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A Cost-Sensitive Model for Revitalizing United Methodist Churches

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

A COST-SENSITIVE MODEL FOR REVITALIZING
UNITED METHODIST CHURCHES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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Portland Seminary
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on February 12, 2018
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DEDICATION

To my wife, Jennifer
and
our three children, Taylor, Zachary, and Reed.

Gathering around the table to share our meals together is always the best part of my day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This journey began almost three years ago with a Facebook message from my friend and colleague Len Wilson, who suggested that I should consider applying for admission into the Preaching as Story DMIN program at George Fox Evangelical Seminary (now Portland Seminary). When I accepted his invitation, little did I know that this program would not only change the way I preach ... it would also change my entire approach to ministry.

I am indebted to my lead mentor, Leonard Sweet, for teaching me to trust the metaphor, and for showing me how to prepare the preacher, not the sermon. I am also thankful for Lori Wagner who keeps reminding me of everything Len has taught us. Thank you to my faculty advisors; Dottie Escobedo-Frank who guided and directed me in my research and writing, and Dan Lioy who helped shape the artifact for my dissertation. Thanks to the other faculty and staff at Portland Seminary who helped guide and support me along the way: Clifford Berger, Loren Kerns, Doug Balzer, Heather Rainey, Adam McGuffie, and my amazing editor Colleen Butcher. My thanksgiving would not be complete without mentioning David McDonald, the one who has pushed me most outside of my comfort zone so that I might become a more creative preacher and writer. Thank you for being a friend to me and reminding me how important it is to go out of our way to have fun.

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Island. For every gathering it seemed that laughter, joy, and dessert were always on the menu. I thank God for each of you and look forward to continuing this incredible journey alongside you for years to come.

I also want to offer my heartfelt thanks and appreciation to the people of Custer Road United Methodist Church in Plano, Texas. I am especially grateful for the members of the Staff Parish Relations Committee and church staff who encouraged me along the way and afforded me the necessary time and resources required to embark on this three-year journey. I look forward to seeing what God will do in the years to come as we seek to bring revitalization to our beloved United Methodist Church.

Most importantly, I thank God for my “first” family: For my wife Jennifer who has managed to juggle everything at home and work so that I could pursue a doctorate in preaching. You have truly taught me what it means to bring a sacrifice unto the Lord as you have done so much to encourage and support me throughout this entire process. And finally, I thank God for our three beautiful children Taylor, Zachary, and Reed who often had to wait patiently for daddy to finish his “homework” before he could play. I love you!

EPIGRAPH

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

Acts 2:46

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
EPIGRAPH.....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM.....	1
Introduction.....	1
A Story.....	3
Counting the Costs: The Problem of Individualism.....	5
Counting the Costs: The Problem of Consumerism.....	7
Counting the Costs: The Problem of Competing Visions and Values.....	11
Counting the Costs: The Problem of Complacency.....	12
Counting the Costs: The Problem of Diminishing Resources.....	14
SECTION 2: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS.....	15
Introduction.....	15
The Attractional Growth Model: “Build It and They Will Come”.....	16
The Attractional Growth Model 2.0: “Re-Remodel It and They Will Come Back”.....	21
Strategic Re-Visioning.....	24
The Simple Church Model.....	34
United Methodist Revitalization Initiatives.....	37
“One Size Fits All”.....	40
SECTION 3: THESIS.....	43
Introduction.....	43
Worship as a Launching Pad for Revitalization.....	46
Re-Assessing the Elements of Worship.....	46
Making Worship More Participatory.....	48
Re-Affirming Christ’s Open Invitation to the Table.....	50
Revitalizing the Church through On-Going Small-Groups.....	51
Overcoming Individualism by Fostering Relational Interdependence.....	51
Building Community and Deepening Faith around the Table.....	54
Revitalizing a Church and a Community through Acts of Love and Mercy.....	56
Intentional Church Closures.....	59
SECTION 4: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION.....	66
SECTION 5: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION.....	68
SECTION 6: POSTSCRIPT.....	74
APPENDIX A: ARTIFACT.....	76
APPENDIX B: FIELD RESEARCH REPORT.....	150
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	160

ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses the topic of church revitalization in United Methodist churches that are experiencing prolonged seasons of stagnation and decline. In particular, it examines various revitalization models so as to determine how well they address the issues related to cost and sustainability. Section 1 describes the state of decline in mainline church attendance over the past 60 years and in particular during the last 15 years in the United Methodist Church. In addition to providing sobering statistics, this section includes a fictional story of a dying church, outlining the costs associated with the root problems that are responsible for this decline. These include: individualism, consumerism, competing visions and values, complacency, and diminishing resources. Section 2 examines other solutions that have been offered as a remedy to these problems. These include adaptations of the attractional growth model, the simple church model, strategic re-visioning, and top down, one-size-fits-all initiatives that have been a hallmark of the United Methodist Church over the past 15 years. Although these models have sometimes yielded positive results, some of the approaches are expensive, and ultimately cost prohibitive for many churches. Section 3 describes a three-fold approach to address the specific costs in a way that is accessible and energizing for churches. Section 4 describes the artifact, a popular-nonfiction book, *[Re] Turning to the Table: Turning Your Church Around One Table at a Time*. This story-based resource offers a practical guide to resetting various tables in the church. Section 5 articulates the specific details of the artifact. Finally, Section 6 summarizes what I have learned during the process of researching and writing this dissertation; and how this learning focus applies to my current ministry context.

SECTION 1:
THE PROBLEM

Introduction

To put it bluntly, the mainline church in America is dying. Despite our best efforts to revitalize ourselves, the overall rate of decline in the mainline church continues to accelerate at an alarming rate. According to reports gathered from the most recent United States Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center, “the Christian share of the US population is declining, while the number of US adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing.”¹ For example, the percentage of adults (age 18 and older) who self-identify as Christian has decreased significantly from 78.4 percent in 2007 to 70.6 percent in 2014.² A deeper look into the statistical data reveals that the sharpest rate of decline was among mainline Protestant churches at 3.4 percent.³ When these statistics are examined alongside the latest data released by the United Methodist Church’s General Council on Finance and Administration (2015), the numbers reveal that, much like the other mainline denominations, an increasing majority of local United Methodist churches here in the United States are also experiencing some level of sustained stagnation and decline. The United Methodist Church has been declining in membership at a fairly consistent rate of around 1.6 percent (year over year) since 2006,

¹ Gregory Smith, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow.” Pew Research Center, Washington D.C. May 12, 2015, 1, accessed November 19, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

while worship attendance over this same time period has decreased by approximately 2.9 percent.⁴ When we stop to consider the sharp rate of decline that has occurred, not just in the past ten years but for nearly four decades, it becomes increasingly clear that a new paradigm for church revitalization is needed now more than ever.⁵

“Church Revitalization” is the generally accepted term that is used to describe the process of turning around a church that has been in a season of stagnation or decline for a period of more than five years.⁶ I first became aware of the concept of church revitalization in 2008 when I was asked to serve on a church revitalization task force for The North Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church. The invitation to join the group came about because, after having experienced several years of decline, the church I was serving at the time had been recognized for its ability to implement a revitalization process which resulted in the church becoming one of the fastest growing United Methodist churches in the United States. To be specific, from 2006-2009, Argyle United Methodist Church was the seventeenth fastest growing church amongst congregations with an average weekly worship attendance of 500-999.⁷

⁴ Heather Hahn, “U.S. Church Sees Numbers Slide in 2015,” United Methodist News Service, November 18, 2006, 1, accessed June 23, 2017, <http://www.um-insight.net/in-the-church/finance-and-administration/u-s-church-sees-numbers-slide-but-there-s-more-to-the-story/>.

⁵ Gregory Smith, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” 1.

⁶ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), xiii.

⁷ Deb Smith, comment, September 4, 2011 on “Top 25 Fastest Growing Large United Methodist churches,” Len Wilson (blog), September, 2011, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.lenwilson.us/top-25-fastest-growing-large-united-methodist-churches/>. Deb Smith, of the General Board of Discipleship, compiled a list of the top 25 fastest growing United Methodist churches with an average worship attendance of between 500 and 999. Len Wilson used these lists as material for a blog post, and included the list as a supplement. These lists were compiled using the 2007, 2008, and 2009 statistical data provided by the General Council on Finance and Administration of the United Methodist Church. When the blog was last accessed on November 30, 2017, the comments feature had been removed.

During this season of unprecedented growth, our church began receiving calls from groups around the country who were researching trends in church growth with respect to membership and worship attendance. Although we knew that God was doing a mighty work in our midst, we had no idea the extent to which the church's exponential growth was so unusual. What made our growth particularly interesting to those doing the research was that our congregation was 114 years old at the time. This is noteworthy because, generally speaking, once a congregation reaches the age of 40 it will most often enter a prolonged season of decline.⁸ Much like the human body, as a congregation ages, so does its ability to remain flexible, and adjust well to change. In order to illustrate the point, let us consider the hypothetical example of Wesley UMC.

A Story⁹

Wesley UMC has a rich heritage as a county seat church. Located just east of the town square, the congregation was well-positioned to reach its primary mission field from the time of its founding in 1947, until sometime in the early 1980s when the demographics of the neighborhood began to shift away from the homogenous makeup of a relatively affluent congregation. Membership and worship attendance reached its peak in 1987 when the church reported 1,400 members and boasted an average weekly worship attendance of more than 800. Since that high-water mark, the church subsequently entered into a season of stagnation that lasted throughout the 1990s.

⁸ David Olson, *The American Church in Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), Kindle loc. 1251.

⁹ The story is fictional.

In 2001, the church began experiencing the first noticeable signs that it was dying, and has been in a perpetual state of decline ever since. Consultants were engaged in 2010 to analyze Wesley's future and to issue recommendations for how to reverse the decline. These recommendations came with a stark warning: If the congregation was unable or unwilling to make the necessary changes in order to reverse this trend over the next three to five years, then the Annual Conference would delegate a task force to begin the process of closing of the church. Although the church made a few modifications to their building in the months immediately following the consultation, after that, the membership was resistant to make any further changes. Subsequently, the church is now past the point of being able to revitalize itself, as there are now only 27 members remaining with an average age of 72. However, the church is positioned to reach a more diverse population of neighbors, who have replaced the homogenous, more affluent neighbors who have moved away. The congregation is only able to utilize and maintain 25% of its building, and with the exception of Sunday mornings, the church is closed throughout the week. According to the church's outdated website, the church collected stuffed toys for one of the local children's hospitals three years ago. With virtually no other sources of income, the congregation is subsidizing its month to month expenses by draining the residual funds from a \$50,000 endowment. At this rate, Wesley UMC will be out of money in less than 24 months.

The story of this fictional dying church is not too dissimilar from so many of the stories that are chronicled every year at our annual conferences, when denominational leaders make their reports. Heads shake and hearts break when someone steps to a microphone and reads the names of the churches that have been voluntarily or

involuntarily closed throughout the previous 12 months. Sadly, many of these closures could have been avoided had these churches been able to make the necessary changes. This is of particular importance as it relates to the issue of church revitalization. When we stop to examine the surveys of 300 “turn-around” churches, the research makes it abundantly clear that “churches desiring a comeback will need to *make changes* in order to start growing again.”¹⁰ As we consider the necessary changes that must be made in order for a congregation to experience new growth, let us also consider the costs that are typically associated with change as it relates to church revitalization efforts.

Counting the Costs: The Problem of Individualism

Anyone who has ever tried to save a dying church can testify that church revitalization is an expensive proposition. In an effort to reverse years of stagnation and decline, congregations are often asked to absorb significant costs associated with launching new ministries, hiring staff, renting space, building new buildings, remodeling old buildings, and in some cases relocating. In addition to taking on these capital and operational costs, members of a dying church must also be willing to lay aside their individual preferences in order to make changes that are necessary for new growth. This is one of the hidden costs associated with church revitalization, and it is usually the hardest to address. This is the problem of individualism.

The problem of individualism directly impacts the cost of revitalization because it ultimately affects the bottom line. Costs rise exponentially when the changes that are being made result in the loss of individual members who are unwilling to subordinate

¹⁰ Stetzer and Dodson, 27. Italics in original.

their own personal interests to the greater needs of the church and the community. When disgruntled members leave, they take their money with them. As attendance and giving continue to wane, many churches will often attempt to placate those who remain, and delay making further changes indefinitely. In an attempt to survive, congregations that remain in this holding pattern for any length of time will typically become more and more insular and self-serving. Unfortunately, this inward focus only exacerbates the problem and compromises the mission of the church.

Self-serving churches pay a hefty price when it comes to their evangelical effectiveness, “because they are locked into a self-affirming subculture while the larger culture continues to move in other directions.”¹¹ As such, this self-affirming subculture makes it extremely difficult for churches to connect with and reach new people for Christ because it elevates the intrinsic value of the self over and above the value of others. Randy Frazee calls this an ideology of the “sovereign individual” and highlights the costliness of this ideal by arguing that once a premium has been placed on the value of the individual, it comes at the expense of the community.¹²

Having spent the past twenty years serving in three different local churches dedicated to designing programs and implementing strategies to attract numerical growth, I have grown weary of trying to feed the insatiable appetite that the church (myself included) has developed for consuming the religious things we create. When Jesus said to Peter “feed my sheep,” he did not envision that Peter, or anyone else for that matter, would design a strategy to produce a multitude of sheep who are simply fat and happy.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹² Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church 2.0: Beyond Small Groups to Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Kindle loc. 1641.

Of course, if the end goal is to lead the greatest number of fattened sheep to the slaughter, then many of us in the church have become wildly successful. There must be a better way. There must be an alternative to this hopeless pursuit of trying to keep pace with an ever-changing culture. Pastors and church leaders need a more balanced approach to church revitalization that is sustainable and produces healthy followers of Jesus who are actively giving of themselves in order to advance the kingdom of God.

Although a rugged sense of independence may bring about a temporary state of self-sufficiency, it ultimately leads to feelings of isolation and discontent. As such, “commitments to visions of the spiritual life, no matter how profound, are difficult to sustain without a community of shared belief.”¹³ Individualism, coupled with the fact that we live in a culture increasingly fragmented, makes the church’s task of trying to bring people into community with one another quite difficult, and yet all the more important. We can no longer afford to bow down at the altar of consumption in an attempt to fill the void that only God can fill. Moreover, we must break free from this narcissistic vortex, lest our insatiable appetite to serve only ourselves leaves us sitting at an empty table.

Counting the Costs: The Problem of Consumerism

Another factor that impacts the cost of revitalization is the culture of consumerism. In the United States, and especially in Texas, bigger is better. The latest is most often considered the greatest, and luxury is always in style. In Texas, the proliferation of expensive, mega-sized high school football stadiums offers an extreme

¹³ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 106.

example of this, as school districts and municipalities throughout the state spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year upgrading and expanding their facilities in order to gain a competitive advantage over their rivals.¹⁴ Smaller districts and communities that lack the resources to keep pace with their larger, more affluent neighbors, find that their “second-tier” programs are at a significant disadvantage. Over time, it becomes increasingly more difficult, if not impossible, for these schools to compete at the highest level. The prevalence of larger and nicer venues has also had another effect on our society. In increasing numbers, Americans seem more and more comfortable with, and perhaps even prefer, congregating in larger groups and meeting in nicer spaces. This has led researcher David Olson to observe that the migration of Christians from smaller churches to larger churches is akin to an airline passenger “upgrading to first class.”¹⁵ In an attempt to remain competitive and culturally relevant, the church has found itself at a crossroads as the gospel of Jesus has been manipulated to fit the consumeristic preferences of the day.¹⁶ These preferences, which are most notably evidenced by a culture of instant gratification, over consumption, desire, and the endless pursuit of prosperity, have reduced the significance of the self-denying message of Jesus to a sentimental virtue.¹⁷ From the perspective of this self-gratifying ideology, a person might naturally surmise: If God wants me to be happy, then why would Jesus tell me to deny

¹⁴ Avi Zaleon, “Arms Race: How We Got to \$60 Million High School Football Stadiums,” *SportsDay HS*. (blog), DallasNews.Com, May 2016, accessed November 19, 2017, <https://sportsday.dallasnews.com/high-school/high-schools/2017/07/19/timeline-high-school-football-stadium-arms-race-went-15-60-million-costs>.

¹⁵ Olson, loc. 1313.

¹⁶ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2010), back cover.

¹⁷ Miller, 105.

myself?¹⁸ When it comes to Christian faith and practice in America, our culture has so elevated the virtue of self-fulfillment that the idea of personal sacrifice seems foreign. As a result, the Christian church in America has become increasingly insular and self-serving in an all-out attempt to survive by way of maintaining a viable share of an ever-shrinking religious market. In this scenario, those outside of the church are seen not as persons of sacred worth who are in need of God's saving grace and love, but rather, they are seen as commodities to be leveraged. This inevitably leads to the perpetuation of a cultural mindset that asks: What's in it for me? Instead of: How can I serve others?

In his book, "Consuming Religion" Vincent Miller argues that "far from being immune to the dynamics of commodification, religion is as susceptible to abstraction and reification as other aspects of culture."¹⁹ As such, our doctrinal beliefs and religious practices run the risk of being absorbed by the prevailing institutions, customs, and social norms that shape who we are.²⁰ The commodification of organized religion, coupled with the pervasive trend toward sovereign individuality, has given rise to a new group of people who self-identify as spiritual rather than religious. To be sure, this rejection of all things religious is not so much a rejection of a certain set of beliefs about God as much as it is a rejection of the bureaucratic institution that the Christian Church has become. Unfortunately, this rejection of the larger institution of the church comes at the expense of both the individual and the faith community. The movement toward individual spirituality as a journey to discover the self is a direct result of the symbiotic relationship

¹⁸ Matthew 16:24 (NIV).

¹⁹ Miller, 105.

²⁰ Ibid.

between the cultural influences of commodification and the “modern, socially isolated individual.”²¹ Inevitably, this leads to a form of spiritual sojourning that produces consumer-driven, capitalistic individuals who are primarily concerned with advancing their own self-interests through their interactions with others.²²

A deeper look into the problems related to consumerism reveal that “one of consumerism’s driving principles is the elevation of rights over responsibilities.”²³ This is the antithesis of our core Christian values. Once an individual or congregation becomes myopically focused on meeting its own needs, it is increasingly more difficult for them to live by the command to “love thy neighbor as thyself.”²⁴ Frazee argues that unrestrained consumerism leads to a level of consumption that is best described as idolatry.

Accordingly, “Consumerism, individualism, and our growing isolation feed one another and keep us trapped in a vicious circle. Consumerism seeks to curb the negative feelings of isolation, and so we spend increasing amounts of money in an attempt to feel better. Yet, the more we consume as a solution to our loneliness, the more this feeds our individualistic idolatries.”²⁵

²¹ Ibid., 106.

²² Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 102.

²³ Frazee, loc. 1632.

²⁴ Mark 12:31 (KJV).

²⁵ Frazee, loc. 1641-1649.

Counting the Costs: The Problem of Competing Visions and Values

Competing visions and values create chaos. When ministries and staff pursue different goals and objectives, the lack of alignment within the church makes it impossible for the congregation to move forward together.²⁶ Leaders who find themselves in this situation often spend an inordinate amount of time trying to keep everyone happy. In turn, these same leaders delay making decisions in hopes of avoiding a situation where there are obvious winners and losers. Subsequently, most churches choose to do nothing, fearing to do anything that will risk alienating or running off some of their members.²⁷ Worry about how people will react to change inhibits the church's ability to make important decisions and fundamental changes that are necessary for revitalization. As unresolved conflict continues, managing the tensions that exist between competing factions becomes increasingly difficult and eventually the "conflict regresses to forceful competition."²⁸

Because the goal of a competition is to win, little thought is given to those outside of the church who stand to gain the most from whatever the church is willing to lose. As long as none of the factions within the congregation are willing to sacrifice their own myopic slices of the vision, the church stands little chance of becoming something that is more reflective of what God is calling them to be for their community. Competition leads to an "us versus them" mentality, and often manifests itself in attitudes that are expressed

²⁶ Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2006), 187.

²⁷ Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

through statements like “what’s in it for us?” and “why do we need to launch a new service?” A few years ago, I received an email from a church member who was upset about a new modern worship service that the church was launching. The email read: “Why does our church need to start a new contemporary service? If the people that don’t come to our church want something different than what we offer, then they can go to the church down the street!” Interestingly enough, in this particular case, no one was being asked to give up anything, and yet, the sentiment expressed in this email reflects very little regard for those outside of the church.

Counting the Costs: The Problem of Complacency

As churches grow older, there is a tendency for them to become comfortable and set in their ways. Unaware of the dangers that await, self-centered congregations cannot see where their complacency will lead them. Gradually, the majority of these congregations begin to experience stagnation and decline. Churches that find themselves in a state of decline year after year are often quick to point to the external factors that are keeping them from growing. The following are some of the more common excuses that are given: (1) The area surrounding our church is built out, (2) The demographics of our neighborhood are changing, (3) There are no new young people moving into our area, (4) We don’t have the money to hire more staff or fix our buildings that are falling into disrepair. Over time, these churches become so focused on rehearsing the litany of excuses for their lack of vitality that they begin to actually believe that there is nothing they can do to change their fate. Soon they become resigned to their destiny as a dying church and grow accustomed to seeing more empty chairs around the table. This is a lonely and painful place to be as a church, but it does not have to stay this way.

An understanding of the correlation between complacency and pain tolerance is a prerequisite for any congregation hoping to make a turn around. Pain is nature's way of telling us that there is problem. Unfortunately, if a church is unwilling to lean into the pain of their present reality, complacency will cause them to become numb to their circumstances and continue to be unwilling to address their problems. This is critical, because pain is the primary motivation for making the changes that are necessary for revitalization. It is not enough for us to simply note the adverse effect that a high tolerance for pain can have on a congregation. We must also recognize that, in order for a congregation to move from complacency to urgency, the amount of pain that a church is able to endure must eventually reach a breaking point. On some level, the church must see its present pain as unmanageable when compared to the relative discomfort that will be brought about by implementing change.²⁹

Once a congregation has reached its maximum limit with respect to the pain and discomfort it is willing to tolerate, it will do just about anything in order to change its present course. Churches that desire deep and lasting transformational change must be willing to lean into the fullness of their pain; otherwise, they will never reach the point of coming to grips with their current situation.³⁰ As such, a congregation's potential for revitalization is directly proportional to the membership's willingness to give themselves over to the pain of their present circumstances. That said, if they are unable or unwilling to do so, they will have little hope of making an "honest effort toward revitalization."³¹

²⁹ Stetzer and Dodson, 32.

³⁰ Ibid., 30.

³¹ Ibid.

Counting the Costs: The Problem of Diminishing Resources

All of the aforementioned problems bring us to a pivotal point. In an age when a majority of the churches in America are in a state of stagnation or decline, and are faced with the reality of limited and diminishing financial resources, it is critical that these churches understand how to best leverage the assets that are available to them. When considering the exorbitant costs associated with trying to revitalize a dying church, a congregation must have a clear vision for how to manage the resources that are available to address the problems they are facing. This is important because a wholesale adherence to church growth models, and church revitalization efforts that rely heavily upon the raising of capital funds in order to satisfy consumer demands and individual preferences, is ultimately cost prohibitive and runs counter to the missiological task of the local church. Unfortunately, this is the environment that the American church is living in today, as the thought of having to deal with diminishing resources is especially troubling for churches that find themselves in the midst of a prolonged season of stagnation or decline.

SECTION 2:
OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Introduction

There is no silver bullet when it comes to revitalizing the local church. In what appears to be a resurgence of ministry models reminiscent of the church growth movements of the 60s, 70s, and 80s, programs that offer “keys” or “steps” to turning your church around are everywhere. Unfortunately, many of these resources fail to address a critical part of the equation: change. By nature, revitalization and change go hand-in-hand. Leading congregational change is, without question, one of the most challenging aspects of the revitalization process and there is no shortage of books dedicated to the topic.³² Navigating change that is transformative in a world that is ever changing requires management and leadership skills that few pastors were taught in seminary. For those who are in the throes of attempting to turn around a dying church, dealing with people who are anxious, emotional, and resistant to change can prove to be an administrative and pastoral nightmare. As we consider the scope and nature of our current predicament, and the difficult choices that will have to be made, let us examine some of the ways in which the church has historically approached the revitalization task. Hopefully, an examination of these alternative solutions will help guide us as we seek to develop a more cost-sensitive model for revitalizing United Methodist churches.

³² Will Mancini, *Church Unique: How Missional Leaders Cast Vision, Capture Culture, and Create Movement* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 197.

The Attractional Growth Model: “Build It and They Will Come”

“Congregations are born from a spark of interaction between faith and context.”³³

Such was the case for many of our churches in the decades following the Second World War. From the end of the war until around 1970, our country entered a time of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity.³⁴ Aptly named “The Baby Boom,” this period of time was marked by a dramatic rise in our nation’s birth rates and an accelerated pace of changing cultural norms.³⁵ As the population grew and demands for affordable housing increased, new suburban communities began to spring up all over the country. It was within this cultural context that values related to faith, family, and the pursuit of the American dream flourished.³⁶ Not wanting to miss the opportunity to keep pace with this expansive growth, denominations began to employ a strategy in which they would purchase a piece of property, recruit a pastor who could attract a large group of people, launch a church, and if possible, construct a building.³⁷ Coincidentally, the suburban church that I am currently serving was started in the winter of 1980 using this same approach.

³³ Alice Mann, *Can Our Church Live? Redeveloping Congregations in Decline* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 13.

³⁴ *The Postwar United States, 1945-1968*, Teacher Resources from the Library of Congress, American Memory Timeline, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/postwar/>.

³⁵ Mann, 14.

³⁶ Jacob Armstrong, *The New Adapters: Shaping Ideas to Fit Your Congregation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), 27.

³⁷ Ibid.

The 1950s and early 60s were a time when people had a deep desire to connect with groups and organizations that they were familiar with. Naturally, churchgoers would seek out and affiliate with others who were like them. “In a time of great belonging, people knew which tribe they belonged to and went there to worship.”³⁸ Because there were plenty of people and resources, and denominational affiliation and brand loyalty were at an all-time high, the “attractional” model was an effective strategy for growing a church.³⁹ It was in this environment that most mainline denominations operated between 1950 and 1965.⁴⁰ Just as a new generation of parishioners was instinctively drawn to where they were going, those who were responsible for planting new churches intuitively knew which doors their constituents would flock to. As a result, church planting strategists within the various denominations adjusted accordingly.

Church planter Jacob Armstrong assesses these formative years following World War II quite accurately when he posits that it was out of the homogeneous environment of the 1950s and 1960s that our prevailing models for church growth were established.⁴¹ As time passed, the new generation of Baby Boomers came of age. They went to college, started their careers, launched their own businesses, got married, and began raising children of their own. Unlike their parents, Boomers were much less likely to attend a particular church just because it was of the same denomination as the one they grew up in. This “independent” spirit triggered a shift in attendance patterns as “denominational

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Mann, 14-15.

⁴¹ Armstrong, 27.

ties became less and less important and nondenominational churches became more and more prominent.”⁴²

In an attempt to respond to these changing dynamics, churches began looking for creative ways to welcome new people through their doors. This was done primarily to help mitigate the losses that so many churches were sustaining. These “losses” were the result of the displacement of those who had grown up in the faith but were not coming back to the church as adults. One key indicator of this shift was the move toward increased programming. Churches began dedicating a tremendous amount of their time and resources to hiring staff and developing dynamic programming for children, youth, and adults.⁴³ Next, churches began offering specialized age-level programs for infants, toddlers, kindergarteners, elementary students, preteens, middle schoolers, high schoolers, college students, young adults, senior adults, and any other life-stage they could possibly imagine.⁴⁴ In order to accommodate all of these new ministries, churches found themselves needing to raise even more money to make capital improvements. This resulted in a construction boom as churches began adding classrooms, libraries, education buildings, day schools, and family life centers to their campuses.

Not surprisingly, families sought out churches that offered the newest programs and met in the nicest buildings. For example, if a United Methodist family did not like the programming that their particular church was providing, they would simply drive down

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the street to the Baptist church to see what they had to offer.⁴⁵ Consequently, churches found themselves in a precarious position where they felt the need to do everything in their power to attract this new generation of church shoppers. But church shoppers, quickly became church hoppers, and local congregations found themselves with the impossible task of trying to hit an ever-moving target of constituents. This was a hallmark of the attractional model for church growth throughout most of the 1970s, '80s, and well into the '90s. The attractional growth model was built upon the premise that people would come to our church either because they were a member of our tribe, or we offered specific programs that fit the particular shape of their family.⁴⁶

This model worked well for many years, until one day it didn't. Because the attractional model was predicated on the idea that there would always be an endless supply of people circulating through the church in large numbers, it began to break down as people began attending church less and less frequently.⁴⁷ As attendance patterns changed dramatically, it was as if someone closed the floodgates and the steady flow of new people was cut off. To be sure, they did not stop coming altogether. They just stopped coming in such large numbers. Although this presented church leaders and congregations with a new set of challenges, the real problem was that the churches did not notice the decline because they were too busy building new buildings and starting new programs.⁴⁸ And while a significant number of churches around the country

⁴⁵ Ibid., 27-28.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

remained focused on expanding their programs and buildings to accommodate the torrential wave of new people that were supposed to come flooding through their doors, their respective denominations were reporting a continuous decline in overall numbers.⁴⁹ To make matters worse, this downtrend has been happening within virtually every Christian denomination for more than forty years.⁵⁰

In an attempt to stem the tide of decades of decline, the church's default response has been to offer those who are out looking for a church a slightly better version of what they have always been doing. But for the church as a whole, it has not been working. A seismic shift has occurred, and this shift has set in motion the beginning of the end of the church revitalization movement as we have known it. For the past twenty-five years, church revitalization efforts have been "built" on the idea that if we offer "attractive" worship services, "pretty" programs and "handsome" ministries, then new people will be enamored by what they see on the outside and subsequently drawn in to take a closer look at what we have for them on the inside. The downtown department stores of old (and even today) offer a glimpse into how this is supposed to work. In order to attract potential shoppers who are casually walking by, department stores like Macy's and Saks Fifth Avenue spend hundreds of thousands of dollars dressing up their windows, hoping that the eye-catching displays will attract attention and lure people into their stores. During the "high" holiday seasons, which just so happen to coincide with Christmas and Easter,

⁴⁹ Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry, "Special Report: The American Church in Crisis," *Outreach Magazine* (May/June 2006): 2, accessed January 6, 2018, <http://www.moneyradio.org/www/pdf/CHURCHCRISIS.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Association of Religion Data Archives, "United Methodist Church," accessed March 10, 2016, http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1469.asp. Association of Religion Data Archives, "Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," accessed March 10, 2016, http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1415.asp.

these stores design even more elaborate and expensive displays in hopes of cashing in on the increased number of window shoppers who will be passing by their storefronts.

For those of us who have been tasked with the responsibility of revitalizing local churches, the window shopping scene has proven to be extremely expensive and all too familiar. When financial resources are plentiful, churches can afford to take this less confrontational approach. But, as has been demonstrated in the discussion of the problems of individualism and consumerism, church revitalization efforts that are based upon satisfying the wants and needs of a consumer-driven culture are cost prohibitive and ultimately unsustainable.

The Attractional Growth Model 2.0: “Re-Remodel It and They Will Come Back”

In an attempt to reverse years of decline and spur growth, churches sometimes revert to a “build it and they will come” mentality that is reminiscent of the attractional models of the past. Thinking that a gymnasium, a coffee bar, or a new sanctuary will fix their systemic problems, desperate pastors and lay leaders are convinced that if they can renovate by building something nice, then people will travel from miles away to attend their church. In many ways, this is similar to a football team attempting a “Hail Mary” pass at the end of a game in hopes of coming back to win in the final seconds. Although the probability for success in these instances is minimal, a desperate congregation will often throw caution to the wind, hoping that others will come running to help them pay off the debt incurred by an ill-conceived building project they could not afford in the first place. Most often this results in the church being saddled with debt that siphons resources away from important missions and ministries.

Churches must have a strategic vision for how they plan to reach the unchurched in their community before they dive headlong into a building project. According to Bob Farr, United Methodist Bishop and church growth strategist, “The attraction model is dying and being replaced with a networking model. ‘Build it and they will come’ is over. We now need a missionary understanding of church and life”⁵¹ When Jesus told Peter that he would use him as the rock on which to build his church, Jesus was not referring to bricks and mortar. He was talking about people.⁵² As such, we should remember that the building is not the church. Rather, the people are the church. And yet, when it comes to “doing” church in America, people most often gather in buildings. This begs the question: How much do facilities really matter?

Although I have argued that leaders must guard against becoming myopically focused on bricks and mortar, there is ample research to suggest that congregations experiencing five or more years of stagnation or decline will find themselves hard-pressed to turn their churches around without addressing their buildings.⁵³ For instance, “when a church faces decline in numbers and revenues, the church grounds often fall into neglect.”⁵⁴ This begs the question: “What is the first thing a person sees when they step

⁵¹ Bob Farr, *Renovate or Die: 10 Ways to Focus Your Church on Mission* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2011), loc. 177.

⁵² Matthew 16:18 (NIV).

⁵³ This general assessment is based on the research conducted by Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson that was done in partnership with the Center for Missional Research (CMR) of the North American Mission Board (NAMB). Additional partners, including twelve different denominational boards and church agencies helped provide statistical data and a listing of churches that met the “turnaround” criteria for their study. These boards and agencies are listed on page xii of the preface to their book *Comeback Churches*.

⁵⁴ Bill Henard, *Can These Bones Live?: A Practical Guide to Church Revitalization* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2015), 74.

foot on your church campus?⁵⁵ I have sarcastically said many times in church board meetings that “nothing says we’re a thriving church quite like a row of dead shrubs!”

In a comprehensive study of 300 turn-around churches, more than 70 percent of the pastors indicated that addressing their building needs was a critical factor in enabling their congregations to make a comeback.⁵⁶ In order to gain a better understanding of what this means for local churches hoping to make a turnaround, consider the following research. What specific types of facilities upgrades had the greatest impact on the revitalization and growth that occurred within these particular churches? Of the 229 churches that addressed their building needs, 107 churches elected to remodel their buildings, 70 churches constructed new buildings, 31 churches relocated, and 21 churches expanded or added on to their existing facilities.⁵⁷ It is interesting to note that when Stetzer and Dodson looked at the top reasons given for remodeling or building new space, support for worship, youth, and children were the most common.⁵⁸ This is consistent with the feedback I received during my field research interviews with clergy from area United Methodist churches.⁵⁹ In follow-up interviews with the churches that addressed their building needs as part of their revitalization efforts, Stetzer and Dodson

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Stetzer and Dodson, 162.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 163-164.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 164.

⁵⁹ In an attempt to better understand the costs associated with church revitalization efforts that necessitate the raising of capital funds, I conducted a field research study of six United Methodist Churches in the North Texas area that have recently conducted capital campaigns. A summary of the on-site visits, interviews, and the data that was collected is included as an appendix to the dissertation. (See Appendix B).

also found that there was a noticeable “cause-and-effect cycle” that many of these “comeback churches” shared:

The vision to reach new people or a segment in the community led to new or remodeled facilities, which helped cause the growth. The resultant effect on the people who began supporting the vision financially had a tremendous impact on the church being excited about the new ministry opportunities, which led to more people, and the church becoming a comeback church.⁶⁰

Strategic Re-Visioning

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”⁶¹ Having been involved in the revitalization efforts of two different churches over the past fifteen years, I can personally attest to how important this passage of scripture is. I can also attest to how anxious pastors and congregation can get when it comes to casting a new vision. Guiding a congregation through a season of strategic re-visioning inevitably includes conflict. Change produces conflict because it poses a real threat to those in the church who are deeply committed to the existing people, programs, and ministries.⁶² “Change invokes simultaneous personal feelings of fear and hope, anxiety and relief, pressure and stimulation, threats to self-esteem, and challenges to master new situations.”⁶³ In the midst of ongoing change, it is critical that pastors and leaders who seek to promote

⁶⁰ Stetzer and Dodson, 165.

⁶¹ Proverbs 29:18a (KJV).

⁶² Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 7-8.

⁶³ Noel M. Tichy and Mary Anne Devanna, *The Transformational Leader* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1986), 31.

organizational health and stability maintain a non-anxious presence.⁶⁴ It is also important for leaders to remember that it is their responsibility to help church members recognize and navigate the conflicting emotions that are the result of the change process. Pastors and lay leaders are uniquely positioned to exhort others to be engaged in the revitalization process in a way that encourages everyone to see beyond themselves and their present circumstances.

Managing fear and anxiety in the midst of corporate change is one of the greatest challenges that pastors and congregational leaders will face as they engage in the process of revitalizing the church. According to congregational systems consultant Peter L. Steinke, there are thirteen primary conditions that trigger conflict and produce higher levels of anxiety in congregations.⁶⁵ Although these conditions are common to most churches, they are specific to congregations that are actively engaged in efforts to bring about revitalization and spur new growth. These include: declining trends in membership, worship attendance and giving; battles over contemporary versus traditional worship; ineffective programming; staff conflict; demographic changes in the neighborhoods surrounding the church; and capital improvement projects that entail modifying or tearing down existing spaces.⁶⁶ Not only do these conditions raise anxiety levels of the members of the church, they also raise the anxiety levels of lay leaders and pastors. A recent study related to clergy burnout listed many of these same conditions as some of the primary

⁶⁴ Steinke, 34.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 15-17.

reasons pastors leave local church ministry.⁶⁷ As conflict continues and corporate anxiety rises, it becomes more and more difficult for leaders to process their emotions and differentiate between competing visions and values.⁶⁸ Even so, it is critical that church leaders learn to remain calm in the midst of the storm.

This “us versus them” mentality has been a part of every church I have served, and most recently reared its ugly head only a few months into my current appointment. After having been the beloved “new” pastor for about a year, the honeymoon came to an abrupt ending. Lay leaders and staff who were eager to see significant change were frustrated that the church had not been completely overhauled. At the same time, other church members were complaining that things were changing too fast. Coincidentally, most of the complaints started coming in right after the trustees replaced the carpet in the front hallway. After having endured several years of steady decline, some of the key leaders and donors wanted to know when a new vision for the church would be implemented. Although the leadership had a clear idea of what makes for a healthy church, there was no shared sense of calling for Custer Road UMC. Even after a year, the “new” pastor still could not walk from the office to the sanctuary without occasionally getting lost. As long as hallway navigation was an issue for me, how could I as the new pastor, possibly know God’s vision for the church?

Out of desperation, the professionals were engaged. The church hired Rev. Stan Copeland and Rev. Donna Whitehead of Colinasway Consulting to help establish a new vision. As part of this process, the church established what change management

⁶⁷ Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 76-79.

⁶⁸ Steinke, 19.

strategists refer to as a vision community.⁶⁹ This vision community was called the Power of One Vision Team (POVT). The POVT was a diverse group of forty-five key lay leaders and staff who engaged in an eighteen-month discernment process. This process included prayer, mission field research, ministry audits, area church visits, congregational feedback, re-visioning exercises, and strategic planning. One of the first challenges that the team faced during the re-visioning process was that some of the members of the POVT were eager to see things change quickly and wondered why there was a need to spend so much time and effort preparing and strategizing. This is quite normal and to be expected.⁷⁰ Because of the complexities of the changes that were being proposed, it was important to spend more time discerning and developing the plan, as virtually every ministry area of the church would be impacted.⁷¹

By the time the discernment process was complete, and the comprehensive re-visioning plans had been formulated, nearly ten percent of the church's worshipping congregation was involved in some aspect of the work. Although this number is slightly more than what is recommended, it allowed for greater representation and diversity.⁷² Once this initial work was completed, the leadership team began unveiling the new vision to various focus groups in the church. The vision included five primary pillars of emphasis for church revitalization: worship, evangelism, discipleship, missions, and

⁶⁹ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 41.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 43.

family building.⁷³ Although additional core values such as love, prayer, compassion, generosity, care, and fellowship were highlighted as support for the five pillars, some in the church expressed concern that there was no mention of older adults, special needs families, weddings, funerals, and an assortment of care ministries. For example, an “inward-focused” question that came up during one of the focus group gatherings was: Is the church going to stop visiting people in the hospital?

The peripheral concerns that were raised made it apparent that many of the long-time church members were experiencing what some leadership experts refer to as a chronic state of anxiety.⁷⁴ The prospect of change had caused latent fears and insecurities, which had been present in the church for a long time, to rise to the surface. Subsequently, this produced a wave of irrational fears which led to a distorted view of what it means to be the church.⁷⁵ Some people believed that the primary role of the church was to provide worship opportunities, programming, and care for its members. Because these members were so focused on their own personal needs, they became obsessed with critiquing the finer details of the strategy, instead of embracing the bigger vision. For these people, it seemed that a special emphasis on worship, evangelism, discipleship, missions, and strengthening families would necessarily prohibit the church from continuing many of the other worthwhile ministries it was already doing. Caring for others and receiving care

⁷³ Custer Road United Methodist Church, “The Five Pillars of Custer Road UMC,” presentation given by the Power of One Vision Team at the Annual Called Church Conference, Plano, Texas, October 11, 2015, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://aboveandbeyond.crumc.org/we-are-custer-road/>.

⁷⁴ Jim Herrington, R. Robert Creech, and Trisha Taylor, *The Leaders Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 35.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

could have been added as sixth and seventh pillars, but where would it have ended? It is quite normal for people to want to protect what is important to them.⁷⁶

Although there are many instances in which members are outright resistant to change, sometimes the resistance is more subtle. For example, a person resistant to change might suggest that the church would be better off taking a more all-inclusive approach to revitalization by only adding new programs, and refraining from taking away anything that might upset those who do not want the church to change. The premise of this approach is that if the church just adds to what it is already doing without subtracting, then no one will have to change anything. In hopes of being perceived as fair and equitable, some churches fall into the trap of believing that the most expedient way to implement change is to keep everyone happy. Gil Rendle has borrowed a well-known phrase to describe this common form of resistance and the mindset of those who want to guard their turf.

If there are priorities to be shifted, practices to be changed, a shift in the way resources are aligned for mission field outcomes, the normal response is that the church should find a way to do so without changing “my” own position or security in the organization, “my” funding or compensation, or the recognition of the importance of “my” own work and interests. If changes are to be made – Not In My Back Yard.⁷⁷

Although the POVT managed to articulate a new vision for the church, the leadership had not done an adequate job of preparing the congregation for the emotional journey that the church was about to undertake. The groundwork for change often necessitates that “the pastor and other leaders in the congregation ... demonstrate why

⁷⁶ Gil Rendle, *Back to Zero: The Search to Rediscover the Methodist Movement* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), loc. 907.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, loc. 906.

change is needed and build the support that leads to a state of change – readiness.”⁷⁸ This process begins with the leaders of the church making personal preparations that include the practice of spiritual disciplines, understanding God’s mission for the church, self-assessment, accountability, identifying potential problems, and timing.⁷⁹ Once these foundational elements are in place, the leadership team can begin to cast the vision and create a healthy sense of urgency for why a change in direction is needed. Urgency is critical for a church that is in desperate need of revitalization because it challenges the status quo and motivates people to change.⁸⁰

For years, our church had avoided dealing with the root problems associated with its decline. Although worship attendance had fallen by almost fifty percent in less than ten years, the size and quality of the music programs and Sunday school classes had not noticeably diminished. This kept long-time church members and staff from being convinced that significant change was necessary. Moreover, because the church had become less effective at reaching large numbers of new young families during this same ten-year period, the congregation had aged substantially. The church is now primarily made up of older, retired, empty nesters. When creating and maintaining a healthy sense of urgency, it is important to remember that “throughout the change process, it will be necessary to reassess current reality and to provide new information to the congregation. Regularly highlighting the gap between current reality and God’s ideal for his church

⁷⁸ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 29.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 35.

keeps the change process moving at the optimum speed.”⁸¹ Had the leaders of the church highlighted this gap at various points along the way, then perhaps some of the same changes that are just now being made today could have been implemented years ago.

As the POVT began casting the new vision and rolling out plans related to the five pillars, it became clear to everyone that the church was making a conscious decision to place a special emphasis on reaching young families with children. This caused various other groups within the church to worry about their own survival. Longtime church members began to get anxious. “At a time when the future is unsure and resources seem scarce, constituencies awaken their self-interests and compete for security.”⁸² Even some, who had previously benefitted from raising their own children in the church, were concerned that if more money was spent on programs and ministries designed to reach new families outside of the church then somehow this would prohibit the church from caring for the families who were already a part of the congregation.

The primal survival instinct often causes long-time, dedicated church members to feel as if their very lives are at stake. Although the emotional reaction is primarily driven by fear, their experience is similar to someone who is going through the grieving process. Anger, fear, and sadness; the pain associated with loss is real. And yet, from a theological point of view, loss is a necessary part of the revitalization process. It was our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who said: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but

⁸¹ Ibid., 41.

⁸² Rendle, loc. 884.

whoever loses their life for me will find it.”⁸³ These words should continue to guide our lives and our churches.

What is true for the spiritual lives of the individual members of a congregation is also true for the church as a whole. A church that is willing to sacrifice their old ways and “lose” their life in an effort to reach those who do not know Christ, will “find” ways to have a greater impact in their communities for the Kingdom of God. At the same time, we should not be too quick to discount the possibilities of the other side of the emotional equation. Long-time church members have a tendency to romanticize how things were in the past. Details about how good things were when the church was “thriving” years earlier are often grossly exaggerated. Even when a church’s demise is imminent, those resistant to change can get extremely nostalgic.⁸⁴ This emotional harkening back creates a false narrative: If the church can continue doing what it’s always done, then everything will be fine. This elevates methods over mission and brings the church to a virtual standstill because people who are emotionally attached to their methods are more likely to resist change.⁸⁵

According to Bill Easum and Bill Tenny-Brittian, most established churches have gotten stuck in a perpetual paradigm where their models for ministry have become more important than the mission.⁸⁶ In order to break this cycle, leaders must remember that “creating an emotionally healthy culture and team is one of the most powerful

⁸³ Matthew 16:25 (NIV).

⁸⁴ Armstrong, 56.

⁸⁵ Mancini, 47.

⁸⁶ Bill Easum and Bill Tenny-Brittian, *Effective Staffing for Vital Churches: The Essential Guide to Finding and Keeping the Right People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 76.

opportunities we have to impact people’s lives and our long-term mission.”⁸⁷ Just as emotions can cause people to resist change, emotional connections can also inspire a congregation to support a new vision for a revitalized church and create a movement. When people “are emotionally connected to the core value...they will not only embrace change but might insist on it.”⁸⁸

One of the other challenges leaders face when trying to implement change associated with launching new programs and ministries is the pushback from staff and laypersons who feel that their existing ministries will be compromised if the new ministry initiatives become more popular. These stakeholders can be best described as the loyal opposition. They love their church and want it to thrive, but are opposed to the changes that are being implemented because of how they will be personally affected by them. In their role, as self-appointed guardians, they fight to protect and preserve that which they believe is a legacy of great worth.⁸⁹

Although it is important to address the legitimate concerns of the congregation, leaders must be careful not to give those who are resistant to change too much power. This is especially important when dealing with the loyal opposition. Two of the traps that churches frequently fall into are related to this dynamic. Leaders who are impatient or overconfident will often ignore the valid concerns of their constituents at their own peril. On the other hand, leaders who are insecure about moving forward will allow petty criticisms to derail the process. When addressing those who are resistant to change, it is

⁸⁷ Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 215.

⁸⁸ Mancini, 47.

⁸⁹ Rendle, loc. 1579.

important to determine how significant the opposition is. For example, if the congregation is divided along the lines of sixty percent to forty percent, then a broad base of support for the new initiative will be difficult to achieve. Contrary to this, if ninety percent of the congregation is supportive of the change that is being proposed then this would be considered an overwhelming show of support. Whichever the case, it is important to remember that there is no way to keep everyone happy. There will always be people who will oppose what the church is trying to do. This is especially true during seasons of change. When dealing with the remnant of chronic complainers it is best to treat them with “benign neglect.”⁹⁰

The Simple Church Model

In a quest to feed the insatiable appetites of their members, churches have a tendency to keep adding and adding to what they do. In time, congregations that keep trying to do everything become more complex and less efficient and effective. “In the absence of Deliberate Simplicity, churches can easily become complicated, either in message (theologically), or in method (organizationally).”⁹¹ Using a tool called the Design Process Survey, a team of local pastors, denominational leaders, seminary professors, and church consultants were able to study hundreds of churches from thirty seven states which varied in terms of size, location, style, age, ethnicity, and

⁹⁰ Larry Osborne. *Sticky Teams* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 79.

⁹¹ David, Browning, *Deliberate Simplicity: How the Church Does More by Doing Less* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), loc. 340.

denominational affiliation.⁹² Over the course of their research the team discovered four key elements that were common to almost all of the vibrant churches they encountered. The four basic elements were: “clarity, movement, alignment, and focus.”⁹³ When compared to the churches that were mired in seasons of stagnation and decline, researchers were able to establish a clear connection between vibrancy and simplicity that highlights the problem of complexity. To put it in the simplest of terms, Rainer and Geiger’s team found that “churches that are vibrant and growing are simple.”⁹⁴

In 1st Corinthians 9:22b, the Apostle Paul wrote to one of the early churches saying: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” This is a wonderful approach to consider when it comes to having an inclusive love for the people who live and work in your mission field. Unfortunately, this “anything and everything” approach does not work very well when resources are extremely limited. Establishing a clear identity, with a more refined focus is especially important for small membership churches, because the smaller the church, the more discerning and specialized it has to be. This is critical, because when a congregation is just beginning the process of revitalization, it typically does not have the resources to be exceedingly proficient in a large number of areas.

When I was growing up my father would often use the expression “jack of all trades ... master of none” when describing himself. He would typically say this when he was tinkering in the garage or struggling to complete a project around the house. What he

⁹² Rainer and Geiger, 64-65.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 67.

meant by this was that even though he was pretty good at a lot of things, he was not exceptional at anything. As an adult, I have since come to realize that my dad was, and still is, quite exemplary at a great number of things. Perhaps the modest self-assessment of his varied skillset was more reflective of my father's humility than it was his proficiency.

The idea of aspiring to be just good enough to try your hand at everything may have been great advice in generations past. But, in today's hyper-specialized environment, there seems to be less and less room for the generalist. We live in a time in which the inability to differentiate oneself from the pack is a disadvantage. This new reality has serious implications for the church. In the past, it was acceptable for a church or a pastor to be average, and in some cases mediocre. But in today's ultra-competitive environment, it is important that churches and pastors "find their niche by being able to "do one or two things really, really well."⁹⁵ Frequently people will describe a particular church by what it is known for in the community. For example, one church might be known as the church that has great worship, while another church is known for its excellent children's and youth ministries. At the same time, a third church might be recognized for its outreach in the community. For churches in the beginning stages of transition and revitalization, this begs the question: What is your church known for? What does your church do best? Is your church seen as exceptional or unique when compared to the other churches in your area?

When I arrived to my first appointment as a lead pastor, the Argyle United Methodist Church was a church of about 250 members and rarely had more than 100 in

⁹⁵ Farr, loc. 1759.

worship. It was a church that was struggling to find its identity. Each time the church would take a few steps forward something would happen and attendance would fall back. As the leaders of our church sat down to determine where God might be leading us we began to ask ourselves some of these questions. When we looked at our missions and ministries we realized that we were trying to be too many things to too many people. Subsequently, even though we were doing a lot of things, we were doing very few of them well. Although it wasn't easy, we made the decision to sunset several of the missions and ministries that were not bearing fruit. We also made changes to our worship services by moving to a more traditional style because even though we had the desire to offer multiple styles of worship, we were not able to do so with excellence.

United Methodist Revitalization Initiatives

Several years ago the United Methodist Church launched a program called the Healthy Church Initiative. One of the workshops offered through the initiative was geared toward helping churches become more effective at reaching new families with young children and youth. Each of the churches had a genuine desire to reach new people, and on the surface, seemed willing to do whatever it would take to accomplish this task. During the workshop, a woman was lamenting that her church's biggest challenge was that it did not have enough space for children. The church included a sanctuary that could seat approximately one hundred, one small office, a kitchen, a multi-purpose fellowship area that could accommodate approximately one hundred twenty, a nursery, and four small classrooms. During the discussion, it was suggested that the church ought to spend a little money remodeling the nursery and repurpose the other small classrooms so that it would be more accommodating for families with young

children. She said that this could not be done because the four classrooms belonged to four different adult Sunday school classes and were already being used during the Sunday school hour. As the discussion continued, the question was asked: is it possible that one or more of the adult Sunday school classes could give up their space on Sunday morning and meet at another time? The primary reason for considering this is that generally speaking, when it comes to when and where people can meet, adults without children have more flexibility than families with young children. Of course, older adults with mobility issues are an obvious exception to this rule. Back to the previous question: Is it possible to relocate an existing group in order to accommodate a new one? Absolutely, but the reality is, far too many churches are unwilling to make the necessary changes and sacrifices in order to reach new people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A year later the woman was asked how things had gone when she went back to her church with some of the suggestions that had come out of the Healthy Church Initiative. Unfortunately, she said that nothing had changed. None of the adult classes were willing to give up their space, and although the church was blessed to have had several young families visit over the course of the year, none of the families ever came back. They didn't come back because it was obvious that families with young children were not a priority for the church. Deep change requires the sacrifice demonstrated by people voting against their own self-interest.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, the members of this particular church were unable to elevate the preciousness of others above their own self-interests. Somewhere along the way it would have been most helpful for the members of the church to heed Paul's advice to the Philippian church: "Do nothing out of selfish

⁹⁶ Rendle, loc. 897.

ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.”⁹⁷

As the church wrestles with some of these difficult issues related to church revitalization, personal transformation, and leading congregational change, they must make difficult decisions. If the church is going to reclaim its vitality, and become who God desires it to be, then congregations must embrace the core value that reaching new people is more important than resurrecting old programs.⁹⁸ When church leaders reach a point where they have to start begging people to volunteer and participate in programs that are floundering, then they need to seriously consider phasing these programs out. If few people in the church feel called by God to lead or support a particular program, then it is time for that program to die.⁹⁹ Allowing dying programs to die is a critical part of the renewal process. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done. This is especially true when attempting to discontinue long-standing programs that have become institutionalized.¹⁰⁰ This institutionalization occurs when a particular method becomes more important than the mission it was originally intended to support.¹⁰¹ Gil Rendle sums up the fundamental consequence of this problem when he says: “Movements need to find ways to restart their focus and passion, or they will die a quiet death.”¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Philippians 2:3-4 (NIV).

⁹⁸ Mancini, 35.

⁹⁹ Easum and Tenny-Brittian, 75.

¹⁰⁰ Rendle, loc. 1438.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., loc. 1442.

If we have any hope of reaching a new generation of people with the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we will have to make some drastic changes. Dottie Escobedo-Frank assesses our current situation correctly: “Decades of honest labor and reams of pages written about this process, however, have shown us that revitalization is, on the whole, not working.”¹⁰³ A close examination reveals that despite our best intentions, church revitalization efforts are producing only a few segregated pockets of renewal and have resulted in the revival of a relatively small number of local churches and ministries across the country. The resulting changes, encouraging as they may be, have been so incrementally slow that they have had very little impact on the church as a whole.¹⁰⁴ In most cases, our church revitalization efforts have only prolonged the pain and agony of so many of our dying churches.¹⁰⁵ If we want to alter our course, “an adaptive change is required. And it goes deeper than the local church.”¹⁰⁶ This change will have to start at the top.

“One Size Fits All”

Futurist, theologian, and pastor Leonard Sweet has observed that the transition from “command-and-control” hierarchies to “connect-and-collaborate” networks is going full steam in almost every sector of society, with the notable exception of the church.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Dottie Escobedo-Frank, *Restart Your Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 6, Kindle.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Armstrong, 28.

¹⁰⁷ Leonard Sweet, *The Greatest Story Never Told* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 79.

The future of any denomination is dependent upon its ability to make these necessary transitions as “people today simply aren’t willing to support an institution whose sole reason for existence is the maintenance of the institution.”¹⁰⁸ For example, the United Methodist Church is known for forming committees and institutionalizing processes and procedures in an attempted cure. In hopes of revitalizing our denomination, and reversing five decades of year over year decline, the United Methodist Church has created a myriad of regulatory tools and conference-wide initiatives designed to diagnose, assess, organize, and fix the problems. These include programs such as the Healthy Church Initiative, the Vibrant Church Initiative, the Clergy Fruitfulness Initiative, the Church Revitalization Task Force, Centers for Congregational Excellence, Centers for Church Transformation, Centers for Clergy Excellence, and Vital Signs (a weekly statistical reporting tool that prompts local churches to record worship attendance, professions of faith, participation in small groups, hands on mission, and giving on a weekly basis).¹⁰⁹

As pertinent as these metrics are with respect to measuring church health and vitality, it is an emotional and spiritual drain for those who send and those who receive this “corporate accountability” email every Sunday night. What might it look like for our denominational leaders to “relinquish hierarchical control to the grass roots?”¹¹⁰ How might this foster a “climate of experimentation” that encourages creativity, excitement,

¹⁰⁸ Andrew C. Thompson, ed., “Discipleship: Christian Life and the Means of Grace,” *Generation Rising: Future with Hope for The United Methodist Church*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 6.

¹⁰⁹ The Texas, North Texas, and Central Texas Annual Conferences of the United Methodist Church, <http://www.ctcumc.org/vitalsigns>, <http://www.txcumc.org/centerforcongregationalexcellence>, <http://www.northtexasumc.org/north-texas-conference-news/clergy-fruitfulness-initiative-develops-conference-clergy>.

¹¹⁰ Sweet, *The Greatest Story*, 80.

and the kind of innovation that will lead to a much better set of outcomes?¹¹¹ Of course those who have the most to lose are often the ones who desperately cling to what little power and influence they have left. Those in power will have to resist the urge to manipulate and/or control the outcomes in order to mitigate the inherent risks associated with their handing over this power and control to others. Yes, there is always a risk that things will not go as planned and it might be easy to place most of the blame upon the shoulders of our denominational leaders, but command and control from the top is only part of the problem.

Local churches can no longer afford to embrace a passive methodology for church growth that is predicated upon “an earlier cultural moment when a sizable constituency of initiates could be assumed.”¹¹² Those days are over. As long as we keep trying to pretend that they are not, we will continue to find ourselves less and less relevant to the people we are trying to reach. It is important to remember that when Jesus commissioned the disciples he said: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”¹¹³ When Jesus sent his disciples into the world to go and make disciples of all nations, he knew that they would encounter hardships along the way. And yet, Jesus sent them anyway; with a promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit, just as the Father had sent him. Some of the new things we try are going to fail, because they will. And when they do, we can take solace in the fact that “Jesus gave us a sacrament of failure that frees us to fail.”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 81.

¹¹³ John 20:21b (NRSV).

¹¹⁴ Sweet, *The Greatest Story*, 80.

SECTION 3:

THESIS

Introduction

As I have argued in the two previous sections, there are a multitude of “cost-related” reasons why so many United Methodist churches in America continue to experience stagnation and decline despite their best efforts to revitalize. Overwhelmed by the costs that are associated with the revitalization process, many of our dying churches have passed the point of no return and will inevitably have to close their doors. Even still, there is hope for the thousands of churches that want to continue to grow and are able and willing to pay the price in order to do so. To be sure, the process of revitalizing a dying church is not an easy task. At a time when so many of our churches are seen as culturally irrelevant, pastors and lay leaders must be able to help congregations assess their present situations and adapt to their immediate circumstances and surroundings. We must be willing to think outside of the box. We must find creative and cost effective ways to spur vitality and growth. And, we must be willing to try new things even if we fear that our efforts may fail or cause us to look foolish. As leaders in the church, we have the responsibility to help resource congregations that have an intense desire to reach their communities but are struggling to absorb the physical, emotional, and spiritual costs that so often undermine the revitalization process.

When considering the variable costs that are associated with church growth and revitalization, it is critical that local churches find creative solutions to maximize their resources so that they can engage their community in ways that are not only effective, but

also sustainable. The high rise in construction costs, principle and interest payments, building maintenance and utilities, means that space flexibility is an important aspect to consider when building or remodeling.¹¹⁵ “It is both more effective and less expensive to have spaces designed in such a way that they can be used by several groupings for twenty or more hours per week.”¹¹⁶ It is cost prohibitive to build multiple single-use facilities that are only used one or two days a week. Besides the obvious reasons related to the stewardship of resources, another advantage of building flexible spaces that are utilized by multiple groups is collaboration. When ministry teams are required to work together out of necessity, there is a greater likelihood that the various groups that are using the spaces on a weekly basis will develop a shared sense of pride and ownership of all that the church is doing.¹¹⁷ This is an important factor to consider when working to revitalize large membership churches, where program ministry leaders and staff are often compartmentalized, work independently from one another, and compete for attention and resources. Strategic efforts geared toward creating alignment and collaboration is of vital importance, especially when ministry groups are being impacted by the changes that are brought about by the process of revitalization. This helps keep everyone moving in the same direction and reminds the different groups that they are ultimately on the same team. It also helps each person in the church to see the intrinsic value that others have as integral members of the body of Christ.

¹¹⁵ Stetzer and Dodson, 165.

¹¹⁶ Kennon Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership: Building on the Twelve Keys*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 213.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

Constrained by the overarching problem of diminishing resources, the majority of dying churches are limited in their ability to raise additional funds for the purpose of renovating their buildings, hiring additional staff, and launching new ministries. Therefore, in an attempt to offer some feasible alternatives to overcoming stagnation and decline in the local church, this document will focus attention on revitalization efforts that are not dependent upon raising millions of dollars of capital in order to ensure their success. In so doing, I will demonstrate that these alternative approaches will not only help the church overcome the problem of diminishing resources, but also offer a meaningful way forward that is cost effective, culturally relevant, and adaptable.

There are three primary areas in which we must re-examine our approach to church growth and revitalization. These three areas are: corporate worship, disciple making, and missional outreach. I have chosen these three particular areas because they address the root causes that are associated with the aforementioned problems of individualism, consumerism, competing visions and values, complacency, and diminishing resources.¹¹⁸ Just as a renewed emphasis on worship, discipleship, and mission can propel a congregation to new heights, “failure to perform them in an exemplary way results in congregational deterioration and decline.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ As I have sought to formulate my own thoughts concerning the areas of worship, discipleship, and mission, I am thankful to United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase for articulating their fundamental importance as it relates to congregational fruitfulness.

¹¹⁹ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 7-8.

Worship as a Launching Pad for Revitalization

When faced with the seemingly insurmountable task of revitalizing a dying church, pastors and lay leaders often find it difficult to know where to begin. This is understandable considering the multitude of factors that contribute to years of stagnation and decline. Corporate worship is one of the best places to start, because “churches often rediscover their passion for God and His mission by examining their worship.”¹²⁰ Generally speaking, congregations get stuck when it comes to the way they worship. When this happens, worship experiences that were once vibrant, relevant, and meaningful, lose their ability to connect with the community.¹²¹ One of the quickest and most effective ways to stir the hearts of the people in our communities and bring vitality back to the local church is to re-examine some of our approaches to corporate worship and think honestly about “what we think worshippers want.”¹²² This is not as simple as song choices and worship styles. Regardless of style or venue, worship must match the affinity of those the church hopes to reach.

Re-Assessing the Elements of Worship

How a community of faith gathers for worship matters. For many people, worship serves as the front door of the church because it is quite often their initial experience of

¹²⁰ Stetzer and Dodson, 79.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 19.

the church.¹²³ In order to appreciate how critical this is, we should also note that for a majority of these people, corporate worship will be the only church experience they ever have.¹²⁴ I believe that God's intention is that we throw open the doors of our churches so that all feel welcomed and included. In doing so, there are all sorts of people who will show up: real people with real issues and real problems who are looking for real answers and real possibilities. In church, these same people will find a God who really loves them.

In his book *Begging For Real Church*, United Methodist Pastor Dr. Joseph Daniels argues that one of the primary reasons that our churches are continuing to experience significant decline is because the vast majority of people who attend worship are not having tangible encounters with God.¹²⁵ Something is missing. When people are not engaged, they have a tendency to sit back. They become passive observers. People who remain in a passive state tend to also become complacent and more set in their ways. Passivity is more indicative of a person who has become a consumer of religion rather than a practitioner of the Christian faith. Without any real interaction, there is no participation. Instead of having a true encounter with God that leaves us with changed hearts and calls us to changed lives, we oftentimes leave worship feeling empty because we have left nothing of ourselves at the altar.¹²⁶ Passive worship is the worst kind of

¹²³ Stetzer and Dodson, 78-79.

¹²⁴ Armstrong, 39.

¹²⁵ Joseph W. Daniels Jr. and Christine Shinn Latona, *Begging for Real Church* (Washington, DC: Fun & Done Press, 2009), 13, Kindle.

¹²⁶ Morgenthaler, 52.

consumerism. By its very nature, an act of worship should serve as an offering of our lives to God in celebration of the grace we have received in Jesus Christ.¹²⁷

Making Worship More Participatory

To address the problems of individualism, consumerism, and complacency, it is important to remember that all people have an inherent need to connect with God and one another.¹²⁸ Because God is the one who created us with this deep longing for connection with God and one another, there is an innate sense that the church ought to be “a space and place where genuine relationships with God and one another can be created so that our dreams, hopes, visions and destinies can become realities.”¹²⁹ Unfortunately, because the interaction between the people who walk through our doors each week bears no resemblance to real community, the vast majority of our church members and guests are not experiencing the kinds of authentic Christian relationships that will “liberate them from their begging conditions.”¹³⁰ This assertion highlights the need for our churches to create worship experiences that are both incarnational and relational. This does not mean that the church has to change everything about its current worship, but it does mean that pastors, worship leaders, and laity will need to devote significantly more time, energy,

¹²⁷ See Romans 12:1.

¹²⁸ Morgenthaler, 117.

¹²⁹ Daniels and Latona, 88.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

and resources to planning and leading worship that is vibrant, passionate, evangelical, and relevant.¹³¹

As long as we continue to spend an inordinate amount of time and resources trying to save sacred traditions and programs rather than engaging our communities at their greatest places of need, we will never fully become the church that God is calling us to be.¹³² Moreover, if we hope to reverse our present course, we must find new and creative ways to worship as we offer prayers, preaching, and music that not only uplifts and inspires, but also enables worship participants to receive and transmit the power and presence of God in a mighty way. One of our primary callings as pastors and worship leaders is to curate worship experiences that connect people to the love of the living God and to the love of a community of believers that is actively engaged in the world.¹³³ In order to accomplish this task, we must be intentional about including various interactive elements in all of our worship services.¹³⁴

A church that wishes to transform itself and its community must be intentional about creating worship opportunities that allow people to participate in the life of the church without fear of being condemned.¹³⁵ Fear of being judged and not wanting to be connected to hypocrites, are two of the most common reasons people give for not attending a church. When church is seen as a place where only perfect people are allowed, it loses its ability to be a place where all are welcome. “Real church happens

¹³¹ Adam Hamilton, *Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived it* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), 93.

¹³² Daniels and Latona, 15.

¹³³ Morgenthaler, 123.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Daniels and Latona, 89.

when hypocrisy gives way to wholeness, truth takes over falsehood; when ‘just as I am without one plea...’ is not just a hymn sung on Sunday, but is a daily practice in the life of the church.”¹³⁶ Vital congregations organize themselves in order to empower and equip their members to bear witness to the love of Jesus Christ through their prayers, presence, gifts, service, and Christian witness not just on Sunday, but every day of the week.¹³⁷ This is participation at its best, and it is truly transformational.

Re-Affirming Christ’s Open Invitation to the Table

The communion table is perhaps one of the best benchmarks for how welcoming a church is. In the United Methodist Church we have an “open” communion table. This means that anyone who desires to come to the table is welcome. There are no restrictions or requirements. You do not have to be a member of the church to receive the elements, because the table doesn’t belong to the church. The table belongs to God. And God’s table is radically inclusive. It is not necessary to become something or someone else before you can come forward. At Christ’s table, we are encouraged to come just as we are. And when we all do this, the church becomes “a community of the broken gathered around a meal, finding hope in the grace of Jesus.”¹³⁸ In this way, our congregations and our communion tables are reflections of our communities and serve as a foretaste of Christ’s heavenly banquet.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 88.

¹³⁷ J. Scott Jones, *The Wesleyan Way: A Faith That Matters* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 92-93.

¹³⁸ Tim Chester, *A Meal With Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community and Mission Around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 54.

Revitalizing the Church through On-Going Small-Groups

In addition to offering corporate worship experiences that are inspirational, interactive, and invitational, local congregations are called to transform their communities and the world by making disciples of Jesus Christ. Another effective way to help revitalize the church is to refine the process for making disciples.¹³⁹ Discipleship is not something that just happens. Disciple making is an intentional activity of the church, and is essential for the ongoing spiritual formation of both the individual and the community of faith. In order to accomplish this, every church must have a clear process for helping people become fully devoted followers of Jesus. One of the most effective ways in which pastors and lay leaders can foster a sense of community and vitality in the local church is to develop an approach to making disciples that equips members to do the work of the church, and also fosters a sense of relational interdependence. Although mentoring and traditional classroom settings serve as effective means of teaching basic Christian principles and theology, the second part of this missiological task is best accomplished within the context of on-going small groups.

Overcoming Individualism by Fostering Relational Interdependence

As identified in the first section, one of the biggest impediments to incarnational community is individualism.¹⁴⁰ The problem stems from a uniquely Western theological construct that focuses almost exclusively upon the personal nature of one's relationship

¹³⁹ Rainer and Geiger, 61.

¹⁴⁰ Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 150.

with God as opposed to an Eastern understanding that places much more of an emphasis on the communal nature of our relationships with God and one another.¹⁴¹ “Social scientists have a label for the pervasive cultural orientation of modern American society that makes it so difficult for us to stay connected and grow together in community with one another. They call it *radical individualism*.”¹⁴²

In the secular world we herald those who demonstrate a spirit of independence, but in the church we would call this type of approach “one-dimensional” faith.¹⁴³ We have been conditioned “to believe that personal happiness and fulfillment should take precedence over the connections we have with others in both our families and our churches.”¹⁴⁴ When the preference of the individual supersedes that which is in the best interest of the group, the community becomes fractured. Rather than investing in relationships within the church family and learning to work through differences, those who are preoccupied with maintaining their own self-interests will often leave in search of another congregation that will better meet their needs.¹⁴⁵ This explains why individuals who are in the process of visiting different places of worship in order to find a new church home, will say they are “church shopping.” Much like buying a new car, they are looking to take the church for a test drive before they commit to buying.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 151.

¹⁴² Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 4. Italics in original.

¹⁴³ Halter and Smay, 150.

¹⁴⁴ Hellerman, 4.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

The modern-day parishioner's propensity to withdraw their support, and walk away from the community when their individual preferences are not being satisfied, stands in stark contrast to the inter-connected relationships that were the backbone of the churches described in the New Testament.¹⁴⁶ Fully devoted followers of Jesus commit to suppressing their own selfish desires in order to advance the mission of the church. Authentic community is formed when each member of the church family makes a covenant to prioritize the needs of the others above their own. Once this happens, the local church becomes a place where each member is bound to one another by mutual commitment and sacrifice.¹⁴⁷ In turn, when Christ followers are able to demonstrate a deep reverence for the relationships they have established at home and in the church, then their capacity to reach their community increases exponentially.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to live out our faith within the context of communal relationships that strengthen the body of Christ, foster mutual accountability, and demonstrate sacrificial love.¹⁴⁸ We are also committed to resolving our differences by adopting the biblical principles of forgiveness and reconciliation.¹⁴⁹ In his letter to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul reiterates the importance of covenant communal relationships and gives us an example of what incarnational community ought to look like. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴⁷ Frazee, loc. 1903.

¹⁴⁸ Bill Donahue, *The Willow Creek Guide to Leading Life-Changing Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 27.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 25.

deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”¹⁵⁰

Building Community and Deepening Faith around the Table

In his book *From Tablet to Table*, Leonard Sweet argues that one of the best places for people to gather and grow closer to God and one another is at the dinner table.¹⁵¹ Moreover, Sweet contends that if we really want to get to the heart of someone’s story, we must take the time to sit down and dine with them.¹⁵² In light of the hectic nature of modern family life, the need to gather around tables in our homes and in our churches is critical. When we gather at the table and break bread together, we do not just pass food and share stories, we share pieces of ourselves with one another.¹⁵³

Communal dining gatherings were an essential part of the life of the early church.¹⁵⁴ Evidence of this is found in Luke’s description of their time together in the book of Acts. “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”¹⁵⁵ With this idea of “breaking bread” in mind, the women’s ministry at Custer Road United Methodist decided to try something a little different to revitalize their small group gatherings. Eighteen months ago the church

¹⁵⁰ Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV).

¹⁵¹ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community is Found and Identity is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 59.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 36-37.

¹⁵⁴ Donahue, 26.

¹⁵⁵ Acts 2:46-47 (NIV).

launched a new small group pilot program called IF:Table.¹⁵⁶ These gatherings provide an opportunity for women to get to know one another at a much deeper level as they gather around tables for a time of sharing food, fellowship, and spiritual formation.

There is something sacred about sharing a meal and a conversation around a table. In most cultures, meal-time rituals are not private; meal-time rituals are social.¹⁵⁷ Food is not simply prepared and consumed in solitude, but enjoyed in the presence of others.¹⁵⁸

One of the hallmarks of the IF:Table is being real: transparency, authenticity, and vulnerability. These are the elements that make a table an IF:Table. When these groups of eight to ten women gather around the table to share in their time of food and fellowship, they are encouraged to come just as they are. Much like the “class meetings” that were so much a part of the Methodist movement in Bristol during the eighteenth-century, the IF:Table groups include an intentional time for each person to give an account regarding the true state of their souls.¹⁵⁹ In so doing, the dinner table becomes a communion table, because it “requires that people unconceal themselves from one another, that for all their faults and failures and foibles and fixations, they still say to one another, ‘Here I am.’”¹⁶⁰

Finally, we must acknowledge that in today’s increasingly fragmented culture, people typically find it much more intimidating to visit churches than they did in previous

¹⁵⁶ IF:Table is a ministry of IF:GATHERING and has been adapted for use by the women’s ministry of Custer Road UMC. For more information visit <https://ifgathering.com/table/>.

¹⁵⁷ Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who’s Already There* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 194.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Hamilton, 92.

¹⁶⁰ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 97.

years.¹⁶¹ This makes the small group an ideal entry point for new, unchurched people.¹⁶² It makes sense that a person would find it more appealing to accept an invitation to gather in the familiar comfort of a friend's home rather than visit a church they have never been to before.¹⁶³

Revitalizing a Church and a Community through Acts of Love and Mercy

A third way to transform our churches and our communities is through coordinated acts of mercy. As followers of Jesus we are called to be in service with those who are lost, lonely, sick, dying, hungry, homeless, impoverished, imprisoned, and anyone else who needs the care of the community of faith.¹⁶⁴ John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement had hoped to bring revitalization to the Church of England. However, his propensity for calling his contemporaries to higher standards of holiness and self-discipline was not well received within the denominational walls of his church.¹⁶⁵ Subsequently, Wesley found himself pushed out of the church, and “by the end of 1738, only five churches in the London area would have him in their pulpits.”¹⁶⁶ In many ways this turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as Wesley spent the remainder of his preaching ministry heralding the Good News of God's free, unmerited grace to the people

¹⁶¹ Kevin M Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), loc. 854.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, loc. 847.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, loc. 876.

¹⁶⁴ Hamilton, 93.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

who resided outside the walls of the church.¹⁶⁷ Wesley preached along the highways and the byways, throughout the countryside, and in the city streets. He preached to those who worked in the foundries and the coal mines, and to those who were sick and in prison.¹⁶⁸ We would do well to remember the lessons learned by John Wesley, George Whitefield, and the early Methodists. Perhaps we should cast our eyes to the hills and set our sights on the potential harvest that awaits those of us willing to push ourselves out of our churches and into the mission fields.

In order for us to reclaim the outward missional focus that was a hallmark of the early Methodist movement, our churches must move beyond the attractional models for ministry that we have employed for the past sixty years. The days of opening the doors of the church and seeing hundreds or even thousands of people come rushing in are long gone. When so many things are competing for people's time and attention, the church cannot rely on ministry approaches that are dependent upon others to take the initiative. We must re-orient ourselves by stepping out into our communities in ways that demonstrate our commitment to Christ and show our willingness to follow his command to go and be.¹⁶⁹ We've heard it said that actions speak louder than words. This is especially true when it comes to missions and evangelism. When we focus our missional activity outside the walls of the church, our tangible expressions of love and mercy serve as our greatest potential witness to the grace that is offered through Jesus Christ. Without action there is no attraction.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 92-93.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 98.

¹⁶⁹ Ed Stetzer and Daniel Im, *Planting Missional Churches: Your Guide to Starting Churches That Multiply* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), Kindle loc. 562.

Although it is true that our actions can effectively demonstrate that we care about the wellbeing of others, it is equally true that our actions can have an adverse effect on what we are trying to accomplish. Before jumping headlong into a missional endeavor, it is important to remember that the most effective outreach is relational. We should begin by asking a few questions. For example, what are the specific physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the community, as articulated by the people who actually live and work in the community? We cannot presume to know what people really need without getting to know them. Most people are hesitant to engage with people they don't know.

In addition to getting to know the specific needs of the people in our community, it is important to identify and invest in the key stakeholders.¹⁷⁰ “Key stakeholders include business owners, local businesses, hospitals, social service agencies, schools, community centers, and residents.”¹⁷¹ When we build collaborative partnerships with others who are also invested in the community, our actions demonstrate that the church is committed to giving rather than taking.¹⁷² Moreover, when we take the time to get to know the people we are ministering with personally, our acts of love and mercy have a greater impact on our communities and ultimately become a means of grace for all of us.

Unity is something that is lacking within the body of Christ in so many of our communities.¹⁷³ Even when our congregations actively seek to engage the community, there is still a tendency to limit our partnerships to those within our own denominational

¹⁷⁰ Olu Brown, *Zero to 80: Innovative Ideas for Planting and Accelerating Church Growth* (Atlanta, GA: Impact Press, 2010), Kindle loc. 461.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid., loc. 435.

¹⁷³ Caleb Breakey, *Called to Stay: An Uncompromising Mission to Save Your Church* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2013), 155.

structures. When we do this, we can easily forget that there are other churches and faith communities that might be receptive to working hand in hand with us to show God’s love to our neighbors, if we would just first reach out to them.¹⁷⁴ Collaboration between various local churches begins when we choose to serve everyone around us: even other churches.¹⁷⁵ In turn, churches that are willing to collaborate with others to revive their communities have a greater likelihood of experiencing restoration, and revitalization themselves.¹⁷⁶

We often think of revitalization as something that a congregation does in order to save itself, when in reality, revitalization is the restorative byproduct of a community of faith that is effectively transforming the lives of those who reside outside the walls of the church. “This divine restoration process is rooted in the salvation that God offers to all.”¹⁷⁷ It is only when we recognize that our attempts to save ourselves are futile, that we are free to receive the healing and wholeness that God longs to bring to our lives and to our churches.¹⁷⁸

Intentional Church Closures

In conclusion, if we are going to be able to change our way of thinking and our approach to church revitalization, the first thing we must do is come to grips with our failures. Once we have accepted the possibility of failure, then we can direct our attention

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Daniels and Latona, 71.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 73.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

to identifying and addressing the primary factors that have led us to our current reality. Based upon an exhaustive analysis of the statistics made available from 2010-2014, Economist Don House, Chair of the Economic Advisory Committee for the United Methodist Church concluded that our present course is “unstable and catastrophic.”¹⁷⁹ In a recent presentation to denominational leaders, House noted that the infrastructure of the United Methodist Church, which includes not only local churches, but districts, annual conferences, boards, and agencies is poised for a collapse by the year 2050 if drastic measures are not taken to address our current trajectory.¹⁸⁰ In his presentation, House reported that:

- The number of annual conferences would fall from the 59 the church had in 2010, to 37 in 2030, and then to just 17 by 2050.
- The number of districts would go from 450 to 235 in 2030, and then plummet to just 91 in 2050.
- The number of local churches would drop from the 32,433 reported in 2010 to 21,117 in 2030, and down to just 9,985 in 2050.¹⁸¹

The evidence shows that the biggest determining factor driving this trend is the long and steady decline in worship attendance.¹⁸² Based upon the average annual losses (52,380 between 2002 and 2012), House projects that by 2030, average weekly worship attendance in the United Methodist Church in the United States will fall from the 3.1

¹⁷⁹ Walter Fenton, “Economist Crunches UM Numbers,” Good News Magazine Online, The Woodlands, Texas, April 1, 2006, 34, accessed April 2, 2016, <http://goodnewsmag.org/2016/04/economist-crunches-um-numbers/>.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Association of Religion Data Archives, “United Methodist Church,” accessed March 10, 2016, http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1469.asp.

million that was recorded in 2010 to approximately 2 million by the year 2030, and then continue falling to 959,000 by the year 2050.¹⁸³

These sobering statistics require a critical question: Is a turnaround even possible? For some of our churches, the answer is yes. But, for what appears to be a significant number of our churches, the answer is definitively no. With this in mind, can we develop a strategic plan for our denomination to identify and invest in the local churches that are willing and able to achieve sustained growth? Perhaps our Healthy Church Initiatives will serve us well in this regard. But there is another side to the equation. In order to keep investing in churches that have a higher potential for a successful turnaround, resources must be divested from other places. Because our denominational resources are shrinking so rapidly, it is not possible for every local church to be adequately resourced.

Accordingly, our denomination must create an effective process for identifying and equipping congregations (that are at or near the point of death) who willingly offer themselves and their resources to be used for the greater cause of revitalizing other healthier churches and starting new ones. This means that some clergy and lay leaders must voluntarily choose to die to themselves by facilitating the closure of their churches. By doing so, additional resources can be made available for investing in revitalizing the churches that have a greater potential to advance the cause of Christ. In turn, these newly revitalized and strengthened churches can help stabilize the basic infrastructure of our denomination as we continue to develop and resource our strategic growth plan.¹⁸⁴ My hope is that this would be something that many of our clergy and churches could embrace

¹⁸³ Fenton, 34.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

for themselves before it becomes necessary for our denominational leaders to take more drastic measures.

In consideration of these more drastic measures, it is important for us to understand the primary factors that have led us to where we are today. One of the greatest challenges faced by many of our local churches relates to the transitional nature of the communities in which these churches are located. Over the past 50 to 60 years, nearly every zip code in which one or more of our local churches is located, has experienced some sort of transition with respect to their economic, ethnic, and cultural demographics. When this happens in a particular community, it is imperative that “the local church...engage in deliberate analysis of the community change and alter its programs to meet the needs and cultural patterns of the new residents.”¹⁸⁵ It is expected that “the local church shall make every effort to remain in the community and to develop effective ministries to those who are newcomers, whether of a cultural, economic, or ethnic group different from the original or present members.”¹⁸⁶

Although it is expected that churches in the midst of these neighborhood transitions will make every effort to adapt to their new surroundings, the reality is that many of these congregations are unwilling to do so. As referenced earlier, the most common example of this situation entails an aging Anglo congregation that finds itself in a neighborhood experiencing transition that is specifically identified as economic, ethnic,

¹⁸⁵ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 149.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

and cultural.¹⁸⁷ When this happens, special attention must be given to how the congregation might respond to the changes occurring within the community.¹⁸⁸ When it becomes obvious that a congregation is adamantly opposed to repositioning its programs and ministries to effectively reach the people who now live and work in the community, then it may be necessary for the denomination (or larger network of churches) to assess the viability of the church's potential to reach its mission field.

The ultimate challenge related to this problem occurs when a local congregation no longer possesses the resources or the energy needed to fulfill its stated mission and purpose. When the variable expenses associated with revitalizing the church have reached a tipping point, any further efforts to subsidize the church are considered cost prohibitive. It is at this point in the process that closing the church becomes the best option. For example, in the United Methodist Church, when it has been determined (with the assistance of a special appointed task force) that all other options have been exhausted, it is recommended that the church be discontinued.¹⁸⁹ With no options and no resources, the conference is left with no other choice but to close the church. Surprisingly, this often comes as a shock to some of the last remaining members who were living in denial because they could not face the reality that their church had been dying for years.

This brings us back to the question we asked ourselves earlier: Are the hundreds of millions of dollars spent every year in an attempt to revitalize our dying churches, the best and highest use of God's financial resources? In most cases the answer is no. So, as

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 150.

we continue to wrestle with the reality that many of the churches in our denomination are teetering on the precipice of collapse, and desperately clinging to the edge for dear life, we must learn to lean forward into the future and come to grips with our own mortality. Perhaps it is time to embrace a new paradigm; to look to our faith in order to find a better metaphor.

Although the closure of a local church is rarely (if ever) the desired outcome of those who were hoping for a turnaround, this “death” constitutes a crucial first step in the process of the church being raised to new life. Death is a natural part of life. As such, we must open our hands and let go of the false premise that we are immune to dying. The natural order of things is a continuum in which life precedes death and death precedes life. Escobedo-Frank writes that if we truly want to experience new life in Christ and become the church that God is calling us to be, “We must make a drastic move away from revitalization and into the death and resurrection of the church.”¹⁹⁰

Resurrection begins with the death of what once was, and ultimately leads to the birth of a new mission and ministry and an expanded witness in the community. In foreshadowing his own death and resurrection Jesus said: “Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”¹⁹¹ Just as these poignant words convey the sobering essence of the circle of life, they also speak in a prophetic voice to our current situation and serve as the foundation for our hope as we proclaim the power of Christ’s resurrection for ourselves and our local churches. According to the faith we sing, there is a promise that “in our end

¹⁹⁰ Escobedo-Frank, loc. 146.

¹⁹¹ John 12:24 (NIV).

is our beginning” and there is “in our death, a resurrection.”¹⁹² If this is indeed the case, then we should not fear the death of the church as we know it. In our dying, the seeds of resurrection will become the first-fruits of a vibrant new movement that will stand victorious over death and bear witness to the promise of our hope.

¹⁹² Natalie Sleeth, “Hymn of Promise,” Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1986.

SECTION 4:
ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

Written in the form of a memoir, the attached artifact is a proposal for a popular, non-fiction book with accompanying study guide entitled: *[Re] Turning to the Table: Turning your church around one table at a time*. This resource will: (1) introduce the reader to some of the most significant challenges facing US churches today; (2) give the reader an overview of how these challenges directly influence the church revitalization process; (3) discuss why so many churches fail in their revitalization attempts; (4) offer a fresh paradigm for church revitalization based upon a reorientation around three primary table gatherings which will help challenge our assumptions regarding family identity, corporate worship, shared leadership, spiritual formation, and neighborhood engagement; and finally, (5) tell the stories of how two of the churches I have served have been able to work through a process of returning to these primary tables in order to gain a renewed sense of who God has called us to be. This book will take the reader on a journey of discovery and self-reflection as I share some of the successes and failures that I have experienced while facilitating the revitalization of local United Methodist churches over the past 15 years.

The fellowship of believers in the early church was centered upon the idea that life and faith was best lived out within the context of authentic community. Accordingly, the first century church was marked by praise and worship, apostolic teaching, the mutual sharing of resources, fellowship, and the breaking of bread around the table. By choosing to reorient our lives and our churches back toward the table, we discover that the early church has much to teach us about what it means to be a family at home and in the

church. In the years since turning my own attention back to the table, I have seen an abundance of fruit born in my own life and ministry. And now, as I offer an invitation for the church to return to the ancient practice of gathering around the table, my hope is that this work will help equip pastors, church leaders, and lay persons to see the value of meeting on a regular basis to experience renewal around their own table gatherings.

SECTION 5:
ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

Cover Letter:

Kory Knott
6404 Rockbluff Circle, Plano, TX 75024
940-300-8306
kknott@crumc.org

Dear Editor,

I am writing to ask you to consider publishing my third book, *[Re] Turning to the Table: Turning Your Church Around One Table at a Time*. This book is a bold approach to church revitalization, based on 20 plus years of leading turn-around churches.

From 2002 to 2013, I pastored a small country church 40 miles North of Dallas/Ft. Worth. From principles I learned while serving a larger church in Dallas, I convinced the new congregation to implement a worship and program strategy designed to spur growth. The strategy was effective, and the church grew in worship attendance from 60 (June 2002) to just over 700 (June 2013). However, as our attendance increased, the percentage of adults and students engaged outside of worship declined sharply. When we started, about 60% of our adults and students were active in a small group or Sunday school class. Despite the growth in worship attendance, small group participation fell to 40% by the middle of 2013. Like many other fast-growing churches, we lost ground as we grew larger.

After seeing these trends continue two years into another turn-around appointment, I decided that enough was enough. I have spent the last three years interviewing pastors, researching other churches, and reflecting on 15 years of ministry, in order to better understand why some of the most popular growth strategies are garnering such poor results.

[Re] Turning to the Table is an attempt to start over. This book is locally sourced and full of tasty morsels. Although some of the table “re-turnings” require significant change, the stories are real and the results are transformational.

Thank you for reviewing my proposal. My hope is that these stories of transformation will inspire others as they have inspired the churches I have served.

Many Blessings,

Reverend Kory Knott
Senior Minister – Custer Road United Methodist Church

Title:

[Re] Turning to the Table: Turning Your Church Around One Table at a Time

Author:

Rev. Kory Knott
940-300-8306
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Overview:

This book will help local churches experience revitalization by a reorientation around three primary “tables” in the church. This will happen through a renewed emphasis on worship, neighborhood outreach, and small groups which meet on a regular basis to experience spiritual renewal and Christian fellowship around the table with a shared meal, scripture reading, prayers, the sharing of stories, mutual accountability and communal service.

Purpose:

This book is intended for denominational leaders, pastors, and lay leaders hoping to revitalize the local church. I want the readers of this book to experience a renewed sense of purpose and love for the local church. My objective is to provide a resource for pastors and churches that are exasperated because the revitalization efforts they are currently engaged in have proven to be cost prohibitive and unsustainable.

Promotion and Marketing:

I am currently working with Len Wilson to develop a comprehensive marketing and promotions strategy that will help maximize the potential for this book. Because Len formerly acquired church leadership books for Abingdon Press, he understands what readers and publishers are looking for. Len’s guidance has been invaluable. He has not only helped me in my quest to find a publisher, he has also helped me leverage my reputation as a church revitalization specialist in the process. In addition to working with Len, I have also spoken with Matt Jacob, Director of Communications for the North Texas Conference, to see how we can partner to promote this book as a denominational resource here in North Texas and beyond.

Competition:

Escobedo-Frank, Dottie. *Restart Your Church*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012.

Farr, Bob. *Renovate or Die: 10 Ways to Focus Your Church on Mission*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2011.

Schnase, Robert. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.

Uniqueness:

Very few books on the topic of church revitalization focus on what is arguably one of the church's most powerful metaphors: The Table. Although there are a great number of books that offer practical advice on how to bring vitality back to the local church, most of these focus on declining buildings, budgets, and programs; and fail to address the importance of table gatherings when it comes to church revitalization.

Endorsements:

Leonard Sweet
 Adam Hamilton
 Dottie Escobedo-Frank
 Jacob Armstrong
 Bob Farr
 Robert Schnase
 Scott Jones

Book Format:

Chapters based upon personal stories, specific practices, and examples of revitalization.

Chapter Outline:***Introduction: Turning Back to the Table***

In the introduction I lay the groundwork for why the table is a perfect metaphor for the revitalization process. I share a personal story of how an intentional move back toward the table has transformed my family and is starting to transform the church I serve as well.

Part 1: The Empty Table

In the first section of the book I offer some of the alarming statistics that reflect the state of the church in the US today, and offer my commentary as to why this is the case. In particular, I focus on the gradual decline of the United Methodist Church over the past 10-15 years. This section is divided into three chapters and incorporates amended portions of sections one and two of my dissertation: A Fresh Paradigm for Revitalizing United Methodist Churches.

Chapter 1: Where Are the Dinner Guests?

Although much of the church's attention is rightly focused on the Millennials, who are perhaps one of the least likely generations to participate in the ministries of the local church, the reality is that when it comes to church engagement, every successive generation since the 1950s is attending church less and less frequently than their parents and grandparents did. This chapter offers some of the sobering statistics that highlight the current state of the church here in the United States.

Chapter 2: Eating Alone

In this chapter I discuss the problems of individualism and consumerism and offer my thoughts as to why more and more people have stopped coming to church. If we have any hope at reversing these trends, then we need to gain a better understanding of how these particular problems impact our ability to revitalize the local church.

Chapter 3: Nothing Left to Serve

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Unfortunately for so many of our dying churches today, there are simply not enough people who are willing or able to harvest the ever-growing mission fields surrounding them. In this chapter I share the stories of two United Methodist Churches that were ultimately forced to close their doors because of their inability to reverse years of decline. The stories are shared from my own perspective as one who lead and served on the committees that assisted the conference in determining whether these churches would remain open or not.

Part 2: [Re] Turning to the Table

In this section of the book, I highlight some of the meal-time stories from the Gospel of Luke that place Jesus with others at the dinner table. In turn, I discuss the importance of these gatherings and offer a table-oriented paradigm for how Jesus calls us to gather around various tables at home, in the church, and in the world.

Chapter 4: [Re] Claiming Your Church's Family Identity

In his book *"From Tablet to Table"* Leonard Sweet describes the table as the place "where community is found and identity is formed." (Front cover) This chapter will help the reader understand the importance of intergenerational gatherings around the table for the purpose of cementing relationships and establishing a sense of family identity at home and in the church.

Chapter 5: [Re] Turning to the Altar Table

Generally speaking, congregations have a tendency to get stuck when it comes to the way they worship. In this chapter I discuss how re-setting the altar table can fulfil the deep longing all of us have for connection: with God and one another. I also make the case that the best expressions of corporate worship are what Leonard Sweet describes as EPIC (Experiential, Participatory, Image Rich, and Connective).

Chapter 6: [Re] Turning to the Dining Table

If it is true that the effectiveness of a church is determined by the quality of disciples it produces, then the church must be willing to abandon complex models of discipleship that are not effectively deepening people's spiritual lives. In this chapter I make the case that we must re-set our discipleship ministries by simplifying the process and of course make the case that the best place for people to gather and grow closer to God and one another is the dinner table.

Chapter 7: [Re] Turning to the Picnic Table

In order for us to reclaim the outward missional focus that was a hallmark of the early Christian movement, our churches must move beyond attractional models for ministry. We must re-set our approach to evangelism by intentionally gathering around tables outside of the church. In this chapter I share some personal stories about how a summer lunch program in the park has changed the trajectory of our church.

Conclusion: Turning Back to the Table Again

In this conclusion I reiterate my invitation for the reader to return to the table. I encourage those who are engaged in the revitalization process to consider how they might reorient their efforts around the idea of table gathering. I end with a reexamination of the words of Jesus. First, as he instituted the Eucharist in the upper room, and second, in Revelation 3:20 when he says: Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."

Manuscript:

Total word count for this book will be approximately 30,000.

Author Bio:

Rev. Kory Knott is the Senior Minister at Custer Road United Methodist Church in Plano, TX. His education includes a B.A. in Biblical Studies/Psychology from Evangel University in Springfield, MO; a Master of Divinity from SMU Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, TX; and a certificate in Leadership from Cox School of Business, SMU.

He was ordained as an Elder in Full Connection, North Texas Conference in 2005 and served as Senior Pastor of Argyle UMC in Argyle, Texas from 2002-2013. Prior to that, he served as an Associate Pastor at Highland Park UMC in Dallas from 1995-2002. Under Kory's leadership at Argyle UMC the church received many awards. In 2013, Argyle UMC was recognized both as a vital and welcoming congregation, and from 2009-2011 as a transforming congregation. From 2007-2009, Argyle UMC was identified as the seventeenth fastest growing UMC in the US, among churches with an average worship attendance of between 500 and 999. During his tenure, Argyle UMC grew from approximately 60 to over 700 in average worship attendance and received more than 1,000 new members between 2002 and 2013. As such, The Foundation for Evangelism recognized Argyle UMC for 20 percent plus worship attendance growth from 2005-2009. On behalf of the church, Rev. Kory Knott received the North Texas Conference Marvin T. Judy award of excellence in 2008 and the North Texas Award for Outstanding Effectiveness in Evangelism in 2007. Kory also serves on the Church Revitalization Task force and the District Committee on Building and Location.

Kory and his wife Jennifer have been married for 18 years and have three children: daughter, Taylor (13), and sons, Zachary (10) and Reed (7). Jennifer works for Sky Ranch Christian Camps.

Publishing Credits:

The Story Lectionary: Journeying Through Scripture from the Garden to the Garden-City. Portland, OR: Portland Seminary, 2017.

The Desert Blooms: Selected Sermons by Kory Knott. Self-Published through Snowfall Press, 2017.

Future Projects:

Study Guide for *[Re] Turning to the Table*.

SECTION 6:

POSTSCRIPT

Both the dissertation and accompanying written artifact reflect a strong desire to bring about renewal and revitalization in the local church. This project is informed by more than fifteen years in ministry, and the past two and a half years of research, working toward the revitalization (and in some cases intentional closing) of various congregations within the United Methodist Church.

Because there are so many approaches to church revitalization, it is necessary to narrow the scope of the project to fully addressing the primary costs that keep so many United Methodist churches from experiencing new growth and revitalization. This was not an easy task. At times it was difficult to avoid wandering off course as there is no shortage of seminars, “how to” books, and consultants who are eager to offer their prescriptions and services. Although this project does offer a particular way of re-imagining what revitalization in the local church looks like, it is important to clarify that the primary purpose is not to herald a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, this project is intended to serve as a creative resource for clergy and congregations struggling to find sustainable solutions that will help mitigate the high cost of turning around their dying churches.

Clearly there is much more work to be done. A disturbing trend revealed by this project is that, despite the fact that United Methodist congregations spend millions of dollars a year in an effort to slow and reverse their decline, very little seems to be happening in the way of progress. In some ways, this project has only scratched the surface. As much as this dissertation project helps to explain why church revitalization is

such a difficult and expensive undertaking, it also raises a variety of other important questions: (1) How much money should denominations allocate to their revitalization efforts. (2) Do intentional church closures combined with new church starts offer a more effective and economical approach? (3) How “affordable” are some of the emergent models as compared to the more traditional models? (4) What does all of this mean for the future of the church?

Church decline will continue to be a problem as long as there are churches that are unable or unwilling to make the changes necessary for revitalization and growth. Because the circle of life and death is in constant motion, it is important that the church continue to lean into the natural rhythm of this cycle. As such, additional resources dedicated to teaching churches how to die to themselves so that they might be raised to new life are where much of our future work ought to be focused.

APPENDIX A:

ARTIFACT

[RE] TURNING TO THE TABLE:

TURNING YOUR CHURCH AROUND ONE TABLE AT A TIME

BY

KORY KNOTT

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”

Revelation 3:20

PREFACE

The seeds for writing this book were planted in the spring of 2014. I was attending the Large Church Initiative Conference in Alpharetta, Georgia when my friend Len Wilson, former Senior Leadership Editor at Abingdon Press, approached me and asked if I would ever consider writing a book on the subject of church revitalization. Len has a special interest in church revitalization and growth within the United Methodist Church. He was aware that I had served for many years on the revitalization task force for the North Texas Conference and consulted on the subjects of hospitality, revitalization, and church growth at previous LCI conference gatherings. Aside from my work in these areas, Len was particularly interested in my story from when I served as the Senior Pastor of Argyle UMC from 2002-2013, where I witnessed the remarkable turnaround of an historic 124 year-old church.

Since my time in Argyle, Texas, I have been engaged in the revitalization of another church in Plano, Texas. Custer Road UMC is considered by many to be one of the flagship churches in our denomination. It is one of the larger United Methodist churches in the United States and at one time boasted a church membership of more than 7,000¹⁹³ Because of the church's reputation for excellence in worship, evangelism, discipleship, and missions, it was featured in a Time Magazine article in 2001 and was recognized as one of the fastest growing churches in the United States with annual

¹⁹³ Leighton H. Bearden, ed., "Statistical Tables 2005: Dallas-Denton District Statistical Table No. 1," *North Texas Annual Conference Journal* (2006): 420-421.

growth rate of 50% throughout the 1990s.¹⁹⁴ Not long after this article came out, the church entered a prolonged season of stagnation and decline that has continued now for over 10 years. To put this into context, Custer Road's current membership stands at 3,800.¹⁹⁵ This is a decline of almost 45 percent. The church's decline has spanned the tenures of three different senior ministers, and now I am the one who is currently holding the baton. Despite having some initial success, Custer Road's membership numbers resumed their downward spiral within 24 months of implementing the church's current revitalization campaign. Frustrated, I decided that enough was enough. I needed to figure out why so many of the strategies that I had been implementing and teaching others about for years, were suddenly not working.

In an attempt to find a better way, I have spent the past three years interviewing pastors, researching other turnaround churches, and reflecting back upon the last 15 years of my own ministry. This book is the culmination of my work. Lighthearted, yet heavy with hope, *[Re] Turning to the Table: Turning your Church Around One Table at a Time* is an attempt to start over with a clean plate. It is my hope that this resource will help us as pastors and lay leaders to realize that our greatest hope for revitalization is to be found in our re-turning to the tables in our homes, our churches, and our communities.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 reviews the emptiness that has come to define the plight of so many dying churches today. The first section of the book includes some of the alarming statistics which highlight the current declining state of the church. It

¹⁹⁴ Richard N. Ostling, "The Church Search," *Time*, June 24, 2001, accessed December 14, 2017, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,161409,00.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Jodi Smith, ed., "Statistical Tables 2016: North Central District Statistical Table 1," *North Texas Annual Conference Journal* (2017): 419-421.

explains how we got here, and discusses some of the reasons why we still have not figured out how to fix the problem. In particular, I focus on the struggles of the United Methodist Church over the past 10-15 years. In contrast, Part 2 speaks to the fullness that can become our present reality. The second section highlights the importance of intentionally gathering around three tables that have the power to transform our homes, our churches, and our communities. Now, as we return our attention to the table in hopes of turning around our churches, I pray that you will be as blessed in receiving these table offerings as I have been blessed in gathering them.

INTRODUCTION

Turning Back to the Table

Tables are a part of everyday life. In its simplest of form, an ordinary table consists of four legs topped by a flat surface. Small, large, round, or square, there are all sorts of familiar tables that you will find in the home. There are coffee tables, bed-side tables, end tables, kitchen tables, and of course dining room tables. There are also a variety of specialized tables that you won't find in every home, but are common nonetheless. These include serving bars, sideboard cabinets, garage work benches, office desks, TV trays, card tables, pool tables, ping-pong tables, and a particular table that our household is quite familiar with: the baby changing table. As the father of three children who were exceptionally slow to potty-train, Jennifer and I spent countless days and nights changing dirty diapers at our baby changing table. One day perhaps, we will co-author a

book titled: “A Beautiful Mess: Life Lessons in Faith, Marriage, and Parenting from Two of the World’s Worst Potty Trainers!” But I digress.

As we begin, you may be asking yourself: Why is this guy talking about tables? I thought this was a book about church revitalization. Rest assured, this *IS* a book about revitalizing churches. But it’s also about tables. This book is about tables because tables are a lot like churches. Tables, like churches, come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some are common and some are more specialized. No two are exactly the same. And yet, they all share a basic set of characteristics that enable them to serve a common purpose. With this idea in mind, let’s consider for a moment some of the similarities between the church and the table. Aren’t both places where people frequently gather with family and friends to break bread and share in a meal which nourishes the body as well as the soul? Aren’t both places where we offer our prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God for what has been set before us? Whether we are in our homes or in our churches, it seems that something special happens when we gather for food and fellowship around the table. In his book *From Tablet to Table*, Leonard Sweet argues that one of the best places for people to gather and grow closer to God and one another is at the dinner table.¹⁹⁶ When we gather around the table, we share stories and recipes that nurture our faith and form our family identity.

The Practice of Table Gathering in the Early Church

The fellowship of believers in the early church was centered upon the idea that life and faith were best lived out within the context of authentic community. Accordingly,

¹⁹⁶ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 59.

the first-century church was marked by praise and worship, apostolic teaching, the mutual sharing of resources, fellowship, and the breaking of bread around the table.¹⁹⁷ By choosing to orient our lives and our churches around the table we soon discover that the early church has much to teach us about what it means to be a family, at home and in the church. In the years since turning my own attention back to the table, I have seen an abundance of fruit born in my own life and ministry. Compelled by a deep love for the local church, and a desire to offer a sustainable model for revitalization, my hope is that this collection of stories will help pastors and church leaders recognize the importance of meeting on a regular basis to experience revival and renewal at their own table gatherings. As such, this book is an invitation for the people of God to return to the ancient practice of gathering around the table.

The Parable of the Lost Son is one of the most well-known stories in all of scripture. Found in the gospel of Luke, this epic tale culminates a trilogy of redemption stories that also includes the Parable of the Lost Sheep, and the Parable of the Lost Coin. Based on clues that Luke gives us at the beginning of chapter fifteen, it is most likely that Jesus was still reclining at a dinner table when he told this parable to the gathering of tax collectors, sinners, and a handful of local Pharisees who had crashed the party. This was a dinner party that was sure to have also included Jesus's beloved disciples as well. The story Jesus tells the dinner guests is of a father who had two sons. Let's take a moment to read it now.

¹⁹⁷ See Acts 2:42-47.

The Parable of the Lost Son

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. ²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”¹⁹⁸

What an amazing story of redemption and a testament to God’s unconditional love! You see, “we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” As I’ve read and reread this story over the years, one of my recurring thoughts has been: Wow... that had to have been one big

¹⁹⁸ Luke 15:11-32 (NIV).

backyard barbecue! I can hardly imagine the feelings of exuberance and relief that must have suddenly overwhelmed this once grief-stricken father. Having assumed that his son had been dead for years, this day called for the grandest of all celebrations. This celebration was a sign that the relationship had been restored. A lost son had returned home. The family was whole again.

The parable Jesus shared with the others who were seated with him around the table, turned quickly from conflict to resolution. Now reveling in the emotions of the moment, it is possible that some had missed a pivotal point in the story. Before an overjoyed father instructed his servants to kill the fattened calf to prepare for the feast, something very important happened. Far from home, feeding pigs in a foreign land, the turning point in the story occurs when a wayward young man finally comes to his senses. Driven by pangs of hunger and a longing to return to where he belonged, the prodigal son looked up from the pods in his hands and recognized one simple truth: His hope can only be found by turning back to his father's table.

My Own Practice of Table Gathering

Jennifer and I first became fascinated with the idea of re-orienting our lives around the table two years ago. While on a dinner date, we spent most of that evening lamenting the fact that our family was rarely sitting down to eat meals together anymore. As our children were getting older and more involved in school and extracurricular activities, our schedule was out of control. On any given week, our family was eating only three to four out of a possible twenty-one meals together. Needless to say, we were both embarrassed and appalled at how infrequently we were gathering together as a

family around the dinner table. That night we made a covenant with God and one another that we would make a change: a [re]turning to the table so to speak.

With the start of the school year just a few weeks away, we made a somewhat controversial decision for our entire family to take a “fall break” from all extra-curricular activities at school (and church) so that we could create extra margin for our family to eat dinner together each evening. We also modified our morning routine so that we would have time to eat breakfast together. To make things easier we began planning and preparing our meals using a service called Prep Dish™. Prep Dish™ is a subscription-based meal planning service that helps make healthy eating easier and more enjoyable. According to their website, Prep Dish™ seeks to save time and decrease stress, ensure that healthy gluten-free and dairy-free meals taste delicious, create happier and healthier people, and bring back family dinners.¹⁹⁹

Although the program requires a bit of extra work on the weekends, Prep Dish™ has indeed made our weekday meal preparation exponentially easier and much more enjoyable. More importantly, the program has made good on its promise to bring back family dinners. In order to help steer our conversations around the dinner table, my wife researched several dinner game ideas online and created a set of conversation cards and dinner games that we could play while we were eating.²⁰⁰ These meal-time activities have proven to be a big hit with all three of our children and have been a part of almost all of our dinner gatherings ever since.

¹⁹⁹ These four goals and more information about Prep Dish™ can be found at <http://prepdish.com/about/>.

²⁰⁰ For more inspirational and creative ideas about how you can make the most out of your family dinners, check out The Family Dinner Project™ at <https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/>.

The renewed commitment to gather more often around the dinner table has become a real game changer for our family! We have seen so many positive changes. Not only are we spending more time together, we are interacting more. These table gatherings are allowing us to get to know one another on a much deeper level. As such, our shared meals have also become an essential means for helping us establishing a sense of family identity for our children. Not only are our children learning what it means to be a valued member of our particular family, each of them is gaining a greater appreciation for what is happening in the lives of their parents and siblings. Finally, there has been one other unexpected bonus. Now that we are consistently eating our meals together, complaints about what we were having for dinner have become virtually nonexistent!

For Christmas this past year I purchased six bronze marquee letters to hang on the wall near our kitchen table. These letters spell one of Jennifer's favorite words and have come to symbolize a defining characteristic of our family. G-A-T-H-E-R. We are a family that has embraced the importance of gathering to share suppers and stories around the table. In addition to hanging these letters on the wall, we have painted the following words over the entry that separates our kitchen area from the den: "They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts."²⁰¹ Because mealtime gatherings have transformed our family in such a powerful way, Jennifer and I have made a conscious effort this year to extend our dining table into the community. Once or twice each month we invite eight to ten people from our neighborhood and/or church into our home for a shared meal together. We are clear in making it known to our guests that we

²⁰¹ Acts 2:46b (NIV).

have no agenda other than to demonstrate, in a tangible way, the importance of gathering together in the presence of Jesus Christ and one another.

This lack of an ulterior motive for inviting people to these dinners is especially important for pastors engaged in the church revitalization process. I say this because oftentimes one of the top complaints of people both inside and outside of the church is that they “only hear from the pastor when the church needs money.” To be clear, churches engaged in a turn-around are quite often in need of money in order to fund their revitalization efforts.²⁰² Even so, it is important to remember that when working to create a sense of community based upon the unconditional love of Jesus, it is critical to start by helping people know that the invitation to gather at Christ’s table is free and open to all.

You may be wondering: what makes an ordinary table such an extraordinary place for spiritual revival to occur? Well for starters, table gatherings are significantly more intimate than large group assemblies. Table gatherings are also much more conducive to engaging in meaningful conversations that help strengthen interpersonal relationships and deepen the sense of connection that people feel with one another. Over the past couple of years, I have seen how a reorientation around the table has revitalized my marriage, my family, and my church. Through the practice of intentional table gathering, God has shown me the value of savoring every moment with the ones I love. More importantly, these gatherings have ultimately strengthened my love and devotion to the One who has “prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”²⁰³

²⁰² Stetzer and Dodson, 162.

²⁰³ Psalm 23:5a (paraphrased from the NRSV).

So as to keep myself out of hot water, let me be clear that when I'm gathered around the table at home or at church, I'm not dining with enemies, I'm dining with friends! With that said, let's commence with the table talk and have an honest conversation about the present state of our beloved church. We begin with the image of an empty table.

PART ONE: THE EMPTY TABLE

CHAPTER ONE

Where Are the Dinner Guests?

I am stating the obvious by saying that if you're reading this book there's a high likelihood that your church is dying, or at the least, your church is currently experiencing some level of stagnation or decline. I offer this as a confession: "I'm reading this book because my beloved church is dying." If this isn't the case, then you have the opportunity to be a prophetic voice for your church and/or your denomination because you're way ahead of the curve! You're in a unique position. In most cases dying churches are blissfully unaware of their situation because the symptoms of decline don't typically manifest themselves immediately. Oftentimes, it's years before a congregation realizes that they are in trouble. As we begin our conversation around the empty table, let's make sure that we're on the same page. Church revitalization is the generally accepted term

that is used to describe the process of turning around a church that has been in a season of stagnation or decline for a period of more than five years.²⁰⁴

I first became aware of the concept of church revitalization in 2008 when I was asked to serve on a church revitalization task force for The North Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church. The invitation to join the group came about because, after having experienced several years of decline, the church I was serving at the time had been recognized for its ability to implement a revitalization process which resulted in the church becoming one of the fastest growing United Methodist churches in the United States. To give you an idea of how successful our revitalization efforts were, from 2006-2009, Argyle United Methodist Church was the seventeenth fastest growing church amongst congregations with an average weekly worship attendance of 500-999.²⁰⁵

During this season of unprecedented growth, our church began receiving calls from groups around the country who were researching trends in church growth with respect to membership and worship attendance. Although we knew that God was doing a mighty work in our midst, we had no idea the extent to which the church's exponential growth was noteworthy. What made our growth particularly interesting to those doing the research was that our congregation was 114 years old at the time. The age of the church is noteworthy because, generally speaking, once a congregation reaches the age of 40 it will

²⁰⁴ Stetzer and Dodson, xiii.

²⁰⁵ Deb Smith, comment, September 4, 2011 on "Top 25 Fastest Growing Large United Methodist churches," *Len Wilson* (blog), September 2011, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.lenwilson.us/top-25-fastest-growing-large-united-methodist-churches/>. Deb Smith of the General Board of Discipleship compiled a list of the top 25 fastest growing United Methodist churches with an average worship attendance of between 500 and 999. This list was provided as a supplement to a blog post written by Len Wilson. These lists were compiled using the 2007, 2008, and 2009 statistical data provided by the General Council on Finance and Administration of the United Methodist Church. Unfortunately, when the blog was last accessed on November 30, 2017 the comments feature had been removed.

most often enter a prolonged season of decline.²⁰⁶ Much like the human body, as a congregation ages, so does its ability to remain flexible and adjust well to change. In order to illustrate this point, let us consider the hypothetical example of Wesley United Methodist Church.

A Sad Story

Wesley UMC²⁰⁷ has a rich heritage as a county seat church. Located just east of the town square, the congregation was well-positioned to reach its primary mission field from the time of its founding in 1947, until sometime in the early 1980s when the demographics of the neighborhood began to shift away from the homogenous makeup of a relatively affluent congregation. Membership and worship attendance reached its peak in 1987 when the church reported 1,400 members and boasted an average weekly worship attendance of more than 800. Since that high-water mark, the church subsequently entered into a season of stagnation that lasted throughout the 1990s.

In 2001, the church began experiencing the first noticeable signs that it was dying, and has been in a perpetual state of decline ever since. Consultants were engaged in 2010 to analyze Wesley's future and to issue recommendations for how to reverse the decline. These recommendations came with a stark warning: If the congregation was unable or unwilling to make the necessary changes in order to reverse this trend over the next three to five years, then the Annual Conference would delegate a task force to begin the process of closing of the church. Although the church made a few modifications to their

²⁰⁶ Olson, loc. 1251.

²⁰⁷ A fictional story.

building in the months immediately following the consultation, after that, the membership was resistant to make any further changes. Subsequently, the church is now past the point of being able to revitalize itself, as there are now only 27 members remaining with an average age of 72. However, the church is positioned to reach a more diverse population of neighbors, who have replaced the homogenous, more affluent neighbors who have moved away. The congregation is only able to utilize and maintain 25% of its building, and with the exception of Sunday mornings, the church is closed throughout the week. According to the church's outdated website, the church collected stuffed toys for one of the local children's hospitals three years ago. With virtually no other sources of income, the congregation is subsidizing its month to month expenses by draining the residual funds from a \$50,000 endowment. At this rate, Wesley UMC will be out of money in less than 24 months.

The story of this fictional dying church is not too dissimilar from many of the stories that are chronicled every year at our annual conferences, when denominational leaders make their reports. Heads shake and hearts break when someone steps to a microphone and reads the names of the churches that have been voluntarily or involuntarily closed throughout the previous 12 months. Sadly, many of these closures could have been avoided had these churches been able to make the necessary changes. This is of particular importance as it relates to the issue of church revitalization. When we stop to examine the surveys of 300 "turn-around" churches, the research makes it

abundantly clear that “churches desiring a comeback will need to *make changes* in order to start growing again.”²⁰⁸

Dottie Escobedo-Frank assesses our current situation correctly when she states that: “Decades of honest labor and reams of pages written about this process, however, have shown us that revitalization is, on the whole, not working.”²⁰⁹ No one would accuse us of not trying to fix the problem. Even so, a close examination reveals that despite our best intentions, our church revitalization efforts are producing only a few segregated pockets of renewal. This has resulted in the revival of a relatively small number of local churches and ministries across the country. The changes that have been made in the past few years, encouraging as they may be, have been so incrementally slow that they have had very little impact on the church as a whole.²¹⁰ For whatever reason, we can’t stop the bleeding. As much as I hate the thought of a congregation giving up without a fight, the saddest part is knowing that in most cases, our church revitalization efforts have only prolonged the pain and agony of many of our dying churches.²¹¹

Where are the Dinner Guests?

In the fourteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus is having dinner at the home of a prominent Pharisee. While he is reclining at the table, Jesus tells the story of a man who

²⁰⁸ Stetzer and Dodson, 27.

²⁰⁹ Escobedo-Frank, 6.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

was preparing a great banquet.²¹² Let's recap the story. When it came time for the banquet to begin, the man noticed that none of his dinner guests had arrived. Perplexed, the host instructed his servant to call on all those who had been invited so that they might come to join in the great feast. The servant did as he was instructed and went out to let everyone know that the dinner was now ready. Unfortunately, each person he spoke with had an excuse for why they couldn't come to the banquet. Having no desire to see his tables remain empty, the man instructed his servant to hurry out and bring back the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. Upon learning that there were still a great number of empty places at the table, the man instructed his servant to go out again. This time the servant was sent beyond the outskirts of town with the mandate to compel others to come in so that the house might be full. It is clear from the beginning that the host had no intention of having a house full of empty tables. This was a banquet that was prepared for many, and he did not want to sit down having to wonder: "Where are the dinner guests?"

Some Alarming Statistics

Worry about the lack of dinner guests is one of the primary concerns for a great many churches. I say this because within the context of today's ever-changing cultural landscape, churches of virtually every size and shape are in some state of stagnation or decline. To put it even more bluntly, the mainline church in America is dying. We are dying because our efforts to reach new generations of Christians have failed. Despite our best efforts to revive ourselves, the overall rate of decline in the mainline church continues to accelerate at an alarming rate. The statistics are sobering. According to

²¹² See Luke 14:15-23.

reports gathered from the most recent US Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center, “the Christian share of the US population is declining, while the number of US adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing.”²¹³ For example, the percentage of adults (age 18 and older) who self-identify as Christian decreased significantly from 78.4% in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014.²¹⁴ A deeper look into the statistics reveals that the sharpest decline (-3.4%) was among mainline Protestant churches.²¹⁵

When we compare these metrics with the latest information released by the United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration in 2015, the numbers reveal that, much like other US mainline denominations, an increasing majority of local United Methodist churches are experiencing some level of sustained stagnation and decline. Accordingly, the United Methodist Church has been declining in membership at a fairly consistent rate of around 1.6 percent (year over year) since 2006, while worship attendance over this same time period has decreased by approximately 2.9 percent.²¹⁶ On their own, these statistics are definitely a cause for concern. However, the problem is not limited to just the past few years. When we stop to consider that the rates of decline have increased for more than five decades, it becomes clear that something is wrong. In order to better understand the problem, let’s take a moment to look at how we got here.

²¹³ Gregory Smith, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” 1.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Hahn.

How We Got to Where We Are Today

“Congregations are born from a spark of interaction between faith and context.”²¹⁷

Such was the case for many churches in the decades following the Second World War. From the end of the war until around 1970, our country entered a time of unprecedented economic growth and prosperity.²¹⁸ Aptly named “The Baby Boom,” this period of time was marked by a dramatic rise in our nation’s birth rates and an accelerated pace of changing cultural norms.²¹⁹ As the population grew and demands for affordable housing increased, new suburban communities began to spring up all over the country. It was within this cultural context that values related to faith, family, and the pursuit of the American dream flourished.²²⁰ The 1950s and early 60s were a time when people had a deep desire to connect with groups and organizations that they were familiar with. Naturally, churchgoers would seek out and affiliate with others who were like them. “In a time of great belonging, people knew which tribe they belonged to and went there to worship.”²²¹ There were plenty of people, churches had resources, and denominational affiliation and brand loyalty were at an all-time high.²²² This was the environment that most mainline denominations operated in between 1950 and 1965.²²³

²¹⁷ Mann, 13.

²¹⁸ *The Postwar United States*.

²¹⁹ Mann, 14.

²²⁰ Armstrong, 27.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Mann, 14-15.

Just as a new generation of parishioners was instinctively drawn to where they were going, those who were responsible for planting new churches intuitively knew which doors their constituents would flock to. As a result, church planting strategists within the various denominations adjusted accordingly. Not wanting to miss the opportunity to keep pace with the expansive growth, denominations began to employ a strategy in which they would purchase a piece of property, recruit a pastor who could attract a large group of people, launch a church, and if possible, construct a building.²²⁴

The Rise of the Attractional Growth Model

Church planter Jacob Armstrong assesses these formative years following World War II quite accurately when he posits that it was out of the homogeneous environment of the 1950s and 1960s that our prevailing models for evangelism and church growth were established.²²⁵ One of these models, appropriately named the “attractional” church growth model, was built upon the premise that people would come to our churches if they were either a member of our tribe, or if we offered specific programs that fit the particular shape of their family.²²⁶ As time passed, a new generation of Baby Boomers came of age. They went to college, started their careers, launched their own businesses, got married, and began raising children of their own. Unlike their parents, Boomers were much less likely to attend a particular church just because it was of the same denomination as the one they grew up in. This triggered a shift in attendance patterns as

²²⁴ Armstrong, 27.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid., 28.

“denominational ties became less and less important and nondenominational churches became more and more prominent.”²²⁷

In an attempt to respond to the changing cultural dynamics, and the shift in attendance patterns, churches began implementing strategies to attract new people. One of the key indicators of this strategic shift was the move toward specific programming for children, youth, and young adults.²²⁸ During this time, churches began designating larger percentages of their operating budget to hiring staff and developing programs that were specifically geared to help their church grow younger.²²⁹ Accordingly, churches began offering age-specialized programs for infants, toddlers, kindergarteners, elementary students, preteens, middle schoolers, high schoolers, college students, young adults, senior adults, and any other life-stage they could possibly imagine.²³⁰ All of this was done to help mitigate the losses that so many churches were sustaining as the result of the displacement of those who had grown up in the faith but were not coming back to the church as adults.

In order to accommodate all of these new ministries, churches needed to raise even more money to make capital improvements. This resulted in a construction boom as churches began adding classrooms, libraries, education buildings, day schools, gymnasiums, and family life centers to their campuses. Not surprisingly, young families sought out churches that offered the newest programs and met in the nicest buildings. For

²²⁷ Armstrong, 27.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

example, if a United Methodist family did not like the programming that their particular church was providing, they would simply drive down the street to the Baptist church to see what they had to offer.²³¹ In time, massive capital campaigns became a necessary part of this attractional model for church growth as the relationship between new programs and new buildings became almost inseparable. This was a hallmark of the attractional model for church growth throughout most of the 1970s, '80s, and well into the '90s. Consequently, churches were in a perpetual state of competition with one another. In time, they found themselves in the precarious position of over extending their resources in order to attract a new generation of church shoppers. But these church shoppers quickly became church hoppers, and local congregations found themselves with the impossible task of trying to hit an ever-moving target of constituents. Ultimately, the church's inability to keep up with rapid cultural shifts resulted in a monumental collapse of the attractional model.

The Fall of the Attractional Growth Model

The attractional growth model worked for many years, until one day it didn't. Because this model was predicated on the idea that there would always be an endless supply of people circulating through the church in large numbers, it broke down as people began attending church less and less frequently.²³² As attendance patterns changed dramatically, it was as if someone closed the floodgates. The steady flow of new people was cut off. To be sure, they didn't stop coming altogether. They just stopped coming in

²³¹ Armstrong, 27-28.

²³² Ibid., 28.

such large numbers. Although this presented church leaders and congregations with a new set of challenges, the real problem was that many churches didn't notice because they were too busy building new buildings and starting new programs.²³³ And while a significant number of churches in every denomination around the country were focused on expanding their programs and buildings to accommodate the torrential wave of new people that were supposed to continue to come flooding through their doors, their respective denominations were reporting a continuous decline in overall numbers.²³⁴

As these congregations got smaller and grew older, they found it harder to effectively reach the younger generations. For example, Millennials, the most prominent of these “next” generations, is currently one of the least likely generations to participate in the ministries of the local church. This, despite the fact that for the better part of this millennia, much of the church's evangelism and revitalization efforts have been tailored to reach this particular generation. Unfortunately, this is not a new phenomenon, and it is not limited to one generation. When it comes to church engagement, every successive generation since the mid-1960s is attending church less and less frequently than their parents and grandparents did. This is a problem that has plagued the church for a long time, and with each passing generation the situation is only getting worse. Len Sweet has this to say about the precarious state of the church: “When any species undergoes a reproduction crisis, a name is given it: ‘endangered.’ Arguably Christianity has entered such a crisis; our inability to reproduce the faith is the number one problem facing our

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Barnes and Lowry.

families and churches today.”²³⁵ This problem invariably brings us to one of the more painful parts of our conversation thus far: coming to grips with our own struggles to revitalize the church.

The Problem with Top Down Leadership Models

Sweet has observed that “the transition from “command-and-control” hierarchies to “connect-and-collaborate” networks is taking hold in almost every sector of society, with the notable exception of the church.”²³⁶ Accordingly, the future of any denomination is dependent upon its ability to make these necessary transitions as “people today simply aren’t willing to support an institution whose sole reason for existence is the maintenance of the institution.”²³⁷ For example, the United Methodist Church is known for forming committees and institutionalizing processes and procedures. In order to revitalize our denomination, and reverse five decades of year-over-year decline, the United Methodist Church has created a myriad of regulatory tools and conference-wide initiatives designed to diagnose, assess, organize, and fix our problems. These include programs such as the Healthy Church Initiative, the Vibrant Church Initiative, the Clergy Fruitfulness Initiative, the Church Revitalization Task Force, Centers for Congregational Excellence, Centers for Church Transformation, Centers for Clergy Excellence, and Vital Signs: a weekly statistical reporting tool that prompts local churches to record worship attendance,

²³⁵ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 1.

²³⁶ Sweet, *The Greatest Story*, 79.

²³⁷ Thompson, 6.

professions of faith, participation in small groups, hands on mission, and giving on a weekly basis.²³⁸

As pertinent as these metrics are with respect to measuring church health and vitality, I can only imagine the emotional and spiritual drain this must be for those who receive this “corporate accountability” email every Sunday night. What might it look like for our denominational leaders to “relinquish hierarchical control to the grass roots?”²³⁹ How might this foster a “climate of experimentation” that encourages creativity, excitement, and the kind of innovation that will lead to a much better set of outcomes?²⁴⁰ Of course, those who have the most to lose are often the ones who desperately cling to what little power and influence they have left. Those in power will have to resist the urge to manipulate and/or control the outcomes in order to mitigate the inherent risks associated with handing over this power and control to others.

While it is tempting to want to place most of the blame squarely upon the shoulders of our denominational leaders, hierarchical bureaucracy is only part of the problem. Congregations must also take responsibility for themselves. Local churches can no longer afford a passive methodology for revitalization and church growth that is predicated upon “an earlier cultural moment when a sizable constituency of initiates could be assumed.”²⁴¹ Those days are over. As long as we keep trying to pretend that they are not, we will continue to be less and less relevant to the people we are trying to reach.

²³⁸ The Texas, North Texas, and Central Texas Annual Conferences of the United Methodist Church.

²³⁹ Sweet, *The Greatest Story*, 80.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 81.

As followers of Jesus we have a job to do. We must do better. If we are to have any hope of reaching a new generation of people with the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we will have to make some changes to our methodology.

When Jesus commissioned the disciples he said: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”²⁴² Accordingly, when Jesus sent his disciples into the world to go and make disciples of all nations, he knew that they would encounter hardships along the way. Jesus knew that many people would not be receptive to the message of the Gospel. And yet, Jesus sent them anyway, with a promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit, just as the Father had sent him. For the sake of argument, let’s assume that some aspects of our efforts to revitalize the church are going to fail as well, because they will. When they do, we can take solace in the fact that “Jesus gave us a sacrament of failure that frees us to fail.”²⁴³

This brings us back to the Parable of the Great Banquet that we talked about at the beginning of this chapter. There are few things as embarrassing or demoralizing for a host than to have made all of the preparations for the banquet, only to have no one show up. And if this wasn’t bad enough, let’s not forget that the man’s first attempt to rectify the situation was a complete failure. In an effort to fill the empty seats, the banquet host kept sending his servant out into the community to gather in more and more people until every table was full. I think that it would be safe to say that this man was determined to not eat alone!

²⁴² John 20:21b (NRSV).

²⁴³ Sweet, *The Greatest Story*, 80.

CHAPTER TWO

Eating Alone

My wife Jennifer and I have had a long-running joke between us for nearly 25 years. It began not long after we first started dating. One night we were hanging out at her parent's house watching television when she looked over at me and said. "I'm starving....do you want to go get something to eat?" "Sure" I said, and off we went. As we were driving out of the neighborhood, Jennifer asked: "What do you want to eat?" Since I wasn't in the mood for anything in particular, I replied as any wise boyfriend would: "I don't care. What do you want for dinner?" "Anything but Chinese" she said! And that's when it began. The refrain that has become the longest running joke in our marriage: "Anything but Chinese!" Well, normally that wouldn't be a big deal... except for the fact that I love Chinese food! And so, because of our dissenting tastes when it comes to Chinese cuisine, I have learned that when I am craving crab wontons and hot and sour soup, I have to be prepared to eat alone.

Anyone who has ever tried to turn around a dying church can testify that church revitalization is a lonely proposition. In an effort to reverse years of stagnation and decline, congregations are often asked to subjugate their particular tastes when it comes to launching new ministries and reaching new people. As such, members of a dying church must be willing to lay aside their individual preferences in order to make a variety of changes that are necessary for new growth. This is one of the more difficult aspects associated with church revitalization, and it is usually the hardest to address. This is the cost of individualism.

The Cost of Individualism

The problem of individualism directly impacts revitalization because it ultimately affects the bottom line. Costs rise exponentially when the changes that are being made result in the loss of individual members who pay their tithe, yet are unwilling to subordinate their own personal interests to the greater needs of the church and the community. When disgruntled members leave, they take their money with them. As attendance and giving continue to wane, many churches will often placate and delay making further changes indefinitely. In an attempt to survive, congregations that remain in this holding for any length of time will typically become more and more insular and self-serving. This inward focus only exacerbates the problem and compromises the mission of the church.

Self-serving churches pay a hefty price when it comes to their evangelical effectiveness, “because they are locked into a self-affirming subculture while the larger culture continues to move in other directions.”²⁴⁴ As such, this self-affirming subculture makes it extremely difficult for churches to connect with and reach new people for Christ, because it elevates the intrinsic value of the self over and above the value of others. Randy Frazee calls this an ideology of the “sovereign individual” and highlights the costliness of this ideal by arguing that once a premium has been placed on the value of the individual, it comes at the expense of the community.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Stetzer and Dodson, 7.

²⁴⁵ Frazee, loc. 1641.

The Cost of Consumerism

Another factor that impacts the cost of revitalization is the culture of consumerism. In the United States, and especially in my home state of Texas, bigger is better. The latest is most often considered the greatest, and luxury is always in style. Here in Texas, the proliferation of expensive, mega-sized high school football stadiums offers an extreme example of this, as school districts and municipalities throughout the state spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year upgrading and expanding their facilities in order to gain a competitive advantage over their rivals.²⁴⁶ Smaller districts and communities that lack the resources to keep pace with their larger, more affluent neighbors, find that their “second-tier” programs are at a significant disadvantage. Over time, it becomes increasingly more difficult, if not impossible, for these schools to compete at the highest level. The prevalence of larger and nicer venues has also had another effect on our society. In increasing numbers, Americans seem more and more comfortable with, and perhaps even prefer, congregating in larger groups and meeting in nicer spaces. This has led researcher David Olson to observe that the migration of Christians from smaller churches to larger churches is akin to an airline passenger “upgrading to first class.”²⁴⁷

In an attempt to remain competitive and culturally relevant, the church has found itself at a crossroads as the gospel of Jesus has been manipulated to fit the consumeristic

²⁴⁶ Zaleon.

²⁴⁷ Olson, loc. 1313.

preferences of the day.²⁴⁸ These preferences, which are most notably evidenced by a culture of instant gratification, over consumption, desire, and the endless pursuit of prosperity, have reduced the significance of the self-denying message of Jesus to a sentimental virtue.²⁴⁹ From the perspective of this self-gratifying ideology, a person might naturally surmise: If God wants me to be happy, then why would Jesus tell me to deny myself?²⁵⁰ When it comes to Christian faith and practice in America, our culture has so elevated the virtue of self-fulfillment that the idea of personal sacrifice seems foreign. As a result, the Christian church in America has become increasingly insular and self-serving in an all-out attempt to survive by way of maintaining a viable share of an ever-shrinking religious market. In this scenario, those outside of the church are seen not as persons of sacred worth who are in need of God's saving grace and love, but rather, they are seen as commodities to be leveraged. This inevitably leads to the perpetuation of a cultural mindset that asks: What's in it for me? Instead of: How can I serve others?

In his book, "Consuming Religion" Vincent Miller argues that "far from being immune to the dynamics of commodification, religion is as susceptible to abstraction and reification as other aspects of culture."²⁵¹ As such, our doctrinal beliefs and religious practices run the risk of being absorbed by the prevailing institutions, customs, and social norms that shape who we are.²⁵² The commodification of organized religion, coupled with a pervasive trend toward sovereign individuality, has given rise to a new group of people

²⁴⁸ Platt, back cover.

²⁴⁹ Miller, 105.

²⁵⁰ Matthew 16:24 (NIV).

²⁵¹ Miller, 105.

²⁵² Ibid.

who self-identify as spiritual rather than religious. To be sure, this rejection of all things religious is not so much a rejection of a certain set of beliefs about God as much as it is a rejection of the bureaucratic institution that the Christian Church has become.

Unfortunately, this rejection of the larger institution of the church comes at the expense of both the individual and the faith community. The movement toward individual spirituality as a journey to discover the self is a direct result of the symbiotic relationship between the cultural influences of commodification and the “modern, socially isolated individual.”²⁵³ Inevitably, this leads to a form of spiritual sojourning that produces consumer-driven, capitalistic individuals who are primarily concerned with advancing their own self-interests through their interactions with others.²⁵⁴

Breaking the Great Commandment

A deeper look into the problems related to consumerism reveal that “one of consumerism’s driving principles is the elevation of rights over responsibilities.”²⁵⁵ This is the antithesis of our core Christian values. Once an individual or congregation becomes myopically focused on meeting its own needs, then it becomes increasingly more difficult to for them to live by the command to “love thy neighbor as thyself.”²⁵⁶ Frazee goes on to argue that unrestrained consumerism leads to a level of consumption that is best described as idolatry. Accordingly: “Consumerism, individualism, and our growing isolation feed one another and keep us trapped in a vicious circle: Consumerism seeks to

²⁵³ Ibid., 106.

²⁵⁴ Bell, 102.

²⁵⁵ Frazee, loc. 1632.

²⁵⁶ Mark 12:31 (KJV).

curb the negative feelings of isolation, and so we spend increasing amounts of money in an attempt to feel better. Yet, the more we consume as a solution to our loneliness, the more this feeds our individualistic idolatries.”²⁵⁷

Having spent the past twenty years serving in three different local churches dedicated to designing programs, and implementing strategies to attract numerical growth, I have grown weary of trying to feed the insatiable appetite that the church has developed for consuming the religious things we create. When Jesus said to Peter “feed my sheep” he didn’t envision that Peter, or anyone else for that matter, would design a strategy to produce a multitude of sheep that are simply fat and happy. Of course, if the end goal is to lead the greatest number of fattened sheep to the slaughter, then many of us in the church have become wildly successful. There must be a better way. There must be an alternative to this hopeless pursuit of trying to keep pace with an ever-changing culture. Because trying to pursue more for the sake of fitting in is not working. Pastors and church leaders need a more balanced approach to church revitalization that is sustainable and produces healthy followers of Jesus who are actively giving of themselves in order to advance the kingdom of God.

Although a rugged sense of independence may bring about a temporary state of self-sufficiency, it ultimately leads to feelings of isolation and discontent. As such, “commitments to visions of the spiritual life, no matter how profound, are difficult to sustain without a community of shared belief.”²⁵⁸ This, coupled with the fact that we live in a culture that is becoming increasingly more fragmented by the day, has made the

²⁵⁷ Frazee, loc.1641-1649.

²⁵⁸ Miller, 106.

church's task of trying to bring people into community with one another quite difficult, and yet all the more important. We can no longer afford to bow down at the altar of consumption in an attempt to fill the void that only God can fill. Moreover, we must break free from this narcissistic vortex lest our insatiable appetite to serve only ourselves leaves us sitting alone at an empty table.

Musical Chairs

The image of someone sitting alone reminds me of a game that I used to play as a child. The game was called musical chairs. Most likely you played this game at a party or a school carnival. Musical chairs is a game which entails arranging a circle of outward facing chairs numbering one less than the number of players playing the game. The game begins with the players lining up outside the ring of chairs while someone who is not playing is in charge of playing some form of recorded or live music. When the music starts playing, the players start moving, and dance in a circle around the chairs. That is, until the music stops.

When the music stops, the players must immediately find a chair to sit in, but because there are fewer chairs than people, one player will not find a seat and they are eliminated. For each of the subsequent rounds, one chair is removed from the circle, and the game continues until only one player remains. This final, lone person is declared the winner. As a metaphor for the dying church, I would liken this "victory" to that of a consolation rather than a prize. Someone may have won the game, but in so doing, they have found themselves sitting alone. The sad reality is that many of our churches seem to be stuck playing a game of musical chairs. Instead of widening the circle so that more people can participate in the ministries of the church, dying churches tend to turn inward

and fight to keep what little they have left, for fear that if they give up something they will have nothing left to serve.

CHAPTER THREE

Nothing Left to Serve

A few years ago I was attending a potluck dinner at the church. Taking my usual place near the end of the line, I asked myself the same question I always ask when I'm at the end of a long food line: "Will there be anything left when I get to the buffet table?" The answer came fairly quickly when one of the church staff members came running up to me in a panic to inform me that we were quickly running out of food! Well, as it turned out, we did run out of food that day. When those of us who were at the end of the line found ourselves staring at the long table full of empty casserole dishes, we shrugged our shoulders and attempted to laugh it off. Although my stomach was growling, I smiled when one of the members of our small group joked that she wasn't really that hungry anyway. From that point forward the church began supplementing all of our potluck dinners with several extra buckets of fried chicken. After that, we never again had to face the problem of having nothing left to serve. We were fortunate in that our church was just beginning to show signs of growth and we were blessed with the resources to solve this particular problem. Having said this, the problem of diminishing resources is not typically addressed so easily.

I share this story because I think that the metaphor of a table with only empty casserole dishes echoes the image of our dying churches. As churches grow older, there is

a tendency for them to become comfortable and set in their ways. Unaware of the dangers that await them, self-centered congregations cannot see where their complacency is leading them. Gradually, the vast majority of these complacent congregations begin to experience stagnation and decline. Over time, as these churches grow smaller and smaller, they find themselves with nothing left to serve. Instead of being defined by empty casserole dishes, and empty stomachs, these churches are marked by empty parking lots, empty pews, and empty offering plates.

Churches that find themselves in a state of decline year after year are often quick to point to the external factors that keep them from growing. The following are some of the most common excuses that are given: (1) The area surrounding our church is built out. (2) The demographics of our neighborhood are changing. (3) There are no new young people moving into our area. (4) We don't have the money to hire more staff or fix our buildings that are falling into disrepair. Over time, these churches become so focused on rehearsing the litany of excuses for their lack of vitality that they begin to actually believe that there is nothing they can do to change their fate. Soon they become resigned to their destiny as a dying church and grow accustomed to seeing more empty dishes on the table. This is an empty and painful place to be as a church, but it doesn't have to stay this way. There is a way to satisfy our hunger.

Hunger Pangs

An understanding of the correlation between complacency and pain tolerance is a prerequisite for any church hoping to make a turn around. Pain is nature's way of telling us that there's a problem. If a congregation is unwilling to lean into the pain of their present reality, complacency will cause them to become numb to their circumstances and

unwilling to address their problems. This is critical, because pain is most often the primary motivation for making the changes that are necessary for revitalization. Now it is not enough for us to simply note the adverse effect that a high tolerance for pain can have on a congregation. We must also recognize that, in order for a congregation to move from complacency to urgency, the amount of pain that a church is able to endure must eventually reach a breaking point. At a visceral level the church must see its present pain as unmanageable when compared to the relative discomfort that will be brought about by implementing change.²⁵⁹ Once a congregation has reached its maximum limit with respect to the pain and discomfort it is willing to tolerate, it will do just about anything in order to change its present course.

Churches that desire transformational change that is deep and lasting must be willing to lean into the fullness of their pain; otherwise, they will never reach the point of coming to grips with their current situation.²⁶⁰ As such, a congregation's potential for revitalization is directly proportional to the membership's willingness to give themselves over to the pain of their present circumstances. If they are unable or unwilling to do so, they will have little hope of making an "honest effort toward revitalization."²⁶¹ Until the church recognizes that our hunger pangs have been brought on by our own contractions, nothing will change. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus says to his disciples: "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out

²⁵⁹ Stetzer and Dodson, 32.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 30.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

workers into his harvest field.”²⁶² For many of our dying congregations today, there are simply too few of us who are willing or able to harvest the ever-growing mission fields surrounding our churches because we are too busy feeding ourselves.

An Insatiable Appetite

In a quest to feed the insatiable appetites of their members, churches have a tendency to keep adding and adding to what they do. In time, congregations that keep trying to do everything tend to lose their sense of identity. “In the absence of Deliberate Simplicity, churches can easily become complicated, either in message (theologically), or in method (organizationally).”²⁶³ Using a tool called the Design Process Survey, a team of local pastors, denominational leaders, seminary professors, and church consultants were able to study hundreds of churches from thirty seven states which varied in terms of size, location, style, age, ethnicity, and denominational affiliation.²⁶⁴ Over the course of their research, the team discovered four key elements that were common to almost all of the vibrant churches they encountered. The four basic elements were: “clarity, movement, alignment, and focus.”²⁶⁵ When compared to the churches that were mired in seasons of stagnation and decline, researchers were able to establish a clear connection between vibrancy and simplicity that highlights the problem of complexity. To put it in the

²⁶² Matthew 9:37 (NIV).

²⁶³ Browning, loc. 340.

²⁶⁴ Rainer and Geiger, 64-65.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

simplest of terms, Rainer and Geiger's team found that generally speaking: "churches that are vibrant and growing are simple."²⁶⁶

In 1 Corinthians 9:22b, the Apostle Paul wrote to one of the early churches saying: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." This is a wonderful approach to consider when it comes to having an inclusive love for the people who live and work in your mission field. Unfortunately, this "anything and everything" approach doesn't work very well when resources are extremely limited. Establishing a clear identity with a more refined focus is especially important for small membership churches, because the smaller the church, the more discerning, and specialized, it has to be. This is critical, because when a congregation is just beginning the process of revitalization, it typically does not have the resources to be exceedingly proficient in a large number of areas.

This conversation brings us to a pivotal point with respect to where so many of our churches are today. At a time when a majority of the churches in America are in a state of stagnation or decline, and are faced with the reality of limited and diminishing financial resources it is critical that these churches understand how to best leverage the assets that are available to them when considering the costs associated with most church revitalization efforts. Wholesale adherence to church growth models and revitalization efforts that are solely predicated on raising capital funds in order to satisfy consumer demands and individual preferences, is ultimately cost prohibitive and runs counter to the missiological task of the local church.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 67.

Offering Your Best

I will never forget when I first arrived to my first appointment as a lead pastor. Argyle United Methodist Church was a congregation of about 250 members and rarely had more than 100 in worship. It was a church that was struggling to find its identity. Each time the church would take a few steps forward something would happen and attendance would fall back. As the leaders of our church sat down to determine where God might be leading us we began to ask ourselves some of these questions. When we looked at our missions and ministries we realized that we were trying to be too many things to too many people. Subsequently, even though we were doing a lot of things, we were doing very few of them well. Although it wasn't easy, we made the decision to sunset several of the missions and ministries that were not bearing fruit. We also made changes to our worship services by moving to a more traditional style because even though we had the desire to offer multiple styles of worship, we were not able to do it with excellence.

When I was growing up my father would often describe himself as a “jack of all trades, master of none.” He would typically say this when he was tinkering in the garage or struggling to complete a project around the house. What he meant by this was that even though he was pretty good at a lot of things, he was not exceptional at anything. As an adult, I have since come to realize that my dad was, and still is, quite exemplary at a great number of things. Perhaps the modest self-assessment of his varied skillset was more reflective of my father's humility than it was his proficiency.

The idea of aspiring to be just good enough to try your hand at everything may have been great advice in generations past. But, in today's hyper specialized

environment, there seems to be less and less room for the generalist. We live in a time in which the ability to differentiate oneself from the pack is an advantage. This new reality has serious implications for the church. In the past, it was acceptable for a church or a pastor to be adequate or even mediocre at a lot of things. But in today's ultra-competitive environment, it's important that churches and pastors find their niche by being able "to do one or two things really, really well."²⁶⁷ Frequently people will describe a particular church by what it is known for in the community. For example, one church might be known as the church that has great music and preaching, while another church is known for its excellent children's and youth ministries. At the same time, a third church might be recognized for its outreach in the community. For each church in the beginning stages of transition and revitalization, this begs the question: What is your church known for? What does your church do best? Is your church seen as exceptional or unique when compared to the other churches in your area?

Another Sad Story

Several years ago, the United Methodist Church launched a program called the Healthy Church Initiative. One of the workshops offered through the initiative was geared toward helping churches become more effective at reaching new families with young children. Each of the churches that were invited to participate in the program had a genuine desire to reach new people. On the surface it seemed that all of the churches were willing to do whatever it would take to accomplish this task. During the workshop, one of the women in our small group was lamenting that her church's biggest challenge

²⁶⁷ Farr, loc. 1759.

was that it didn't have enough space for children. The church included a sanctuary that could seat approximately one hundred, one small office, a kitchen, a multi-purpose fellowship area that could accommodate approximately one hundred twenty, nursery, and four small classrooms.

When it came time to formulate a plan for revitalizing the church, it was suggested that the church could spend a little money remodeling the nursery and repurpose the other small classrooms so that it would be more accommodating for families with young children. She said that this couldn't be done because the four classrooms belonged to four different adult Sunday school classes and were already being used during the Sunday school hour. As the discussion continued, the question was asked: is it possible that one or more of the adult Sunday school classes could give up their space on Sunday morning and meet at another time? The primary reason for considering this is that generally speaking, when it comes to when and where people can meet, adults without children have more flexibility than families with young children. Of course, older adults with mobility issues are an obvious exception to this rule. Back to the previous question: Is it possible to relocate an existing group in order to accommodate a new one? Absolutely, but the reality is, far too many churches are unwilling to make the necessary changes and sacrifices in order to reach new people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A year later the woman was asked how things had gone when she went back to the church with some of the suggestions that had come out of the Healthy Church Initiative. Unfortunately, she said that nothing had changed. None of the adult classes were willing to give up their classrooms. Although the church had been blessed to have

had several young families visit over the course of the year, none of the families came back for a second visit. Based upon feedback the church received after making some follow-up calls, it was determined that the families chose not to come back because it was obvious to them that families with young children were not a priority for the church.

Deep change requires sacrifice. In particular, it requires the sacrifice of people voting against their own self-interest.²⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the members of this dying church were unable to elevate the preciousness of others above their own self-interests. Somewhere along the way it would have been most helpful for the members of the church to heed Paul's advice to the Philippian church: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."²⁶⁹

Taking the Back Seat

Several years ago I was invited to attend a gathering of large church pastors. The meeting was called by our Bishop for the purpose of discussing how our conference cabinet might reimagine the process for making appointments. The hope was that our conversation might yield some practical ways to increase clergy effectiveness and help revitalize our local churches. One of the suggestions that came out of our discussion was to consider placing a greater emphasis on the needs of the neighborhoods surrounding our churches, rather than arbitrarily matching pastors with churches based on their own preferences or affinities. As we were gathering for the meeting, taking our seats around

²⁶⁸ Rendle, loc. 897.

²⁶⁹ Philippians 2:3-4 (NIV).

the large conference table, one of the younger pastors took the seat at end of the table. Upon noticing this, one of our colleagues joked with him that he might want to choose another seat as that particular spot was reserved for the Bishop.

In the midst of the laughter that was heard all around the room, my mind immediately jumped to a story Luke tells about a particular time when Jesus is having dinner in the home of a prominent Pharisee. At one point during the gathering Jesus notices that many of the other guests are choosing to sit at the places of honor around the table. Upon seeing this he tells them all a parable:

When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.²⁷⁰

As we continue to wrestle with some of the more difficult aspects related to church revitalization, personal transformation, and congregational change, it all boils down to one very important thing. If the church is ever going to reclaim its vitality, and cut to the heart of who God desires it to be, then congregations must begin and end by embracing the core value that new people are more precious than old programs.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ Luke 14:8-11 (NRSV).

²⁷¹ Mancini, 35.

PART TWO: [RE] TURNING TO THE TABLE

CHAPTER FOUR

Reclaiming Your Church's Family Identity

My wife Jennifer and I had been married ten years before we bought our first dining room table. Well, that isn't entirely true. Our first table was a small round pedestal with a glass top that sat four to six people around it. That table was our first big purchase as a married couple and we were so excited the first time we had guests come over for dinner. Fast forward a few years to the dining table we have today. We weren't even looking to buy a new dining table on the day we decided to duck into a furniture store that was having a "damaged items" clearance sale. Evidently someone had gotten a little careless when unloading one of the delivery trucks.

We were upstairs in the clearance area when we noticed a beautiful baroque table with a parquet top leaning against the wall. The ornately carved legs had been removed and were taped to the underside of the table top. The price of the table was \$299. We couldn't believe our eyes. This was a table that could have easily fetched \$2,999. The only thing wrong with the table was that it had a small chip on one of the legs and a small hairline crack inside one of the parquet squares. Each flaw was so insignificant that the salesperson had to point them out to us. Needless to say we eagerly told her that we wanted to buy the table. At the register, we were informed that the table came with a leaf that was in the back of the warehouse. And when we drove around back to pick it up, the guys working in the warehouse told us that the table actually came with two leaves. What

a bargain! \$299 for a beautiful, handcrafted table that comfortably seats ten! A few weeks later we found ourselves at another furniture store and scored a really good deal on some tufted upholstered dining chairs, but I'll save that story for another day because, as you already know by now, this book is about tables.

An Invitation to Sit at the Big Table

When I was growing up, I was blessed to be a part of a close-knit family that would gather for the holidays. Although Christmas and Easter are typically the highest attended seasons for most families and churches, Thanksgiving was our family's biggest draw. On any given year we might have had as many as thirty people in my grandparent's house. The thing I remember most about Thanksgiving, besides the amazing taste of my Mamaw's cornbread dressing and giblet gravy, is sitting with my brother and my two cousins at the kiddie table. The dining table, or "big" table as we children called it, could seat eight to ten people. Yet, even on the occasions when half of the members of our family were celebrating Thanksgiving elsewhere, and there were a couple of empty spots at the main dining table, our reservation (cousins: party of four) always had us seated at the kiddie table. While the adults were gathered around the sturdy dining room table sitting comfortably in their cushioned chairs, our dining accommodations were out in the tiled entryway and consisted of a rickety card table and four metal folding chairs that were stored 364 days out of the year under a blanket in the garage. As you can imagine, the biggest challenge at the kiddie table was trying not to accidentally knock over someone else's glass of iced tea when you were excusing yourself from the table.

After my grandfather died, Thanksgiving moved to my parent's house for a few years. The change in venue wasn't a big deal, because we actually lived next-door.

Unfortunately, my parents didn't have a dining room table because our house didn't have a dining room. Instead, we had a nook with a kitchen table that normally seated four, but when the leaf was added it would expand to seat eight. In the days leading up to that first Thanksgiving at my parent's house, I remember having visions of sitting in my usual spot at the kitchen table when the big day arrived. In my dreams, I was seated between my two favorite uncles ... passing the gravy, telling jokes, and talking about sports! Occasionally I would take a break from my deep belly laughs and glance over at the dejected ragamuffins I had left behind at the kiddie table. But alas, despite having home-field advantage, my dreams of sitting with the adults were crushed when I was relegated to my usual place at the kiddie table yet again!

When I think about the challenges younger generations often face when trying to find ways to connect with the church, I wonder if their experiences are not too dissimilar from those who find themselves relegated to the kiddie table on Thanksgiving Day. Perhaps because they are young or new to the faith, these voices are rarely if ever invited to join the conversations that are shared around the main table. Much like the disciples who sought to keep the children to the periphery of Jesus' ministry, many churches make the mistake of dismissing young people altogether. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is quite clear about his expectation that children are to be included in his ministry.²⁷² What would it look like for the church to become more invitational and inclusive? What would it look like for us to reset our dining tables? Instead of inviting only the most tenured pillars of the church to sit with us, let us adopt a new posture of intentional hospitality by also inviting even the youngest among us to join us at the tables where we are sitting.

²⁷² See Matthew 19:13-14.

When we intentionally invite new people to sit with us, we are creating an environment “where community is found and identity is formed.”²⁷³

Sifting Through the Brokenness

In addition to witnessing the good that can come from sitting together at the dinner table, I have seen firsthand how gathering around other tables can build community and reinforce family identity. When I was a teenager, I sang in the youth choir of the First United Methodist Church. Our choir anchored the early service, which meant that I had to be in the choir rehearsal room to warm up by 8 AM every Sunday morning. Although I wasn't much of a singer, I enjoyed spending time worshiping God alongside my friends. Our weekly rehearsals were on Sunday afternoons, before youth group.

One day a couple of my friends and I snuck out of practice early to hang out in the fellowship hall, which was located in the basement of the church. As we were rummaging around, one of my friends discovered three old foosball tables hidden behind several racks of folding chairs. Eager to play, we spent the next 15 minutes moving the chairs to the other side of the room so that we could access our newfound treasure. Unfortunately, upon closer inspection, we found that all three tables were broken and in various states of disrepair. To say that we were disappointed would be an understatement. Dejected, we put all of the chairs back where we had found them and headed back over to the family life center where snack supper was being served. While we were eating, one of my friends suggested that we should go back and examine the tables again. He wanted to see

²⁷³ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, front cover.

if there was any way that we could salvage enough parts from each of the tables so that we might piece together one table that would function properly. What an ingenious idea! Perhaps we had everything we needed and just didn't know it yet.

Salvaging the Things That are Working

Later that same evening, we snuck back down to the fellowship hall to begin our restoration project. Armed only with our teenage ingenuity and a Swiss Army knife, we managed to unscrew and disassemble each of the three tables until we had all the necessary pieces to rebuild the mother of all foosball tables. Of course, it would take us a couple of weeks to piece everything back together, but sneaking out of choir practice to work on our secret project was all part of the fun. We were having a blast building something together. Well, the day finally arrived when we had finished rebuilding and got to play our first game of foosball together. We were all smiles and felt a great sense of accomplishment. We had brought an old table back to life.

Over the course of the next several weeks we also discovered and refurbished an old ping pong table, a pool table, and an Atari 2600 gaming system. Word of our restoration efforts soon spread throughout the rest of the youth group and before long, more and more students started making their way to the basement to gather with us around these various gaming tables every Sunday night. Although we didn't realize it at the time, we had done something significant. We had done more than fix a few broken tables. We had started a revitalization movement in our church!

It was not long before several of the members of the Board of Trustees learned about what we had done. Although they were not pleased to know that we had been skipping out of youth choir rehearsals, they were impressed with how our creative efforts

had helped make the church more attractive to new students. During one of their meetings it was decided that our church would launch a capital campaign to remodel the third floor of the church's education building. This would create a new gathering space for students and their families. It had been years since the rooms on the third floor had been used by anyone. They were definitely in need of some serious TLC. Just as the renovations were nearing completion, my friends and I were invited to come to the church to help move the tables that we had refurbished, up to the new youth lounge.

Getting the tables up three flights of stairs is a story for a different day. But for now, I offer the once-broken foosball tables as a wonderful testimony for how church revitalization often works. Sometimes everything a congregation needs in order to start flourishing again is already in place and just waiting to be rediscovered. As various individuals and groups within the church come together for the common purpose of reaching new students and their families for Christ, the church begins living into the fullness of what God had created it to be. What began as a simple act of sifting through the brokenness, ended with a church getting in touch with the best elements of its storied past, and reclaiming its family identity.

As we consider some of the ways in which we can return to the table, I would like to highlight three primary tables (ministry areas) in which we must re-examine our approach to church growth and revitalization. These three areas are: corporate worship, disciple making, and missional outreach. In keeping with the table metaphor, I will refer to the three ministry areas as the altar table, the dining table, and the picnic table. I have chosen these three particular areas because they are well suited to address the root causes that are associated with the aforementioned problems of individualism, consumerism,

complacency and pain tolerance, complexity, and diminishing resources. As I have sought to formulate my own thoughts concerning the areas of worship, discipleship, and mission, I am thankful to United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase for articulating their fundamental importance as it relates to congregational fruitfulness. Just as a renewed emphasis on worship, discipleship, and mission can propel a congregation to new heights, “failure to perform them in an exemplary way results in congregational deterioration and decline.”²⁷⁴

CHAPTER FIVE

Returning to the Altar Table

Generally speaking, congregations have a tendency to get stuck in their ways when it comes to how they worship. When this happens, worship expressions that were once vibrant, relevant, and meaningful, lose their ability to connect with the community.²⁷⁵ When faced with the seemingly insurmountable task of revitalizing a dying church, pastors and lay leaders often find [it difficult to](#) discern exactly where to begin. This is completely understandable considering the multitude of factors that contribute to years of stagnation and decline. Having said this, corporate worship is one of the best places for a congregation to start because “churches often rediscover their passion for God and His mission by examining their worship.”²⁷⁶ Accordingly, worship gatherings

²⁷⁴ Schnase, 7-8.

²⁷⁵ Stetzer and Dodson, 79.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

have the potential to be the launching pad for revitalization because they often serve as the primary venue for people to engage the church on a weekly basis.

Humans are relational beings. We were created to be in connection with God and with one another.²⁷⁷ We are social by nature and crave interactions that create intimacy. The sad reality is that if those who are searching for community don't find it in the church, they will continue to search for it elsewhere. Instead of being sacred spaces where people are welcomed to gather around tables and partake in stimulating conversation, many of our churches have become sterile places where people are ushered to empty rows and left to listen in on conversations they haven't been invited to participate in. Regardless of style or venue, worship must match the affinity of those the church is hoping to reach. Even so, a re-examination of how we worship is not as simple as changing song choices and worship styles.

Assessing the Various Elements of Worship

How a community of faith gathers for worship matters. For many people, worship serves as the front door of the church because it is quite often their initial experience of the church.²⁷⁸ In order to appreciate just how critical this is, we should also note that for a majority of these same people, corporate worship will be the only church experience they ever have.²⁷⁹ God's intention is that we throw open the doors of our churches so that everyone will feel welcomed and included. In doing so, there are all sorts of people who

²⁷⁷ Morgenthaler, 117.

²⁷⁸ Stetzer and Dodson, 78-79.

²⁷⁹ Armstrong, 39.

will show up: real people with real issues and real problems who are looking for real answers and real possibilities. It is in our churches, where these same people will find a God who really loves them. In his book *Begging For Real Church*, United Methodist Pastor Dr. Joseph Daniels argues that one of the primary reasons that our churches are continuing to experience significant decline is because the vast majority of people who are attending worship are not having tangible encounter with God.²⁸⁰ Something is missing.

When people are not engaged, they have a tendency to sit back. They become passive observers. People who remain in a passive state tend to also become complacent and more set in their ways. Passivity is more indicative of a person who has become a consumer of religion rather than a practitioner of the Christian faith. Subsequently, without any real interaction, there is no participation. Instead of having “a true encounter with God” that “leaves us with changed hearts and calls us to changed lives,” we oftentimes leave worship feeling empty because we have left nothing of ourselves at the altar.²⁸¹ Passive worship is the worst kind of consumerism. By its very nature, an act of worship should serve as an offering of our lives to God in celebration of the grace we have received in Jesus Christ.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ Daniels and Latona, 13.

²⁸¹ Morgenthaler, 52.

²⁸² Romans 12:1.

Making Worship More Participatory

Because God is the one who created us with this deep longing for connection, there seems to be an innate sense that the church ought to be “a space and place where genuine relationships with God and one another can be created so that our dreams, hopes, visions, and destinies can become realities.”²⁸³ Unfortunately, this is not something that happens in most churches. Because of the way of our worship gatherings are structured, there is very little opportunity for the people who walk through our doors each week to interact in any meaningful way. As such, the modern church bears no resemblance to authentic community that was evidenced by the New Testament church. Subsequently, the vast majority of our church members and guests are not experiencing the kinds of authentic Christian relationships that will “liberate them from their begging conditions.”²⁸⁴ This assertion highlights the need for our churches to create worship experiences that are both incarnational and relational. This doesn’t mean that the church has to change everything about how they are currently worshipping, but it does mean that pastors, worship leaders, and laity will need to devote significantly more time, energy and resources to planning and leading worship that is vibrant, passionate, evangelical, and relevant.²⁸⁵

As long as we continue to spend an inordinate amount of our time and resources trying to save our sacred traditions and programs rather than engaging our communities at their greatest places of need, we will never fully become the church that God is calling

²⁸³ Daniels and Latona, 15.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Hamilton, 93.

us to be.²⁸⁶ Moreover, if we hope to reverse years of stagnation and decline, we must find new and creative ways to worship as we seek to offer prayers, preaching, and music that not only uplifts and inspires, but also enables worship participants to receive and transmit the power and presence of God in a mighty way. As such, one of our primary callings as pastors and worship leaders is to curate worship experiences that connect people to the love of the living God and to the love of a community of believers that is actively engaged in the world.²⁸⁷ In order to accomplish this task, we must be intentional about including various interactive elements in all of our worship services.²⁸⁸

A church that wishes to transform itself and its community must be intentional about creating worship opportunities that allow people to participate in the life of the church without fear of being condemned.²⁸⁹ Fear of being judged and not wanting to be around hypocrites are two of the most common reasons people give for not wanting to attend a church. When a church is seen as a place where only perfect people are allowed, it loses its ability to be a place where all are welcome. “Real church happens when hypocrisy gives way to wholeness, truth takes over falsehood; when ‘just as I am without one plea...’ is not just a hymn sung on Sunday, but is a daily practice in the life of the church.”²⁹⁰ Vital congregations organize themselves so that their members are empowered and equipped to bear witness to the love of Jesus Christ through their prayers, presence,

²⁸⁶ Daniels and Latona, 15.

²⁸⁷ Morgenthaler, 123.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Daniels and Latona, 89.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 88.

gifts, service, and Christian witness, not just on Sunday, but every day of the week.²⁹¹

This is participation at its best, and it is truly transformational.

Re-Affirming Christ's Open Invitation to the Table

The communion table is perhaps one of the best benchmarks for how welcoming a church is. In the United Methodist church, we have an “open” communion table. This means that anyone who desires to come to the table is welcome. There are no restrictions or requirements. You do not have to be a member of the church, because the table doesn't belong to the church; the table belongs to God, and God's table is radically inclusive. It is not necessary to become something or someone else before you can come forward. At Christ's table, we are encouraged to come just as we are. And when we all do this, the church becomes “a community of the broken gathered around a meal, finding hope in the grace of Jesus.”²⁹² In this way, our congregations and our communion tables ought to be reflections of, and serve as a foretaste of, Christ's heavenly banquet.

A couple of years ago our church made the decision to switch to gluten-free wafers for our Communion service so that the Lord's Supper would be more accessible and palatable to those who have issues with gluten. The problem was that we never could find a gluten-free communion wafer that tasted good. They were all bland and chewy. Even after we finally found a wafer with a tasty crunch, if you didn't immediately chase it down with a shot of grape juice it would stick to the roof of your mouth. Although some might commended us for making the effort to be especially hospitable to our gluten

²⁹¹ Jones, 92-93.

²⁹² Chester, 54.

intolerant guests, our decision to force everyone to eat gluten-free turned has turned out to be a big mistake.

Our mistake was made crystal clear to me during a youth worship service that my family and I attended recently. I was excited to be gathered in the upper room student center that night, because a friend of mine from another church was our guest preacher that evening. His sermon was based on the question: How can we experience God through our five senses. Near the end of his sermon, my friend invited us to turn in the Scriptures to Psalm 34:8. Even though I knew exactly where he was leading us, it still took my breath away when he read these words from David's song: "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him." Taste and see that the Lord is good. How can we help others taste and see that the Lord is good when all we ever offer them are tasteless wafers? Thankfully that night in the "Upper Room" we offered something much sweeter, and more substantial than the tasteless wafers we had been serving our community for the better part of two years. That night, instead of wafers, the body of Christ was served in the form of King's Hawaiian© bread. After having sampled literally hundreds of different breads, crackers, and communion wafers over the years, I can personally attest to the fact that King's Hawaiian© is far superior to anything else you will find on the open market. Not only does it taste delicious, it is also the perfect bread to use if you are serving communion by intinction because it really soaks up the grape juice.²⁹³

²⁹³ Intinction is the act of dipping the bread in the wine at a Eucharist so that a communicant receives both together.

Regardless of what type of bread or juice we use, the most important thing to remember is that Christ's table is open to all. Holy Communion reminds us that God has demonstrated his amazing love for us in this way: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."²⁹⁴ This "proves God's love toward us."²⁹⁵ In response to God's mighty acts of salvation in Jesus Christ, we "offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us..."²⁹⁶ In so doing, we model the overflowing hospitality with which Christ invites us to his table: a table set with "extravagant generosity."²⁹⁷ In the United Methodist Church we have a prayer of consecration that is offered as part of communion liturgy. I believe that it expresses beautifully, the spirit in which we gather at the altar table.

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet. Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy church, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, now and forever. Amen.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁴ Romans 5:7 (NIV).

²⁹⁵ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 8.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁹⁷ Schnase, 103.

²⁹⁸ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 10.

CHAPTER SIX:

Returning to the Dining Table

In 2008, I had the opportunity to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land for ten days. Visiting the towns in the Galilee as well as those in and around Jerusalem helped me gain a much better understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus. Seeing these historic sites with my own eyes also helped the Gospel narratives to come alive for me in a way that they had never done before. During our trip, I became particularly fascinated with the locations related to Jesus' ministry in the Galilee region. The highlight of the trip came when we visited the site of the Byzantine church in Capernaum. What makes this particular site so special is that underneath the remains of the octagonal church, archaeologists discovered the walls and foundation of a first-century home that may have been the house of Peter which served as a primary home for Jesus when he was in Capernaum.

As we toured the site, including several adjacent Byzantine-period houses, I could not help but imagine Jesus and his disciple gathered together for one of their shared meals in Peter's home. Imagine the feast they must have had the day Jesus came into Peter's house and healed Peter's mother-in-law. Matthew tells us that after Jesus touched her hand and her fever had left her, she got up and began to wait on him. Later that evening, Peter's house became a virtual hospital for healing many who were sick physically, emotionally, and spiritually.²⁹⁹ Knowing how important this homestead must have been to Jesus' earthly ministry, it should come as no surprise that in the years

²⁹⁹ Matthew 8:14-17 (NIV).

following his death and resurrection early Christian pilgrims began making their way to pray and worship at this particular house. In time, the believers built a church to commemorate where Jesus spent much of his time and consecrate this place as a holy site.

Prior to churches being built upon sacred sites like the one in Capernaum, one of the earliest places that Christians would gather together for worship was the home.³⁰⁰ Much like the Byzantine church in Capernaum, archaeologists have discovered a house church that dates back to the third century. What is most interesting about this particular discovery is that one of the rooms in the house appears to have served as a small chapel.³⁰¹ Although not all of the early churches met in homes, Paul's letters reference several New Testament house churches:

The church in Jerusalem met in the house of Mary (Acts 12:12), at Philippi in the house of Lydia (Acts 16:40), at Ephesus in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 16:19), and later in Rome (Rom. 15:5), and likewise there was the church that met in the house of Philemon in Colossae apparently (Philem. 2).³⁰²

In addition to gathering for worship and prayer, communal dining was an essential part of daily life for Christians in the first century.³⁰³ Evidence of this is found in Luke's description of the early church in the book of Acts. "Every day they continued to meet

³⁰⁰ Fred H. Wright, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1953), 123.

³⁰¹ Joseph P. Free, *Archaeology and Bible History* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1950), 335.

³⁰² Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Paul and the Intellectuals* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1928), 207-208.

³⁰³ Donahue, 26.

together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”³⁰⁴

Building Community and Deepening Faith around the Dining Table

Len Sweet contends that if we really want to get to the heart of someone’s story, then we must take the time to sit down and dine with them.³⁰⁵ In light of the hectic nature of modern family life, the need to gathering around tables in our homes and in our churches is critical. When we gather at the table and break bread together, we don’t just pass food and share stories, we share pieces of ourselves with one another.³⁰⁶ I believe that there is still a place in the church for adult Sunday school classes, whereby members sit in rows or in a large circle while lessons are taught in the form of a short presentation or lecture. Certainly this education model has its merits, and is familiar to those who grew up in churches that incorporated this style of teaching. That said, having lead and participated in small group Bible studies for more than twenty years now, I would say that I prefer the intimacy of gathering in homes rather than meeting in a traditional classroom setting. It’s not that there is anything wrong with meeting in a classroom. I have just found that when a group meets in the intimacy of a home, there tends to be a greater sense of connectedness among the members. I think this is because when you are graciously welcomed into someone’s home you gain a greater appreciation for the importance of hospitality through shared acts of kindness and generosity.

³⁰⁴ Acts 2:46-47 (NIV).

³⁰⁵ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 59.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

With this idea in mind, the women’s ministry at Custer Road United Methodist decided to try something a little different in hopes of revitalizing their small group gatherings. Eighteen months ago, the church launched a new small group pilot program called IF:Table.³⁰⁷ These gatherings provide an opportunity for women to get to know one another at a much deeper level as they gather around tables for a time of sharing food, fellowship, and spiritual formation.

There is something sacred about sharing a meal and a conversation around a table. In most cultures, meal-time rituals are not private: meal-time rituals are social.³⁰⁸ As such, food is not simply prepared and consumed in solitude, but enjoyed in the presence of others.³⁰⁹ One of the hallmarks of the IF:Table is being real: transparency, authenticity, and vulnerability: These are the elements that make a table an IF:Table. When these groups of eight to ten women gather to share in their time of food and fellowship, they are encouraged to come just as they are. Much like the “class meetings” that were so much a part of the Methodist movement in Bristol during the eighteenth-century, the IF:Table groups include an intentional time for each person to give an account regarding the true state of their souls.³¹⁰ In so doing, the dinner table becomes a communion table, because it “requires that people unconceal themselves from one another, that for all their faults and failures and foibles and fixations, they still say to one another, ‘Here I am.’”³¹¹

³⁰⁷ IF:GATHERING.

³⁰⁸ Sweet, *Nudge*, 194.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Hamilton, 92.

³¹¹ Sweet, *From Tablet to Table*, 97.

A discussion about the importance of reclaiming the practice of regular small group dinner gatherings for revitalizing the local church would not be complete without acknowledging that in today's increasingly fragmented culture people typically find it intimidating to visit a new church.³¹² The small group is an ideal entry point for new "unchurched" people.³¹³ It seems logical that a person would more easily accept an invitation to gather in the comfort of someone's home, rather than trying to find their way into a church they have never been to before.³¹⁴ Of course, it is most likely that the majority of those outside the church will remain outside the church. With this in mind, let's turn our attention to these outside matters. As we consider how we will reach the people who are most unlikely to come to us, it is perhaps time to look at a third table in which the church ought to return: the picnic table.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Returning to the Picnic Table

One of the best ways a congregation can connect with its community is through coordinated acts of love and mercy in the public square. As followers of Jesus we are called to be in service with those who are lost, lonely, sick, dying, hungry, homeless, impoverished, imprisoned, and anyone else who needs the care of the community of

³¹² Watson, loc. 854.

³¹³ Ibid., loc. 847.

³¹⁴ Ibid., loc. 876.

faith.³¹⁵ John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement had hoped to bring revitalization to the Church of England. However, his propensity for calling his contemporaries to higher standards of holiness and self-discipline was not well received within the various parish churches of his denomination.³¹⁶ Subsequently, Wesley found himself pushed out of the church, and “by the end of 1738, only five churches in the London area would have him in their pulpits.”³¹⁷

In many ways this “expulsion” turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as Wesley went on to spend the remainder of his preaching ministry heralding the Good News of God’s free, unmerited grace to the people who resided outside the walls of the church.³¹⁸ Wesley preached along the highways and the byways, throughout the countryside, and in the city streets. He preached to those who worked in the foundries and the coal mines, and to those who were sick and in prison.³¹⁹ Perhaps we would do well to remember the lessons learned by John Wesley, George Whitefield, and the early Methodists. Perhaps we should cast our eyes to the hills and set our sights on the potential harvests that are waiting to be gleaned outside of our churches, in the great beyond of the mission fields that surround us.

In order for us to reclaim the outward missional focus that was a hallmark of the early Methodist movement, our churches must move beyond the attractional models for ministry that we have employed for the past sixty years. As already stated, the days of

³¹⁵ Hamilton, 93.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 88.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 92.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 92-93.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 98.

opening the doors of the church and seeing hundreds or even thousands of people come rushing in are long gone. In a day and age when so many things are competing for people's time and attention, the church cannot rely on approaches to ministry that are dependent upon others to "come and see." As churches, we must re-orient ourselves by stepping out into our communities in ways that demonstrate our commitment to Christ and show our willingness to follow his command to "go and be."³²⁰ We've heard it said, many times, that actions speak louder than words. This is especially true when it comes to missions and evangelism. When we focus our missional activity outside the walls of the church, our tangible expressions of love and mercy serve as our greatest potential witness to the grace that is offered through Jesus Christ. Without action there is no attraction.

Getting to Know our Neighbors

Although it is true that our actions can effectively demonstrate that we care about the wellbeing of others, it is equally true that our actions can have an adverse effect on what we are trying to accomplish. Before jumping headlong into a missional endeavor, it is important to remember that the most effective outreach is relational. As such, it is important to begin by asking a few questions. For example: What are the specific physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the community, as articulated by the people who actually live and work in the community? We cannot presume to know what people really need without getting to know them. And most people are hesitant to engage with people they don't know.

³²⁰ Stetzer and Im, loc. 562.

In addition to getting to know the specific needs of the people in our community, it is important to identify and invest in the key stakeholders.³²¹ “Key stakeholders include business owners, local businesses, hospitals, social service agencies, schools, community centers, and residents.”³²² When we build collaborative partnerships with others who are also invested in the community, our actions demonstrate that the church is committed to giving rather than taking.³²³ Moreover, when we take the time to get to know the people we are ministering with personally, our acts of love and mercy have a greater impact on our communities and ultimately become a unifying means of grace for all of us.

Coming Together as a Church and a Community

Unity is something that is severely lacking within the body of Christ in our communities.³²⁴ Even when our congregations actively seek to engage their communities there is still a tendency to limit our partnerships to those within our own denominational structures. When we do this, we can easily forget that there are other churches and faith communities that might be receptive to working hand in hand with us to show God’s love to our neighbors, if we would just first reach out to them.³²⁵ Collaboration between various local churches begins when we choose to serve everyone around us: even other churches.³²⁶ In turn, churches that are willing to collaborate with others to revive their

³²¹ Brown, loc. 461.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid., loc. 435.

³²⁴ Breakey, 155.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

communities have a greater likelihood of experiencing restoration and revitalization themselves.³²⁷

Most often we think of revitalization as something that a congregation does in order to save itself, when in reality, revitalization is most often the restorative byproduct of a community of faith that is effectively transforming the lives of those who reside outside the walls of the church. “This divine restoration process is rooted in the salvation that God offers to all.”³²⁸ And it is only when we recognize that our attempts to “save ourselves” are futile, that we are free to receive the healing and wholeness that God longs to bring to our lives and to our churches.³²⁹

In order for us to reclaim the outward missional focus that was a hallmark of the early Christian movement, we must move beyond the same old attractional models for ministry that have been employed over the course of the past sixty years. If we genuinely want to connect with our neighbors, we cannot be content to stay huddled around the tables inside our homes and our churches. We must be intentional about gathering around tables outside of our walls. When it comes to gathering in public spaces, the picnic table is the perfect place. By returning to the picnic table we are essentially extending Christ’s table into the community.

³²⁷ Daniels and Latona, 71.

³²⁸ Ibid., 73.

³²⁹ Ibid.

Gathering Around the Picnic Table

At our church, we have an outreach program called “Summer Lunch.” The program, which will begin its seventh year in the summer of 2018, is a partnership between Custer Road UMC, the Plano Independent School District, and the Texas Department of Agriculture. The program’s goal is to distribute nutritious, prepared meals to children (ages 1 to 18) and their families each weekday throughout the summer months. Although the program has been successfully feeding the community since it began in 2011, something extraordinary happened this past year. After five summers of lunches and conversations around the picnic tables with parents and grandparents of some of the children, we have seen this program in the park begin to change the trajectory of our church. For example, this past year, twenty one children and their families, who were not previously affiliated with your church, attended our children’s Vacation Bible School. This was a direct result of their participation in the Summer Lunch program. In addition to the children who participated, a grandmother of one of the children served as one of our VBS volunteers! Former Summer Lunch Coordinator Jon Graf has summed it up best:

Each person who attended, both volunteers and recipients of the lunches, has their own story of how the program has affected them. I know I am truly moved and excited to get out there and serve children lunches each day, because when I pull up to the park with the CRUMC trailer, there are smiling faces waiting on the curb! There is a true sense of community at the park.³³⁰

Playing games and sitting down at a picnic table to share a meal with a group of children in the park is obviously about so much more than feeding the body, it’s also

³³⁰ Custer Road United Methodist Church, “Summer Lunch Program,” Events, June 7-August 18, Plano, Texas, accessed December 19, 2017, <https://www.crumc.org/events/summer-lunch-program-2-2017-07-28/>.

about building community and feeding the soul. And even though some weekdays we sit down over the simplest of meals that may consist of a single piece of fruit, and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, to all of us who serve and eat with the children, these lunches are a gourmet feast.

CONCLUSION

Breaking Bread

Twenty-two years ago I had an opportunity to attend a “Walk to Emmaus” retreat. It was Dallas Emmaus Walk #53 and I sat at the table of Luke. There were about forty other men who were on the retreat and I was the youngest participant by at least ten years. Although I had attended several church retreats and Christian summer camps as a student, this was the first time I had ever been invited to participate in an adult spiritual formation program. As such, I was excited about the opportunity to be around adults for a weekend. I say this because I was a student minister at the time, and although I was newly enrolled in seminary, I had yet to establish any meaningful relationships on campus or at the church. I was eager to learn from those with more life experience. God must have known the desire of my heart, because that weekend I met a group of men who taught me more about God’s prevenient grace in two days than I had learned over the course of my entire life. Prevenient grace is a Wesleyan term used to describe the grace of God which is present in our lives prior to our recognition of it. This is the grace of God drawing us to himself even before we are aware of our need for it.

Throughout the weekend my eyes were opened in a way that I had never experienced before. Through worship, talks, table discussions, and shared meals, I was overwhelmed by so many expressions of God's love and grace. One of the ways I experienced this was through the retelling of the walk to Emmaus story. In reading the story, I came to see that just as the eyes of the disciples were "opened" to see the resurrected Jesus in the breaking of the bread, my eyes were also opened to seeing the love of Jesus resurrected in my life. As I think back upon this experience I can't help but wonder how this post-resurrection story might change the way we think about revitalizing the church. Let's take a moment to read it now.

The Walk to Emmaus

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" ¹⁹ He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. ²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, ²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. ²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." ²⁵ Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. ²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he

took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.³² They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.³³¹

Although I have read this story many times, I still find it difficult to comprehend the fullness of all that is happening in this final chapter in Luke. I can’t begin to imagine how surreal it must have been at the precise moment when the two disciples recognized that Jesus was seated right next to them at the table. Then, in an instant, he was gone. My favorite line from the story is the last. “Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.” What is it about the breaking of the bread that enables them to finally see that the man they had been walking and talking with the whole time was Jesus? Why didn’t they recognize him earlier? In hindsight, the disciples acknowledge their own blindness when they exclaim: “Were not our hearts burning within us, as we walked and talked with him along the road?” They must have wondered: how is it that the entire time Jesus was opening up the scriptures to us...our eyes were closed?

Opening Our Eyes

The seven-mile journey west from Jerusalem to Emmaus would have taken about three and half to four hours by foot. Although we’re not told why the disciples were headed to Emmaus, we are told that they were traveling on the same day that Mary Magdalene had seen Jesus in the cemetery and thought he was the gardener. This begs the

³³¹ Luke 24:13-35 (NRSV).

question, what kept Mary and the disciples from recognizing Jesus when they first laid eyes on him that day? It would be too convenient to say that their temporary blindness was the result of the bright light of the morning and evening sun shining in their eyes. And yet, I think that the proximity of these two stories which occur during the rising and the setting of the sun is not a mere coincidence.

The walk to Emmaus story, which has as its backdrop the setting of the sun, serves as a poignant metaphor for the darkness that has come upon them and the blindness that the disciples are experiencing emotionally and spiritually. They are grieving. And their grief has blinded them. In their blindness, they have lost the ability to see any hope for the future. Does this sound familiar? How many of our churches are grieving what they have lost? How many of our churches have lost the ability to see any hope for their future? The disciples had just witnessed their would-be Messiah's arrest, trial, torture, crucifixion, and burial. Whatever hopeful ray of light they may have seen before, it was surely extinguished in the darkness of the grave.

According to Jewish tradition, "the human eye has always been considered a passageway between the interior and exterior, the window of the soul, a conduit of worldly knowledge. And because the eye sees light, and light originates from the sun, the natural source of all life on earth, the eye has also been equated with illumination and spiritual insight."³³² At the same time, "blindness is often symbolic of the loss of spiritual vision or power."³³³ If our dying churches have any hope of regaining spiritual vitality and embracing the vision that God has for us, it will be revealed in the breaking of bread.

³³² Ellen Frankel and Betsey Platkin Teutsch, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1992), 51-52.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 52.

William Barclay notes that even when all seems lost, “the Christian goes onwards, not to a night which falls, but to a dawn which breaks – and that is what, in their sorrow and their disappointment, the two on the Emmaus road had not realized.”³³⁴

Breaking Blindness

The walk to Emmaus ends with the disciples inviting Jesus to dinner. They ask Jesus to stay and eat with them because the night is fast approaching. It is during this evening meal that the eyes of the disciples are opened, when Jesus blesses and breaks the bread. What is it about the bread, or more specifically, the “breaking of the bread,” that enables the disciples to see Jesus for who he is: the Messiah who allowed his body to be broken for them? In that table moment, the disciples’ eyes are opened and the radiance of Christ breaks in and turns their mourning into gladness. Perhaps it was in the breaking of the bread that the disciples’ thoughts and minds went back to that night in the upper room when Jesus first broke the bread and said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In that moment they recognize him. It’s as if remembrance is the prerequisite for their restored vision. And just like that, he’s gone. He vanishes from their sight.

One of the divine attributes of Jesus is that he opens up the eyes of the blind. Jesus did this both literally and figuratively. And just as Jesus did for so many throughout his life and ministry, he longs to open our eyes as well. Wherever your church is today with respect to the revitalization process, it is critically important that you remember this: even if the light of hope seems to be fading and has given way to the darkness of

³³⁴ William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series: The Gospel of Luke* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 295.

nightfall, know that Christ has come to break open whatever is blinding you from seeing the hope you have in him.

What does Jesus need to break open in your life and in your church today so that you can see the light and hope of his resurrection? Is it pride, fear, anger, or resentment? Is it a longing to relive the glory days of the past instead of embracing a future that is uncertain? What doubts do you have about where you can go from here? Has your church continued to grow smaller and smaller as you've gotten older? Are you tired of sitting at an empty table, eating alone? Are you embarrassed that you have nothing left to serve? Have your eyes become blind to the possibilities? [Have](#) you been walking into the sunset for so long that you haven't been able to see that Jesus has been right there walking beside you the whole time?

Jesus *IS* here! And he has invited us to his table. Now is the time for us to move beyond our fears and insecurities about what the future holds for the church, and to accept Christ's invitation to turn back to the table. Now is the time for us to gather around the tables in our homes and in our churches, and to break bread in the presence of Christ so that we can see his face and recognize the face of Christ in one another. Jesus knows the pain of feeling alone. More than this, Jesus knows what it [is](#) like to sit at an empty table after everyone else has denied, betrayed, or abandoned him. It is in the breaking of the bread that we see Jesus for who he really is, the one who allowed his body to be broken so that his light might break forth from the darkness.

The Emmaus story concludes with the disciples turning back to the east ... back to Jerusalem to share the good news that Christ is Risen! My guess is that the start [of](#) this walk was a lot different [from](#) the first, because this time they were able to walk with their

eyes wide open and their faces set to the rising sun. Now, as we go forth to share the Good News of the Gospel, and set our sights on the renewal of our beloved church, let the revitalization journey begin with our [re]turning to the table.

APPENDIX B:
FIELD RESEARCH REPORT

In addition to documenting and reflecting upon the revitalization efforts of Custer Road UMC, I reached out to several other United Methodist Churches in the North Texas episcopal area in order to collect relevant statistical data, make on-site visits, and conduct more than 45 hours of interviews. These churches included: St. Andrew UMC (Plano, Texas), Christ UMC (Plano, Texas), First UMC (McKinney, Texas), First UMC (Richardson, Texas), and Fellowship UMC (Trophy Club, Texas). These particular churches were chosen because each of them has recently conducted a capital campaign dedicated to remodeling their buildings and funding new ministry initiatives for the express purpose of church revitalization and growth. In addition to all being located within the same 25-mile radius, the six churches have similar affinity to that of Custer Road UMC, and are comparable with respect to their approaches to worship, evangelism, discipleship, and mission.

Outline of the Field Research Methodology

- I. On-Site Visits and In-Person Interviews
- II. Financial and Statistical Data
- III. Metrics and Critical Analysis

St. Andrew UMC – September 27, 2015

Arthur Jones (Assoc.)

In my interview with Rev. Arthur Jones, Pastor of “The Well” at St. Andrew UMC we spent a great deal of time discussing the impact that the launch of their contemporary service has had at the church. The most dramatic impact has been related to the demographic makeup of the congregation. Since the launch of the service on September 9, 2012, the number of active young adults thirty-five and younger has grown from approximately six or seven to more than thirty. Additionally, the number of young families with children has quadrupled. This influx of new young families has resulted in corollary growth within the children’s ministries. Perhaps the greatest impact that this new service has had on the church is that it has dramatically lowered the average age of the congregation. Although St. Andrew UMC has seen exponential growth with respect to reaching young families through the launch of the new service, the church has also seen a decline in its traditional services as many of the members of the church have switched over to the new service. That being said, overall worship attendance is up almost five percent over last year, and what started as one service in 2012 averaging 185 has now grown to two services with a combined average of almost 700.

Not including Rev. Jones’ salary and benefits, “The Well” has an annual budget of \$330,000. This includes salaries and stipends for the worship leader, a creative director, two part-time multi-media positions and operational expenses. Non-salary budget items include pastoral expenses (\$2,500), worship support (\$9,000), set designs (\$7,000), CD production (\$5,000), and music staffing (\$81,300). Renovation of the

worship space and coffee bar area cost \$1.3M. A \$2.2 M capital campaign was launched in May of 2012 for the purpose of paying for these renovations and providing staffing for the first three years.

Christ UMC – November 22, 2015

Josh Fitzpatrick (Assoc.)

During my interview with Rev. Josh Fitzpatrick, Pastor of “Table of Grace” at Christ UMC, we also discussed the impact that the launch of this service has had on the church. Josh was hired in May of 2014 to help revive a contemporary service that had an average weekly attendance of approximately 100 but had remained stagnant for approximately 24 months. After shutting down the “Impact” service for six weeks, the service was re-launched with approximately 80 people, many of whom had been recruited to serve as greeters, ushers, hospitality coordinators, communion servers, set-designers, sermon based small group leaders, and connections team members. In the 14 months since the launch of the service, average attendance is now at 185 and 70 new members have joined the church so far this year. Unlike St. Andrew UMC, Christ UMC has not seen as dramatic a shift in their primary demographic makeup. Although they are reaching more young adults and families with small children, the overall age of the congregation has remained fairly constant.

Not including Rev. Josh Fitzpatrick’s salary and benefits, the annual budget for “Table of Grace” is \$53,000. This includes a part-time worship leader, contract musicians, set designing, advertising, and special events for Christmas and Easter. It is

important to note that this budget does not include “overlap” services provided by the congregation such as graphic design and printing. In contrast, St. Andrew UMC, Christ UMC utilizes more volunteers to design their sets, and has a much smaller band (4 as compared to 7-8). As such, their budget for contact musicians is approximately \$60,000 less. When there is a need for additional elements, the active men’s ministry often provides labor and building materials little or no cost. A \$1M capital campaign was launched in 2014 to renovate the children’s building entrance and hallways.

FUMC Richardson – April 12, 2016

Clayton Oliphant (Senior Minister), Rich Rindfuss (Assoc.)

In the fall of 2015 construction began on a new 70,000 square foot expansion that will consist of a state of the art 450-500 seat contemporary worship venue, fellowship hall, café, music suite, and second-floor offices. The cost of this project is approximately \$22.5 million. Currently the church has \$14.7 million in pledged contributions and dedicates approximately 8% of its operational budget to service existing debt. Debt service is projected to rise to 12% upon completion of the current project. As a part of the long-term vision of the congregation, this project is in response to the church’s most recent growth patterns and projections.

FUMC Richardson currently averages nearly 2,400 in worship each weekend, with 2,100 attending one of three traditional services, and 100 attending the Sunday evening contemporary worship experience. An additional 150 to 200 people worship through various live-stream services. Due to lack of space, the church has only been able

to offer contemporary worship on Sunday evenings. The new space will allow them to offer more services on Sunday mornings when other children, youth, and adult ministry options are available. The contemporary (Access) service was launched in January 2010 and experienced a change of pastors when Rich arrived in July 2012. The current budget for the service is approximately \$230,000 with around \$200,000 dedicated to personnel and the remainder for operational expenses. Full-time positions include one clergy and one worship leader. Part-time positions include one clergy, one children's assistant, one welcome coordinator, band members, and tech support.

As the church is nearing full capacity in its traditional worship services, the primary purpose for the Access service is to create new space for new people, and to reach a younger, more diverse segment of the population. Early indications are that the service is accomplishing this, as those who attend the Access service are on average 10 to 15 years younger than those who attend traditional services. It is important to note that FUMC Richardson has consistently been one of the fastest growing and most effective large churches in our denomination for the past 10 years.

FUMC McKinney – April 19, 2016 and December 13, 2016

Tommy Brumett (Senior Minister), Doug Fox (Assoc.), Stacy Piyakhun (Assoc.)

On April 19, I had the opportunity to visit with 3 pastors from FUMC McKinney: Senior Pastor Tommy Brumett, Associate Pastor Doug Fox, and Lead Pastor of the Melissa Campus Stacy Piyakhun. A great deal of our time in the combined and individual interviews was spent discussing how the church is reaching the community by creating

new worship venues and launching a second campus. Although the vision for multi-venue ministry began in 2007, things began to take shape in 2009 when the post office adjacent to the church became available. The church, which was in the midst of a \$1.5M capital campaign for the purpose of remodeling their main campus, changed course and voted to purchase the post office for \$900,000 instead. Following another campaign in 2012, FUMC McKinney constructed a new 22,000 square-foot youth and family activities building at a cost of \$4.8M. This building includes a 250 seat worship venue, a large gathering and recreation area, mezzanine, classrooms, youth ministry offices, kitchen, and a large outdoor pavilion. Debt service for the project is approximately 8% of the \$3.2M annual budget. FUMC McKinney currently averages 1,800 in worship with 1,250 attending one of four traditional services, 400 attending one of three contemporary services, and an additional 170 attending the Melissa campus. This February the church began live-streaming the 10 AM traditional service. Currently, the biggest challenge for the church moving forward is the lack of space in the sanctuary. It is important to note that FUMC McKinney is one of the 25 fastest growing UMCs in the country.

In 2013 the annual conference asked them to take over a struggling new church start located 10 miles north of the main campus. Upon taking over the struggling church, a \$220,000 budget was established to cover the salaries for a full-time Elder, a full-time worship leader/youth director, a part-time children's coordinator, and a part-time administrative assistant. This budget also covers the cost for office rental space and worship space at one of the nearby elementary schools. In 2015 the Melissa congregation completed a \$670,000 capital campaign for the purpose of building a new church on a 12-acre property that was donated by one of the members of FUMC McKinney. The

estimated cost for the new building is \$2.5M. As previously mentioned, the Melissa Campus has an average weekly worship attendance of 170, which is up from 35 when Stacy was appointed in July of 2013.

On December 13, I had the opportunity to have a follow-up visit with Rev. Stacy Piyakhun, Lead pastor of FUMC McKinney's Melissa Campus. Most of our time was spent discussing how the church is preparing for development and phase one construction on their 12-acre campus. Since Stacy and I spoke last spring, attendance at the Melissa campus has increased by nearly 10% and is between 180- 200 each week. Their original budget of \$220,000 has also grown to \$260,000 and is projected to increase to \$280,000 in 2017. The budget covers the salaries for a full-time Elder, a full-time worship leader/youth director, a part-time children's coordinator, and a part-time administrative assistant. An additional, part-time facilities/set up coordinator will be brought on board in January. This budget also covers the cost for office rental space and worship space at one of the nearby elementary schools. In 2015 the Melissa congregation completed a \$670,000 capital campaign for the purpose of building a new church on a 12 acre property that was donated by one of the members of FUMC McKinney. The estimated cost for the new building is \$2.5M. As previously mentioned, the Melissa Campus has an average weekly worship attendance of nearly 200, which is up from 35 when Stacy was appointed in July of 2013.

FUMC Rockwall***Joe Pool (Senior Minister), Jenna Morrison (Assoc.)***

During my interviews with Rev. Joe Pool and Rev. Jenna Morrison from FUMC Rockwall, discussions focused on the years following their latest capital campaign in 2013. The major components of the project were a new traditional 1,100 seat sanctuary, and the renovation of the old 450-500 seat contemporary worship venue. The total cost of these two projects was approximately \$6.1 million. Currently the church has received \$4.2 million in contributions and dedicates 10% of its \$2.5 million annual operating budget to service debt. It is interesting to note that unlike what we experienced here at Custer Road UMC the capital campaign at FUMC Rockwall did not adversely impact operational giving in any way.³³⁵ In fact, in the first three years of the campaign, FUMC Rockwall saw increases of 5% in 2014, 7% in 2015, and 10% in 2016.

The church currently averages 1,000 in worship each weekend, with 850 attending one of three traditional services, and 125-150 attending the contemporary service. The contemporary (Open Door) service was launched in 2008 and has endured 8 location and 3 pastor changes. Since Jenna arrived in July of 2013, the service has seen steady growth and now brings in between 12-15% of the church's new members which is comprised primarily of young families with children. The budget for the service is approximately \$70,000 and is completely dedicated to personnel. Part-time positions include: one worship leader, three band members, and one support person.

³³⁵ Although Custer Road UMC experienced an overall increase in giving from 2015 to 2016 immediately following its fall 2015 capital campaign, actual operational giving fell by 7% in 2016, and an additional 6% in 2017. Giving projections for 2018 have us anticipating a 2% decline in overall revenue.

Fellowship UMC – October 15, 2016

Edlen Cowley (Senior Minister)

Fellowship UMC is a church that, up until recently, had remained fairly flat over a majority of the last ten years. That being said, a pastor change two years ago has brought a renewed energy and excitement to the church and community. One thing that makes this church unique and distinguishes it from the others that I have researched thus far is that, with Edlen Cowley serving as pastor, this is a cross-racial appointment. Edlen is African American, while the church is almost exclusively Anglo. Edlen has served in cross-racial appointments for the past eleven years and his model for revitalization and growth is consistent with that of the other pastors and churches that I interviewed.

When Edlen arrived two and a half years ago, the church was looking to expand its ministries to meet the needs of the growing community. In 2014 a storm literally ripped the steeple right off of the building and the church received a great deal of media coverage because of it. The church used this as an opportunity to rally. In 2015 the church raised \$160,000 to remodel their lobby, restrooms, and children's and youth areas. In 2016, the church again raised money to install a digital sign on the road in front of the church. The renovations have had an immediate impact on the church as they have seen a 20% increase in worship attendance over the past 18 months: up from 340 to almost 400 currently. The church has also seen an increase in first-time visitors to the church and has seen giving increases each of the last three years.

The biggest obstacle the church faces currently is helping the leadership to move beyond their small-church mindset. As of the end of 2017, Fellowship UMC had renovated its fellowship hall in order to offer contemporary services concurrent to the

traditional ones that are held in the sanctuary. The one significant challenge to their plans; however, is that the church will have to wait until the third quarter of 2018 to hire another full-time Elder and worship leader because they do not currently have the financial resources to do so at this time. I have suggested that this new worship venue could be launched earlier if they decide to equip laypersons to lead the service using a multi-site, church planting model that has been developed by Kenneth Nash.³³⁶

³³⁶ Kenneth Jeffrey Nash, “The Identifying, Equipping, and Sending of Laypersons to Lead a Multi-Site Church” (DMIN diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2014), Abstract.

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