of response in the first

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<sup>4</sup> Instructions and questions are provided in Appendix E.

<sup>5</sup> Instructions and questions are provided in Appendix E.

focus group. For example, the first participant to answer in the first focus group was assigned the letter A, and the second participant to answer was assigned the letter B, et cetera. Once assigned a letter, participants maintained their letter through the remainder of groups and interviews. The data were compiled, coded, and analyzed for thematic patterns. Themes were determined by the frequency of repetition and emphasis. The results intersected with the theological and biblical research, the literature review, and the historical review to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on the revitalization efforts of churches in Mobile, AL, and to evaluate the resulting implications on the mission of the NT Church. The goal is to provide suggestions to help leaders in Mobile, AL develop contextual strategies to grow out of plateau and decline.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PROJECT EVALUATED

#### *Introduction*

This phenomenological study, involving lead and staff pastors, used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline of churches in Mobile, AL. Twenty-eight people participated in total. Eleven people participated in the first focus group. Due to the one-hour timeframe being insufficient for the first focus group, a second focus group was held as a continuation, utilizing the same questions as the first focus group. Twelve people participated in the second focus group. The third focus group consisted of eighteen participants. Four people participated in interviews.

The research consisted of three focus groups of approximately one hour in length and four interviews of approximately thirty minutes each. The first two focus groups were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on four pre-COVID-19 contextual barriers: previous leadership, leadership style change, worship style change, and disproportionate internal focus. The third focus group and the four interviews engaged questions about the impact of COVID-19 on the fourth pre-COVID-19 contextual barrier: disproportionate internal focus. The research reached saturation concerning the first three contextual barriers in the first two focus groups. However, another focus group and interviews were necessary to reach saturation concerning the fourth contextual barrier (disproportionate internal focus). The interviews and focus groups produced qualitative data.

The theological research revealed a Christological-missiological-ecclesiological theology of the NT Church as a witnessing and inviting community with an external focus first and primary, committed to fulfilling the Great Commission. More specifically, it revealed the

necessity of the NT Church's proper orientation of its identity and mission. This orientation is necessary as the church is an extension and incarnation of Christ in culture. An external focus is vital for the church to embody Christ's actions to enter culture to reach people. Spirit-empowered leadership is needed to orient the church to its identity and mission, to maintain a proper external focus, and to develop others to participate in the Great Commission.

The literature review affirmed the persistent struggle of church plateau and decline. This struggle includes the continuing drift away from the institutional church, organizational health issues, and the current impacts of COVID-19. It also supports the necessity of healthy church culture and the critical role of leadership in leading churches out of plateau and decline. The historical review explored three plagues in history and how the NT Church was impacted and responded to the crisis. It revealed that the church, although impacted in many ways, found ways to maintain or reorient its identity and mission, to maintain or renew a commitment to an external focus, and to continue working to fulfill the Great Commission during pandemic-related challenges.

In conjunction with theological research, literature and historical reviews, and human-subjects research, this study includes a comprehensive evaluation of the audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews and focus groups. The results were analyzed and coded manually for thematic elements.<sup>1</sup> Identifiable themes surfaced, and the research analysis did not address responses that did not relate to themes. It is essential to note that the data reflect the participants' experiences at the time of the focus groups and interviews in the midst of COVID-19. Based on the reports of the participants, most of the congregations were experiencing active cases of the virus.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 203.

### *Analysis of Data*

#### Focus Groups 1 and 2: Evaluation of the impacts of COVID-19 on four pre-COVID-19 contextual barriers

Four themes surfaced in the first two focus groups. The research identified three positive themes of impact and one negative theme of impact.

1. The impacts of COVID-19 reoriented churches to a biblical identity and mission. (11)<sup>2</sup>
2. The impacts of COVID-19 decreased resistance to pastoral leadership. (10)
3. The impacts of COVID-19 decreased resistance to cultural change in churches. (9)
4. The impacts of COVID-19 decreased engagement from existing members, resulting in a more significant internal focus. (4)

In the first two focus groups, there was an overall tone of positivity from the pastors concerning where the churches were and how they were doing. There was a general agreement that although COVID-19 created difficult and challenging situations, the results contributed to an environment where pastors were freer to lead, set new directions for ministry, make cultural church changes in order to appeal to outsiders, and restructure their leadership styles. Based on the pre-COVID-19 research that produced the four contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in these churches, it was clear that the pastors had been battling resistance in these areas by church members before COVID-19. It is important to note that most pastors reported an influx of new people during COVID-19. Further research in focus group three and the interviews

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<sup>2</sup> The number in parenthesis indicates the number of responses aligning with the theme.



identified the reality that all churches experienced a significant loss of pre-COVID-19 members and attendees, which is discussed later in this section.

The most dominant theme of the first two focus groups became the reorientation of the church's identity. Numerous comments supported the idea that COVID-19 helped pastors and churches reorient their biblical identity and mission, which most indicated had been lost or neglected over the years. Early in the first focus group, a participant noted the impacts of COVID-19 on the contextual barriers helped pastors reorient people to a true biblical identity for who the church is. He noted this impact helped pastors remind people they had a responsibility to personally live out their faith daily. Another participant affirmed that the impact of COVID-19 allowed pastors the opportunity to remind people of who they are and what they must do as a church. Another participant noted that it required pastors to evaluate the biblical concept of the church and redefine success based on that instead of a secular concept of the church.

The next theme to surface regarded pastoral leadership. One participant stated, "COVID-19 reinforced the effort to move to a pastor-led and team-empowered leadership structure." This comment was affirmed and echoed by numerous pastors in the room. Another participant shared that their church gained a new pastor before COVID-19, and the staff and church struggled to follow him. She noted COVID-19 pushed them to follow the new pastor and look forward instead of backward to the legacy of the former pastor who led the church for many years. It helped the church let go of the past and look forward with a new leader. A key point in this theme was pastors and churches moving toward a more significant external (outward) focus because the impacts of COVID-19 forced them to reevaluate the church beyond the traditional facilities and meetings.

Another participant shared his view that the main reason for leadership's greater freedom was that the influx of new people reinforced pastors' abilities to set a new direction. He said, "COVID-19 produced new people who were attracted to the fresh vision pastors were casting in unprecedented times." Another participant noted that the influx of new people was, in his opinion, because of a fresh vision, which reinforced the pastors' credibility in knowing what direction was best for the church. Another participant stated, "the new people were early adopters of pastoral vision." As this theme surfaced, more specific examples were shared. One participant noted that the forced closure of his church by state mandate enabled him to do a "hard reset" and make changes without resistance. Two participants dialogued that they had freer decision-making abilities and that there were fewer politics in the church. Another participant affirmed that the decision-making process was much faster and easier for him. The consensus appeared that COVID-19 resulted in the removal of barriers of resistance to pastoral leadership.

The third theme flowed naturally from the second, as less resistance to pastoral leadership led to less resistance to changing the culture of the churches. The participant who previously commented about the hard reset his church did during closure further explained that they revamped their ministry structure and church worship style to more of an attractional model. Another participant noted that the pace of change exponentially increased as pastors tried to determine what to do in different conditions (closure, mandates, social distancing protocols, fear of mass gatherings, et cetera.). He expressed that they did not have time to wait for things to revert to the pre-COVID-19 normal, they had to innovate to reach people, and rapid change was considered necessary, even among many who previously resisted change.

A few specific examples of people embracing church cultural change were shared. One participant noted that many of the people in his congregation who previously resisted any digital

communication and technological deliveries of services such as emails, texts, social media, and live streaming embraced these technologies when they could no longer meet in person. Multiple participants affirmed that their congregations had previously resisted financially investing in, and using, digital delivery systems, such as live streaming for the services. However, because of the closure mandates, they readily embraced these technologies to continue to worship together. Even after they returned to in-person gatherings, requests were made for electronic sign-up sheets for events to avoid the potential contact exposure manual sign-up sheets may bring. The participants specified that pre-COVID-19, the electronic sign-up sheet would have been a definite point of contention in some cases. A final example is electronic giving. Most participants reported that the use of electronic giving increased significantly, many of whom stated it was previously underutilized.

The fourth theme was the only negative impact in the first two focus meetings. The shift to a negative impact appeared as retrospect among the group after dialoguing about the positive impacts of COVID-19. During the discussion about people embracing the live streaming of worship services, a participant raised the issue of actual engagement in an online service. He noted leaders were excited about the number of live stream views early in the COVID-19 mandated closures, but there was a need for reflection on what that meant in terms of engagement. This reflection marked a shift in the conversation, and the participants dialogued about how to define engagement online. The consensus was that the numbers of views are not accurate indicators of engagement with the content, and even complete online engagement is insufficient for spiritual community and discipleship.

On the subject of online engagement, one participant noted that his view is some prefer it because it offers a lack of accountability. This suggestion further shifted the conversation into

the negative impact as participants discussed why people do not want accountability, and that COVID-19 was the perfect excuse to avoid it, especially after in-person gatherings resumed. Another participant noted that COVID-19 was the perfect excuse for people previously on the fringe of the church community to leave the church. Multiple participants discussed the idea that for people who were not deeply committed to the church, the fear of the virus (which they affirmed as a legitimate concern) was the perfect opportunity to withdraw. They further agreed that levels of engagement decreased, even among those who did not entirely leave the churches.

The overall tone of the first two focus groups presented more positive than negative impacts from COVID-19 on contextual barriers contributing to plateau and decline. The first theme was reorienting the church to its biblical identity and mission. The theological and biblical research and the literature and historical reviews provide convergence for the importance of a church understanding who it is and what it must do. When Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection, John records, Jesus said to them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”<sup>3</sup> God calls the church to be the people of Christ, doing the work of Christ, incarnating Christ in their context. Wu says, “Christian workers face the task of contextualizing their message in a way that is culturally comprehensible and yet is not compromised biblically.”<sup>4</sup> The church cannot be the church as God designed apart from its identity as Christians and its mission to participate in the Great Commission in its local context. The church historically remained true to its identity and mission even during plagues.

The second and third themes relate to the role of leadership in the church’s mission. The theological and biblical research, contemporary literature, and historical reviews provide

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<sup>3</sup> John 20:21

<sup>4</sup> Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations*, sec. 3, chap. 7, Kindle.

convergence for the critical nature of leadership in churches. Jesus established authentic leadership that serves others and transforms people, communities, organizations, and nations. Jesus Christ was the perfect leader and the model of Spirit-empowered leadership. Although far from perfect, the leaders in Acts practiced Spirit-empowered leadership after the manner of Jesus. Kouzes and Posner affirm the critical role of leadership, stating, "Leadership makes a difference. That difference can be negative or positive, but it does make a difference."<sup>5</sup> The goal of Christian leaders must be to make a positive difference in the type of servant leadership Jesus modeled. Martin Luther's leadership during the Black Plague is an excellent example for leaders today dealing with the impacts of COVID-19 or extenuating circumstances.

The fourth theme, the only negative impact theme identified in the first two focus groups, surfaced after a shift in dialogue to the difficulties pastors appeared reluctant to discuss early in the groups. The negative theme captured the increased withdrawal levels, resulting in the decreased engagement of members. The historical review offered insight into the reality of similar impacts during previous pandemic-type situations. Luther was compassionate toward those who felt the need to flee populous areas out of fear of catching the plague. He understood and affirmed the Christian's right to make that choice without guilt, yet he acknowledged the lack of care for others that resulted from withdrawal. He chose to stay and requested ministry leaders stay in the city to provide care for the sick. The literature review revealed similar impacts among churches outside the Mobile, AL area. The data presented by Clarensau reveals national- and state-specific (Alabama) data showing measurable impacts on church health.<sup>6</sup> The data show that COVID-19 impacts churches beyond the research area. The theological and biblical research

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<sup>5</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *Learning Leadership*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> 40.1% of Assemblies of God churches in Alabama decreased due to COVID-19. See Clarensau in Appendix C.

intersects with the theme that the church's identity and mission do not change in difficult times. The early church existed in hostile environments but remained externally focused as it engaged the Great Commission's commands.

But the high priest rose, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.<sup>7</sup>

This passage shows the hostility the early church faced, yet the Lord instructed them to remain focused on the mission even when faced with prison. Paul recounted to Timothy the many cases of abuse he experienced on his missionary journeys, yet he remained committed to the Great Commission.<sup>8</sup> Speaking of Cyprian’s leadership in times of difficulty, Williams notes his success was keeping the church looking outward and continuing in its mission.<sup>9</sup>

Interviews and Focus Group 3: Evaluation of the impacts of COVID-19, specifically on the pre-COVID-19 contextual barrier, a disproportionate internal focus

Three themes surfaced.

1. The impacts of COVID-19 reinforced a disproportionate internal focus. (6)
2. The impacts of COVID-19 increased withdrawal resulting in decreased engagement. (5)
3. The impacts of COVID-19 contributed to the permanent loss of members and attendees. (5)

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 5:17-21

<sup>8</sup> Paul refers to abuses in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra in 2 Tim 3:11, “my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me.”

<sup>9</sup> Williams, “Pastoring Through a Pandemic,” 1–14.

The questions for the third focus group and the four interviews focused specifically on one of the four pre-COVID-19 contextual barriers, a disproportionate internal focus. The data analysis summary provides greater detail for focusing further on the barrier of internal focus. The qualitative data and research analysis from the first two focus groups indicated there was a need to spend more time on the disproportionate internal focus barrier. The following clarification of a disproportionate internal focus was communicated to the participants.

Churches need both internal and external focus. Internal focus includes pastoral care, discipleship, spiritual growth, et cetera, toward edifying the existing church body. External focus is engaging people outside the church, in its immediate context and beyond, as commanded in the Great Commission, toward reaching those who are not yet in Christ. Care of the existing body is an integral part of pastoral leadership. However, it must not negate the balance of having an external focus as first and primary, or it is a disproportionate internal focus. Plateau and decline are the natural results when churches (attendees, members, lay leaders, and influencers) show more concern for those who are already a part of the church than showing concern for people outside of the church because the focus becomes maintaining the expectations of existing people. The pre-COVID-19 research that identified four contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL, revealed this insight.

When presented with questions about a disproportionate internal focus, one participant shared that the impacts of COVID-19 reinforced the internal focus in his church before the pandemic. He said, "COVID-19 solidified it (internal focus) for those who were already internally focused and for those who were in between internal and external focus, it reinforced internal focus." He concluded that the pandemic entrenched the overall position of an internal focus for most of his members.

Another participant commented that the impacts of COVID-19 magnified members' previous positions relating to an internal/external balance. Another participant affirmed by stating, "it is the same in my church." Another participant agreed with the previous statements and noted that the impacts of COVID-19 "emboldened people who were not previously outward focused."

As a continuation of the previous discussion, another participant spoke for several minutes, noting that the impacts of COVID-19, directly and indirectly, contributed to a disproportionate internal focus. He suggested that the move by most churches to live streaming services during the mandated lockdowns provided a false sense of engagement. He stated, "views do not equal reach." He made the point that too many pastors thought they were successful in reaching out externally when the number of views of their live stream services increased but that in his view, pastors were being naïve in thinking views equals engagement. To this point, another participant stated, "live stream is not quantifiable in terms of true engagement." He also noted that live streams will never adequately replace in-person worship services but that churches today must offer live streams for other purposes, such as for those traveling, the sick and shut-in, et cetera.

The second theme surfaced as participants discussed the previous point concerning a false sense of engagement from online views. One participant noted he agreed with the idea that live stream provides a false sense of engagement but clarified that the level of withdrawal among his members also increased. Another participant said, "COVID-19 caused people to withdraw from important personal relationships, including relationships in the church." A participant who previously affirmed this view noted that COVID-19 "emptied his outreach teams due to fear of the virus." Another participant agreed and affirmed that they lost most of the people who served



in their outreach teams. Another participant agreed with the previous statements and noted that the church experienced multiple challenges retaining existing team members each time the mandated closures were lifted and resumed because each shutdown resulted in greater withdrawal levels. A clear theme surfaced: due to the impacts of COVID-19, withdrawal increased, resulting in decreased engagement.

The third theme surfaced as the previous point about multiple mandated closures and re-openings opened a further dialogue. Each church represented experienced at least two closures and re-openings, and some of the churches experienced more at the discretion of their leadership. During this cycle of forced closures and re-openings, one participant noted that many of his members left the church because the church could no longer meet their needs. Another participant echoed the same experience and noted it connected to a disproportionate internal focus because, when the church could no longer meet some of the members' needs, they did not have an external focus to keep them grounded in their mission as part of the church. Two participants connected the permanent loss of members to the lack of accountability and engagement in live-stream worship services. Both participants noted that many of their members never transitioned from online viewing to in-person gatherings when their churches re-opened.

All participants affirmed this view, and the consensus arose that the online worship option provided a path away from a genuine engagement many members had grown comfortable not having. The discussion indicated that many who transitioned to online engagement early in the mandated closures eventually stopped engaging online. At the time of this research, one participant estimated that at least one-third of his church's pre-COVID-19 members were no longer attending in person, participating in live streams, or giving financially. There was a general agreement among the group that every church has experienced a similar loss.

The overall tone of this first theme was clear: COVID-19 directly reinforced a disproportionate internal focus. People felt justified in becoming or remaining internally focused. The subsequent related view that digital technologies for delivering worship experiences were insufficient for an adequate external focus reveals that participants thought COVID-19 also contributed indirectly to greater internal focus as pastors embraced a false sense of success.

Comments about the convergence of the theological and biblical dimensions and the literature and historical reviews regarding the church's identity and mission in the first two focus groups were provided previously. A disproportionate internal focus is a direct issue with the church's identity and mission because an external focus is first and primary to the Great Commission. Another issue that intersects with the literature review on this theme is the concept of digital technologies for online worship services. The participants' consensus was that online worship services are necessary for other reasons but inadequate as a primary means of spiritual community for people who can attend in-person gatherings.

Isetti, in an article titled "Online You Will Never Get the Same Experience, Never," studied the migration of churches online during COVID-19.<sup>10</sup> Her conclusions agree with the participants' consensus from the focus groups that online religious engagement is insufficient based on the needs of her participants. The basis for her conclusions was the necessity to have all five senses engaged to have a whole spiritual community. She noted the importance of religious materiality: "all five senses have been mentioned by respondents as meaningful and constitutive elements of their religious identity and experience."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Giulia Isetti, "'Online You Will Never Get the Same Experience, Never': Minority Perspectives on (Digital) Religious Practice and Embodiment during the COVID-19 Outbreak," *Religions* 13, no. 4 (April 2022): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040286>.

<sup>11</sup> Isetti, "Online You Will Never Get the Same Experience, Never," 11.

Other researchers disagree with this view and feel that online church is viable for a spiritual community. In a study published in the *Journal of the Academic Study of Religion*, Hutchins researched three successful online churches and concluded that online church is a legitimate expression of spiritual community.<sup>12</sup> It is also important to note, however, Hutchins included that most people (75% - 85%) involved in the online churches also participate in local in-person church services.<sup>13</sup> Hutchings' research was conducted pre-COVID-19 and did not present the same situation of members choosing online church as an alternative to in-person gatherings.

Another study promotes the validity of digital technologies for online churches and adequate spiritual communities.<sup>14</sup> This study affirms virtual space as a legitimate space for fellowship because God is omnipresent and, therefore, in the virtual spaces even though people are not physically in the same space. The authors state, “Within the framework of Christian theology, it is understood that God is the spirit not limited by place, time and other means.”<sup>15</sup> Although the study offers profitable opportunities with an online church, such as an unlimited reach of virtual evangelism, it also acknowledges potential impacts, such as how quickly and easily false teaching spread and the difficulties pastors face in providing pastoral care virtually.<sup>16</sup> This study was conducted during COVID-19 and suggested ecclesiology as a principle and technology as a method can produce an adequate spiritual community virtually.

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<sup>12</sup> Tim Hutchings, “Online Christian Churches: Three Case Studies,” *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 23, no. 3 (2010): 366–367, <https://doi.org/10.1558/arsr.v23i3.346>.

<sup>13</sup> Hutchings, “Online Christian Churches: Three Case Studies,” 364.

<sup>14</sup> Gernaida K. R. Pakpahan et al., “Pandemic Ecclesiology: Church Re-Actualisation during the Pandemic,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 78, no. 4 (October 2022): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7201>.

<sup>15</sup> Gernaida K. R. Pakpahan et al., “Pandemic Ecclesiology,” 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Gernaida K. R. Pakpahan et al., “Pandemic Ecclesiology,” 4.

It is important to note that there is not a clear consensus in the literature review concerning digital technologies pertaining to the validity of online religious activity as a complete alternative to an in-person spiritual community. It is also important to note that there are two different groups in this research concerning digital technologies. The first two focus groups' data revealed an embrace of technology for the online church as a positive theme. The first group of members adopted digital technologies as additional tools to be used when in-person gatherings are not viable, not as an alternative to in-person gatherings. The second group of members, identified in the third focus group and the interviews, represent members who chose the online church as a complete alternative to in-person gatherings. Both groups only represent a small group of people in Mobile, AL.

The second and third themes flow as natural by-products of the first theme. As the impacts of COVID-19 reinforced a disproportionate internal focus among members, members' withdrawal levels increased, resulting in decreased engagement. As members continued to withdraw, it seemed harder for many of them to engage online adequately and return to in-person services upon re-opening. This pattern resulted in many members eventually abandoning engagement with their pre-COVID-19 churches altogether.

John's record of the Great Commission provides a key emphasis regarding the foundational element of external focus. This theme intersects with the theological and biblical dimensions showing the necessity of an external focus as first and primary in the church's identity and mission. The Great Commission is the continuation of the proclamation of the message of the salvific work of Christ, and it is for everyone not yet saved. It is essential to fulfilling the Great Commission. Jesus said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even

so I am sending you.”<sup>17</sup> Jesus left heaven and came to earth to save those separated from God.

The concept of man's salvation is externally focused, as none were with God in a completed state of righteous standing before Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection.

An external focus as first and primary in emphasis does not negate the imperative command to make disciples; it precedes it as a necessary task. Donald Stamps noted the centrality of the holistic work of the church when he wrote: "Christ institutes Christian missions as a holy and mandatory task of the church. The Mission of God is the main theme in both the Old Testament and the New Testament."<sup>18</sup>

The dysfunction of a disproportionate internal focus and the necessity of an external focus to fulfilling the Great Commission also intersects with the literature review. Discipleship is a critical factor in the proper balance of internal and external focuses. Discipleship is critical because Christians are to grow to spiritual maturity as disciples after conversion. The discipleship process develops Christians committed to the *Missio Dei*, precisely the church's function of evangelism and discipleship. White shares that one of the reasons for the decline among North American churches is an improper view and practice of discipleship. He proposes that salvation combined with intentionality, training, and community is a process that equals transformation, or life change, which produces disciples that make more disciples.<sup>19</sup>

Stetzer and Dodson approach this issue with the same conclusion. They share that churches that lack an intentional and strategic culture of evangelism that grows from spiritual

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<sup>17</sup> John 20:21

<sup>18</sup> Donald Stamps, ed., *The Full Life Study Bible King James Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 1585.

<sup>19</sup> White, *Rethinking the Church*, 75.

maturity suffer a decline.<sup>20</sup> McIntosh and Reeves share that a significant component of a lack of attendance (people flow) is a failure of churches to reproduce missional community members that continue the process.<sup>21</sup> Matthews notes that a missional community (mature disciples) is critical to the church and states that any other model will fail to cultivate an external focus necessary to reproduce new Christians.<sup>22</sup> Churches that fail to mature people to the complete cycle of prioritizing and engaging in reaching outsiders will struggle to grow out of a disproportionate internal focus.

The historical review offers vital insights into internal and external focuses during pandemics. Just notes that the topic of an external focus (expressed as care for the sick in Just's study) during a pandemic is a complicated issue for Christians trying to balance imperatives to sacrifice for the good of others, to be willing to enter harm's way in the name of Christ, and to obey authorities. He concludes that the church has a duty to minister, even in difficult times.<sup>23</sup> Butler notes Luther used a similar approach in that Luther did not look down on Christians who fled the plague, but he, his family, and his clergy remained with the sick, Christians, and non-Christians to provide care, even at the risk of personal peril.<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to offer specific detailed instructions for churches attempting to maintain an external focus in pandemic times. There is much to consider, but churches must find ways to remain true to their identity and

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<sup>20</sup> Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 98-131.

<sup>21</sup> McIntosh and Reeves, *Thriving Churches in the Twenty-First Century*, 129.

<sup>22</sup> Tracey Matthews, "New Wineskins for a Vintage Gospel," *St Mark's Review* 233 (October 2015): 87–102, Alta Religion.

<sup>23</sup> Just, "Historic Plagues and Christian Responses," 3.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, "Plague, Pentecostalism, and Pastoral Guidance," 13.

mission as a witnessing and inviting community with an external focus as first and primary to fulfill the Great Commission, even in difficult times.

### *Data Analysis Summary*

The first two focus groups revealed four themes of impact from COVID-19 on pre-COVID-19 contextual barriers to the churches growing out of plateau and decline. The first theme revealed that the impact of COVID-19 positively affected leaders by helping the church reorient to its biblical identity and mission as a church. The second theme revealed was the positive effect of decreased resistance to leadership because of the impacts of COVID-19. The third theme revealed that the impact of COVID-19 positively affected decreased resistance to cultural change in the churches. The fourth theme highlights the only negative theme from the first two focus groups: increased withdrawal and greater internal focus (inward drift) among members.

Due to the nature of the positive impact in the second and third themes, revolving around new people in the churches, the research indicated the need for additional questions regarding a disproportionate internal focus. The need for further research is because the positive nature of decreased resistance to pastoral leadership and cultural change in the churches represented appeared to share the commonality of the churches losing pre-COVID-19 members and attendees and gaining new people during COVID-19. Without more insight, there was the potential to overlook the negative impact of existing people leaving the church. The data from the first and second focus groups indicated the potential for a lack of congruency. The concern was the pastors were speaking from the resulting positive standpoint of having less resistance to leadership and change because of members and attendees who were leaving tended to be

internally focused and resistant to change. There appeared to be a gap in the data between the initial negative and the resulting positive impacts; therefore, the third focus group and four interviews specifically focused on internal focus.

The interviews and the third focus group focused explicitly on internal focus. The results showed significant negative impacts on the churches regarding the pre-COVID-19 members and attendees. The third focus group and the four interviews revealed three sub-themes concerning internal focus. These three sub-themes consisted of reinforced internal focus, increased withdrawal resulting in decreased engagement, and the permanent loss of members and attendees. All three themes revealed negative impacts and contributed to greater detail of the fourth theme from the first two focus groups, that COVID-19 negatively impacted churches because of reinforced internal focus.

These data appeared to contrast the data from the first two focus groups because the first two groups revealed an overall more significant positive impact than a negative impact. Upon analysis, the gap in the data was confirmed. The impact of COVID-19 on the four contextual barriers was eventually positive in that the leaders could orient the church to its identity and mission with a renewed commitment to an external focus with less resistance.<sup>25</sup> It is clear; however, the overall positive impact was after the negative impacts on pre-COVID-19 members and attendees, as new people accepted the vision.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> As reflected in the data from focus groups one and two.

<sup>26</sup> As reflected in the data from focus group three and the interviews.



### *Synthesis within Ministry Context*

The overarching goal of this project was to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on church revitalization efforts, specifically contextual barriers contributing to plateau and decline, in churches in Mobile, AL, with the hope of providing suggestions for leaders to assist them in organizational health. The responses of the interview participants suggest that the impacts of COVID-19 within their church communities are more positive than negative, although the negative impacts have generated continuing struggles for leaders. The interactions between the participants and the research data provided clear insight that the negative impacts of COVID-19 can align under two main topics: leadership and internal focus. Leadership is the broader category because reorienting a church from a disproportionate internal focus to an external focus as first and primary is a leadership task. Toward assisting pastors and leaders in this task, four components were created that may help leaders grow their churches out of plateau and decline.

The first component is a study designed to help pastors and church leaders address the impact of COVID-19 on the contextual barrier of a disproportionate internal focus contributing to plateau and decline among churches in the Mobile, AL area.<sup>27</sup> This research focuses on reorienting pastors and leaders to the church's biblical identity as a witnessing and inviting community. The church's identity is inseparable from its mission; therefore, understanding this connectedness of the identity and mission is critical to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. The study highlights five ways the impacts of COVID-19 intersect with the church's identity and mission and its presence in culture and identifies challenges and opportunities that have resulted.

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<sup>27</sup> See Appendix F, Joseph Lee, "Exploring Five Ways COVID's Impact Intersects with the Church's Identity and Mission, its Presence in Culture, and Resulting Challenges and Opportunities," (DMIN8023, Contextual Engagement II, Spring 2022).

The second component is a leader feedback questionnaire.<sup>28</sup> This questionnaire is intended for pastors to complete after engaging in the previous study to generate reflection on the study and to evaluate any change or progress toward reorientation of the church's biblical identity and mission. The questionnaire addresses leaders' understanding of the church's purpose-fulfilling activities, the connection between identity and mission, organizational (church) health, cultural changes, and the critical role of leadership in leading churches out of a disproportionate internal focus (inward drift).

The third component is a sermon series designed to reorient congregations to the necessity of an external focus as first and primary toward fulfilling the Great Commission.<sup>29</sup> The core idea of the series is to cultivate an "others-focused" mentality. An external focus needs the proper orientation of priorities toward God (first sermon), outsiders (second sermon), and insiders (third sermon).<sup>30</sup>

The fourth component is a congregational feedback questionnaire.<sup>31</sup> The questionnaire should be completed by those who heard the sermon series to generate reflection on the sermons and evaluate change or progress toward reorientation of the church's biblical identity and mission. It addresses the church's biblical identity and mission and their connectedness, the responsibilities of Christians toward the mission, the negative impact of a disproportionate internal focus, and the necessity of an external focus as first and primary.

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<sup>28</sup> See Appendix G, Joseph Lee, "Leaders Feedback Questionnaire," (DMIN8023, Contextual Engagement II, Spring 2022).

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix H, Joseph Lee, "You First," (DMIN8023, Contextual Engagement II, Spring 2022).

<sup>30</sup> Matt 9:10-13

<sup>31</sup> See Appendix I, Joseph Lee, "Congregational Feedback Questionnaire," (DMIN8023, Contextual Engagement II, Spring 2022).

These components were not designed for nor implemented as part of this evaluative research. They are recommended resources for pastors in Mobile, AL. One of the pastors who participated in the research utilized the materials and was asked to provide personal feedback. The pastor noted that his church has changed by creating and training about external focus. He said, "The recent series, 'You First' is one step of teaching that unselfishness or outward focus is a daily discipline and ... to put God first motivates people to obey God's Great Commission." After preaching the three-part sermon series, he summed up the direction his church chose to take: "to be involved in outreach and serve the church in a way that is an outward focus." He prompted his church to participate in community outreach as part of the series conclusion. He reported a 2% increase in the number of people who participated compared to the average participation rate before the series. He conducted this evaluation during high numbers of COVID-19 cases, so the pastor summarized the 2% increase as a significant gain. This feedback is minimal, but the hope is that it indicates future results for pastors who may utilize the materials.

### *Summary*

The analysis of this phenomenological qualitative study consisted of twenty-eight pastors and staff pastors, consisting of three focus groups and four interviews. Focus group one did not complete the discussion questions due to time constraints, so focus group two was a continuation of the first group. The data from these two groups revealed four themes from the impacts of COVID-19 on pre-COVID-19 contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL. Three of the four themes revealed positive impacts of COVID-19, and

one revealed negative impacts. One concern of the research related to the participants neglecting the fourth barrier of internal focus and speaking of how their churches were without addressing the negative issues they were battling to overcome. Therefore, the third focus group and the interviews were additional research specifically on the topic of internal focus. The data revealed three negative sub-themes because of the impacts of COVID-19.

The research revealed that the impacts of COVID-19 were both positive and negative. Although the overall impact was positive for pastors in leadership and leading change, all the churches but one reported they were still below pre-COVID-19 attendance numbers. It is necessary to note two significant observations. First, although the pastors responded that the overall impact was positive in leadership and cultural change dynamics, it came after the negative impacts and the resulting loss of people who previously resisted leadership and cultural change. Second, the impacts of COVID-19 continue to create resistance for churches trying to grow out of plateau and decline even though the leaders have more freedom to lead change. In summary, COVID-19 had both positive and negative impacts on the contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

#### *Introduction*

This doctoral journey focusing on effective leadership practices in challenging seasons originally began with a passion for helping church leaders grow churches out of plateau and decline. Research began in this direction in the fall of 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The original pre-COVID-19 research identified four contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL. In the middle of the doctoral program, the pandemic ensued, creating chaos in the church, the research process (like most of the world), and academic studies. A pause on the research ensued for a year to focus on the church, and it proved to be a good move with the many difficulties, closures, re-openings, staff transitions, and financial challenges that followed. The research process resumed in the spring of 2022, and the research question was modified to evaluate the impacts of COVID-19 on the contextual barriers to church revitalization identified in pre-COVID-19 research. This project conducted a phenomenological qualitative study of twenty-eight church leaders in Mobile, AL. The results provided insight to answer the research question: How has COVID-19 impacted the contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, Alabama?

The intersection of the theological dimensions, the literature, and historical reviews with the research results confirmed the pre-research anticipations. The Christological-missiological-ecclesiological theology of the church in this project presents the necessity of pastors, leaders and churches understanding the biblical identity and mission of the church. The trend toward plateau and decline of the church in North America, despite many revitalization efforts, was

confirmed by the literature review. Therefore, no existing revitalization model has been proven universally applicable. The historical review revealed that the church leadership found ways to maintain an external focus toward fulfilling the Great Commission in challenging times like pandemics. The research results revealed the impacts of COVID-19 reinforced some contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL, removed others, and brought new barriers into focus, or existing barriers into greater focus.

The contextual barrier of a disproportionate internal focus was reinforced in these churches early in the pandemic. As existing members withdrew and new people entered the church, pastors found it easier to orient the church to its biblical identity as a witnessing and inviting community with an external focus, first and primary, toward fulfilling the Great Commission. Previous and existing members realized pastors had to be innovative because of the challenges of forced church closures. This reality essentially negated the contextual barriers of leadership and church worship styles. This change led to an embrace of previously resisted or neglected digital methods of communication (email and text), communal connection (social media), and sharing worship services (live streams). The pastors and church leaders in this study chose to continue utilizing digital technologies for an online presence after re-opening to in-person gatherings. The embrace of digital technologies gave rise to the potential contextual barrier of false engagement resulting from online church participation. This issue needs further research.

The research evaluated the leadership challenges associated with the impacts of COVID-19 on the pre-COVID-19 contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL. This project successfully met the goals set for the research. The intersection of the theological dimensions and the literature and historical reviews with the research results

offers pastors and leaders insights for effective leadership in challenging seasons, specifically, clarity to reorient to the church's biblical identity and mission as a witnessing and inviting community with an external focus, first and primary, toward fulfilling the Great Commission. As a result of this project, resources were created to assist pastors, leaders, and church members in reorienting their identity and mission.

### *Lessons Learned*

The project revealed that pastors and leaders can successfully lead churches in challenging seasons. It revealed that a healthy church culture is integral to churches fulfilling the Great Commission. The cultures in the participating churches in Mobile, AL contained dysfunctional dynamics before COVID-19. The overall dysfunction revealed through the research was a disproportionate internal focus. This dynamic existed in varying degrees among the churches, but the researcher found an element in all of them. In some churches, a disproportionate degree of internal focus existed at alarming levels. This atmosphere created an extreme inward culture in some of the churches. One pastor described the culture in his church as members seeing outsiders as enemies of God. An “us versus them” mentality existed in some of these churches.

The Bible instructs the church to carry the gospel to people outside of the church with the intent that they will be converted and added to the church. The lack of a proper understanding of the church's identity and mission resulted in the dysfunction of disproportionate internal focus. Many people consider Mark to be the oldest gospel.<sup>1</sup> Mark records Jesus saying, “And he said to

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Grant, “The Origin of the Gospel of Mark,” in *The Earliest Gospel* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1943).

them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.’<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ command here begins with “go,” but the question arises, go where or to whom? The answer is to all the world, to proclaim the gospel. These actions led to some believing, being saved, and being baptized. Those who were the focus of the command to go were not yet saved and outside of God's redeemed people before receiving the gospel. This explanation shows the necessity of an external focus for disciple-making and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Another contributing factor to a disproportionate internal focus is a misconstrued view of discipleship. Discipleship is cyclical and grows people from new Christians reached with the gospel to mature Christians who participate in reaching outsiders with the gospel. An external focus is foundational to a proper biblical identity and mission of the church and the complete process of discipleship. Draughon notes that modern churches tend to isolate discipleship from evangelism but distinguishes, "In the Early Church ... no distinction exists between discipleship, spiritual formation, and evangelism. Engaging the local culture remained essential to the church's identity and its health."<sup>3</sup> Discipleship that fails to produce people with a desire to fulfill the Great Commission is incomplete.

An unclear understanding of the church's identity and mission and a misconstrued view of discipleship resulting in an inward-oriented culture creates a complex and challenging environment for pastors to lead change in their churches. The pastors in this study expressed deep frustration about not being able to change their churches to more of an externally focused culture. Church culture is influential. The way people in the church view, understand,

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 16:15-16

<sup>3</sup> Draughon, "Church Priorities Reset," 32.



communicate, and act in ministry defines the contextual culture of the church. Ershova and Hermelink, in an empirical study of church organizational culture, define church culture as “the “character” of an organization, encompassing the beliefs, values, and attitudes of its members.”<sup>4</sup> Church culture is the product of the alignment, often through negotiation or tension of the church's identity, mission, and ministry strategies.<sup>5</sup> A church’s contextual culture regards how the people in the church perceive and act upon the ministry strategies of the church.

The shared beliefs of a church (communal group) provide the foundational guiding framework of the group.<sup>6</sup> A church’s contextual culture can be a powerful positive force or a powerful negative one. The tension between leadership and members reported by the participants in this project affirms this claim. The result of an inward-focused church designed to be externally focused is a dysfunctional culture that fails to fulfill the Great Commission. The result of a church culture not aligned with its ministry strategies is often dysfunction, stagnation, plateau, and decline.<sup>7</sup>

The participants in this study expressed grief over the people who left their churches because of the impacts of COVID-19. However, they also showed a clear and mutual excitement

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Ershova and Jan Hermelink, “Spirituality, Administration, and Normativity in Current Church Organization: An Empirical Study of the Organizational Culture in Three Church Denominations, under Conditions of Social Change,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 2 (2012): 223, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2012-0015>.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew May, “Superordinate Ties, Value Orientations, and Congregations’ Organizational Cultures,” *Religions* 11, no. 6 (June 2020): 277–277, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11060277>. May’s results show possible tension over biblical interpretation that produces values.

<sup>6</sup> Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 5th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2017), 6. Schein focuses on the belief that culture is fundamentally the product of shared learning by a specific group.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin M. Brosius, “Cultural Contextualization and Methodology: Why Some North American Churches Have an Effective Ministry and Others Have Become Irrelevant” (DMin., Clarks Summit University and Baptist Bible Seminary, 2022), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Brosius’ research reveals the necessity of church culture adapting and remaining cohesive between the contextual culture and the ministry strategies.

over the greater freedom to lead cultural change toward a more externally focused church culture. This freedom resulted because the loss of previous members lessened resistance levels to change and the new people entering their churches embraced the externally focused culture.

This project clearly revealed the critical role of leadership in churches. Jesus exemplified perfect leadership. He launched the movement that has changed the world more than anyone else, the church.<sup>8</sup> Jesus established servant leadership as the highest form of leadership. Acts records Spirit-empowered leaders emulating Jesus' servant leadership. Spirit-empowered servant leadership is the model for church leaders to follow. Leadership is not a uniquely inherent trait. Some people may be born with leadership traits or skills, but people can learn leadership as an art and practice.<sup>9</sup> Those called to lead the church should approach learning leadership as an act of a loving spiritual discipline offered to God as a sacrifice of commitment.

Leadership is vital for churches to have a proper comprehension of their identity and mission and for churches to fulfill the Great Commission. It is vital for churches, like those in this project, that have drifted into dysfunction to reorient to true identity and mission. Leadership and business expert John Kotter has noted that leading cultural change is difficult in any organization.<sup>10</sup> The same is valid for leading cultural change in churches, and leadership is an irreplaceable component.<sup>11</sup> The importance of leadership in challenging situations extends beyond the scope of church revitalization and is universally important in organizations.

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<sup>8</sup> Geoff Loftus, "The Greatest Leader of All," *Forbes*, April 2, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/geoffloftus/2014/04/02/lead-like-jesus/>.

<sup>9</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *Learning Leadership*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, 37.

The greatest lesson this project revealed is that being a part of the church as a Christian and leading the church as a pastor is about the life-long transformation by the Holy Spirit into the person and leader God desires me to be. Gorman reflects this desire well: "not merely to believe the gospel but to become the gospel, and in doing so to participate in the very life and mission of God."<sup>12</sup> This doctoral journey and research project have given me a greater desire to be a more diligent student of the scriptures, a more intentional leader, and a more externally focused Christian.

### *Considerations for the Future*

The project identified themes of impact from COVID-19 on contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL. Throughout the study, it was recognized that although each church represented shared many similarities that produced thematic elements, minor differences and details were also present in how some of the pastors related to the identified themes of impact. More in-depth research on each identified theme may reveal additional contextual nuances.

The results of the data revealed that although the consensus at the time of the research was positive in that pastors had greater freedom to lead and create cultural change in their churches; it came after the negative impacts of decreased engagement among existing members and the permanent loss of members. Future research into the tension concerning previous leadership and cultural change may reveal how to reduce the loss of existing members while also

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<sup>12</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 2.

creating an atmosphere that attracts new people. A suggested approach is to utilize the concept of a mandorla circle.<sup>13</sup> The components, “respect, realize, and reimagine” may help leaders and members grasp a shared future vision.<sup>14</sup>

Pastors who show respect for the contributions of the past may gain credibility with existing members. If such respect removes resistance barriers and builds trust among the members of the leaders, they may exhibit a greater willingness to realize their current reality and need for change. If leaders and members can respect the past and realize the condition of the church in the present, perhaps they can reimagine the church's future together.

A final suggestion for future research concerns digital technologies and online engagement for sharing the gospel and providing a spiritual community. This research project revealed that the pastors in the study were skeptical about online engagement as an adequate expression of a spiritual community if embraced as a replacement for an in-person community. However, they agreed that digital presences were necessary for churches as a supplemental tool. This project shares some of the proponents and critics of online churches' validity. In his dissertation *The Great Digital Commission: Embracing Social Media for Church Growth and Transformation*, Caleb Lines argues that the use of social media and digital technologies for the delivery of the gospel are not replacements but practical adaptations of traditional methods.<sup>15</sup> As digital technologies and virtual connections continue to increase, further research into the church's use of them is needed.

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<sup>13</sup> Sweet and Beck, *Contextual Intelligence*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> See appendix K for more information about the mandorla circle and process for gaining a shared vision.

<sup>15</sup> Caleb J. Lines, “The Great Digital Commission: Embracing Social Media for Church Growth and Transformation” (DMin., Duke University, 2020), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, 117.

### *Limitations to the Project*

This project was limited by focusing on churches and pastors in one city: Mobile, AL. The findings from churches and leaders in this city may not represent those of churches and leaders in other areas. The findings may not transfer to churches in other areas because of contextual factors. This project is also limited because it only provides insight into a brief period during the COVID-19 pandemic. The continuing presence of COVID-19, the long-term effects of which will require ongoing and further study, possibly for years to come, further limited this project. This dissertation project, while inherently limited, provides evidence supporting the need for further study of the impacts of COVID-19 on contextual barriers contributing to church plateau and decline.

### *Concluding Remarks*

This project culminated more years of my life leadership experiences than those included in this doctoral journey. This research journey gave structure, exploration, and voice to my ministry career's pursuit of trying to help churches grow out of plateau and decline. Although my specific research goal was to evaluate the impacts of COVID-19 on contextual barriers contributing to the plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, AL, the topic was part of the more extensive subject of leadership challenges in difficult seasons, such as church revitalization in a pandemic era. Over the last twenty-six years, God has moved me to five different churches, four of which I served as lead pastor and one as a campus pastor. My leadership assignment in all these churches was revitalization, as those churches were in a plateau or decline. I did not fully recognize God's

specific call for me to be a revitalization leader until I began this journey and began reflecting on my experiences that made me so passionate about the leadership challenges involved in church revitalization.

The church I currently lead (in a revitalization process) has been the most complex and complicated. Being in the Mobile, AL area has given me a heart for fellow pastors working to lead their churches out of plateau and decline. Although my focus has been on the revitalization efforts of local pastors and churches in the city we share, I hope this research provides insights for successful leadership in challenging seasons beyond the scope of church revitalization. Leadership is universally essential to all organizations facing difficult challenges. Though this research may not address every barrier to growth and every impact COVID-19 has brought to those barriers, I pray it gives pastors clarity in some areas and motivation to continue their efforts toward revitalization with new passion and determination, taking encouragement as Paul said, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal 6:9, ESV).

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## APPENDIX A

### AVAILABLE METRICS FOR MEASURING CHURCH HEALTH

Submitted by The Healthy Church Network Team  
As a report to the 2012 District Superintendent's Forum

In early 2012, the Healthy Church Network began research aimed at identifying the components of a healthy church. While this study is ongoing, certain statistical observations have emerged that appear worthy of initial reporting. This document and the provided district report seek to communicate this valuable information.

While we collect significant data from our churches through the Annual Church Ministries Report, there is some debate as to the value of certain data elements in the effort to measure church health. It can be argued that raw attendance, conversion data, and even attendance growth may not always correlate fully with church health.

Combining this data into ratios, however, seems to hold more significant potential for measuring various church health elements. By using the raw data currently available in Sunday morning attendance, conversions, water baptisms, and Spirit baptisms, we can gain insight into five church health elements: missional effectiveness, assimilation, kingdom growth, Pentecostal discipleship and mobilization, and the reproduction of Spirit-filled disciples. These ratios can also provide the local church with a means of evaluating their overall effectiveness and identifying areas that require greater emphasis on the road to church health.

#### **1. MISSIONAL EFFECTIVENESS: the AC ratio (Attendance/Conversions)**

Raw attendance numbers can be influenced by several variables such as weather, church conflict, aggressive outreach efforts, community development factors, etc. At the same time, numbers of conversions reported from year-to-year can also be subject to numerous variables such as quality of outreach efforts, congregational age, etc.

But combining these two data elements (attendance and conversions) into a ratio can yield more valuable information. While the variables affecting the raw data remain, the ratio reveals a different metric—the relative effectiveness of our evangelism efforts (conversions) given the number of people potentially available to aid our efforts (attendance).

The **AC** ratio measures our worship attendance against the number of conversions or salvation decisions our efforts produce. As such, this ratio can demonstrate the local church's missional effectiveness. Rather than measuring attendance alone, the **AC** reveals the degree to which our efforts to connect with people and lead them to faith in Christ are being effective by essentially calculating how many of us it takes to produce a new believer each year.

For example, a church with 180 in worship attendance reporting 15 conversions in a year would have an **AC** of 12 (180/15). If that same church had 120 attending five years ago and reported 12 conversions that year, the previous **AC** would have been 10. As such, the church would see that they have grown in the past five years, but their **AC** has risen from 10 to 12 (lower is better) meaning their effectiveness in leading people to conversion decisions declined.

But are these **AC** ratios healthy? Should it take 12 or 10 of us to lead one person to Christ in a year? What would a healthy **AC** ratio look like? Based on national averages over the past decade, one could conclude that the **AC** of a healthy local congregation will likely be 5.0 or lower.

**RESEARCH NOTES OF INTEREST:** *In 2000, our national AC was 3.37, but that number had risen to 4.28 by 2010, meaning that today it takes more than four of us to reach somebody each year when just over three of us could do so just a decade ago.*

## 2. ASSIMILATION: the CW ratio (Conversions/Water Baptisms)

A second available metric can be found in the ratio of conversions and water baptisms. The **CW** identifies the salvation decisions solidified by the act of water baptism by taking the total number of conversions for the year and comparing that number with the water baptisms reported that same year.

For example, a **CW** of 1.0 would mean that we baptized the same number of people as made conversion decisions. The **CW** can be used to help us measure the health of our assimilation efforts. A low (or healthier) **CW** indicates that the church is maintaining connection to its converts long enough to guide them toward the choice to be baptized. A high **CW** indicates that we aren't baptizing a good percentage of our converts, perhaps because we have failed to assimilate them into the ongoing life of the congregation.

Given certain evangelism approaches and the transitional elements of our culture, it may not be possible for a local church to baptize every individual its people and ministries bring to Christ, but it seems hard to imagine that a **CW** above 3.0 would be healthy. A **CW** of 3 would mean we baptized 1/3 of the number of our converts. Since those converted in previous years may also be among the local church's water baptism numbers for the current year, one can see how moving toward a low **CW** is critical to a healthy church.

**RESEARCH NOTES OF INTEREST:** *Nationally, our CW is improving, perhaps indicating a renewed focus on water baptism, yet it still remains higher than the healthy threshold.*

The **CW** ratio is greatly affected by two variables—how a local church counts conversions and how frequently baptism opportunities are offered. Given the likely diversity of local church approaches to these variables, potential surely exists for our Fellowship to provide guidelines and recommended practices in these areas in order to achieve greater local church health.

## 3. KINGDOM GROWTH: the AW ratio (Attendance/Water Baptisms)

The third metric available from these numbers combines the first two into an **AW** ratio. The **AW** measures the number of water baptisms against our average worship attendance. Since most of our churches require new members to be converted and baptized, this ratio can help us see our potential for membership growth. While it is true that transfer growth can give us new members and not positively affect this ratio, the **AW** demonstrates a local church's actual contribution to true kingdom growth by focusing on those converted and baptized.

The **AW** is the mathematical product of the **AC** and **CW** ratios ( $AW = AC \times CW$ ). If it is recommended that a church's **AC** should be below 5.0 and the **CW** should be less than 3.0, the resulting **AW** should be less than 15.0.

Since the **AW** ratio mathematically combines both the **AC** and **CW** ratios, it can mask unhealthy numbers in one of its two component parts. For example, a church may report a high number of conversions for its size and have a very healthy **AC** of, say, 3.0, but then fail to baptize a good number of its converts, yielding a **CW** of, perhaps, 5.0. The result would be an **AW** of 15.0 (our healthy threshold), even though

the church's water baptism efforts need to be addressed. This example illustrates why each metric is important and can help diagnose where a church must focus to become even healthier.

**RESEARCH NOTES OF INTEREST:** *In spite of overall numerical growth, the national **AW** has climbed beyond the healthy threshold. All four of the district church-size groupings show an **AW** that is moving in the wrong direction. Only Hispanic and Southern regions posted a healthy **AW** in 2010.*

#### **4. DISCIPLESHIP & MOBILIZATION: the CS ratio (Conversions/Spirit Baptisms)**

When we consider Spirit-baptism numbers, two additional ratio metrics emerge. The first of these is the **CS** ratio. A **CS** ratio compares conversions with Spirit baptisms and can help us measure both discipleship effectiveness and our efforts to mobilize our Spirit-filled saints.

A healthy (lower) **CW** ratio indicates that the church has engaged its new believers in an ongoing process of discipleship that has led them to the priority of Spirit-baptism. This can indicate success at both connecting new believers to a discipleship journey and the church's effort to prioritize Spirit baptism. Given a study of national averages over the past decade, it would seem that the local church's **CS ratio** should be no higher than 4.0 since, over time, that would mean only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of our converts are being baptized in the Holy Spirit. If the ratio is higher, then prioritizing Pentecostal discipleship is an available road to greater health.

At the same time, one can argue that the local church's **CS** could also be so low that it is unhealthy. If the number of those experiencing the baptism in the Holy Spirit approaches the number of converts, then the church may be failing to effectively mobilize its Spirit-filled believers in evangelism. A key purpose of Spirit-baptism is the empowerment for witnessing, so one would expect that more Spirit-baptisms would also lead to more converts. For this reason, a **CS** below 3.0 might indicate that we are struggling to mobilize the Spirit-filled people in our church into the evangelism effort for which they are now greatly equipped.

The result is that a healthy **CS** ratio would likely fall between two parameters such as 3.0 and 4.0. So, if our numbers are outside those parameters, we can identify whether we have a discipleship problem or a mobilization problem.

**RESEARCH NOTES OF INTEREST:** *While the national **CS** continues to demonstrate a need for greater Pentecostal discipleship, in recent years the **CS** is moving in a healthier direction. There is, however, a significant gap between the **CS** of larger church-size districts and smaller church-size districts. Overall, smaller church-size districts show a much healthier **CS** ratio. This may demonstrate that as a church grows larger, it typically will become less effective in guiding people toward Spirit-baptism.*

#### **4. REPRODUCTION: the AS ratio (Attendance/Spirit Baptisms)**

The final of these five available metrics compares Spirit-baptism to worship attendance. As we did with water baptism, we can combine attendance and Spirit baptism numbers in an **AS** ratio. By measuring Spirit baptism against average worship attendance, we can measure the reproduction of Spirit-filled disciples taking place in the congregation. Since ministry leadership roles such as deacon, elder, evangelist, pastor-teacher, and missionary require the experience of Spirit-baptism, our collective efforts to continue pursuing Christ's worldwide harvest in the future hinge on the continued reproduction of Spirit-filled believers.

The **AS** ratio can be found by combining the **AC** and **CS** ratios (**AS** = **AC** x **CS**). As such, the guidelines for these two metrics apply. If, as we have said, a healthy **AC** ratio would be less than 5.0 and a healthy **CS** ratio would likely be between 3.0 and 4.0, then one can calculate that a healthy **AS** would be between 15.0 and 20.0. However, it may be simpler and more effective to state that the church should multiply its

current **AC** ratio by 3.0 and 4.0 to find the healthy boundaries for its **AS** ratio. The result will help the church better discern where it truly needs to be more focused—Pentecostal discipleship and/or mobilization from the **CS**, or even its overall evangelism efforts revealed in an unhealthy **AC**.

**RESEARCH NOTES OF INTEREST:** *The national **AS** ratio has declined significantly over the study period. Given the **AC** of 4.28 (2010), a healthy **AS** would be between 12.84 and 17.12. The 2010 national **AS** was 21.79. In 2010, none of the district church-size groupings posted an **AS** under 20.0.*

### THE PERSONALIZED DISTRICT REPORT

Included along with this document, you will find a 2000-2011 report of these five metrics for your district. (Individual district data is being provided solely to the district superintendent, and not being provided to other districts for comparison purposes.) In addition, you will see comparison metrics provided by district size, geographic/language region, and national data.

The district size calculation is based on average church size in each district. Approximately 15 districts are included in each of the four district size groupings. While a study of individual church data would be valuable and highly recommended, it is believed that these district groupings can provide for general projections according to church size. (The collective data of smaller church-size districts will likely be similar to that of smaller-size churches, and the collective data of larger church-size districts will likely correlate to that of larger-size churches.)

### THE VIDEO

In your personalized envelope, you will also find a flash drive containing an 18-minute video explanation of these metrics and how they relate to church health. The video seeks to provide a “layman’s-level” explanation of this information and may be useful should you choose to share this information with leaders within your district.

In conclusion, while there are likely many other valuable metrics in measuring church health yet to be identified, conversions, water baptisms, and Spirit baptisms will continue at the core of our Great Commission priorities, and our study of these numbers should not be devalued.

Dr. Mike Clarensau and the team currently known as the Healthy Church Network are providing this document and the attached report. Questions and additional discussion should be directed to the office of the Healthy Church Network, 417-862-2781 ext. 3480.

Respectfully submitted,



Mike Clarensau  
Senior Director, Healthy Church Network

## APPENDIX B

### ACTS 2 JOURNEY TEAM REPORT 2018

#### Acts 2 Journey Team Report 2018

##### *Acts 2 Journey Churches*

Submitted by Dr. Mike Clarensau, Research Coordinator

This report reviews data related to Acts 2 Journey cohorts that have been offered by the national team since 2010. This report will focus on the churches participating and the impact since completing the Acts 2 Journey.

It should, of course, be noted that many factors contribute to local church growth and/or revitalization. Community population growth, pastoral leadership capacity, congregational morale, and available resources play a large role in such impact; however, the challenge of Acts 2 Journey teaching, the pursuit of vision and the development of a strategic plan can also have an impact and aid the consolidation of these other factors into a season of growth and/or greater effectiveness.

#### WHO IS PARTICIPATING?

The following demonstrates the distribution of churches by Sunday attendance that have participated since 2010:

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	Totals
0-PACs	5	12	9			1	1	1		29
1-49	34	29	48	12	34	12	17	21	9	216
50-99	50	47	63	17	19	25	40	42	17	320
100-199	31	41	48	15	14	16	19	27	21	232
200-399	12	16	23	5	5	5	13	10	2	91
400-699	2	7	8	2	2	2	1	3	2	29
700-999	1	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	7
1000+	3	2	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>933</b>
1-99	115	117	159	44	67	53	76	90	47	768
1-199	115	117	159	44	67	53	76	90	47	768
200+	18	27	36	7	7	8	15	13	5	136
400+	6	11	13	2	2	3	2	3	3	45
	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	Totals
0-PACs	3.6%	7.7%	4.4%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	1.1%	1.0%	0.0%	3.1%
1-49	24.6%	18.6%	23.5%	23.5%	45.9%	19.4%	18.5%	20.2%	17.3%	23.2%
50-99	36.2%	30.1%	30.9%	33.3%	25.7%	40.3%	43.5%	40.4%	32.7%	34.3%
100-199	22.5%	26.3%	23.5%	29.4%	18.9%	25.8%	20.7%	26.0%	40.4%	24.9%
200-399	8.7%	10.3%	11.3%	9.8%	6.8%	8.1%	14.1%	9.6%	3.8%	9.8%
400-699	1.4%	4.5%	3.9%	3.9%	2.7%	3.2%	1.1%	2.9%	3.8%	3.1%
700-999	0.7%	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	1.9%	0.8%
1000+	2.2%	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
1-99	64.5%	56.4%	58.8%	56.9%	71.6%	61.3%	63.0%	61.5%	50.0%	60.6%
1-199	83.3%	75.0%	77.9%	86.3%	90.5%	85.5%	82.6%	86.5%	90.4%	82.3%
200+	13.0%	17.3%	17.6%	13.7%	9.5%	12.9%	16.3%	12.5%	9.6%	14.6%
400+	4.3%	7.1%	6.4%	3.9%	2.7%	4.8%	2.2%	2.9%	5.8%	4.8%

The following identifies the affiliation of participating churches at the time they engage the Acts 2 Journey:

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	Totals
General Council Church	102	118	100	32						352
District Affiliated	31	24	93	19						167
Parent Affiliated	5	12	9	0		1	1	1	(since 2015)	26
	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	Totals
General Council Church	73.9%	76.6%	49.5%	62.7%						64.6%
District Affiliated	22.5%	15.6%	46.0%	37.3%						30.6%
Parent Affiliated	3.6%	7.8%	4.5%	0.0%						5.3%

The following identifies the condition (Growth-Plateau-Decline) of participating churches at the time they engage the Acts 2 Journey:

	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	Totals
Growing	40	48	59	20	23	15	26	33	15	279
Plateaued	26	34	34	8	12	16	15	28	11	184
Declining	58	50	69	21	38	22	44	40	25	367
Plateaued & Declining	84	84	103	29	50	38	59	68	36	551
No G-P-D	10	12	33	2	1	8	6	2	1	75
PACs	4	12	9	0	0	1	1	2	0	28
Total	138	156	204	51	74	62	92	104	52	933
	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	Totals
Growing	29.0%	30.8%	28.9%	39.2%	31.1%	24.2%	28.3%	31.7%	28.0%	29.9%
Plateaued	18.8%	21.8%	16.7%	15.7%	16.2%	25.8%	16.3%	26.9%	21.2%	19.7%
Declining	42.0%	32.1%	33.8%	41.2%	51.4%	35.5%	47.8%	38.5%	48.1%	39.3%
Plateaued & Declining	60.9%	53.8%	50.5%	56.9%	67.6%	61.3%	64.1%	65.4%	69.2%	59.1%
No G-P-D	7.2%	7.7%	16.2%	3.9%	1.4%	12.9%	6.5%	1.9%	1.9%	8.0%
PACs	2.9%	7.7%	4.4%	0.0%	0.0%	1.6%	1.1%	1.0%	0.0%	3.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

At the end of 2018, churches from 36 districts in the General Council of the Assemblies of God have participated in the Acts 2 Journey. This data report is limited to churches in the 68 districts of the General Council Assemblies of God and does not include those churches that have participated in international settings. At this time such data is unavailable.

Churches from the following districts have participated in the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2018):

- Alabama
- Arizona
- Arkansas
- Central Latin
- Florida Multicultural
- Georgia
- Hawaii
- Iowa
- Kansas
- Kentucky
- Louisiana
- Michigan
- Midwest Latin
- Mississippi
- New Jersey
- New York
- North Carolina
- North Dakota
- Oklahoma
- Rocky Mountain
- Peninsular Florida
- Pennsylvania-Delaware
- South Central Hispanic
- South Dakota
- South Texas
- Southern California
- Southern New England
- Southern Latin
- Southern Pacific
- Southwest
- Spanish Eastern
- Tennessee
- West Florida
- West Texas and Plains
- Wisconsin-N. Michigan

#### SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS:

1. **60% of A2J churches are plateaued or in decline over the 5-year period preceding the time they engage the journey.**
2. 40.0% of A2J churches are in decline over the 5-year period preceding the time they engage the journey.
3. Just over 60% of A2J churches welcome fewer than 100 to worship each week.
4. 82% of A2J churches welcome fewer than 200 to worship each week.
5. Less than 5% of A2J churches welcome more than 400 to worship each week.
6. Of the 545 churches to engage the A2J in the past three years, 167 are District Affiliated churches (30.6%) and 26 are PAC churches (5.3%).
7. **Only 36% of churches reported an increased in attendance in the year prior to engaging the Acts 2 Journey.**
8. Churches from 36 districts in the United States have participated in the Acts 2 Journey (2010-18). This, of course, does not include international settings.

## WHAT IS THE INITIAL IMPACT OF THE ACTS 2 JOURNEY?

The following demonstrates the impact of the Acts 2 Journey within 2-3 years after it was initiated:

Reported after 2 years	Status at Start of Journey						Total
	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	
Increased attendance	68	49	113	162	18	0	248
Same attendance	23	8	24	32	9	0	64
Decreased attendance	94	65	115	180	21	0	295
Closed	6	2	7	9	5	0	20
Total	191	124	259	383	53	12	639
Increased attendance	35.6%	39.5%	43.6%	42.3%	34.0%		38.8%
Same attendance	12.0%	6.5%	9.3%	8.4%	17.0%		10.0%
Decreased attendance	49.2%	52.4%	44.4%	47.0%	39.6%		46.2%
Closed	3.1%	1.6%	2.7%	2.3%	9.4%		3.1%
Total	29.9%	19.4%	40.5%	59.9%	8.3%	1.9%	100%

Reported after 3 years	Status at Start of Journey						Total
	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	
Increased attendance	52	30	85	115	7	0	248
Same attendance	6	1	12	13	3	0	64
Decreased attendance	69	59	85	144	9	0	295
Closed	5	0	8	8	1	0	20
Total	132	90	190	280	20	3	639
Increased attendance	39.4%	33.3%	44.7%	41.1%	35.0%		38.8%
Same attendance	4.5%	1.1%	6.3%	4.6%	15.0%		10.0%
Decreased attendance	52.3%	65.6%	44.7%	51.4%	45.0%		46.2%
Closed	3.3%	0.0%	4.2%	2.9%	5.0%		3.1%
Total	30.3%	20.7%	43.7%	64.4%	4.6%	0.7%	100%

### OBSERVATIONS:

1. Of the 259 "declining churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2016), nearly 44% were at a higher level of attendance two years later.
2. Of the 190 "declining churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2015), nearly 45% were at a higher level of attendance three years later.

## HOW ARE THESE CHURCHES DOING TODAY?

The following provides a 2018 "snapshot" of churches that have completed the Acts 2 Journey:

Reported in 2018	All Churches (2010-2017) Status at Start of Journey						Total
	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	
Increased attendance	81	53	127	180	18	0	279
Same attendance	21	10	19	29	13	0	63
Decreased attendance	127	88	147	235	25	0	387
Closed	10	7	16	23	9	1	43
Total	239	158	309	467	65	23	795
Increased attendance	33.9%	33.5%	41.1%	27.7%	27.7%		35.1%
Same attendance	8.8%	6.3%	6.1%	20.0%	20.0%		7.9%
Decreased attendance	53.1%	55.7%	47.6%	38.5%	38.5%		48.7%
Closed	4.2%	4.4%	5.2%	4.9%	13.8%		5.4%
Total	30.1%	158%	38.9%	58.7%	8.2%	4.2%	100%



Reported in 2018	2017 Churches Status at Start of Journey						Total
	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	
Increased attendance	19	12	24	36	4	0	68
Same attendance	7	2	4	6	3	0	32
Decreased attendance	22	20	22	42	2	0	85
Closed	0	0	0	0	3	0	10
Total	48	34	50	84	12	12	204
Increased attendance	39.6%	35.3%	48.0%	42.9%	33.3%		33.3%
Same attendance	14.6%	5.9%	8.0%	7.1%	25.0%		15.7%
Decreased attendance	45.8%	58.8%	44.0%	50.0%	16.7%		41.7%
Closed	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%		4.9%
Total	30.8%	21.8%	32.1%	53.8%	7.7%	7.7%	100%
Reported in 2018	2016 Churches Status at Start of Journey						Total
	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	
Increased attendance	21	13	25	38	9	0	68
Same attendance	11	5	9	14	7	0	32
Decreased attendance	24	14	34	48	13	0	85
Closed	3	2	1	3	4	0	10
Total	59	34	69	103	33	9	204
Increased attendance	35.6%	38.2%	36.2%	36.9%	27.3%		33.3%
Same attendance	18.6%	14.7%	13.0%	13.1%	21.2%		15.7%
Decreased attendance	40.7%	41.2%	49.3%	46.6%	39.4%		41.7%
Closed	5.1%	5.9%	1.4%	2.9%	12.1%		4.9%
Total	28.9%	16.7%	33.8%	50.5%	16.2%	4.4%	100%
Reported in 2018	2015 Churches Status at Start of Journey						Total
	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	
Increased attendance	8	3	6	9	0	0	17
Same attendance	1	0	2	2	0	0	3
Decreased attendance	8	5	11	16	2	0	26
Closed	3	0	2	2	0	0	5
Total	20	8	21	29	2	0	51
Increased attendance	40.0%	37.5%	28.6%	31.0%	0.0%		33.3%
Same attendance	5.0%	0.0%	9.5%	6.9%	0.0%		5.9%
Decreased attendance	40.0%	62.5%	52.4%	55.2%	100.0%		51.0%
Closed	15.0%	0.0%	9.5%	6.9%	0.0%		9.8%
Total	39.2%	15.7%	41.2%	56.9%	3.9%	0.0%	100%
Reported in 2018	2014 Churches Status at Start of Journey						Total
	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	
Increased attendance	5	3	19	22	1	0	28
Same attendance	0	1	2	3	0	0	3
Decreased attendance	18	6	14	20	0	0	38
Closed	0	2	3	5	0	0	5
Total	23	12	38	280	1	0	74
Increased attendance	21.7%	25.0%	50.0%	44.0%	100.0%		37.8%
Same attendance	0.0%	8.3%	5.3%	6.0%	0.0%		4.1%
Decreased attendance	78.3%	50.0%	36.8%	40.0%	0.0%		51.4%
Closed	0.0%	16.7%	7.9%	10.0%	0.0%		6.8%
Total	31.1%	16.2%	51.4%	67.6%	1.4%	0.0%	100%

		2013 Churches Status at Start of Journey					
Reported in 2018	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	Total
Increased attendance	5	6	12	18	2	0	25
Same attendance	1	0	1	1	2	0	4
Decreased attendance	9	10	8	18	4	0	31
Closed	0	0	1	1	0	0	1
Total	15	16	22	38	8	1	62
Increased attendance	33.3%	37.5%	54.5%	47.4%	25.0%		40.3%
Same attendance	6.7%	0.0%	4.5%	2.6%	25.0%		6.5%
Decreased attendance	60.0%	62.5%	36.4%	47.4%	50.0%		50.0%
Closed	0.0%	0.0%	4.5%	2.6%	0.0%		1.6%
Total	24.2%	25.8%	35.5%	61.3%	12.9%	1.6%	100%
		2012 Churches Status at Start of Journey					
Reported in 2018	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	Total
Increased attendance	8	4	20	24	1	0	33
Same attendance	0	1	1	2	0	0	2
Decreased attendance	16	10	20	30	3	0	49
Closed	2	0	3	3	2	0	7
Total	26	15	44	59	6	1	92
Increased attendance	30.8%	26.7%	45.5%	40.7%	16.7%		35.9%
Same attendance	0.0%	6.7%	2.3%	3.4%	0.0%		2.2%
Decreased attendance	61.5%	66.7%	45.5%	50.8%	50.0%		53.3%
Closed	7.7%	0.0%	6.8%	5.1%	33.3%		7.6%
Total	28.3%	16.3%	47.8%	64.1%	6.5%	1.1%	100%
		2011 Churches Status at Start of Journey					
Reported in 2018	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	Total
Increased attendance	10	8	15	23	1	0	34
Same attendance	0	1	0	1	0	0	1
Decreased attendance	22	17	22	39	1	0	62
Closed	1	2	3	5	0	0	7
Total	33	28	40	68	2	1	104
Increased attendance	30.3%	28.6%	37.5%	33.8%	33.8%		32.7%
Same attendance	0.0%	3.6%	0.0%	1.5%	1.5%		1.0%
Decreased attendance	66.7%	60.7%	55.0%	57.4%	57.4%		59.6%
Closed	3.0%	7.1%	7.5%	7.4%	7.4%		6.7%
Total	31.7%	26.9%	38.5%	65.4%	65.4%	1.0%	100%
		2010 Churches Status at Start of Journey					
Reported in 2018	G	P	D	P&D	No GPD	PACs	Total
Increased attendance	5	4	6	10	0	0	15
Same attendance	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
Decreased attendance	8	6	16	22	0	0	30
Closed	1	1	3	4	0	0	5
Total	15	11	25	36	1	0	52
Increased attendance	33.3%	36.4%	24.0%	27.8%	0.0%		28.8%
Same attendance	6.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%		3.8%
Decreased attendance	53.3%	54.5%	64.0%	61.1%	0.0%		57.7%
Closed	6.7%	9.1%	12.0%	11.1%	0.0%		9.6%
Total	28.8%	21.2%	48.1%	69.2%	1.9%	0.0%	100%

## OBSERVATIONS:

1. Of the 308 "declining" churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2017), 41% are currently at a higher level of attendance than their pre-A2J levels, and fewer than half (47.6%) have continued to decline.
2. Of the 158 "plateaued" churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2017), 1/3 are currently at a higher level of attendance than their pre-A2J levels.
3. **Only 43 of the 795 churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2017) have closed or moved to PAC status, roughly 5% of the total participants over the eight years (2010-2017). Overall, approximately 16.0% of all AG churches have closed during this same time period.**

## SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS:

1. **60% of A2J churches are plateaued or in decline over the 5-year period preceding the time they engage the journey.**
2. 40.0% of A2J churches are in decline over the 5-year period preceding the time they engage the journey.
3. Just over 60% of A2J churches welcome fewer than 100 to worship each week.
4. 82% of A2J churches welcome fewer than 200 to worship each week.
5. Less than 5% of A2J churches welcome more than 400 to worship each week.
6. Of the 545 churches to engage the A2J in the past three years, 167 are District Affiliated churches (30.6%) and 26 are PAC churches (5.3%).
7. **Only 36% of churches reported an increased in attendance in the year prior to engaging the Acts 2 Journey.**
8. Churches from 36 districts in the United States have participated in the Acts 2 Journey (2010-18). This, of course, does not include international settings.
9. **Of the 259 "declining churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2016), nearly 44% were at a higher level of attendance two years later.**
10. **Of the 190 "declining churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2015), nearly 45% were at a higher level of attendance three years later.**
11. Of the 308 "declining" churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2018), 41% are currently at a higher level of attendance than their pre-A2J levels, and fewer than half (47.6%) have continued to decline.
12. Of the 158 "plateaued" churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2018), 1/3 are currently at a higher level of attendance than their pre-A2J levels.
13. **Only 43 of the 795 churches to engage the Acts 2 Journey (2010-2018) have closed or moved to PAC status, roughly 5% of the total participants over the nine years (2010-2018). Overall, approximately 16.0% of all AG churches have closed during this same time period.**

Respectfully submitted.

## APPENDIX C

### ACTS 2 JOURNEY CHURCH HEALTH AND METRIC REPORT – ALABAMA

#### Church Health Metrics & Growth-Plateau-Decline (GPD) - District Report

July 1, 2022

#### ALABAMA

##### GPD

Growth-Plateau-Decline is determined by the rate of growth over the previous five years. A total attendance growth of 10% or more equates to a growing church. A total attendance decline of 10% or more equates to a declining church. Those how growth rate is between +10% and -10% are considered plateaued.

GPD	Growing	Plateaued	Declining	Plateaued & Declining
District	14.0%	36.0%	50.0%	86.0%
SE Region	18.4%	24.8%	56.9%	81.6%
National	18.6%	22.8%	58.6%	81.4%

##### MEAN

The Mean is the average church size and is calculated as Sunday AM Attendance / # of Churches Reporting.

MEAN	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2015	2010	2005	2000	1995	1990	1980
District	86.6	86.4	101.0	99.8	102.9	101.2	104.9	108.6	114.9	94.5	94.0	96.2
SE Region	138.2	135.5	163.2	161.6	159.2	159.2	159.2	150.8	148.2	132.1	127.5	121.2
National Average	130.6	135.4	153.5	155.8	155.4	152.1	153.1	142.8	135.5	129.5	128.6	126.3

##### MEDIAN

The Median is the Sunday AM Attendance of the midpoint church, so in a district with 125 churches, the midpoint church would be the 63<sup>rd</sup> church, so the Median would be the Sunday AM Attendance of that church. While there are ways to increase the size of the Median church that don't indicate existing church growth (closing small churches, gaining large churches through transfer, etc.), an increasing Median would generally indicate growth.

MEDIAN	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2015	2010	2005	2000	1995	1990	1980
District	50	50	54	52	55	55	60	60	65	55	44	60
SE Region	60	60	70	68	70	70	70	70	72	65	68	67
National Average	58	60	68	67	70	70	70	70	70	70	70	75

#### CHURCH HEALTH METRICS

Metrics, such as those provided below, are designed to measure effectiveness, health, and overall contribution to Christ's kingdom.

In the charts below, your district's five church health metric calculations are compared to two different groups.

Region: This comparison measures church health metrics across the district's geographic or language region.

National: This comparison provides the church health metric for the U.S. Assemblies of God.

##### 1. MISSIONAL EFFECTIVENESS: the AC ratio

The AC measures our worship attendance against the number of conversions or salvation decisions our efforts produce. This ratio demonstrates the local church's missional effectiveness. Rather than measuring attendance alone, the AC reveals the degree to which our efforts to connect with people and lead them to faith in Christ are being effective by calculating how many of us it takes to produce a new believer each year. In a healthy church, the AC of a local congregation will likely be 5.0 or lower.

AC (x < 5.0)	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2015	2010	2005	2000	1995	1990	1980
District	6.0	10.0	4.5	4.6	4.1	4.3	4.9	3.6	2.7	5.1	6.7	6.2
SE Region	4.4	5.1	3.9	4.0	3.8	3.3	3.3	3.0	3.0	3.0	5.9	4.4
National Average	4.6	5.1	4.1	4.2	4.0	4.1	4.3	3.9	3.4	4.0	4.6	5.5

## Church Health Metrics &amp; Growth-Plateau-Dcline (GPD) - District Report

July 1, 2022

**2. ASSIMILATION: the CW ratio**

The **CW** identifies the salvation decisions solidified by the act of water baptism by taking the total number of conversions for the year and comparing that number with the water baptisms reported that same year. A **CW** of 1.0 would mean that we baptized the same number of people as made conversion decisions. The **CW** can be used to help us measure the health of our assimilation efforts. A low **CW** indicates that the church is maintaining connection to its converts long enough to guide them toward the choice to be baptized. A high **CW** indicates that we aren't baptizing a good percentage of our converts. It seems a good target for the **CW** would be 3.0 or lower.

<b>CW (x &lt; 3.0)</b>	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2015	2010	2005	2000	1995	1990	1980
District	2.3	1.7	3.2	2.8	3.2	3.0	2.7	4.3	4.3	3.2	2.6	2.4
SE Region	2.7	2.9	3.6	3.5	3.7	4.1	4.2	4.8	4.3	4.9	2.8	2.9
National Average	3.2	3.6	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.6	3.8	4.1	3.8	3.5	2.1

**3. GROWTH: the AW ratio**

The **AW** measures the number of water baptisms against our average worship attendance. Since most of our churches require new members to be converted and baptized, this ratio can help us see our potential for membership growth. Yes, transfer growth can give us new members and not positively affect this ratio, but the **AW** demonstrates a local church's actual contribution to kingdom growth. If a church's **AC** should be below 5.0 and the **CW** should be less than 3.0, the **AW** should be less than 15.0.

<b>AW (x &lt; 15.0)</b>	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2015	2010	2005	2000	1995	1990	1980
District	13.7	17.3	14.4	13.0	13.2	12.7	13.5	15.3	11.7	16.0	17.6	15.0
SE Region	12.0	14.7	14.0	14.1	13.9	13.4	14.2	14.6	12.7	14.8	16.7	12.5
National Average	14.7	18.7	15.2	14.9	14.6	14.5	15.3	14.8	13.7	15.2	15.9	11.7

**4. DISCIPLESHIP & MOBILIZATION: the CS ratio**

A **CS** ratio compares conversions with Spirit baptisms and can help us measure both discipleship effectiveness and our efforts to mobilize our Spirit-filled saints. It would seem that our **CS** should be 4.0 or less since that would mean ¼ of our converts are being baptized in the Holy Spirit. At the same time, a **CS** below 3.0 would indicate that we are struggling to mobilize the Spirit-filled people in our church. So a healthy **CS** would likely fall between 3.0 and 4.0. So, if our numbers are outside those parameters, we can identify whether we have a discipleship problem or a mobilization problem.

<b>CS (3.0 &lt; x &lt; 4.0)</b>	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2015	2010	2005	2000	1995	1990	1980
District	5.0	3.0	5.7	5.0	6.3	5.6	3.4	5.1	5.8	3.4	2.8	2.7
SE Region	5.5	5.2	6.0	5.6	6.2	6.9	5.2	5.3	6.0	5.6	3.2	3.6
National Average	5.6	5.5	5.7	5.4	5.8	6.0	5.1	5.1	5.5	4.9	4.2	3.2

**5. REPRODUCTION: the AS ratio**

As we did with water baptism, we can combine attendance and Spirit baptism numbers in an **AS** ratio. By measuring Spirit baptism against average worship attendance, we can measure the reproduction of Spirit-filled disciples taking place in the congregation. Our collective efforts to continue pursuing Christ's worldwide harvest in the future hinge on the continued reproduction of Spirit-filled believers.

<b>AS (15.0 &lt; x &lt; 20.0)</b>	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2015	2010	2005	2000	1995	1990	1980
District	29.9	29.6	26.0	23.1	25.9	23.9	16.8	18.5	15.8	17.1	18.9	17.1
SE Region	24.3	26.5	23.6	22.6	23.1	22.6	17.3	16.1	17.9	17.0	18.6	15.7
National Average	25.7	28.1	23.2	22.7	23.4	24.7	21.9	19.6	18.4	19.5	19.0	17.6

**2019-21 COVID IMPACT**

Churches that INCREASED (+1 or more)	- 11.2%
Churches that STAYED SAME (no change)	- 48.7%
Churches that DECREASED (-1 or more)	- 40.1%

**2020-21 COVID RECOVERY**

Churches that INCREASED (+1 or more)	- 20.3%
Churches that STAYED SAME (no change)	- 59.0%
Churches that DECREASED (-1 or more)	- 20.6%

## APPENDIX D

### INSTRUCTIONS AND QUESTIONS ON FOUR PRE-COVID CONTEXTUAL BARRIERS

The impact of COVID-19 on the contextual barriers contributing to plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, Alabama.

Based on previous research, four contextual barriers were identified that contributed to church plateau and decline in some churches in Mobile, Alabama.

#### **Contextual Barriers:**

- Previous leadership
  - Following a long tenured leader
    - Lingering loyalty to previous leader
  - Following a leader with a different leadership style
    - Imposed expectations based on previous leader's ministry approach
    - Resistance to a different approach
- Leadership style change
  - Changing leadership/team culture
    - Resistance from body, board, and leadership team/staff to new leadership structure: expectations, accountability, roles, functions, responsibilities
    - Struggle for control, power, and authority
    - Resistance to changing organizational logistics: service times, office hours, resource allocation and access, etc.
- Worship style change
  - Changing church/organizational culture
    - Resistance to changing worship experience
      - Aesthetics: sanctuary décor, art, images, signage, lighting, etc.
      - Communication style: preaching and general correspondence
- Disproportionate internal focus.
  - Having internal focus to the neglect/opposition of external focus

This research was conducted before the impacts brought by the coronavirus, COVID-19. The goal of the dissertation is a comparative analysis of the contextual barriers identified pre-COVID with new research conducted among the pastors and churches in the area to evaluate the pre-COVID contextual barriers in the current mid-COVID, potentially post-COVID.

#### **Questions**

5. How has COVID impacted these contextual barriers as compared to their impact pre-COVID?
  1. How are these barriers having greater or lesser impact on your church during COVID?
6. How are these barriers affecting your church currently?
7. Have you been successful in addressing these barriers?
  1. What efforts have been successful?
  2. What efforts have been unsuccessful?

## APPENDIX E

### INSTRUCTIONS AND QUESTIONS ON DISPROPORTIONATE INTERNAL FOCUS

COVID-19's impact on the contextual barriers contributing to plateau and decline in churches in Mobile, Alabama.

Based on previous research, contextual barriers were identified that contributed to church plateau and decline in some churches in Mobile, Alabama. These included previous leadership, leadership style change, worship style change, and internal focus. This research was conducted before the impacts brought by the coronavirus, COVID-19. The goal of the dissertation is a comparative analysis of the contextual barriers identified pre-COVID with new research conducted among the pastors and churches in the area to evaluate the pre-COVID contextual barriers in the current mid-COVID, potentially post-COVID.

One of the contextual barriers is a disproportionate internal focus.

The Bible teaches that churches are to have both internal and external focus. Internal focus is pastoral care, discipleship, spiritual growth, etc. External focus is engaging those outside of the church in its immediate context and beyond as commanded in the Great Commission toward reaching those who are not in Christ.

A disproportionate internal focus can be understood as churches having internal focus, to the neglect or even opposition of external focus. This is one of the points of resistance for pastors and church leaders working to lead the congregation out of plateau and decline. When churches (attenders, members, lay leaders, and influencers) are entrenched in being concerned for those who are already a part of the church more than showing concern for people outside of the church, (as indicated in the previous research data), it naturally promotes plateau because the focus becomes maintaining the expectations of existing people. Care of the existing body is obviously an important part of pastoral leadership, but if it negates the balance of having an external focus, it is a disproportionate internal focus.

#### Questions

1. How has COVID impacted the contextual barrier of a disproportionate internal focus as compared to its impact pre-COVID?
2. How is this barrier more or less impacting during COVID?
3. How is this barrier affecting your church now
4. Have you been successful in addressing this barrier? If so, how?

## APPENDIX F

### STUDY FOR PASTORS AND CHURCH LEADERS

Exploring Five Ways COVID's Impact Intersects with the Church's Identity and Mission, its Presence in Culture, and Resulting Challenges and Opportunities.

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#### Introduction

The study is designed to help pastors and church leaders address the impact of COVID on the contextual barrier of a disproportionate internal focus contributing to plateau and decline among churches in the Mobile, Alabama area. This study's focus is to assist pastors and leaders in gaining a greater understanding of the church's identity as a witnessing and inviting community. The church's identity is inseparable from its mission. Understanding the Biblical description of what constitutes a church is critical to church health (organizational health). Understanding the connectedness of its "identity and mission" is critical to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. This study highlights the following five ways COVID's impact intersects with the church's identity and mission, its presence in culture, and identifies challenges and opportunities that have resulted.

1. The importance of organizational health and how it is defined biblically for the church.
2. The reality COVID has changed culture inside and outside of the church.
3. The opportunities for change created by COVID's impacts.
4. Leading positive change requires a team.
5. Leading positive change requires courage.

#### Intersection #1

##### Organizational Health

In *The Advantage*, Lencioni brings the many years of his work in the field of organizational health and leadership together in a single book focused on the single most important factor in successful organizations, which is organizational health.<sup>1</sup> He notes that organizational health is overlooked by many to their demise. This is true in churches as well as business organizations. He describes organizational health as centering around integrity as

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012). Kindle.



defined as being complete or whole “when its management, operations, strategy, and culture fit together and make sense.”<sup>2</sup>

Organizational health is the ability to identify critical needs, experiment, recover from mistakes, and work through problems toward the most important needs in safe environments.<sup>3</sup> Organizational health is the umbrella and dominant idea in this study. The remaining four ideas come under the overall category of organizational health, as key attributes contributing to and supporting it.

Church health shares components of organizational health because the church has organizational components, but it is not just an organization. At its purest, it is a living organism, the Body of Christ. Church health is extremely important for the church to successfully fulfill its design and purpose. This requires that church health be defined and clarified. A distinction of organizational design is necessary regarding the church. Organizations’ purposes are often defined by the founders because they are often created to generate leverage to meet needs or provide services or goods. The church was not created by people, it was designed, created, and birthed by God. This requires the purpose of the church to be defined by its Creator, not the people involved in it. God has done so, and it is revealed in the Bible.

The key theme in this study is the mission of the church is inseparable from its identity, as a witnessing and inviting community. The union of identity with mission is expressed in the actions and commands of Jesus. After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples and breathed on them and according to John said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> This was the promise and the beginning of the birth of the church in the New Testament. Matthew adds more detail on the instructions of Jesus after the Resurrection in what is known as the Great Commission.<sup>5</sup> This overall mandate of the New Testament church, to carry the message of the gospel to those who have not heard so that people can be saved and discipled, was commanded by Jesus with the promise of his presence and empowerment. John’s report and Matthew’s report are different details of the birthing of the church *into* its mission.

Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to his followers to enable them (church) to accomplish something beyond their abilities. The promise of enablement was connected to the overarching mandate of the church, the Great Commission, which Luke expresses as witnessing of Jesus to all the world.<sup>6</sup> The fulfillment of the Holy Spirit’s infilling the followers of Jesus constituted the birth of the church as recorded in Acts, “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> The church was born with the promise of God’s Spirit to empower them to complete the overall mandate of bearing witness of Jesus in the world, which is the fulfillment of the Great Commission Jesus enacted before he departed from earth.

To accomplish the mandate of the Great Commission, the church was designed by God to embody five core activities that constitute the purpose of the church. These purpose-fulfilling

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<sup>2</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 355, Kindle.

<sup>3</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 425, Kindle.

<sup>4</sup> John 20:22

<sup>5</sup> Matt 28:16-20

<sup>6</sup> Acts 1:8

<sup>7</sup> Acts 2:1-4

activities do not change for different churches, this is what the church, designed by God, accomplishes. These activities are woven throughout the Bible but are clearly identified in the narrative life of the earliest New Testament church in Acts as worship, community, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism.<sup>8</sup> White affirms the permanence of these five activities as that which constitutes the purpose of the church, “It is what a biblically functioning community looks like ... it is what the church does.”<sup>9</sup> To be clear, God calls churches to determine strategies to accomplish the purpose of the church in their respective cultures because different cultures may require different strategies. This is contextualization and is necessary for each local church or group to effectively embody the purpose in their context. The point for clarification here is that although churches design and define strategies, God, the Architect of the church, alone has the authority to define the purpose of the church. The role of church leadership is to design contextualized strategies to fulfill the five purpose-fulfilling activities of worship, discipleship, community, ministry, and evangelism.

As referenced earlier, Lencioni describes organizational health as the environment in which leadership, culture, and mission fit together to accomplish the goal or purpose of the organization.<sup>10</sup> In terms of organizational health in the church, the same principle applies. When churches embody the five purpose-fulfilling activities of the New Testament church’s design, the leadership, body, and culture align to accomplish the overall mission, the Great Commission. If a church fails to embody all five purpose-fulfilling activities, it is unhealthy and loses synergy toward accomplishing its mission. It is weakened overall by the underperforming area of activity, contributing to less effectiveness in the overall mission. Understanding and embodying all five purpose-fulfilling activities of the church is critical to being and doing what God designed for the church to be and do. This union of identity and mission as a witnessing and inviting community is the soul of the church. For an organization to lose purpose is to lose its soul.<sup>11</sup>

Possessing a proportionate external focus is a necessity for a healthy balance between identity and mission so the church can fulfill the Great Commission. Therefore, a disproportionate internal focus weakens the evangelistic activity of the church and turns the focus away from one of the essential core elements of the Great Commission, to share the gospel with those who have not heard it. The church cannot neglect the external focus component and adequately operate in the full definition of its identity, as defined by God, as a witnessing and inviting community.

### **Key Points**

- The church’s identity as a witnessing and inviting community is inseparable from its mission.
- Organizational health is critical for churches.
- Organizational health is described in the Bible as engaging the five purpose-fulfilling activities that constitute a church according to God’s design.

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 2:42-47

<sup>9</sup> James Emery White, *Rethinking the Church: A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition*, rev. ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 31.

<sup>10</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 355, Kindle.

<sup>11</sup> Allan Cox and Julie Liesse, *Redefining Corporate Soul: Linking Purpose and People* (Chicago, IL: Irwin, 1996), 3.

- The five activities are: Worship, Community, Discipleship, Ministry, and Evangelism.

## Intersection #2

### The Reality of Change

One of the main reasons Lencioni wrote, *The Advantage*, was his experience and realization that most organizations were drifting further into organizational dysfunction instead of health.<sup>12</sup> Research indicates that the church has been declining (organizational dysfunction and lack of health) for at least a couple of decades.<sup>13</sup> The COVID pandemic began in 2020 and has impacted churches greatly, creating what some researchers believe is a permanent change in some dynamics. Recounting a conversation with a pastor who was looking forward to church returning to normal after the first round of quarantine, Thom Rainer shares he broke the news to the pastor “as much as I hated punching a hole in that pastor’s enthusiasm, I didn’t want him walking blindly into a world that no longer exists.”<sup>14</sup>

Rainer also reports that church closings are rising due to COVID but qualifies most of the churches closing were in decline before the pandemic.<sup>15</sup> Regarding organizational health, these churches were unhealthy prior to the pandemic, experiencing organizational drift. Such churches allowed a break in the union of their identity as witnessing and inviting communities. They allowed a separation between identity and mission which results in identify confusion and missional drift. Sweet says, “identity requires discipleship and evangelism, the two biggest failures of the contemporary church and the two biggest imperatives of the future church.”<sup>16</sup> Sweet’s insights capture the necessity for a proportionate internal (discipleship) / external (evangelism) focus.

Facing the reality of change, many churches did not adjust and closed. One element of change that strained most churches and contributed to the closure of others was the social distancing mandates adopted by many governments and agencies that limited or prevented in-person gatherings for a season. Cho wrestles with the question, can the church be the church without community because community is critical (one of the five activities of the purpose of the church)? She concludes that churches can create community through strategy and hard work utilizing digital means but that it is difficult.<sup>17</sup>

The reality of change due to the pandemic is not just an issue for churches that have closed, it remains an ongoing issue for churches seeking to survive and thrive now and into the future. Churches must avoid the tendency to ignore the reality of change and just double down

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<sup>12</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 257, Kindle.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel A. Cox, “The Decline of Church Membership,” American Enterprise Institute – AEI, April 19, 2019, <https://www.aei.org/society-and-culture/the-decline-of-church-membership/>.

<sup>14</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *The Post Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges + Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Rainer, *The Post Quarantine Church*, 64.

<sup>16</sup> Leonard Sweet and Mark Chironna, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith through a Volcanic Future*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2019), 179.

<sup>17</sup> Anna Cho, “For the Church Community after COVID-19.” *Dialog* 60, no. 1 (March 2021): 14–21, Alta Religion.

on what they've always done. Bolsinger notes this is the tendency of leaders when faced with the reality that change is necessary.<sup>18</sup> One of the key elements necessary for positive change to happen is churches getting healthy, specifically regarding a disproportionate internal focus. Rainer suggests a key problem is churches experiencing a slow erosion due to drifting into an inward focus, stating that churches were "replacing the Great Commission with the great complacency" by turning inward.<sup>19</sup> Churches have always required a healthy external focus to be organizationally healthy and fulfill the Great Commission, yet the pandemic has accelerated and compounded the need to reorient outward instead of retreating inward.

### Key Points

- The cultural landscape has changed due to COVID.
- COVID's impact has reinforced some churches inward drift.
- An external focus is necessary for church health and fulfillment of the Great Commission.

### Intersection #3

#### Opportunities for Change

Rainer's views on the state of the post quarantine church are not all negative. He feels much of the church has responded successfully to maintain organizational health and reorient to a healthy outward focus during the pandemic. He even goes further and shares the pandemic has created *opportunities* for churches to reorient and function in the organizational health of the New Testament church. He reports his general conclusion from researching the impact of the pandemic as "it gave church leaders an opportunity to rethink everything."<sup>20</sup> Leaders of churches experiencing missional drift are not giving enough consideration to the external focus component of a healthy church. One opportunity, created by the pandemic to rethink, reorient, and reinvent, is the greater openness to experimentation. Rainer highlights churches have experimented with different service times, new and different uses of facilities, and digital delivery systems and were met with less resistance because of the restraints of quarantine due to the pandemic.<sup>21</sup>

The reality is that when church members were faced with quarantine restrictions for gathering, their resistance levels to leaders being innovative in how to carry out the functions of the church lessened. This offers church leaders a great opportunity to evaluate the strategies, systems, and priorities of the churches to determine if they are aligned with the five activities that constitute the purpose of the church. Less resistance to change paves the way for greater adjustment and experimentation toward fulfilling the Great Commission.

Another positive impact and great opportunity is the realization many people have of the brevity of life and the short duration to make a difference. Berthoud explores the value in presenting the good news of the gospel to a world grappling with the reality of death, considering the power of the message of eternal life in the face of potential death.<sup>22</sup> The goal is not freedom

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<sup>18</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, Exp. Ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 108.

<sup>19</sup> Rainer, *The Post Quarantine Church*, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Rainer, *The Post Quarantine Church*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Rainer, *The Post Quarantine Church*, 28-30.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Berthoud, "The Church in the Midst of the Enduring Pandemic," *Unio Cum Christo* 7, no. 1 (April 2021): 156-62, Alta Religion.

to change for the sake of change, it is the freedom to change so that the mission is accomplished, which is people coming to Christ, entering into the life of a spiritual community, and participating in serving the mission. Lencioni notes a team or an organization is only effective if it achieves its goals.<sup>23</sup>

### Key Points

- COVID's impact has created opportunities for churches to reorient to their identity as a witnessing and inviting community.
- COVID's impact has provided greater permission to experiment strategically.
- COVID's impact has brought new awareness of the brevity of life and the opportunities to make a difference in the world.

### Intersection #4

#### Team Leadership

Building a cohesive leadership team is the first, in priority and order, of Lencioni's four disciplines, and is based on the simple idea that an organization cannot be healthy if the leaders are not cohesively aligned in purpose and practice.<sup>24</sup> (The second discipline is to create clarity, the third is to clearly and repetitively communicate clarity, and the fourth is to reinforce clarity through minimal effective systems that reinforce the clarity of what matters to all employees.<sup>25</sup>) Lencioni builds his method on two general organizational values, team and communication. The concept of cohesive leadership teams, beginning at the top level, is a generally accepted organizational value. Kotter's eight-step plan for leading change includes this concept as step two, only behind the need to create urgency so that others see the necessity of change due to their organization's missional drift. Kotter, like Lencioni, considers a competent team essential to organizational health.<sup>26</sup> Another respected expert in organizational success, Jim Collins, also affirms the need for cohesive teams. Collins reported the first key to bringing an organization to health and success is getting "the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus).<sup>27</sup>

The organizational value of team leadership, especially a cohesive, unified, healthy team is critical to organizational health. It is taught by many leadership experts around the world. It is important to note that the Old Testament teaches team leadership. One example is Moses being instructed to raise up and train leaders.<sup>28</sup> Jesus modeled the concept of unified team leadership in choosing and training the disciples and then committing the leadership of the church to their care (under the influence, power, and direction of the Holy Spirit), that they might reproduce the same leadership structure as the church grew. The book of Acts serves as evidence the disciples worked, although not perfectly, to that end. Lencioni establishes the necessity of a cohesive team

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<sup>23</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 1294, Kindle.

<sup>24</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 510, Kindle.

<sup>25</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 521, Kindle.

<sup>26</sup> John Kotter, *Leading Change*, (Boston MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012), 54.

<sup>27</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Other's Don't*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2001), 41.

<sup>28</sup> Exod 18

united around a mutual vision as a foundation for organizational health. This is a very similar structure to Jesus uniting the church around the shared vision of the Great Commission through the five activities that constitute the purpose of the church.

### Key Points

- Leadership is essential to healthy organizations and churches.
- Team leadership structure is Biblical and provides greater reach of influence.
- Cohesive team leadership, unified around a common mission, is powerful.
- Communication is vital for team leadership.

### Intersection #5

#### Courageous Leadership

Lencioni gives attention to the reality that organizational health must be led by courageous leadership.<sup>29</sup> The factor of leadership cannot be delegated to subordinates. This requires courage and sacrifice on the leader's part due to the necessity to be selflessly and completely committed to the process. One critical insight is being willing to look into the arena of the organizational dynamic and acknowledge the areas of struggle rather than ignore them to focus on the positive aspects of the organization. Lencioni used the illustration from an old tv show of looking for something that is lost in a room that it wasn't lost in because the visibility was better in that room. His point is that leaders prefer to look where they are more comfortable with what they see and how they see it, rather than look at negative aspects of reality.<sup>30</sup>

Organizational health is more complex than a system of data and metrics because it involves the culture of the organization. This is even more important in the church because the culture is based on the sacrifice of Jesus for all humanity and the call of Jesus for all believers to follow in the same spirit. Chand says that culture is the most powerful factor in an organization.<sup>31</sup> Lencioni is describing the power of focused culture in his plan for organizational health and correctly pointing out that it begins with looking into organizational health (correct culture) as the big goal instead of one factor of a larger goal.

Another critical insight regarding courageous leadership is the challenge leaders face in creating the correct balance of structure. This is a great challenge for many pastors. As Lencioni pointed out, too little structure is a bad thing and too much structure is a bad thing in any organization, including churches.<sup>32</sup> Too little structure and the church fails to "take shape" around the core values and missional directives as a witnessing and inviting community. Too much structure and the church may bog down in bureaucracy leading to inward drift. Sweet say, "when the church no longer exists for mission but for the perpetuation of the church, the church has become a bureaucracy. In other words, an ecclesia of missional disciples turns into an ecclesiocracy of arrogant, corrupt, self-serving ecclesiocrats."<sup>33</sup> The proper balance is the amount

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<sup>29</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 3233, Kindle.

<sup>30</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 394, Kindle.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel R. Chand, *Cracking Your Church's Culture Code: Seven Keys to Unleashing Vision and Inspiration*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 2664, Kindle.

<sup>33</sup> Sweet and Chrionna, *Rings of Fire*, 244.

of structure possessing enough systems to unify people around the critical mission throughout every step of the organization's process without creating too many unnecessary systems which creates lag.

Churches tend to drift inward unless the proper structure and leadership continually orient them outward. Bolsinger, in *Canoeing the Mountains*, affirms Lencioni's views on organizational health and states "the most critical attribute a congregation must have to thrive in uncharted territory is a healthy organizational culture."<sup>34</sup> He also orients healthy organizational culture in the church as having a proportionate external/internal focus due to the tendency of organizations to drift inward, noting that churches built on an inward culture "struggle with implementing changes that depend of putting those self-interested needs aside."<sup>35</sup>

Leading change that orients churches toward a healthy organizational culture with proportionate external/internal focuses requires courageous leadership. The reality is that this type of leadership is dangerous for the leaders. The title of Bolsinger's chapter on the emotional implications for those who lead change is "take a good look into the coffin," to illustrate facing loss as part of the price of such leadership.<sup>36</sup> This connects with Lencioni's views that leading such change has a price. Lencioni notes that being a leader of a healthy organization is difficult.<sup>37</sup>

Leaders must remain vigilant and always alert to anything in the culture of the organization causing the organization to drift as this can erase gains or entrench existing drift.<sup>38</sup> They must communicate and continually reinforce clarity as Kotter notes employees and team members, as humans, are "emotional creatures" and need constant reinforcement in communication. Leaders must communicate and continually reinforce clarity. They must monitor for complacency and competency. Bolsinger points out that emotional challenges of leading change are real and require "missional conviction" to complete the journey.<sup>39</sup>

This level of commitment to the mission of the church is necessary to stay the course in leading churches to reorient outwardly. Leaders must share identity with the mission of Christ through the local church so what they do is a product of who they are. The Holy Spirit's enablement is critical in leading positive change, to both provide clarity of purpose and direction as well as give courage and control to the leaders. Bolsinger refers to Steinke's views that leaders of positive change must be able to manage their own anxiety, so it doesn't derail decision-making.<sup>40</sup>

### Key Points

- Leading positive change is difficult.
- Leaders must embody the process of change and continue to develop and grow as they lead organizational change.

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<sup>34</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 73.

<sup>35</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 135.

<sup>37</sup> Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 3255, Kindle.

<sup>38</sup> Kotter, *Leading Change*, 146.

<sup>39</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 136.

<sup>40</sup> Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 148.

- Leaders must be courageous in the face of the unknown, difficult challenges, and often difficult decision making.
- Leaders must possess a deep commitment to the mission.
- Leaders can be courageous through faith in God's call, provision, and guidance.

## Conclusion

Churches require a healthy organizational culture to fulfill their role in the Great Commission. One of the most impactful issues in dysfunctional church culture is a disproportionate internal focus. Leaders who lead positive change in churches to reorient to a proportionate level of external/internal focus and a balance of the five activities that constitute the purpose of the church, toward accomplishing the Great Commission need the Holy Spirit's enablement and courage. The COVID pandemic has changed the landscape of the church in America, but it has not changed the church's identity as a witnessing and inviting community. COVID has also provided opportunities for reorientation and innovation. Leaders need to develop courageous teams to help reorient churches to biblical church health toward the goal of fulfilling the Great Commission as a witnessing and inviting community in this world.



APPENDIX G  
LEADERSHIP FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRE

Based on your participation in the study, *“Exploring Five Ways COVID’s Impact Intersects with the Church’s Identity and Mission, its Presence in Culture, and Resulting Challenges and Opportunities,”* please respond to each question below.

1. How has your understanding of the Biblical description of the five practices that constitutes a New Testament church changed?
2. How important is the connection between identity and mission for the New Testament church as a witnessing and inviting community?
3. How has your understanding of the importance of organizational health in the local church changed?
4. How has your understanding of the cultural changes, inside and outside of the church, impacted your approach to reaching outsiders?
5. How would you describe your approach to the challenges and opportunities created by COVID?
6. What are your views on the importance of team leadership in the church fulfilling the Great Commission?
7. What are your views on the importance of courageous leadership in leading churches to reorient to organizational health?
8. What insights are the most important toward reoriented a church from a disproportionate internal focus to a proportionate internal/external focus?

## APPENDIX H

### “YOU-FIRST” SERMON SERIES

#### SERMON 1

##### Introduction

- One of the beautiful things about walking with God, in the covenant of His grace, is the opportunities we have to repent and refocus our lives when we drift.
- One area we tend to drift in is that of identity and mission as a church.
  - We have a great opportunity to refocus and set our priorities in a way that aligns with who we are called to be and what we are called to do.
  - I believe that scripture teaches that if we put God first above all and others first before ourselves, we will find true fulfillment, and be happier and more blessed than if we live with a “self-first” way of life.
  - I know this seems counter-cultural and opposite of what our old nature tells us - but remember as Christ-followers, we are no longer of this world!
    - We are in it but not of it this world and we will find fulfillment in a higher calling because we are now citizens of Heaven.

C.S. Lewis said, “If I find in myself desires that nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>41</sup>

##### Transition

- This series is entitled, “You First,” as it relates to putting God first above all, then the unchurched, and then the family of faith as we are a witnessing and inviting community.
- Today is the foundational sermon encouraging us to say to God, “You First.”

**Text:** Mark 12:29-31 ESV

- Jesus said, love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.
- **We say to God, “You First” in our hearts (affection).**
  - The arena of the heart contains powerful emotions, affections, and desires.
    - Our affections are deep currents that steer our life; like a ship’s rudder.
    - To determine where our affections are, we discern what occupies our time, what motivates our actions, what shapes our aspirations, and what comprises the rewards.
    - Affections can be directed, they wait to be captured, to cling to someone or thing.
  - Our affections determine our devotion, what we value most in our hearts - our treasure.
    - And our affections follow what we treasure and if we find our greatest treasure, then we find the love of our hearts.

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<sup>41</sup> C.S. Lewis, “Mere Christianity,” *Surrey Libraries*, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://surrey.bibliocommons.com/v2/quotation/187327293>.

### Matthew 6:21 ESV

- Seek Christ as your greatest treasure.
  - The Apostle Paul taught that Jesus was THE treasure of life.
  - He also said that losing everything else was nothing compared to gaining Christ.

### Philippians 3:8 ESV

- When Jesus is our Great Treasure then our affections are captured. This is how we love God with all our hearts.

### • We say to God, “You First” in our souls (devotion).

- Loving the Lord with all our hearts has to do with affection and loving the Lord with all our souls has to do with devotion.
  - The soul is the part of us that defines who we are – it is the “core us”.
  - The essence of the definition of the soul means life, personality, identity, etc.
- To love the Lord with all your soul means to love Him in the way we live, the choices we make, and in the lifestyle, we lead.
- We love God with all our soul by:
  - Make godly choices.
    - Our choices reveal our commitments and reflect our core values, defining us.
    - We do what we value because choices flow from what we treasure most.
    - How do I spend my money? How do I spend my time?
    - Obey His Word.

### John 14:15 ESV

- When our affections are captured then choices become god-centered and a lifestyle of humility and godliness is born. This is loving God with all your soul.

### • We say to God, “You First” in our minds.

- The language of the mind is images. Often our mind is an ongoing movie screen that provides pictures and words that are endless.
  - We can never truly turn our minds off and we are constantly seeing images being played for us or holding a conversation in our mind, often at the same time.
  - The Lord created us this way for ceaseless communion with Him - in the live stream of our life. Even as our body sleeps our mind stays active dreaming.
  - To love God with all our minds in its fallen state is impossible.
  - But through Christ, our spirits are revived, our souls restored, and our minds renewed.

### Romans 12:2 ESV

- A renewed mind can love the Lord in many ways.
  - Knowledge

W. Tozer said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>42</sup>

- Loving God and learning truth are deeply connected because Jesus is the Truth.

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<sup>42</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), 1.

- Love itself includes great depths of knowledge so loving God is continually refueled when the mind encounters truth over and over.
- Memory
  - Scripture is filled with commands to remember.
  - When we use our minds to remember His kindness, faithfulness, patience, etc., we develop gratitude and worship, we build a foundation of faith, hope, and love.
  - When we remember the Lord's faithfulness and think about His goodness, we love Him with our minds.

## Conclusion

- **We say to God, "You First" in our strength.**
  - Loving the Lord with all our strength is to love him exceedingly, lovingly, radically, with reckless abandon - basically to love Him 100% - with all our might.
  - Loving Him with all our strength is not just an invisible activity - it includes loving Him with our resources, abilities, and time.
  - It's loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength by saying to Him, **"You First"** as we choose to live a "sold out" life as the people He has called us to be.

## SERMON 2

### Introduction

- Last week was the foundational message about saying to God, "You First" above everyone and everything in our hearts, souls, minds, and with all our strength so that we can be who He has called us to be and do what He has called us to do.
- Loving God well is loving others well.
- As followers of Christ and as the "Church," we are the recipients of so many blessings - salvation, peace with God, joy, fulfillment, etc.
- We are called to the responsibility of stewarding the grace of God that we have received.
  - We are called to those outside of the family of faith - the unchurched, to love them well and show the grace of God and to our family of faith (Church).
  - It's not someone else's responsibility, it's ours - this responsibility belongs to everyone who has received the grace of God in their lives for salvation.
  - The cool thing is although technically it's our responsibility, it's also a great privilege in this fallen world - to put others first with the intent that they may encounter the grace of God that we have and be saved, fulfilled, and blessed.

**Text:** Luke 15:1-7 ESV

### Transition

- Today I will focus on our call to be others-focused to those outside of the family of faith as a witnessing and inviting community.
- **We say to those outside of the faith, "you first" in our passion.**
  - We need a burning passion for all to be saved; this is the heart of God!
    - We need to have a passion that prays, "God let what breaks your heart, break ours" - those outside of the faith are what break God's heart.

- It is this passion that moved Jesus to descend to earth, live a sinless life, die on the cross as our substitute, and rise from the grave that we too might have eternal life.
  - He put us “First” and now we should strive to lead all to Him & we do it by being passionate enough about the heart of God to take the same posture toward others that He did for us - “you first”.
- He taught that even in 99 of 100 are saved and one is still lost that a passionate effort must be made to find the 1.
  - This passion must be genuine, and heartfelt from the Holy Spirit within us or it will only be a short-term emotional prompting to help others.
- **We say to those outside of the faith, “you first” in our mission.**
  - A heart-felt burden in our spirit must produce action so that those we are trying to reach truly believe that we mean what we say.
    - We are called by God to be intentional in reaching others just as we were reached by someone with the message of Christ.
  - A key to truly putting those outside of the faith ahead of yourself is understanding that everyone is equally valuable to God.
    - We are neither above nor beneath anyone - we are all sinners before God and can only be saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus.
  - The actions we take to share God’s grace with others can be in many varieties; service, gift, time, courtesy, etc. but a good rule to use is to prefer others over self.
- **We say to those outside of the faith, “you first” in our prayers.**
  - If you are in the family of faith today, you can know that someone prayed for you!
  - We should always remember to pray for others to come to Christ and that we might be able to show the grace and love of God to all men.

Philippians 2:3 ESV

- You have probably heard the acronym JOY - Jesus-others-you.
  - Saying “you first” in mission means intentionally finding ways and making the effort to show someone love and grace.

Romans 10:1 ESV

1 Timothy 2:1-4 ESV

## Conclusion

C.S. Lewis said of a humble man, “He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”<sup>43</sup>

- We live fulfilled lives when we put God first above all and others ahead of ourselves, this is who we are and what we are called to do!

## SERMON 3

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<sup>43</sup> C.S. Lewis, “The Great Sin,” in *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperOne, 1965).

## Introduction

- We are in the final message of this series, “You First;” a series is designed to help us understand our identity as a witnessing and inviting community.
  - It is based on the message of Jesus that the greatest commandments are to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and body and to love your neighbor as yourself.
    - I truly believe life is better with a “you first” mentality instead of “me first”.
- The first message was the foundation - saying, “You First” to God in all areas above all.
  - The second was saying, “You First” to those outside of the family faith that we might share Christ with them.
  - Today will focus on saying, “You First” to our family of faith as we continue to learn who God has called us to be and what he has called us to do.
  - Our identity is inseparable from our mission.

## Transition

- There are many terms for the “Church:” Christ’s Body, Bride, Church, and family of faith.
- The church is not just an organization, it’s an organism made up of redeemed living souls.
  - To be a part is to be a convert and follower of Jesus.
  - Salvation is open to all but only those who receive Christ become part of the universal family of faith.
    - Together we are part of this local part of the family of faith and for those of you here who are a part of this local family but are not yet converts, we pray you will be soon!
- As members of this family of faith, we should say to each other, “You First”!

- **We say to the family of faith, “You First” in our love/affection.**

### 1 John 3:14 NLT

- This is powerful because our love for our faith family is an indicator that we are reborn of the Spirit.

### Hebrews 13:1 NLT

- “Keep on” loving the family of faith! (*REO Speedwagon - “keep on loving you”*)
  - We show affection and love to our faith family by keeping on and showing grace and patience with each other - because we are not perfect!

- **We say to the family of faith, “You First” in our commitment.**

- True love ALWAYS produces commitment.

Jerry Falwell said, “Love is commitment; love is a relationship that never gives up.”<sup>44</sup>

- Commitment is the product of love.
- We are saying, “You First” to our faith family when we commit to them in our allegiance, time, and actions.
  - In our allegiance: I’m committing to this family, to be a part, to give, help, to contribute to the work of Christ being done through it in this community.
    - It means that I’m with you for the long haul, the good & difficult, the highs and lows - I’m ALL IN.
    - I will work things out instead of stepping out! (This is the family of God!)

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<sup>44</sup> “Jerry Falwell Quotes and Sayings,” Inspiring Quotes, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/5166-jerry-falwell>.

- In our time: God, family then family of faith.

#### Hebrews 10:25 NLT

- Scripture calls us to spend time together for many reasons.
  - Because it's encouraging to others when we're here! (Opposite is true also)
  - We are encouraged when we are here; we receive God's touch in worship, His Word in teaching, and the encouragement of family in fellowship.
  - Our time commitments greatly impact us.

Rick Warren said, "Nothing shapes your life more than the commitments you choose to make."<sup>45</sup>

- In our actions: we say, "You First" to our faith family by our actions toward them.
  - Commitment is the product of love and action is the evidence of our commitment.

#### Galatians 6:10 NLT

- Notice that it says, "do good to" - actions!
- It is proof to our faith family that we truly love them in Christ.
- It's also proof to those outside of the family of faith that we are His people.

#### John 13:35 NLT

### Conclusion

#### 1 John 3:16 NLT

- No one said it better than the elder John.
- No one shows what real love is better than Jesus.
- BECAUSE of His love for us, we choose to say, "You First" to our family of faith.
- Our love for insiders is part of the motivation that helps us love outsiders because we want everyone to know the love of God and the spiritual family that we have found.

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<sup>45</sup> "Rick Warren Quotes," Good Reads, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/740303-nothing-shapes-your-life-more-than-the-commitments-you-choose>.

APPENDIX I

CONGREGATIONAL FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRE

Based on hearing and interacting with the sermon series, “*You First*,” please respond to each question below.

1. Why is it important for Christians to understand the New Testament church’s identity as a witnessing and inviting community, is inseparable from its mission (the Great Commission)?
2. How has your understanding of the responsibility each Christian has to participate in the church’s mission changed?
3. Why is a proportionate external focus toward reaching outsiders critical to the identity and mission of the church?
4. Why does a disproportionate internal focus contribute to church plateau and decline?
5. How would you describe the mission of the church?



APPENDIX J  
ADULT CONSENT FORM  
SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

PROJECT TITLE: “How has COVID impacted the contextual barriers (previous identified in pre-COVID research) of: previous leadership, leadership style change, church worship style change, and a disproportionate internal focus in your church?”

INVESTIGATORS: Dr. Jamie Stewart and Joseph Lee

**PURPOSE:**

This study will examine how COVID has impacted the previously identified contextual barriers in churches in Mobile, AL.

**PROCEDURES**

Participants will answer a series of questions via personal interviews and focus groups.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:**

There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:**

If participants are interested, they will be provided with a copy of the results of the study when it is finished.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

The records of this study will be kept private. Any written results will discuss group findings. Each participant and their input will be coded so that the information shared, as a result of the research, will not identify the participants. 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.

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:**

I understand that my participation is voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty.

**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. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant

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Date

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

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#### Contact Information

Researchers:  
Dr. Jamie Stewart

[REDACTED]

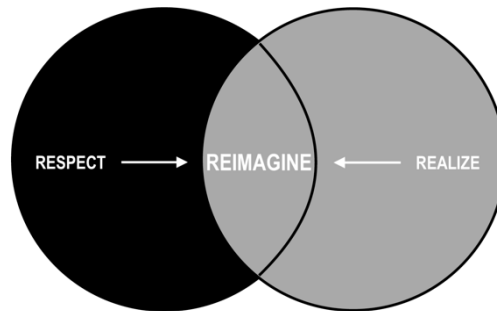
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## APPENDIX K

## MANDORLA CIRCLE AND PROCESS FOR GAINING A SHARED VISION



The mandorla circle is an almond-shaped area created by two overlapping circles. It indicates that the center circle, the almond, is both part of each circle (opposites), yet not fully either circle. It is the overlap, common ground, the balance. Sweet and Beck suggest it can be used to discern an effective approach to developing contextual intelligence, that is knowing what to do to take the church forward today.<sup>46</sup> The approach is explained below.

- Pastors face the risk of resistance from existing members when casting vision for change or correction in a church. The potential exists for member to think the pastor is criticizing or disrespecting the past. Pastors can build relational capital with existing members by showing respect for the past efforts, approaches, and accomplishments of the church.
- Existing members face the risk of ignoring their realities when opposing change. They can think they need to protect the past against change and stifle the correction and growth of the church. Existing members may be more ready to trust pastors who respect the past and therefore open their minds to the reality of their situations, which require change.
- When pastors show respect for the past and existing members acknowledge the need for change, they can reimagine the future together as a unified team. With mutual respect and commitment to the same mission, churches can strategize how to accomplish the purpose of the church in their specific context.

<sup>46</sup> Leonard Sweet and Michael Beck, *Contextual Intelligence: Unlocking the Ancient Secret to Mission on the Front Lines* (Oviedo, FL: HigherLife Development Services, Inc., 2020), 151, 386.

