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Sampling Methods and Sample Size in Church-Based Research

David R. Dunaetz, Editor
Azusa Pacific University

Abstract
An underlying assumption of most church-based research is that the sample from which the data is collected is representative of a wider collection of church members, church leaders, small groups, churches, denominations, or whatever is the focus of the study. To increase the likelihood that this assumption is met without making the research an impossible undertaking, various sampling strategies are used ranging from random sampling to convenience sampling, each with advantages and disadvantages. After a sampling strategy is chosen, an appropriate sample size should be pursued, depending on the nature of the study. The sample size of quantitative studies seeking to describe the frequency of a phenomenon (such as a belief or behavior) or the number in a category (such as demographics) is determined by the desired margin of error. It is more complex to determine the desired sample size of quantitative studies that test a relationship between concepts or differences between groups; several variables must be considered (statistical power, acceptable false-positive error rate, and effect size). For qualitative studies, sampling and data collection should continue until saturation is reached, that is, until little or no new information would be gained from additional data.
One of the goals of church-based research is to collect data from a limited number of participating individuals, small groups, churches, or denominations and then to make conclusions about the broader population of individuals, small groups, churches, or denominations (Dunaetz et al., 2018; Hartwig et al., 2020; Perl & Olson, 2000; Wulff, 2011). For example, data collected from 200 small groups that includes data on average member satisfaction with the group and the size of the small group may allow us to conclude what the optimal size of church small groups are in general.

The reason that academic articles are interesting and useful, whether it be the Great Commission Research Journal or some other academic journal, is that the results of studies presented are, to some degree, applicable to other situations, a phenomenon known as external validity. Sometimes we will read an insightful study and be convinced that its conclusions are applicable to our own context. Other times we will conclude that the study is not applicable to our context. For example, American church leaders are likely to find Moon’s (2024) article on alternative financial models of churches (pp. 43-62 of this issue) more relevant than Hildebrand’s (2024) article on the names of God in Thai (pp. 87-97 of this issue), which is likely to be much more interesting to pastors and missionaries working in Thailand.

One of the underlying reasons that some studies seem more relevant than others is the choice of data sources, or the sample, that are used to make conclusions and generalizations. If a study of churches examines churches that are similar to our own, we are more likely to see the relevance of the study than if the churches are clearly different, especially in ways that are relevant to the phenomena being studied. Researchers must therefore choose a sample that is appropriate for the conclusions that they hope to make. The goal of this article is to discuss relevant issues for selecting a sample for a study we would like to undertake (whether our unit of analysis be individuals, small groups, churches, or denominations) and how to determine how many of our unit of analysis are needed in our sample to make credible conclusions.

**Sampling Strategies**

Samples are relatively small subsets of the population that interests us
(Morling, 2021). If we are studying the people in our community, the population might be everyone in our specific town, a set of towns, or all the people within a certain radius. In any case, it is highly unlikely that we can get data from everyone to know what they are thinking or doing. Instead, we seek a sample, a relatively small number of people from whom we collect information. Using inferential statistics (Howell, 2007), we can make *inferences* (or conclusions) about the population that interests us if our sample is representative of the population. The following are six strategies that can be used to obtain a sample, two of which are probability strategies (everyone has an equal chance of being chosen) and two of which are non-probability strategies (some people are more likely to be chosen than others).

**Probability Strategies**

In probability strategies, every possible source of data has an equal chance of being chosen to be a source of data. If we are studying churches in a country, that means that each church would have an equal chance of being contacted by the researcher, not simply those that are the easiest to contact. Probability strategies of sampling tend to be difficult to carry out, so sometimes shortcuts are taken that facilitate data collection.

**Simple Random Sampling.** The gold standard of sampling is simple random sampling. In our example of studying churches in a country, simple random sampling would require that we obtain the name of every church in the country, put these names into some sort of “hat” and pull out names randomly from the hat until we have the desired sample size. These churches would be representative of all the churches in the country, deviating from what is typical only by chance (which can be described by inferential statistics quite well). The external validity of such a study would be high and the conclusions would be highly generalizable to the population being studied (all churches in the country). However, undertaking such a project would be very difficult. It might be possible to find all the national organizations, networks, and denominations in the country, but it is unlikely that all would readily share the contact information of their member churches. In addition, there may be many independent churches that would not be included. Moreover, churches start and die regularly (Eymann, 2012; Hayward, 1999; Moberg, 1962), making the list of all churches out of date almost immediately. To make things worse, many churches will not respond to a request for information, especially if there is no personal relationship between the researcher and the church leader providing the data (Dillman et al., 2014; Fowler, 2013). In general, simple random sampling in church-based research, and in
almost all social research, is very difficult.

**Systematic Sampling.** A slightly easier probability strategy, useful when a complete list of members of a population is known, is systematic sampling. Suppose a researcher is studying a megachurch with 4000 members, rather than randomly selecting a sample of 400 people from the membership list, the researcher might choose every tenth person on the membership list. Certainly, Abigail Aamot might not be very likely to be chosen to participate in the study, but in general, most everyone else will have close to an equal chance of being asked to participate, resulting in a nearly random sample that will be representative of the population. So, this is a good strategy when a complete list of the population is available and those selected can be counted upon to respond, but if such a list is not available, it is very difficult to carry out.

**Stratified Random Sampling.** Sometimes we are interested in comparing groups to understand how they differ. For example, a church might be interested in understanding what different groups in the church think of the current worship style (for example, high schoolers, young adults, young marrieds, parents of young children, parents of older children, empty nesters, and seniors). It is important to have a large enough sample from each group to draw conclusions about each one. In a simple random sample or systematic sampling, it is quite possible that one or more groups would be underrepresented, simply by chance. To prevent this from happening, every tenth person from the list of high schoolers, the list of young adults, the list of young marrieds, and so on could be chosen to participate in the study. This would ensure that each group would be represented. If some groups are smaller than others (for example, young marrieds), every fifth person on the list could be chosen in order to ensure a sufficient sample for each group. But again, this strategy is only feasible if such lists exist and those selected are motivated to participate.

**Cluster Sampling.** Sometimes lists of the people who interest us are partially available for some groups within the population but not for others. Suppose a church network wants to study what the members of the denomination’s churches think about a name change. The researcher could try to get a random sample drawing from all the churches in the network, but a much easier approach would be to randomly select a handful of churches and then survey all the members in this limited number of churches. This would be an example of cluster sampling. It is much easier to randomly select churches than it is individuals because the list of churches will be more readily available to the researcher, and it is easier to collect data from people grouped together in a handful of
churches than to collect a few from all the churches. If one church does not wish to participate, another can be randomly selected to replace it. A limitation to this approach is that people from small churches are likely to be overrepresented since there are far more small churches than large churches, although most people do not go to small churches (e.g., if there were 50 churches of 40 people each and 1 church of 4000 people in a town, two-thirds of the church attenders in that town would be in the large church). However, in some situations, such as classes in schools, which tend to have approximately the same size, cluster sampling would work very well.

**Non-Probability Strategies**

All the probability strategies described above tend to be difficult, if not impossible to put into practice. Even if a random sample is truly random, most church-based research is carried out through interviews or surveys. In general, it is not ethical to force randomly selected people to participate in these studies if they are randomly selected. Forcing people to reveal information that they do not want to reveal is incompatible with love and respect, central values of most churches (Matt. 7:12, Rom. 12:10, I Pet 2:17). In contrast, non-probability strategies, strategies that are non-random and in which not all members of the population are equally likely to be selected, are much easier to carry out and do not require mandatory participation.

**Convenience Sampling.** The most common sampling strategy in church-based research is convenience sampling. First, the researchers clearly determine the population being studied and then recruit whomever they can to participate in the study as long as the participant meets the selection criteria (i.e., they are part of the population being studied). For example, a study of the membership of a specific church would try to get as many of that church’s members to participate, perhaps by sending out an email invitation to the whole membership list. Or if the study were slightly broader and the population being studied included all who were associated with the church, the email invitation could be sent to everyone on the church’s email list. Since response rates in voluntary surveys tend to be low, several reminders might be needed in both cases to reach the desired sample size.

This sampling strategy does not select a representative sample of the population being studied because some people are more likely to respond to the invitation to participate (e.g., people who know the researchers, people who are especially conscientious and respond to all church-related requests, and people who are interested in the topic announced in the invitation) and some are less likely to respond (e.g., people without email,
people who struggle with reading, and people who do not enjoy revealing to others what they think). However, in many situations, this is a small price to pay to ensure reaching the desired number of participants. Nevertheless, the selection criteria should be clear (e.g., people who attend the church at least twice per month, people who are currently leading a small group in the church, or people who are salaried by the church full-time) in order to have a sample that approximately represents the population being studied.

**Quota Sampling.** In quota sampling, the researcher determines beforehand the minimum number of people (or churches, etc.) needed in each group examined in the study and then works to recruit participants who fit the criteria. For example, in recent years, the Great Commission Research Network has conducted an annual study of the challenges faced by pastors or churches in the United States (e.g., Dunaetz, 2023; Moody, 2023). In general, a convenience sample designed to represent the population that shares the organization’s values is used (i.e., all the board members of the organization reach out to their personal social networks). However, denominations and church networks are invited to participate as well so that they can compare their churches to a broader sample of evangelical churches and gain insights into the needs of the denomination or network by seeing how they are different from the broader sample. To increase the likelihood that these differences can be detected, each denomination or network is directed to keep inviting pastors and church leaders to participate until they have at least 30 responses. Once the target of 30 responses for the group is achieved, efforts taper off to collect data (but the data-collecting survey is not turned off until the analysis is undertaken, because more data is always better).

**When are Probability Strategies the Most Important?**
Random selection such as used in the probability strategies previously described is most important when comparing the size of one group to another. Political polls are the most visible type of study where random selection is needed because the number of people who support Candidate A may be very close to the number of people who select Candidate B. Convenience sampling (e.g., by Fox News or MSNBC) would produce very biased results. For this reason, political polls are very expensive and often carried out by large organizations with many resources. A panel of respondents, chosen to be representative of the nation, may be paid to participate in surveys, not just the ones that interest them.

Similarly, demographic studies need to be based on a random sample. Religious demography (Johnson & Grim, 2013; Johnson & Zurlo, 2020;
Zurlo et al., 2021) is the study of how religions and religious values are distributed among a population. This is a very important topic for mission leaders who seek to reach the least reached, and excellent resources are available (e.g., Johnson & Zurlo, 2020; joshuaproject.net; Mandryk, 2010). The most credible sources used to determine the number of Christians in a specific location are government censuses, studies carried out by professional organizations with the necessary resources (e.g., Pew Research Center), or denominations that keep track of the characteristics of their associated churches. However, when these approaches are not used, and estimates need to be made from a biased sample, the uncertainty of the figures generated can be very high (See the cases discussed in Rhodes, 2022).

Any time a study seeks to answer the question “How many?”, such as “How many people in our town attend church?” “How many people in a country self-identify as evangelicals?”, it is important to use a probability strategy (e.g., cluster sampling) to maximize unbiased sampling. In contrast, studies that seek to understand relationships, especially relationships that are grounded in human nature or in culture, are less sensitive to non-random samples (e.g., convenience sampling). For example, if we want to study the relationships between churches changing their name (e.g., from First Baptist Church to Cornerstone Church or New Hope Church) and changes in people’s commitment to their church, it is not necessary to get a representative sample from all churches that have changed names. A convenience sample of all church attenders, even if they just come from a few churches, might reveal trends that are likely to be true for the population of all churches. Certainly, there is a possibility that people from a church with a botched name change might be overrepresented in a convenience sample, but the researcher may deem this to be only a minor threat and may be willing to conduct the study in spite of it.

Typically, quantitative studies in which a hypothesis is tested (Dunaetz, 2021) only require a convenience sample from the appropriate population. The more representative the sample is of the population studied, the more credible the study will be, but even convenience samples from a very specific population may be useful, as long as the sample is large enough.

**Sample Sizes**

In quantitative research, determining the needed sample size depends on the goal of the research. If we are simply trying to collect descriptive statistics such as the number of something or the average of some variable, our sample size depends on the desired margin of error. Our desired
margin of error can be expressed as a confidence interval, that is, a range of numbers that is likely (typically 95% likely) to contain the true number, that is, the value of the variable in question if we were to measure the whole population, and not just a sample taken from the population. On the other hand, if we want to test a hypothesis, we need to choose a sample large enough to make detecting the relationship in the hypothesis very likely.

**Sample Size in Quantitative Studies:**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics are numbers that we get from measuring a sample (e.g., some of the members in our church, but not our whole church) in order to estimate what the true value is (that is, if we had data for everyone in the church). For example, suppose a pastor is trying to determine if the church would be more interested in a sermon series on apologetics (Choice A) or a sermon series on building relationships with people in order to better communicate the gospel (Choice B). To be reasonably sure what the majority desires, we need to know the confidence interval (usually the 95% confidence interval) of the information we collect from our sample. Suppose the pastor does a survey of 50 church members, and 30 say they would prefer the series on apologetics. This means that 60% of the sample (= 30/50) prefer the series on apologetics. However, the margin of error (based on the 95% confidence interval) of this estimate is ±14%, that is, there is a 95% chance that the true percentage of those in the church who prefer the series on apologetics lies in the range 60% ± 14%. This can also be written 95% Confidence Interval [46% - 74%]. So, it is very possible that a minority of the church (e.g., 47%) would prefer the series on apologetics. This means that it is too close to call.

To be more certain, we need to have a large enough sample size so that 50% is not in the confidence interval, for example, 60% ± 8% (or 95% Confidence Interval [52% - 68%]). If this were the case, we could be reasonably certain that the series on apologetics is the preferred series. In a study like this, when there are only two choices, the formula for the confidence interval is the following (De Veaux et al., 2004):

$$95\% \text{ Confidence Interval} = p \pm 1.96 \sqrt{\frac{p(1-p)}{n}}$$

Where p = the fraction of people who chose choice A and n is the sample size (Bulmer, 1979; Howell, 2007). In our example, 30 out of 50 people chose Choice A, so n = 50 and p = 30/50 = 60%. Similarly, 40% chose Choice B (20/50 = 40%, which is 1 - p in the above equation). Therefore, the 95%
confidence interval is $60\% \pm 1.96\sqrt{.6(1-.6)/50}$, or $60\% \pm 14\%$ as stated above. This means that we cannot be sure of the entire congregation’s preference since it is somewhere in the range of 46\% to 74\%.

If we want a narrower confidence interval to be more certain of the congregation’s preference, we need to collect more data so that we will have a larger $n$ (and which will most likely give us a slightly different value of $p$). If we collected data from 100 people ($n = 100$), and 61\% preferred Choice A, we would have a confidence interval of $61\% \pm 9.6\%$, that is, 95\% Confidence Interval $[51.4\%, 70.6\%]$. In this case, we can be reasonably sure that the true proportion of the congregation that prefers Choice A is greater than 50\%. If we had surveyed 1000 people, our confidence interval would have been about $\pm 2\%$, a figure that is often reported in national surveys concerning predicted election results that are based on a sample of about 1000 people.

It is important to emphasize that such estimates are only valid for random samples. If the calculations are based on data from a biased sample (e.g., all the men at a Saturday morning men’s group), the estimate is also likely to be biased. Such data would be useful, but its meaning is not as relevant as we would like it to be.

**Sample Size in Quantitative Research:**
**Hypothesis Testing**
Quantitative research that aims to test a hypothesis (Dunaetz, 2021; Fisher, 1925) uses a different approach to determine the sample size. An important concept is statistical power (Cohen, 1988; Faul et al., 2007). Statistical power is the probability that we will be able to detect that a hypothesis is supported based on the data that we collect. It can range from 0\% to 100\%. Power of 0\% indicates that there is no chance of detecting a hypothesized effect if it were real. Suppose for example a pastor wants to know if people in the church thought a certain sermon was better than average. His hypothesis is that the average congregant thinks that sermon was above average. If he asks only two people, he has a 0\% chance of having strong evidence (e.g., having less than a 5\% chance of being wrong, $p < .05$) that his hypothesis is correct. The reason for this is that if the overall audience did not think it was above average (e.g., 50\% thought it was above and 50\% thought it was below; this is known as the null hypothesis), there would be up to a 25\% chance ($50\%*50\%$) that both people in a random sample would think it was above average. This means that he would have much more than a 5\% chance of being wrong ($p > .05$).

On the contrary, if we asked 1000 people what they thought, we have
a much greater chance of detecting with reasonable certainty ($p < .05$) that the sermon was either above or below average. The power to detect this difference approaches 100% as the sample size approaches the population size (the number of people in the church). This means that the statistical power to support a hypothesis increases with sample size.

The needed sample size also depends on other factors. First, it depends on the criteria we use to determine what it means to be reasonably sure. In the above example, we said that we wanted to have less than 5% chance of being wrong if we conclude that our hypothesis is supported ($p < .05$). This 5% is known as the alpha level, the significance level, or the rate of false positives. However, we could have said we are willing to be wrong 10% of the time. Then we would choose an alpha level of 10%; if there were less than a 10% chance of getting our results randomly given there was no difference between this sermon and the average sermon, we would say our results are significant. It also means we would make erroneous conclusions (false positives) 10% of the time, versus 5% of the time for a 5% significance level. Thus, we can reduce the needed sample size if we increase our alpha level or significance level. If we can tolerate a greater likelihood of a false positive, we can reduce the sample size. If we want to make a false positive less likely, we should increase our sample size.

Secondly, the needed sample size depends on whether our hypothesis is directional or non-directional. A directional hypothesis (also known as a one-tailed hypothesis) predicts the direction of a difference (or a relationship). If our hypothesis states that the sermon in question is better than average, it is a directional (one-tailed) hypothesis. However, if we do not state the direction of a difference (or relationship), we are making a non-directional hypothesis. If we make the hypothesis that the average evaluation of the sermon in question is different from the overall average, that is, either below or above the overall average, we are making a non-directional hypothesis. If we make the hypothesis that the average evaluation of the sermon in question is different from the overall average, that is, either below or above the overall average, we are making a non-directional hypothesis rather than two.

However, if we make a directional hypothesis (e.g., the sermon is above average) and the results indicate that reality is in the other direction (the sermon is below average), we cannot ethically change our hypothesis to a non-directional hypothesis that would have been supported. This is a phenomenon known as hypothesizing-after-the-fact (HARKing; Kerr, 1998) which is unethical because it can be misused to make almost any data set look like it supports a hypothesis.

A third factor to consider in determining sample size is the effect size.
If there is a big difference between groups or a strong correlation between two variables (i.e., a large effect size), the difference or correlation will be easier to detect than if the difference or correlation is small. The smaller the expected effect size, the larger the sample needed. But often we do not know what effect size to expect. In this case, we should aim to detect the smallest effect size that has a practical impact on the phenomenon that we are studying. For example, if a congregation’s rating of a pastor’s sermons is negatively correlated with the length of the sermon with $r = -.02$, such a small correlation may be significant, but it has no practical implications; it is too small to be noticed in everyday life. In church-based research, a rule of thumb is that we are especially interested in correlations of at least $|r| \geq .15$. Correlations with a magnitude smaller than .15 may not have much of a visible or practical effect.

Another consideration in determining sample size is how much statistical power we want. If we want 95% statistical power or greater, we will need a very, very large sample. Traditionally, researchers are content with 80% power. An online sample size calculator (such as https://sample-size.net/correlation-sample-size/) can be used to calculate the needed sample size in light of the various factors we have discussed. As a rule of thumb for church-based research, a sample of 350 will usually be sufficient. This will give us 80% power to detect a correlation of $r = .15$.

**Sample Size in Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research, rather than measuring specific concepts as in quantitative research (Dunaetz, 2022), seeks to gain insight into how people understand various phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2002). Qualitative research may focus on producing a phenomenology (a study of a specific phenomenon; Moustakas, 1994), a narrative biography (a study of an important person; Bornat, 2008), grounded theory (the development of a new theory based on the examination of people’s experiences; Charmaz, 2014), a case study (Tellis, 1997), or an ethnography (a study of a specific culture, either anthropological or organizational; Brewer, 2000). These studies tend to produce more subjective interpretations of the data than quantitative research. Rather than collecting quantitative data on well-defined concepts, qualitative research collects verbal and subjective evidence relative to the topic being studied. The most common sources of data are interviews and written texts. In studies relevant to everyday disciple making, interviews may be the most common source of data.

The principle of saturation (Saunders et al., 2018) is often used to
determine how many interviews need to be conducted or how many source documents need to be examined in a qualitative study. Saturation occurs when additional interviews or additional readings of source documents no longer contribute something new vis-à-vis the research question. For example, in a study of how Generation Z Christians in a specific church live out their faith, the researcher might notice that by the thirtieth interview, little or no new information is being gained; the lifestyles being described have all been described by those previously interviewed. Once saturation is reached, data collection may stop, and data interpretation should begin.

This means that it is impossible to know how many people should be studied for a qualitative study. As a rule of thumb, the interviewer should set aside enough time for 30 interviews. If saturation is reached before the thirtieth interview, then data collection can end early. However, the researcher should be prepared to continue collecting data beyond the thirtieth person if saturation has not been reached.

**Summary**

For church-based research to be credible, it needs to be based on data collected from people who are representative of the population that is being studied. A sample selected randomly is theoretically the best, but ethical and practical limitations often require the researcher to use a convenience sample. Such samples might be quite appropriate when examining the relationships between concepts that interest us, but they are less appropriate when we are trying to get an accurate count for classifying the data into categories (e.g., demographic studies).

The needed sample size depends on the type of study. In demographic studies, larger sample sizes will permit us to have narrower confidence intervals. In hypothesis testing of relationships between variables, larger sample sizes will make detecting the hypothesized phenomena more likely; as a rule of thumb, 350 participants for a quantitative study (such as a survey) will usually be quite sufficient to test a hypothesis, although smaller sample sizes can still produce useful results. In qualitative studies, data should be collected until saturation is reached, that is until no more useful information relevant to the research question is gained from further data collection.

By properly designing church-based research, which includes both determining the way the sampling will be conducted and how large the sample should be, the researcher is more likely to produce useful research that will enable others to better serve the Lord in the communities where he has placed them.
References


The Top Ten Challenges Facing Pastors in 2024

Edward E. Moody, Jr.
National Association of Free Will Baptists

Abstract

This article summarizes the results of a study conducted by the Great Commission Research Network seeking to identify the top challenges facing pastors in 2024. The results are similar to a study conducted last year examining concerns of churches (Moody, 2023). While both studies highlighted challenges related to evangelism and young adults, this study revealed additional, pastoral concerns.

In the fall of 2022, the Great Commission Research Network surveyed pastors to identify what they believed would be the greatest challenges faced by churches in 2023 (Moody, 2023; Dunaetz, 2023). Concerns centered around evangelism and retaining young adults. However, in this most recent study, pastors were surveyed about their personal concerns. Whereas the previous survey of churches’ concerns included 50 challenges, this survey addressed 79 challenges. Respondents provided answers using five categories: 1) not a challenge, 2) a slight challenge, 3) a significant challenge, 4) a very significant challenge, and 5) a nearly insurmountable challenge.

Do pastors think differently, or have different challenges from others in the church? The Barna Group (2023a) reported on a study that
compared what pastors, non-Christians, and Christians who are not pastors believe the role of the church should be. Pastors believe that the church’s role is as follows: tell others about Jesus (84 percent), help Christians grow (75 percent), practically assist those in need (64 percent), provide hands-on help to people in need (57 percent), teach/serve children (55 percent), care for the elderly and widows (52 percent), form close-knit community for Christians (38 percent), offer counseling and care (31 percent), host family-friendly events for the whole community (31 percent), and advocate or enact local social reform (18 percent).

On the other hand, non-Christians’ view of the church’s role in a community is as follows: provide hands-on help to people in need (39 percent), offer counseling and care (38 percent), practically assist those in need (38 percent), help Christians grow (32 percent), tell others about Jesus (30 percent), form a close-knit community for Christians (29 percent), teach/serve children (26 percent), host family-friendly events for the whole community (23 percent), care for the elderly and widows (20 percent), and advocate or enact local social reform (13 percent) (Barna Group, 2023a). Note the much lower percentages for all categories indicating lower expectations of the church by non-Christians. However, there also appears to be an opening for engagement since the top expectations were hands-on help, offering counseling, and providing practical assistance.

Furthermore, Christians (who are not pastors) were asked about their opinion of the church’s role in a community. The results are as follows: help Christians grow (62 percent), tell others about Jesus (58 percent), offer counseling and care (52 percent), provide hands-on help to people in need (51 percent), practically assist those in need (46 percent), teach/serve children (46 percent), care for the elderly and widows (38 percent), form a close-knit community for Christians (35 percent), host family-friendly events for the whole community (26 percent), and advocate or enact local social reform (16 percent) (Barna Group, 2023a).

Each group has a different view for the church, but the number one role for pastors is to tell others about Jesus. “Help Christians grow,” the second most important role of the church from the pastor’s perspective (79 percent), also appears to be a major challenge.

In another Barna Group study, fifty-four percent of pastors disagreed with the statement “my church puts a significant priority on training and developing the next generation of leaders,” which was a 22 percent increase from a 2015 study. Seventy-nine percent of pastors agreed that “churches aren’t rising to their responsibilities to train up the next generation of Christian leaders.” In the same study, pastors reported
concern about finding a successor. Seventy-one percent at least somewhat agreed with the statement “I am concerned about the quality of future Christian leaders” (Barna Group, 2023b).

Another Barna Group study broke down pastors’ concerns about church giving. While they noted that 34 percent of pastors felt that older congregants are extremely effective at demonstrating generosity, only 5 percent of pastors said the same about younger congregants (Barna Group, 2023c).

Pastors have much on their minds, and another Barna Group study indicates many carry these concerns alone. Barna compared survey results obtained in 2022 to those gathered in 2015 regarding loneliness and isolation. Forty-seven percent of pastors said that, during the past three months, they had sometimes felt lonely or isolated (compared to 28 percent in 2015). Further, 18 percent reported feeling lonely and isolated in the last three months (compared to 14 percent in 2015) (Barna Group, 2023d).

As we examine the results of this study, we will see how previous research informs the findings. In this study, pastors were contacted via email and asked to complete the five-minute survey. There were 347 respondents, and the data was gathered from September 2023 to December 2023. See Figure 1 below for the top ten challenges reported by pastors (which contains 11 challenges because two were tied for tenth place).

**Figure 1: A Research Framework for Ethnoscopic Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Top Ten Challenges Facing Pastors in 2024</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effectively Evangelizing People Who Have Never Visited...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobilizing for Evangelism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retaining Young Adults</td>
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<tr>
<td>Getting Members to Put Faith Into Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Running High Quality Youth Programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effectively Evangelizing People Contacted Through...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finding High Quality Pastoral and Intern Candidates</td>
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<td>Mobilizing Members for Ministry</td>
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<td>Running High Quality Children’s Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting Lay Leaders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increasing Small Group Participation</td>
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Results

Three clusters of challenges emerged in this survey: concern about evangelism, retaining young adults, and concern about training. Concern about evangelism is seen throughout the results: effectively evangelize people who have never visited my church (3.30) and effectively evangelize people contacted through outreach efforts (2.95). Other challenges are likely related to pastors' concerns about evangelism: getting members to put their faith into practice (2.98), mobilizing members for ministry (2.94), and reaching out to the community to develop new relationships (2.89).

The second cluster of challenges is in the area of retaining young adults (3.18). This concern likely led to other top challenges faced by pastors such as running high quality youth programs (2.95) and high quality children’s programs (2.91). It is likely many of these pastors saw these programs as a key to keeping young adults.

The last cluster of challenges centered around training and discipleship. Finding high quality pastoral and intern candidates tied for the seventh highest concern (2.94), followed by increasing small group participants (2.90), and recruiting lay leaders (2.90), which tied for the tenth concern. “Training leaders” came in as the number 15 challenge (2.86) faced by pastors.

It is important to note that in a previous study, pastors were asked to indicate the top concerns they anticipated their churches facing in 2023 and the ratings were higher. The highest rating for that study was 3.62 (Moody, 2023), and the highest for this study is 3.3. This decrease in most scores may reflect a less challenging situation in 2024 as the pandemic becomes more distant compared to recent years. The decrease may also be due to the pastors’ greater confidence that they personally can face these challenges compared to their confidence that their church as a whole can face them. We will examine the top ten challenges.

1. Effectively Evangelizing People Who Have Never Visited the Church (3.30)

The top concern for pastors in 2024 is effectively evangelizing people who have never visited the church. This is consistent with the most recent Barna Group (2023a) study where 84 percent of pastors believe the most important role of the church is to tell people about Jesus. Similarly, a Lifeway Research study conducted in 2021 indicated that 76 percent of protestant pastors said they needed to focus more on fostering connections with the unchurched (Earls, 2022a).
Only 39 percent of pastors feel their churches are at least somewhat effective in community outreach. This is down from 63 percent who said their churches were effective at reaching the unchurched in a 2015 survey (Barna Group, 2023a).

2. Mobilizing for Evangelism (3.27)
This was the top concern for churches in 2023 (Moody, 2023). This concern hints at a discrepancy between what pastors believe should be the main role of the church and that of Christians who are not pastors. In the Barna Group 2023a study, while pastors said the most important role of the church was to tell others about Jesus (84 percent), 58 percent of Christians who were not pastors rated that role as important. Pastors are struggling to mobilize congregations to do evangelism.

3. Retaining Young Adults (3.18)
This was also the number three concern for churches in 2023 (Moody, 2023). Retaining young adults is on the minds of pastors. Most pastors know that Generation Z is the least churched generation in American history (Burge, 2023). Pastors are also aware that many young adults who attended church as youth have stopped attending. For example, one Lifeway Research study has indicated that 66 percent of American young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year as a teenager say they also dropped out for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22 (Lifeway Research, 2019).

4. Getting Members to Put Their Faith into Practice (2.98)
Whether it is sharing their faith or ministering to others, pastors are struggling to help their members put their faith into practice. Perhaps this is also linked to giving. Fifty-six percent of pastors said that younger congregants are “somewhat” effective in this area, and 18 percent went so far as to say that younger congregants are “not very” effective in generosity. Put another way, 51 percent of pastors were “very concerned” about younger Christians not financially supporting the church, and 43 percent were “somewhat concerned” (Barna Group, 2023c).

5. Effectively Evangelizing People Contacted Through Outreach Activities (2.95)
The top concern of pastors is evangelism. They often lead their church to engage in outreach activities. A major concern is if these people will be effectively evangelized.
In one study, 65 percent of American Christians endorsed the statement, “Sharing with a nonbeliever how they can become a Christian is the most loving thing I can do for them.” However, 42 percent of the same sample said, “Sharing with a nonbeliever how they can become a Christian is scary.” Only 30 percent of the sample reported sharing how to become a Christian with a stranger, and 38 percent with a friend in the previous six months (Earls, 2022b). Effectively evangelizing people is a legitimate concern which also relates to “getting members to put their faith into practice.”

5. Running High Quality Youth Programs (2.95)
No doubt this concern is connected to the retaining young adults concern and the high number of youth who have reportedly left the church. Many pastors have limited budgets, but the good news is they can partner with parents to address this concern. Smith and Adamczyk (2021) have found three factors that are key to whether an adult child remains in their faith past high school. Those factors include whether the family attends church at least once a week, whether the parents reported that their religious faith was “extremely” important, and how often they have conversations about religious matters. Youth groups partnering with parents have the strongest impact on lasting faith (Anderson, 2023).

7. Membership Mobilization (2.94)
This was the fifth highest concern for churches in the previous year as churches struggled with a reduction in volunteers (Moody, 2023). In addition to working on current church programs, a mobilized membership will have many opportunities. Barna’s findings about the views non-Christians have about the role of the church are informative. At a time when fewer people are attending church, many non-Christians may be looking for hands-on help, counseling, and care, as well as practical assistance (Barna Group, 2023a). A mobilized membership might be able to use these activities to better reach their community.

7. Finding High Quality Pastoral and Intern Candidates (2.94)
The shortage of pastoral candidates is tied for the seventh highest concern of pastors. In the Barna Group study cited earlier, the average pastor said they were about 17 years away from retiring, and one-quarter of pastors indicated they would like to retire within the next seven years (Barna Group, 2023b). There is a great concern about a lack of leaders to whom to pass the torch of leadership.
9. Running High Quality Children’s Programs (2.91)
This concern is likely rated high based on the same concern for having “High Quality Youth Programs.”

10. Increasing Small Group Participation (2.90)
Nineteen percent of protestant churches indicated that 75 percent or more of their worship attendees were involved in small groups. Thirty percent of the churches said that 50 percent to 74 percent of their worship attendees were involved in small groups. Twenty-seven percent said that 25 percent to 49 percent of worship attendees participated in a small group. Twenty-four percent said that less than 25 percent of their worship attendees were participating in a small group. By comparison, in 2008, only 17 percent of pastors reported that less than 25 percent of worship attendees participated in a small group (Lifeway Research, 2022).

10. Recruiting Lay Leaders (2.90)
Even before the pandemic, there was an understanding of a leadership crisis in American churches (Sanchez, 2020). Pastors are well acquainted with this challenge. In one study, 38 percent of pastors said developing a leadership pipeline is a “top personal priority.” Furthermore, 40 percent said they had thought about the need for a leadership pipeline but “have too many other ministry concerns.” Another 14 percent said they have delegated the job of training leaders to others (Barna Group, 2023b). Pastors know this is a problem but struggle to address it.

The Rest of the Challenges
After looking at the top ten concerns (eleven because two tied for number ten), there are a few more notable challenges pastors faced. Coming in at number 12 was “accomplishing all my responsibilities” (2.89). No doubt all of these challenges leave pastors often feeling overwhelmed. Similarly, number 21, “meeting the demands of my schedule” (2.73), number 23, preventing leadership burnout (2.71), and number 26, managing my time (2.66) indicate that self-care is important and why it is difficult for pastors to prioritize these challenges.

Tied at number 12, “reaching out to the community to develop relationships” (2.89) is related to evangelizing concerns. Number 14, “increasing salaries to keep pace with inflation” (2.86) is not a surprise considering the economic conditions during the time the survey was taken. “Training leaders” (2.86) rounds out the top 15 and points to the training and discipleship concerns of pastors.

Interestingly, the mental health issues were not rated as major
concerns: “dealing with personal anxiety” (2.19) at number 63, “maintaining my mental health” (2.19) at number 64, and “dealing with loneliness” (2.11) at number 68. For pastors who are struggling with their mental well-being, these issues are often extremely challenging, but such concerns are not at the forefront of the challenges that most pastors face.

Conclusion

Pastors are concerned about reaching people with the gospel, keeping people in the fold, and passing the faith baton to the next generation. We are all in this together. May we work together to successfully meet these challenges for the sake of the gospel.

References


**About the Author**

Edward E. Moody, Jr., Ph.D. is the executive secretary of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, a former professor and administrator at North Carolina Central University, and former pastor at Tippett’s Chapel in North Carolina.
Evangelism in the USA: A Look Back and a Look Ahead

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Biola University

Abstract
Innovations in approaches, methods, and techniques for fruitful evangelism are a hallmark of the church in the United States. This article explores eleven evangelistic innovations observed in the last half of the twentieth century and offers seven insights for the future.

Keywords: American history, evangelism, gospel, disciple making, innovation

Evangelism. Depending on your experience, the word brings cheers or jeers. Cheers because someone once shared the Good News with you, that is, they evangelized you, which led you to personal faith in Christ. Jeers because the word dredges up images of manipulation, undue pressure, or misguided coercion. Whatever the images or feelings, there is no doubt that evangelism is a biblical, as well as a necessary component of a growing church.

Evangelism is Biblical
Biblically, the noun evangelion, meaning good news, appears in the New Testament seventy-five times and is usually translated as gospel. This word is coupled with other words, e.g., “The gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35, 24:14, NASB); “the gospel of God” (Mark 1:14; Romans 1:1; 15:16; 2 Corinthians 11:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 9; 1 Peter 4:17, NASB); and “the
gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1; cf. Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 9:12; 2 Corinthians 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; Galatians 1:17; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:8, NASB). The passages which refer to personal salvation emphasize Jesus Christ as the content of the gospel message. One passage of Scripture provides the essential ingredients of the gospel:

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast to the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (1 Corinthians 15:1-5, NASB).

Comparing this passage to other verses (see Luke 24:46-48; Acts 2:22-23; 3:125; 4:10; 10:39ff: Romans 1:4; 4:25), “Paul seems to be saying that the gospel consists of (1) the fact that Christ died for our sins, the proof of which is His burial; and (2) the fact that Christ was raised from the dead, the proof of which is His appearance” (Howard, 1978, p. 2). The essential ingredient of the gospel is “Christ died for our sins,” but his death is of no value without the resurrection, since the resurrection demonstrates “Christ’s death has been accepted by the Father as substitutionary payment for our sins, that He is indeed God’s Son, and that He can now apply the benefits of His death (John 16:10; Romans 1:4; 4:25)” (Howard, 1978, p. 2). Given Paul’s warning in Galatians 1:6-9 that anyone who preaches a different gospel is accursed, it is crucial to pay attention to this content of the gospel as described by him.

This gospel of salvation is to be shared with others, as numerous Scripture passages assert. Christ’s command to “make disciples of all the nations” requires evangelism, and is included in the participle “going” [most often translated as “Go”]. Disciples are only made as believers go among unbelievers, build relationships, live, and speak the gospel to those whom they encounter. The Book of Acts demonstrates the early church members understood this. Christ told them, “You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NASB). Following the early persecution of the church in Jerusalem, people were scattered into Judea and Samaria where they “went about preaching the word” (8:4, NASB). The Apostle Paul explains that God has given all of us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:14-21, NASB). As such, we are to make the most of every
evangelistic opportunity toward unbelievers. Paul’s exhortation to “Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” suggests that every believer has a part in evangelism through everyday conversations (Colossians 4:5-6, NASB).

**Evangelism is Necessary**

Mankind is a relational creature. Made in the image of God (Genesis 1:28), the Creator declared it was not good for mankind to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Chapters 4 to 10 of Genesis report how from the beginning mankind gathered in groups of families, clans, tribes, and nations. Mankind has always gathered in social groups, and Christ commissioned us to disciple *panta ta ethne* that is, all the groups in society (Matthew 28:18-20).

In sociological models of group formation and development, there are typically five prerequisites for groups to exist (Moburg, 1962; Mott, 1965; Scheine, 2010). These include (1) Recruitment or reproduction, for example, births to replace deaths and departures, (2) Socialization, such as learning the language, customs, and practices of the group, (3) Production of goods and services, such as food, clothing, tools, education, and activities, (4) Preservation of order, such as protection, safety, and freedom, and (5) a sense of purpose, for example, ultimate meaning, service, love, or care. Evangelism, of course, fulfills the first of these five functions. All groups require the addition of new people if the group is to continue. If there are no additions to a social group, the group in time dies out. Since churches are a type of social group, there is a continuing need for new people to be added to the group. All local churches are only a generation away from extinction. If new people are not added to a church through biological, transfer, or conversion growth, the church will eventually go out of existence (See McGavran & Arn, 1974, pp. 57-60).

Thus, evangelism is necessary for the continuing existence of a church. A church that lacks evangelistic concern is most often a dying church. Respected church consultant Lyle Schaller explained that one characteristic nearly every growing congregation has in common is “an active evangelistic emphasis” which “has its most important expression in lay persons” (Schaller, 1975, pp. 150-153). Well-regarded expert on reaching secular people, George Hunter, adds “The one reason why so many congregations do not grow—they do not engage in intentional evangelism. The other reason is that they do engage in evangelism—but in ways which are outmoded, or not indigenous to the culture of the target population” (Hunter, 1979, p. 20).
A Brief Overview of the History of Evangelism in the United States

The practice of evangelism has existed since the first churches were planted on North American soil. Early churches focused evangelism toward their own families through Word and Sacrament. Children were socialized in Christian families and churches where they found faith, were baptized properly, and added to the church (biological growth). Since most of the first churches in North America were composed of people from a single ethnic group, wherever the people from the group moved, new churches were started for the faithful. In time many others were drawn to faith while listening to the preaching of the gospel, or by observing the faithful lives of believers.

The First Great Awakening (1730-1740)

The First Great Awakening found new interest in evangelism in the form of revivals spurred by Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729), Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), and George Whitefield (1714-1770). Most of these revivals were in the larger cities of the colonies, although some were seen on the expanding frontier. The revivals helped usher in new ideas of democratic thought, such as a free press, as well as seeing new forms of preaching develop focusing on initiating spiritual response from listeners.

The Second Great Awakening (1800-1850)

The Second Great Awakening spread out to the Western frontier and helped spur growth among Methodist and Baptist congregations. As people spread out from the east coast to the frontier, new ways of evangelizing developed. Preachers traveled to distant places preaching and teaching the gospel of salvation to pioneer families, often located near smaller towns. In some places, large gatherings of people, called Camp Meetings, met for days at a time to hear preachers and socialize with friends. Not only did this provide a source of entertainment for lonely pioneer people, but many found faith through the faithful preaching of the gospel. Charles Finney (1792-1875) wrote about how to bring about revival, which inspired innovations in outreach. Along with evangelizing thousands of new believers, the awakening influenced the growth of reform movements, such as abolition, temperance, and women’s rights. The Second Awakening also resulted in the founding of numerous colleges and universities by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists.

The Third Great Awakening (1850-1900)

Not always recognized, the Third Great Awakening took place in the second
half of the 1800s. While not directly connected, the awakening is seen in the work of the YMCA, the Civil War, and the Businessmen’s Revival.

The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA-founded 1844) helped cultivate revival in 1857-1858 through discipleship of young men. A financial panic hit Americans in 1857 as banks failed, factories shut down, and railroads fell into bankruptcy. Prayer meetings among businessmen in New York led to widespread revival there and in other cities. Sometimes called the Businessman’s Revival, it is estimated that one million people became Christians as a result of this revival.

The Civil War (1860-1865) drew men from frontier towns into military service, which resulted in corrupt and immoral activities and actions among many. Church leaders observed a lack of morals among men during and after the war, which fostered a wave of concern. Evangelistic revivals during the Civil War found some 200,000 soldiers receiving Christ. Following the war, they took a fresh spirit of outreach back to their homes and towns.

As in previous revivals, new denominations (e.g., The Salvation Army came to the USA in 1888) and leaders arose. Evangelist Dwight Moody came of age during this period and became the lead figure in a long line of well-known revivalists who followed in his wake, such as Wilbur Chapman (1859-1918) and Billy Sunday (1862-1935).

The Fourth Great Awakening (1950-1990)
It is still debated, but it appears a new religious awakening occurred beginning in the mid to late 1900s. Before and after World War Two, a new wave of interest in evangelism burst forth in the USA. This resulted in numerous organizations, methods, and strategies for evangelism. “The array of evangelistic plans, especially over the last fifty years [1946-1996], has been dizzying: Ambassadors for Christ, Project Philip, Youth for Christ, Navigators, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, Athletes in Action, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Here’s Life America, Jews for Jesus, and many other endeavors that are sponsored by individual denominations” (Salter, Darius, 1996, p. 118). It is to this period of time I now turn.

A Closer Look at Contemporary Evangelism
Many different methods, organizations, and approaches to evangelism appeared by the end of the twentieth century. While there is overlap among them, the following are of note.

Crusade Evangelism (1950s)
This approach to evangelism was no recent innovation. The American
frontier in the 18th and 19th centuries brought out thousands at a time to hear such great orators and preachers of the gospel as John Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, Dwight L. Moody, and Billy Sunday. Vast crowds gathered for evangelistic revivals in large church buildings, in town squares, in open fields outside of cities and towns, and in camp meetings miles into the wilderness.

Billy Graham (1918-2018) ushered in a new age of revival evangelism with his 1947 crusade in Los Angeles. He innovated the staging of large evangelistic campaigns, usually in the thousands, through the involvement and support of local leaders and churches. Cooperative evangelism relied on the involvement of multiple denominations. Graham encouraged the involvement of all ethnic groups, as well as Roman Catholics. This approach to evangelism continues today in the Harvest Crusade ministry of Greg Laurie.

**Student Evangelism**

Young Life (1941) and Youth for Christ (1944) are two well-known evangelistic ministries targeting middle school and high school students. In the beginning, Youth for Christ used large gatherings, similar to evangelistic revivals, called Saturday Night Ral lies. Counselors used the Roman Road to lead students to Christ. In contrast to large rallies, Young Life directed energies toward building personal relationships with students, often leading students to Christ at Christian camps throughout the year.

**Campus Evangelism (Cru and Navigators 1950s)**

*Campus Crusade for Christ (1951)*

Campus Crusade for Christ (now known as Cru) was founded at the University of Los Angeles by Bill and Vonette Bright. Both had been influenced by Henrietta Mears at the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, CA. Mears was nationally known as a Christian educator and a designer of Sunday school curriculum and teacher training materials. She also taught the college class, whereby she led hundreds of college students to Christ using a method she learned from her mother (who probably learned it from Mear’s grandmother). Under her influence, the Brights caught a vision for evangelizing university and college students.

*The Navigators (1951)*

The Navigators ministry was started in 1933 by Dawson Trotman, but the campus ministry came into view in 1951 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. A major focus of the Navigator ministry was military personnel,
and it stressed small-group and personal one-to-one discipleship.

**Memorized Presentations (1940)**

*The Romans Road (1948-49)*
The use of memorized presentations became popular in 1948-1949 when a pastor in East Texas, Jack Hyles, came up with a useable plan for people to share the gospel—*The Romans Road* (Hyles, 1970). He took verses from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans to show people how to come to faith. He originally used Romans 3:10, 3:23, 5:12, and 5:8. The use of this method became popular and is still in wide use today.

*Steps to Peace with God Booklet (1954)*
During the 1954 London Crusade, Charlie Riggs, director of counseling and follow-up for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA), developed four steps and titled them *Steps to Peace with God*. The booklet is a key part of training counselors for crusades sponsored by the BGEA. “Riggs saw Steps to Peace with God as a natural overflow from the message Billy Graham preached. The challenge was how to translate that message into a tool that the counseling and follow-up team could use in training volunteers who prayed with inquirers at the end of a Crusade meeting” (BGEA Staff, 2023).

*Four Spiritual Laws (1960s)*
In 1965 the *Four Spiritual Laws* booklet was published to help Campus Crusade for Christ staff lead college students to Christ. The roots of the booklet began in the late 1950s when Bill Bright (1921-2003) decided that “the movement needed a standardized evangelistic tool that staff could use in their witnessing” (Quebedeaux, 1979). He first wrote a presentation titled “God’s Plan for Your Life,” which was Crusade’s first how-to material. By the early 1960s, it was found that an even shorter version was needed. Thus, the *Four Spiritual Laws* was written.

According to one of Mear’s biographers, Bright adapted the evangelism methodology of his mentor, Henrietta Mears to explain the fundamentals of salvation (Leyda, 2023). The *Four Spiritual Laws* became a widely used booklet for evangelism training in the last half-century. Numerous adaptations were created by individuals and denominations.

*Bridge to Life (1950s?)*
An exact date is not known when or how the *Bridge to Life* approach was created, but the Navigator booklet presentation—*The Bridge to Life*—has become a widely used method of evangelism. It has been adopted by numerous individuals, churches, and organizations as their primary tool.
for sharing the gospel of salvation with others.

**Saturation Evangelism (1960s)**

In 1961 Missionary Kenneth Strachan experimented with an approach to evangelism that tried to mobilize all of the resources of a church for comprehensive witness to the world. The approach became known as *Evangelism in Depth* (Strachan, 1961). In the USA his approach became known as *Saturation Evangelism* and was defined by Jerry Falwell as the preaching of the gospel to every available person at every available time by every available means (Falwell and Towns, 1973). Campus Crusade’s “Here’s Life” evangelistic campaign (also known as “I Found It”) of the 1970s was a type of saturation evangelism, as are many local churches’ attempts to reach their village, town, or city for Christ. The recent “He Gets Us” media blitz is a type of saturation evangelism still employed as a strategy today.

**Evangelism Explosion (1970s)**

Evangelism Explosion trains lay Christians to effectively tell others about Jesus and the good news that heaven is a free gift that cannot be earned or deserved (Kennedy, 1970). It teaches a clear outline of the gospel message which can be explained in a short summary or a two-hour discussion. Trainees learn a simple outline, how to engage non-Christians in conversation, and key apologetic answers to questions that are asked most often. It uses a warm call approach of visiting people in their homes, but only after they have shown some receptivity by first visiting the church. It also relies on the ministry of conversation more than booklets or written literature.

**Seeker Evangelism (1970s)**

A new approach to evangelism arose with innovative church planters in the 1970s and 1980s. Willow Creek Community Church’s founding pastor, Bill Hybels, and Saddleback Church’s founding pastor, Rick Warren, pioneered a new form of church that focused attention on the unchurched. Sunday morning church services were re-engineered to appeal to non-churched people. This approach spotlighted a social-cultural analysis of a church’s community and the people who resided within it. Ministry was adapted to the needs, desires, and expectations of the non-churched. While not using the term seeker-sensitive, the originator of this approach was Robert Schuller, founder of the Crystal Cathedral (originally Garden Grove Community Church) in Garden Grove, CA (Hybels and Hybels, 1995; Warren, 1995; Schuller, 1975).
Relational Oikos Evangelism (1980s)

Oikos is the Greek word translated as “house” or “household.” It refers to one’s entire estate, people, and property forming one family or household. In biblical times it included not only one’s spouse and children, but also extended family, servants, foreigners, and associates. Thus, relational evangelism refers to the preaching of the gospel over the natural networks of relationships, friendships, and associates. Other names often used for a relational approach are network evangelism, friendship evangelism, and incarnational evangelism.


Power Evangelism (1986)

Power evangelism was an approach to evangelism promoted by John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Church movement. It was based on a Pentecostal theological perspective and depended upon a demonstration of God’s power through signs and wonders as a means of evangelizing people. Spiritual gifts, such as words of knowledge, prophecy, and deliverance, were key to this type of evangelistic outreach. The approach was explained in Power Evangelism (1986) by John Wimber and Kevin Springer. The book sold over one million copies but was not well accepted outside of Pentecostal churches.

Servant Evangelism (1990s)

Servant evangelism is a simple, straightforward approach to sharing God’s love in simple, practical ways. It often involved church members serving their community in practical ways, such as sweeping a street, painting a house, picking up trash, and other down-to-earth ways of demonstrating care for others. Conspiracy of Kindness: A Refreshing Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus with Others (1993) by Steve Sjogren helped make this evangelistic approach popular.
Missional Evangelism (2000s)
Missional evangelism defines evangelism as an invitation into the Kingdom of God. It involves getting to know someone well enough to see where the Kingdom is seen and needed in their lives. In other words, where is God’s presence visible in a person to bring redemption, healing, renewal, and transformation through his or her submission to God’s reign? Is there a brokenness, an injustice, or a relationship that needs to be submitted to God’s reign? In practice this means, for example, if a friend gives evidence of concern for the poor, one might invite them to help serve a Thanksgiving meal to the poor in the community along with Christians. As unbelievers serve together with believers, they hear stories of faith, ask questions, probe for insights, and in time come to faith in Christ. The Celtic Way of Evangelism (2000) by George G. Hunter, III, is an expression of this approach.

Summary
With the rise of multiple cultural groups, as well as the identification of numerous personal needs, it is common today to find churches using multiple methods to communicate the gospel of salvation. Observation discovers countless churches engaging in a wide range of ministry programs to connect the gospel to others, including Celebrate Recovery, financial management seminars, Bible studies, missional activities, sports teams, lay witness training, social action, and many other programs and activities.

What Have We Learned?
This brief overview of the various approaches to evangelism that arose during the last half of the twentieth century gives testimony to the innovativeness of Christ’s Church (and churches). The following are a few insights.

First, Christ’s church is innovative. The various means, approaches, and techniques observed in the last half-century point out the reality of the Holy Spirit’s active work in bringing forth new ways to preach the gospel. It is thus to be expected that newer approaches will be born in the coming years.

Second, new approaches to evangelism rise up every ten to twenty years. For example, today we are seeing new approaches, such as 3 Circles, developed by Jimmy Scroggins, a Southern Baptist pastor, that has gained wide popularity. Others include Training for Trainers (T4T) “Why, Whom, How?”, 411 Disciple Making Training, He Gets Us, Jesus Is (blank), Do vs. Done, and The Morality Ladder. More innovation is coming.
Third, every new method works somewhere, but not everywhere. Memorized presentations assumed that people could be led to Christ in a few minutes. This may have been true in the middle of the last century, as people in general had enough familiarity with Christianity’s core story to make a quick decision. However, as people have become more secular, we have to begin further back in the process, and it takes extended conversations before people believe. As one example of this, I was told by a member of Cru that back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was common for a staff member to share the *Four Spiritual Laws* with fifty or more students a week, leading a number of them to faith. But around the turn of the century, it was common to share the *Four Laws* with less than fifteen students a week, with few coming to faith. Evangelism Explosion’s memorized outline worked best with unbelievers who were formally educated and enjoyed verbal discussion. It did not work as well among those with less verbal skill. The Navigator’s *Bridge to Life* seems to work well with unbelievers who are visual learners, while not as well with those who are less visual. Similarly, Friendship evangelism approaches work best where people have large networks of family or friends or associates with whom they can share their faith. Thus, relational approaches tend to work well with younger people and in newer churches, while not as well in older churches with older members (who tend to have fewer relational connections).

Fourth, packaged approaches to evangelism have a lifespan of about fifteen years, after which they have decreasing popularity and results. As an example, I vividly recall the excitement of attending an Evangelism Explosion training event in 1975 with over a thousand others. While Evangelism Explosion training is still available, it does not attract the same interest as it did when it was new.

Fifth, churches that are successful evangelistically use multiple methods and approaches. While a larger church may focus on services for seekers, they also offer small groups around topics of interest to the non-churched, such as financial management, and provide outreach ministry to those with various addictions. The wide variety of interests, concerns, and passions found among unchurched people demand churches use multiple approaches rather than just one.

Sixth, as each new approach becomes visible, denominations and associations of churches innovate to develop their own culturally appropriate clones. Multiple versions of the *Four Spiritual Laws* and the *Bridge to Life* are easily found, as are adaptations of friendship evangelism and *Evangelism Explosion*. This is to be expected in the future.

Seventh, it is generally held today that most churches in America need revival, renovation, restoration, or resurrection. Whatever word one uses,
one of the evidences that true revival is taking place is when the gospel of salvation is preached, particularly by the whole church, including lay persons. McGavran noted, “Revival implants Christ’s Spirit in men and forthwith they, like their Master, make bringing salvation to men a chief purpose of their lives” (McGavran, 1970, p. 169). McGavran reminds us, “Remember, after the day of Pentecost occurred and 3000 people were baptized and received the Holy Spirit, there were not just 12 apostles preaching, but 3000 Christians preaching” (McGavran and Arn, 1974, p. 20). Thus, fresh innovation in evangelism is needed, particularly innovation that involves motivating, training, and deploying lay persons to share the gospel of salvation with others.

Conclusion

While we face challenging barriers to the preaching of the gospel, it is true that God has often used the worst of times to do his greatest work. We hold that evangelism—the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ—is the force that can change the world. Let’s pray that God will use our time to discover new innovative approaches from the Holy Spirit to faithfully and fruitfully reach thousands, yes, millions for Jesus Christ in the coming years.

References

https://billygraham.org.uk/p/london-birthplace-of-the-steps-to-peace-with-god/


[The story of Bill Bright adapting Mears’ evangelistic method into the Four Spiritual Laws was shared in a personal conversation between Leyda and the author.]


https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol16/iss1/16

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Innovations in Church Financial Models: Research on Alternative Practices

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Abstract
Asbury Theological Seminary conducted a research project exploring financial models beyond traditional church tithes and offerings. This qualitative study focused on financial viability and missional vibrancy. It involved surveys, interviews, a focus group, and site visits to churches using alternate financial models. Major findings revealed that six alternate financial models are presently used that increase missional impact, allowing churches to serve communities and engage in meaningful interactions. These models also provide churches financial viability and surprising missional benefits that include goodwill, partnerships, real estate development, job creation, and enhanced community engagement. Some precautions are also noted based on the experiences of these churches using alternative financial models.

This study was partially funded by Exponential NEXT (https://exponential.org/next/).
on life support, suspended between continuing operations on a budget shortfall or shuttering their doors completely (Toberlin & Bird, 2020). Financial stress in churches is a significant problem, amplified by the COVID pandemic during which over half of American churches experienced a decrease in giving according to accountants Faulk and Reiff (2020). They estimate that one-third of churches in the U.S. are barely making payroll each month. This financial stress takes a toll on the leadership and may ultimately decrease the missional effectiveness of the church. Instead of launching or developing outreach and ministry programs, leadership may be left in survival mode, wondering if the doors will even be open next month.

Church planting teams often face similar financial challenges. Passion for ministry can fade after several months of difficult and unsuccessful fundraising. Common North American church planting financial models ask the planting team to raise money for the first three years of operations prior to launch, which is typically around $300,000 to $500,000 (personal discussion with a representative from the church planting network Stadia, 2018). When teams are unable to raise this much capital, the seed of what could have been an effective ministry may die.

How do we change dying churches into alive and growing churches, the salt and light of the community as the hands and feet of Christ? How do we lift the sails of new and existing church plants, passionate for the gospel and their unique areas of calling? The good news is that church leaders are finding new ways to create financially thriving churches so that the gospel can expand.

Many church planters are finding solutions in alternate financial models that are not completely dependent on tithes and offerings. In this article, I will describe the research process undertaken to understand alternate financial church models and summarize the findings drawn from their practices. I will also describe six alternate financial models in practice today and suggest some pressing questions that need further research.

**Method**

Asbury Theological Seminary undertook a research project in 2022 that assessed the opportunities and obstacles for existing churches pursuing financial models that did not rely solely on tithes and offerings to finance their activities. Both financial viability and missional vibrancy were of great concern. The objectives of this study included understanding the principal financial issues that these churches have faced and how these have affected their missional impact. Furthermore, objectives included describing alternate financial models that are presently used effectively
and evaluating the results of these alternate financial models to provide both financial viability and missional vibrancy of established churches and church plants. A final objective was to discover questions concerning churches with alternate financial models that need to be addressed with further research.

The research approach was a qualitative study using mixed methods to collect data in three phases.

**Phase I Questionnaire and Interviews (October 2022)**
An open-ended questionnaire using questions developed to reach the research objectives (see Appendix 1, [https://osf.io/y6qcf](https://osf.io/y6qcf)) was emailed to 59 leaders of churches with alternate financial models. These practitioners were selected for their experience in this area and were part of the author’s social network through Asbury Seminary or Exponential, a large annual church planting conference in Orlando, Florida. Eleven leaders provided phone interviews, which were then recorded and analyzed during Phase II. The respondents were church leaders, largely from the East, South, and Mid-West United States. Their experience ranged from three to more than twenty years in ministry.

**Phase II Focus Group (November 2022)**
The leaders on the initial Phase I list were invited to Asbury Seminary to discuss with the Innovation Lab (comprised of Asbury Seminary faculty and students) the initial Phase I results, provide additional insight, and develop research problem statements for further research. See Appendix 2 ([https://osf.io/2tvjc](https://osf.io/2tvjc)) for the schedule of these meetings. Twenty-five leaders of churches with alternate financial models participated.

**Phase III Site Visits (January-March 2023)**
Drawing from sites listed in Phase I, members of the Innovation Lab visited 7 different churches (see Appendix 3, [https://osf.io/fmr5j](https://osf.io/fmr5j)) that were using alternate financial models, chosen from the original list of 59. The site visits included tours of the facilities and neighborhoods and interviews with 17 church leaders who were seasoned practitioners at these sites.

**Results and Discussion**
Building on the initial analysis of the data (Moon, 2023), a more in-depth analysis of the data collected indicates that several themes occur repeatedly in the discourse of these churches. Similarly, several common approaches to finding alternative funds were observed and used effectively in these churches.
Common Themes Among Leaders of Alternative Financial Model Churches

The following are six themes that came out repeatedly in the interviews of the leaders of these churches that used alternative models of financing.

Financial trends are making it harder to depend upon tithes and offerings alone.
The most common financial concerns in the churches were inflation/rising rent (63% of participants) and unemployment (18% of participants). In addition, there were concerns about a possible recession, food insecurity, and lack of affordable housing. Several of the leaders noted that they would likely no longer have a viable church if they were depending solely on tithes and offerings to support the church.

Younger generations present budgeting challenges with inconsistent giving.
All of the leaders noted that there is usually less giving by the younger people in the church who are more “tippers” than tithers compared to older people in the church. One of the participants, Mark DeYmaz (pastor of Mosaic Church, Little Rock, AR) estimated that it takes approximately seven Millennials to replace the amount of tithing of one Baby Boomer who leaves his church. Some of the hesitancy among younger generations may be their distrust of institutions in general, along with their desire for transparency and vision concerning how money is spent (e.g., they may be wondering if their tithes are making a difference.). One church planter who works among marginalized young people noted that he is seeing “lives changed, but they make lousy tithers.” Another church planter summarized the thought of many other leaders, “We’ve found sole reliance on Sunday morning giving is not a viable source of income like it may have once been in the local church context.”

It is not viable for churches to depend only on income from a separate non-profit.
Some noted that when a church forms a separate non-profit organization, this often plays a helpful role in addressing physical needs in the community. One participant noted, however, that non-profits do not normally disciple people; therefore, the church must work in parallel with the non-profit. In addition, some participants noted that non-profits can have a limited life span, which makes it hard to rely upon this income stream for the long term.
Churches can generate income from businesses but with added complexity and cautions.
Since a church is a benevolent organization, people may expect services to be free. As a result of this expectation, it is hard for some church-related services to function as a business to generate income. Several noted, though, that many churches have space that is not utilized throughout the week that provides opportunities for revenue generation for ministry. Some addressed the need to be aware of the tax implications, particularly for unrelated business income to the church. This is a helpful and necessary caution against naively baptizing business on one hand or demonizing it on the other hand.

Alternate financial models increase missional impact in the community.
After paying the pastor’s salary and building mortgage, church budgets often have very little money left for mission in the community. One planter serving in a multiethnic community noted, “The more people who joined our church, the more it cost us [to serve them].” Alternate financial models allowed this church to serve the community and church members in ways they could not afford before. In short, generating revenue from the church space allowed the church to be more generous to the community. This resulted in people who were more committed and missionally engaged in the church.

Moreover, pastoral staff number and effectiveness often increased with alternate financial models in these churches. When previously relying upon tithes and offerings alone, several churches were forced to cut pastoral staff due to decreasing funds. One church that previously had five pastors was now reduced to a pastoral staff of two.

Several alternative financial models require pastors to assume new roles, and as a result, their field of mission has been expanded. For example, the pastor of a church plant that bought an outdoor shopping plaza regularly visits several of these businesses and noted, “The interactions we have daily on our plaza are as important as the interactions we have on Sunday mornings.” These interactions provide pastors and church planters new opportunities to foster relationships with those outside the church.

These pastors with increased ministry opportunities echo Paul Unsworth (2014), a church planter with the Church of England who started an entrepreneurial church plant with a coffee shop that also serves as a church venue. Paul said, “I have had more spiritual conversations with people in a week than I had in working in a church for a whole year...
people that don’t know anything about Jesus. We need to create opportunities to genuinely listen to people. In time, they will be interested in what I believe. Church is more than a service on a Sunday. Church is a spiritual family that comes together to redeem the lost.” This response stresses that the alternate financial models are not based on economic motivations alone; rather, there is a missional passion that often drives pastors and church planters to consider these models. This accords with a study in Canada among co-vocational pastors that found “that money and time were not necessarily their primary concern” (Watson et al., 2020, p. 10). In short, the alternate financial models allowed pastors to break out of the walls of the church and engage others in the marketplace for missional impact.

Several participants also noted that these churches with alternate financial models increased the missional engagement of their members in the community, provided more exposure to the church, and added to the church’s credibility since they were engaged in the real needs and concerns of the community.

**Alternate financial approaches provide surprising benefits to the community.**

The participants described how alternate financial models provided surprising benefits. The most common of these are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Common Benefits for Churches Using Alternative Financial Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Percent of Churches Reporting This Benefit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill in the city</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnerships with others outside the church</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of real estate (such as the creation of a laundry, grocery</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>store, gym, or kitchen)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging local entrepreneurs to start their own businesses</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging other church planters to plant other churches</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a tangible service to the community</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other benefits included providing jobs from the businesses formed, providing people a place to belong, offering dignity provided by work, increasing the spirit of generosity of church members, reducing the burden of raising funds, spreading the gospel outside the church, meeting people
in tragedies and celebrations of life, developing faithful courage in the leadership team, and teaching the church that seemingly ‘secular topics’ can have sacred potential (e.g., financial education, stewarding money, and viewing business as a discipleship activity).

**Effective Alternate Financial Approaches Used by Churches**

Previous research (Moon, 2020) found that six approaches to alternatively finance churches are commonly practiced in contemporary American churches. This six-fold classification of practices was confirmed by observing the practices used by the churches participating in this study. These churches following an alternative financial model use one or more of the following approaches.

**Monetizing Existing Church Resources**

Monetizing existing church resources means generating revenue, especially by renting existing church property. This is the most common approach to alternative financing, utilized by 55% of the participants in the study who generate revenue from the church property by renting space to others (e.g., businesses, non-profit organizations, and individuals to use as a collective workspace or other churches who do not have their own meeting space). In this approach, the church rents its space to users who operate out of it for an indefinite period, but the church does not operate the associated business or non-profit organization. For example, some churches rent space to entrepreneurs to use as a coworking space. Mazareanu (2019) notes, “Coworking is a new but fast-growing trend in the United States - from only 14 spaces in 2007, the number of coworking and other shared, collaborative office spaces increased to 4,043 in 2017.” This not only provides an income stream for the church, but it also presents the church as relevant and engaged in the issues and community concerns of Millennials, who are typically the most frequent users of coworking spaces.

The Post Commons in Alton, Illinois, provides a collective workspace inside of a converted old Post Office that they have bought as a meeting place for the church. In addition, the ministry rents the building to a business that operates a coffee shop inside the building. Not only does this provide income, Hugh Halter, the founder and leader of this church, described how this provides an ecosystem for ministry to people that he meets in the coffee shop as well as in the neighborhood.
Incubating New Businesses

Incubating new businesses refers to churches starting new activities that generate revenue. Unlike traditional business incubators, the goal is not necessarily to help independent businesses flourish. Rather, the new business activities may either continue as part of the church or become independent for-profit organizations. The goal is to start activities that generate revenue and contribute to the mission of the church. This approach, characterized by offering services that have market value, was utilized by 36% of participants. In contrast to the previous approach where the business activity was led and initiated by individuals in long term rental agreements with the church, the church staff in this approach is often more involved in the regular business operation that uses the church space. This often (36% of participants) takes the form of short-term rentals (e.g., an event space or Airbnb) or business collaborations (27% of participants) during the week. For example, a church may offer photography or wedding planning services or house a counseling center or workout facility.

Consider the ministry and financial opportunities presented by running an Airbnb. Millennials account for roughly 60% of Airbnb users. Airbnb hosts earn an average of $9,600 annually (Meyer, 2023). Looking at this from a missional perspective, Airbnb challenges Christians to do what they should do – show hospitality. Airbnb incentivizes its hosts to practice hospitality by making a room available for rent. At the same time, offering hospitality through an Airbnb creates opportunities to connect with others for faith discussions. Churches can open a parsonage or other space to travelers who are thankful for the accommodation. Again, this not only provides an income stream but also engages the church to meet the needs of the community via hospitality. The result can be a fresh missional engagement. The Airbnb that operates in my house has led to many faith discussions as well as some guests even coming to church with me.

Grace Chapel in Cincinnati, Ohio, incubated six revenue-generating activities that provide over $200,000 annually for the ministry of the church. In addition to providing this income, Jeff Greer and Chuck Proudfit (2013) describe how this provides the opportunity to help entrepreneurs engage faith and work in what they describe as ‘biznistry’, meaning a “faith-based business that generates profits for ministry” at the Grace Chapel (2013, p. 18). These include renting spaces, coaching, and offering financial services. The motivation for each of these biznistrates is “to create purpose-filled, meaningful work in the business world that advances the kingdom of God” (Greer and Proudfit, 2013, p. 52).
**Nonprofits Forming Mission Arms of the Church**

Another common approach to increase financial viability and missional vibrancy is to form a separate nonprofit organization that serves as a mission arm of the church that can receive funding not available to churches. This approach was used by 36% percent of the participants. Since the non-profit is a separate entity from the church, the nonprofit is eligible to receive grants from organizations (governmental and non-governmental) that are prevented from giving to churches or other religious organizations. The nonprofit focuses on a need in the community (e.g., food distribution, supporting teenage mothers, or business incubation) that corresponds to a passion of some of the church members. As a result, this becomes a mission focus of the church, but at least part of the funding for this mission comes from outside the church.

Mosaic Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, has formed a separate non-profit called Vine and Village (vineandvillage.org) that has its origins in the holistic work of the church. The leaders of this ministry have attempted to integrate three components for community transformation, as described by their mission statement, “To be a catalyst to serve people living in and around Little Rock’s emerging University District by helping to meet their social, economic and spiritual needs resulting in Real Community Transformation.” Since this non-profit is separate from the church, Vine and Village can attract government grants and donations from other entities that would not give to the church. Even other churches are donating to this non-profit due to their missional impact. This separate non-profit then becomes a mission arm of the church as they address community needs by assisting immigrants, training teen moms, offering fresh produce in ‘food deserts,’ providing an extended family for those with disabilities, organizing a community chess club, maintaining a clothes closet, and providing employment training. This non-profit contributes to the financial viability of the church because the mission activities do not require funding from the church. In addition, the non-profit can rent office space from the church at market rates, thereby providing revenue to the church. Once again, both missional impact and financial viability are achieved through this approach.

**Co-vocational Pastoring Opening Multiple Income Streams**

Karl Vaters (2017) in *Christianity Today* called bi-vocational ministry the “new normal.” This form of pastoring has increased from about one-quarter of all head pastors in the US in 2010 to about three-eighths of all head pastors in 2015 (Vaters, 2017). A growing number of pastors are adopting this approach for both financial and missional reasons. Since the
Marketplace is a relational network in which people exchange value, the co-vocational approach is particularly helpful in developing relational networks, in addition to providing another source of income. In this study, 18% of the participants used this approach.

The term bi-vocational commonly describes a pastor who works another job outside the church. Often this outside job is considered secular, suboptimal, and a temporary solution until the church can afford a full salary. Once the church can afford a full salary, the pastor might be expected to leave his or her secular job and work full-time for the church. The term co-vocational, in contrast, assumes that the pastor will continue to work outside the church even when the church can afford a full salary. The co-vocational pastor regards the work outside the church as a choice to remain engaged in the community. These pastors, about 40% of bi-vocational pastors, see both serving in the church and in their job as long-term vocations (Yang, 2019). Again, such an approach can cause the church to be more missionally engaged in serving the community, as well as develop relational networks through the pastor’s job (Briscoe, 2018).

I am part of a co-vocational leadership team for Shadowland Community Church in Nicholasville, Kentucky (shadowlandchurch.com). Three teaching pastors share the preaching but only one is salaried (part-time). The church has a goal to give away a large percentage of its income to reveal the kingdom of God to the surrounding community. This would be hard for many traditional churches because the personnel and building costs often comprise large parts of the budget. This example demonstrates that the alternate financial models often require a team approach instead of a sole church pastor or church planter.

**Entrepreneurial Churches Locating Church Inside the Marketplace**

A spiritual entrepreneur may be defined as “a visionary who, in partnership with God and others, challenges the status quo by energetically creating and innovating in order to shape something of kingdom value” (Volland 2015, p. 32). Extending this definition to churches, an entrepreneurial church would be a group of believers committed to innovation in serving God. Because many churches value tradition over innovation, not all churches are entrepreneurial.

One entrepreneurial approach to church is to hold church meetings in commercial locations, in contrast to a traditional church building dedicated to church activities. This approach was used by 27% of the participants and can be defined as forming
“Communities of Christ followers among unchurched people through businesses in the marketplace. Entrepreneurial church plants address the need to engage public society through the marketplace via entrepreneurial means. Such entrepreneurial church planters either start new businesses or work within existing businesses to plant churches in business venues.” (Moon & Long, 2018, p. 6)

Paul Unsworth, the Church of England church planter mentioned earlier, noticed that 20,000 people a day walked down his street in London each weekend, yet there was no vital Christian witness (Personal conversation, 2019). Only 5% of the British attend church regularly (Brierly Consultancy, 2015). How could he gain access to this large group of people and lead them to Jesus? His response was to open the Kahaila coffee shop (kahaila.com) that serves excellent coffee and cake. Unsworth explains his rationale:

> We need to find out how to form community. This is why we chose a coffee shop. It is a third space where people share life. We aim to build community in the café. For evangelism, if you like doing something, do it with others. Invite others to do it with you. You build community and listen to others. (Baptist Union of Scotland, 2015)

This has resulted in a church plant that also meets in the same building on Wednesday nights. He is motivated by a missional impulse to connect with the unchurched or de-churched. Unsworth is not unique in this approach (Moon & Long, 2018). Several venues have been used successfully to start entrepreneurial church plants such as workout facilities, bakeries, barber shops, hotels, and cafes, in addition to numerous coffee shops.

**Decentralized Churches Not Requiring Large Memberships or Buildings.**

Decentralized churches go under several names, such as house churches, simple churches, organic churches, dinner churches, fellowship bands, and micro-churches. What they all have in common, though, is the gathering of small groups of Christ followers in everyday settings for worship, fellowship, and mission. The venues vary, as well as the number of people and the meeting frequency. They all challenge the existing financial models as they subtly ask the question, “When did church attendance at a large gathering become the gold standard for church health? Who said that bigger is always better?” (Suttle, 2014). Since a large central gathering space with a paid pastor is not essential, this eliminates (or greatly reduces) the largest line items for most church budgets:
building costs (such as mortgage, rent, and maintenance) and salaries.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic revealed the strength of decentralized churches. In a short time, large church gatherings were prohibited (Anderson, 2021; Franks, 2021; Norregaard & Ng, 2021). As a result, many churches quickly adapted to technology such as Zoom to maintain their connections with their congregations. Hugh Halter explains how decentralized churches hardly skipped a beat amidst the pandemic,

“Where is the missional movement?” so many have asked in the last five years. Well, the real answer is that the missional church, with decentralized form, is alive and well. Like cockroaches to the coronavirus, we know how to navigate and even prosper among the rubble. We already know how to live off the meager scraps. We are everywhere and we’re healthier now than ever before. (Halter, 2020)

One of the surprises of the Coronavirus has been that churches have been ‘forced’ to decentralize for their own survival. The pandemic evokes events from biblical stories and various historic periods in church history when the church survived and thrived amidst great struggle and persecution.

While none of the participants in this research used the decentralized approach, this option highlights what all of the participants realized: A church can be financially viable and missionally vibrant even when the membership is small. Historically, a church planter needed 100 to 150 people to faithfully give for the church to remain viable with a building and full-time pastor. Using these alternate financial models, however, some of the participants have an average church attendance of 30 to 40 people, yet they are still financially viable and missionally vibrant. Using the traditional model, these churches would have likely closed due to a lack of finances.

In some ways, multisite churches fit into this category, but they have a more central hub than the other churches that have been described here. I know of several financially challenged churches that have reached out to a larger church to become one of their offsite campuses. This has kept the struggling church open while also allowing more lay involvement.

Challenges for Alternate Financial Approaches
Churches using alternate financial models also face challenges. Here is a summary of some of the greatest challenges identified by the research participants.

Sustainability
The most common concern (27%) was sustainability. This was most
prominent when relying upon a grant to be renewed, as well as when the
business entrepreneurs’ expenses were greater than the income, as is
typical at the beginning of the business lifecycle.

**Administrative and Management Demands**

Another major concern (27%) was the time required to manage the
revenue-generating activities. One church planter said during certain busy
times (e.g., after the church space was flooded), “I spend 40% of my time
on managing concerns.” Another church planter commented (during the
most difficult period of the pandemic), “I am one step removed from doing
ministry since I am consumed with administrative concerns.” Nevertheless,
the church conducted 60 baptisms the following year, indicating that
challenges can be overcome.

**Finding Good Business Partners**

18% commented how it was hard to find good partners for rentals. Renters
may default or they may simply ignore their rules (e.g., one participant
noted that guests added graffiti with Satanic symbols and gay pride
symbols). One participant said, “It is sometimes better to turn down
money for better partners.”

Other challenges included the need to prohibit some people from
attending due to safety concerns, confronting legal and tax matters not
usually affecting churches, planning and space issues, and lack of
thoughtfulness from other churches or church leaders.

**Questions for Further Research**

One of the main goals of this research was to discover the major questions
that practitioners face. What do we still need to learn in order to encourage
others to experiment with alternate financial models for their church or
church plant? Four major questions arose, as follows.

**Reframing: How do We Reframe our Mission Field
and Ministry?**

Church pastors and church planters using alternate financial models often
have a different daily routine than traditional church pastors and church
planters. Tim Farrell operates his church and ministry in a shopping plaza
in Orlando, Florida, and described it this way:

Ministry does not look like it did when we graduated from seminary in
1998. We now look at all of the ministry on the plaza as a part of what
the Lord is actively doing. Our staff understands that the interactions
we have daily on our plaza are as important as the interactions we have
on Sunday mornings. Talking to a stranger who does not know Jesus but loves the coffee at Duo58 (named one of the top 10 coffee shops in Orlando) is exactly why we gather on Sunday mornings!

Many of the pastors and church planters using alternate financial models find that a significant portion of their time and energy is spent outside the walls of the church. As a result, they have begun to reconceptualize their ministry and mission in a larger way to include what God is doing in the marketplace. Some of the participants described this phenomenon, “I had to leave my pastorate in order to get into ministry,” “I have to redefine the success of my ministry,” and “[I] look at every encounter as a ministry opening. Do I have an ear to hear the concerns like a pastor?”

Traditional and non-traditional churches and ministries need to rethink or reframe their mission fields and ministries. During the site visits, several church planters drew from missiological sources such as Lesslie Newbigin (1989) and Alan Hirsch (2003). Traditional pastors often feel frustrated and irrelevant being part of traditional churches that sideline marginalized people, but they feel hopeful seeing colleagues who are leading non-traditional churches to which these people can relate. We need to better understand how both traditional and non-traditional churches and ministries that use alternative financial models have gone through the process of discerning their mission fields and ministries. How do they articulate their ministry, incorporating theological, biblical, and missiological concepts? What does success look like and how do they measure it? How do they conceptualize their roles when engaged in the marketplace?

An initial research statement could be stated this way, “We need to understand how traditional and non-traditional churches and ministries using alternative financial models have re-framed their mission fields and ministries with new and sustained metrics.”

**Sustainability: Are These Alternative Approaches Financially and Missionally Sustainable?**

While some of the participants have been using these alternative financial models for over 20 years, questions still remain about sustainability after the initial visionary leader moves on. This was a particularly acute question for one of the church planters who had just retired after approximately 25 years, and was now watching his successor navigate his role. Some participants noted that long-term sustainability is an extremely important issue when relying heavily on funding given to church-associated nonprofits since grants often are for a limited time.
Similar questions relate to sustaining the missional connection between suburban and urban churches. For example, “How do we help suburban churches and people (who have financial resources and missional motives) to maintain passion for poor urban areas?”

Some participants noted that rental arrangements can be burdensome if the relationship between the church and tenant is not good or if the partnership between the church and the renting organization sours. How do we develop and sustain good relationships with tenants who align with our mission and would benefit from renting space at our churches?

Case studies of existing churches using alternate financial models may be especially useful for answering these questions. One potential church worthy of additional study is the Mercy Road church in Indianapolis which is undertaking a project involving a co-working space, affordable housing, and a 30,000 square foot community center. They envision a Trinity Network comprised of entrepreneurs, investors, and faith leaders that will lead to church planting by combining three components: profit, non-profit, and church.

An initial research statement could be “We need to study the current sustainable, innovative, and disruptive church financial models to learn reliable approaches in order to provide a vision to launch, accelerate, and sustain missionally vibrant and financially viable movements of the Kingdom of God to the ends of the earth.”

**Organization: How are Churches with Alternate Financial Models Organized?**

Many of the practitioners were surprised and delighted that other church leaders were undertaking projects similar to their own. They felt that additional church pastors and church planters would also move in these directions if the lessons learned from the pioneers could be clearly articulated. While each context is unique, some common patterns have emerged. What are some of the initial organizational models that need to be articulated, especially concerning the roles of leaders, the timing of decisions, legal structures, and relational networks? There are many unknowns in these alternative financial models of churches, particularly in the early startup phase. Depending on the business model chosen, there may be a need for an administrator, a grant writer, a vision caster, an accountant, or a realtor. How are the staffing decisions made? Moreover, the timing of balancing priorities in activities needs to be better understood. How does the experience of a church planting team differ if profit-generating activities are established before a church plant, rather than if the church is established first?
Questions regarding legal and fiscal issues also need to be addressed, such as “How do we cover liability while making money in church space?”, “What tax implications are there?”, “Does this change our legal status?”, “What are the rules for space that is used?”, “Do we need guidance from a CPA?”, and “Is there a network of like-minded practitioners to connect with (for coaching, assistance, etc.)?”. The practitioners in this study had to address these organizational concerns eventually, but the common sentiment was that it would have been better to have understood these issues before starting.

Some participants noted that there are likely to be differences in the experiences of churches using alternative financial models in the urban contexts of the majority of the participants compared to suburban or rural contexts. Similarly, churches of different ethnicities will have different experiences. Several participants noted that the non-White churches are often eager to join this conversation because the traditional funding models are often not appropriate in their contexts. In addition, many of these churches have been using alternate financial approaches for a long time and may be able to provide valuable insights to others. The insights from the bishops and pastors from the Church of God in Christ, a primarily Black denomination, may be especially important. They indicated that these alternate financial models have been used in their churches since the founding of their denomination and will likely continue.

An initial research statement could be framed this way, “We need to study churches with alternate financial models that have at least five years of ministry experience to identify potentially unforeseen organizational patterns in order to inform and prepare churches that want to adopt alternate financial models in changing environments.”

**Practice: What are the Best Operational Practices for Churches and Church Plants Using Alternate Financial Models?**

Concerning the day-to-day operations of their churches, the participants were eager to share best practices from hard-learned lessons. Each of the participants could explain metrics like the number of income streams they have and the percentage of income that each stream supplies to the church budget. They also could describe surprises they had to learn about and address. This led to questions like, “What are the best operational practices that we can learn to increase cross-pollination? What have we learned that doesn’t work? What are some cautions/pitfalls that we need to be aware of and address?”

Several participants expressed a desire for a repository of resources to help guide the operations of churches using alternative financial models.
This could include best practices from business theory, entrepreneurship, marketplace ministry, missional thinking, history of the church in the marketplace, and biblical and theological perspectives. To the surprise of several of the participants, there is a long history of God’s people participating in the marketplace in both the Old and New Testaments, as well as in church history. For example, several were surprised to hear that John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, was a successful businessman who made the equivalent of four to five million dollars in today’s money. He had several sermons on the use of money and the dangers of riches to describe both the opportunities and dangers related to money (see https://osf.io/8kw6z for some examples). What we are really discussing is a renaissance more than a new movement. We are re-discovering what the church has lost more than discovering something new. One of the practitioners at a site visited described how he had learned valuable business insights from the Trappist Monks (Turak, A. 2013).

The Exponential organization has been at the forefront of publishing on alternate financial models (Moon, 2019, 2021) recently but there is still a great need to make resources available and accessible to practitioners and other leaders in order to sustain a movement. An initial research statement could be framed this way, “We need to compile best practices of churches that are practicing alternate financial models to inform and prepare church pastors and planters who want to adopt alternate financial models.”

**Conclusion**

Discussing and visiting sites to learn these alternate financial models of church has been exhilarating. It provides a breath of fresh air to the church planting movement. For example, upon visiting the Camp House church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Pastor Matt Busby described the long journey of engaging a socio-economically diverse population in downtown Chattanooga through their coffee shop, café, art gallery, conference room, prayer chapel, and church sanctuary. They had to pivot many times along the way but were able to survive during the COVID period and even double their attendance to about 500 people.

While Busby mentioned the financial viability these alternate financial models provide, he seemed to have the biggest glean in his eye when he described how the church was contributing to the flourishing of the neighborhood. He noted,

Property values have risen after our participation in the neighborhood... We find niche culture events to host... We are trying
to bless the city and care for the common good, per the book of Jeremiah... People make decisions based on desires, and desires are based on habits, so we provide liturgy to form habits that reflect the kingdom of God.

Walking away from the Camp House after the conclusion of our visit, I could not help but think (like I did on our other visits), “This approach to revealing the kingdom of God is what more neighborhoods need around the world.” Financial viability provides a means for church pastors and church planters to be more generous and outward-facing in their communities. There are certainly real challenges and questions to understand and address, but there is the potential for a sustainable movement of church planting using these alternate financial models for the church of the future.

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Church-Supported ESL Ministry in Canada: A Look at the Church’s Mission in Action

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Abstract

English is a dominant business, academic, and communicative language throughout the world. Immigrants and refugees coming to the West have a great need to learn the language but often do not have the funds or time to pursue studies full-time. Churches often offer English classes to minister to not only their language needs but also to their relational and spiritual needs. This mixed-methods survey and interview research investigates the state of church-supported English as a Second Language (ESL) programs across Canada following the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 50 teachers and program coordinators completed the survey, which revealed needs relating to training and materials for volunteers and demonstrated the importance of the recruitment of additional teachers, the restart of dormant programs, and improved networking among churches. The role of church-supported ESL programs as a means of presenting the gospel to newcomers is also discussed and is recognized by teachers and coordinators as a foundational aim of this ministry.

Keywords: English as a Second Language, mixed methods, COVID, evangelism, church
Introduction: English as a Global Language

English is the most commonly used language worldwide, estimated to be spoken by over 1.4 billion people as a first or additional language (Statista, 2023). According to the CIA World Factbook (2023), this accounts for 18.8 percent of the world’s population. Ironically, only 5.1 percent of people globally speak it as their native language; the vast majority of speakers of English worldwide use it as an additional language. This global popularity is a testimony to its linguistic power. Historically, it owes this to the growth of the British Empire, which governed as many as 87 colonies worldwide (Moorhouse, 2023); many of these, such as Canada, Australia, and the thirteen colonies that formed the United States, have English as an official or main language. The linguistic power of English lies also in its dominance of the internet, and its utility as a language of communication and collaboration for international companies whose employees and contacts speak a variety of different mother tongues but use English as a lingua franca (Fisher, 2015).

Increased immigration to Western nations has further heightened the communicative value of English, as the number of those needing to learn the language for their livelihood has increased. For example, the number of immigrants has risen sharply in both Canada and the United States: in Canada, the number rose from 923,950 arriving between 1981 and 1990 to 2,454,080 between 2011 and 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2022), while the United States had an increase in the total number of immigrants from 24,557,000 in 1996 to 44,799,000 in 2021 (United States Census Bureau, 2022). According to a UN world migration report, the United States has been by far the most popular destination for migrants over the past fifty years, with an increase in the number of foreign-born residents from 12 million in 1970 to nearly 51 million in 2019, representing 15.3 percent of the total population. The UK, another predominantly English-speaking country, included about 13.8 million foreign-born residents in 2019, making it the fifth most popular destination of migrants, while Canada ranked eighth, with a foreign-born population of about 8 million (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

English Language Teaching

The global popularity of English, and the desirability of countries such as the USA, the UK, and Canada as destinations for migrants from around the world, have combined to make the field of English-language teaching (ELT) a global phenomenon. In Canada and the United States, for example, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs exist to prepare
international students for admission into their desired English-medium university. Commercially, many organizations worldwide, such as Berlitz and the British Council, view English-language teaching as a marketable service and so offer courses on subjects such as exam preparation and business, communicative, and children’s English, to name a few. Cambridge English Assessment focuses on language testing; this organization designs and administers a range of English tests, as a business, to young children, K-12 students, business people, and college-age learners of English seeking to achieve a particular scholastic or other goal by obtaining a sufficiently high score on their test of choice (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2023). Publishers likewise seek to make a profit through test preparation materials for exams such as the SAT, GRE, and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language).

Other organizations work to help English-language learners further their proficiency in the language as a free service. The LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) Program, for adult permanent residents and recognized refugees, aims to help “newcomers integrate into Canada and their communities” (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2013). In both Canada (Hunter & Trethewey, 2009) and the United States (CELEA Community-based ESL Group, n.d.), community ESL classes serve a purpose similar to LINC, and their value has grown with the increase in the number of immigrants.

The Church and English Language Teaching

A Brief History

As a service to people in a particular local community seeking English-language instruction, churches in many countries have been involved in teaching English. Indeed, it is not a recently-developed ministry but one which in some cases has been in existence for well over a century. Kristjansson (2018, p, 173), for example, states that church-supported English-language teaching programs in Canada have existed for over 150 years. Wang adds that Protestant missionaries were teaching English to Chinese immigrants as early as 1859 in British Columbia; their outreach was based on the goals of both helping them integrate into Canadian society and making disciples where possible; some of these immigrants indeed converted to Christianity (2002). Han (2009) reports that the response to evangelism among Chinese immigrants in Canada was very different after 1967, by which time immigration of people from non-white ethnic groups was permitted. Instead of white protestant missionaries leading the effort to evangelize immigrants as was done previously, however, it was the growing number of ethnically Chinese churches reaching out in
many cases, given the large number of skilled Chinese immigrants entering the country since the mid-1990s, needing not only English classes but also a stepping-stone for integrating into local communities.

Currently, churches representing a range of denominations, as well as independent congregations, pursue ESL ministry across Canada, as will be shown in the study described in this article. Although it is difficult to gauge the number of church-supported ESL programs currently active across the country, the survey reported in this paper was sent out to approximately 1000 contacts representing churches offering ESL classes in Canada at some time prior to the COVID pandemic of 2020-2022. The actual number in operation may have been—and may currently still be—considerably higher, depending on the number of programs operated by churches not in contact with the organization that commissioned the survey. In the United States, meanwhile, there were reportedly over 300,000 Protestant churches in 2016 (Steir, 2016), and over 25 percent of the American population has been identified as “Evangelical Protestant” (Pew Research Center, 2023). Given the greater number of immigrants in the US in comparison to Canada, and the far larger population overall—over 330 million in 2020 as opposed to 38 million estimated in 2023 (CIA World Factbook, 2023), the number of American churches engaging in outreach ministries such as ESL classes for the purpose of disciple-making is potentially much higher than the number in Canada. Indeed, organizations such as TESOL Ministry (2023) and Mission to North America (n.d.) both oversee networks of churches in the US offering ESL classes, while ESL Cooperative Ministries Society (2023) serves the same role in Canada. Globally, international missionary organizations such as OMF (2023), SEND (n.d.), and SIM (2023), among others, also use English language teaching as an opportunity for outreach in churches in different regions of the world.

A Divine Purpose

As a Christian ministry, the goals of English-language teaching differ from those of community-based, government-sponsored, and company-based ESL programs in important ways, which stem from God’s call for the church. It is important to view the role of church-supported ESL ministries through the lens of the mission and vision of the church as the institution mandated by Christ to fulfill His purpose. The mission is recorded in Matthew 28:19-20 to “make disciples of all the nations”, “baptizing them”, and “teaching them to follow” all of Christ’s commands. Christ provided a vision for accomplishing this in Acts 1:8 with a command to His disciples to be His witnesses locally, nationally, and globally. The global nature of
this command became evident at Pentecost, with the Holy Spirit empowering the disciples to speak in the languages of the people gathered for the event and Peter delivering a message exhorting repentance on the part of all listening. Later, the Lord led Peter and Phillip to preach to a Roman household and an Ethiopian eunuch respectively, and commanded the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas to take the gospel abroad.

However, the mission Christ commanded in Matthew 28 goes beyond preaching the gospel, to also teaching new disciples to obey all of Christ’s teachings. This includes Christ’s command to love our neighbor as ourselves through acts of mercy, such as those displayed in the Parables of the Good Samaritan and of the Sheep and the Goats. In the first Jerusalem church, the need for such acts became evident when Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the serving of food (See Acts 6). Paul, in his letters, called on congregations to minister financially to members of other congregations experiencing hardship. We are to care for those in need, and those needs are many, as evident in Christ’s three-year ministry on earth.

The teaching of English as an additional language from a Biblical perspective is thus best understood holistically as an important means of meeting one of the many needs of people in our surrounding communities (Chang, 2020). Canada is a country where being able to understand and communicate in the official language (English) used in most of our provinces is critical to survival; immigrants and refugees who recognize that their English skills are weak will naturally seek language classes to build up their skills. Churches offering ESL classes can thus contribute to filling an important need of the immigrants and refugees in their midst. Yet even more, the church is also a community of people who support one another not only spiritually, but also socially and emotionally through fellowship, and financially through giving to the poor amongst them. The local church is to be characterized by such qualities as love, service, care, hospitality, empathy, humility, and harmony (Romans 12:9-16). It is to be a community without divisions, where there is “neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man . . .” (Galatians 3:28). Immigrants and refugees who join a church community in the process of taking an ESL class thus stand potentially to benefit in multiple ways—practically, relationally, and spiritually.

A Study Focused on Current Church-Supported ESL Ministry in Canada

The study described in this paper examined the impact of COVID-related church closures on the teaching and learning of English as a second language in churches across Canada. The study was commissioned in 2022.
by the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society, an interdenominational Canadian organization supporting churches nationwide that provide or sponsor ESL classes. The organization is “dedicated to welcoming newcomers to Canada”, and regards the fulfillment of the Great Commission as “an obligation of all believers in our Lord Jesus Christ” (2023).

In light of an extensive period of mandated church closures across Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study was undertaken to assess the state of church-supported ESL programs after in-person church services were permitted again in 2022. Thus, it was designed to answer two research questions: first, “What is the current state of church-supported ESL programs after an extended interruption of in-person services and other in-person activities?”; second, “With the advent of online instruction arising from the pandemic, what services would teachers and program coordinators like to see offered?”

Leaders of the organization approached me, a researcher and instructor in research methods in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), to see whether I would be interested in creating a survey to be distributed electronically to churches across Canada. As a volunteer teacher serving in an ESL program at a church in Metro Vancouver, I was as eager as they were to learn the current state of what I regard as a vital ministry in a country with a growing immigrant population. Further, having conducted a mixed-methods survey study the previous year on the impact of pandemic-based campus-access restrictions on the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language worldwide, I was receptive to Cooperative ESL Ministries’ request for a similar study focusing on church-supported ESL ministry.

The survey was developed by myself and the leaders of the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society and piloted over the summer of 2022. It was then revised to clarify the meaning of ambiguous items and distributed electronically in the fall via Survey Monkey to elicit information from ESL teachers and administrators on a variety of topics concerning their programs. It was sent to church contacts across Canada whose contact information was included in directories maintained by Cooperative ESL Ministries of churches that have offered ESL classes at one time or another. The survey contained a total of 24 multiple choice and open-ended items covering topics such as the location and denominational affiliation of each church, the age ranges and the number of teachers and students involved in each program, program characteristics such as the number of online and/or in-person classes, each program’s chief strength and challenge, and the perceived training needs of teachers currently in the program.
Findings
Fifty-one respondents, mostly teachers and program coordinators, completed most or all of the items on the Survey Monkey site. Among those who completed the survey, three offered to participate in individual interviews afterward to provide a more in-depth description of the ESL ministry in specific locations. Two-thirds of all respondents were based in either Metro Vancouver (including Fraser Valley) or the Greater Toronto area, both regions with large populations.

ESL Program Characteristics. The respondents represented churches from a range of denominations (e.g. Mennonite Brethren, Pentecostal), as well as independent congregations, as shown in Table 1. Similarly, the range of mother tongues (e.g., Mandarin Chinese, Farsi, Spanish) represented among students enrolled in church-supported ESL programs across the country is extensive, featuring speakers from countries worldwide. In terms of each program’s place within its church’s organizational structure, about 70% of the programs represented by respondents are offered as a separate ministry within their churches. About half have been in existence for more than five years. Program size varies widely, from a single teacher doing a class on his or her own to as many as 26 teachers. On the other hand, about 20% of respondents represented programs not in operation when the survey was conducted, suggesting a potentially high number of programs across the country were not functioning at that time. (Fall, 2022).

Table 1: ESL Program Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The number of denominations represented among respondents</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(including independent churches)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of first languages represented among students in programs across Canada</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of programs offered as a separate ministry within their church</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of programs that have been in operation for more than five years</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of programs featuring both online and in-person classes</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of programs offering instruction solely or mostly in English</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of programs featuring required Bible study with each lesson</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of programs currently not in operation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The range in the number of teachers serving among active programs</td>
<td>1-26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $n = 51$.

While most of these programs feature instruction solely or primarily in
English, there is considerable variability concerning the formality of their structure, the proportion of online and in-person classes and times, and the approach to teaching the Bible. This is evident in Table 2. There is no noticeable standard program model but rather variation in each of these areas. Indeed, based on responses to the different items in the survey, it is evident that the actual operation of any program can be affected by several factors: the number, English proficiency level(s), and preferences of learners involved; the availability of teachers and others needed to run a given program; the need for—and availability of—technology and/or physical classroom space; teaching materials and method used; and, the church’s policy with regards to Bible study.

**Table 2: Variability in Program Structure, Delivery, and Approach to Bible Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variability in Program Structure</th>
<th>Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat structured: classes are organized by level, but teachers select their own teaching topics, materials, and teaching methods.</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very structured: classes are organized by level and teachers use pre-selected textbooks/materials.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variability in the provision of in-person and online instruction</th>
<th>Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One or more mornings or afternoons a week, in person.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more evenings a week, in person.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or more evenings a week, online.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple days via a blend of in-person and online classes.</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variability in approach to Bible study</th>
<th>Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a Bible study included in every lesson.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including Bible study is up to individual teachers.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An English Bible lesson is offered and participation is optional.</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible lessons are offered in their first language.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no Bible study included in the English classes; it is part of a different ministry.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *n* = 51.

**Respondent characteristics.** Table 3 reveals background information about respondents. Most are native speakers of English and serve in churches in or near metropolitan areas. A large majority (70%) are over
the age of sixty, with an additional 20% aged between 50-59 at the time the survey was conducted. While 70% teach in programs having three or more teachers, 30% serve in smaller programs—a noteworthy statistic given the age range of respondents and the fact that 20% had served in programs not currently in operation the previous fall, perhaps due to the lack of available students or teachers to restart some programs once in-person church services had resumed after the pandemic.

**Table 3: Key Statistics Concerning Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The proportion of respondents 60 years old and above</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proportion of respondents seeking professional development workshops</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proportion of respondents serving in programs with fewer than three teachers</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proportion of respondents citing the supply of volunteers as the biggest challenge</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proportion of respondents citing relationship building as their program’s greatest strength</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proportion of respondents who are not native speakers of English.</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** n = 51. Percentages rounded to the nearest 5%.

The three volunteer interviewees are representative of the respondents overall; each is a native speaker of English and lives and serves in a metropolitan area. All three are in their sixties. Conversely, there are some interesting differences among them; one is a pastor, the second a retired high-school ESL teacher, and the third an experienced ESL teacher and program coordinator who has worked both in Canada and overseas serving in church-supported ESL ministry. Their current church environment is likewise quite different; the first serves within a Pentecostal organization, while the second serves in a Mennonite Brethren church in cooperation with the pastor of a Chinese church sharing the premises. The third interviewee, meanwhile, although currently working with a Pentecostal pastor, has served in churches representing different denominations.

**Program Strengths and Challenges.** Discussing program and respondent characteristics lays the groundwork for examining the various program strengths and challenges identified by respondents. Although no single model for developing church-supported ESL programs exists, understanding the most significant strengths and weaknesses of different programs can help us gain an understanding of characteristics that can serve as building blocks for developing programs with a higher probability of successfully meeting program goals and learners’ needs.
Table 4 provides a list of the primary program strengths and challenges most commonly mentioned by respondents. Notably, the most commonly identified strength, relationship building, was mentioned twice as often as the second and third—passionate, committed volunteers and program flexibility. Technology, on the other hand, was mentioned far less often, both as a strength and as a challenge. The high priority given to relationship building implies the importance teachers and program coordinators attach to church-supported ESL ministry as a strategy for helping to build a community within the church between members of the congregation and those from the surrounding area. Teachers in church-supported ESL programs appear to see themselves as having a second role in class, being a community builder, fostering relationships among the students and helping newcomers feel welcome and eager to become a member of the “community” they’ve entered. This highlights the importance of the second primary strength listed in Table 4, and the most commonly cited challenge: the need for committed, passionate volunteers, teachers who heartily embrace the nature of their ministry to be not only effective teachers but also good relationship builders.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Often Mentioned Primary Program Strength</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building/Community</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committed, passionate volunteers</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program flexibility</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of organization</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Often Mentioned Primary Program Challenge</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of volunteer teachers</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent student attendance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching the Bible</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( n = 51 \).

The interviewees were in agreement concerning the value of building relationships. As the first commented, “I think it's the relationships...when we get together, we have a great time, and people seem to enjoy themselves and feel quite comfortable to speak or just to listen.” The second stated: “I think our ministry’s biggest strength is interpersonal relationships,” continuing by saying that one student described her teacher and the teacher’s husband, in relation to the entire class, as “our family.” The third interviewee, setting up a new program with immigrants as the intended
teachers, spoke of their desire to “reach the neighborhood” they’re in, which itself has many newcomers from overseas. Their keen desire to build bridges is reflected in comments such as “Oh, yeah, I’ve got a pick-up truck. I can help people move if they need to move. I can help them pick up stuff if they need to pick up stuff for their apartment.”

The interviewees also stressed the value of committed volunteers. As the one working with immigrant teachers noted, they saw their immigrant status as an opportunity to help other newcomers: “We’ve been here a few years now five or ten years, and now the people who are just arriving here need the benefit of what we have gone through for the last five or ten years, including things of racism and unacceptance, and all of those kinds of feelings.” Another of the interviewees cited the fatigue of working alone as the reason for desiring additional help: “I think the biggest challenge will be to get people to help me shoulder the load. I do get tired, and it would be nice to have a team of people that I could work with in this.” The third did not mention fatigue but did point out the need for more workers: “The challenge is, if we want to grow, then we have to have another teacher, and you know, a couple of more helpers.”

Aside from the lack of volunteers, other program weaknesses are reflected in the pedagogical challenges and training needs identified by respondents. Table 5 highlights teaching grammar and pronunciation respectively as the two most significant difficulties experienced by teachers. Respondents’ identified training needs for teachers offer little surprise given the challenges mentioned in Table 5: four of the five most cited needs reflect their language-teaching difficulties, as illustrated in Table 6. The lone exception is the most commonly-mentioned need: teaching the Bible in English. A couple of respondents did mention using Bible-based materials for their English classes; such materials are available, for example, through the “Love New Canadians” ministry (2023) based in Calgary, Alberta. From the study, it is impossible to know how many ESL programs are making use of such materials; nevertheless, there is evidently considerable interest in using English as a means of sharing Biblical truths with learners in church-supported ESL programs, judging by the data in Table 6.
Table 5: Pedagogical Challenges Identified by Respondents

“Our teachers/I currently find ______________ most difficult to teach.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized classes (e.g., academic English, business English, English for children)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic literacy skills</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bible</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills (politeness, greetings, introducing oneself, etc.)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number of Responses</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Teacher-Training Needs Identified by Respondents

“Our teachers/I would love to have a workshop on__________________.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching the Bible in English</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching pronunciation</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching grammar</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching communication skills</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Zoom more effectively</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable. We do our own training.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching older adults.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching specialized courses (e.g., academic English, business English)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching vocabulary</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number of Respondents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A final piece of evidence for the challenges experienced by church-supported ESL teachers is seen in the types of services most commonly desired among respondents, shown in Table 7. Reflecting the training needs expressed through Table 6, workshops emerged as the most sought-after service; one-day conferences were also a popular request, potentially for the same reason as the workshops. The second most commonly desired service was for opportunities to exchange ideas for materials, a request likely included in the third most requested service: a national website to include, among other things, “program ideas”. It is only natural for
volunteer teachers to have little or no idea what materials are available for teaching ESL in a setting such as a church, particularly for online classes. This leaves them with the challenge of using materials found online or developing their own, the latter option being likely a significant task for a teacher having little or no formal training or teaching experience. Program ideas would also include such items as selecting appropriate class goals and objectives, planning lessons, using apps such as Zoom effectively, and conducting effective assessments, all unfamiliar to inexperienced volunteers, who would benefit a great deal from ideas and guidance from seasoned teachers.

Table 7: The Most Highly Desired Services Indicated by Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Putting on workshops for teachers.</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering opportunities for exchanging ideas for materials.</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a national website where all programs can contribute news, program ideas, etc.</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering one-day conferences for teachers and other ESL ministry members.</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering opportunities for social connecting with other churches in our area.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing Bible study, etc.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing opportunities for students from different church programs to meet each other.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing ESL or ministry workers camps.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Number of Respondents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>46</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion of Findings**

**Mission and Vision**

While the purpose of church-supported ESL ministry was not a specific focus of the survey, it is nevertheless important to consider its role in relation to the mission and vision of the church articulated by Christ. In the context of the study, it can be shown that the importance of the Great Commission exists as a founding principle for all church-based ministry on the part of the organization that commissioned the survey and of at least some churches and program directors. For example, as mentioned in the introduction, Cooperative ESL Ministries considers participation in fulfilling the Great Commission to be a responsibility of all Christians; Christian ESL teachers, regardless of their specific teaching context, are thus expected to view themselves as participants in carrying it out through
their work as teachers, whether as professionals or volunteers. Another Canadian organization that offers ESL classes as part of its intercultural ministry, as mentioned earlier is Love New Canadians (2023), which applies a “pathway to Jesus” approach featuring Bible-focused ESL study for immigrants strongly considering becoming Christians.

The interviewees in the study likewise considered the Great Commission to have foundational importance. The first stated that he started his ESL ministry so that “people would have the opportunity to hear the Word of God and experience the love of God as they develop their English skills in a supportive environment.” He shares Bible stories and invites his students “to events and gatherings where the Gospel is often shared.” The second described evangelism as “the primary aim” of her program and uses “direct verbal teaching from the scriptures, interactions over questions arising from the scripture passages, and group prayer” to this end, as well as teaming with the pastor of the Chinese (Mandarin) congregation sharing the church premises, as he shares the students’ mother tongue. The third interviewee worked most recently in a church with a multilingual Chinese pastor who would intentionally “share the Gospel personally and individually in the heart languages of many students, said to be a crucial final step in evangelizing immigrants with low levels of English” (personal communication). Additionally, the church was providing translation of its sermons, as well as “ESL-friendly Bible studies,” excerpts of the Jesus film, and the Alpha Program for evangelistic purposes. While these available examples are few, they represent the seriousness with which some churches involved in ESL ministry work to bring immigrants and refugees to faith in Christ.

The Impact of the Pandemic

The most noticeable impact of the pandemic is reflected in the fact that over half the programs currently in operation feature a blend of online and in-person classes. Less than 30% of programs feature in-person classes alone (See Table 1). At one church in the Metro Vancouver region, for example, the number of classes had expanded from 12 online operating in the Fall of 2021 to a total of 22 classes (13 online and nine in person) by March 2023 (See Table 8); this hybrid approach has allowed the program to take in more students, increasing the number who are not only learning English but also studying the Bible and learning important Biblical truths. A second potential impact of the pandemic on church-supported ESL programs can be seen in the proportion of programs (approximately 20%) not in operation at the time the survey was distributed. This may be due, at least in part, to the lengthy suspension of all in-person church activities.
mandated by provincial governments across the country during the pandemic, resulting in a possible loss of students and teachers needed to restart classes. One cannot be sure how many ESL programs were discontinued as a result of such mandates; however, the proportion of respondents to the survey whose programs were discontinued (20%) suggests the number countrywide could be quite large.

The Effect of Technology
The relatively high proportion of blended or hybrid programs in comparison to those that are in-person only reflects the impact of technology in the operation of many church-supported ESL programs (See Table 1). Indeed, online services continue to be offered at many churches despite the return to in-person services in 2022. As Professor Lisa Weaver of Columbia Theological Seminary stated, “The technology and communications platforms that were initially incorporated as part of a rushed recalibration to provide worship services virtually are now a fundamental and standard part of the worship life and ministry of the church.” (2023, p. 64). Pakpahan et al. (2022) and Chow and Kurlberg (2020) have described how this impact has affected local churches in Indonesia, as well as churches in places as diverse as Singapore and Sweden. Many churches worldwide have adapted their worship and other activities to this new reality, although its spiritual repercussions need to be examined through formal research focusing on different churches.

Considering the effect of technology on church-supported ESL, the first interviewee recognized both the challenges and opportunities it has presented. As to the challenges, he stated, “What I found is, many of the 60-plus crowd are uncomfortable with technology, and as a result of that, they either paused or discontinued their ESL ministry when their groups could not meet in person.” Nevertheless, he also recognized the benefit, “In my Zoom class...I literally get people from all over the world participating in that group.” The third interviewee, who is experienced in launching ESL programs in churches and is currently helping to set up a new one, had a team-teaching strategy in mind for dealing with the challenge of technology, “We want to have an older person paired with a younger person for the sake of the younger person, and we can recruit them, saying, ‘Hey, listen! We've got some older teachers, but they're not as comfortable using Zoom online for the Thursday class, so if you can be their partner, you can help them with the online part. They will help you with the English instructional part, and you'll both benefit each other.’”

The opportunity for global outreach presented by technology is evident in the growth of the program mentioned in the previous section,
as shown in Table 8. The expansion in the number of online classes there has brought in new students joining classes from such countries as Bolivia, Colombia, and Chile, although most had already immigrated to Canada. During the current term (September-November, 2023), the average weekly number of in-person attendees to the program has been 93, and the average number online has been 103; most of the latter group reside locally rather than overseas and like the in-person attendees, live within walking or driving distance of the church. The actual number who attend a weekly church service and are thus potentially integrated into a local Christian community, however, is unknown.

Table 8: ESL Program Growth at a Metro Vancouver Church

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Number of ESL classes</th>
<th>Total number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2021</td>
<td>12 (online)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2022</td>
<td>15 (online and in-person)</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter 2023</td>
<td>22 (online and in-person)</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Participants originated from 25 countries (Winter 2023): Afghanistan, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Latvia, Mexico, Peru, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Syria, Taiwan, Turkey, Ukraine, and Venezuela.

Conversely, one wonders how many ESL programs across the country were discontinued during the pandemic due to a lack of technology. Although this was not the primary program challenge identified by most respondents, one cannot discount the possibility that in smaller churches, lack of access to the needed technology, and the absence of people qualified to use it resulted in a sizable number of ESL programs being put on an indefinite hold. Such a scenario is not implausible given the proportion of respondents (30%) serving in churches with fewer than 3 ESL teachers.

A Broad Range of Interest

Evidence from both the range of denominations in which ESL programs are operating and the number of first languages represented among the students in those programs demonstrates that interest in church-supported ESL programs within Canadian churches and among Canadian immigrants is strong. This appears to be the case even for the churches whose respondents indicated their ESL program had been discontinued; their effort to complete the survey suggests a certain level of interest in the
As one respondent commented, “We would welcome support for a restart.” Another stated, “I was involved in a program that has recently shut down due to changes at the church. I’m praying through options at my home church (no program currently).” At the same time, the difficulty of finding additional volunteer teachers to keep the ministry going and offset the fatigue expressed by interviewees is a matter of concern. Among ESL students, on the other hand, the interest may be in a growth phase with the return to in-person services and the number of hybrid programs (those offering both in-person and synchronous online classes) as indicated by data from the church represented in Table 8.

**The Importance of Community Building**

As noted earlier, the most commonly cited strength of programs was the development of relationships, also referred to by some respondents as “community building.” This is perhaps the signature characteristic of church-supported ESL programs in comparison to those sponsored by the government (e.g., settlement English programs) or private institutions targeting international students or immigrant businesspeople. Tsaneva (2022), reflecting on her experience as a church-supported ESL program director, stresses its importance, “Ultimately, ESL ministry is about far more than teaching English. Our relationships go deep and create a safe place for belonging and community, for students to practice English without fear of judgment, and for the Gospel to be shared in word and deed.” Han (2009), who conducted a case study of a couple’s gradual inclusion as members of the faith community of a Chinese church in Greater Toronto, mentioned that English classes served as one organized means of assisting the couple in the process of becoming full-fledged members of that community. However, due to a lack of research, the extent to which community building also occurs in online class environments is not clear.

**The Issue of Discontinued Programs**

The proportion of respondents that had been serving in programs that have been discontinued is itself a concern, given the increase in immigration in Canada over the past thirty years and its projected increase in the near future (Feinstein, 2023). The concern is even greater considering the number of teachers serving in small programs. As examples of this, two of the three respondents I interviewed either teach alone or with their spouse (with a Mandarin-speaking pastor helping out). Both expressed concern about the fatigue factor in serving without additional teachers to share the load. The high proportion of older
volunteer teachers in the ministry combined with the proportion of small programs raises two questions: First, how many similar programs are there among those that have been discontinued? Second, how can additional volunteer teachers (and, where needed, tech experts) be recruited to help re-start discontinued programs and to prevent current small programs, such as those in which the two aforementioned interviewees are serving, from being forced to close their doors?

Training and Materials Needs

Similar to other ministry work done in churches, most teachers in church-supported ESL programs are volunteers; few have served as professional teachers, and 20% are non-native speakers of English, based on the results of the survey. It is thus not surprising that, as a group, teachers in such programs experience challenges in areas such as teaching pronunciation and grammar; while some non-natives have better knowledge of grammatical rules and structures than native speakers, this does not mean they will necessarily be able to teach these effectively without some helpful guidelines. As for teaching pronunciation, understanding how individual sounds are produced and the techniques for producing these sounds is knowledge that is not acquired without some form of training. Moreover, my personal experience with ESL teachers whose first language is not English has brought to light the lack of confidence many have when it comes to teaching English for oral communication due to their awareness that they lack a native Canadian, British, or American accent.

Concerning teaching materials, as discussed earlier, training for teachers and the sharing of materials (and ideas for such) were the most common needs expressed by respondents (See Table 7). Workshops, conferences, and a website for sharing materials (and ideas) were the most commonly mentioned solutions to meeting these needs. To this end, conferences have been offered online over the past two years through the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society, and resources are available online for teachers searching for ideas (SOCEM, 2023). A conference in October 2023 had nearly 70 in-person and online participants, including presenters and panelists, according to one administrative employee (personal communication). A hybrid conference was also held in Metro Vancouver earlier in 2023, with nearly 40 attendees representing 22 programs in Metro Vancouver and beyond (personal communication from the conference organizer). As contact information for churches operating ESL programs is updated, more teachers will potentially gain access to resources and hopefully be able to attend future online or in-person workshops and conferences. Additionally, it is hoped that information for
churches wishing to (re)start ESL programs will be made available and accessed to facilitate success in these efforts.

**Moving Forward: Maintaining and Strengthening the Ministry**

Based on the earlier discussion regarding the expressed training priorities for teachers and their desire for teaching materials or ideas for such, one gains some sense of helpful strategies for maintaining and strengthening church-supported ESL programs.

First, teachers would benefit from attending conference sessions, webinars, and workshops covering topics such as teaching grammar and pronunciation (both in person and online) as well as teaching the Bible in English. Second, teachers would also be helped by being made aware of, and having access to, online networks offering links to resources for teaching both ESL and the Bible. ESL teachers and coordinators aware of these networks need to share this information with their ESL ministry colleagues so that more of them can benefit from announcements of upcoming conferences, webinars, workshops, and social gatherings. Currently, networks such as the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society in Canada, CELEA (Christian English Language Educators Association), and TESOL Ministry in the US are active in North America. CELEA offers an annual conference in the spring (which was both virtual and in-person in 2023), and the Cooperative ESL Ministries Society holds conferences about twice a year. Developing and maintaining directories of churches offering ESL programs in different regions is thus a vital task of these networks.

Third, and most importantly, there is a need for church-supported ESL ministry leaders to work collaboratively to formulate strategies for promoting and assisting in the expansion of the ministry by helping churches whose ESL programs are dormant to restart them and to begin new programs where there is a local demand. Tsaneva (2022) supports such collaboration, citing this approach being used in other ministries. This will likely require the recruitment of new leaders, at the church, denominational, and network levels, to join in the ministry work. Additionally, it will need the support of elders and others in positions of church leadership to encourage members of their congregations to participate in the ministry. In a world where steady migration to the West is expected to continue for years to come, the need for church-supported ESL programs will continue to expand.
Closing Thoughts

Limitations
No research is without limitations, and this study is no exception. The most important is the low response rate to the survey, 5%, considerably lower than what is expected (nearly 30%) for an online survey (Lindemann, 2021), suggesting it may not have yielded a representative sample of such programs. Yet the response rate itself can be meaningful as it is potentially indicative of the extent of the impact of programs discontinued as a result of mandated closures of onsite services and ministry activities.

With regards to the church’s directive to share the gospel, the question of how effective church-supported ESL programs have been at helping to advance this effort was beyond the scope of the current study; its purpose has been descriptive rather than evaluative. Nevertheless, the prime importance of the Great Commission is a reminder that an in-depth understanding of the value of church-supported ESL programs as a ministry requires additional research to develop an awareness of their effectiveness in fulfilling the task of making disciples.

Conclusion: Carrying on with the Mission
Since the Lord declared to Abraham that “in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 22:17), God’s plan for humankind has involved all nations. This is clear from Christ’s mission and vision for the church. Yet the mission involves more than sharing the gospel: From Christ’s command to demonstrate the genuineness of our faith through our love for one another, the church, both globally and locally, has had a perpetual mission to attend to the different personal needs of its members and those in surrounding communities. Immigrants, and in particular refugees, bring a multitude of needs to their new homelands, and in regions where English is the language of the workplace, education, and all daily communication, the need for effective instruction in the language is immeasurably great to help those whose proficiency is lacking. As descendants of Abraham through our faith in Christ, the call to be a blessing to the nations, both practically and spiritually, rests with us.

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**About the Author**

Gordon Moulden has over forty-years’ experience teaching English in universities and churches. He currently serves in the ESL ministry with a church in Burnaby, BC, Canada, and professionally as an ESL teacher educator.
Gods Have Names: Addressing the Translation of “God” in the Thai Language and Culture

Kelly M. Hilderbrand
Bangkok Bible Seminary

Abstract
This article is a practical missiological examination of the word used to reference God in the Thai language. The problem is that the term used in Thai, Phrajao (พระเจ้า), is a generic term that can be used for any number of different gods or royalty and is easily misunderstood. After an examination of the words used for “God” in Chinese and Hindu contexts, the biblical terms for “God” are examined. Although the Bible uses generic terms for God (Elohim and Theos), God has a name. The name of God, Yahweh, was revealed to Moses and used throughout the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the name of Jesus is equated with the creator God. In a polytheistic, non-Christian culture like Thailand, we should emphasize the name of God, with explanation and clarity to avoid confusion, in evangelism and discipleship.

Introduction
This article is a practical missiological examination of the word used to reference God in the Thai language. I do not claim to be an expert in translation. I respect the complexities of translation, the difficult choices that must be made, and the varied opinions of translators. My concern is more practical. What word should Thai Christians use to reference God?
When speaking to non-Christians or new believers, what is the best word to use when speaking of God?

In a church that my wife and I started over twenty years ago in Bangkok, a mother and her three daughters came to Christ, the whole family, except the father. They have now been faithful and active followers of Jesus for two decades. However, the father had chosen to stay loyal to the Thai religion, Theravada Buddhism. The man had not opposed the faith of his wife but had chosen to be apathetic and disinterested in the issue. However, during the Covid crisis, the father became ill and was admitted to the hospital. He was found to be afflicted with cancer and tested positive for Covid. (He is now cancer-free.)

Following hospital protocol, the man was placed in isolation for many days until he tested negative for Covid. The father was not allowed visitors nor any contact except for medical personnel. During his isolation, however, the father claimed that a heavenly being visited him in his room. The father recounted that the God of the Christians visited him and spoke with him. After the incident, the father contacted one of his daughters by phone. The father told his daughter about this visitation and expressed his wish to now follow the daughter’s religion. The father had one question, however, “What is His name? What do I call Him?” His daughter wisely advised that her father may call him Phra Yesu (พระเจ้า), Jesus, a title of respect (Phra) with the translation of Jesus’ given name (Yesu).

After the father’s release from the hospital, the leaders of the church began several months of discipleship, explaining the identity of Jesus, leading to his eventual baptism in the faith. It would be common for a Westerner to declare that Jesus is God or that Jesus is the Son of God. But these titles or phrases, even in the Western context, need elaboration and explanation. Words have meanings that are not always shared among cultures. In many cultures, the word we use for God can be problematic. What do we mean by “God?” Who is God?

The Problem

In Western culture, there is an understanding that the word “God” (with a capital G) refers to the singular, unique creator God of the Abrahamic religions. As Paul stated, “Yet for us there is one God” (1 Corinthians 8:6, ESV). This is not true in many non-Western contexts. The question often asked in the Western world is, “Does God exist?” The question most often asked in a polytheistic or animistic world is “Who is this Christian god and what is his name?”

The word for a god or God in the Thai language is “Phrajao” (พระเจ้า).
But this term can be used in different forms for many divine and human beings. For some, the term Phrajao (พระเจ้า) “refers to the King of Thailand in Bangkok. And when it is combined with other words or phrases it almost always refers to royalty of some level” (Hatton, 1992, p. 447). From a Western perspective, the term is used to refer to both divine and human beings. However, in Thailand, the distinction between divine and human are more blurred. Some believe the king to be a divine human.

As in English, the word “god” can be a generic term. For example, Zeus is a god. Thor is a god. The Buddha may be considered a god or given a god title. Within the Thai worldview, many beings, spiritual and human, are called “gods.” Some Thai Christian leaders have argued that the terminology is not really an issue. One Christian leader, in a discussion of this topic, proclaimed to me that Christianity has been present in Thailand for so long that most Thai people understand the singular term “Phrajao” (พระเจ้า) to be a reference to the Christian God. I would argue that this may be true among younger urban educated Thai people, but in my experience, this is not true for many Thais outside of Bangkok. We must be aware of our listeners and how they hear the message and understand our terms. Paul chose his words and examples carefully when communicating the message of God to the Athenians (Acts 17).

Boon-it (2008) wrote that Thai Christian language is often a barrier to communicating with the majority Buddhist population. Christians sometimes use “Thai vocabulary that is incomprehensible” (Boon-it, 2008, p. ii). This is not a uniquely Thai problem. Across various cultural contexts, including Western societies, adherents of Christianity employ an inherent lexicon, characterized by a distinct manner of expression and unique terminology, which may remain incomprehensible to the broader populace. In a profoundly non-Christian culture, this insider vocabulary becomes a significant barrier to evangelism and discipleship.

The word Christians choose for “God” is important. The word choice can open doors for evangelism or even cause political difficulty as it has done with the use of Allah for God in Malaysia (Neo, 2014, Klett, 2021). What is the nature of the problem when using the term “god” for the Christian God in Thailand? Although dated, the observation of Hatton (1992) above, that Phrajao often refers to royalty, is still relevant to the rural situation in Thailand.

Boon-it wrote, “The understanding of the word ‘God’ for a Christian is very different from a Buddhist’s understanding. For a Buddhist, ‘god’ can mean several things, but the most common understanding is that ‘god’ means one of the many deities who occupy the different heavenly realms”
(Boon-it, 2014, p. 17). Therefore, the sentence, “I worship God,” is rather ambiguous. Which god? Whose god? The Chinese context may provide some insight into the Thai problem.

**A Lesson from China**

What can we learn from the translation of the word for God in the Chinese context? Choi (2023) approached the Chinese linguistic issue from a historical perspective. As the first Christian missionaries to China, the Syriac-speaking Nestorians were the first to wrestle with the contextualized terms used for God in Chinese. “It is clear that Nestorian translations of the Holy Names are both phonetic (based on Syriac) and paraphrased, even borrowing Buddhist terminology” (Choi 2023, p. 3). The Nestorians were not afraid to use indigenous concepts, ideas, and words to explain the Christian faith.

The term Elohim/Theos is variously translated in Nestorian literature spanning a century as Huáng fù ē lóu hé (皇帝阿羅訶 Elohim the Imperial Father), Fó (佛 Buddha), Tiān zūn (天尊 Heavenly Reverence), and Zhēn zhˇu (真主 True Lord). (Choi, 2023, p. 3)

Roman Catholic missionaries, many centuries later, introduced the term, Shàngdì, meaning the Emperor of Emperors or the high God (Keightly, 1978; Ricci, 2016). Shàngdì is the name of a deity worshipped even today in China as the high God. The Catholic missionary, Matteo Ricci, argued that this deity was the God of the Bible remembered by the Chinese as Shàngdì (Ricci, 2016).

However, some Christians were not comfortable with importing words from the indigenous culture or equating the Christian God with an indigenous deity. This raises questions of the limits of contextualization. Would equating the Christian God with Shàngdì be contextualizing the understanding of God by using the many connecting points and similarities between Shàngdì and the Christian God? Shàngdì is the high god in the Chinese pantheon, above all other gods. No idols or pictures can be found of Shàngdì (Ex 20:4; Lev 26:1; Ross, 1909). Shàngdì is qualitatively unique among the Chinese gods as is the Christian God (Ross, 1909). Or would the identification with Shàngdì be like equating the God of Israel with Baal, a deity at the head of a pantheon of gods, but not the supreme creator God of Israel?

To avoid such a conflict, a new word was created, a neologism, Tiānzhˇu (Heavenly Master; Choi, 2023). Later Protestant missionaries
were not unanimous in accepting the terms used by the Catholics, although some were inclined to adopt *Shàngdì*. By 1850, the American Bible Society suggested a generic term, *Shén*, equivalent to *Elohim/Theos*, or the ambiguous term for god (Choi, 2023). However, in the later part of the 19th century, the diverse Protestant community reinvigorated the debate. Several names were proposed, “Tiandi (天帝), Dadi (大帝), Di (帝), Tianshen (天神), Tian (天), Tianfu (天父)” (Choi, 2023, p. 10). Other names were also proposed, but none of these suggestions were adopted and are not found in any published Chinese Bible translations.

The issue has not been definitively resolved. Presently, “modern Protestant Bibles...exist in two versions: the *Shàngdì* version and the *Shén* version, while the term *Tiānzhˇu* (Heavenly Master) has become the preferred term among Catholics and Orthodox Christians” (Choi, 2023, p. 13).

What do we learn from this historical overview? Ricci (2016) believed that God already revealed Himself to the Chinese as *Shàngdì*, therefore, we should honor God’s revelation by using that name. Many Protestant Christians agree and use the word *Shàngdì*. Other Christians wish to stay close to biblical revelation. These Christians use the term *Shén*, which is equivalent to the biblical terms for God (*Elohim/Theos*). Some Catholics and the Orthodox chose to seek clarity of meaning. They wish to avoid confusion in their terms. These Christians use a descriptive term for God *Tiānzhˇu* (Heavenly Master). How we view God’s revelation to a culture, our values, and the assumptions we make about contextualization will influence our choices in this matter.

A Lesson from South Asia

Next, an examination of the translation struggles in South Asia is warranted. Although China has culturally influenced Thailand through trade and immigration, the religious worldview of Southeast Asia is predominately Hinduistic (Wyatt, 2003). The predominant religion of Thailand is Theravada Buddhism which is rooted in the religious stories and worldview of Hinduism (Hilderbrand and Srirakool, 2020). Furthermore, the religious language found in Thailand has its roots in the Pali language of South Asia (Stargardt, 2000). Buddhism and Hinduism do not have a unique high God like *Shàngdì*.

Thus, we might glean from the experience of Bible translators in South Asia. In Southern India the term used for God is the generic term *Deva* (“*deus* in Latin, *theos* in Greek) ... The term means ‘respectable or glorious being,’ so it has a positive sense” (Rai, 1992, p. 444). However, “this is not
a personal name: it is a term to refer to any divine being, of which there are plenty in the Hindu pantheon” (Rai, 1992, p. 444). According to Rai (1992), some Hindus will often ask for the name of the Christian God. Why? Because gods have names in Thai culture. “The Hindus claim that all Hindu gods and goddesses have a personal name such as Ram, Krishna, Brahma, Bishnu, Savitri; and when they know the names of gods and goddesses, they can relate themselves to the deities” (Rai, 1992, p. 446). A quick examination of all religions and cultures will reveal that gods, in general, have names.

In Northern India, Bible translators have experimented with other words to communicate the identity of the Christian God. For example, Ishwar or Param-Ishwar (Supreme Ishwar) are used as names for God. According to Rai (1992), this name is usually used as a title for the Hindu god, Siva. However, in some Hindi scriptures Ishwar is used as the personal name of the creator and “master of the universe (see for instance Svetasvatara Upanishad 6.7)” (Rai, 1992, p. 444). Thus, we collide again with the difficulty of possibly confusing the Christian God with another deity.

We learn from the South Asian context that gods have names, but South Asia does not have a unique high God with a specific name, except possibly in some localized areas. The solution in South India is to again find equivalent biblical terms for God. Therefore, we next turn to the biblical context for solutions.

**Is Scripture the Solution?**

Hebrew speakers in the Old Testament context had similar linguistic and cultural issues with the use of the term “god.” The Scriptures use three primary words to refer to God, two generic, El (לֵא) Elohim (םיִהלֱא) and one specific name, Yahweh (יהוה). The God of Israel competes against the gods of the Levant and Egypt. The God of Israel reveals and defines himself to Pharaoh. “But Pharaoh said, ‘Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go.’” (Ex. 5:2, ESV). God identifies himself, not as the only god, but as the unique, creator God above all other gods (Ps. 95:3, 95:4, 97:9, 135:5), the high God [El-Elyon] (Gen. 14:17-20, Deut. 26:19, Is. 14:13-14), Mighty God [El Gibor] (Is. 9:6), Almighty God [El-Shaddai] (Gen. 17:1, 49:24, Ps. 91:1, 132:2, 5), Everlasting God [El-Olam] (Is. 40:28), the judge of all other gods (Ps. 82:1).

The God of the Bible sometimes defined himself relative to other gods. However, God has a specific name that is revealed to Moses. (Ex. 3:13-16).
The people of Israel are able to relate to Yahweh because they know His name. “And those who know your name will trust in you, for you do not forsake those who seek you, O Yahweh” (Psalm 9:10, LEB). We see in Scripture that Yahweh is the God of Israel, “O Yahweh, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath” (1 Kings 8:23, LEB). Yahweh is also the God of the universe, unique and different from all other gods. “But Yahweh is the true God, he is the living God, and an everlasting king.” (Jer. 10:10, LEB). The problem in Thailand is the same as in the time of biblical Israel. God needs to be defined beyond the mere generic word. He is the high God, the great God, whom we know by name, Yahweh, the uncreated, self-existent one.

In my own teaching and preaching in Thailand, I have chosen to use Yahweh (พระยาห์เวห์) instead of using the generic term for God (พระเจ้า). This avoids confusion as to the identity of the god to whom I am referring. I also avoid confusing the Christian God with any other deity. The name, Yahweh, still must be defined. This can be done through teaching and discipleship, but the Christian God has a name that was revealed to Moses and to us in Scripture (Ex 3:13-16). The latest Thai standard translation of the Bible (THSV 2011) wisely, in my opinion, transliterates the name of God as Phra Yahweh (พระยาห์เวห์). Other Thai translations still prefer to use the more ambiguous “the Lord” (องค์พระผู้เป็นเจ้า) as do most English translations except for a few like the Lexham English Bible.

The solution to the problem is more clarity in our vocabulary by returning to the original language of Scripture and not being afraid to use Yahweh where appropriate. Using Yahweh gives clarity to hearers as to whom we are referencing. Many Thai people believe that Christians worship the god of the Westerners, one god among many. When we name our God, we are able to define Him. This does not mean we should reject the more generic word for God Phrajao (พระเจ้า). The generic terms Elohim and Theos are used liberally in Scripture. Many Thai Christians are comfortable with the term and it is the accepted term in most contexts. However, we might choose to clarify the term when speaking by saying the high God (พระเจ้านิยม) or God above all (พระเจ้าเหนือทั้งปวง), especially in evangelistic settings or when teaching new believers.

However, using God’s name also implies relationship. We know his name. Again, the name, Yahweh, still needs to be defined and clarified as will most Christian concepts in a predominately Buddhist culture. However, using the name of God creates a bond. As was noted above, gods have names (Rai, 1992).

Therefore, we should not abandon the biblical example of using the
generic term for God when appropriate. However, we should be bolder in using the biblical name of God, Yahweh, to distinguish the Christian God from other deities. Knowing the name of God implies relationship and the name of God also reveals His character and essence to those who are seeking to grow closer to Yahweh.

**The Name of Jesus**

The situation changes with the New Covenant and the New Testament. We are told of a new name for God.

> And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12, ESV)

> Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11, ESV)

The success of the Free in Jesus Christ Church Association (FJCCA) is a demonstration of the power of using a specific name for God. The group exclusively uses the name of Jesus (พระเยซู) in its evangelism and teaching. The generic term for God Phrajao (พระเจ้า) is avoided as it is deemed too confusing for the Thai context.

[T]he use of the term Pra[j]ao (lord or god) by Thai Christians is confusing to Buddhists because it can refer to any number of Hindu deities, local spirits, angels or even a king. To avoid this confusion FJCCA only speaks of PhraYesu or Jesus. This is no trivial change of nomenclature, since it clarifies the story of the gospel for Thai who now understand that the message is about a God named Jesus who was incarnated and died to take away our bad karma. Jesus, they are told, is ready to help us with our problems and guide us today. (Bailey and Martin, 2020, p. 43)

Uniquely using the name Jesus has led to great success in evangelism, including large numbers of people being baptized as reported in numerous periodicals including *Christianity Today* and *Charisma* (Berglund, 2019; Shellnutt, 2020). However, the movement has caused some controversy.

While the FJCCA acknowledges the Father, the Son, and the Spirit
as they read of them in Scripture, it does not teach the doctrine of the Trinity. Pastor Somsak explains, “It's not my history.” By this he means that the doctrine is not articulated in the Scriptures and the philosophical debates that gave rise to the doctrine are not relevant to Thai people. (Bailey and Martin, 2020, p. 43)

Thus, many, but not all, mainstream Christian organizations are hesitant to welcome the group into the wider fellowship of Protestant Christians. Yet, the success of this experiment gives impetus to the wider debate about what word to use for God. In the Thai context, identifying the Christian God revealed in Jesus by name seems to be very beneficial. Calling God by name brings clarity and distinguishes the Christian God from the various other deities respected and worshipped in Thailand.

**Summary**

What word should Thai Christians use to reference God? I argue that we should not reject the generic term for God as even the Scriptures use the nonexclusive terms *Elohim* and *Theos*. However, clarity of terminology is important in evangelization and discipleship. Therefore, when speaking, we should often pair the term for God with superlatives like the most high God (พระเจ้าสูงสุด), God above all gods (พระเจ้าเหนือพระองค์ทั้งปวง), the creator God (พระเจ้าผู้สร้าง).

Furthermore, Yahweh has revealed to us his name. Although in the Western context, some may be hesitant to use the name Yahweh for fear of offense to some; that offense is not present in Thailand. People want to know the name of our God. Depending on the context of our conversation, preaching, or teaching, we should not be hesitant to say Yahweh (พระยาห์เวห์) or Jesus (พระเยซู) or even Yahweh Jesus (พระยาห์เวห์เยซู) who is Yahweh incarnated as the human Jesus. Clarity and explanation will always be needed for those who do not understand or who are new to the message, but we must not continue to use a term simply out of habit. We must use the clearest terms and concepts to communicate the message of the True God to those who need to hear.

**References**


**About the Author**

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Book Review

*Vital Christian Community: 12 Characteristics of Healthy Congregations*

By Phil Brochard and Alissa Newton
Church Publishing, 2022
240 pages
US$23.99

Reviewed by Renee Jones, widowed after 42 years of marriage, a mother of 3, grandmother of 12, and great-grandmother of 10. Renee is a DMin Student at Liberty University and has served in various ministerial capacities.

Many churches are going through the post-pandemic recovery of worship attendance and participation. *Vital Christian Community: 12 Characteristics of Healthy Congregations* will help pastors, including myself, to refocus and revitalize their congregations. Phil Brochard and Alissa Newton bring their expertise to the forefront in a comprehensible narrative. Both authors are rectors of the Episcopalian church who share their passion for the church, skills, and experience. Brochard, the rector of All Souls Episcopal Parish and a trainer with the College for Congregational Development, brings his belief that health is not a static state of being but a series of intentions, behaviors, and practices resulting from a vital and healthy community. Newton is the vicar of St. Columba’s Episcopal Church and co-founder of the College for Congregational Development and has worked throughout the United States. “The goal of the College began with one aim: to equip lay and clergy leaders with the frameworks and the practical skills to develop or redevelop their congregations” (ix). This book reflects that goal as it uses stories,
examples, and principles to demonstrate how a congregation can be healthy if it achieves the twelve characteristics described in the book.

The foundation of the twelve characteristics is also the first characteristic: a sense of purpose. The authors give pastors the understanding that revisiting their church’s purpose is the key to becoming a healthy congregation. The old method of opening church doors or simply having a building with services on Sunday is not a sufficient purpose to build or sustain a faith community. The first core development model (Gather-Transform-Send) is introduced to help congregations articulate their purpose. The basic purpose is to gather God’s people in a community to be a site of transformation and renewal through worship and congregational life together and then to send God’s people out into a world that needs them as salt, light, and leaven.

The subsequent characteristics build on the church’s sense of purpose. They include being reliably transformational, practitionership, the ability to trust, curiosity, responsiveness, reflection, openness to change, collaboration, productivity in conflict, being emotionally grounded, and having self-differentiated leadership. These characteristics have proven vital for many pastors whose hopelessness and helplessness result from their ego or efforts to make changes by themselves. The book’s central focus is the congregants’ interaction and ownership of becoming a vital and healthy congregation.

A practical guideline that I found particularly resourceful for pastors is the importance of being open to change. The pastor is not to be the savior, sole driver, or only person to make change happen. The authors make it clear that no change happens unless multiple people work on it and for it.

The authors also promote an online retreat focusing on the 12 characteristics, where congregants are exposed to the core purpose of the Gather-Transform-Send model. This model is consistently applied throughout the book, with practical guidelines for implementation.

The fundamental way the 12 characteristics are explained to reach congregants on every level is one of the book’s notable strengths. Although the authors speak to leaders of every denomination, they reference their Episcopalian faith frequently. One review on the book’s back cover from The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers notes, “Vital Christian Community offers churches of every kind access to clear, tested practices and pathways toward authentic, transformed life with Jesus and with each other.”

Another strength is the practical application of the characteristics through exercises that include the whole congregation. This helps to promote interaction among the congregants who are re-adapting to physical
gatherings. While congregations may benefit from the exercises presented with each of the twelve characteristics, some may not be appropriate to all congregations. For the congregants in my faith community, the exercise on the Johari Window (Chapter 5) was not as useful as the other exercises.

For pastors recovering from a tragic decline in church attendance due to the COVID-19 restrictions, this is a must-read to motivate them to revisit their church’s purpose. Readers who come hoping for change in their congregation will not be disappointed by the information and insight gained from these authors, which will provide them with lenses for development. Whether starting with a new congregation or revitalizing a seasoned group, this book will aid your church in discovering and developing a core purpose.
Book Review

Diaspora Missions to International Students

By Enoch Wan, editor
Western Seminary Press, 2019
191 pages
US$9.99


For over a century Protestant mission agencies, churches, and parachurch campus ministries have sought to evangelize and disciple international students. With mixed results and effectiveness, the most popular missiological frameworks and methodologies used have been borrowed from the world of secular management in business. This pragmatic, programmatic, and formulaic approach is heavy on the American “obsession with doing/performance/outcomes” (24) while being light on being (ontology) and relationships—both vertical (with the Triune God) and horizontal (other people). Veteran missiologist Enoch Wan is seeking to change this in his plea to “all Christians and all churches to rediscover and revitalize ‘relationship’ in faith and practice” (23).

Developed about ten years ago and still evolving, Wan led the formation of a supplemental and “relative new paradigm” (31) called the Diaspora Missiology Paradigm (DMP), and he formulated what he has
labeled the Paradigm of Relational Realism. His latest edited volume integrates these two cutting-edge paradigms as they relate to International Student Ministry (ISM), thus making it “unique” and “not merely another book on ISM” (8, 187). The book is the third by the new Western Seminary Press in their ongoing series by the Wan-formed Center of Diaspora and Relational Research in Portland, Oregon.

The volume’s other ten contributors—six men and four women—are a mix of academics and field experts with over one hundred cumulative years of ISM experience. Seven have doctorates and several are previously published authors. Some served or are serving with the Association of Christians Ministering among Internationals, Cru, International Student Ministry, InterVarsity, or Navigators.

In the brief introductory chapter, Wan provides the background and uniqueness of the book, its purpose, a definition of thirteen key terms, and an explanation of its organization. In Chapter Two, Wan provides his reasoning behind the book and introduces a theoretical framework for a relationally based understanding of Christian mission. Aspects of Scripture, history, theology, and practice form the basis of his relational paradigm. Wan’s relational missiology is rooted in and summed up in his “STARS” approach to integrative research: scripturally sound, theologically supported, analytically coherent, relevantly contextual, and strategically practical.

Chapters Three and Ten are case studies. In each, the reader learns about the author(s) through their autobiographical details that are presented before, or are incorporated into, the case studies.

Chapter Three shares the stories of five international students who attended schools in New York. This ethnography describes a Buddhist from China, two atheists from China, and two Muslims from South Asia. The chapter describes each student’s particular context and subsequent encounter with Christianity. It also describes the impact of this outreach after their graduation. The chapter’s authors are confidently able to state that “all [five] developed a more positive and enriching attitude toward Christianity” (46).

Entitled “From Every Campus to Every Nation,” Chapter Ten presents several case studies of churches and campus ministries that have ties to the evangelical charismatic church-planting organization Every Nation Churches and Ministries. The author describes missionary efforts by Filipino, Nepalese, and Zimbabwean diaspora workers and students. The case studies give examples of Wan’s four types of diaspora missions.

This kind of missional movement is reminiscent of the early church in the book of Acts. . . While these varied stories of diaspora missions in
the Every Nation world, particularly those facilitated through international student ministry, may represent something of a departure from conventional, western missionary narratives of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is something peculiarly biblical about God using diasporic peoples in unexpected times and places in the story of redemption. (184)

Chapter Four seeks to show that a biblical theology of ISM is rooted in the missio Dei (mission of God) and can be seen in the various Old and New Testament stories of scatterings and sojourning. An examination of current global migration trends, comments on the unique issues with international students, and three reflections are also provided in the chapter that ends with this statement by Alexander Best: “God is regathering nations, drawing their brightest hopes for the future, to a global campus near you” (69).

Chapter Five offers a five-fold personal reflection and biblical meditation on ISM by a Dallas Theological Seminary-trained campus minister and teacher who has served in Australia, Canada, Singapore, the UK, and the USA. She recommends for us to “Focus on Father’s Wind” (John 3:8), to “Find Fields for Witnessing” (Mark 16:15), to “Familiarize Foreign Ways” (1 Cor. 9:19, 22), to “Follow Fellowship Walk” (Matt. 28:19, 20), and to “Fly on His Wings” (Mal. 4:2).

The book’s longest chapter—Chapter Six—traces InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA’s long and effective history of ministry to international students. The chapter reveals how reaching international students is a part of the “DNA” of Intervarsity (117).

“The Global ISM Movement Emerging from Diaspora Missions on Campuses: From John R. Mott to ‘Lausanne’” is the title of Chapter Seven. It shows how ISM developed into a strategic diaspora mission. ISM had the American and Noble Peace Prize-winning J. R. Mott (1865–1955) as its “unrecognized visionary and founder” (123). ISM regionally expanded throughout post-WWII North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia-Pacific; and has been incorporated into the work of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization—the global movement that was inspired by Billy Graham to mobilize Christian leaders to collaborate for world evangelization.

Chapter Eight details five stages or thresholds of cross-cultural evangelism or of “conversion in community.” These stages are distrust to trust, apathy to curiosity, curiosity to openness, openness to seeking, and entering the kingdom. Before discussing the five stages, the author explains the difference between a surface-level decision and a core-level conversion. The author finds a crucial truth in the story of “Jesus the
Farmer” (Parable of the Sower, Mark 4:26–29)—namely, that spiritual birth and growth are mysterious and organic. “How long might it take for our friends to go through the stages?”, the author asks before answering, “God is sovereign over conversions” (149).

Chapter Nine relies on scripture, demographic data, and current missiological trends to exhort local congregations to become involved in ISM—especially among unengaged unreached people groups (UUPGs). With estimates of 214–232 million people living outside their place of birth, and 1.4 million international students registered at U.S. institutions of higher education (158), “it is imperative that the church of Jesus Christ see the sovereign hand of God in this unprecedented movement of people across the planet” (153). Mission agencies and parachurch campus ministries can assist and partner with the Body of Christ in evangelizing UUPGs.

The work concludes with a summary and final word from the editor in Chapter Eleven. Wan opens the two-page chapter by stating that the publication “is both personally and professionally significant” (187). He reiterates his strong belief that, in contrast “to the popular and programmatic and outcome-based approach in Christian practice,” now is the time for ISM to “rediscover the relational characteristic of Christian faith and practice in the pluralistic and post-modernistic era of the 21st century” (187).

As usual with a Wan-edited work, Diaspora Missions to International Students has much to commend. Space allows me to only mention a few examples while focusing mostly on Wan.

The book is highly informative and insightful as it integrates theology, missiology, theory, concepts, statistics, and history with case studies, storytelling, the practical, and the personal. Its logical and skillful organization, clearly defined terms “along with the embedded assumptions” (11), lucid writing, relevancy, interaction with the latest missiological trends and key figures, and well-reasoned and fact-based arguments are all noteworthy. For instance, regarding relevancy, no work about students today can omit the subject of social media. Though not at length, the volume does comment on this popular form of human interaction. Wan states, “The popularity of social media is symptomatic of the starvation for relationship of contemporary people due to multiple factors, e.g. broken marriage, dysfunctional family, high mobility, etc.” (36).

Like an effective defense lawyer, Wan is convincing with his missiological emphasis on the relational aspect (“relational realism paradigm”). Influenced heavily by the ingrained cultural obsession with doing and results, American Christians would do well to return to this more biblical approach to reaching international students and others with
the gospel. Indeed, being (ontology) precedes doing (pragmatic).

A deep and conceptual thinker, Wan’s charts and graphs help readers to better comprehend his thought process. The seasoned teacher is an impressive master wordsmith, chartsmith, and succinct abbreviator (e.g., “STARS” approach of integrative research, and his to, through, by and beyond, and with four main types of diaspora missions and ISM).

Most would agree that parachurch mission agencies and campus ministries have helped the kingdom of God to advance. But as it has been explicitly stated by many, and implied in Diaspora Missions to International Students, the local church is the divine “Plan A” for rescuing the perishing and strengthening the disciples. How true: “Focusing on diaspora missions is very appropriate for the average church member and should not be considered another responsibility for the pastoral staff” (168).

A wide range of readers will benefit from this work which offers “stimulating and challenging concepts and insights” (9). These include university campus ministers, evangelical students and professors with an interest in missiology, mission agency leaders, and academically inclined pastors and laypersons living near a university or who are at a multicultural church. Indeed, international students “represent a unique missions opportunity worthy of sustained theological reflection and loving engagement” (69).
Book Review

Fanning the Revitalization Flame: Leading Your Church from Smoldering Embers to Revival Fire

By Robert Beckett
WestBow Press, 2022
176 pages
US$15.99

Reviewed by Robert Shepherd (M.T.S, M.Div.), a doctoral candidate at Liberty University who serves as the lead pastor of New Heritage Baptist Church in Sherman, Texas.

“It is my hope and my prayer that this book may be able to help in some way to encourage and ignite the fire in a congregation and/or pastor again so that they can be an effective and contributing neighbor in the neighborhood” (xiii). With this statement, Robert Beckett sets the stage for everything that is to come, fanning the flame of revitalization fire within the Western church. Fanning the Revitalization Flame argues that a change of mind, attitude, and focus is required by churches to make disciples. This is the foundation of revitalization. While he breaks no new ground, Beckett does effectively communicate Scriptural truth mingled with practical application throughout the book.

Beckett’s contribution to churches engaged in revitalization can be summed up in one word: encouragement. Throughout Fanning the Revitalization Flame, he takes every opportunity to speak life into the hearts of pastors and congregations struggling with their purpose or level of community impact, at one point encouraging leaders to “change from thinking of lack to thinking of supply” (29). The author believes that
We need new ways to look at church health and growth that go beyond numbers and counting people in the pews. We must be looking at measurements of health, vitality, outreach, and creating touchpoints. Instead of saying our church is small, so what? We need to say our church is small, now what? (30)

In essence, this approach turns traditional church health metrics—focused on numbers—on its head, and instead, it invites pastors to focus on making disciples who make disciples. While no single church is great at all things, all churches are commanded by Jesus Christ to make disciples who make disciples. Thus, a church will never fail when discipleship is at the heart of its revitalization program.

The strength of Beckett’s book, again, is in his ability to encourage small churches who understand their need for revitalization. Beckett argues, “We must recognize who we are as a church, and anything different than what God says we are is missing the mark” (47). He lists three ways in which churches can be all they can be. First, small churches must believe that they can be everything God intends for them to be. Second, small churches need to understand what purpose God has for them. Third, small churches need to be unapologetic in obedience (47-48). Once a church comes to terms with who they are before God—beloved and secure—they begin to walk in faithful obedience intent on fulfilling Christ’s command to make disciples. Church size has no bearing on a church’s ability to make disciples. An intentional discipleship program takes very little funding, promotion, or massive programming. It is simply one mature disciple pouring biblical truth and wisdom into another Christ follower.

Beckett does an excellent job of capturing the need for revitalization. He also neatly and concisely presents a path forward for churches in need of revitalization, focusing on discipleship to achieve this end. However, Beckett’s work is not without its share of weaknesses, chief among them is the style of writing. Oftentimes, Beckett’s writing is dry. While the content is solid, it is not a very engaging book. This should not dissuade pastors or lay persons from reading Fanning the Revitalization Flame, as it will encourage and equip all who pick it up.
Book Review

*Leadership by the Book: Cultivating Spirit-Led Kingdom Leaders*

By Galen Wendell Jones
B&H Academic, 2023
129 pages
US$24.99

Reviewed by Jeremy Langley, DMin candidate at Liberty University. He has served in pastoral ministry in his home state of Arkansas for 12 years.

There is no shortage of books on leadership. Bookstores and websites seem to overflow with volumes expounding upon the latest and greatest leadership strategies. But what if the secret to developing leaders in the church was not new and not really a secret? What if the key to cultivating the next generation of leaders has been readily available to us all along? That is the basis for the argument Galen Jones makes in *Leadership by the Book: Cultivating Spirit-Led Kingdom Leaders*. In eight chapters, he provides encouragement and insight as he weaves together the argument that true Christian leaders are those appointed by God, and who “display the active indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit” in their lives (9).

Jones makes it obvious from the book’s introduction that the topic is deeply personal to him. Like all genuine Christian leaders, he contends that his journey began with his conversion and it was clarified upon his surrender to God’s call to ministry. “When one recognizes Jesus as the King, it involves much more than making a simple theological claim,” he writes. “The recognition that he is King has implications for a person’s entire life” (2).
Leadership by the Book stands out from other leadership development books because it places the focus on the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, not the individual leader. He presents the contents in two parts. The first half makes a clear presentation of “The God News.” This phrase “is a reclaiming of what the term ‘Good News’ once conveyed, i.e., the transformative truth of Jesus” (4). Jones demonstrates that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel, making Him the Lord of all Scripture and the model for leaders throughout both Testaments and today (23). An entire chapter is devoted to the model set by Abraham which Jones contends is “the foundational template” for church leaders (44). Having demonstrated the truth of Christ’s identity and the importance of knowing Him as Savior and King, the author concludes the first half with a leadership paradox, “The real onus is not on who is following us, but rather whom we are following — and what kind of follower we are” (75).

In the second half, Jones builds on the previous paradoxical statement with the argument that “all leaders (in the Kingdom) are chosen, appointed, and authorized by the God of Heaven” (81). One of the primary tasks of Kingdom leaders is to raise up new leaders through discipleship all the while submitting to personal discipleship and continual spiritual growth. “When we are faithful to develop ourselves and pour into the lives of others, it is powerful to watch God use the leaders he called to influence others for his Kingdom’s sake,” Jones writes (105). Despite one’s best efforts, only those who “experience oneness with the Father, the witness of Jesus, and the witness of the Holy Spirit” can be true Kingdom leaders, he concludes (129).

Staying true to the book’s title, Jones relies heavily on scriptural citations to justify the ideas expressed in each chapter. This dependence on the Word of God over personal opinion adds credibility to his work. The arguments of the book are also strengthened through the use of footnotes to point the reader to related scholarly material.

One aspect of Leadership by the Book that I found beneficial is the way Jones keeps the reader engaged by inserting personal stories. While discussing the leadership model set forth by Abraham, the author writes about the challenges God often allows leaders to face and the maturity that should result. This point is illustrated with personal stories that include the struggle he and his wife have faced with infertility, watching his mentor struggle through the loss of a child and the horrors he learned of while visiting a former slave encampment in Africa. The emotion of these stories draws the reader in to hear the main point: “The rawest parts of life can be the trials God uses to sharpen our endurance and make us mature believers” (38).
Jones includes a significant amount of theology and theory throughout each chapter. However, one thing that makes *Leadership by the Book* useful is the way the author presents practical points of application from which anyone in Christian leadership can profit. Of particular interest, he provides seven leadership principles from the life of Abraham (28-43), a five-point paradigm for equipping tomorrow’s leaders in today’s church (96-97), and eight points for effective leader-follower formation (97-105).

*Leadership by the Book* would be a beneficial read for any pastor or others in church leadership. The practical steps outlined in the preceding paragraph can be quickly implemented in most church settings. Seminary students and others who desire a position of church leadership would also profit from the raw truth espoused by Jones. Unlike the authors of some leadership books, he does not only tell the glamorous side of the leadership preparation journey. He also exposes the challenges. “The Lord does his best work in the seasons of difficulty,” he writes about Abraham’s story (44). As a young leader, I appreciate his candor.

One of the book’s final claims demonstrates the fact that how we lead the church has a direct impact on how we fulfill the Great Commission: “As we understand the biblical foundation for leadership, we understand more clearly the mission of God; the more the mission becomes a daily part of our lives, the more we are transformed by it” (129).
Book Review

Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture

By Justin Ariel Bailey
Baker Academic, 2022
192 pages
US$21.99

Reviewed by John E. Rife, Jr., who holds a Master of Theological Studies from Palmer Theological Seminary and is a Theology and Apologetics doctoral candidate at Liberty University.

In theology, we wrestle with eternal truths acted out daily in ever-changing cultures. Every now and then, it is helpful to engage material that embraces the timeless Gospel of Jesus Christ and that shows how the gospel interacts with—and breaks through—the trends of the day. Readers are indebted to Justin Ariel Bailey for accomplishing just that.

This book attempts to make theological concepts understandable in modern contexts, not with syncretism but with relativism. It makes sense of the gospel in the surrounding cultures not by discarding vital cultural elements but by transforming them in light of the good news of Jesus Christ. Bailey uses five dimensions, 1) Meaning, 2) Power, 3) Ethical, 4) Religious, and 5) Aesthetic, as a means of embracing the valued components of the world in which we live. He explains how Christian life impacts the culture through each of these five dimensions.

The book is filled with many of Bailey’s personal encounters and experiences as he becomes very transparent. It is not that the book serves as a confessional, but he uses his experiences to offer practical,
experiential direction to the reader. Bailey uses terms familiar to modern audiences, such as "going viral." Because of the frequency that these contemporary expressions are used in the book, it is hard to say how long the concepts will be relative in a quickly changing culture. Still, for today’s Christians, the material is undoubtedly beneficial.

This does not mean that the content lacks timeless concepts. For example, Bailey explains, “The Pharisees said, if you are clean, you can be with us; Jesus said, be with me, and you will become clean” (37-38). Such a truth can be applied and seen in any culture where there is an elite group that claims who is out and who is in.

The book comes with a shining endorsement from Bailey’s former instructor, Kevin Vanhoozer of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Vanhoozer states, “The five lenses allow us not simply to stay on the surface of the water but to plumb its depths” (xii). He goes on to say, “What is at stake in the dialogue between theology and culture that Justin here engages is nothing less than the shape of our discipleship” (xiii).

Bailey boldly engages concepts familiar to modern Western minds, such as critical theory. He states,

On the surface, critical theories seem to work from a similar starting point as the Scriptures (recognition of oppression) and seek similar outcomes (justice). But as we dig deeper, we find significant differences in how oppression, liberation, and justice are defined, as well as in the story of the world that lies beneath these definitions (44).

Bailey’s book can appeal to nearly all audiences, from the layperson to the academic, because it seeks to engage culture thoughtfully, though without sacrificing truths found in the Bible. The author’s work challenges the reader to face outward. This is not a book on personal spiritual growth but a book on attaining spiritual maturity to facilitate effective transmission of the good news of Jesus Christ and make it meaningful in the theological garden in which such seeds of truth are planted. It is a book that concerns itself with personal character growth for the benefit of others. According to Bailey, “Our answerability to God does not clear us of accountability to others, but it does relativize all human judgments” (78). As for challenges that inspire the reader to look beyond his or her own cultural and spiritual comfort zones, he writes,

We walk humbly (Mic. 6:8), in the name of our God, the One who has joined us at our table, sharing our food, and suffering our violence. His continuing presence interrogates our practices. For though Jesus is
not averse to flipping the tables (John 2:13–17), his more common practice is to sit at them, asking penetrating questions. When Jesus sits at the table, he draws our attention to who is sitting in the place of honor and who has been left out. He exposes our attempts to be in the center and to avoid the voices of those on the margins (Luke 14:8–14). And he reminds us that God’s kingdom runs in the opposite direction of every human culture on earth: toward the outsiders (83).

This is indeed a great reminder of how we can take the character and example of Jesus Christ into our surrounding culture and live out an eternal truth in very fluid times. *Interpreting Your World* gives readers insight not only into how to interpret scripture, but how to live it out, and how to do so with a Christ-centered engagement. This is a book that I would recommend to readers of nearly any Christian background with nearly any level of educational experience.
Book Review

Missionary Motivations: Challenges from the Early Church

By Matthew Burden
William Carey Publishing, 2023
131 pages
US$10.99

Reviewed by Ryan Jensen, PhD in intercultural studies (Biola University). He has lived and served in China for nearly five years and is the author of Seeking God’s Face: Practical Reflections on Honor and Shame in Scripture.

This book is immensely important and helpful for growing in one’s understanding of what should motivate engagement in missions. Personally, my excitement for missions was primarily birthed out of passages like Isaiah 6:8, the Great Commission in Matthew 28, and Romans 10:14-17. These motivations involve obedience to Jesus’s commands and the necessity of answering the call to meet the world’s tremendous needs. Such motivations have been common among missionaries for the past several hundred years, but have they always been the primary drivers for the missionary enterprise? We know that Christianity spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire in the first few centuries, so what was motivating these early Christians? Perhaps surprisingly, Burden notes, “Many of the most commonly articulated motivations in our day appear only sparsely in early records, if at all” (113).

A key strength of Missionary Motivations is that it synthesizes the difference between modern conceptions of missionary motivation and that which influenced the early Christians. And importantly, Burden does so
with a largely balanced and nuanced approach as he recognizes that neither early Christians nor modern believers have things completely right nor wrong. The focus of the book is on answering the question “What does mission look like when undertaken in the spirit of early Christianity?” (89). It largely reads like a modified dissertation and is organized as such: an introduction to the subject matter (Introduction and Chapter 1), a survey of the history of early Christian missionary motivations (Chapters 2 through 6), and a discussion of the findings of the research (Chapters 7 through 9).

Burden begins by explaining the impetus for his research, which began with the realization that “the writers and missionaries of earlier eras of the faith seemed to be operating on a somewhat different theological wavelength, and it resulted in different answers to the question of missionary motivation” (viii). While much is known about the early Christian church from a historical perspective, not much has been written specifically regarding the missionary motivation of those early Christians. He expressly states, “This study aims to help fill that gap by opening a window on the way that Christians in the early centuries of our faith thought about the task of global mission” (ix).

The bulk of Missionary Motivations is a historical survey of the motivations of early Christian missionaries. Chapter 2 covers the time of the expansion of Christianity within the Roman Empire. Next, the expansion east in modern-day India, Armenia, Central Asia, and Eastern Asia is discussed. The expansion south in the Arabian Peninsula and parts of northern Africa is then considered. Next, the expansion into central and western Europe is discussed. Finally, the growth of Christianity in modern-day Ireland, Scotland, England, and Germany is explained.

The final section — Chapters 7 through 9 — synthesizes the broad survey of the previous five chapters and sets out to draw some conclusions regarding what motivated the early Christians in terms of missions. The first distinctive quality is that “the spirit of early Christianity is communal and ecclesial” (89). Burden says that the primary goal of the expansion of the early church was not the salvation of individual people but instead to establish communities of faith which “constituted a new incarnation of the reality of the reign of Christ” (90). This motivation was driven by a Christus Victor theology, which primarily views the work of Christ “as the triumph of God over the powers of sin, death, and the devil” (115). Burden summarizes the difference in missionary motivation between modern Christians and the early church by saying that “early Christian expansion appears to have been motivated less by Jesus’s commands and more by his pattern of life” (114).
One shortcoming of this book is that Burden almost makes it seem like a fool’s errand to discover the missionary motivations of the early church. While admitting the difficulty in answering the central question, Burden (2023) says, “Our sources often amount to chance lines in works of apologetics or sermons, along with apocryphal and hagiographical stories written generations after the events they describe” (16), “What can we discern of the missionary motivations of those who went to the Goths? Unfortunately, we know next to nothing of the original Christian contacts” (64), and “We have only a few hints as to how [Christianity] grew, and still less to what motivated Christians to evangelism or mission” (113). While being self-aware of the limitations of his conclusions, Burden does undersell what he has brought to light.

Another shortcoming is that the book reads like a modified dissertation. There is a lot of repetition throughout, and the bulk of the book reads almost like a literature review, which can be a bit cumbersome to get through.

Overall, Burden (2023) has brought to light legitimate motivations for missions that are quite frankly missing from contemporary Christianity at large. The current primary motivations for missions are most certainly not wrong, but they may be incomplete. As global Christianity continues to expand and the non-Western church increasingly becomes the primary driver of global missions, it would be wonderful to see a more comprehensive understanding of what can and should motivate missionary activity – and this book can contribute to that goal.
Book Review

Organic Disciples: Seven Ways to Grow Spiritually and Naturally Share Jesus

By Kevin and Sherry Harney
Zondervan, 2021
288 pages
US$19.99

Reviewed by Jesse Ruby (DMin candidate, Liberty University), lead pastor of the South Austin Church of the Nazarene, a multilingual church doing church as one church in three languages.

The church's future is discipleship, as it moves us out to the lost. Unfortunately, it seems that the longer people are in the church, the less they connect with the lost. The world needs disciples who love God and people, and who will share their faith regularly. In Organic Disciples: Seven Ways to Grow Spiritually and Naturally Share Jesus, the authors share how to make this sort of discipleship happen. Offering hope and inspiration, the Harneys share, “The future of the church requires leaders who recognize that true discipleship moves people out with the gospel” (20). Written for the layperson and pastor, the Harneys inspire readers to become growing, evangelistic disciples. As they read this book, church leaders will find themselves praying, "Lord, make this true in my church and me."

“This is the central purpose of this book! Good discipleship leads to a lifestyle of evangelistic outreach” (256). Imagine your life and church marked by that statement. In the first three chapters, the Harneys discuss what a growing disciple is. They provide a practical measure of spiritual
growth by noting seven growth markers of thriving disciples. The seven markers are Bible Engagement, Passionate Prayer, Wholehearted Worship, Humble Service, Joyful Generosity, Consistent Community, and Organic Outreach. Most of the book is a discussion of these seven markers. In seven sections, the authors share how Jesus embodied these marks of discipleship, and they explain how each marker connects to evangelism.

In the Bible Engagement section, the Harneys show how Jesus embodied engagement with the Word by consistently quoting Scripture. Jesus lived what the Scriptures teach. The disciple who follows Jesus engages the Word by loving it, knowing it, and following it. The Harneys make it clear that loving and knowing the Bible moves us to the lost.

Jesus embodied passionate prayer. A growing disciple who follows Jesus will have a passionate prayer life. The Harneys note that unbelievers will welcome prayer. They share practical tips for praying with unbelievers in Chapter 9. One practical idea is the “1-1-1 prayer.” “Each day at 1:00 p.m. you pray for one minute for one person who is not yet a Christ follower” (98).

Jesus worshipped, Jesus accepted worship, and Jesus invited others to worship. Jesus’ followers are people who worship wholeheartedly. Wholehearted worship focuses on God and is embodied in a life of surrender. The authors express how a life lived for the glory of God is a life lived to lead others to Jesus.

Jesus served humbly. A Jesus follower is a servant. Humble service draws attention to Jesus. But serving is not enough; there is a need to connect the message to service. They write, “Humble service is not the end of evangelism, it is the door that opens the way to speak words of life, tell Jesus' story, and share the good news of the hope that is found in him alone” (160).

Jesus lived a life of joyful generosity (John 3:16, Heb 12:2). True Jesus followers live lives of joyful generosity. They connect joyful generosity to evangelism through stewardship and investing in eternity. They show how stewardship is counter-cultural. Every church needs disciples who live as joyfully generous people.

The Triune God is the embodiment of a consistent community. Jesus lived continually in community, inviting others to follow Him. The true follower of Jesus will live in consistent community (Heb 10:25). The authors share this hope of consistent community. “Imagine what could happen if every follower of Jesus modeled loving community and embraced people who have not yet met Jesus as Savior” (229).

In the section on Organic Outreach, the Harneys describe how God always moves first. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. He commanded
His disciples to go. Evangelism is the natural response of the disciple. What would happen if every disciple naturally and faithfully shared Jesus? The goal of a disciple is to make more disciples. The authors give practical ideas to make this happen in this section. This section of the book is worth the price of the book itself.

Writing with hope, inspiration, and engaging questions that pique the imagination, the Harneys invite us all to the abundant life of discipleship. Every pastor and layperson interested in becoming all that God desires should read this book. Every church should prayerfully consider using this book in a study group, to inspire and grow disciple-making disciples. Imagine yourself inspired and moving with the Spirit to see others consistently being won to the Lord. Imagine new disciples joining you regularly in following Jesus. That is the goal of this book. Imagine your church excited in worship, passionate in prayer, joyful in generosity, and faithfully sharing Jesus with others. What would your community look like if that were the case? Want to find out? Get this book, study it, share it, and live it.
**Book Review**

*Supracultural Gospel: Bridging East and West*

By Mary Lou Codman-Wilson and Alex Zhou  
William Carey Publishing, 2022  
214 pages  
US$9.99

Reviewed by Mark D. Wood, PhD., Director of Kingdom Leadership Training Center, Darhan, Mongolia.

Each year as international students come to the United States, they encounter the good news and some decide to follow Jesus. However, after they return home, many of these converts walk away from the faith. The challenge of helping international students — particularly those from Asia — to navigate the transition home is the focus of the book *Supracultural Gospel: Bridging East and West*. Codman-Wilson (Ph.D., Northwestern University), has served Asian international students in the United States for many years. Alex Zhou (JSD, City University of Hong Kong; LLM, Northwestern University) was an international student who participated in cross-cultural student ministry. He currently resides in Macau.

The book is organized into five parts. Part one, the Introduction, frames the problem of discipling Asian international students, and it describes the cultural struggles that the East and West have when it comes to understanding the gospel. “Both Christianity in the East and Christianity in the West have significant distortions that do not represent the core of the gospel” (3). To address the need for connection between East and West, and avoid any distortions of the gospel, the authors assert that “the supracultural gospel is that bridge. We call this bridge the supracultural gospel because it can transcend the limited cultural and
theological understandings of the gospel in both the West and East” (4).

Part two, chapters 2-4, examines the cultural barriers between the East and West. For example, the authors observe, “Western Christianity not only emphasizes a me-centered Christianity (that is being exported globally), but it also violates the biblical values of community that are central to Asian identity and to biblical teaching” (22). The section then goes on to explore Chinese, Japanese, and Thai perspectives of Christianity.

Part three, Chapters 5-11, continues with the concept of “boxes” (which form cultural barriers) and explores bridges between East and West. This is the heart of the book. “The supracultural gospel is above all cultures. It is not limited to one worldview or one set of religious constructs” (43). The section goes on to discuss concepts of salvation, sin, grace, the Holy Spirit, and the body of Christ.

Part four, Chapters 12-17, focuses on “Discipleship Essentials That Undergird Thinking Outside the Box.” It addresses the subjects of a Christian mind, lordship, scripture memorization, prayer, and spiritual warfare.

Finally, Part 5, Chapters 18-22, shares practical examples of how Christians from China and Asia have transcended the East/West boxes through gospel living. Chapter 19, entitled “A Bridging Faith,” was very helpful in understanding the overall concept of a supracultural gospel.

Supracultural Gospel is strongest when the voices of international students or believers in Asian contexts are heard through their stories. These voices comprise strong qualitative evidence supporting the authors’ suggested approach. The subject of helping Asian international students retain and flourish in their faith as they return home is very important and I appreciated the passion of the authors for this subject.

However, the book has some significant weaknesses. The term supracultural is a tricky one to use. Invoking the term supracultural, the authors want to argue for a gospel that is free of cultural constraints; but I do not think they take seriously enough the bias that we inevitably bring to the Gospel because of our cultural backgrounds. Also, I do not think the term supracultural in the title communicates the intent of the book. Instead, the subtitle “Bridging East and West” is more accurate. Throughout reading the book I struggled with “YBH?” (Yes, But How?). I often agreed with the concepts being discussed but I did not understand how the concept would be applied. There were also aspects of the book that are still too strongly rooted in the West. For example, the authors did not address deliverance from spirits, curses, or dedication to spirits (To paraphrase a seminary professor, if we struggle with discipleship, could it be because we are trying to disciple those who are not converted?). Unfortunately, conversion is also an area that needs to be explored further.
but is not mentioned.

This book is best suited for those working with Asian international students, whether in contexts abroad or in the United States. It covers a wide range of issues and will prompt the reader to think about how to best disciple these students.
CALL FOR PAPERS

KNOX Fellowship AWARDS 2024

RESEARCH IN THE PRACTICE OF EVANGELISM

The Great Commission Research Network is calling for papers to be considered for the 2024 Knox Fellowship Awards for Research in the Practice of Evangelism (one award of $1200 and two awards of $800). The goal of the competition is to conduct and disseminate research that serves to help churches fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). Winning papers will be considered for publication in the Great Commission Research Journal.

Types of Research: Since the focus is on the practice of evangelism, preference will be given to research that is not primarily focused on theology, exegesis, or philosophy. Priority will be given to research based on experiences and focused on behavior. This includes:

1. Empirical Research--Reporting quantitative research (e.g., hypothesis testing using survey data) or qualitative research (e.g., interviews to answer a research question) on a topic relevant to the practice of evangelism. Such studies could address topics such as pre-evangelism relationship building, communication skills, assessing a person’s openness to discussing gospel-related topics, approaches to sharing one’s personal testimony, evangelism through dialog, humor and evangelism, or equipping others for evangelism.

2. Case Studies--A description, analysis, and assessment of an approach to evangelism in a specific context such as a ministry setting, a virtual space, or chance encounters.

Submissions: Papers should be in APA format, consist of 3000-7000 words, and present original, unpublished research. Email submissions by May 30, 2024, to David Dunaetz, editor of the Great Commission Research Journal: ddunaetz@apu.edu For more information, click here.
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What is the Great Commission Research Network?
The Great Commission Research Network (GCRN) is a worldwide and professional association of Christian leaders whose ministry activities have been influenced by the basic and key principles of church growth as originally developed by the late Donald McGavran. Founded by renowned missiologists George G. Hunter III and C. Peter Wagner, the GCRN has expanded into an affiliation of church leaders who share research, examine case studies, dialogue with cutting-edge leaders, and network with fellow church professionals who are committed to helping local churches expand the kingdom through disciple-making.

Who Can Join the GCRN?
GCRN membership is open to all who wish a professional affiliation with colleagues in the field. The membership includes theoreticians, such as professors of evangelism and missions, and practitioners, such as pastors, denominational executives, parachurch leaders, church planters, researchers, mission leaders, and consultants. Some members specialize in domestic or mono-cultural church growth, while others are cross-culturally oriented.

Why Join the GCRN?
The GCRN provides a forum for maximum interaction among leaders, ministries, and resources on the cutting edge of Great Commission research. The annual conference of the GCRN (typically held in March each year) offers the opportunity for research updates and information on new resources and developments, as well as fellowship and encouragement from colleagues in the field of church growth. Membership in the GCRN includes a subscription to the Great Commission Research Journal and a discount for the annual conference.

How Do I Join the GCRN?
For further information on membership and the annual conference, please visit greatcommissionresearch.com.
Membership Fees

- One-year regular membership (inside or outside USA) - $59
- One-year student/senior adult membership (inside or outside USA) - $39
- Three-year regular membership (inside or outside USA) - $177
- Three-year senior membership (inside or outside USA) - $117
- Membership includes a subscription to the *Great Commission Research Journal* which is in the process of transitioning to an electronic format.
GREAT COMMISSION RESEARCH NETWORK
AWARDS

Donald A. McGavran Award for Outstanding Leadership in Great Commission Research
Normally once each year, the GCRN gives this award to an individual for exemplary scholarship, intellect, and leadership in the research and dissemination of the principles of effective disciple-making as described by Donald A. McGavran. The award recipients to date:

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John Ellas 2003 Gordon Penfold 2023
Rick Warren 2004 James Cho 2024
Charles Arn 2005

Win Arn Lifetime Achievement Award in Great Commission Research
This award is given to a person who has excelled in the field of American church growth over a long period of time. The award recipients to date:

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GREAT COMMISSION RESEARCH NETWORK
SUBMISSIONS

The Great Commission Research Journal publishes both peer-reviewed articles reporting original research and reviews of recent books relevant to evangelism and disciple making.

The scope of the journal includes research focusing on evangelism, church planting, church growth, spiritual formation, church renewal, worship, or missions. Articles come from both members and non-members of the Great Commission Research Network and are generally unsolicited submissions, which are welcomed and will be considered for peer-review. There is no charge for submission or publication.

ARTICLES

All submissions should be emailed to the editor, David R. Dunaetz at ddunaetz@apu.edu.

Peer Review Process
Only the highest quality submissions presenting original research within the scope of the journal will be chosen for publication. To ensure this, all articles will go through a peer review process. Articles deemed by the editor to have potential for publication will be sent to reviewers (members of the editorial board or other reviewers with the needed expertise) for their recommendation. Upon receiving the reviewers’ recommendations, the author will be notified that the submission was either rejected, that the submission has potential but needs to be significantly revised and resubmitted, that the submission is conditionally accepted if the noted issues are addressed, or that the submission is accepted unconditionally.

Format
Papers should be APA formatted according to the 7th edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. Submissions should include a cover page, be double-spaced in Times New Roman, and be between 3,000 and 7,000 words (approximately 10-22 pages) in .docx format. Contact the editor for exceptions to this word count.

In-text references should be in the form (Smith, 2020) or (Smith, 2020, p.100). At the end of the article should be a References section. No
footnotes should be used. Minimize the use of endnotes. If endnotes are necessary, more than two or three are strongly discouraged; rather than using Microsoft Word’s endnote tool, place them manually before the References section.

Include an abstract of approximately 100-150 words at the beginning of your text.

After the References section, include a short biography (approximately 30 words) for each author.

BOOK REVIEWS

The purpose of our book reviews is to direct the reader to books that contribute to the broader disciple making endeavors of the church. The review (500-2000 words) is to help potential readers understand how the book will contribute to their ministry, especially those in North America or which have a large cross-cultural base. The review should consist of a summary of the contents, an evaluation of the book, and a description of how the book is applicable to practitioners.

Before submitting a book review, please contact the book review editor Ken Nehrbass (knnehrbass@liberty.edu) to either propose a book to be reviewed or to ask if there is a book that needs to be reviewed.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

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