ABSTRACT

EVANGELISM STRATEGIES FOR REACHING PRE-CHRISTIANS IN UPSTATE NEW YORK: A STUDY OF THREE WESLEYAN CHURCHES EFFECTIVELY REACHING THEIR CULTURES

by

Donald Eugene Lain

The purpose of this research project was to discover common evangelism strategies employed by three successful Wesleyan churches in upstate New York. More specifically, the research sought to discover strategies that effectively evangelized pre-Christian populations. New York statistically is among the leading states that have advanced away from Christendom to a new pre-Christian era. If churches are to succeed, they must understand this shift in spiritual status and adjust their strategies.

I conducted interviews, contextually defined pre-Christian characteristics, and identified common evangelism strategies.
DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

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EFFECTIVELY REACHING THEIR CULTURES

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Introduction

David W. Henderson offers a descriptive account that effectively introduces the focus of this dissertation. Henderson wished to mail a birthday gift to a friend in Cincinnati, so he purchased, wrapped, addressed, and mailed the item in time to arrive before his friend’s birthday.

When the day came, Henderson called his friend and was surprised that the package had not arrived. He called his friend twice in the succeeding two weeks only to be further disappointed at the disappearance of the gift. One week later, the package returned to his own home marked “Return to Sender. Address Unknown.”

Somewhat aggravated, Henderson checked his records and confirmed the address. He then looked again at a recent letter from his friend and made a terrible discovery: the friend had moved to another Cincinnati address without Henderson’s knowledge (15-16).

Henderson makes an appropriate application from this account:

We’ve done our work, carefully unfolding God’s spoken Word. Now we pack up our insights into well-chosen phrases and send them out across this nation’s pulpits and restaurants and neighborhood fences. The perfect gift.

But the address of the world around us has changed. Dramatic shifts in the fabric of American culture have nudged the world out of reach of the words we’ve so carefully selected. (16)

In the past decade and beyond, ministry’s address has changed and caught many off guard. The dramatic shifts in American culture as mentioned by Henderson are evident, but the church has only recently recognized them.
Specifically, the shift that has occurred in the United States is one from an age of Christendom back to a pre-Christian age. The age of Christendom has effectively ended in the United States. Alex Roxburgh offers this insight: “[T]he fourth and twentieth centuries form bookends marking transition points in the history of the church” (qtd. in Nees 24). Roxburgh states that during these bookended sixteen centuries, Christianity became the “state religion” of most of Europe and America. These centuries were preceded by and are now followed by time periods in which Christianity is no longer the norm (24).

**Dilemma**

As this opening chapter introduces and Chapter 2 further documents, the dilemma facing the Christian church in the United States can be summarized as follows:

1. The age of Christendom as a predominant culture no longer exists in the United States. Christianity is no longer the dominant religion. While persons in the church often conclude that today’s culture is anti-Christian, the conclusion is erroneous.

2. Although the age of Christendom as a predominant culture has ended, many churches are unaware of this truth. Others are aware of the cultural change but, due to denominational pressures and expectations, continue to operate in a way that fails to address the culture. A perception of ineffectiveness pervades many local American churches, but the cause of, or solution to, such ineffectiveness is not identified.

3. Because many American churches do not understand that Christendom as a predominant culture has ended, churches continue to operate as they have in the past. Churches wonder why their communities do not respond to their message.
America is no longer a Christian nation (Wiseman 24). More data will be offered subsequently to support this position, but some statistics at this point place in perspective the decline of Christianity in the United States. George Barna in *Re-Churching the Unchurched* speaks of two groups that should concern the church. First, he speaks of United States residents classified as “not born again Christians” (12). In 2000 when the book was written, these residents totaled “180 to 190 million people” (12). “If that group were a nation unto itself, it would be the third most populated nation on the planet, behind only China and India” (12).

Second, he speaks of the unchurched. According to Barna, a person is unchurched “if he/she has not attended a Christian church at any time during the past six months, other than special events such as weddings and funerals” (*Re-Churching the Unchurched* 12-13). “[I]n spite of the presence of 324,000 Protestant and 20,000 Catholic churches throughout our nation,… [t]he unchurched population … generally encompasses about one-third of the adult population and slightly less among young people” (13). Barna estimates that by the middle of the twenty-first century “about 95 to 100 million Americans of all ages [would be] unchurched” (13). In perspective, “if all the unchurched people in the U.S. were a nation of their own, they would be the eleventh most populated country on earth” (13).

Historians, authors, and church leaders have often stated that the United States is a Christian nation. For years this phenomenon was assumed without data to support the claim. Barna’s research reveals a different truth: America is actually a nation whose majority is both unchurched and un-Christian. Christianity is no longer the norm but the
exception. The church must acknowledge the end of Christian dominance and understand that it now operates in a mission field.

Thom S. Rainer (relying on Barna’s research) speaks of the decline of the American church. He summarizes the declining church’s condition:

Only 41 percent of Americans attend church services on a typical weekend. Each new generation becomes increasingly unchurched. Slightly over one-half (51%) of the builder generation (born before 1946) attends church in a typical weekend. But only 41 percent of the boomers (born 1946 to 1964) and 34 percent of the busters (born 1965 to 1976) attend church on a given weekend. Our recent research on the younger generation, the bridgers (born 1977 to 1994), indicates that only 4 percent of the teenagers understand the gospel and have accepted Christ, even if they attend church. Of the entire bridger generation, less than 30 percent attend church. (*Surprising Insights* 33)

Rainer concludes that “America is clearly becoming less Christian, less evangelized, and less churched” (34). The condition is progressive.

The end of Christendom is more than just a decline in attendance and adherence to the Christian faith. Christian understanding has declined. Alvin Reid in *Radically Unchurched* gives this important observation:

[O]ne fact is clear—with the shift from modernism to postmodernism, Christians have lost the home-field advantage. A generation ago, even atheists were “Christian atheists”; atheists disbelieved in the Christian God, but the discussion was at least on our turf. Now, in most parts of America, including major universities in the Bible belt, many people have no clear understanding of even the most basic Christian terminology. (78)

Another sign of Christendom’s demise is the increasing ignorance of basic Christianity. Postmodernism has convinced today’s generations that all grounded truth, including Christian truth, does not exist. All truth is questioned.

A further sign of Christendom’s end is religious cultural change. Christianity is no longer the dominant voice of American culture. Several leading voices on the state of
American Christianity are addressing this shift. Reggie McNeal says, “The American culture no longer props up the church the way it did, no longer accepts the church as a player at the table of public life, and can be downright hostile to the church’s presence” (Present Future 5). He points out that “the values of classic Christianity no longer dominate the way Americans believe or behave” (5). Christianity has ceased to be America’s driving cultural force.

Robert H. Scott, leading researcher on American church growth and decline in the Church of the Nazarene, speaks of the condition of today’s culture. He concludes, “Everywhere, especially in once church-friendly North America, we find shocking examples of paganism, apathy, and darkness. America’s media and political leaders have pushed this country far toward ultimate heathenism” (42). Scott is not saying that the church itself has become pagan, apathetic, and dark, but that it has culturally lost its preferred Christian status.

Harry Lee Poe speaks of an American culture “in which the [Christian] church has no special status” (10). Reflecting on the thoughts of missionary sociologist Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, Poe speaks of the United States as a “mission field” once again “as if the gospel had never been preached here before” (10). He, too, concludes that “[t]he old assumptions of Christendom no longer hold. The [Christian] church has lost North America and Europe as she once lost North Africa and the Middle East” (10).

George G. Hunter, III has been the leading authority on this topic during the past two decades. He succinctly summarizes the post-Christendom condition in the United States in How to Reach Secular People:

Although secularity takes different regional and cultural forms, Christianity in each form has lost most of its influence. A vast majority of
the people in western culture are no longer christian [sic] disciples by anyone’s serious definition. They live their lives, personal and public, not consciously influenced or shaped by Christianity. Christianity is no longer the dominant privileged religion of western nations. Indeed, western nations now ferment with many religions and philosophical options, and Christianity must now compete [original emphasis] on its merits if it is to rewin the West. (32)

The end of Christendom can be seen in these ways: attendance decline, decrease in adherence to Christian faith, increasing ignorance concerning even basic Christian truth, and a cultural shift moving Christianity from dominance to neutrality and sometimes hostility. The end of Christendom identifies the cultural challenge of the American church and is its first problem.

Although the age of Christendom as a predominant culture has ended, churches are unaware of this truth. Some churches are aware of the cultural change but, due to denominational pressures and expectations, continue to operate in a way that fails to address the culture. A perception of ineffectiveness pervades American churches, but the cause or solution is not identified. Rainer describes churches as comprised of “Christians [who] do not realize how unevangelized and unchurched America has become” (Surprising Insights 33). In response to the progressive generational decline in church attendance and Christian awareness, he speaks of a church that is “oblivious to this reality” (34).

Haddon Robinson states this aspect of the problem:

When we weren’t looking, the world changed and we weren’t ready for it. Christians may be nostalgic for the “good old days” when society endorsed Christian values and believed churches were important. But we wait in vain for the culture to turn back its thinking so we can speak to it again as we did in a more “Christian” period. (10)
The local church’s challenge is to realize that its culture and ministry have returned to where it began: a pre-Christian culture. The church must implement a twenty-first century adaptation of first-century apostolic ministry.

G. Hunter in *Church for the Unchurched* speaks of the shift in terms of “opportunity” (23):

The shape of the Church’s emerging opportunity … looks like this:

- Christendom is largely dissolved, and the peoples of Europe and North America are increasingly secular.
- The Enlightenment, which provided the worldview for the secular West, is a spent force. Consequently, people are increasingly receptive to, and searching for, a satisfying worldview.
- We are, once again, in an Apostolic Age—much like the age that early Christianity engaged in. (23)

The twenty-first century American church must recognize that today’s Apostolic Age would be different than in biblical times. The ministry of the original apostolic period was to a specific culture. The challenge is to apply apostolic understanding and principles to the twenty-first century version of pre-Christians.

Elmer Towns and Warren Bird summarize this challenge:

North America today may at one time have been like Jerusalem—an environment where most people worshipped the same God (or at least claimed that they did), shared a common knowledge of Scripture, and held a similar worldview. Today North America is becoming increasingly like Athens. The Christian’s task, with the Apostle Paul of old, is to utilize contemporary culture as a tool to meaningfully introduce the message of salvation. The challenge is how to enter the language of today to engage the “Athens” in which we live with the life-changing good news of Jesus Christ. (57-58)

This challenge demands a clear understanding of the new Apostolic Age and an identification of approaches effective in evangelizing today’s “Athens.”

Additionally, some pastors and church leaders have become aware of the surrounding pre-Christian culture, but they do not respond to this phenomenon because of
denominational pressures. While association with a denomination is valuable, one liability is the built-in systems controlling church operations. Specifically, denominations have well established measures that churches strive to achieve, often at the expense of culturally relevant ministry. Most denominational measures are internal measures (such as Sunday school attendance or budget payments) that take energy and focus away from effective external measures (such as instituting outreach initiatives that reach pre-Christians).

The American church is at a critical juncture as it enters the twenty-first century. The age of Christendom has effectively ended. Many churches are unaware of this end. The American church must realize that the United States has become a pre-Christian nation that demands a neo-apostolic approach to ministry.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to discover a denominational model that effectively evangelized the pre-Christian culture of upstate New York in the twenty-first century. At this point, identification of the important conditions that shape the purpose of this research is necessary. These conditions explain the specific nature of this research.

First as a pastor in a denomination (Church of the Nazarene), I wished to discover an evangelistic model with dynamics similar to my ministry setting. Three Wesleyan churches were chosen as study subjects. This choice was intentional because the Wesleyan Church is nearly identical to the Church of the Nazarene in doctrine, polity, and practice. No Nazarene churches in the Upstate New York district have grown as successfully as these churches, hence the importance of studying a similar Wesleyan-Holiness denomination.
Second, the study assumed a pre-Christian culture. The previous segment documented, in part, that the United States is largely becoming predominantly secular, unchurched, and similar to the Apostolic Age. Further evidence is offered in Chapter 2. Pre-Christian is becoming an appropriate descriptor of American culture. Also, most statistical data identified the Northeast, along with the West, as the most unchurched of all population groups. My experience as pastor in upstate New York for twenty years confirms that “unchurched” is an appropriate cultural descriptor.

Data offered by the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) shows some evidence of growing secularism in the Northeast. The following summary of religious affiliation in New York State is offered from 2000. New York’s religious affiliation is divided into seven categories with the following breakdown: evangelical Protestant—559,060; mainline Protestant—1,290,577; Orthodox—119,895; Roman Catholic—7,550,491; other—1,939,813; unclaimed—7,516,621 (“State Membership Report”). In Syracuse, specifically (where I ministered), the religious affiliation is evangelical Protestant—27,391; mainline Protestant—88,122; Orthodox—3,587; Roman Catholic—214,304; other—15,958; unclaimed—382,755 (“Metro Area Membership Report: Syracuse”). In New York State, 48.8 percent of people are classified as other or unclaimed (“State Membership Report”). For Syracuse, the numbers are more drastic where 54.4 percent of the city is classified as other or unclaimed. A closer look at the data also reveals that many in the remaining categories would not be classified as Protestant Christians. Many who claim a specific religious group are members in name only (“Metro Area Membership Report: Syracuse”). The data shows that New York State is considerably unclaimed, and Syracuse fits that category more extensively (“State
Membership Report”; “Metro Area Membership Report: Syracuse”). ARDA data shows that Albany and Rochester are even more unclaimed. ARDA data also shows that Buffalo is more Roman Catholic but still considerably unclaimed (“Metro Area Membership Report: Albany”; “Buffalo”; “Rochester”).

Third, upstate New York was my ministry context. I pastored in Springwater for six years and Syracuse for fourteen years. I desired to understand my ministry location better. The three churches studied are in upstate New York with two of the three in similar population sizes to my former ministry location.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to discover a denominational model that effectively evangelized the pre-Christian culture of upstate New York in the twenty-first century.

**Research Question #1**

How is pastoral leadership important in reaching pre-Christians within a denominational model of evangelism?

**Research Question #2**

What cultural understanding did pastors use to guide their evangelistic efforts?

**Research Question #3**

To what factors do the churches attribute their numerical growth?

**Definition of Terms**

Understanding of terms is critical to this research. Some terms are more technical in nature; some have multiple meanings or applications.
The purpose was to discover a denominational model for evangelizing pre-Christians. Denomination is generally understood as a collection of churches with a shared government and/or theology. Often denominations share common cultures shaped by denominational measures that define success. Denominational affiliation is valuable for accountability, support (physical, emotional, and financial), resourcing, and camaraderie. Denominational affiliation is a liability when expectations in measuring systems cause churches to strive for less important goals and ignore critical ministries. For example, if a denomination measures success in terms of Sunday school attendance or budget payments, the church will strive to maintain itself because these are internal measures. In studying three churches within a specific denomination, my goal was to discover how they dealt with such pressures as they attempted to reach pre-Christians.

The research took place in three churches in upstate New York. Upstate New York refers to all areas of the state outside New York City. Many non-New York residents are surprised to learn that most of New York State is comprised of rural areas, small towns, and cities. Albany, Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse are four major cities in New York, but none of them exceed 500,000 in population. Upstate New York is more conservative, rural, white-Anglo/European than downstate (i.e., New York City). Upstate New York is quite secular and somewhat resistant to religion.

The term evangelize is common in Christian circles but has very broad definitions. Evangelism is often defined as the end product. A person is converted or born again and thus evangelized, or common thinking says that a person is not evangelized until he or she becomes part of a local church. For the purpose of this paper, evangelize is meant in a more generic sense: to move a person closer to God. Defining evangelism too
narrowly limits ministry to the pre-Christian who may not be prone to following traditional paths. A pre-Christian is characteristically (as seen in the literature review) spiritually hungry but does not believe organized churches are the answer. Although difficult to accept by those raised in Christendom, a person in today’s culture may be effectively evangelized but not join a church as typically understood by church people. Resistance to organized structures can be frustrating for many pastors or laypersons because of the difficulty in measuring results. In keeping with today’s culture, congregations may return to house churches as the norm.

Postmodern is further defined in the literature review. For these purposes, I have used a modified version of Thomas Glenn Jackson, III’s definition. Jackson defines the term as follows: “Postmodern describes the philosophical, religious, and cultural ministry area that has replaced the modernist/Enlightenment movement” (5). I would modify the definition by excluding the word “religious.” While postmodernism has religious results, the term postmodern is a philosophical and cultural term.

While the term postmodern is not, in my estimate, a religious descriptor of American culture, two words are descriptors. The first is post-Christian. As postmodern is a reaction against modernity, post-Christian is a reaction against Christianity. American culture has experienced Christianity and rejected it in some form. Some have rejected Christianity’s claims while others have rejected only its forms, specifically institutional forms. McNeal introduces a growing category of post-Christians that he calls “post-congregational Christians” (Present Future 4). He defines this group as ones who “are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith. They contend that the church no longer contributes to their spiritual
development” (4). Citing statistics from David Barrett’s World Christian Encyclopedia, McNeal states that about “112 million churchless Christians worldwide” exist, but he projects that the number will “double in the next twenty years” (5).

A second religious descriptor is the term pre-Christian. Other terms commonly used to describe this population group are secular, pagan, unchurched, radically unchurched, or “neverchurched.” For the sake of this project, the term pre-Christian refers to those who have either never been exposed to Christianity in a meaningful way or have at most a distant memory of Christianity resulting in no clear personal understanding of the faith. Neverchurched is not a term I would use as a definition of pre-Christian because many pre-Christians have at some time been churched, though possibly in the distant past or in forms that neutralized the gospel or anesthetized the person to the point of no Christian understanding. In my personal experience, parishioners have sometimes attended twelve years of parochial school but have almost no understanding of the tenets of Christianity.

Reid offers the following to help clarify the term pre-Christian:

In the first century, the apostle Paul was called of God to be a missionary to the Gentiles. The Jews were Paul’s people. They had a heritage of faith, a scriptural underpinning, and a common cultural background. The Gentiles in the first century were those who, for the most part, knew nothing about the gospel message until someone like Paul told them. Some Gentiles were religious; some were not. But they had no heritage of Scripture, as did the Jews.

First century Gentiles, then, are analogous to the millions of unchurched people in our day in this country who have almost no real knowledge of Christianity. Oh, they know what a clerical collar is, and they recognize a church building, but they have no practical knowledge of the gospel. (Radically Unchurched 22)

The challenge is to understand today’s “Gentile” population to achieve ministry effectiveness.
A final term is **Christendom**. Simply stated, Christendom is a sixteen-century period between the fourth and twentieth centuries “during which Christianity was the official religion of the state churches of Europe and the cultural or civic religion of the United States” (Nees 24). G. Hunter speaks of Christendom as the “period of Western history when parish churches influenced virtually everyone in Western Culture” (*Church* 20). Using more common vernacular, G. Hunter identifies this period as one in which the church enjoyed the “home field advantage” (20). Robinson speaks of Christendom as the time during which society endorsed Christian values and beliefs and churches played an important role (10). The research documents the demise of Christendom as a predominant culture in twenty-first century America.

**Context**

The research for this dissertation was conducted in three churches located in upstate New York. Church A (city population ten thousand) and Church B (city population 5,500) are suburbs of a larger city of approximately 290,000. Church C is in a growing tourist town of approximately twelve thousand (*American Road Atlas 2006* 135).

These three churches are located in population groups fairly representative of upstate New York. Many communities are small towns or suburbs relatively near a small or medium-sized city. Additionally, the churches are located in population groups somewhat typical of the northeast United States with the exception of major metropolitan areas such as New York City or Boston.

**Methodology**

The research conducted was qualitative, using interviews specifically.

Distinguishing qualitative from quantitative, William Wiersma and Stephen G. Jurs offer
Qualitative research has its origins in descriptive analysis, and is essentially an inductive process, reasoning from the specific situation to a general conclusion. Quantitative research, on the other hand, is more closely associated with deduction, reasoning from general principle to specific situations. (13)

By definition, the goal was to make discoveries described “in words instead of numbers” (Krothwohl 740). The study was a field study that used the “researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Data [was] mediated through this human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines” (Creswell 145). Such research is interpretive, meaning the researcher aims to “account for what they have given an account of” and attempts to see “beneath manifest behavior to the meaning events have for those who experience them” (35). In other words, the data reported in such research addresses both words heard and perceived within the context of the research. Further description of the qualitative method of research is offered in Chapters 2 and 3.

Participants

The focus of the research was three Wesleyan churches in upstate New York averaging above one thousand in Sunday morning attendance. The pastor was interviewed, speaking on behalf of the congregations. The three churches were chosen based upon these criteria: they are located in upstate New York, they are from the same denomination, they are growing, and they have attendance above one thousand persons.

The research utilized three sets of interviews. I conducted two sets of interviews at the churches studied and the third set in a restaurant. The third pastor no longer served at the church being researched, so an alternate location was required.
**Instrumentation**

The research was qualitative, seeking to discover common traits and approaches for ministering to pre-Christians in upstate New York. The anticipated outcome was the forming of a theory about possible ministry approaches to be used more broadly in other churches. I developed and used a researcher-designed interview. I interviewed each pastor three times, approximately one hour per interview.

**Data Collection**

I contacted denominational leaders, first by e-mail, then by phone, and explained the purpose of the research. I sought permission to interview the pastoral staff of the churches within their jurisdictions and asked the denominational leaders to discuss the research goal with the three pastors and seek their cooperation. The denominational leaders reported back by e-mail that the pastors were willing to be interviewed. I then contacted the pastors directly, explained the project, confirmed their participation in the research, and began to schedule the interviews.

Each pastor was interviewed with questions moving from general to more specific. Some interviews lasted one hour per protocol, some interviews combined the protocols into longer time periods. The first two interviews included eight questions and the last interview included seven questions. I sought and received permission to record the sessions. The recorded sessions were then transcribed and analyzed.

**Delimitations and Generalizability**

The study focused on churches with specific characteristics. The project may be limited by those characteristics, namely, they are located in upstate New York in communities that are primarily white Anglo and middle to upper class, are
denominational, are theologically Wesleyan, are growing, and have attendances above one thousand. I hoped to discover transferable principles that would apply to small and mid-sized churches. I also hoped to find useful data for other denominations, specifically those theologically Wesleyan. Some data would not be practically useful for smaller churches with limited personnel and budgets.

I assumed that these three churches culturally and spiritually represented upstate New York and the northeast United States. The project may be limited in that this assumption may not be true for all areas of upstate New York and the northeast United States.

The study is limited because of a recent pastoral change in one church. Nevertheless, access to the pastor who recently resigned was secured. The data is potentially limited in these two respects: one pastor interviewed offered data from past memories, not current activity.

The anticipated outcome of the study was a set of common traits and/or principles that could possibly serve as an evangelistic model for upstate New York.

Theological Foundation

Ministers must understand their assignment at the dawn of the twenty-first century in the United States of America. Specific to this study is an understanding of ministry in upstate New York. The assignment is actually the same as in the past: offer God’s message and forgiveness to pre-converted persons. The historical conditions that change are their description and culture. To fulfill this assignment successfully, ministers must understand their commission and culture.
The purpose statement of Christ’s ministry, found in Luke 4:16-21, gives instruction concerning the ministerial assignment. The purpose statement encompasses the Great Commission and may even surpass it. The purpose statement connects back to the Old Testament, and its association with later ministers in the New Testament seems to make the words more central and historically overarching than any other passage informing the Church of its mission.

The Scriptures offer this account after Jesus returned to Galilee following his time of testing in the desert:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16-21, NIV)


title of “Here and Now—or Never” (19). E. Earl Ellis offers a much larger slice of Scripture from 1:5-9:50 and calls these verses “The Messiahship and Mission of Jesus.”

While I do not presume to be more scholarly than any of these learned authors, my repeated reading of the book of Luke tends to place together 2:21-4:30, a section of Scripture entitled “Jesus’ Time of Preparation.” Each smaller section of verses tells how Jesus prepared for ministry. In 2:21-40, Jesus prepared for ministry as his earthly parents brought him to the temple to be circumcised. While there, Simeon and Anna announced Jesus’ purpose in life. In 2:40-52, the boy Jesus already understood his calling and demonstrated all he had learned to his parents. John the Baptist offered a ministry of preparation in 3:1-20. The baptism of Jesus, which included the anointing of the Holy Spirit, served as a moment of preparation. Jesus was tempted in the desert as recorded in 4:1-13 to prepare him for the tests of ministry. Finally, in 4:14-21, Jesus took his last preparatory step: announcing and beginning his mission, followed by the first signs of resistance that he faced (4:22-30). To illustrate Jesus’ preparation for ministry, one must look at all these elements together.

More broadly, Luke 4:16-20 offers a front bracket in the writings of Luke’s two-part history of the Church that continues through Luke and Acts to Paul’s testimony before King Agrippa in Acts 26. The language is similar. Jesus declared his mission to be one of preaching to the poor, proclaiming freedom for prisoners, opening blind eyes, and releasing the oppressed. When asked by King Agrippa to explain his life, Paul summarized his calling and mission with a restatement of Jesus’ instructions given to him on the Damascus road, words that seem very similar to Jesus’ own mission:

I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive
forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. (Acts 26:18)

While the words are not identical, the parallels are clear: Both speak of opening blind eyes; release from oppression and turning people from darkness are clearly similar; freedom from imprisonment is parallel to release from the power of Satan; and, Jubilee living and sanctification are parallel expressions. From Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry through the end of Paul’s, a common vision successfully penetrated pre-Christian people. The United States is becoming a pre-Christian nation. Luke/Acts can be a missions textbook with Jesus and Paul as the teachers.

Luke 4:16-21 also connects backward in Scripture to covenant and prophecy. In God’s covenant with Abram in Genesis 12, God desires a relationship with Abram, resulting in blessing that ultimately affects all people. The prophets call the hearers to bless those outside God’s fold. Jesus, and then Paul, bring fulfillment to the covenant and prophecy as described in Jesus’ vision verses in Luke 4 and Paul’s commission recorded in Acts 26. Viewing the broader scriptural picture conveys a vitally important truth: God’s heart and goal do not change. He desires covenant and mission, demonstrated in Christ and imitated in Paul. The vision for ministry and Christian living has an author—God, a perfector—Jesus, and a possibility—Paul.

Although the biblical-theological directive prescribed by God, perfected in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and lived out by the Apostle Paul stands constant, culture has shifted repeatedly throughout history. Luke 4:16-21 was written as a vision for ministry and Christian living that must be applied to today’s culture. As the Apostle Paul ministered in a culturally relevant way, every generation must understand that cultural relevance is critical in accomplishing the mission of the Church. Jesus’ culture shares
many common characteristics with upstate New York and the northeast United States. In both situations the culture is predominantly pre-Christian.

In the time of Christ and the apostles, ministry was called “apostolic.” Ministry during Christianity’s first centuries was primarily to pre-Christians—those with either no or limited knowledge of Christianity and its claims. During the age of Christendom, Christianity was the dominant religion; therefore, the approach was less apostolic and more a matter of maintenance. However, Christendom no longer exists in America. Since the era of Christendom has ended and returned to a similar culture of Christ and the apostle Paul, ministry today must shift accordingly. Poe states that “those who recognize that the United States now represents a great mission field and that we are aliens in it will find the next century filled with all the adventure of the first three centuries of the church” (51). G. Hunter makes the interesting statement that “we face a ‘Corinthian future’; our emerging challenge is reminiscent of the church’s challenge in the ancient city of Corinth—the setting for much of Paul’s ministry and correspondence in the third quarter of the first century” (Radical Outreach 22). The church must embrace the hope of the Apostle Paul in Romans 10: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (v. 13). Paul follows this hopeful declaration with sobering questions: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (v. 14). These sobering questions are finally answered by an apostolic announcement: “As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (v. 15b).
These statements can be considered as the beginning of a sort of ministerial “apostolic succession” from Christ to Paul. The parallel statements serve as definitions of their apostolic ministry. Jesus, standing in the synagogue before the religious leaders, declared his vision at the beginning of his ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus' vision is repeated in a slightly different form by the Apostle Paul. Paul, recounting his life before King Agrippa in Acts 26, spoke of a vision from Christ that became his ministry definition:

“Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. (Acts 26:16-19)

Christ and Paul offer a definition of apostolic ministry that addresses all the previously mentioned challenges of the pre-Christian world and also a framework for practical apostolic ministry.

First, apostolic ministry is a response to a call to go. Christ responded to a call and an anointing of the Holy Spirit. Paul responded to a call, and was sent by Christ. G. Hunter points out that if a church is apostolic, it must be “like the root meaning of the term ‘apostle’ and like the New Testament apostles … [who] believe that they and the church are ‘called’ and ‘sent’ by God to reach an unchurched pre-Christian population” (Church 28). Steve Sjogren comments that the Bible’s call is to be a “‘go and do’
Lain 23

[church], not a ‘come and see’ one.” Erwin Raphael McManus expands this idea. Metaphorically speaking, McManus speaks of the apostolic church as one whose “ethos is fire” (176). He declares that “the apostolic ethos is fueled by incarnation” (176). He describes this fire as beginning within the believer but clearly meant to “encounter culture” (178). He wonderfully describes this experience: “When God sends fire from heaven, communion happens and God creates an encounter-culture” (178). Paul’s emphatic call cannot be overlooked. John R. Stott in his commentary on Acts 26:18 points out that “the emphatic ego (I), the personal se (you) and the verb apostello (send) could almost be rendered ‘I myself apostle you,’ I myself make you an apostle” (373).

The common thread tying together the lifestyles of Christ, Paul, Sjogren, and McManus is an understanding that the church properly defined is a people acting obediently to take the gospel into the world instead of waiting for the world to come to the church. Apostolic churches are sent.

Second, apostolic ministry understands its target: lost people. Both Christ and Paul (along with other New Testament apostles) understood clearly that they existed to reach lost people. One speaks of pre-Christians as the target, not for elimination but to help them find salvation. Although Christ and Paul often spoke sharply to the church, they did not speak to the unchurched in this manner. Christ’s goal was to usher in “the year of the Lord’s favor.” For Paul, the not-yet-converted were meant to be given “a place among those who are sanctified” (Acts 26:18). Jesus and Paul clearly knew the pre-Christian was lost, but not on purpose. G. Hunter states that “apostolic congregations understand, like, and have compassion for lost, unchurched pre-Christians” (29).

Additionally, their drive compels them to “obey the Great Commission—more as warrant
or privilege than mere duty” (*Church* 29). McManus uses the metaphor of wind to address this issue, declaring the apostolic church to be one that is “fueled by intentionality,” driven to respond with fervor to the Great Commission (166). Apostolic churches are compelled to reach the lost.

Third, apostolic churches engage their culture physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Pre-Christians are not only lost, but they have no idea how to be “found.” Pre-Christians do not think that Christians have relevant answers to life; however, they are looking for an anchor. The engaging commission of Christ in Luke 4:18 is worthy of notice: to offer good news to the poor (salvation and compassion), open the eyes of the blind (offering light to confusion), set the captive free (emotional support), and release the oppressed (counsel and security). Paul, in Acts 26:18, speaks almost the same words in announcing his call to the culturally and spiritually blind, darkened, and oppressed.

Many churches understand the call to go to lost people, but the tension is in the area of cultural relevance. G. Hunter speaks of a majority of churches that have unfortunately erected “cultural barriers” (*Church* 58). However, G. Hunter speaks with hope:

> Once the apostle Paul was willing to “become all things to all people that [he] might by all means save some,” so we are observing the emergence of entire congregations who are willing to be culturally flexible in order to reach people. (58)

The number of churches willing to make this adjustment is inadequate. Nevertheless, *some* churches *are emerging* that understand the need for cultural engagement. This change is promising.

Darrell L. Guder understands the importance of cultural engagement: “There is no cultureless gospel. Jesus himself preached, taught, and healed within a specific context. Nor is it the case that the gospel can be reduced to a set of cultureless principles” (114).
When Jesus declared that his commission included the announcement of the release of Jubilee, the hearers should understand that “Jubilee release is not spiritualized into forgiveness of sins, but neither can it be resolved into a program of social reform. It encompasses spiritual restoration, moral transformation, rescue from demonic oppression, and release from illness and disability” (Nolland 202). Jubilee, practically speaking, is the full expression of being physically, spiritually, and emotionally released through Christ and his gospel. The apostolic church understands that its calling in a pre-Christian world is to a secular people with secular problems, needs, and ethics who want a church willing to encounter them as they are. When church people understand who pre-

Christians are and speak to them in their language, spiritual restoration follows more naturally. “Apostolic congregations adapt to the language, music, and style of the target population’s culture” (G. Hunter, Church 32). They also adapt to the needs of their culture. I could issue a warning about being swallowed up by culture; however, most churches are so far from that problem, the danger of assimilation is almost negligible.

Fourth, the apostolic church values and deliberately creates relational environments. Both Christ’s and Paul’s commissions are relational. Both are shaped for people and not programs. Every action in Christ’s commission is directed toward a person with a need: the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, or the oppressed. Paul’s call is to encounter people of blindness, darkness, or satanic oppression. Apostolic ministry is to people for people; it is relational at its root. Lee Strobel points out that a program-oriented church sees people as projects (60). Program-oriented churches serve as a place of further alienation. Program churches are self-serving and measure their success based upon a number or a job well done. Many authors write about the loneliness of today’s
culture. Poe’s description of this loneliness is rather depressing but real. Because the average American moves every three years, “the average American no longer has an extended family. They may know of relatives they have, but the children do not know cousins. They do not know aunts and uncles. They do not know grandparents” (32).

“Loneliness is very serious” (33). Poe further analyzes the typical American church since World War II: Today’s churches emphasize “the big meeting,” (33) the most impersonal part of a church. In today’s culture, “you go to the big meeting, listen to the lecture, and then you leave. There is no real connection with the people in the room and you” (33).

The absolute truth about American culture is that “the postmodern generation will not visit the church building. They will not go to the lecture. They will not join the organization. The church looks like just one more institution. They are interested not in institutions but in relationships” (33-34). The theology of ministry of both Christ and Paul was absolutely relational; they engaged their culture in a way that relieved loneliness.

One final statement should be made about how the church is called to relate and minister to today’s pre-Christian culture. The statement almost seems elementary. G. Hunter offers the following as his final feature in a list of the top ten features of an apostolic church: “Apostolic churches engage in many ministries to unchurched non-Christian people” (Church 32). While the discipling of the Christian must not be ignored, even in the disciple-making process, the modern-day church must clearly understand that Jesus’ purpose was to reach the unchurched, as was Paul’s. Both Christ and Paul discipled believers, but in both of their commission statements they focused on encountering unchurched people. Believers will enjoy the year of the Lord’s favor and be
counted among the saints. Jesus and Paul were driven by the primacy of encountering and rescuing unchurched people.

Essential to fulfilling the church’s apostolic call is a proper theological understanding in terms of the source and power of evangelism. Returning to the call of Jesus and Paul, the opening words must not be ignored. Luke 4:18-19 begins with the words, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me.” As Paul gives his testimony before King Agrippa in Acts 26, his call in verse 17 begins with the words, “I am sending you to them.” Evangelism is best executed when the evangelist understands that God who calls also empowers them.

Evangelism’s call has an external source: Jesus was called by the Holy Spirit and Paul was called by the resurrected Christ. As such, evangelism must be understood as the ambassador’s work for another: the Holy Spirit or Christ. Evangelism results in redemption because the evangelizing person comes in the name of the Holy Spirit or Christ. Many fail to respond to the call to “go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:18) because of an improper theological understanding of evangelism: the credibility of the sent one is not as critical as the credibility of the sender, Jesus Christ.

A theological understanding of evangelism’s power is equally important. A look at the Great Commission is helpful here. Matthew 28:18 begins with these critical words: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” The second part of the Great Commission is found in Acts 1:8a where Jesus states, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you.” Understanding the power of evangelism enables the delivery of and response to the good news.
Apostolic ministry succeeds because the Holy Spirit sends and also empowers the evangelist. The sent agents must obey, but they do so in the power of God. God gives the ability, the words, the cultural sensitivity, the proper responses, and the required patience. This truth is empowering: the One who issues the call empowers the obedient.

Apostolic ministry succeeds because the sending Holy Spirit is also the transformer. Salvation is not dependent on the evangelist’s power; God is the redeeming agent. Hopelessness is nonexistent in reaching the poor, imprisoned, blind, and oppressed because God can encounter and transform every person.

Overview

Chapter 2 reviews literature pertinent to the research topic. Statistical data summarizes the progressive rise of pre-Christian culture in North America. Leading church authorities address the end of Christendom and the call to renewed ministry understanding tailored for a pre-Christian culture. The culture is further defined using the philosophical descriptor postmodern and the religious descriptor pre-Christian. Characteristics of each are defined. Current approaches are discussed. The research method employed is further defined.

Chapter 3 describes the detailed research design.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings.

Chapter 5 discusses findings, makes practical applications, and offers suggestions about further required research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

In the past decade and beyond, ministry’s address has changed and caught many off guard. The shift in American culture is evident, but the church has only recently realized it.

The problem facing the church in the United States is summarized as follows:

1. The age of Christendom in the United States has come to an end resulting in the loss of Christianity as the dominant cultural religion. Many within the church have misunderstood this shift, interpreting our culture as anti-Christian.

2. The shift from Christendom as a predominant culture is unnoticed by many churches. Other churches see the shift but continue to operate in ways that fail to address the shift. In many cases churches have failed to change in ways that would properly address the new culture because church oriented denominational pressures and expectations that are church-oriented versus culture-oriented. The result is ineffectiveness.

3. Many American churches continue to operate as if Christendom as a predominant culture still exists and wonder why their communities do not respond to their message or methodologies. The expectation is that past methodologies should still succeed, although culture has changed.

The purpose of this research was to respond to these issues. Specifically, the purpose of this research was to discover a denominational model that effectively evangelized the pre-Christian culture of upstate New York in the twenty-first century.
The literature review addresses five critical areas: (1) a statistical review of the spiritual condition of the United States; (2) an expanded look at the problem facing the church (i.e., the end of Christendom and the failure of the church to understand and respond to this condition); (3) an analysis of the philosophical and spiritual description of the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century; (4) a summary of what is already known about reaching the American population; and, (5) an expanded description of qualitative research as the method used in this research.

Statistical Review of the Spiritual Status of the United States and the Northeast

Statistically, most of the recent data collected by census and survey organizations show that, nationally, if the country is not currently pre-Christian, it is rapidly moving in that direction. Preliminarily, an important note is that pre-Christian does not mean nonreligious. A leader in the Christian world in understanding religious trends, G. Hunter observes that “[s]ecularization has not made people less ‘religious’” (How to Reach Secular People 42). He further adds, “There is extensive evidence that people are incurably ‘religious,’ though some people feast, serially, from a growing menu of religious options that the Church no longer controls” (42). Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion at Harvard University, wrote in 2001 that “the United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth” (4).

Although statistical religious data will be presented, accurate data collection is a challenging research agenda. B. A. Robinson, attempting to summarize statistical data from several sources, explains the challenging nature of collecting religious data,

Reliable religious information is hard to come by.

- Some religions count every person that has been baptized into the denomination as a member. Many individuals change their religion later in life and thus may be double or triple-counted.
Other religions have no accurate accounting system.
Some religions, like Christian Science and the Church of Satan have a policy of not releasing membership statistics to the public.
Some faith groups count only confirmed, baptized or initiated members; others count total adherents. Some count only adults; others include children.
Many U.S. sources of religious information include the major religions—Christianity, Islam, Judaism—and many of their denominations or sub-divisions. But they often ignore what might be called “underground” religions.
Many sources ignore an amorphous group who may have variously described themselves as Agnostics, Atheists, Ethical Culturalists, Freethinkers, Humanists, or Secularists.

B. Robinson further concludes that from the polling data “the United States appears to be going through an unprecedented change in religious practices. Large numbers of American adults are disaffiliating themselves from Christianity and from other organized religions.”

The Houston Chronicle printed an article on 21 July 2004 entitled “Study Finds Number of Protestants Is Falling,” using data from the National Opinion Research Center’s General Social Survey. The survey studied various aspects of American life for the past thirty-two years, including religious dimensions. Tom W. Smith, director of the organization, concluded from his data that “[f]or the first time in U.S. history, the number of Protestants soon will slip below 50 percent of the nation’s population” (qtd. in Vara).

The survey, released 20 July 2004, discovered that from 1972 to 1993, 63 percent of the nation was Protestant. By 2002 that number had decreased to less than 52 percent of the population with trends indicating that by the mid-2000s the number would slip under 50 percent. Equally important is the increase in those who state they have “no religion.” That number grew from 9 percent in 1993 to 14 percent in 2002.
Barna, perhaps the most respected authority in studying religious statistical data, addresses the growing number of unchurched people. Barna uses the term to describe a person who “has not attended a Christian church service at any time during the past six months, other than special events such as weddings and funerals” (Re-Churching the Unchurched 13). Statistics indicate that “[s]ince 1991, the adult population in the United States has grown by 15%. During that same period the number of adults who do not attend church has nearly doubled, rising from 39 million to 75 million—a 92% increase” (“Number of Unchurched Adults”).

Following Barna’s research through several years does not show favorable trends for Christianity. Writing almost one year later, the Barna Group reports that “[d]espite widespread efforts to increase church attendance across the nation, the annual survey of church attendance … shows that one-third of all adults (34%) remain ‘unchurched’” (“One in Three Adults”). The Barna Group notes that the “proportion has changed little during the past five years. Because of the nation’s population continuing growth, the number of unchurched adults continues to grow by nearly a million people annually” (“One in Three Adults”).

Reporting again two years later, the Barna Group declares the “unchurched population [to be nearly] 100 million in the U.S.” including adults and children (“Unchurched Population”). Again the percentage of the unchurched population remained constant, but population growth made the raw number of unchurched individuals considerably higher.

Trends can be noticed by following the Barna Group’s research year by year. Their statistical data on the unchurched population indicates that the United States is...
progressively becoming a more unchurched nation. The Barna Group’s data also includes those with a stated church affiliation but without attendance. Also important, their data does not include those who are churched but are not Christian.

Alan C. Klass reports more drastic numbers than Barna. According to Klass, “roughly 50 percent of the people in the United States are effectively unchurched. ‘Effectively unchurched’ means people do not participate in a congregation” (51). At the same time, Klass reports, “[M]ost pollsters find that 70 to 80 percent of effectively unchurched people say they have faith or that religion is important to their lives” (51). Unchurched does not mean nonreligious.


Active, practicing Christians compose—even when being generous with the numbers—only 82.08 million or 29 percent of the population in the United States. Those Christian in name only (giving no evidence of any consistent practice of their faith) comprise 86.07 million or 30 percent. Americans who report no religious affiliation total 116.85 million or 41 percent. The largest percentage consists of the last group—the radically unchurched.

According to this data, those categorized as “practicing Christians” are in the minority with the vast majority of Americans best categorized as nominal or non-Christians. This number is growing.

In 1995, Barna issues a warning to the American church:

Our Christian churches have a monumental challenge of reaching the current non-Christian population of 190 million people plus the anticipated horde of 45 million newcomers. That adds up to 235 million people who live on American soil—nearly a quarter of a billion souls. (Evangelism 127)
That number has only grown over the past twelve years.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study on religion in the United States has been done by Barry A. Kosmin, Egon Mayer, and Ariela Keysar from the graduate center of the City University of New York. They have published the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS). While the Barna Group surveyed one thousand or less adults in their annual survey, the ARIS 2001 “was based on a random digit-dialed telephone survey of 50,281 American residential households in the continental U.S.A. (48 states)” (6). The results of the study were compared to a similar survey using the same methodologies conducted by the National Survey of Religious Identification in 1990. In that survey the sample was twice as large (113,723 persons were questioned). “The primary question of the interview was: What is your religion, if any? [original emphasis]” (6).

The authors of the study also offered this critical observation:

One of the distinguishing features of this survey, as of its predecessor in 1990, is that respondents were asked to describe themselves in terms of religion with an open-ended question. Interviewers did not prompt or offer a suggested list of potential answers. Moreover, the self-description of respondents was not based on whether established religious bodies, institutions, churches, mosques, or synagogues considered them to be members. Quite the contrary, the survey sought to determine whether the respondents themselves regarded themselves as adherents of a religious community. Subjective rather than objective standards of religious identification were tapped by the survey. (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 7)

This survey offers some of the most critical and comprehensive religious data.

Among other results, the group concluded the following:

Often lost amidst the mesmerizing tapestry of faith groups that comprise the American population is also a vast and growing population of those without faith. They adhere to no creed nor choose to affiliate with any religious community. These are the seculars, the unchurched, the people who profess no faith in any religion. (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 5)
This growing number of people without faith—ones with no Christian memory or any other religious memory—add to the pre-Christian nature of America in the twenty-first century. Further data supports this conclusion.

The results of the ARIS 2000 study produced some critical findings about the religious composition of the nation. First, in response to the question “What is your religion, if any?” the respondents fell into over one hundred different categories that were narrowed down to sixty-five categories by the survey team. Second, respondents who identified themselves with a specific religious group dropped from 90 percent in 1990 to 81 percent in 2001. The report then listed what they considered to be major changes between 1990 and 2001:

[T]he major changes between the results of the 1990 survey and the current survey are:

- the proportion of the population that can be classified as Christian has declined from eighty-six in 1990 to seventy-seven percent in 2001;
- although the number of adults who classify themselves in non-Christian religious groups has increased from about 5.8 million to about 7.7 million, the proportion of non-Christians has increased only by a very small amount—from 3.3% to about 3.7%;
- the greatest increase in absolute as well as in percentage terms has been among those adults who do not subscribe to any religious identification; their number has more than doubled from 14.3 million in 1990 to 29.4 million in 2001; their proportion has grown from just eight percent of the total in 1990 to over fourteen percent in 2001;
- there has also been a substantial increase in the number of adults who refused to reply to the question about their religious preference, from about four million or two percent in 1990 to more than eleven million or over five percent in 2001. (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 10-11)

Some of the list of “Christian Religious Groups,” are the following, who do not qualify for the sake of my study as Protestant or evangelical: Roman Catholic, Mormon/Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah’s Witness, Orthodox (Eastern), and Christian Science. These groups comprise a little over 55.8 million of the over 159 million the ARIS group call
“Christian.” If those numbers are removed from the total, the result would be Protestant/Evangelical Christian—49.7 percent; Other “Christian” Religions (as listed above)—26.9 percent; Other Religions—3.7 percent; No Specific Religion—14.1 percent; and, Refused to Respond—5.4 percent (10-11).

One final observation from the ARIS study is necessary: while approximately 80 percent of the U. S. population identified themselves as belonging to a religious group, a considerable gap exists between those who identify with a group and those who are, in fact, members. To illustrate, of those who identify themselves in one of the Protestant/evangelical groups, those who actually joined the group by membership ranged from a low of 55 percent (nondenominational Christians) to a high of 83 percent (evangelical/born again Christians) (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 15). The data documents a growing number who identify with a particular group but do not formalize their affiliation:

More than thirty years ago, the sociologist Thomas Luckmann anticipated the emergence of an increasingly de-institutionalized form of religious identification in an incisive analysis of modern religious life, *The Invisible Religion*. In that work he concluded, “The modern sacred cosmos legitimates the retreat of the individual into the ‘private sphere’ and sanctifies his (or her) subjective autonomy.” (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 14)

This group may mark the front edge of a further movement away from religious identification and, ultimately, Christianity.

Statisticians agree that certain areas of the United States are less Christian than others. The Barna Group consistently identifies the northeast and west as less Christian. In the Barna Group’s 2004 report states the following:

Although just four out of ten adults (42%) live in the Northeast or West, more than half of the unchurched (51%) live there. In fact, the two largest
states in the nation—California and New York—contain 18% of the nation’s residents, but one-quarter of its unchurched adults (23%). (“Number of Unchurched Adults”)

The population studied in this research was from the northeast, representing a less Christian or more pre-Christian area of the nation.

The mounting statistical data is conclusive. McNeal in *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* adds a critical thought:

> The percentage of Americans who claim to go to church each week has hung in the 40 to 43 percent range for thirty years. But I ask you, do you really believe those numbers?… A study conducted in the late 1990s suggested Americans might be lying about their churchgoing habits to pollsters. It pegged church attendance at only 26 percent of Americans. (The study was conducted by sociologist Stanley Presser of the University of Maryland and research assistant Linda Stinson of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, who assessed church attendance by actual diary entries as opposed to responses to pollsters.) Quite a difference! Think about it. Does your town even have room in all the churches for 40 percent of the population? A friend of mine in a Southern Bible Belt town called every church in his town after Easter 2001 and reported that only about 25 percent of the town attended church—on Easter! (2-3)

Whether or not one agrees with McNeal, the data alone suggests this conclusion: If the United States is not already a nation without a Christian religious center, it is rapidly becoming one. The loss of a religious center is more evident in certain areas of the nation, specifically the northeast and west. The combined statistical data for the northeast and the nation suggest that the church has a huge task in identifying and ministering to an increasingly secular or “pre-Christian” society.

**The Challenge Facing the Twenty-First Century Church**

Authoritative voices within the church are addressing what has been documented statistically. As stated in Chapter 1, a shift has occurred in the United States from an age of Christendom back to a pre-Christian age. The age of Christendom has effectively
ended in the United States. Alex Roxburgh, pastor in British Columbia and faculty member at Regent College, reports: “the fourth and twentieth centuries form bookends marking transition points in the history of the church” (qtd. in Nees 24). Roxburgh defines the age of Christendom as a sixteen-century period during which Christianity became the state religion of most of Europe and America. While perhaps not formalized, especially in the United States, European and American cultures were governed by Christian principles and consciousness. These centuries were preceded by and are now followed by time periods in which Christianity is no longer the norm (Wiseman 24).

Christendom has come to an end, but the church has failed to understand this end, has chosen to deny it, or simply has not known how to respond to the change. Thus, the church continues to operate as if nothing has changed.

For those honestly observing today’s culture, most concur that a major shift has occurred. Bill M. Sullivan, longtime denominational leader in the Church of the Nazarene, enunciates the change well. He describes an American church that has perhaps been so caught up with the change of millenniums that it has failed to realize that it has also “lived through the end of an era” (“We Must Become a Missional People” 11). He explains, “We have seen America go from over 200 years of a basically Christian culture to a non-Christian culture that rejects the foundational principles of Christianity” (11). G. Hunter speaks of a nation that is becoming more secular now than at any other time in its history (Church 20). Towns and Bird speak of a Western culture that is “more non-Christian in its outlook than at nearly any other time in history” (19). Further stating their case, they speak of a generation that is “the first to grow up with virtually no ‘public square’ connection to its Judeo-Christian roots, and the next generation will be raised in
North America’s most secularized culture since the Pilgrims landed” (107). The
“challenge is to present the gospel to people who look at Jesus Christ through secular,
skeptical, and technical eyes” (19).

Jackson speaks of the dramatic religious culture shift facing the twenty-first
century church:

For much of the past two hundred years, the various Protestant
denominations operated in a culture that, for the most part, both affirmed
and supported the mission and values of the Christian faith… [T]he
number of people with virtually no awareness of even the basics of the
Christian faith seems to be on the rise. (1-2)

The church must acknowledge the shift in culture.

Henderson concedes that today’s American culture can best be described as
“secular” (1):

We live in a world where God is irrelevant. God is not so much dead as he is
superfluous… [I]t isn’t that God is dead so much as that he is simply
not, as they say in the business world, “a player.” We have shoved God
aside. (123-24)

God has been shoved aside because a secular culture is “concerned only with the flesh-
and-blood life on this planet” (123). Time is not spent discussing God’s existence. Such a
discussion is immaterial. Even if he does exist, he is not recognized or consulted.

Klass, reporting the results of a two-year, million-dollar study conducted by the
three largest Lutheran fraternal benefit societies, offers these two conclusions: “First, the
most potent factor in declining membership is the change from a churched to an
unchurched society. Second, the best hope for dealing with the changed society is the
individual congregation” (viii). The challenge, of course, is convincing today’s church to
acknowledge society’s spiritual condition and respond accordingly.
Tom Nees, a denominational leader of the Church of the Nazarene, addresses the denominational call to declare the United States a mission field:

Declaring the United States and Canada as a new mission field is tantamount to admitting that North America with all its Christian traditions and churches may be as unchristian as the “mission fields” in countries thought in the past to be unfamiliar, if not unfriendly to, the gospel. (25)

Once again, the biggest challenge is convincing churches that the United States and Canada are now mission fields. Statistical evidence documents this situation, but church leaders and church members have been reticent to accept reality. This denial exacerbates the problem.

Although statistically and anecdotally the United States is increasingly secular, unchurched, post, or pre-Christian, this fact alone is not the crux of the issue facing the American church. Throughout the centuries, Christianity has entered into and effectively evangelized such cultures. The issue is the failure of the American church to realize that AMERICA is such a culture.

Speaking of a culture that is increasingly “secular,” “urban,” “postmodern,” “neo-barbarian,” and “receptive [to] exploring worldview options from Astrology to Zen” (G. Hunter, *Celtic Way* 9), G. Hunter gives the primary reason the church has failed to respond to today’s new culture:

In the face of this changing Western culture, many Western Church leaders are in denial [emphasis mine]; they plan and do church as though next year will be 1957. Furthermore, most of the western church leaders who are not in denial do not know how to engage the epidemic numbers of secular, postmodern, neo-barbarians outside (and inside) their churches. Moreover, most of the few who do know what to do are intuitive geniuses who cannot teach others what they know (or charismatic leaders who cannot yet be cloned). The mainline Western Churches, Roman Catholic and Protestant, lack both the precedent and the “paradigm” for engaging the West’s emerging mission field. (9-10)
McNeal concurs with G. Hunter’s conclusion:

We are witnessing the emergence of a new world,… This phenomenon has been noted by many who tag the emerging culture as post-Christian, pre-Christian, or postmodern. The point is, **the world is profoundly different than it was at the middle of the last century** [original emphasis], and everybody knows it. Even the church culture. But knowing it and acting on it are two very different things. So far the North American church largely has responded with heavy infusions of denial [original emphasis]. (*Present Future* 2)

McNeal continues by listing ways the church has shown its denial. Some examples are withdrawing from their communities, designing programs to “fix their culture by flexing political and economic muscle,” or turning to “internal theological-methodological debates” (2). Whatever the form, the church has chosen to ignore the religious cultural shift of their communities.

Second, the American church has also chosen “preservation over evangelism”—albeit at times unintentionally. G. Hunter writes the following statement:

[T]he vast majority of churches have not, within memory, reached and discipled any really secular persons! Many churches would be astonished if it ever happened, because many churches do not even intend to reach lost people…. Their main business is caring for their members. (*Church* 25)

The church has not only chosen preservation over evangelism, but it has systemized it.

McManus speaks of this systemic condition:

Seminaries began to produce what local churches perceived they needed: godly men who had a professional understanding of theology, pastoral care, and management. Pastors were valued for their ability to bring and keep order rather than for their ability to bring and lead change. The reality was that pastors were being equipped to preserve the past rather than create the future. We became known for being traditional rather than transformational…. The pastor/teacher replaced the apostle/evangelist. (25)
The result is a church led by pastors trained to maintain churches but unequipped to impact a secular community and grow a church.

Third, the inwardly focused church with the purpose of “discipling their own” has done the opposite: the church has actually become less spiritual and thus even less effective. Henry Blackaby makes this unfortunate observation:

The problem of America is not [so much] unbelievers; the problem of America is the [professing] people of God. There are just as many divorces and abortions in the churches as outside the churches…. Our gospel is being cancelled by the way we live. (2)

McNeal speaks of a church that “is not spiritual enough to reach our culture” (Present Future 27). McManus offers this sobering assessment:

America’s best atheists are children of the church. It is rare to find a person who is a passionate enemy of the church who has never had contact with her…. The church, at best, fell asleep. It might be fair to say that we lost the power to transform culture. We accommodated to a culture that was, for us, user-friendly. We equated being a good citizen with being a good Christian. We lived without persecution and soon found ourselves without conviction. *We didn’t lose America; we gave her away* [emphasis mine]! (28)

One might say that today’s church has produced secular Christians more defined by the term “secular” than the term “Christian.” The only Christian part of their life is their attendance in weekend church services, while the rest of life remains relatively unaffected. Today’s church has little chance of impacting the unchurched culture.

Fourth, failure to impact the culture is due to ignorance. G. Hunter speaks of a church that is “no longer able to reach, receive, retain, and grow the receptive people in their ministry area” (Church 24). In the same path as Europe, “secularization has now advanced in North America to the point that, in [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer’s words, ‘The rusty
swords of the old world are powerless to combat the evils of today and tomorrow” (24).

Hunter offers the following analogy to illustrate the issue:

The harvest has changed from, say, corn to wheat. We know how to harvest corn, but we have no experience harvesting wheat. So, going with what we know, we now enter wheat fields with our corn pickers. We fail to gather the harvest, and even destroy some of it while trying to gather it!

To be specific, churches usually assume:

- What motivates us is what will motivate them.
- The approach that reached us is the approach that will reach them.
- They already know what we are talking about.
- They like the Church enough to be able to respond affirmatively. (24)

Such ignorance about how to reach this culture is both nonproductive and damaging.

Fifth, the failure to impact American culture spiritually is because of a lack of understanding. Understanding has not followed the description of the culture.

The challenge facing the twenty-first century American church is monumental. The American church has failed to respond to its culture. This failure has occurred for four primary reasons: (1) denial that a cultural shift has occurred, (2) the choice of church preservation over evangelism, (3) preference given to discipleship at the expense of reaching the unconverted, and (4) cultural ignorance.

**Defining Today’s Culture**

If the church is going to rediscover its missional call, education is critical. The church must become cultural exegetes once again, seeking to dispel ignorance by honestly and purposefully identifying today’s culture. Culture must be understood from two perspectives: its philosophical nature and its religious nature. Specifically, the nation is philosophically postmodern and religiously pre-Christian.
Two terms best describe United States culture in the early twenty-first century. The first term, postmodern, is a description of the philosophical and cultural/sociological nature of the nation. The second term describes the religious nature of the culture. The categories, however, are not as neatly separated as they appear. Postmodernism has clear religious implications, just as pre-Christianity has philosophical implications. A cause-and-effect element exists between the two.

The term post-Christian is not included in this review. The dominant religious term describing today’s culture is pre-Christian. Those who would be classified post-Christian (also described by some as anti-Christian) comprise a relatively minor percent of religious culture. The religious culture of the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century is not so much antagonistic toward Christianity; it is much more apathetic, uninformed, and disinterested in Christianity. Poe, writing from the philosophical vantage point, offers an important insight:

Because Christianity has continued to exist or coexist with modernity after the collapse of Christendom, many Christians believe that a rejection of the values of modernity means a rejection of the values of Christianity. This assumption would only be valid for those Christians who have compromised their faith to the extent that it has become indistinguishable from the values of modernity. Postmodern thought proceeds from a basic ignorance of Christianity rather than a rejection of it [emphasis mine].

Although ignorance of Christianity can be viewed as antagonistic at times, to interpret it as such would be inaccurate.

Postmodern philosophy. Recognizing the end of the modern era, postmodernism is a repudiation of the claims of modernity, especially in the areas of reality and truth. Postmodernity, in short, changed reality and truth from certainty to perspective. The
conclusion of the postmodernist is that reality and truth are defined by each person’s perspective (Grenz 14-15). Truth is not necessarily even what is; rather, one’s interpretation must come from one’s own perspective.

Towns and Bird use a Walter Anderson baseball analogy to describe the difference between three philosophical views: premodern, modern, and postmodern. Anderson creates an imaginary conversation between three baseball umpires after a ballgame. The umpires are discussing their reactions when a pitcher throws the ball toward home plate. Each umpire offers a contrasting worldview:

- Premodern—“I call them as they are.” This umpire’s world deals with objective, right-and-wrong absolute truth.
- Modern—“I call them as I see them.” This umpire’s world is shaped by relativism. Truth depends on the stance of the observer.
- Postmodern—“They ain’t nothing until I call them.” This umpire’s world contains no truth except what he makes up. How does he know, after all, if there is anything “real” beyond his judgments? His perspective is all there is, or at least all that matters. (70)

In summary, premodern is “naïve realism,” modern is “relativism,” and postmodern is “radical perspectivism” (70).

Reid traces the movement from premodern to postmodern:

In the *premodern* [original emphasis] era, the time before the Renaissance, the view of the world went like this: God knows all, we may know some, but our knowledge is… anchored in God’s knowledge…. The *modern* [original emphasis] era—founded largely upon Descartes’ rationalism—*cognito ergo sum* [italics in original], “I think, therefore I am”—shifted focus from the supreme nature of God to man’s being the measure of all things. D. A. Carson offers six characteristics of modernist thought:

1. Begins with I: not God;
2. Assumes *certainty* [original emphasis] is desirable and achievable;
3. Is *foundationalist* [original emphasis], you lay a foundation then build on it;
4. Focuses on *methods* [original emphasis], leading to the scientific method;
5. Leads to naturalism [original emphasis], which pushed God to the periphery;
6. Leads thought processes to a historical [original emphasis] truth (i.e., water is water always, no matter what time you are in history).

Postmodernism rejects all of the characteristics of modernism given by Carson—except number five, the rise of naturalism. Number five, however, causes the greatest problem for biblical Christianity. Characteristics 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 contain at least the seeds of an objective reality, whereas in postmodernism, subjectivity rules. (Radically Unchurched 76-78)

If hope exists for evangelizing today’s culture, the church must understand this shift to postmodernism.

Several tenets of postmodernism are pertinent to the subject matter of this paper. They are (1) individualism, (2) perspectives about truth, (3) experience/consumerism, (4) philosophical pluralism/tolerance, and (5) views on authority and authoritative individuals. Collectively, these postmodern tenets shape the way American culture thinks in reference to all areas of life, including religion.

**Individualism.** Everything about life for the postmodern is understood from one’s personal perspective. Such individualism affects what a person believes to be true, what they value, and how they relate to others. Towns and Bird speak of the absence of “an eternal or transcendent perspective on truth” as it is replaced with that which is true to an individual (71). Similarly, no list of absolute values exists in postmodernism; values are determined by what matters to each individual. The same is also true for character. Instead of striving to “become who I am,” which would be defined by some set of “universally held goals or standards,” the postmodern strives to become “authentic,” defined from one’s own perspective (71).
Jackson adds this dimension to understanding individualism: “Though the transition to the postmodern world has undoubtedly brought about a new drive for community…. it is a community that looks much different from days past. Community in postmodern society is primarily focused on the individual” (31). Community is not necessarily a gathering of people for the sake of common experience; it is a gathering of people seeking individual experiences.

Truth. Craig Miller speaks of postmodernity as “the condition of living in a sea of ‘truths,’ each within its own reality and set of beliefs” (55). In keeping with individualism, the postmodern determines whether to believe something is true, or “drift aimlessly in a sea of information…. Rather than the culture or the society dictating truth, the person in the midst of the postmodern condition has to decide what is true for him or her” (55). Brian McLaren speaks of postmodernism as being “skeptical of certainty—‘it’s just theories, just fantasies’” (167).

In the postmodern world, truth is not absent; universally accepted and final truth is absent. Truth is always changing and elusive within each individual. Francis A. Schaffer states, “[W]hat is taught is there is no final truth, no meaning, no absolutes” (23).

Jackson, summarizing Celek and Zander, points out that “when postmoderns do create truth, they do so in community…. Truth is not inherent to a culture but rather something that blooms from within it…. Truth is processed relationally” (29). Truth is created in community because it is something experienced instead of learned.

Experience/consumerism. Because postmoderns know based upon personal perspective, experience is critical. Eddie Gibbs makes this observation:
The world of the postmodern is a world of image rather than substance. They are concerned with the immediate rather than the long term because history is meaningless and the future is too scary and unpredictable to contemplate. Meanwhile, the present is lived out as a tumble of fleeting experiences. (24)

With life perceived as what is now, each generation demonstrates an increasing desire to experience life in as multisensory a manner as possible (Slaughter 62). This desire drives postmoderns to consumerism. Experience is fleeting and requires nonstop consumption of new experiences. “Indeed, a person’s actions as a consumer often defines one’s identity” (Jackson 31). People are known by what they have recently acquired, recently experienced, or recently encountered. The daily drive is to experience the next technological invention, the next social event, the newest technique, and so on. While the old societal “rule” was that the “person who dies with the most toys wins,” the new rule is seemingly the “person who dies with the most experiences wins,” a lifestyle that demands constant consumption and change.

**Philosophical pluralism/tolerance.** The postmodern embraces and tolerates a multitude of belief systems. Because no absolute truth exists and individuals determine truth, the postmodern chooses what is right and has no authority to declare someone else’s view wrong. This outlook even changes the understanding of tolerance. D. A. Carson in a lecture presented at Southeast Seminary states, “Formerly, people were tolerant if they allowed those with whom they disagreed to have their say. Now, tolerance means every opinion is okay. The only heresy is in claiming there is heresy” (qtd. in Reid, *Radically* 78).

**Authority.** Because truth is questioned, authority and authoritative figures are also questioned. Authoritative figures presume to possess knowledge or understanding,
and because postmodernism is suspicious of authority, ultimate allegiance to any authoritative figure—political, religious, philosophical, or educational—is nonexistent. Behavioral standards and moral values are also often rejected. “Individuals are free to create their own authoritative, moral structures and free to give or not give allegiance to any overarching system” (Jackson 29).

**Pre-Christian**

The predominant religious condition of the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century is “pre-Christian.” Authors use many terms to define those the Christian church must reach including the terms secular, unchurched, radically unchurched, de-churched, and even “anesthetized” (e.g., Barna, Reid).

The purpose here is to identify who is pre-Christian. G. Hunter offers the classic definition of who would be called pre-Christian: ones “who have navigated their whole lives beyond the serious influence of Christian churches. They have little or no Christian memory, background or vocabulary” (*Church* 20). Similarly, using the term “radically unchurched,” Reid speaks of those who “have no clear personal understanding of the message of the gospel, and who have had little or no contact with a Bible-teaching, Christ-honoring church” (*Radically Unchurched* 21).

In this paper, the term “unchurched” in its various forms is not an adequate definition of pre-Christian. Unchurched, radically unchurched, or de-churched refers primarily to attendance patterns. Charles C. Kyker is correct in stating that “pre-Christian is a term that is not necessarily synonymous with unchurched” (21). To be pre-Christian, a person must have no, limited, or distant knowledge of the claims of Christianity and/or be “people who have yet [to] receive and claim for themselves God’s grace and
forgiveness found in confessing their sins and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord” (21). This definition allows for the existence of a growing number of pre-Christians who can actually be churched but nevertheless pre-Christian.

While the pre-Christian audience is primarily composed of the unchurched with little or no knowledge of the claims of Christianity, a growing number do not fit this narrower definition. Barna identifies some persons as “de-churched” or “anesthetized,” and I include pre-Christians with this group (Evangelism 49-50). I have increasing personal experience with such a group. Consideration of the definition of de-churched persons is important before looking at the characteristics of pre-Christians.

The de-churched are ones who have had some—often extensive—exposure to a Christian organization at some period in their lives. In the years of polling the American public, Barna was startled to discover that “[o]verall, 85 percent of all nonchurched adults have had a prolonged period of time during which they consistently attended a church or religious center” (Evangelism 50). Church attendance, or lack of it, is a volitional act. Barna discovered that often people did not want to leave the church; they left because the church failed to understand and minister to them effectively. They were “driven away” (50). This segment of society has only slightly more of an understanding of Christianity than those never exposed to it. They have what G. Hunter calls “a distant memory” (How to Reach Secular People 41). They unfortunately represent a growing number who are familiar with Christianity but who also have in their memories false claims and/or experiences. They are, in effect, pre-Christian.

Barna also identifies and describes the anesthetized. In their research, the Barna group discovered that “half of all adults who attend Protestant churches on a typical
Sunday morning are not Christian!” (Evangelism 38). This revelation led to further research with the “non-Christians who regularly attend churches” (38). Barna writes, “The result of our explorations was frightening: Rather than introducing people to Christ, churches had effectively *anesthetized* [original emphasis] these regulars to the gospel” (38). Barna discovered this condition:

> These religious folk had been exposed to the gospel in such a predictable, repetitious manner so many times, some of them starting from the time they first crawled in the church nursery, that they could recite the words backward and forward. But in spite of their familiarity with the phrasing, the behaviors and the church governmental structure, they lived without having a shred of insight into what a relationship with Christ was all about. (38)

Barna describes a very real phenomenon. The result is a population group essentially overexposed to a religious system to the point of neutrality in their basic understanding of Christian claims.

Overexposure to a religious system resulting in neutralizing Christian understanding was an unquestionable reality in my community. The area is highly Roman Catholic with many who attended parochial schools. Many even served as altar boys or performed other religious roles. They no longer attend church and, if engaged in a religious conversation, they usually cannot answer even basic questions about the Christian faith. They have been anesthetized and have no Christian memory other than schooling and childhood religious activity. This alarming situation also exists in the mainline denominations of the community. They are effectively pre-Christian.

Several tenets of pre-Christians are pertinent to the subject matter of this paper. The pre-Christian is (1) lost but not necessarily unhappy, (2) lost but not intentionally, (3) lonely, (4) lost to Christianity but not lost to religion, (4) religiously pluralistic, and (5)
not expecting the church to have answers in their search for life meaning. Collectively these tenets shape the way today’s American culture thinks about its religious self and its view of the church.

Lost but not necessarily unhappy. John Kramp, writing on “lostology,” speaks of a population that is lost, but not on purpose, and they are not necessarily upset about it (9-36). Barna has convincingly discovered that those he classifies as unchurched are not necessarily miserable. In Re-Churching the Unchurched, Barna states, “[M]ore than average, these are people who are more aggressive, high energy, and driven. They have made something of themselves, by the world’s standards” (15). They may be quite content with their life standing. The Christian ear has not often heard this first statement.

The church believes that people are lost and miserable. Certainly, the eventual consequences of being lost are painful, but even Jesus did not negatively portray the beginning of lostness. As Kramp points out about the prodigal son narrative of Luke 15, Jesus neither said the son’s goal was lostness, nor said the son was immediately miserable. In fact, the beginning of the journey was filled with fun and great benefits: unlimited options, time away from home, and lots of money. The son may have felt this way: “If this is lost, then I want to stay lost the rest of my life” (11).

The Church must understand that pre-Christian culture may not be looking to be found. In fact, the pre-Christian is offended by such a declaration. Until “lostness” becomes negative and “foundness” looks more attractive, the pre-Christian will not be interested in Christian claims.

Nevertheless, the pre-Christian is disconnected with God and his offer of salvation. The lost are increasing, resulting in increased secularization of the culture.
“Due to several centuries of secularization, Europe and North America have become mission fields once again. Today, in every community, there are more people than ever who have no idea what Christian people are talking about” (G. Hunter, “Doing Church”). The church must realize that many are truly lost and, even more challenging, not unhappy about it.

**Lost but not intentionally.** To the pre-Christian lostness is not an intentional or rationally calculated decision. Kramp notes in his study of lostology that the average person did not decide to become lost intentionally (17).

This belief is a myth: Lostness is not a result of studying and rejecting the claims of Christianity. G. Hunter accurately declares, “Some church leaders … imagine that all secular people are philosophically sophisticated geniuses who have read christian [sic] literature from Augustine to Zwingli and rejected the christian [sic] case in toto on rational grounds” (*How to Reach Secular People* 43). Continuing this thought, Hunter states that “the vast majority of secular people are not epistemologically sophisticated; most are naïve, superficial, gullible people who may fall for anything” (43). Poe adds, “The postmodern generation does not have a theological position so much as it lacks a theological position. It has not rejected Christianity, because it is generally unaware of the Christian faith” (139). In light of this truth, to conclude that this generation is anti-Christian would be erroneous. Today’s culture has not rejected Christianity. Today’s culture is unintentionally uninformed.

**Lonely.** G. Hunter speaks of secular people as having “multiple alienations” and who are consequently lonely (*How to Reach Secular People* 49-50). Hunter, based on a private conversation, quotes Bruce Larson who observes that “many people are dying of
loneliness” (50). The church must understand this hunger and allow it to shape their approach.

Poe speaks of this postmodern phenomenon:

In a highly mobile society accompanied by the breakdown of the extended family as well as of the traditional family unit, relationship has become an increasingly valuable commodity because it is so difficult to obtain and maintain. The postmodern age is an anonymous age with a yearning for relationship. Existential isolation has come to full flower as people seek relationships through joining formal small groups and develop anonymous relationships over the Internet. People will talk about emotions, feelings, failures, dreads, aspirations, and inadequacies before perfect strangers in a plea for attention and caring relationships. (27)

Poe adds the hopeful word that the incarnational God is the perfect answer to a pre-Christian world because Christ’s Incarnation is the most relational move God ever made (27).

In the matter of approach, Strobel offers this important qualifier: “[The pre-Christian] doesn’t want to be somebody’s project, but he would like to be somebody’s friend” (60). Relationships are very important to the pre-Christian; however, people must be approached in friendship and not as a project or denominational number.

Lost to Christianity but not lost to religion. Christian circles commonly assume that people are lost because they are irreligious. Twenty-first century American culture is actually very religious. The church assumes that if a person does not embrace God—or better stated, the Christian’s definition of God—that a person is totally irreligious. Many have concluded, erroneously, that society has “no religion,” that “secularization has erased all religious consciousness from people’s minds” (G. Hunter, How to Reach Secular People 42). In fact, “[s]ecularization has not made people less ‘religious.’ There is extensive evidence that people are incurably ‘religious’” (42).
According to McManus, although Christianity seems to be losing its influence, religion is on a rising trend. In fact, America is perhaps more spiritual now than in at least one hundred years. “We are more mystical than ever. We are more open than ever. We are more searching than ever. We are more inquisitive than ever” (29). All this searching is for god, but not necessarily for the Christian God.

**Religious pluralism.** “America’s new grass-roots religion is not atheism, but pantheism” (McManus 29). G. Hunter states that society is a place where “people feast, serially, from a growing menu of religious options that the church no longer controls” *(How to Reach Secular People 42)*. The practice of multiple religions is becoming a norm. *Influenced by Ken Chafin, G. Hunter concludes that “Western culture is much like ancient Athens where, in Acts 17 Paul reasoned with people influenced by a range of religions and philosophies” (43)*. More and more people are multi-religious, choosing what they consider to be good from many religions and philosophies.

In speaking of the influence of postmodernism on the religious culture, Poe tells of a nation that “grew up without a cultural allegiance to Christian ideas and values” (47). Poe compares today’s culture to the culture of the book of Judges: “Everyone did what seemed right in his own eyes… [T]hey have no other basis” (47). Henderson concurs with Poe’s conclusion. Because of the waning Christian influence on culture, society has embraced all religions. “They have been exposed to—and possibly drawn to—the single-mindedness of Islam, the simplicity of Zen, the respect for creation found in traditional Buddhism, and the friendliness and family orientation of Mormonism” (58). Adding to Poe’s conclusion, America is a nation that not only lacks allegiance to Christianity, it lacks allegiance to any religion.
Today’s culture is not best defined as one of choice; it is a culture of multiple choice. Like the pre-Christian of Jesus’ and Paul’s day, the twenty-first century pre-Christian is a blend of multiple religions. Today’s pre-Christians buy parts of multiple religions and place them collectively into their lives as though shopping in a mall.

McManus describes the phenomenon well:

We don’t just live in a world where Muslim and Hindu live side by side; we live in a world where the Muslim and Hindu both live inside one person. If we are to engage in a conversation about the gospel, we need to be aware that the people we’re talking to may in no way have a cohesive view of reality. Individuals may hold multiple views of what’s real or true. And as you engage them in an apologetic, you may effectively respond to one of their arenas of reality and never touch an entirely contradictory view. (57)

This statement explains why apologetics is not the best way to engage the pre-Christian in today’s culture. One could effectively address the perceived religious view only to discover that mid-conversation the person has shifted religions.

Not expecting the church to have answers in their search for life meaning.

When lostness loses its appeal, pre-Christians search for God (or a god), but are not really sure where “the door” is to find him (G. Hunter, How to Reach Secular People 53). Also challenging and to the church’s discredit, though pre-Christians know that churches are supposedly God’s representatives, most do not expect Christians to have the answers they are looking for in life (Strobel 54). Engaging pre-Christian people is vital in helping them find the door to God. The church must not expect the pre-Christian to seek out the church for answers but rather be Christian in the streets.

In general, secular people “have a negative image of the Church. Specifically, they doubt the intelligence, relevance, and credibility of the Church and its advocates”
McManus states the case in sobering terms:

The indictment that we must receive is that the Christian faith as we express it is no longer seen as a viable spiritual option. Masses gave the church a try and left wanting. We accuse them of not being willing to surrender to God; they accuse us of not knowing him. People are rejecting Christ because [original emphasis] of the church! Once we were called Christians by an unbelieving world, and now we call ourselves Christians and the world calls us hypocrites. It is possible that it wasn’t the nation that was becoming dangerously secular but the church? We were neither relevant nor transcendent. We have become, in the worst of ways, religious. We are the founders of the secular nation. (29)

Such an indictment is hard for the church to receive; however, this indictment is issued by the culture to the church.

Poe, challenging the claims of postmodernity, speaks of a culture that is, in fact, “searching for the ultimate truth” (139). While Strobel uses different language than Poe, and may even disagree with his postmodern assessment, he does speak of a nation that is at least looking for stability, looking for “an anchor” (47). He makes this observation: “It takes emotional energy to make day-to-day ethical choices with no baseline to start with and to keep track of a tangle of conflicting decisions” (48). Although pre-Christians have decided that the church has no life answers, they are looking for a church with concrete standards. People who are morally adrift and tired of the ethical juggling act are looking for a church that can offer clear-cut biblical guidelines (49).

G. Hunter adds the claim that most secular people think their lives are out of control because of the forces of history or because of the circumstances of their personal lives (How to Reach Secular People 52-53). The pre-Christian looks for a church that offers fresh hope and an anchor in a world of uncertainty and negative forces. Often, the church fails to respond to this call and is, thus, rejected by its culture.
The church’s challenge is to transcend the identification of current cultural issues; it must address them. The missional church must reach the population with the message of Christ.

**Preliminary Matters**

First, I begin with a statement of optimism. Scott offers eternal perspective: “The future has arrived. A loving, faithful God was here through the chaos leading to this time. He will be with the challenges accompanying it. He will be nearby when today’s future becomes tomorrow’s yesterday. Everything changes—except God” (11). The direction taken by the church must have clear cultural understanding, but the church does not determine its path in isolation: God knows the beginning from the end and sees the entire path. God knows the needs of today. Ultimately, the church’s task is to learn and to seek God for application in reaching the lost. The final section of literature review summarizes principles that others have learned and have determined is God’s direction within this culture.

Second, the church is challenged, in a sense, to forget what has been during the age of Christendom. Poe speaks of the tendency of parents to preface instructions to their children with the words “when I was your age.” The truth is that today is different from earlier days. “Christians have the task today of forgetting how they had gone about theology during the modern [and Christendom] period, just as the Reformers of five hundred years ago had to forget how theology had been done in Christendom” (25-26). At a time of cultural paradigm shift, Joel Arthur Barker speaks of the necessity of the “back to zero” rule (140). McManus, summarizing Barker’s writings, explains that “the
critical rule to both surviving and thriving in this new paradigm is the ‘back to zero’ rule, that when a paradigm shifts, everything goes back to zero. In a sense, it’s time to shake the Etch A Sketch, clear the slate, and start afresh” (qtd. in McManus 187). Starting fresh is challenging, but required if the church is to address today’s culture.

Poe and McManus respond similarly regarding the definition of going back to zero. The meaning is not ignoring the world but addressing the world from a better perspective. For both Poe and McManus, the call is to “start over very simply with the Bible in hand and listen to the questions the world is asking” (Poe 26). The phrase back to zero is a call to “put aside all of our assumptions and [allow] the Scriptures [original emphasis] to speak to us afresh” (McManus 188). Back to zero means removing historical interpretations of the Scripture and allowing Scripture to speak directly to today’s culture.

Poe speaks of the call and opportunity of the church in addressing today’s culture:

Postmodernity as yet lies unfinished. People talk about it and try to describe it, but the most we can say now is that it will be different from modernity. Christians stand in a unique position to direct the next age rather than to fall victim to it. (26)

The church in the face of this challenge must not shrink in fear but rise up and take advantage of this new opportunity to reach our emerging culture.

Misconceptions or Myths

Barna in Re-Churching the Unchurched and Rainer in his article “Shattering the Myths about the Unchurched” address matters of misconception and myth about reaching the early twenty-first century population. Six of these statements merit consideration. First, Barna states the inaccuracy of concluding that “successful ministry to the unchurched depends on following the right model” (116). While some American churches are reaching the unchurched, “there is not a standard formula or program that
invariably works among the unchurched” (17). Most churches attempt to use a “cookie-
cutter approach” to reaching the unchurched, discovering what a particular church is
doing within a specific culture and attempting to duplicate it in a totally different culture
(Rainer 48). Barna has discovered a commonality among churches effectively reaching
the unchurched: “[M]inistry to unchurched people is about developing a culture within
the church, not a program,… [and] it must be modeled by the pastoral staff and lay
leaders for everyone to see and appreciate” (116). The need for a collective effort on
behalf of the pastoral staff and lay leaders is addressed in more detail later in the review.

Second, a misconception exists that “the biggest problem in [reaching the
unchurched] will be dealing with the attitudes of the unchurched toward Christianity and
churches” (Barna, Re-Churching the Unchurched 117). Although postmoderns/pre-
Christians do not believe churches have life answers, this view does not likely originate
with the unchurched. It originates rather from churched Christians and their attitude
toward the unchurched:

The more audacious task is getting churched people to genuinely care
about the souls and the lives of those visitors. Getting them to give up
their close-to-the-door parking spaces, to take time to get to know the
newcomers, to ante up the money to carry the costs of reaching out to
those folks, or to get excited about a church that is not necessarily
designed exclusively to meet their personal needs is often a major
challenge. (117)

Addressing this institutional condition is challenging but necessary.

Third, the conclusion is erroneous that “the best way to attract the unchurched is
through large-scale events” (Barna, Re-Churching the Unchurched 119). Barna has
discovered that some of the most effective churches in reaching the unchurched host no
large events at all. Large-scale events are internally and programmatically driven and
send a message to congregations that evangelism is simply getting people into a building. Large-scale events fail to teach that evangelism is a lifestyle that must happen everywhere and all the time if the church is going to encounter and impact the unchurched effectively (119).

Fourth, a myth exists that “the pastor must be a dynamic and charismatic leader for the church to reach the unchurched” (Rainer, “Shattering the Myths” 53). This myth assumes that the pastor’s personality and even preaching are vital in making a church evangelistic. These components (while important) are not the most critical. The pastor’s attitude toward reaching the unchurched is the most critical component.

Barna lists the fifth misconception as three different statements, but they are related: (1) “If you do a good job, most of the unchurched visitors will return” (Re-Churching the Unchurched 121); (2) “If an unchurched person comes five or six times, they’ll stay for good” (124); and, (3) “Once you start attracting them, the challenge is simply managing the flow of incoming unchurched” (126). Common misunderstanding exists in all three statements: They are attitudes that fail to understand the individualism and consumerism of the postmodern/pre-Christian. The postmodern must be won at all times and cannot be assumed to be secured in the congregation. If ministries and programs no longer meet needs, the postmodern will seek consumption at another venue. Actually, the same is true for the churched, which surprises many church leaders.

The sixth misconception is that “if you do it right, most of the people in your church will have been unchurched before they choose yours as their home church” (Barna, Re-Churching the Unchurched 121). This attitude is neither true nor desired. Of those categorized as “great churches” in reaching the unchurched, the Barna group found
that the average “number of current attenders who were previously unchurched was in the 40% to 50% range” (120). The majority were still transfers from other churches. Although this trend may not seem desirable, balance is needed to disciple the formerly unchurched properly. Although unchurched people remain the target, transfer will happen and may not be a negative issue.

**Guiding Principles**

Reid offers five guiding principles in his article “A Hotel for Saints or a Hospital for Sinners.” Additionally Timothy George offers important insights in his presentation “Understanding Postmodernism” presented at the North American Missions Board in Denver. Many guiding principles for reaching postmoderns/pre-Christians are presented by Reid and George, but these five seem most important. First, the beginning point for reaching the postmodern/pre-Christian must be the gospel, the divine, the kerygma, or the Christian message. I do not believe that Reid or George ignores the culture, but both state strongly that cultural exegesis is not the beginning point. Proper understanding of culture determines the delivery method, but the content must be Christian. Reid states, “Never begin with the situation of the radically unchurched in developing a process to reach them. Rather, begin with the heart of God himself, for who knows better how to reach those without Christ than their Creator” (“Hotel” 55). In George’s words, “[C]ontext shapes our proclamation strategy, but not our proclamation content,” God, gospel, and biblical truth shape the message; culture shapes the strategy.

Second, when the gospel is presented to the postmodern/pre-Christian, it must be presented “intact” and in a culturally-permeable way (George). The gospel must be neither culturized nor compromised to make it more acceptable. “Some pulpits, for
example, equate self-esteem with the embracing of the gospel. Some make the gospel almost equal to a political party. Such mistakes cause unbelievers to reject the pure gospel out of guilt by association” (George). The gospel must not be compromised in an attempt to reach the postmodern/pre-Christian.

Third, if the unchurched are reached, this effort will demand an “intentional” evangelism. Speaking more to motivation than style, Reid is concerned about the attitude that “the radically unchurched are also the totally unreachable” and challenges the church to understand that “the Lord compels believers intentionally, boldly, and lovingly [to] share … the Good News” (“Hotel” 56).

Fourth, George calls the church to “[m]aintain conviction in cooperation with other believers.” The local church must cooperate with other churches in reaching the lost in whatever way possible without compromising or violating the church’s conscience. This principle of cooperation understands that leading lost people into salvation is not a competition; it is a joint mission. This statement is valid, although difficult to practice.

Fifth, to reach the postmodern/pre-Christian, the church must change its image to “raise the bar for Christian living…. In the sixties, secular people avoided the church because it was too spiritual; now they do so because it is not spiritual enough” (Reid, “Hotel” 57). Barna adds valuable insight: “The first step toward truly preparing to reach the unchurched is for you to become a living representation of His intended Church, a one-person model of faithfulness, obedience, holiness and righteousness” (Re-Churching the Unchurched 8-9). The distrust and the tendency of pre-Christians to look elsewhere for answers could be because the church does not behave in a manner by which pre-
Christians want to define their lives. They see the lifestyles of the churched as less desirable than their own lifestyles.

A sixth principle for reaching the postmodern/pre-Christian is the matter of language. Much has been written on language and communication of the gospel. This dissertation does not discuss such matters, but they are considered briefly here. Towns and Bird summarize communication that speaks to postmoderns:

**Acknowledge your Culture-Encoded Version of Christianity.** Regularly acknowledge that there’s a difference between genuine Christianity and your culture-encoded version of it…. Postmodernists are often sensitive to over-statements that come across more as dogmatism than as someone still in the process of learning and growing.…

**Affirm Truth and Goodness.** Affirm truth and goodness even when they exist in postmodernism. Postmodernism tends to chasten the know-it-all arrogance of a modern world…. People today are asking “does it work?” or “is it real?” more than “is it true?” Postmodernists typically want to experience spirituality, and that’s often all the evidence needed to conclude that spirituality is real and worthy of exploration.…

**Magnify the Importance of Faith Perspectives.** The idea of faith used to be an embarrassment in the modern world. Today in most scientific quarters, however, the era of dogmatic, scientific certainty is gone. In keeping with today’s postmodern turn, the world of science increasingly realizes that all conclusions involve a degree of faith.…

**Bend Over Backwards to Be Fair.**…. The desire to be fair—to treat others no more harshly than one treats oneself or wants to be treated—is precious to postmodernists. Postmodernists can spot hypocrisy a mile away.…

**Learn to Listen to Postmodern Stories.**…. In the postmodern world, we need to tell our own stories: unsanitized, rough and lumpy, not squeezed into a formula. Our doubts, failures, fears, problems, embarrassments, and confusions have tremendous apologetic and pastoral value in a postmodern world. They illustrate truth in its postmodern form of honesty, authenticity, and transparency…. Many Christians have a hard time talking about what God is doing in their life without their story seeming plastic, put on, or inflated. Some of us can’t admit weakness.…

**Deal with the Issues and Language of Postmodernists.**…. If “turn or burn” was the connection point for seekers reached by the revivals of the nineteenth century, the language that makes sense with twenty-first-century people is closer to: “What step can you take next?” or “Where do you see yourself in this process?”…"
Reassert the Value of Community…. The greatest apologetic for the gospel is and always has been a community that actually lives by the gospel. As… Lesslie Newbigin wrote, “Jesus… did not write a book, but formed a community.” (72-76)

The language and style of the twentieth-century church was effective in reaching that generation. The twenty-first-century church must pay close attention to the importance of language and presentation style if it is to reach today’s generation.

From Internal to External

Ministry focus determines whether the church ministers effectively and evangelistically within the culture. Choosing to be internally or externally focused is the most critical issue facing the American church at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Once the choice is made, methods will follow. Methods are specific to the culture in which the church is ministering. The same methods are not effective in every situation.

Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson accurately state that most churches would not claim to be internally focused (16). Most pastors and lay leaders state their belief in the importance of reaching lost people. They even engage in occasional evangelistic events; nevertheless, the majority of churches are actually internally focused.

Rusaw and Swanson define internally focused churches:

Internally focused churches concentrate on getting people into church and generating activities there. These churches may create powerful worship experiences, excel in teaching, offer thriving youth programs, and have vibrant small groups, but at the end of the day, what is measured is the number of people and activities within the church. These are good churches filled with good people. And what they do is vital but not sufficient for a healthy church. Worship, teaching, and personal devotions are absolutely necessary for building the internal capacity necessary to sustain an external focus, but if all the human and financial resources are expended inside the four walls of the church, then no matter how “spiritual” things may appear to be, something is missing. (16)
Activities of an internally focused church are good, admirable, and essential. This truth is one of the challenges in focusing the church externally. Church members are spiritually fed, adequately entertained, and well discipled. In fact, the church is so content that little guilt exists for the lack of evangelism. The result is a church that fails to resemble what Christ had in mind when he left earth, commissioning the Church to go out to a world in need of salvation.

The church will only be complete if it finally understands its call to “engage the culture … [and thus] influence it. None of the other postures give you that privilege” (K. Hunter 15). Klass assesses the situation:

Attitude toward Great Commission outreach ministry is the key difference between churches that grow and churches that do not. “Magic pills” make no difference if the congregation has not first decided to be serious about reaching the people in their neighborhood. Small groups, planning systems, community census, each-one-reach-one programs and other evangelism efforts are not effective in congregations closed to the realities of the unchurched society. (104-05)

This statement is evident (but often ignored): The world is not coming to the church and “if they aren’t going to come to [the church], then [the church has] to go to them. This is the crux of the issue” (McNeal, Present Future 26). In The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church, McNeal speaks of the church’s future: “Churches that understand the realities of the present future are shifting the target of ministry efforts from church activity to community transformation. This is turning the church inside out” (26). This strategy is the primary way the church will effectively evangelize their communities.

This external shift utilizes multiple terms. Each is an expression of Chapter 1’s call to apostolic ministries. Some use the term “incarnational ministries.” Built on the
understanding of Christ’s act for the world, the church is called to become a part of the world for the purpose of redeeming it. Christ became accessible to people and intentional toward people. He had a sense of urgency in reaching lost people even as he faced hostilities from current religious leaders who disliked having the status quo disturbed. Jesus demonstrated the power and effectiveness of incarnational ministry as he came to earth for the sake of winning a culture (Reid, “Hotel” 55).

Another term that describes this external shift is “engaging.” Also using Jesus as the model, K. Hunter contrasts the typical church reaction toward culture—retreating from it, ignoring it, judging it, or choosing self-preservation—with the activity of Christ who “engaged culture” (13):

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, he didn’t retreat from her—despite the fact that he was a Jew and she was a Samaritan (John 4:5-30). He didn’t ignore her, as most other Jewish men would have done… He didn’t pronounce judgment on her—although he did speak truth in the context of their conversation… And he didn’t preserve the unwritten rules regarding male/female public conversation. Instead, he was committed to interacting with her and engaging her in a conversation at the end of which he would tell her how her life could be changed forever. (14)

Such engagement marked the apostolic style of Jesus to his culture.

Reid contrasts the approaches of the American church. He states that in essence the church has chosen to take one of three different approaches in affecting culture: It can “pervade culture through winning elections and influencing the political system” (Radically 61). It can “evade culture, living in Christian subdivisions, attending Christian schools, using Christian yellow pages, and so on” (61). It can “invade the culture with the power of the gospel” (61).
Whatever the term used, the call to the twenty-first century Church is the same as the call to the first century Church: a call to apostolic ministry—to ministry that is externally focused.

Rusaw and Swanson offer this concise definition of externally focused churches:

Externally focused churches are internally strong, but they are oriented externally. Their external focus is reflected in those things for which they staff and budget. Because they engage their communities with the good works and good news of Jesus Christ, their communities are better places in which to live. These churches look for ways to be useful to their communities, to be a part of their hopes and dreams. They build bridges to their communities instead of walls around themselves. They don’t shout at the dirty stream; they get in the water and begin cleaning it up. They determine their effectiveness not only by internal measures—such as attendance, worship, teaching, and small groups—but also by external measures: the spiritual and societal effects they are having on the community around them. (17)

Rusaw and Swanson highlight critical points in the description of the externally focused church. First, externally focused churches do not ignore internal needs. Attendance growth is still important, quality worship services drawing people into God’s presence are invaluable, scriptural truth must be taught, and the formation of healthy community should continue. To be externally focused is not to ignore the existing congregation.

Rusaw and Swanson understand that internal dynamics still matter.

Second, an intentional and focused understanding exists that is community oriented. The church does not gather just to gather; it gathers for the purpose of going. What happens inside the church is not the end; it is the beginning. The local church’s main business must shift from chaplaincy to apostolicity (G. Hunter, How to Reach Secular People 111). The purpose of going to church is to be better prepared for the missional call to intermingle with and impact the unchurched pre-Christian outside the church. McNeal makes a critical point in response to the many churches who perceive the
problem with the church today as an internal issue. As churches continue to decline, the
tendency is to attempt to “try to become better at doing church. This effort only feeds the
problem and hastens the church’s decline through its disconnect from the larger culture.
The need is not for a methodological fix. The need is for a missional fix” (*Present Future*
18). The cure is not to be seen inside the doors of the church; the cure is found in
rediscovering an external view of culture.

Third, the call to engage and change the culture must be understood. This call is
not a political movement that attempts to change culture through policy; it is a movement
that attempts to change culture through presence and direct interface. The externally
focused church approaches culture as Christ does, who understood that often the first step
toward salvation from sin is salvation from physical and cultural disease. Externally
focused churches demonstrate real care for the community before offering the greater gift
of salvation.

As in the days of the apostles, the church must find an entry point for engaging
the culture:

> The classic example is Paul’s speech on Mars Hill in Athens (see Acts
17:16-33). As his springboard Paul uses a religious site in the city: an altar
to an unknown god. Later in the same presentation he quotes a Greek poet.
He appeals to the Athenians’ own experience in order to create a common
ground before presenting the gospel. (Colson 112)

Connection occurs when the gospel is taken to the community instead of demanding that
the community come to the church.

Rusaw and Swanson list four characteristics of externally focused churches: (1)
They are “convinced that good deeds and good news can’t and shouldn’t be separated”
(24); (2) they “see themselves as vital to the health and well-being of their communities”
For Rusaw and Swanson, “[w]herever churches are engaged in community transformation, the avenue they’ve chosen lies at the intersection of the needs and dreams of the city or community, the mandates and desires of God, and the calling and capacity of the church [original emphasis]” (56). Externally focused (apostolic) churches understand three critical factors. First, externally focused churches intentionally seek to discover the “needs and dreams of the city” where they are ministering. The easiest way to discover those needs and dreams is to ask “those who are actively serving the city—servants in law enforcement, fire protection, schools, public service, and so on” (56). Second, externally focused (apostolic) churches clearly understand “the mandates and desires of God,” which can be discovered through a reading of the Word of God (56-57). Clearly included in God’s mandates and desires is the calling to engage and redeem community. Third, externally focused (apostolic) churches understand “the calling and capacity of the local church” (58):

The church has a place in creating healthy, transformed communities. Churches don’t have the luxury of withdrawing from the community. Whether they feel wanted or not, churches must realize that the community cannot be healthy, and all that God wants it to be, without their active engagement and involvement in its life—that’s the way God designed it. (58)

These three critical factors must be looked at collectively.

Seeing these three elements as three intersecting circles, each intersecting the other two with one common place where all three intersect, Rusaw and Swanson speak of how the externally focused church ministers at the points of intersection (see Figure 2.1).
1. One intersection is the mandates and desires of God with the needs and dreams of the city. Rusaw and Swanson call this intersection the place of “common grace” (59). The church and the community share this position and both seek to bring “graces” to the city. They are shared expressions of things such as justice, kindness, and health (59).

2. Another intersection is the calling and capacity of the church with the needs and dreams of the city. This intersection is the place of “control.” Historically, this place has been a struggle with society trying to control the church, or vice versa. The church must replace the word control with the word cooperation (59).

3. Another intersection is the calling and capacity of the church with the mandates and desires of God. This area is called “salvation.” God desires that the externally focused church aligns its call and capacity with his mandates and desires that all people be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 60).

4. Another intersection is the overlap of all three circles. Rusaw and Swanson call this overlap the “transformational sweet spot” where apostolic ministry finds expression in “service:"

   Service is something the community needs, God desires, and the church has the capacity to do. The community may not care much about salvation, but it does have needs. It is in meeting those needs through service that meaningful relationships develop, and out of relationships come endless opportunities to share the love of Christ and the gospel of salvation. (60-61)

The “transformational sweet spot” is the aim of the apostolic church.
Two factors are critical if the early twenty-first century church is to succeed in becoming apostolic. The first is the leadership factor. Sadly, the Barna Group discovered that less than half of all senior pastors believe they are effective in leading their churches evangelistically, less than 25 percent describe their churches as evangelistic, and senior pastors average less than two hours per week in evangelistic activities (Barna, Evangelism 84). In a list of sixteen factors that hinder a church’s evangelistic efforts, Barna includes these: (1) “[n]ot enough strong leadership by the pastor in evangelism,” (2) “[t]he absence of a strategic plan for outreach,” and (3) “[n]o accountability for meeting evangelistic goals and standards” (139).

In contrast, the Barna Group discovered a common dynamic present in churches who were succeeding at reaching and retaining the unchurched:
All of these churches have a senior pastor who is driven to embrace people who are not in love with God. Whether you call it a gift, a passion or a calling, each pastor was unquestionably … committed to helping grow the kingdom by attracting outsiders (Barna, *Re-Churching the Unchurched* 129).

Klass concurs, further stating that such pastoral leadership is first driven by the desire to reach unchurched people, not church growth. Growth is simply a by-product of evangelistic focus (45).

The second factor is church-wide cooperation. Barna lists two factors that may hinder a church’s evangelistic efforts: (1) “[t]he lack of churchwide ownership of evangelism as a core value and activity,” and (2) “[t]he absence of churchwide prayer for evangelistic efforts” (*Evangelism* 139). Alternatively, Barna states that “in every church [doing a superb job in reaching and retaining the unchurched], this ministry was a church-wide crusade, not the pastor’s pet project” (*Re-Churching the Unchurched* 130).

Klass speaks of the church’s new role as ministers in an unchurched culture. “Congregations in the unchurched society function as if they are on a mission field and believe everyone is involved in the mission work of the congregation. All members have evangelism responsibilities” (10). Klass makes a further observation: “[M]any (perhaps most) congregations with effective outreach activities do not have an evangelism committee. They consider it dangerous to make a small group of people responsible for what should be everyone’s responsibility” (10). Although perhaps more difficult to measure, this approach is considerably more healthy and productive.

**Research Methodology: Qualitative Study**

The purpose of this research was to discover a denominational model that effectively evangelized the pre-Christian culture of upstate New York in the twenty first-
century. I chose to use interviews for data collection. As such, the research methodology was qualitative.

Elliot W. Eisner lists six predominant features of qualitative research. Following is a summary of those six features.

“[Q]ualitative studies tend to be field focused [original emphasis].… [T]he field focus that I describe is not limited to places in which humans interact; it also includes the study of inanimate objects” (Eisner 32). An advantage of qualitative studies versus quantitative studies is the allowance for more than just numbers, attempting to understand data within a context.

“[Q]ualitative studies relate to the self as an instrument [original emphasis].… Researchers must see what is to be seen, given some frame of reference and some set of intentions” (Eisner 33). In a sense qualitative research transforms the researcher into a critic, evaluating what is heard and seen in an attempt to understand the situation fully (33-34).

“A third feature that makes a study qualitative is its interpretive character [original emphasis]” (Eisner 35). Eisner offers two meaning for the word interpretive. “First, it means that inquirers try to account for [original emphasis] what they have given an account of [original emphasis].… A second meaning of interpretive [original emphasis] pertains to what experience holds for those in the situation studied” (35). In other words, the goal of qualitative study is not only to collect data but to understand its meaning within the context in which it is collected. The “what” and the “why” of data are of equal value and interpretive in nature.
“A fourth feature that qualitative studies display [is]... the use of expressive language [original emphasis] and the presence of voice in text.... We display our signatures” (Eisner 36). To add clarification to this feature, Eisner adds that qualitative study “makes it clear that a person, not a machine, was behind the words” (36). As an instrument in the study itself, the researcher’s language is critical in communicating data collected. As such, expressive language is encouraged.

Fifth, qualitative studies give “attention to particulars” (Eisner 38). As particulars are collected and analyzed, the goal is to “arrive at general statements” (38) concerning meaning. If more attention is given to particulars, data interpretation can be more accurate.

Finally, “[q]ualitative research becomes believable because of its coherence, insight, and instrument utility [original emphasis]” (Eisner 38). Instead of using “cause and effect or correlations that statistically describe the strength or association, qualitative studies typically employ multiple forms of evidence, and they persuade by reason” (39). The researcher must persuade the reader of the truth of the data collected rather than persuade the reader to agree with their viewpoint.

In discussing the epistemology of qualitative research, Wiersma and Jurs add valuable insights to the understanding of qualitative research. They offer five concise statements on the nature of qualitative research, most of which concur with Eisner. Of particular value are some of Wiersma and Jur’s statements concerning the openness and evolving nature of qualitative research. In emphasizing that qualitative research must be done in “a natural setting because of the concern for context” (201) in addition to data, they speak of the importance of “flexibility in design and even the possibility of an
evolving design as the research proceeds” (201). Later in the discussion, they speak of the “funnel approach” to qualitative research that begins with general questions and, based upon what is discovered in the general questions, continue with more narrow questions that seek full understanding or meaning (211).

One must grasp the importance of the evolutionary process of qualitative research. Often what one assumes will be discovered is not discovered, thus demanding flexibility and a willingness to change the line of questioning and inquiry as the research continues. Wiersma and Jurs make this point: “A priori assumptions, and certain a priori conclusions, are to be avoided in favor of post hoc conclusion. Assumptions and conclusions are subject to change as the research proceeds” (202). Research must continue to its ending point free from preliminary conclusions so full meaning and understanding can evolve.

Summary

In summary, the literature reviewed indicates the following:

- Statistical data is conclusive that the United States is increasingly secular and unchurched. Studies have documented a national demographic that is more secular than Christian, perhaps for the first time in American history. Additionally, the data demonstrates that the west and northeast are more secular than other areas.

- Leading church authorities are concluding that American culture has left the age of Christendom. Society has returned to the pre-Christendom era similar to the days of the first-century Church.

- Today’s philosophical and cultural description is now postmodern. The
culture’s religious description is pre-Christian. If the church is to be relevant and effective in reaching this population, it must understand these conditions. Although the church has returned to an apostolic age, today’s apostolic age has unique characteristics.

- The church is moving away from Christendom perceptions, methods, language, and context. Specifically, the church must become apostolic again, moving from a church-centric approach to a community-centric approach. This shift must occur cooperatively and collectively by pastors and congregations passionate about evangelizing pre-Christians. Leadership is critical, but equally critical is congregational support and joint missional mind-set.

The research recorded in Chapters 4 and 5 sought to discover a denominational model that effectively addresses these concerns. The method employed to discover this model was qualitative with the specific use of interview.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

The literature identified the problems facing the church in the United States as follows:

1. The age of Christendom as a predominant culture no longer exists in the United States. Christianity is no longer the dominant religion. While often deduced that the culture is “anti-Christian,” such a conclusion is erroneous.

2. Although the age of Christendom has ended, many—if not most—American churches are unaware of this truth. Others are aware of the cultural change but, because of denominational pressures and expectations, continue to operate in a way that fails to address the culture. A perception of ineffectiveness pervades many local churches, but the cause of such ineffectiveness is not identified.

3. Because many churches do not understand that Christendom has ended, they continue to operate as in the past. Churches wonder why their communities do not respond to their message.

The purpose of this research was to explore these issues. Specifically, the purpose of this research was to discover a denominational model that effectively evangelized the pre-Christian culture of upstate New York in the twenty-first century.

Research Questions

The research was guided by three questions. These questions framed the construction of the interviews and data collection.
Research Question #1

How is pastoral leadership important in reaching pre-Christians within a denominational model of evangelism?

The literature review revealed that leadership is critical in addressing the problems facing the twenty-first century American church. Churches that effectively minister in today’s culture are led by pastors and staff who are passionate about reaching pre-Christians, intentionally leading congregations, often against denominational pressures, in this pursuit. Personality, charisma, or preaching skill may not be critical factors in reaching pre-Christians; however, evangelistic passion is critical.

Additionally, leadership must have congregational cooperation. Churches that excel in reaching their culture work collectively: Pastors equip and lead by example; congregants respond. Together pastors and congregants share this evangelistic passion.

The first research question sought to solidify the nature of the relationship between pastors and congregations of churches with successful ministry to pre-Christian people.

Research Question #2

What cultural understanding did pastors use to guide their evangelistic efforts?

Effective churches that reach their populations understand the philosophical/cultural and spiritual description of their community. Evidence demonstrates that early twenty-first century American culture is predominantly postmodern and pre-Christian. This understanding, along with contextualization of postmodernism and pre-Christian elements, is critical in shaping evangelistic ministries.

Research question two seeks to discover whether or not such understanding played an important role in shaping successful evangelistic ministries.
Research Question #3

To what factors do the churches attribute their numerical growth?

Understanding leads to specific action, which then results in church growth through the addition of new converts to a local church. I asked the churches studied to identify specific strategies used that demonstrated cultural understanding. Research question three sought to discover if the churches designed and employed specific, culturally relevant strategies in their attempts to reach pre-Christians and a definition of those strategies.

Participants

The study focused on three Wesleyan Church pastors in upstate New York, two in the Western New York District and one in the Central New York District. I chose the pastoral staffs based on their leadership of churches meeting specific criteria: They were in upstate New York; they were Wesleyan in denomination; they were growing; they exceeded one thousand in attendance. I hoped to conduct the interviews with the senior pastors of these three churches, but changing conditions made this process challenging. One church changed senior pastors after selecting the participating churches, so the study was adjusted in an attempt to account for these variables.

After establishing the criteria, I contacted the district superintendent in each jurisdiction. I explained the project and sought permission to conduct the study in these churches. After receiving approval, I further requested that the district superintendent contact the pastors of the churches, request their cooperation, and inform them of his approval. I received permission from the district superintendent to do the study; the superintendents, in turn, requested and received permission from the pastors to conduct
the interviews. I contacted the pastors of the three churches directly, explained the project, and confirmed their participation in the research. At that time, I scheduled the first set of interviews.

The pastors interviewed ministered in the following communities:

1. Pastor A served in a city of ten thousand in western New York. The city was a southern suburb to a major city. The church’s ministry focus was their own city, but ministries expanded into the major city.

2. Pastor B served in a community of 5,500, also in western New York. This community was a northern suburb to the same major city near Pastor A’s church. Again, the church’s ministry focus was their own community, but ministries expanded into the major city.

3. Pastor C served in a growing tourist town of approximately twelve thousand in central New York.

At the times of the interviews, I contacted each pastor by e-mail, then by phone. I explained the nature of the research, outlined the interview process, and established appointments. I requested that the interviews be conducted at their churches. Because Pastor C no longer pastored the church being studied, we sought and found other accommodations and conducted the interviews at a local restaurant.

**Instruments**

As stated in Chapter 1, the research conducted was qualitative with the specific use of interviews. Distinguishing qualitative from quantitative, John W. Creswell offers this concise summary:

[A qualitative study is] an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed...
with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in natural setting. Alternatively, a quantitative study[original emphasis] is an inquiry into a social or human problem, based upon testing a theory composed of variables, measured with numbers, and analyzed with statistical procedures, in order to determine whether the predictive generalizations of the theory hold true. (1-2)

By definition, the goal was to make discoveries that would be described with the use of words versus numbers (Krothwohl 740). “Qualitative research is interpretative research. As such, the biases, values, and judgment of the researcher become stated explicitly in the research report” (Creswell 147). In other words, the data reported in such research addresses both words heard and perceived within the context of the research.

I conducted three interviews with the three pastors, the first two consisting of eight questions and the last consisting of seven questions. Interview protocols are found in Appendixes B, C, and D. Appendix A illustrates how each interview question corresponds with the dissertation’s research questions. All three interviews took questions from each research question list. I designed the interviews to last one hour.

Variables

The variables in this research were the pastors interviewed including their leadership styles and levels of cultural understanding, the church cultures (local and denominational), the communities in which the churches were located, the evangelism strategies, and the interview data.

Design

I designed the interviews based upon data collected in the literature review. Additionally, I read various sources that identified characteristics of successful apostolic churches. I sought to discover if these characteristics were present and if others could be identified. Because the research’s purpose was to discover a model that effectively...
I did not attempt to discover what was done that was ineffective.

Pretest and Refine

Once I established the interview questions, I asked two pastors to review and critique the questions: a member of my pastoral staff, and a pastor from a neighboring town. I made revisions according to their suggestions.

I pretested the three interviews. I interviewed a local pastor, using the three interview protocols. Following the interviews I asked the pastor to evaluate the questions. Revisions occurred as warranted.

Data Collection

I collected the research data using three interview protocols designed to address the three research questions. I conducted the interviews with Pastors A and B at the churches being studied in the pastors’ offices with the pastors choosing seating locations. Pastor C no longer serves the church being researched. I conducted the interviews at a location of his choice, a local restaurant. I sought and received permission to record the sessions and briefly explained the research project. I also informed the pastors that I would be taking personal notes during the interview. The personal notes sought to record extra details beyond the actual responses, such as perceived emotional reactions, hesitations, facial expressions, and other data not discovered in only the verbal recordings. The pastors knew the length of the interviews in advance. I read the questions without additional comment so as not to influence the answers.
After each interview, transcriptionists prepared the data from recordings of the interviews. The transcribed manuscripts, along with notes taken during the interviews, became the data for analysis.

**Control**

Many components were outside of my control: age, gender, educational level, experience of the interviewees, different ministry locations, and different church populations. The interview questions served as a control: I designed questions without prior knowledge of the churches studied or the pastors interviewed. I asked only the questions written in the interview and asked all questions uniformly.

**Data Analysis**

Following each set of interviews, I read and interpreted the data. Reading the responses multiple times helped identify common themes that served as codes for interpretation. After I established a coding system, I read the interview responses multiple times and coded, sorted, and interpreted them. While coding software is available (e.g., the ethnograph, NUD*IST, or NVIVO), such technology had limited value because of the limited number of subjects considered. In relation to the recorded and transcribed data, I was careful to maintain the integrity of the answers, interpreting only what was said and not presuming to know what was implied. The goal was the discovery of grounded theory based strictly upon the verbal data collected.

Grounded theory, most commonly associated with qualitative studies, “comes from the inductive analysis of the data as the research is conducted” (Wiersma and Jurs 19). Grounded theory, as such, is theory developed “from the bottom up” (19). “If a theory develops based on the data, we have a ‘grounded theory,’ that is, a theory...
grounded in the data rather than based on some a priori constructed ideas, notions, or system” (14). Unique to research seeking grounded theory is an analysis of not only the data collected but an evaluation during the process of data collection. The research method used for this research was interview. Grounded theory not only collects the data spoken in the course of the interview but also records the movements and expressions of the subjects as the interviews occur. Theory is then developed based upon a “repetitive review of data,” digging below the surface of the data to extract theory (244). Often such extraction and interpretation is clearer when adding an analysis of the observations of the subjects during the data collection itself.

I followed the same procedure in relation to the notes taken during the interview sessions: I read the notes multiple times, identified codes, and labeled, sorted, and interpreted lines. This data is more atheoretical but carries descriptive value.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Churches in the northeast United States, including upstate New York, where the research occurred for this dissertation, are struggling to find ways to evangelize their communities and grow their churches effectively. Successful strategies seem elusive except for some exceptions. Successful denominationally affiliated churches are difficult to find. Perhaps churches lack an understanding of the emerging culture of the northeast. Old evangelism methods are not producing the same results.

The purpose of this research was to discover a denominational model that effectively evangelizes the pre-Christian culture of upstate New York in the twenty-first century. I conducted research in three churches, all from the Wesleyan denomination. The required condition for research inclusion was to be a church of at least one thousand. Such a size suggests (does not confirm, however) effectiveness in reaching the church’s community. Clear evidence should have shown that recent growth had taken place, also suggesting, but not confirming, current evangelism effectiveness. This evidence was important since the purpose of the research was to discover twenty-first century models. As a member of a holiness denomination, I desired to choose a like-minded denomination. I chose the Wesleyan denomination because it is the only holiness-based denomination in upstate New York with three or more churches exceeding one thousand in attendance. This fact suggests that effective evangelism methods may have been broadly discovered in this particular denomination.

Three questions guided this study: How is pastoral leadership important in reaching pre-Christians within a denominational model of evangelism? What cultural
understanding did pastors use to guide their evangelistic efforts? To what factors do the churches attribute their numerical growth?

The goal was discovery of shared characteristics or strategies, especially shared characteristics or strategies that resulted from intentional action.

**Profile of Pastors**

I studied three churches for this dissertation. The original plan was to study four churches, but I eliminated one church because changed conditions disqualified the church from the study, specifically the pastor’s resignation from the church and relocation to a new assignment in a different state. If the pastor had remained in upstate New York and kept contact with the church, data would have still been valuable.

Two pastors interviewed serve in the same upstate New York city, one in a northern and one in a southern suburb. Both have served the same church for over twenty years and have experienced healthy growth in those years of ministry. Pastor A began his ministry with a small church, and the church has grown to more than 2,500 in attendance. Pastor B began his pastorate in 1987 with nineteen in attendance, and the church has grown to more than 2,600 in attendance.

Pastor A was cerebral, contemplative, and somewhat self-deprecating. Throughout the interviews he was hesitant and almost apologetic in not knowing how to answer some interview questions. He sometimes thought his church was not measuring up. His voice was often so quiet that his responses were difficult to hear. His dress was casual. He was approximately 60-62 years in age. His office (where we met) was attractive but slightly untidy. He sat behind a desk throughout the interviews.
Pastor B was very demonstrative and cheerful. He seemed to be brimming with confidence and readily gave his answers to the interview questions. He spoke the longest of the three pastors, often expanding his answers beyond the original questions. His dress was also casual, matching his demeanor. He was approximately 55 years old. We sat in lounge chairs around a small coffee table during the interviews.

Pastor C served a church in a smaller city. When his ministry began, the church was small but grew to over 1,500 in attendance during his ten plus years of tenure. The third pastor no longer serves this church and is not currently pastoring but working in higher education. He remained a credible source for research because of his continued contact with the church and continued residency in the same town. The data collected from his interview was current and valuable.

Pastor C was the most relaxed of the three pastors, possibly because I have met him on other occasions, including a classroom situation where he was the professor. He viewed the subject matter more from an educational perspective because he is now a college vice president. Pastor C was most casual, corresponding to the interview setting in a restaurant. He is the youngest of the three pastors, approximately 50 years old.

All three church buildings were sizeable (as might be expected of large churches), well kept, and welcoming. From the exterior, Pastor A’s buildings appeared most traditional and Pastor C’s most contemporary. Pastor B’s church had completed a building project one month before the interviews. Their lawns were tended, landscaping was adequate, and parking was well laid out. I had difficulty finding the offices at Pastor A’s and B’s churches because directional signs were lacking. I cannot comment on Pastor C’s church because I met him off-site. Pastor A’s church was on a well-traveled road in a...
Pastoral Leadership and Effective Evangelism

In response to the question, “How is pastoral leadership important in reaching pre-Christians within a denominational model of evangelism?” the research revealed eight common components:

- All three churches possessed a missional component as one of the first three priorities of the pastoral staff.
- All three pastors placed the missional component of the church as their first or second priority.
- All three churches understood that missional effectiveness demanded a balance of mission and discipleship.
- In all three churches, the senior pastor served as the primary promoter of mission.
- In response to the senior pastor’s initiative, two out of three churches reported a 40 to 50 percent lay involvement in reaching the unchurched.
- All three churches were led by pastors who focused personal energy on reaching pre-Christians.
- All three pastors reported they did not have a spiritual gift of evangelism. They all instead had a passion for evangelism.
- All three pastors valued their denominational affiliation but clearly understood their primary allegiance was to their community.
A detailed discussion of each component follows.

### Missional Priority and Pastoral Staff

All three churches possessed a missional component as one of the first three priorities of the pastoral staff. When asked to identify the top five priorities of the pastoral staff, priorities were diverse, but all possessed a clear missional drive. In describing this priority, pastors used words such as “committed,” “dedicated,” or “driven” in conjunction with the missional priority.

Pastor A was very hesitant in responding to the question. In fact, Pastor A admitted he was “not sure that the staff would be together enough to say what their top five priorities are.” After further reflection, however, Pastor A listed three priorities, stating his “hope” was that “one of the senior staff’s priorities would be to help people grow in their commitment to outreach and touching the community.”

Pastor B also listed three commonly shared staff priorities, but his response was more certain based upon recent work by the collective staff on “a ministry action plan.” The missional component was clearly established in the explanation of the church’s “environmental description.” The pastor emphasized the staff’s collective mission was to create an environment where people could connect with God, grow in discipleship, and serve. The “connect” part of the church’s environment included an intentional drive to connect people to God in a saving way. This strategy also involved a call to believers in helping create connections between God and their neighbors. Using Peter’s call as an example, Pastor B described “connecting”: “Up until now, you’ve caught fish. Now you’re going to start catching men. So it’s two things: it’s a deepening relationship with Christ and it’s a widening of the sphere of influence.”
Pastor C also identified staff priorities in the form of an annually established collective agreement. The staff met annually to emphasize four important callings: “maintain a healthy relationship with God, honor and develop volunteers, maintain a healthy relationship with other members of the leadership team, and work on the 3Ds of the church: Devotion to God, Doing Life Together, and Dedicated to reaching those who don’t know him.” When asked if these four duties were staff priorities or expectations, Pastor C conceded that they were most likely expectations, but the staff considered them priorities.

Pastor A hoped the staff prioritized mission. Pastor B knew mission was a staff priority based upon collaborative staff work, and Pastor C expected his staff to embrace the missional component. Although different, mission’s importance was clearly articulated by all three pastors.

**Missional Priority and the Senior Pastor**

All three churches possessed a missional component as either the first priority or in the first two priorities of the senior pastor. In varying degrees, the senior pastor indicated that a missional priority was not necessarily natural to the broader pastoral staff but the senior pastor drove that priority.

Pastor A spoke of a “hope” that he prioritized mission but was uncertain of the reality level of that hope. However, the pastor clearly desired “to try to get the fire back to go out and reach unchurched people.” Pastor A’s first priority was to reach unchurched people. His vision was somewhat clouded because of staff shifting and loss of focus. New staff had been recently hired along with an executive pastor, causing a shift in...
organizational structure. The pastor hoped they would soon “rediscover the vision and passion of the past” as soon as they could “get stable organizationally.”

Pastor B seemed the most hesitant in terms of mission as first priority. He stated: “Early on I was a little behind the ball; I was playing a little bit of catch up.” Initiative for mission began with the church’s governing body and had to be learned by Pastor B. Later in his ministry because of the positive influence of Bill Hybels, the passion to “become much more unchurched-focused” developed and became his first priority.

Pastor C clearly stated that reaching unchurched people was his number one passion. He explained the reason for his passion:

I grew up in a church that had zero effectiveness in reaching lost people. That is what I grew up in and it was frustrating. When I went into ministry, I was determined that it would be different; that we would be effective and passionate about reaching lost people.

Pastor C’s history and resulting passion established him as the lead agent in shaping staff and church “expectations” to reach those without Christ.

Again, each pastor placed high priority on mission for various reasons: Pastor A desired to recapture the passion of the past, Pastor B responded to another intentional missional church, and Pastor C was personally passionate about unchurched people.

Nevertheless, all three pastors recognized the mandate to be missional.

The Importance of Ministry Balance

All three churches clearly understood that being only missional was inadequate; the church needed balance between mission and discipleship if they were to evangelize their community effectively. The senior pastor’s role was to help the church understand the multiple sides of effective ministry. The first church sought balance between four critical ministry areas: evangelism, discipleship, servanthood, and connection ministries.
The second church identified three critical ministry areas: evangelism, discipleship, and service. The third church used “three Ds” of ministry: Devotion to God, Doing life together, and Dedication to reaching those who do not know him.

A surprising discovery was the fact that all three pastors indicated that one component was not more valuable than another; balance in ministry was critical. Pastor C spoke about the 3Ds—Devotion to God, Doing Life Together, and Dedication to those who do not know him—as “three targets on the wall, the three gauges on our dashboard.” Pastor C recounted a time when a layman pressed him to identify which ministry area was most important. He responded that “they are in fact like three legs on a stool. You can’t take one out of the mix. They are all essential.” Pastor B stated that “if any of those pieces is missing, then we feel like we are out of balance.” An important lesson exists in this emphasis on balance: Churches must balance all ministry areas to be truly successful.

**The Senior Pastor as Missional Promoter**

In all three churches, the senior pastor primarily promoted mission. Lay leadership responsibilities indirectly fulfilled the senior pastor’s promotion of mission. Two pastors understood the role of lay leadership to be maintenance, administration, and accountability, making sure the stated vision/mission of the church was executed. Pastor B offered unique insight into the role of the governing body of the church:

I think the primary function of our congregational leadership team, as they understand it, from what I hear them say, is to provide the church with a quality senior pastor and staff so that the church can benefit and grow. It’s in keeping with the Ephesians 4 model and we follow it…. I think [the church board’s] number one priority is to see to it, through accountability, through interviewing, through prayer, through constant accountability with me and my senior staff, that the church be provided with the best staff that can give the church a chance to be the best church it can be.
The governing body clearly understood missional mandate. Ephesians 4 served as their model.

According to Pastor C, indirect evangelism happened through lay leadership who valued mission but saw it initially promoted through the senior pastor. Lay leadership understood their role as mission facilitators through the prayerful selection of a senior pastor and staff who would lead in missional efforts. In the end, the senior pastor led in making the church missional; the church’s governing body found that leader.

The Importance of Lay Involvement

Two of three churches reported 40 to 50 percent of the laity was actively engaged in reaching the unchurched. This engagement did not happen accidentally; it was initiated by the senior pastor. Although Pastor A hesitantly reported a 5 percent (at best) laity involvement in reaching unchurched people, the other two churches seemed more optimistic. Such engagement occurred because of intentional equipping and programming. Pastors B and C listed specific initiatives:

- They offered regular relational evangelism courses. Pastor B used the “Just Walk Across the Room” curriculum, “liberating people that had been deathly afraid of even letting people know that they were a Christian because they were afraid someone was going to ask them a question.” In one session, more than eight hundred people attended. As a result of such intentional training, Pastor B stated at least 40 percent of the congregation was involved in relational evangelism. Pastor C offered regular evangelism courses, exhorting congregants to “come and enhance your skills and shape your heart to reach unsaved people.” As a result, one hundred to 150 people attended these courses.
each time. At least 50 percent of Pastor C’s church was involved in intentional evangelism.

- When someone was effectively evangelizing, they were highlighted in the **Sunday** service; intentional validation and recognition of evangelism occurred. Pastor B built into the services a five to seven minute sharing time when “a couple of people who wanted to would stand, we would give them a microphone, and they could share whatever was on their heart.” This time was clearly defined by Pastor B as an occasion to share testimonies about evangelism efforts and exciting results.

- Pastor B established a “Year of Sharing Our Faith” campaign, encouraging **people** to share Jesus with nonbelievers. In response to the emphasis, e-mail communications from congregants testified to effective witnesses. People evangelized “because someone asked them to, we’ve invited them to give it a try, and we’re finding that it has increased the passion” to reach unchurched people. In support of such efforts, all three churches understood the on-site services to be a resource or support for lay evangelism. Those who were doing evangelism knew that if they brought a friend or neighbor to church, the service would be excellent and presented in a form that would be attractive to their guest. I will discuss worship services further in Cultural Understanding and Effective Evangelism.

**The Senior Pastor’s Role in Reaching Pre-Christians**

All three churches were very clear that the senior pastor focused energy on reaching pre-Christians. **Pastors A and C** indicated that they primarily initiated reaching pre-Christians. **Pastor B** indicated that the emphasis came first from the lay leadership,
but he quickly embraced it. All three indicated that the pulpit, the senior pastor’s place of speaking, was the primary tool for promoting evangelism.

Pastor A emphasized the pastor’s lead role in promoting missional activity to the unchurched. He assumed that about 5 percent of the congregation embraced evangelism, with a “larger percent of ‘bobble-heads’ who are agreeing with everything just because.” I am surmising that Pastor A may believe that only 5 percent are fully embracing his leadership. Later he stated, “I think people still believe in [reaching pre-Christians], but I think they need to deepen their convictions.” Nevertheless, although 5 percent may follow his leadership, Pastor A understands the senior pastor’s role as lead agent in promoting evangelism.

Pastor C responded quickly to the leadership question: “It is absolutely me. I mean, I wasn’t the only one. Clearly that kind of vision has to be embraced by the congregation, but it had to start with me.” Pastor C further explained the leadership required:

> Along the way we would name different people as champions of the cause, or we would give specific leadership roles to people. But it always comes back to me and what I say behind the pulpit, to what degree I talk about it with the leadership, to the degree we would budget to reach pre-Christians, to what extent our weekend services and all programs achieve the objective of reaching pre-Christians. All these things, they had to begin with me. If I wasn’t encouraging those things, then they wouldn’t have gotten done.

Pastor B, as mentioned earlier, admitted that reaching the unchurched was not originally initiated by him, but it became his role. He stated, “I am the public voice because of the strength of the pulpit here, the platform ministry is impactful. I am the primary voice of passion for sharing with pre-Christians.” While no pastor diminished the importance of
laity in reaching pre-Christians—in fact they emphasized its necessity—such efforts must have a leader. That person must be the senior pastor.

**Gifting versus Passion**

All three pastors stated they did not have the spiritual gift of evangelism; however, all three indicated their extremely high passion or compassion for the unchurched and are highly motivated by that passion. Two of the three seemed almost embarrassed that they could not remember the last time they personally led someone to Christ. Nevertheless, the passion to motivate and facilitate such conversions was a driving force in all three pastors.

Pastor C responded most strongly to his lack of evangelistic gifting. When asked if evangelism was one of his top three spiritual gifts, he stated, “I’m terrible about winning people to Christ. I’m terrible at it. I’ve never really thought about it.” He continued, making an important distinction between “passions and gifts.” He spoke of being “highly passionate” about reaching pre-Christians, but certainly not gifted. In addition to verbal responses, I easily observed Pastor C’s passion when speaking about reaching pre-Christians.

Although less strong, Pastors A and B concurred. Pastor A clarified his position on reaching pre-Christians: “I feel ungifted in the area of evangelism—and I’m feeling embarrassed about this—but I do have a compassion for the unchurched and a desire for the church to be effective in reaching unchurched people.” Pastor A described occasions when he would look over the congregation, see a new person, and feel deep compassion rise up within him for that person.
Each pastor had a driving force of passion or compassion. I sensed a mandate for evangelism from all three pastors along with a heart for those without Christ.

**The Primary Commitment of Denominational Pastors**

All three pastors valued their denomination, but each one emphasized their primary commitment to their community, not the denomination. The value of association with a denomination came in the form of shared theology and collaboration.

Nevertheless, the three pastors clearly stated that striving to please the denomination or achieve the denomination’s measures of success was not important. Local church measures and initiative replaced any district or general initiatives. At times tensions arose with the denomination, especially regarding membership requirements conflicting with local dynamics. All three pastors eliminated these tensions by creating levels of membership. Each pastor had a strong entrepreneurial spirit.

Each pastor wanted to balance the value of denominational ties with the constraining aspects of the denomination. Pastor B seemed most at ease as a denominational pastor, stating that the denomination’s measures of success matched their local measures well. Slight deviations existed, but they were not deterrents.

Pastors A and C felt more strongly about restrictive denominational ties.

Measures of success for the denomination and the local church were often very different from each other. Pastor A summarized their opinion:

I don’t much care whether we’re hitting [the denomination’s measures of success] or not. If our measures of success are different, we just do what we do. The denomination and our district leadership person, they just let us do what we’re doing. They’re just grateful we’re succeeding.

Measures of success were important for Pastors A and C. However, local measures superseded district expectations.
Pastor C expressed concern about the denomination “being held hostage by the church growth movement” of several decades ago with an emphasis on numbers. Although numerical statistics are important, they are only one measure of success. More tensions existed in denominationally mandated initiatives where all district churches were asked to participate in a specific program.

If we believe some kind of denominational position or program or emphasis is going to hinder what we’re doing successfully in the local church, we’ll just “blow it off.” I’ve had my hand slapped by the denomination a number of times. This attitude was not intentional rebellion against the denominational mandate but rather an understanding of missional priority. Pastor C offered this perspective:

My guess is that whatever the denomination, the churches that are growing are the ones who are not stressed out about “toeing the line” of the denomination. They are churches that are more concerned about what is needed and relative in an entrepreneurial way to reach the community in which they live. The local community always has precedence over the denomination.

This dynamic is clearly evident in the three churches studied. Each of these eight shared component speaks to the necessity of having strong, missionally driven pastors. The senior pastor’s direction and understanding is critical in terms of missional effectiveness.

Cultural Understanding and Effective Evangelism

In response to the question, “What cultural understanding did pastors use to guide their evangelistic efforts?” I discovered seven common components in the research:

- Christendom, at least in the northeast, no longer exists as a cultural reality.
- The demise of Christendom is not necessarily a negative development. It has ushered in a new age of evangelistic opportunity similar to the apostolic age.
• The cultural description of residents in the churches’ communities was post-Christian with a tendency toward pre-Christian.

• The gateway to reaching their community is through ministering to felt or real needs. Ministries of compassion meet these needs.

• All three churches cared deeply about the importance of inclusive language and style in their worship services and all other church-related ministries.

• All three pastors felt clearly that their Sunday morning services and activities partnered with relational evangelism and compassionate ministries during the week.

• Two of three pastors had begun to research the former spiritual status of new attendees to their church.

A detailed discussion of each component follows.

The End of Christendom

The three pastors formed the decisive opinion that Christendom, at least in the northeast, no longer existed as a cultural reality. All three pastors believe that a remnant of Christendom is still evident in their communities. The pastors interviewed felt this remnant could be explained by the continued strong presence of the Roman Catholic church. The Catholic church has an influence in 69 to 80 percent of their community’s population. Nevertheless, Christianity as the “civil religion” is no longer a reality. Christianity, instead, is now considered by pre-Christians to be equal with every other religion, forcing the Christian church to become successful on its own merit.

Pastor B was the least adamant about the demise of Christendom, stating instead that “there are regions where the absence of Christendom exists.” In his opinion, “in the Northeast, ... a religious sense of Christianity, a religious sense of Christian doctrine, the
formality and organized side of Christianity is losing ground to some extent. We are becoming much more organic.”

Pastor A spoke of Christendom dynamics ending in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. During that time, the church “was kind of inoculated against growing realities. We had enough civil religion or enough Christianity that people considered themselves Christian without being close.” That dynamic has changed. “Now the lines are drawn more clearly; you are or you are not a Christian.”

Pastor C unhesitatingly stated his convictions about the end of Christendom:

In almost every way that you would measure it, [Christendom has disappeared]. Church attendance is down, we are more pluralistic in terms of the number of adherents to differing religions…. Other religions other than Christianity have been much more effective than we have lately. Certainly the tone of our culture is much less in line with Christian ethics and values.

Pastor C spoke of the decisive shift away from Christendom. The three pastors shared this opinion but surprisingly did not see the situation as negative. Their shared opinion led to the next discovery.

**A New Age of Opportunity**

Although they agreed that Christendom no longer exists as a cultural reality, all three pastors believe this situation is not necessarily detrimental; instead, the situation ushers in a new age of evangelistic opportunity similar to the apostolic age. The age of Christendom may have been a deterrent to evangelism because churches were assuming an advantage in society and failing to do the work required to evangelize their communities. Christianity can now be offered in a fresh way, similar to the apostolic age.

Christianity thrived in the apostolic age and can thrive today with fresh approaches.

Pastor B expressed this sentiment best:
Christendom has come to an end, but I don’t bemoan that. I actually, in some ways say “thank God” that we are finally back to not being the official state religion, if you will. Now we can do real Christianity again. We can win or lose on the basis of our own ideas, our own worldview, without having the “church-i-anity” part of it interfere with how people receive it or don’t receive it.

Pastor B admits that Christianity has “fallen on hard times,” but the church has not. The church has new opportunity similar to the days of the early Church. Pastors A and C concurred with a vision of renewed optimism.

**Ministering to a Post-Christian/Pre-Christian Culture**

All three pastors tend toward a belief that their communities are primarily composed of post-Christians with a tendency toward pre-Christian. They described their communities as follows: a declining sense of Judeo-Christian ethics; an absence of absolute truths; loss of scriptural authority; perhaps pre-Christian but certainly not pre-religious—a general sense that a god exists; religious pluralism; a substantial and growing amount of hostility toward Christianity with much of it deserved. At the same time, a growing number of second-generation nonchurched people exist, and growing numbers of second and third-generation nonchurched people are totally unevangelized. As this trend continues, pre-Christian culture will become more and more dominant.

Each pastor struggled to describe their culture specifically. All sensed a period of transition in upstate New York communities. Their use of different descriptors of community spiritual dynamics seemed to highlight that indeed a transition period was underway. Some descriptors suggested a post-Christian dynamic: a decline, but not an absence of Judeo-Christian ethics. Another described a decline in absolute truth and the emergence of relative truth; a decline in the authority of Scripture (identified by Pastor A). Pastor B stated that the persistence of Roman Catholic influence preserved some level...
of “cultural Christianity.” Pastor C believed that growing hostility toward Christianity was connected with a post-Christian society.

At the same time, several dynamics are emerging, causing the church to move in the direction of pre-Christian. Pastor A admitted that “we are beginning to run into a second generation of unchurched people more and more.” Even more alarming is that “increasingly in our culture—on campuses and other places—we are running into a second and third generation of people who are unevangelized and unchurched.” As this dynamic continues, more and more people will have a distant memory of Christianity and eventually no memory of Christianity, which is pre-Christian.

**The Importance of Needs-Based, Compassionate Ministries**

All three pastors have discovered that the gateway to reaching their community is understanding and ministering to felt and real needs. These needs are met by ministries of compassion. Each church intentionally discovered what the felt community needs were and designed ministries to meet those needs. Each church used intentional methods to discover those needs: forums in which they asked community leaders to help the church identify community needs (Pastor A); external focus groups where they invited unchurched people to share community needs with the pastor in a local gathering area (Pastor C); internal focus groups that asked new and recent attendees to identify community needs (Pastors B and C); attempts to connect personal and community need: “I am the community. What do I need?” (Pastors A and B). As the three churches conducted research, they discovered their communities had shared needs: spiritual hunger, multiple layers of relationship problems, high life stress and anxiety, local and national economic concerns, financial need, need for compassion. Such discoveries
inspired each church to design ministries inside and outside the church to reach people at their point of need through compassion.

While all three pastors attempted to understand cultural needs, Pastor C seemed the most aggressive. He and the staff conducted internal and external focus groups regularly. The pastor described the process:

I pull together some people I know from the community, often at Starbucks, just friends and neighbors. I’d say to them, “I’m a pastor—you know that. We’re trying to help people in our community. What are people in our community struggling with?” As they would answer, it would help me know what our church should be talking about.

The information gained shaped the church’s ministry both internally and externally. Pastor C designed sermon series around community needs. Pastor C took the lessons learned from the external focus groups plus further information from internal focus groups. He then met with the leadership team to discuss meeting those needs. “In the meetings we were always talking about the [issues of the community] and asking, ‘What are people struggling with, what are the questions they have, and how can we address them?’” The team designed sermon series, dramas, and songs around themes that addressed needs. They also shaped external ministries similarly to meet specific needs.

Although Pastor C best expressed the details of needs-based ministries, all three churches operated in like manner. All agreed that by meeting needs, they gained the audience to which they presented Christ’s message of forgiveness.

**Language and Style Matters**

All three churches were extremely concerned about the importance of inclusive language and style in their worship services and all other church-related ministries. In each church, the music was contemporary. They limited their services to one hour,
realizing that Catholic mass is fifty minutes long and visitors are not accustomed to long services. Language was screened at every level: song lyrics, sermons, dramas, and printed publications were carefully examined to ensure no “Christianese,” “theological jargon,” or “inner sanctum lingo” made an appearance. The service presentation was so intentionally inclusive that many visiting established believers accused the church of shallowness because they did not understand the church’s goal of reaching pre-Christians. The church made overt attempts to present everything in an ordinary way so as to reach ordinary people.

Pastor A’s church intentionally screened language so much that they “almost don’t even think about it any more.” From the early days of his ministry, the church knew that presentation style was very important.

Pastors B and C are even more intentional about screening everything for language and style. Pastor B spoke of a process their church undertakes every six months:

We get in one of our shuttle buses, we start on the road, and pull into a church parking lot and pretend it’s our first time at the church. So what is in the parking lot? Do people know where they are supposed to go? We get out of the shuttle and walk in the door. What does it feel like? We’re a first-time guest, unfamiliar with Protestant, evangelical churches. We pick up a bulletin. What does it feel like for an unchurched person to be handed a bulletin? Does the bulletin make sense? We think about things said in the pulpit. If someone says “there’s a CCR meeting tomorrow night,” we’ve just excluded a bunch of people. Are we helping people find their way around the Bible? We tell people how to find the Scripture being used that day. Will the segues in the service help the service flow? How long will the service take?

Every six months this exercise occurs to ensure visitors are comfortable and understand what is happening in the church.

Pastor C also took aggressive approaches to screening worship services and media for language and style. Pastor C stated that their church “is obsessive about it.” Pastor C
personally edited the bulletin, eliminating any insider language. “Music, drama, media, messages, the way in which we built the building—it’s a rather generic building, not churchy, the way we welcome people, the way our printed materials are put together, everything is scrutinized.” Also, weekend worship times are scrutinized between services to screen for language and style. Pastor C describes this editing:

We have Saturday night services—we started those four or five years ago. After every Saturday night service all of us involved in the service would go back to the green room and we’d spend an hour analyzing the service. We’d go item by item right through the service and critique it so it would be better the next time we did it on Sunday morning. Everything was placed under scrutiny: the worship, the drama, the sermon. We’d ask, “Did that work? Did that make sense? Is there a better way to do that?” If we did a sketch we’d look at the dialogue in a sketch and if something didn’t work, we’d change it before the next morning.

Pastor C admitted that their obsession may have added undue stress and anxiety to the ministry teams. This example, however, demonstrates the degree to which language and style matters in churches that effectively reach pre-Christians. While such scrutiny may seem obsessive, all three churches deemed it critical if they would intentionally reach their culture.

**The Importance of Ministry Partnership**

All three pastors believed their Sunday morning services and activities partnered with relational evangelism and compassionate ministries during the week. Their research showed that between 69 and 95 percent of all new attendees came to the church because of a personal invitation by a Christian from that church. These invitations were effective for two reasons: The inviter’s quality of life was appealing to the guest, and the inviter knew that when the guest came to church, the guest’s experience would be of high quality, easy to understand, and relevant to life.
Pastor C spoke of the connection between the laity (who were evangelizing their neighbors) and the church (who provided services that would support their efforts):

We did a study and found out that 90 to 95 percent of all people who have come to our church did so because they were invited by someone in our church to come. Why did they respond positively? First, they obviously believed in the credibility of the person who was inviting them, and that’s good. But secondly, it’s because of the intentionality of what we are doing in the church in terms of programming and presentation that was intentional about reaching those kinds of people…. We felt confident enough to say to our people—and they believed us because they had experienced it—that if they invite their friends, whether they are de-churched or unchurched, we would connect with them when they come inside the doors of our church.

Pastor C felt strongly that a trust partnership between the laity and church must exist. Then they could reach the unchurched effectively as both parties performed their tasks.

Pastor B concurred, speaking of the importance of matching services with the efforts of relational evangelism. Similar to Pastor C, Pastor B declared that “most of the people that come do so because they were invited.” He continued his observation:

I’d like to think that they decided to come because they like the quality of the person who invited them. So my main ministry as a pastor, by the grace of God, is to create people who you just want to be around, that are attractive for Christ.

Finally, Pastor B spoke of the church partnership with quality invitations: “We’ve created an environment that has an acceptance level that surprises people.” A quality invitation coupled with a church ready to receive its guests is critical in reaching pre-Christians. This environment comes out of a proper cultural understanding.

Understanding New Attendees’ Spirituality

Two of three pastors had begun to research the former spiritual status of new attendees to their church. They discovered that 40 to 50 percent of new attendees (according to Pastors B and C) were former Roman Catholics or Christians who wanted
to visit and experience the “hottest game in town” (Pastor C). Around 40 percent of new attendees were classified as de-churched. They were offended in a previous church or the previous church failed to minister to them, but now their needs were met. The final 10 percent were classified as unchurched or irreligious: not necessarily non-spiritual people, but people having spirituality without definition.

These shared church components display a keen awareness of each church’s culture and an intentionally designed ministry to reach their populations.

Factors Affecting Church Growth

In response to the question, “To what factors do the churches attribute their numerical growth?” the research discovered four common dynamics.

- Each church’s mission/vision/values statements exhibited a clear drive to reach the unchurched.
- All three pastors understood the scriptural call to mission as a mandate.
- All three pastors understood the need to balance internal and external ministries, otherwise known as attractional versus missional ministries.
- Intentional mission strategies and efforts were required in reaching the unchurched, but the churches did not ignore the importance of the “God factor.”

A detailed discussion of each factor follows.

The Importance of Missional Vision

Each church’s mission/vision/values statements exhibited a clear drive to reach the unchurched. Although somewhat obvious, if the mission/vision/values statements do not emphasize the importance of reaching the unchurched, then such efforts will not take place. Also, all three pastors understood the importance of balance. If discipleship,
servanthood ministries, and small group connections were absent or deficient, the unchurched would not have a healthy place to grow. Even discipleship, service, and small group connections can be part of evangelism. This balanced view is critical.

I was intrigued by Pastor A’s vision/mission/values statement. Finding themselves at a plateau after years of growth, they are currently crafting a vision statement that “documents ... what has been going on” in hopes of recreating those dynamics. The goal is to “take the concepts that worked in the past and change them into new workable ideas.” This approach is unique because it chooses to use history to shape the future. The conceptual goal is to rediscover their success in reaching the unchurched.

Pastor B offered a vision statement that was guiding the church with an emphasis upon what he considered to be a key component in reaching the unchurched. The mission of the church was, “We exist by the grace of God to enable ordinary people to be transformed into extraordinary followers of Christ.” Pastor B spoke of the importance and intentional use of the word “ordinary.” The pastor spoke of the term ordinary as “a real bridge term for us because that can apply to spiritual or non-spiritual; it can apply to evangelical Christians or Roman Catholics.” Pastor B spoke of being ordinary as a means of “leveling the field” between Christian and non-Christian: “We are all just ordinary people except for Christ’s influence.” Emphasizing the dynamic of ordinary introduces the importance of humility, something that is attractive to all cultures.

Pastor C approached the vision/mission/values concept from a third vantage point. For him, vision is always changing and is a two or three-year goal. The 3Ds are always constant, however; Devoted to God, Doing life together, and Dedicated to those who do not know him.
Each approach is different, but all three have a clearly articulated vision/mission/values document that emphasizes reaching pre-Christians as a component.

**Understanding Mission as a Biblical Mandate**

Ministry to the unchurched is a biblical mandate. The Scripture compelled all three pastors to reach the unchurched, knowing that God’s mission is to reach lost people. All three churches were keenly aware of the call of the Great Commission. Each church also understood the call to execute the Great Commission in the mode of the Great Commandment. The result is the coming of God’s kingdom to earth. Each church shared the opinion that the desire of evangelism—reaching the unchurched, is inseparably coupled with the method of evangelism—loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Each church discovered common ways to present Jesus to the unchurched in compassionate ways: compassionate ministry initiatives, community involvement, special events that met needs, intentional training for church members to present Jesus in relationship. As a result, the churches executed effective ministry initiatives (e.g., free medical clinics, nursery and pre-schools, food and clothing pantries, 10K runs with proceeds going to hospitals for cancer research).

Every church knows the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. The mandate appears to set apart growing churches from nongrowing churches. Pastor A called the mandate the “biblical imperative.” The Great Commission is the text that has informed their work. The imperative in the passage is what we try to be obedient to in the church.”

Pastor B stated his belief:

I think the primary mission of the church is to take what it is and to get as many people to become a part of it as you can. Bill Hybels talks about...
how he still believes—and I share this sentiment—that the local church is still the answer for the community and the world. And so to me the mandate is heavy upon us sharing our faith.

The church is called to execute the Great Commission and Great Commandment as its mandates, not as mere suggestions. Growing churches embrace these mandates.

Pastor C concurred with the others with a slight twist. He stated, “I think the biblical mandate is pretty compelling.” In an attempt to operate from both the Great Commission and Great Commandment, Pastor C spoke of a debate in his church “about whether or not our mandates are meant to be primarily evangelistic or primarily social kinds of things.” He spoke of the evangelistic mandate in the church growth era of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, followed by an opposite swing so that church is more about “the cup of cold water, being holistic and missional, helping people and all that stuff.” Pastor C spoke of his church as one that has “never really fallen off the log one way or another” between these two extremes using their 3Ds as a balancing document. Both the Great Commission and Great Commandment can be seen as balancing mandates.

The theological foundational text of this dissertation presents the balance between the Great Commission and Great Commandment. In Luke 4:18-19, the Great Commission is in the call to “proclaim” and “declare.” The Great Commandment is in the identification of the target: the poor, imprisoned, blind and oppressed. Each church seemed to understand not only a biblical mandate but also the balanced biblical mandate.

**Balancing Internal and External Ministries**

All three pastors understood the importance of balance between internal and external ministries, otherwise referred to as attractional versus missional ministries.
While balance is a concern, the general consensus was that internal and external ministries did not have to be equally balanced. All three indicated their churches were more attractional than missional: 70 percent attractional and 30 percent missional.

Pastor C spoke of this balance: “Obviously,… we try our best to make [our church] externally focused. However, we tell our people that actually it’s probably a combination of the two.” He spoke further about the combination:

Our church has said to our people, “Utilize what we will offer in our church, and when we give an invitation for someone to find Christ, I will have made the assumption that you have built a relationship with the person who will respond.”

The external complements the internal and vice versa.

Pastor A found the question uncomfortable. The church is presently internally focused—most efforts are toward getting the unsaved into the church. Pastor A is concerned about the absence of externally focused ministry.

Pastor C spoke of the importance of both, admitting the church is more attractional than missional, but successful. He stated, “We talk a lot about the fact that if you can get them here then we’ll craft an experience, we’ll try to communicate with clarity, we’ll extend love; get them here and we can help.” He stated that probably 70 percent of their activity focused on getting people into the church, while 30 percent was externally focused in the form of compassionate ministries.

**The “God Factor”**

While clear intentionality is necessary in reaching the unchurched, two of three churches highlighted the “God factor.” Pastor A stated without hesitation that a period of time transpired when discussions such as internal versus external ministry or methods of evangelism was not necessary. The congregation simply opened the church doors and
people came. God decided to move and nothing could stop the flow of seekers. Pastor B spoke of a ten-year period where his church grew two hundred people per year. God is the only explanation for such rapid growth. The church had made attempts at intentional ministries, but God simply chose to bring people to the church. Both churches have now plateaued in growth and are seeking ways to begin growing again. However, both acknowledge that growth often happens simply because God chooses to make it happen.

Summary of Major Findings

The study made some noteworthy discoveries:

1. Data collected from the three pastors support the data discovered in the literature review: Today’s culture is now post-Christian and advancing toward pre-Christian.

2. The age of Christendom is no longer descriptive of the upstate New York culture, demanding a shift in ministry approach. The end of Christendom marks the beginning of a new age of ministry opportunity similar to the apostolic age.

3. Pastoral leadership is imperative if a church is to evangelize any culture successfully. Strong pastoral leadership mobilizes pastoral staff and laity for effective missional activity. Reaching the unchurched is a partnership between pastor and laity.

4. The gift of evangelism is not required to be effective in reaching the unchurched. Passion or compassion for evangelizing the unchurched is more important.

5. The biblical mandate is compelling in evangelizing the unchurched. Coupling the Great Commission and the Great Commandment is critical. The church must seek to evangelize the unchurched with love.

6. All three churches in the research employed the common strategy of
needs-based/compassionate ministries. This strategy demanded both attraction/internal and missional/external programming.

7. Understanding and accommodating culture was critical in reaching the unchurched. The style of music, the length of services, and the use of language must be intentionally designed to accommodate and reach the unchurched.

8. The vision/mission/values statements of churches that effectively reach their culture understand the need for a balanced ministry: evangelism, discipleship, connectional ministries, and service. Emphasizing evangelism without the supporting ministries would be ineffective.

9. Denominations can be a limiting factor, but limits can be overcome by entrepreneurial, independent-minded, and locally driven senior pastors.

10. The “God factor” is critical in reaching the unchurched, although it cannot be programmed.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This research originated from a desire to find answers for pastors in upstate New York frustrated by their lack of missional effectiveness. In my twenty years of pastoral ministry in upstate New York, I experienced and observed growing desperation to discover effective missional strategies in reaching the culture. Strategies effective in other United States regions often have limited value in upstate New York. Some cultural issues had to be identified so that new evangelism methods could be specifically developed for upstate New York culture.

I purposefully and intentionally studied strategies effective in reaching the culture within a holiness denominational subset. As a pastor within a holiness denomination, the usefulness of the data depended on discovering methods coinciding with my theology and structure. I looked for churches that demonstrated recent and successful growth and chose three Wesleyan churches as subjects because they met the criteria necessary for the research purpose. The purpose of this research was to discover a denominational model that effectively evangelizes the pre-Christian culture of upstate New York in the twenty-first century.

As discussed in Chapter 2, recent literature dealing with American culture and the church helped clarify some cultural issues. Also, literature defined the demands placed on the church today if the church desires to be effective. Statistical data concludes that the secularization of America is rapidly increasing, more so in certain regions of the United States (Arn 20; “Number of Unchurched Adults”; Klass 51). Statistics and literature...
concur that the west and northeast are more secular than other regions of the United States ("Number of Unchurched Adults").

The literature further documented that the United States generally, and the west and northeast particularly, is no longer in the age of Christendom. General society may have some remnants of cultural Christianity, but Christendom as a dominant societal influence has ended (Sullivan 11; Towns and Bird 19, 107; Wiseman 24). Because of this cultural shift, the American church must exegete and understand culture in order to succeed. Specifically, the church must discover new missional methods, language, and style to match cultural phenomena (G. Hunter, Church 24).

Literature often concluded that twenty-first century American culture is philosophically postmodern (Poe 21; Towns and Bird 70; Reid, Radically, 76-78). The religious descriptor of the culture is transitioning from post-Christian to pre-Christian (Barna, Evangelism 38; Hunter, Church 20; Reid, Radically Unchurched 21). Many authors identify the beginning of the twenty-first century as a new apostolic age (Hunter, Church 23; Towns and Bird 57-58). The term apostolic speaks of a similar culture to the early Church, but today’s apostolic age has unique characteristics. However, both time periods called the church to move outside its walls and into the communities (K. Hunter 15; McNeal, Present Future 16; Rusaw and Swanson 16-17).

The literature spoke definitively about the importance of pastoral leadership in reaching emerging pre-Christian culture (Barna, Re-Churching the Unchurched 129; Klass 45). Pastoral leadership and congregational support are equally critical in their joint missional mind-set (Barna, Evangelism 139; Klass 10). Both senior pastor and congregation must be guided by a solid biblical/theological base.
The collected research data concurs with and supports the literature review findings. I used interviews as the instrument to collect data, specifically three interviews with each pastor. Data collected was beneficial and informative.

Chapter 4 lists nineteen research discoveries summarized in ten statements. These assertions provide four critical truths that must be understood for evangelizing twenty-first century pre-Christians in upstate New York.

The Senior Pastor Role as Lead Agent

The senior pastor’s role is critical in leading a church toward missional effectiveness in upstate New York. All three pastors spoke definitively about the importance of the senior pastor in this area. In a slight deviation from the literature review, the research found that the senior pastor’s role is the most important factor in leading a church to impact its community. An explanation of the nature and possible reason for this deviation is discussed under leadership factors important for reaching pre-Christians.

Although missional strategies must be executed by laypeople also, the senior pastor carries the responsibility of leading and shaping its efforts. The senior pastor’s efforts might be called dynamism, charisma, or attitude; nevertheless, he or she serves as the church’s leader in evangelizing the community.

The research demonstrated that in all three churches, the senior pastor called and motivated the pastoral staff to evangelize the unchurched. The pastoral staff was supportive of their assignment’s missional component, but the response was driven more by the expectations of the senior pastor than personal initiative of the pastoral staff. The literature review did not include this discovery. A possible explanation for this deviation...
may be related to the organizational structure of the Wesleyan Church. In the Wesleyan Church, the senior pastor, as opposed to the governing body, hires staff. Accountability and vision is directly related to the senior pastor’s direction.

The research also demonstrated that in all three churches, the governing church body was supportive in evangelizing the unchurched, but the senior pastor initiated that support. Church B was especially intriguing in its understanding of the church board’s role: to hire a senior pastor and staff who shapes and executes the church’s vision, including the missional element. This church understood that the governing board did not shape mission, but they must find a mission-shaping pastor along with a supporting staff to help execute the mission. The execution of the church’s mission was an indirect role for the church board, as a supporting desire to minister to the unchurched existed among them. While this dynamic was not concisely articulated by the other two churches, they concurred on many levels.

This operational mode is consistent with the church’s biblical/theological mandate. Luke 4:18-19, the Great Commission, and the Great Commandment constitute the “what” of missional ministry. Pastor B found in Ephesians a description of the “how” of missional ministry. The properly formed church operates best as each person understands and executes their gifting. The church board in Church B understood this partnership and understood the role of the pastor “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:12). The act of preparation includes the shaping and promotion of the church’s mission.

In all three churches, the congregation clearly supported fulfilling the missional component of the church, but the most optimistic projection of the three churches was a
50 percent laity involvement. A second church projected the involvement to be 40 percent, and the third estimated about 5 percent. The two churches with higher laity involvement percentages seemed to demonstrate better current growth. The church with 5 percent laity involvement was in a period of missional transition, attempting to rediscover its identity.

Five factors demonstrated how pastoral leadership was important. **First, the senior pastor determined that reaching the unchurched was central to the church’s vision.** This research seems to disagree with Rainer who listed as a myth that “the pastor must be a dynamic and charismatic leader for the church to reach the unchurched” (“Shattering the Myths” 53). **This myth assumes that the pastor’s personality and even preaching are vital in making a church evangelistic.** The data collected in these churches did not concur with Rainer’s conclusion that the pastor does not need to be a dynamic and charismatic leader. Nor did it concur that preaching was not vital. Each pastor spoke of his role as the source of passion and the public voice leading the church in reaching the unchurched. Each of the three pastors also identified preaching as one of his primary gifts and stated that through the pulpit evangelism was promoted. Perhaps Rainer believes that a person can be passionate without being dynamic or charismatic. I am not certain that I agree with that conclusion. The three pastors studied in this research were passionate and dynamic/charismatic. Their dynamism and charisma drove the mission.

The literature review did, however, state that the pastor’s attitude toward reaching the unchurched is the most critical component. Perhaps Rainer means that pastoral charisma is not necessary, but attitude is necessary. On this point Rainer and the research concur.
Although possibly true elsewhere, in the three churches studied, the passion and drive of the senior pastor was critical. No other entity was present to promote a missional mind-set. The pastoral staff, governing body, and laity responded favorably to the call to reach unchurched people, but the passion was birthed in the senior pastor.

Once again, this discovery did not completely agree with the literature conclusion. I offer here two of many possible explanations for this difference. The first has already been expressed, a possible matter of semantics. Rainer declares that dynamism and charisma are not necessary for pastors reaching the pre-Christian culture. He does, however, state that attitude matters (“Shattering the Myths” 53). Perhaps I describe this drive as passion while Rainer describes the same drive as attitude.

Concerning Rainer’s further declaration that preaching may not be critical, (“Shattering the Myths” 53) in the broadest sense, accounting for all denominations and churches, this declaration may be true. However, in many holiness churches, including, but not limited to the Wesleyan Church, the Free Methodist Church, and the Church of the Nazarene, the word of God/sermon is the critical element in worship. Placing the pulpit in the platform center is not accidental; the location demonstrates the centrality of the Word/sermon. Because of this dynamic, preaching may be more critical than in other churches or denominations. Perhaps this factor explains the reason the three churches differed from the literature’s conclusion.

Second, the senior pastor understood and shaped the biblical and theological mandate of mission. Interestingly, in all three churches the biblical and theological understanding of evangelism was similarly shaped. All three churches tried to execute the Great Commission in the mode of the Great Commandment. The call to “go and make...
disciples” (Matt. 28:19) is done by “loving your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). All three churches blended mandate and heart as the method for reaching the lost in their community. This balance is discussed in the biblical/theological section of this dissertation. Luke 4:18-19 was chosen as the biblical/theological ground for reaching pre-Christians because of a balanced understanding of call and heart. Throughout Scripture (Isa. 61:1-3; Luke 4:18-19; Acts 26:18), God’s call was to seek those needing both his salvation and compassion. When the Great Commission is combined with the Great Commandment—as in Luke 4:18-19—the result is a church understanding the dynamics of apostolic ministry:

- Apostolic ministry is a response to go.
- Apostolic ministry understands its target: lost people.
- Apostolic churches engage their culture physically, spiritually, and emotionally.
- Apostolic churches value and deliberately create relational environments.

Each pastor spoke of a compulsory biblical mandate: to go, to love, to attract, and to offer hope. The shape of their ministries demonstrated this biblical understanding. Ministries such as medical clinics, food and clothing centers, counseling centers, nursery and pre-schools, and homework assistance programs successfully combined the call to go with the heart to love. Many ministries were attractional, trying to draw the community inside the church doors, but senior pastors understood that more was required. The church must go to the lost in relational ways that touch people physically, spiritually, and emotionally.
Third, the senior pastor was the primary motivation for mission. Earlier I stated that passion for reaching the unchurched came from the senior pastor. Equally important is the ability to transfer the passion into motivation. All three pastors clearly understood that they must motivate the church to engage in missional activity. Each pastor’s primary spiritual gift was preaching, so the primary means of motivating the church was through the pulpit.

Each church had well-designed vision/mission/values statements. All three emphasized that the vision/mission/values statement required balance in emphasis between mission, discipleship, connectional ministries, and service. Each understood that mission is included in the church’s vision statement but also that mission without discipleship, connectional ministries, and service would cause the church to collapse.

Fourth, the senior pastor understood the need for cultural understanding if the mission was to be accomplished. In response to interview questions relating to pastors’ understanding of their culture, each shared a clear community understanding because of specific research. They employed tools such as community forums, internal and external focus groups, community organizational involvement, questionnaires, and other methods to gain a clear understanding of their community. The pastors performed many of these studies themselves.

Fifth, the senior pastor led in designing specific methods for reaching the unchurched. The senior pastor led in shaping both internal and external ministries. Ministries that reached into the community have already been mentioned and will be further defined later in this chapter. The research discovered that the senior pastor was also responsible for shaping the internal ministries in a way that most effectively reached
the unchurched. All three pastors understood that reaching pre-Christians was accomplished through partnership between laity and the senior pastor. They accomplished this understanding by balancing the importance of external and internal ministries. I discovered four common factors among the three churches:

- First, the senior pastor properly prepared and equipped laity for relational evangelism and discipleship. This preparation helped laity to share with non-Christians and give a credible witness through the quality of their lifestyles.
- Second, the senior pastor and laity cooperatively infiltrated the community through relational and compassionate ministries.
- Third, the laity invited unsaved neighbors and friends to the church.
- Fourth, the senior pastor and staff presented culturally relevant worship services in a language and style that would be accommodating to those unfamiliar with church culture.

Many churches tend to compartmentalize ministries, failing to see the importance of tying together and balancing internal and external ministries. These three churches discovered the importance of integrating internal and external ministries under one mission: reaching the pre-Christians in their community. The genius of this approach is the partnership that is developed. The implication of this discovery is that healthy churches find a way to de-compartmentalize. Healthy churches unify ministries under one mission, resulting in more effectiveness and, as a bonus, a healthy sense of unity. In the three churches studied, each downplayed the internal/external or attractional/missional discussion. Instead, they concluded that both internal and external ministries are partners in accomplishing the shared mission.
All three churches gave evidence of these five components. I was fascinated with the attention to detail relating to preparation for services and church operations. Two of three spoke of their care to screen everything—language, service length, style—to ensure services were free from “christianese,” theological jargon, or “inner sanctum language.” Pastor C spoke of being obsessive to the point of personally editing printed materials. Pastor B carried out Sunday morning walk-throughs every six months, simulating every step taken by a first-time visitor and trying to eliminate any deterrent. Pastor A stated that the church had become so used to screening out overtly Christian elements, those procedures were natural. Pastor B commented that their services had been transformed to such a degree that visiting established Christians often felt uncomfortable because the service seemed shallow to them.

Required Intentional Cultural Exegesis for Effective Evangelism

Each pastor interviewed has intentionally exegeted for understanding their local culture. Their clear cultural knowledge may distinguish them from upstate New York churches ineffective in their missional efforts.

The three pastors unanimously concluded that Christendom no longer culturally describes upstate New York; however, all three were equally convinced that Christianity does influence culture because of the strong Roman Catholic presence. Although many do not actively practice Catholicism (also true of Protestantism), this influence has preserved a remnant of Christendom still affecting the culture. Understanding the end of Christendom and the Roman Catholic remnant has helped shape ministry for these three churches. Because upstate New York culture no longer necessarily understands Christian language, ethics, norms, or practices, these churches employed intentional strategies to
accommodate this shift. Churches who do not acknowledge Christendom’s end will likely have little effectiveness because their missional strategies developed during the Christendom age.

The three pastors collectively described upstate New York culture as post-Christian. They were not as familiar with the term pre-Christian. I compared each pastor’s definition of post-Christian with definitions offered in the literature review. The pastors defined the population using the following descriptors:

- A declining sense of Judeo-Christian ethics,
- An absence of absolutes,
- A belief that Scripture is no longer authoritative,
- Perhaps pre-Christian people, but not pre-religious,
- A general sense that a god exists,
- Religious pluralism,
- Substantial and growing amount of hostility toward Christianity, especially in politics,
- A growing number of family units not attending church for two generations, and
- A growing number of family units not evangelized for three generations.

In the literature review, the tenets of postmodernity were (1) individualism (Towns and Bird 71), (2) absence of accepted and final truth (Schaffer 23), (3) experience and consumer mentality (Jackson 31), (4) philosophical pluralism leading to tolerance (Reid, Radically 78), and (5) distrust of authority (Jackson 29). Also in the literature review, the tenets of pre-Christianity were listed as (1) lost but not necessarily unhappy.
(Kramp 9-36), (2) lost but not on purpose (G. Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* 43; Kramp 17), (3) lonely (G. Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* 49-50; Poe 27), (4) lost to Christianity but not to religion (G. Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* 42; McManus 29), (5) religiously pluralistic (Henderson 58; McManus 29, 57), and (6) not expecting the church to have answers in their search for life meaning (G. Hunter, *How to Reach Secular People* 53; Strobel 54).

In comparing the pastor’s descriptors of upstate New York with the postmodern and pre-Christian descriptors from the literature review, I believe the pastors are correct in stating that upstate New York is postmodern with a leaning toward pre-Christian. The literature review concludes that northeast culture is philosophically postmodern but religiously pre-Christian. Data collected from the interviews lends support to this conclusion. The transitional climate may make exegeting upstate New York culture more challenging; however, the three pastors were not overly concerned about labeling their culture. They simply understood the culture and shaped their ministries accordingly.

Research’s nature and purpose is the discovery of truth. The discovery from this research is valuable in that it offered anecdotal evidence of the conclusions of the preponderance of literature: Christendom has ended in the United States, ushering in a new age of philosophical postmodernism and spiritual post-Christianity with movement toward pre-Christianity. This movement is more evident in United States regions such as upstate New York. These statements are the implications of these discoveries:

- Cultural exegesis is important and must be intentional. The pastors studied were able to design ministries that effectively reached their communities because they intentionally engaged and understood their communities. If churches are to reach their
Communities effectively, in upstate New York or otherwise, intentional cultural exegesis must occur.

- Cultural labeling is not an exact science, but it can narrow definitions so proven strategies in similar cultures can be used. Philosophically, the pastors concurred that upstate New York is postmodern. Spiritually, the label was not as clear. Some post-Christian and pre-Christian characteristics were evident. When a culture is in transition, the ministry challenge is greater, but not impossible. By seeking shared descriptions of each side, effective ministries can still be found. Common to both post-Christian and pre-Christian cultures are (1) a desire for experience and/or relationship, (2) pluralism (philosophical and religious), and (3) a feeling of distrust (of authority or the church as an authority).

- The methods employed that were effective in these three churches that can be effective in other churches were needs-based ministries and ministries of compassion. Based upon the common dynamics of post-Christians and pre-Christians, this approach may be successful. Needs-based and compassionate ministries are experience based and relational. They present Christianity in a nonthreatening way as the most positive religious choice. These ministries break down walls of distrust through compassion.

**Specific Strategies for Missional Effectiveness**

The three churches outlined four effective strategies for reaching their culture. These four strategies may not be imperative, but all three churches employed them. Furthermore, all three churches were successfully evangelizing their communities.
Four important factors describe reasons for their success. Although this conclusion is not necessarily decisive, each factor was unanimously present in the three churches studied.

**First, all three churches understood the importance of developing needs-based and/or compassionate ministries.** This understanding resulted in ministry designs that shaped the church’s attractional/externally driven initiatives and their missional/internally driven initiatives. Because they were shaped by the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, each church operated from a mandate to proclaim the gospel lovingly. Internally then, the churches shaped worship services around community needs discovered through intentional study groups, forums, and community involvement. Their research discovered that primary community needs were spiritual hunger, relational tension, high stress and anxiety, concerns about the economy and finances, and needs for compassion. Because of their discoveries, worship services were attractive to the unchurched.

Externally, all three churches were active in ministries of compassion, demonstrating love and concern for their community. Compassion for the lost served as a gateway to sharing Christ.

**These needs-based ministries, both internal and external, reflect an understanding of Christ’s biblical/theological call in Luke 4:18-19. As Jesus went to the poor, imprisoned, blind, and oppressed, he modeled the importance of reaching the lost through ministries of compassion.** Such ministry also reflects Rusaw and Swanson’s discovery that the “transformational sweet spot” of ministry (“needs and dreams of a city.”
“mandates and desires of God,” and “calling and capacity of the local church”) is service (61). This compassionate ministry eliminates resistance to the gospel.

Internally and externally, shaped by the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, pre-Christians looking for meaning (but not expecting the Christian church to have answers) find a caring church with relevant life answers. This gateway opens their hearts to forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ, the ultimate Answer.

Second, the three churches understood the importance of music, language, time, and style. They must heed cultural factors if they wish to attract and keep pre-Christians. The communities’ music style was largely contemporary, so the music style offered in worship services was contemporary. The communities’ language was ordinary, not religious, so the churches intentionally created worship services without unexplained religious language. Two of three pastors commented they were obsessive about having ordinary language in services. If citizens did have religious background, the usual influence was Roman Catholicism. The duration of Catholic mass was about fifty minutes, so the churches made efforts to have services no longer than sixty minutes.

G. Hunter speaks of the need for churches “who are willing to be culturally flexible in order to reach people (Church 58). D. Guder reminds today’s church that “there is no cultureless gospel. Jesus himself preached, taught, and healed within a specific context” (114). Towns and Bird speak of the importance of “deal[ing] with the issues of the language of postmodernists” (75). If churches are to reach their culture, they must understand the importance of context, including music, language, time, and style.

These churches implemented cultural relevance.
Third, each church’s vision statement must contain missional components as well as components of discipleship, connectional ministries (i.e., small groups) and service. Two of three pastors stressed the importance of vision balance in order to grow the church successfully. Many churches are strong in evangelism but weak in discipleship, connectional ministries, and service. Other churches are strong in discipleship, connectional ministries, and service but weak in evangelism. The pastors interviewed emphasized the necessity of strength in all four areas if the church would effectively evangelize the unchurched and disciple Christians.

Fourth, each pastor chose to prioritize local mission over denomination initiatives and measures of success. The three pastors agreed on the value of belonging to a denomination, especially in regard to shared theology and collaborative efforts. They also agreed that denomination participation had some obstacles that could stifle a church’s effectiveness. All three clearly decided that the local church, local measures of success, and local initiatives must always supersede district or general denominational measures of success or ministerial initiatives. This decision sometimes created negative feelings between the denomination and the pastor, but each pastor decided to place their growing local church ministry above any denominational priority. Each pastor identified themselves as entrepreneurial, occasionally at the expense of denominational affirmation.

Surprising Discoveries

In any research, something unexpected is usually discovered. Those unanticipated discoveries can actually become the most valuable and helpful data. In this study, two unexpected discoveries were made that may help the average pastor.
First, I discovered that none of the three pastors had the spiritual gift of evangelism. In all three interviews, I added an extra question: “Do you consider evangelism to be one of your top three spiritual gifts?” To my surprise, all three stated they did not have the gift of evangelism. Instead, they had a passion for unchurched people. Two of the three pastors seemed almost embarrassed they did not have an evangelism gift, and one stated that he could not remember when he had personally led someone to Christ. Before beginning this study, I automatically concluded that any growing church must be led by a pastor with the gift of evangelism. These three pastors proved otherwise.

Instead, the three pastors had a deep and compelling passion for the unchurched and a compelling scriptural mandate to reach them. Passion and mandate propelled them to be intentional about understanding and evangelizing their culture. In a sense, they were facilitators and motivators of evangelism but not the evangelists. They facilitated evangelism through intentional cultural exegesis and ministry design that could be used by their church. They motivated through preaching and promotion and vision casting.

Many pastors and church leaders would challenge the notion that pastors can effectively reach the lost without the spiritual gift of evangelism. The data collected seems to challenge this conclusion. In the case of the three pastors, they contended they did not have the gift of evangelism, but instead a heart for reaching pre-Christians, a mandate to facilitate that ministry, and visionary skills to guide a church accomplishing this mission. Because they did not have a personal evangelism component, they concluded that the gifting was not present. In other fields, a person may have passion but not skills or gifting. Many people are deeply passionate about baseball, but are not able to
Many with this passion serve as coaches because they understand the game’s mechanics, dynamics, and physical and emotional requirements. They produce an excellent baseball team even though they are not personally proficient in playing the game. This dynamic appears to be present in the three pastors interviewed. They have a passion for evangelism and the required organizational skills to facilitate the passion, but not necessarily the gift to execute evangelism personally.

This discovery seems important for many pastors who desire to grow a church but feel inadequate because they lack the gift of evangelism. This research discovered that evangelism gifting may not be as important as evangelism passion, which is available to anyone.

Second, two of three pastors talked about a God factor that cannot be designed or programmed but must be present for any real church growth. The God factor cannot be explained, but these two pastors were adamant about its effect. One pastor spoke of a ten-year period when God grew the church by two hundred people per year and the church simply tried to keep up. The second pastor spoke of a time period when the church merely opened its doors and people came; they could not really explain the reason. The second church is now attempting to write a new vision statement in a different way: They are attempting to explain God’s movement in those years as a vision for the future.

This discovery also seems important for pastors who feel inadequate in building a church. In spite of felt or real inadequacy, the God factor supersedes all other advantages or limitations. The God factor cannot be used as an excuse for laziness, and churches
should be attentive to ministry demands. However, the God factor is a vivid reminder that the church is ultimately managed by God. He can do the impossible.

**Implications of the Study**

This study provides data to upstate New York pastors. The data was gathered from three regional churches that have successfully evangelized communities known to be difficult to reach. The study may be even more valuable and informative to denominational holiness churches, although the information is not limited to those churches.

Pastoral leadership is important in every church. The research discovered five areas of critical leadership in growing churches in a pre-Christian culture. Discussion could center around these five areas of pastoral leadership—why they are important and in what ways lessons learned from the three churches could be applied to other churches in upstate New York.

The research provides a study on the importance of understanding culture. For pastors serving in upstate New York, discoveries made in the literature review as well as in the interviews can help accelerate a cultural understanding the church is called to evangelize. I believe many pastors are failing to evangelize their community because they fail to understand their community’s culture and needs. Methods from other regions or some other time in history will have limited effectiveness in upstate New York.

In all three churches some strategies effectively ministered to pre-Christians. These factors can help begin shaping successful ministries in other upstate New York communities.
This research offers encouragement to those who think that limitations preclude them from growing a church in upstate New York or elsewhere. Many pastors do not have the gift of evangelism. Each of the research pastors did not have the gift of evangelism. Passion drove the church, and any pastor can have passion. Second, God can break in at any time. At the end of one’s very best efforts, God’s miraculous power will do the impossible. This knowledge reminds every church and pastor that the God factor is most important in growing a church.

**Limitations and Weaknesses**

This research looked at a very small sampling of circumstances in upstate New York. The study size was three churches; the churches were denominational. They were from the same denomination, and they were all holiness denominations. The pastors studied were all white males. Unlimited options are still available for study in effective church growth methods.

This research looked at the church from the inside and collected data from the senior pastor. More concluding data could be discovered by interviewing pastoral staff or other church lay leaders. Completely different conclusions could be discovered by interviewing community citizens where the churches ministered.

One research pastor was compromised because of missional and structural transition. Much more data could have been gained from the interviews, but I sensed he was not at his best. Church vision and organizational shift was creating personal tension. Nevertheless, the interview was valuable.

The research encountered some problems. I planned originally to study four churches. Soon after choosing the project, two of four pastors resigned their pastoral
positions for other assignments. One pastor began a position in higher education but remained in the area and kept in contact with the church. This career change perhaps skewed the results slightly but not enough to preclude him from the study. The pastor of the church eliminated from the study resigned and left the state for another assignment. Because of personal matters, the study took longer than anticipated. By the time I conducted the interviews, I determined the pastor who moved to another state had been away too long to preserve the integrity of the study.

**Recommendations**

This study has the potential to help many churches and denominations in upstate New York, but would be most valuable to those with common theology and denominational structure: the Wesleyan Church, the Free Methodist Church, and the Church of the Nazarene.

First, I recommend that the research be offered and discussed by Nazarene pastors in the upstate New York district. After pastoring in that district for twenty years, I understand the frustration of fellow pastors in trying to minister effectively in that region. This study discovered valuable information and discussion materials to assist pastors’ effectiveness. Specifically, the research discovered critical leadership components necessary for pastors attempting to evangelize pre-Christians in upstate New York. The research also highlighted the importance of proper cultural exegesis and diligence in cultural understanding of the ministry. A presentation describing postmodern and pre-Christian characteristics would help pastors in the study of their cultures.

I have made such a presentation on the upstate New York District Church of the Nazarene in a class for pastors in training. I presented a detailed description of...
postmoderns and pre-Christians. The class discovered their communities matched the cultural descriptors of postmoderns and pre-Christians. In response to this discovery, I gave each prospective pastor the assignment of preparing a presentation within their specific discipline (worship leader, Christian education director, preaching pastor). They offered a fifteen minute example, designing a worship service, Sunday school lesson, or sermon that effectively communicated with their culture. The class made excellent presentations and illustrated the importance of adjusting ministry to address postmoderns and pre-Christians.

Second, I recommend the research be offered to the eight district superintendents from the northeast region of the Church of the Nazarene for further dialogue and adaptation. Although some data would not be pertinent, many upstate New York cultural descriptors are shared by the northeast United States. Specifically I would address the importance of proper pastoral continuing education. This instruction could help them understand necessary leadership qualities within a postmodern/pre-Christian culture. I would suggest to these district superintendents that their districts embody a new mission field similar to other world areas with pre-Christians. I would further suggest they seek pastors with training in missions and cultural anthropology to help their churches effectively reach their culture.

Third, I recommend the study be posted on the International Church of the Nazarene Web site for access and study. The Web site includes space for dissertations written by Nazarene pastors. This research may be valuable for the greater denomination and could serve as possible inspiration for further study. Perhaps a forum could be established for dialogue in response to the research. The forum would discuss and/or
challenge the research discoveries, offer anecdotal evidence from personal experience, and allow for collegial discourse as pastors seek effective cultural ministry.

Fourth, I recommend the research be offered to some larger northeast churches for use in congregational studies. The study would be valuable to smaller church pastors, but the data would be more useful to larger churches seeking more effectiveness.

Fifth, I recommend giving a presentation of the study to the Nazarene regional pastoral gathering that occurs every four to six years. Because the data would be most helpful to the region, this forum would be the best method for presentation. The data presented would be similar to data presented on a district level.

Sixth, I recommend that our Nazarene colleges and seminary consider the addition of required courses in cultural anthropology and missions to pastoral students. My college and seminary experiences did not require such courses, although they were electives. Prospective overseas missionaries were the primary students of anthropology classes. Colleges and seminaries must grasp a post-Christendom cultural understanding and train pastors accordingly.

Suggestions for Further Study

I conducted this research within one denomination. Other holiness, evangelical, or independent churches in upstate New York have exceeded one thousand in attendance. A study looking at the subject from a different perspective would be valuable, perhaps with a combined set of strategies taken from the best of multiple denominations and independent churches.
Although more difficult, a cultural study using the unchurched as the study group would be fascinating. The study purpose could attempt to discover a philosophical and spiritual description of upstate New York from the target group. The research could also help discover secular people’s opinion of the church, what they are looking for from the church, and their community needs.

A study of growing churches and the spiritual gifts of their senior pastor would be valuable. This research discovered that the gift of evangelism may not be necessary. Further study would discover if this phenomenon remained true in other places and additionally, learn about the gifts that are most valuable and possible other factors more important than spiritual gifts.

Finally, a study would be valuable of pastors growing churches in other denominations. What factors cause these churches to grow when others do not? What unique characteristics or qualities are found in pastors of different denominational churches that differentiate them from nongrowing churches? All three churches in this study were led by pastors who are entrepreneurial. Is this characteristic a necessary factor?

**A Final Word**

Henderson noted the culture’s shift but also realized that churches did not understand this shift. Christendom as a cultural norm has vanished from the upstate New York landscape. Instead, one finds a philosophically postmodern and spiritually pre-Christian culture. In the communities researched, the cultures did not fit neatly into these two cultural descriptors, but they exhibited enough characteristics to assume a tendency in that direction.
Upstate New York pastors’ frustration in reaching their culture may be because they fail to understand that the world has changed. Effective ministry strategies during the age of Christendom are no longer effective. Pastors must take the lead in reshaping the church’s vision. Intentional cultural exegesis is required. Cultural exegesis will result in new and effective methods for reaching postmoderns and pre-Christians. Cultural exegesis must shape both internal and external strategies of the church. This study presents possible effective strategies that can assist upstate New York pastors.

For twenty years I pastored churches in upstate New York. I enjoyed limited measures of success in those twenty years but also felt much frustration at the limitations. Much more effectiveness was possible; ministries should have flourished more. I recently moved from upstate New York to another United States region that has not regressed as far from Christendom. I hope the discoveries in this research can be helpful to my pastoral friends who continue to minister in upstate New York.
APPENDIX A

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RELATED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTION #1: How is pastoral leadership important in reaching pre-Christians within a denominational model of evangelism?

1. What are the top five priorities of the pastoral staff? Which of these five is most important to you as the senior pastor? (RQ1)

2. What are the top five priorities of your congregational leaders? How are they related to the top five priorities of the pastoral staff? (RQ1)

3. Estimate the percentage of your church population that actively engages unchurched people for the purpose of reaching them for God? (RQ1)

4. Who in the church initiates the focus on pre-Christians in your community? If it is the senior pastor, what percentage of the congregants embraces this focus? (RQ1)

5. As senior pastor, describe your level of passion for reaching unchurched people? (RQ1)

6. What are your “measures of success”? What are the denomination’s “measures of success”? If the church’s and the denomination’s “measures of success” are different, how have you dealt with these differences? (RQ1)

7. Is “denominational culture” a hurdle to overcome in becoming a church that reaches the unchurched? Explain. (RQ1)

RESEARCH QUESTION #2: What cultural understanding did pastors use to guide their evangelistic efforts?

1. How would you describe the spiritual demographic of your community? (RQ2)

2. What attracts unchurched people to your church? (RQ2)

3. What are the life concerns/needs of your community? How does this understanding shape your evangelistic efforts? (RQ2)

4. What conscious efforts, if any, are made in the language and style of presentations that make your church appealing to the unchurched? Explain. (RQ2)
5. How would you describe the people who have come to your church in the last two years? Before coming, what was their spiritual condition? Why did they come to your church? (RQ2)

6. How do you understand the place of Christianity in today’s culture? (RQ2)

7. How would you respond if someone were to suggest to you that Christendom has come to an end in America, and that we have returned to a pre-Christian/apostolic era? (RQ2)

RESEARCH QUESTION #3: To what factors do the churches attribute their numerical growth?

1. What is your vision/mission/value statement(s)? In what ways does your vision/mission/values statement(s) address the need for intentional outreach to secular people? (RQ3)

2. What would you consider to be the biblical mandates for the church as it relates to reaching the unchurched? In what ways do these biblical mandates shape your ministry? (RQ3)

3. Describe for me how successful you feel the church has been in attracting your target audience? What is your target audience? (RQ3)

4. What intentional approaches are being executed to impact your secular population? (RQ3)

5. In what ways has the laity been mobilized to reach unchurched/secular people within your community? Give specific examples of this mobilization. (RQ3)

6. Would you describe the church’s evangelistic approaches as “internally focused”—getting the unchurched people into the church, or externally focused—getting the churched people into their community? Offers some specific examples. (RQ3)
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #1

1. How would you describe the spiritual demographic of your community? (RQ2)

2. What is your vision/mission/value statement(s)? In what ways does your vision/mission/values statement(s) address the need for intentional outreach to secular people? (RQ3)

3. What would you consider to be the biblical mandates for the church as it relates to reaching the unchurched? In what ways do these biblical mandates shape your ministry? (RQ3)

4. What are the top five priorities of the pastoral staff? Which of these five is most important to you as the senior pastor? (RQ1)

5. What are the top five priorities of your congregational leaders? How are they related to the top five priorities of the pastoral staff? (RQ1)

6. Estimate the percentage of your church population that actively engages unchurched people for the purpose of reaching them for God? (RQ1)

7. Who in the church initiates the focus on pre-Christians in your community? If it is the senior pastor, what percentage of the congregants embraces this focus? (RQ1)
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #2

1. How do you understand the place of Christianity in today’s culture? (RQ2)

2. How would you respond if someone were to suggest to you that Christendom has come to an end in America, and that we have returned to a pre-Christian/apostolic era? (RQ2)

3. How would you describe the people who have come to your church in the last two years? Before coming, what was their spiritual condition? Why did they come to your church? (RQ2)

4. Describe how successful you feel the church has been in attracting your target audience? What is your target audience? (RQ3)

5. What intentional approaches are being executed to impact your secular population? (RQ3)

6. In what ways has the laity been mobilized to reach unchurched/secular people within your community? Give specific examples of this mobilization. (RQ3)

7. Would you describe the church’s evangelistic approaches as “internally focused”—getting the unchurched people into the church, or externally focused—getting the churched people into their community? Offer some specific examples. (RQ3)
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #3

1. As senior pastor, describe your level of passion for reaching unchurched people? (RQ1)

2. What attracts unchurched people to your church? (RQ2)

3. What are the life concerns/needs of your community? How does this understanding shape your evangelistic efforts? (RQ2)

4. What conscious efforts, if any, are made in the language and style of presentations that make your church appealing to the unchurched? Explain. (RQ2)

5. What are your “measures of success”? What are the denomination’s “measures of success”? If the church’s and the denomination’s “measures of success” are different, how have you dealt with these differences? (RQ1)

6. Is “denominational culture” a hurdle to overcome in becoming a church that reaches the unchurched? Explain. (RQ1)
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The effectiveness of evangelism is not so much found in the person responding to the call (although critical), but is due to the source of the call.

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does not happen because of the power for of the apostle; it happens because of the transforming power of God. G
and transform. The power of evangelism is in God.

The study focused on the pastoral staff of four Wesleyan Churches in Upstate New York; two on the Western New York District and two in the Central New York District. The pastoral staffs were chosen based on their leadership of churches meeting specific criteria: they were in Upstate New York; they were Wesleyan in denomination; they were growing; they exceeded one thousand in attendance. It was hoped that the interviews would be conducted with the senior pastors of these four churches, but changing conditions made this impossible: two of the churches changed senior pastors after the participating churches were chosen, and one senior pastor indicated that he did not have enough time to participate in three one-hour interviews. Adjustments were made, therefore, in an attempt to account for these variables. One further criterion was added in an attempt to deal with the above mentioned variables: I interviewed the staff person with the longest tenure and/or most
comprehensive understanding of the church and its history. In churches where the senior pastor had been serving for many years, I interviewed either the senior pastor or one he appointed. In churches experiencing recent pastoral change, if a new senior pastor was in place, I asked that he choose the person to be interviewed. If the new senior pastor was not in place, the district superintendent identified the most qualified person for the interview. When each interviewee was identified, each interview was conducted with that person to maintain continuity.

After establishing the criteria, I contacted the district superintendents in jurisdiction. I explained the project and sought permission to conduct the study in these churches. After approval, I further requested that the district superintendent contact the pastors of the churches, request their cooperation, and inform them of his approval. Permission was granted for the study from the district superintendents, they requested and received permission from the pastors to be interviewed, and such information was communicated back to me via e-mail.

At the times of the interviews, I contacted each pastor by mail, then by phone. I explained the nature of the research, outlined the interview process, and established appointments. I explained that the first and third interviews would be personally conducted at their churches. The middle interview would be conducted by phone since distance from all the churches was an encumbering factor. Personal contact in the first and third interviews was especially important.

I conducted interviews with staff from the following churches:

1. Crosswinds Wesleyan Church, Canandaigua, NY. Canandaigua is a growing tourist town of approximately 12,000 in central New York.
2. Eastern Hills Wesleyan Church, Williamsville, NY. Williamsville (population 5,500) is located in western New York and is a suburb of Buffalo with a population of approximately 290,000.

3. Hamburg Wesleyan Church, Hamburg, NY. Hamburg (population 10,000) is also a suburb of Buffalo in western New York.

4. Victory Highway Wesleyan Church, Painted Post, NY. Painted Post, adjacent to Corning, has a combined population of approximately 13,000.

I collected the research data using three interview protocols designed to address the four research questions. The first round of interviews was conducted at the churches being studied. In all four cases the interviews were executed in the pastors’ office with the pastor choosing seating locations. I sought and was granted permission to record the sessions and briefly explained the research project. The pastor was told that the interview would be ten questions and was designed to last one hour. I read the ten questions without additional comment so as to not influence the answers.

I conducted the second set of interviews by phone. I asked and was granted permission to record the session, and the interviewees were told that the interview would consist of ten questions and last for one hour. All ten questions were read without additional comment.

I conducted the third set of interviews onsite at the churches studied. Location and seating arrangements were at the discretion of the interviewees. I followed the same procedures and format as in the first round of interviews.
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finding the offices was difficult

Signage was lacking.

may be the same, but I do not know

Toddy. I may have over responded to your comment using the baseball analogy. I’m not sure I’m comfortable inserting the analogy and feel I may just be responding to you. What I want to say is simply this: "I do believe a person can have a passion without a gifting. I see this all the time in the church and can give many illustrations.

They would contend that they had, but they were not personally engaged in one-on-one evangelism


