

BECOMING A HEALTHY SMALL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH:

A TONGAN PASTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

by

John (Sione) H Tu'uta

ABSTRACT

The wave of disaffiliation became a relationships rogue wave that swept through the Louisiana Annual Conference, and the Shreveport United Methodist district was no exception. Among the churches' remains were twenty-two small churches. This research study delved into these small churches and revealed unexpected findings:

1. Leadership Readiness: Two major categories of pastoral leaders served the small churches: retired and reappointed and less than part-time local pastors. There continues to be a shortage of full-time seminary-trained pastors. Throughout the research, more would be unpacked about the appointment system and its impact on the small churches.

2. Mission Drift: Amnesia disorder cannot work with the Great Commission. It turned the small church inwardly and stayed within the edges of its lawn. The community's list of pains and needs is too wide of a river, which is too far distant land to bridge from the church lawn.

3. Comparison Trap: It is a fact that no one is immune to the trap of thinking that "more is better," including pastors and members of the church. This mindset can be incredibly draining and can lead to a never-ending cycle of feeling like there's never enough.

4. Self-worth Inventory: COVID-19, made worse by the disaffiliation resulting in isolation and separation, has taken a toll on self-esteem. Small churches' tremendous potential and uniqueness have been replaced by a sense of inadequacy and a fear of closure.

The local church is still the hope of the world: The study reveals the exciting potential and untapped treasures that the small churches are. Transformation occurs by adjusting its campus to the true north, God's vision for the church known as the Great Commission. In the Methodist DNA, laypeople hold the keys to the church's health and the future health status of the United Methodist; their full engagement and leadership are insurmountable. This research serves as a rallying cry for revitalization, reminding these small churches that "where two or more are gathered," God promised to be there. Where there is pain, there God is. Where there is sickness, there God is. Where there is despair, there God is. Where there is church, there God is. God is not done with the church yet!

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A Tongan Pastor's Perspective

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by

John (Sione) H. Tu'uta

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CHAPTER 1 NATURE OF THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter 1 provides the framework for discerning why small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual remain small, continue to decline, or even close, and then suggests best practices for reversing this trend. I provide a rationale for how the research topic evolves from a spirit of discontent and personal experience supported by research. The research project overview includes the research design, purpose statement, research questions, participants, and methods of collecting and analyzing results. To support this type of project, themes of the literature review and contextual factors are identified. Further discussion of the anticipated project results establishes the significance and impact on the practice of ministry.

Personal Introduction

The Louisiana summer heat beat down on my best tie, Winnie the Pooh, as I pushed open the double doors to the Grace Community United Methodist sanctuary—a seminary intern, ready to meet his fate. However, fate seemed to be on an island vacationing. The pastor, a phantom voice on my unanswered calls, was nowhere to be found. Now, here he was on stage; his hands were dancing on Congo drums and accented to cymbals at times, and he might as well be on the river dance group, for he cannot stop dancing while playing. A thought walked across the front stage in my mind: I pondered what kind of Methodist this was and whether it was the kind of Methodist that I was looking for.

Inside, the air buzzed with a strange and different kind of energy. Dim lights clothed the stage, where a full band thrummed with anticipation. Lavish chairs instead of pews, more suited to a rock concert in a local pub, formed a semicircle around the musical epicenter. It was shocking to see so many wearing jeans or shorts, sandals or flip-flops, and suits and dresses were reserved for first-time visitors. Truly, the gathering had the energy of an exceptionally stylish mosh pit, unlike a gathering of a United Methodist church.

Another oddity struck me as I settled into the plush anonymity of the third row. At that time, Grace Community was a giant in the Louisiana Methodist Conference. It was a decade old and boasted three-weekend services, averaging eight to nine hundred attendees, and a brilliantly creative staff team that rivaled a small corporation. This was not the small-town church experience I thought fitting for a seminary intern. For eleven years, Grace Community was my ministry home, a bustling beehive of community activity with an appetite for ridiculous love and acceptance of all people.

Then, the landscape shifted. My next eight years found me in a world of churches where fifty souls filled the sanctuary instead of five hundred scattered in the sanctuary. It was a substantial difference and a humbling journey. Back at Grace Community, unhealthy seeds of self-righteousness and prejudice had sprouted within me. Small churches, I had assumed, were churches on life support, stagnant, resource suckers, and irrelevant relics of a bygone era.

Conversations with colleagues serving these smaller churches-recurring themes surfaced, which fueled the misconception of defeat, anger, and a yearning for a “bigger pond.”. They painted a picture of small churches as mud-stuck, uninspired, disconnected

fossils clinging to a fading past. Hospice care, morphine drips and the imagery grew darker, and emotions of being self-righteous grew deeper with each conversation I had with other pastors.

This internal confusing tension, this chasm between my experiences, became the spark for this journey. Voting for Methodist church closures at Annual Conference meetings felt like a betrayal, failure, shame, a grim reaper's ritual. The negative assumptions that continue to grow in me about the culture, and mindset in the small churches needed to be addressed, but there was more to the story. Indeed, there was life beyond the deathwatch. God is not done yet.

Statement of the Problem

The United Methodist denomination is organized to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” (The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016, ¶120). That is the mission of the denomination. The UMC practiced such a purpose in certain ways to demonstrate being followers of Jesus Christ. Every professing member of the UMC enters into a covenantal vow that says, “through Christian baptism, I promise to pray, to be counted on to show up (be present), to share my gifts, to serve God and others, and to witness for what God has done, is doing and will do” (“Our United Methodist Vows”). The mission is clear, and the process by which a professing member lived it out is also straightforward. However, the UMC is no different from the rest of the mainline faith communities in the long journey of membership decline.

According to Aaron Earls, senior writer at the LifeWay Research Center, in 2019, approximately 3,000 Protestant churches were established in the U.S., but 4,500 Protestant churches were closed. More Protestant churches closed than started in 2019, and an estimates based on information from 34 denominational and other groups representing 60 percent of U.S. Protestant churches (Earls).

Figure 1.1. Comparison of Opened vs Closed Churches.

Two small churches I served previously, like most small churches in the Louisiana Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, knew they were on a path toward an inevitable fate. In other words, these small churches were on a long farewell journey. The undeniable signs of this decline were few attendees in worship and fewer activities inside or outside the church where the community could participate. Furthermore, another practical sign was less money in the offering plates because fewer people attended worship and other church gatherings. Like most small churches, they

expressed their desire to see their church grow, but they have been saying this for a long time without seeing any progress.

A turnaround requires a change in direction and purpose. This six-letter word “change” has become almost taboo in the church context. Even in small churches, change is a process that takes time. According to William Willimon, “Leadership is only necessary if a group needs to go somewhere” (qtd. in Perry and Easley 163). Other options exist besides the obvious ones of change or die. The church growth movement said no one likes change except those in charge. The church health movement said everyone loves new things (change), like a new car, hairstyle, or house. Change is inevitable; how one approaches change is the key to a healthy way forward, and most pastors and lay leadership of small churches need help to see different pathways toward a different future.

In the last two decades, the Louisiana Annual Conference meetings voted to accept the closing of churches. Other faith groups bought some of these closed former United Methodist church facilities, and shortly after that, three to four months later, some of those nearly empty former UMC sanctuaries no longer had enough room for the new faith community. This is a problem, and the Louisiana Annual Conference needs to do something. Precisely for this study, the Shreveport District must do something about it, not because of the new faith community result but because that result suggested that the United Methodist folks are not doing anything or maybe doing something else. The new faith groups who bought the closed United Methodist church facilities demonstrated, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into the harvest field” (Luke 10:2, NIV).,

These concerns shaped this research of twenty small United Methodist churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference. The study delved into the narratives and lived experiences of six pastors, seven churches, fifteen lay persons, and the district superintendent of the Shreveport district. The excavation of lived experiences sought to gain insights into why the small churches arrived at their current size, started small, stayed small, declined, and even closed.

Purpose of the Project

This project aims to discern why small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remain small or continue to decline and even close and then suggests best practices for reversing this trend.

Research Questions

The research questions explore reasons why small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remain small or continue to decline and even close; the instruments used provided data that answered the following questions.

RQ #1 In the opinion of pastors, lay leaders, and district superintendents, why do small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remain small or continue to decline and even close?

Every journey has an intended destination: the global positioning system (GPS) is set to guide the journey until the final destination. This research question sought to understand how pastors, laity, and the district superintendent understood God's vision for the church.

What are the church's current practices as their outward participation in God's vision (Great Commission)?

RQ #2. In the opinion of pastors, lay leaders, and district superintendents, what practices could help reverse the trend of small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remaining small or continuing to decline and even closing?

Each church has enough history to look back and give a narrative of how they got to where they are. Indeed, numbers do not lie; however, numbers tell more about lives that have been transformed, healed, and helped in the community. This research question delved deep into the narratives of all participants' lived experiences. It sought to understand the current culture and the narratives the participants told themselves that enabled their chosen practices.

RQ #3. Moving forward, what practices, based on participant responses and the Literature Review, could help reverse the trend of small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference from remaining small or continuing to decline and even close?

This research question investigated the current practices of small United Methodist churches through the lenses of relevant information from existing literature. The narratives of lived experiences of the seven small churches in the Shreveport District were compared to and contrasted with relevant literature on healthy church practices.

Thus, steps and processes with the potential for small churches to become healthy churches should be identified.

Rationale for the project

It all started with a simple question: Why do small churches stay small? The bottom line of this project is what happens to individuals in the local churches who have no vision; they perish (Prov. 29:18a KJV). Of course, people are not physically perishing. More than half of the United Methodist Churches in the Louisiana Annual Conference have doors open, but not necessarily for God's purposes. Most pastors are ill-equipped to lead small churches. The reason is that seminaries believe they will grow any church. Most seminary training is geared toward a healthy, well-established, well-involved ministry doing life with and in the community of a growing local church. However, it seems that seminary-trained pastors who arrive at small churches and choose to maintain the status quo often end up keeping the church small. In such cases, the pastor may feel unsure about how to proceed. Additionally, when a new pastor asks to see the church's ministry plans and receives blank looks in response, it suggests that the church may not have a clear vision for its future. Unsurprisingly, many laity members in small churches do not spend much time contemplating change. Many of the laity in small churches do not dedicate time to thinking about or devising plans to fulfill the church's purpose within the community and beyond. When a seminary-trained pastor collaborates with the lay leadership of a small church that has chosen to remain small by continuing its existing practices, the path forward for both the pastor and the local church often leads to a dead end. This project initially aimed to provide both the pastor and the laity of

small churches with a starting point for a meaningful discussion about their current realities.

The second objective of this project was to attempt to reduce “burnout.” More than half of the Louisiana Annual Conference churches have fifty or fewer people attending worship. Consequently, more than half of the clergy are serving small churches. As a result, more than fifty percent of the clergy will spend more than half, if not all, of their pastoral career serving small churches. Thom S. Rainer stated, in his blog titled “Six Stages of a Dying Church,” that “somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000 churches in America will close their doors in the next year.”

The expectations between seminary-trained clergy and small church culture must find common ground to reduce the number of physical church deaths and, more importantly, spiritual deaths among both clergy and laity. The United Methodist pathways toward ordination have certain expectations due to their guardrails. The failure of seminaries to equip pastors with leadership skills often results in pastors feeling ineffective and frustrated. Conversely, the United Methodist itinerant process inherently prepares the local church to deal with each appointed pastor’s different leadership styles. Such constant adjustments have a more significant impact on the small churches’ laity, leading to feelings of fatigue and protectiveness.

In other words, the tension between the pastor’s and the laity’s expectations significantly contributes to small churches’ demise. This tension is often referred to as burnout. For me, “burnout” is an outgrowth of chronic frustration expressed in anger, which ultimately turns into a feeling of failure. This feeling of failure often leads one to question their call to ministry and consider quitting as a means of self-care.

The misconception or myth about small churches is that they are all dying. Karl Vaters coined the phrase “grasshopper myth,” which he defines as “the false impression that our Small Church ministry is less than what God says it is because we compare ourselves with others” (Grasshopper Myth, 63). More often than not, small churches’ laity speaks about their local churches’ endless problems. They see themselves not for who they are and their capacity, possibilities, and opportunities; instead, they compare themselves to the so-called large churches. This was precisely depicted in Numbers 13:32-33. As many have said before about church health, there are many large, impressive churches and unhealthy large churches. Likewise, literature claims that many small churches are lovely and influential as well as far too many unhealthy small churches. The following was how the spies described what they saw and the way it shaped their mindset:

“So, they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, ‘The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.’”

The individual's life experiences shape the spies' perspectives and influence the choices they make. Effective leadership involves the capacity to manage challenging information. Despite receiving unfavorable feedback from the frontline, the leaders remained hopeful that, through taking the right steps and with divine intervention, the community could overcome their fear.

The third objective of this project was to help both pastors and laity of small churches reclaim their identity, which can only be found in God. Both pastors and laity in small churches were at a high risk of low self-esteem. Vaters stated that pastors and

laity of small churches “were not failures if their church reached its optimal stage of maturity, then started growing in ways other than butts in seats and bucks in plates on weekend services—growing from being healthy to being healthful” (Grasshopper Myth, 181).

Leadership in small churches often spend too much emotional and mental resources on building up their self-image of scarcity. Landlock was the biggest challenge every organization in New Orleans dealt with, including the church. Since Hurricane Katrina, the economy has been recovering. Five years after Katrina, the City of New Orleans had taken significant steps forward in physical development. The excitement of economic growth meant high demand for land. As a result, new business developments were excited to hear about financially struggling businesses, including churches. This meant that closing a church was a costly choice since small church attendees argued that it was not their choice to close their church. In other words, when the keys were turned over, and the utilities were cut off, the likelihood of trying to buy that land back someday was close to nil. However, it was too emotionally, mentally, and spiritually expensive to continue limping along. Therefore, both pastors and laity of small churches had to come to a truth-telling prayer meeting where decisions could be made to turn around and go in a different direction or turn the lights off and turn the keys over.

Often, in small churches, when dealing with physical properties, it could be a deeply emotional and fragile tightrope that all involved in the decision process had to tread with much care. Lands where churches were built were often donated by families, and it was not unusual that there were stipulations about how to deal with the land if the church ceased to be a church. The unspoken reality that was never spoken of, even as the

sun set in the church's life, was shame. John Bradshaw describes the result of this identity crisis as a "toxically shamed person is divided within himself and must create a false self cover-up to hide his sense of being flawed and defective" (17). In the end, when the sun sets on any church, whether it was an economic decision or an administrative decision, the true identity of the church, which could only be found in Christ, was rarely spoken of; for that matter, it was mostly forgotten. The shame was equally true for pastors. In my conversations with pastoral colleagues, I never heard any pastor claim that they had closed a church for the last time.

The final reason for this project was simply a business decision. It was a matter of a financial decision based on the bottom line of the income and expense statement. In the case of small churches being closed, it meant that small churches were operating at a loss; however, that was not just a tiny church issue. Framing this very issue in proper churchy language is what it looked like when the church said that closing the church was a matter of stewardship. Hurricane Katrina undressed the ugly, naked truth about every United Methodist Church's financial responsibilities and/or irresponsibility in the Louisiana Conference. Churches of all sizes that did not have proper insurance faced decisions they did not want to make; in many cases, they were angry at the thought—no insurance meant closing the church. Sixteen years later, a global pandemic shook the whole world so that no one knew what to do or if there was anything to do. The church was no exception because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) prevention requirements were the opposite of how the church functioned. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, pastors and lay leaders have been constantly asking themselves how they can effectively manage and utilize the resources available to their

church. They are faced with the challenge of operating the church in a way that was not planned for, without sufficient financial resources, and with no idea of how long the situation will last. Many small churches are wondering whether they will return post-pandemic. When a gathering is chartered as a United Methodist congregation, it becomes a responsibility of the Annual Conference. In order to make decisions that align with the church's vision, pastors and laity need to understand what the church is organized to accomplish. Leaders have the task of listening to God and speaking for God, which is a prophetic duty. When there is alignment between leadership and laity, the church can become the agent of change that God intended it to be.

Definition of Key Terms

For clarity, here are definitions of terms that were used in this project:

Small congregation and small church are used interchangeably in this project.

Small congregations and small churches mean the same thing. For this project, a small church is defined as a church that is worshiping with fifty people or fewer.

A healthy church refers to an attitude and a mindset of willingness to be helpful.

For this project, a simple and limited definition of healthy means being intentionally helpful beyond the church walls.

Burnout refers to a culture of naysayers. For this project, the defeatist mentality and attitude directly reflect chronic frustration, creating an environment where mediocrity is considered an ideal.

Delimitations

Even though more than half of the United Methodist Churches in the Louisiana Conference were worshipping with fifty or fewer attendees, the conference Office of Congregational Development did not have the data needed for a conference-wide comparison of the two hundred-plus churches within the parameter of fifty or fewer attending worship. Therefore, small churches in the Shreveport District were the focus of this project.

The United Methodist organization had unique processes that shaped how the project was navigated. The church growth movement of the 1990s provided a wide range of written literature. In addition, online digital training materials dealing with strategies and leadership required to grow churches were consulted. However, this research project was specific to small Louisiana United Methodist churches with fifty or fewer attendees.

The United Methodist processes were not the unique aspects of this project. The culture (precisely the issue of race) of northern Louisiana was a vital factor considered in this project. The family system was strong, which meant a strong loyalty to family church affiliation. Unlike New Orleans, which predominantly identified with Catholic affiliation, northern Louisiana identified more with Baptist theology, which was considered.

Another unique dimension considered in this project was hurricanes' impact, people's displacement, and hurricane fatigue. This research project included the Shreveport District Superintendent, pastors, and laity of small United Methodist Churches in the Shreveport District. Like a hurricane, the recent and ongoing disaffiliation from the United Methodist denomination impacted the research more deeply

and unexpectedly. Of the seven churches that voluntarily participated in the study, only one was African American. The demographic sector for this study was the older generation, retired, with limited travel access, and dealing with physical health issues as their highest concern.

Review of Relevant Literature

Dr. Gloria Fowler, the Director of the Congregational Development of the Louisiana Annual Conference, pointed out in a conversation how more than two hundred United Methodist churches were currently worshiping with fifty or fewer attendees. The death march was not unique to United Methodists among the mainline denominations. Rainer, the President and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, author, blogger, and lecturer, spent most of his ministry resources helping churches on the topic of church revitalization, church growth, and church health. His book *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* shaped much of the project's attitude, understanding, and passion. Rainer's publications, both in books and on social media, are aimed at revitalizing dying churches and encouraging all other churches to strive toward being healthy. He covers a wide range of topics such as psychology, finance, leadership, church health, church growth, church revitalization, church multiplication (multisite), and other topics unrelated to church literature.

With the emergence of megachurches, the church growth movement and leadership development took center stage in the global church conversation and resource allocation in the local church. Books, blogs, publications, YouTube videos, and podcasts flooded the bookstore and the World Wide Web. Unlike any other time in history, the

demand for and the development of leaders were equally prioritized for the corporate arena and the church. The Global Leadership Summit (GLS), put on by Willow Creek Community Church, has been one of the world's most significant leadership training events for churches, but not limited to them. The faculty of the GLS are always global, male, and female, church leaders and business leaders, and political leaders and teachers. Most, if not all, of the GLS faculties have written books on leaders and leadership. Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, Andy Stanley, Craig Groeschel, Jim Collins, Patrick Lencioni, John C. Maxwell, Bishop T.D. Jakes, Horst Schulze, Simon Sinek, and countless others have written and spoken extensively on leadership development. What these authors and trainers have in common is that they lead large, successful organizations.

Vaters' work is between *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* by Rainer and leadership successes of megachurches. His passion and focus are about resetting the mindset of both pastors and laity of small churches that being small does not mean dying. Foundational to this project is literature that deals specifically with God's vision for the church. The long-term hope of this project would be to create a safe and constructive space for pastors and laity to start a new march in a new direction.

The foundation of this study began with the biblical narratives and theological interpretation of God's vision for the church. The plumb line in which everything in and through the church is in alignment with God's vision for the church is what Matthew recorded in chapter 28:18-20. The research delved deeper into the culture and mindset of the small churches through biblical and theological lenses, drawing from the existing relevant literature.

Research Methodology

This research project relied on qualitative research methods to discern reasons why small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remain small or continue to decline and even close. It then suggests best practices for reversing this trend. Critical to this research project were online surveys and unstructured interviews. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, Zoom conferences and phone calls became the preferred method for most of this research.

After the 2023 special conference regarding disaffiliation, churches from the Shreveport district were among the ninety-five disaffiliated churches. Twenty-two small churches from the Shreveport District fit the parameters defined for this study, and all were invited to participate. Seeking the district superintendent's help to identify the qualified small churches not only followed the proper channels of authority prescribed by the United Methodist organizational structure but also enabled the district superintendent to share, advise, or limit any channels that did not fit the study. There were face-to-face interviews (via Zoom), phone calls, and emails with the Shreveport district superintendent, pastors, and laity who participated in the study.

Of the twenty-two churches, seven voluntarily participated in this study. This is a pre-intervention qualitative study. The research employed an online survey through the SurveyMonkey platform. Unstructured interviews were conducted following the survey for clarification purposes. SurveyMonkey counted, collected, and analyzed results from online surveys and interviews with the pastors, laity, and district superintendent. The data analysis was conducted to discern why small churches in the Shreveport District stay the same, decline, or even close, and what could help reverse the unhealthy trend.

Throughout this research, notes were carefully taken on how pastors, lay leaders, district-level leaders, and laypersons reacted mentally, emotionally, and spiritually to the vision for the church. All written notes, audio, and video recordings were kept in a locked safety box only accessible to me.

Type of Research

This pre-intervention qualitative research project utilized mixed methods. The qualitative research aimed to discern why small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remain small or continue to decline and even close. SurveyMonkey.com is an online platform which was used to send surveys to sixty-five laity from the twenty-two small churches, seventeen pastors serving those twenty-two small churches, and the Shreveport district superintendent.

The district superintendent's office provided the list of churches upon approval of the request for the research. The survey provided the research with narratives of the participants' lived experiences. The data collected were sorted using an alpha-numerical coding system.

These instruments were used for this project, based on a qualitative phenomenological research approach that framed the current health realities of small churches in the Shreveport District. When pastors and laity of small churches wanted to march in a different direction, they started at the foundation of this project. This pre-intervention research engaged the narratives of the lived experiences of laity, pastors, and even the district superintendent. The excavation process of the lived experiences aimed to discern reasons for why small churches in the Shreveport District are the sizes they are.

The surveys and interviews were based on literature reviews from books and online resources. Additional data were collected in a follow-up phone interview with pastors and laity from the seven churches.

Participants

Unless pastors and laity of small United Methodist Churches had developed and owned a crystal-clear vision for the church, the church's health at that time would have continued into a very predictable future. The churches in the Shreveport District were chosen for this research project based on consultation with the Shreveport district superintendent. Prior to the ongoing disaffiliation season the United Methodist denomination is dealing with, there were more than seventy small churches in the Shreveport District, and following the 2023 Louisiana United Methodist Annual Conference, among the remaining churches were twenty-two small United Methodist churches that fit the required parameters of this study.

Another parameter for the research project was pastors serving churches with fifty or fewer worshippers at that time. The author John C. Maxwell said that "everything rises and falls on leadership" (The 21 Irrefutable Laws, 246). The Shreveport district superintendent, the pastor of pastors of the Shreveport United Methodist District, was interviewed, adding some unique conference leadership perspectives to this research project. Included in the study were sixty-five laity from the twenty-two small churches and seventeen pastors serving those twenty-two churches.

The twenty-two churches selected for this research project were chosen based on two criteria: they had to be a United Methodist Church and had fifty or fewer attending

worship at that time. The United Methodist Church has some unique ways, and it was considered. The organizational structure and the power attached, such as the Book of Discipline, to what makes it uniquely United Methodist, as one of the biggest global organizations, defined some of the data collection for the project. Despite the uniqueness of each church's story, this qualitative research project sought to identify factors that shaped how pastors, laity, and even Louisiana Conference level leadership decisions paved the road where the small churches in the Shreveport District traveled to get to where they are now.

The demographics in the study were of older generations which had 60 percent male and 40 percent female participants, 98 percent white participants, 2 percent minority, and most were retirees.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used in this research study:

1. Survey-The researcher-designed online survey questionnaires.

SurveyMonkey.com platform hosted the online surveys for the laity (Appendix C), pastors (Appendix B), and district superintendent (Appendix D).

2. Interview-a) Three days before meeting with the Shreveport district superintendent for an unstructured interview, a list of questions (Appendix D) was emailed to him for his information and preparation. b) Unstructured phone calls, Zoom, and Facetime interviews were conducted with laity and pastors for clarification purposes.

Data Collection

The United Methodist Church had a well-defined process by which administrative decisions were handled. This qualitative research study was specific to the laity, the district superintendent, and pastors of small United Methodist churches in the Shreveport District, and it used the SurveyMonkey.com platform to send, collect, and analyze the data. Following the online survey questionnaires, unstructured interviews were conducted with the Shreveport district superintendent, pastors, and laity.

Digital voice and video recording instruments were used to capture interviews that produced narrative transcripts for qualitative analysis. Waivers were administered before all interviews as part of the interview protocols, which included the following: a written explanation of the purpose of this research, a list of questions/topics, time/date, and demographics. Digital technologies such as phone calls and video phone calls like Facetime, Zoom, and Facebook video calls were used to capture the non-verbal cues, expressions, and reactions, which helped analyze the interview phase of the data collection. Data were collected from the online survey questionnaires and unstructured interviews with pastors, laity, and the Shreveport district superintendent in two months.

Out of the twenty-two small churches in the Shreveport district, seven voluntarily participated in the study. Fifteen laypersons from these seven churches volunteered to participate in the study. The district superintendent and six out of the fifteen pastors who serve the twenty-two churches completed the survey and participated in some unstructured follow-up interviews. SurveyMonkey collected and analyzed data, and then I sorted all the results according to the research questions. For security and the high priority of the safety of the participants, all personally identifiable information was

redacted. Every name was replaced with an alpha-numerical code. All written, audio and video records were locked in a safety deposit box accessible only to me. On June 1, 2024, every written, audio, or video document will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

In her presentation on the Fundamentals of Qualitative Research Methods: Data Analysis, published by the Yale University YouTube channel, Dr. Leslie Curry said, “Qualitative data analysis is an iterative process of individual and group-level review and interpretation.” Also, she explained how critical it was to embed the research questions in the coding structure in the direction of the stated problem so that the study is on task toward the intended outcome. For this research study, unstructured interview transcripts and questionnaires were read multiple times and categorized according to patterns, theories, and themes based on qualitative data collected.

Generalizability

According to Rainer, between 100 to 200 churches close each week (“Hope for Dying Churches”). Although this research project was specifically about the small United Methodist Churches like Metairie UMC and Boynton UMC in the New Orleans District, those two churches represented more than half of all United Methodist Churches in Louisiana. What was happening in Metairie and Boynton churches was happening to the other two hundred United Methodist churches; they were all choosing to die. The particulars of the research were a United Methodist church that was worshipping with fifty or fewer. Of course, churches arrived at worshipping with fifty or fewer people in attendance from both directions (decline and incline); however, this research project

focused on declining trends. Despite the full range of literature reviews on leadership and the diversity of strategies for turning around a dying organization, this research focused on vision as an onramp to the current health of the church. This research project transcended every culture, geography, ethnicity, and generation.

This research study was critical to the health and longevity of pastors and small churches' laity. Vaters said dying small churches' prognosis was a "lifetime of wandering, whining and placing blame, and it is contagious" (63). This research provided an antidote—having a vision meant moving forward with purpose and no longer wandering and whining.

Project Overview

This pre-intervention qualitative study focuses on the small United Methodist churches nestled within the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference. The research study is structured across five pivotal chapters, each contributing to a better understanding of the dynamics at work within these congregations. The qualitative research study commences with Chapter 1, where the groundwork for the study is laid, clarifying its purpose, and providing essential context. Chapter 2 delves into the biblical and theological underpinnings, drawing upon relevant literature reviews to establish a strong framework enriched by insights from leadership theories, church health studies, and the peculiar dynamics of small congregations.

In Chapter 3, the research methodology is carefully structured, outlining a timeline and detailing the steps necessary for data collection and analysis. Human elements take center stage in Chapter 4, as I delves into the cultural, mindset, and structural aspects shaping these churches, all the while keeping a keen eye on aligning

with God's vision for the church. Finally, Chapter 5 unveils my discoveries, presenting the findings gleaned from the lived narrative of this qualitative research study. The hope of this research is to provide useful information to pastors and laypersons to help them make informed decisions and promote healthy growth in small congregations. Through this comprehensive study, the authors aspire to illuminate small churches' unique challenges and opportunities, thereby enriching the tapestry of faith communities.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter 2 delves into the unique life of small churches, exploring the cultural and mindset factors that contribute to the practices of smallness within these congregations. This qualitative pre-intervention research seeks insights into the lived experiences that led to the decline and closure of churches; this will be addressed in Chapters 3 and 4. This chapter lays the biblical foundation and theological interpretation of God's vision for the church.

The research draws on existing relevant literature to examine the practices often hindering small churches from fulfilling God's vision for the church, the Great Commission. By contrasting these counter-productive practices with behaviors that lead to a healthy small church, the chapter wove the biblical and theological interpretation with existing relevant literature to address what is happening in the small church. This analysis provided valuable insights into how small churches can overcome internal limitations and embrace their full potential for growth and impact, which will be unpacked more extensively in the following chapters.

A working definition of vision

Vision: For this project, the church's vision answers WHY the church exists. Like any effective business or organization, the church aims to address a need or a challenge. Therefore, the church needs to know its purpose and the needs it wants to fulfill. This knowledge helps to shape the church's goals, culture, values, and standards in everything it does.

Turnaround: As defined in Chapter 1, for this project, A turnaround means more than just a change in a physical location; it represents a holistic shift in focus. Instead of emphasizing the importance of coming to and staying within the church building, the focus shifts to going out and engaging with the community. When people go out into the community, resources follow, attitudes adjust, mindsets change, and new processes develop.

Biblical Foundations

The Purpose Driven Life, a devotional book by Rick Warren, the founder of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, became a best seller on the Wall Street Journal and Publishers Weekly lists, with more than thirty million copies sold by 2007. Warren asserted that “the most basic question everyone faces in life is, What on earth am I here for?” (19). This question encourages humanity to revisit the beginning of the creation story. A story of a relational God who called nothingness into being as a visible and outward expression of an inward reality only known to God.

Old Testament

The creation story begins with the storyteller setting the hearer in a starting place by saying, “In the beginning” (Gen. 1:1). It establishes a kairos where the Creator and the creations are in one accord. As the story unfolds, it reveals that Community is at the heart of the triune God. I would be so bold to say the Creator God did not have to create, but he did. The Creator God displayed what only dwells in the ridiculously creative mind of God and revealed to humanity reasons that point to the why. In 1985, Natalie A. Sleeth penned these words down in a hymn entitled “The Hymn of Promise” as she reflected on the depth of the glorious mystery of the Creator’s creativeness:

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
 In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
 In the cold and snow of winter there is a spring that waits to be,
 Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see! (Bennett)

The lyrics above expressed the profound vulnerability in the relationship between the Creator and his creation. The knowledge, known only to the Creator, was eventually revealed in due time, at the precise moment, showing what had been at work but unseen by the naked eye. The determination that creations endured was a process that the Creator knew had to be that way in order for the fullness of hope to be fully realized.

All of the creations contained within it, the glorious mysteries of God's creativities, were in total obedience to the visions the Creator created. What follows establishes the reason for the beginning saying, "God created heavens and earth." The unfolding of the Creator's expressions of his creativeness, among which humans were created in the likeness of God (Gen. 1:26), answered the question Warren asked as the premise of his best-seller book by the title "Why am I here?" The Creator God created crawling things, things with wings in the air, things that walk on the surface of the plains, lights, darkness, waters, dry land, above all his likeness-the first Adam, and all with purpose in mind. The storyteller told of a God by whom all things were created and for his purposes. The whole creation's longing to know its meaning did not start with Warren. However, Warren's successful book was not accidental. He uncovered what happened with creations when they disconnected from their created purpose. A deep hunger and sense of looseness, and to that end, all of creation turns into the practice of self-preservation instead of being the expressions of the Creator's revelation in this space and time. Neither Genesis Chapter 1 nor Chapter 2 said of the Creator God, in his

blessings after the completion of each creation, so now for the entirety of your existing in this space and time, live for yourself. Instead, Walter Brueggemann said that “God and his creation are bound together by the powerful, gracious movement of God towards that creation. The binding between the Creator and creation is irreversible. God has decided it. The connection cannot be nullified” (23-24). The very act of creation establishes a powerful relationship and covenantal bond between God and everything he spoke into existence. This covenantal relationship, initiated by God's gracious movement toward creation, is irrevocable and irreversible. Humanity is not an afterthought; instead, humanity is chosen to exist in this divinely ordained relationship. Humanity's purpose lies in living in obedience to God, a response to the immense love and power that binds all creation to the Creator.

All by God for God

Since it was the Creator God who initiated this deep irreversible relationship that Brueggemann spoke of, God blessed Adam with a promise of responsibility, a vision for his existence, “You (Adam) are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Gen. 2:16-17). The Creator God now established the responsibility of freedom to choose obedience over self-desire. Notice how the likeness of God (created man) has a high EQ (emotional intelligence) which functions in and out of the mindset of obedience. “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen. 2:25). Evidently, the blessing of obedience is freedom without shame and life without death.

Though shameless for a little while, both Adam and Eve decided to choose disobedience over obedience. “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (Gen. 3:6). They ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and God the Creator was not happy with their choices. Adam and Eve’s choice earned them a way out of God’s vision for their life and into the promise of death (Gen. 2:17). Theologians and biblical scholars term this event, “the fall.” In other words, what was once a complete relationship was now a broken relationship between the Creator God and his creation.

In Genesis 6, humanity learned of the Creator God coming to his wits’ end with what once was pronounced good. Since “the fall,” creation grew more out of line with God and God’s vision. “God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways” (Gen. 6:12). Because of corruption, the Creator God reset the vision for all of creation. The first of its kind was told in Genesis: for forty days, the flood kept coming upon the earth and kept on for a hundred and fifty days (Gen. 7:24). Resetting the vision for the Creator God meant letting go of what was and starting something new. The Creator God and his creations embarked on another journey together. Noah brought the best available animals and healthiest birds to the altar as a burnt offering to God. In response, God made a promise to protect his creation. More than just seeing and pronouncing that it was good and handing the caring responsibilities over to humanity, God volunteered to be a part of the nursery worker team (Gen. 8:20-22). The story of Noah's ark and the aftermath in Genesis 8 paints a beautiful picture of God's ongoing commitment to what he created. Noah, responding as a faithful steward,

offers the best he has of the healthiest animals and birds as a sacrifice. This act of obedience is met in return with a powerful response from God.

Here is the picture in motion of God being part of the "nursery worker team." It goes deeper than just creating something good and then stepping back, not this God. Imagine a nursery worker who does not just watch over the children but is fully committed to their well-being, ensures their safety, and nurtures their growth. In Genesis 8:20-22, humanity is reminded again of this very characteristic of God. Following Noah's offering, God reclaimed the goodness of creation; God initiated a covenant, a promise never again to destroy the earth with a flood. This covenant signifies God's commitment to rescue and restore his creation, much like a fully committed nursery worker. It is a promise that extends to all of creation.

In Genesis 12, Abram is being introduced to the reader. The Creator God gave him a vision for his life that would happen in a particular place known as "I will show you." God told Abram to "go" rings a foreshadowing sound of the Great Commission given to the New Testament church (Matt. 28:19). The result of obedience was a great nation, a great name, and a continued blessing. An added benefit of being obedient was God's promise to match the blessing, and then Abram was named as the vessel of blessing for all people on earth (Gen. 12:1-3). The universality of God's vision for the whole creation was to send blessings for all people, anchored in God's promise to Abram saying, "all people on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). While Abram's personal life seemed to get worse with his wife not being able to conceive, unlike his maidservant Hagar, God gave him a vision (Gen. 16:2). For Abram, there were twofold dimensions to God's vision, which were inward possibilities and outward promises. The

inward possibilities for Abram were a vision of children upon children of great nations, and the outward promise of being the one who would deliver God's blessings upon God's creation. God's vision for Abram was both personal and universal in nature. As it was for Abram, God's vision for the church is both personal and universal in truth and life. God transitioned from giving blessings directly, as was done with Adam and Eve and then Noah and the animals, to a broader circle of messed-up people as vessels of blessings delivering pathways to all people. The ongoing relationships of the Creator God with his creations developed a pattern where God defined a vision for his people while they were in good standing relationally, and then God's people decided to leave God and do their own thing. Still, God refused to give up on his messed-up chosen people, thus continuing to seize new opportunities, and launching an ongoing rescue mission for all people. God's vision for their lives and all of those in whom they have been blessed to be a blessing were yet to be fulfilled.

God comes in unexpected ways; Moses, in a fog of guilt and terrible fear, met God via a talking bush on fire in the middle of nowhere. Lost and disillusioned, Moses stumbled upon a talking burning bush that defied logic, a fiery sermon roaring in the desert's silence. Through this heated dialogue, God did not just speak; he commissioned a vision for Moses' life. God dictated the coordinates into Moses's GPS (God Positioning System) that would forever track Moses's and his descendant's travel and alter history.

⁷The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of

Egypt.”¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”¹² And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you worship God on this mountain.” (Exod. 3:7-12)

Even when God’s vision was clear, it did not always mean full acceptance without questions or further conversations. The author Moshe Greenberg said it best, “Those who are brought close to God retain their integrity even in moments of closest contact. They are not merely passive recipients, but active, even opposing respondents” (96). Again, God continued to give hope and new life to his people. The words are being used to signal how close the Creator God’s proximity is to his creations, revealing the intentional relationships God had in mind. God responded to the cries of God’s people displayed in the following actionable words: “I have seen, I have heard, I am concerned about their suffering. So, I have come down to rescue them by sending you (Moses).” In the end, when the people are out of Egypt and in their promised land – God says, “you worship God on this mountain” (Exod. 3). The ultimate vision for people freed from bondage and slavery was to worship God.

The shift in God’s personal relationship with his people became more evident. From a directional relationship with Eve and Adam (free to eat any...but you must not eat from ... – Genesis 2) to a covenantal relationship with Moses and his elected people (you will be my people and I will be your God – Exod.6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 30:22; Ezek. 36:28). Lawrence Boadt described this covenant in terms of the Hebrew word *berit*, which is used most often to express the idea of covenant, and which originally meant a “shackle” or “chain,” but \came to be any form of binding agreement (174):

Berit is a term so rich it captures the heart of Israel’s religious beliefs: (1) they are bound to an unbreakable covenant-union with their God; (2) he has made known his love and his mercy to them; (3) he has given them commandments to guide

their daily life; (4) they owe him worship, fidelity and obedience; (5) they are marked by the sign of that covenant-bond. The covenant created their unity of the nation Israel, based not on blood relationship but on submission to the divine will and the confession that he alone is God. (Boadt 175)

The covenant initiated by God, specifically Boadt's number 4, stated God's vision for his relationship with his "elected" Israel as his vessel for blessings; all the nations anchor on the elected response to God in worship. God's appointment of Israel, in whom all other nations shall be blessed, has a missional purpose. Throughout the history of God's relationship with his elected Israel, the people of Israel turned the vision of being the blessing to other nations into being the chosen blessed one, totally the essence of being ethnocentric. Even being elected by God, the Israelites behaved just as Eve and Adam did, thinking of self and living a life of self-preservation instead of being God's revelation in the world. God's declaration of Israel as his chosen people was not an exclusive honor but an inclusive duty to be the vessel in which God blessed all people on earth. Paul unpacked the spirit of God's intention for Israel this way:

"not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. In other words, it is not the children of physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (Rom. 9:6-8).

God's call had no limit regarding race or ethnicity; it was open to all who surrendered and obeyed. The invitation for humanity to be the vessels of blessings to all the world remained until the end of the ages. It was not just a call for self-preservation; it was a call to action as agents of God's hope for the redemption and restoration of the falling world.

God on the Move

As with Moses, the Creator God's dwelling among his people is not to be confined to a geographical location. Moses and God's chosen people were

technologically way ahead of their time, which was a highly sophisticated and reliable GPS (God's Positioning System) to guide them on their journey, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exod. 13). In the covenant God made with Moses and his chosen people, God moved into the neighborhood and dwelled among his people. God expressed his faithfulness to his promises (Exod. 3:8) through his provision of manna (Exod. 16) and water (Exod. 17:6), and indeed his protection as he (God) looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion (Exod. 14:24). God dwelled among his chosen people on the move toward the promised land of freedom and new beginning which was a new direction on their life journey. Even with God the I AM (Exod. 3:14) among them, the enemy, Pharaoh's army, still chased them. The responsibility of being the protector meant that God moved from the front to the back and stood between his chosen people and their enemy. God's vision for his chosen people to have a life and a future meant he (God) had to fight against their enemies sometimes (Exod. 14:19). God demonstrated the intentionality of being in close proximity to the problem; it is a choice, not an accident.

God got off the Script

God moved off the script as the chosen people of Israel puffed out their chests, inflated their assumptions of being the favorite, and claimed the exclusivity of God's favors upon them. Manna no longer just fell from the sky; no designated birds fetched food on God's command. The prophet Elijah the Tishbite, heard God's voice and obeyed. God showed up through the seasons of great prophets, including the Tishbite. During Elijah's ministry, there was great famine in the land, and there were many hungry

Jewish women, and yet the prophet gave only to a Gentile pagan woman, a widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17). God's vision through Elijah was outside of the chosen people's expectations.

The number of people or their names with different types of illnesses in the time of the prophet Elisha were unknown; however, the chosen people of God watched and heard about the self-appointment God went off script again. Consider Solomon's observation of the cycle of life in Ecclesiastes 3, "there is a time for every activity under heaven." Solomon did not mention a time to be ill and a time to heal; however, it was and still is a part of our life cycle. In Elisha's time, indeed, many Jewish men, women, and children suffered from different types of illnesses, including leprosy. God's prophet healed none of them; the only one he healed was a Syrian army officer—Naaman was his name (2 Kings 5:1-15). God's appointment of Israel was not an exclusive blessing but an inclusive responsibility of being the deliverer of blessings to all people. God went off script again.

The prevalent attitude of entitlement, often discussed today, has ancient roots. The Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, tells the story of the Israelites who repeatedly forgot the core principle of their existence. God, on his own initiative, chose them as his people, establishing a covenant with their ancestors. The Israelites, however (especially after experiencing God's favor), would readily acknowledge this special relationship. However, their history reveals a recurring struggle with remembering their core obligations within this covenant. They like God as long as God does what they constantly complain about. Elisha's servant, Gehazi, exemplifies the pitfalls of entitlement. Witnessing Elisha's prophetic power seems to have warped

Gehazi's thinking. He believed he deserved the same rewards as the prophet, attempting to exploit the situation for personal gain. However, this greed ultimately led to his downfall, as he contracted leprosy, a stark reminder of the consequences of such behavior (2 King 5:1-15).

God's vision for his chosen people got muddy when the Israelites assumed they had a monopoly on God. However, God continued to move his agenda forward with or without the chosen adhering to their covenant. The failure of the Israelites to adhere to the covenant meant pain and suffering. God could have picked another nation as his chosen people and then moved on with a new agenda. However, God's vision for his chosen people, which he promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was yet to be fulfilled (Deut. 6:10). God could not void his covenant no matter how angry he was at Horeb. The Lord was so angry he could have destroyed his chosen, but he did not (Deut. 9:8). In a moment of a one-on-one therapy session with Moses, God asked to be left alone with his burning anger (Exod. 32:10-11). Still bound to the unfulfilled covenant, the next best option instead of toasting them all, God made them wander in the wilderness for forty years until an entire generation of evildoers was gone (Num. 32:13). Even in times of deep waves of anger, God continued to dwell among his chosen. God's vision of "a universe made new, whole, and fresh by a God who loves it inordinately and will not rest until that which is upside down is turned right side up until the justice, righteousness, and *shalom* of God cover the earth as the water cover the sea" (Tisdale, 37).

Sweeping through the Old Testament stories, God's vision of a new life, hope, and future for his chosen people requires different and unexpected choices from within the Israelites' community. The unfolding of God's vision in the leadership roles engaged

men like seventy-five-year-old Abram who was asked and obeyed, leaving Harran for a place known as I will show you (Gen. 12:1-4). God's vision required an adopted baby named Moses to move it forward (Exod. 2:1-4). God's vision of a future for his chosen people requires a military leader whose military training and experiences took place on his father's farm (1 Samuel 17:34). A military leader who will not stand by while outsiders disrespect his God; thus, it was a call to war upon the power of his God. As a young man, David obeyed his father to be a journalist and grocery delivery boy, leading him right into God's vision for his particular life and the life of God's chosen people (17-19). God's grand imagination unfolds through a composition of many notes, times, rests, and from an orchestra of many instruments. It requires the obedience and faithfulness of all people, such as kings and prophets, young and old, men and women. Each life, regardless of age, gender, or social standing, plays a vital role in bringing God's vision to fruition.

Many struggles took place from the Garden of Eden to the Promised Land. Arriving at the Promised Land was not the completion of God's binding covenant with this chosen people. Since the fall, humanity has struggled to be faithful to the vision God made with them. Being faithful to an unseen preferred future is constantly overwritten by the presumed desire of the now. Around 445 BC, God's vision arrested Nehemiah, who had the leadership task of rebuilding the wall around the city of Jerusalem, which had been in ruins for a long time (Neh. 2:1-10). The wall of Jerusalem was in ruins, and the people who lived there, whether they had come back from exile or had stayed all along, had no desire to rebuild it. They felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the task and lacked the vision to see beyond their circumstances. However, when God planted his dream in

someone's heart and mind, and when that person embraced God's call, it was a powerful thing, for nothing in all creation can compare to the Creator. One mind and heart accepted the blueprint for the project, and he went to work:

¹⁶The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders—the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration. ¹⁷But now I said to them, “You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!” ¹⁸Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king. They replied at once, “Yes, let’s rebuild the wall!” So they began the good work.¹⁹But when Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab heard of our plan, they scoffed contemptuously. “What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” they asked.²⁰I replied, “The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall. But you have no share, legal right, or historic claim in Jerusalem. (Neh. 2:16-20)

Like a frog slowly brought to a boil, the Israelites had grown accustomed to their problems over time. They accepted the broken wall and made it a routine aspect of their lives, causing them to turn a blind eye to it. Thus, the Israelites chose denial, refusing to see the need for change. For the Jews living in Jerusalem, Nehemiah came into the city to point out they had been living with a problem, which was a broken wall. With God’s help, Nehemiah presented an obvious solution to the identified problem and said let us (the community) build the wall. The project’s magnitude requires a convincing reason; for Nehemiah, it was personal. He inspired them with these deep-in-the-heart words, “Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace” (v.17). Nehemiah was no stranger to naysayers and mockers, and there were plenty who opposed him during the rebuilding of the wall.

God’s vision was an inclusive promise requiring a strong, intelligent, beautiful woman in this narrative. Dr. David Ward says, “Valuing diversity in preaching requires

more than a surface commitment to inclusion. Deeply held values about good and bad often have to be changed and recognized as more limited than we believe.” Queen Esther stood in the face of certain death of God’s chosen people and asked King Ahasuerus to find favor in her beauty, which he did and so granted Esther and her people life (Esth. 8:1-8). Within God’s vision expressed in his covenant with his chosen people was a cost which was a call to sacrifice their self-preferences for a higher calling. Consistently from the very beginning of the story of Creation, sacrifice meant life, not death. Beginning with Eve and Adam, they were given an opportunity to sacrifice their personal desire in exchange for life. In Esther chapter 4, Mordecai tells Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace, you will escape any more than all the other Jews” (4:13). In Esther 8:6, Carol M. Bechtel points out how Esther does not even bother to argue for her own life, instead, her focus is entirely on the fate of her people (71).

Esther's position as a foreigner, specifically a Jew living in exile, challenges the traditional understanding of whom God favors. She was not a prominent leader, a prophet, or a descendant of royalty; she was a woman in a man’s world. Yet, Esther, a female, was chosen by God to lead a rescue operation to save the Jewish people. This shatters any notion of favoritism based on ethnicity, power status, or social standing. God's rescue plan for his people, and by extension humanity, extends beyond a select group. He empowers the seemingly ordinary to achieve extraordinary things.

In addition, Esther's success hinges on her courage and intelligence, not her physical strength or military might; however, her beauty worked its divine power. She does not lead armies, offer money, or wield political power directly. Instead, she relies on her wit, charm, and strategic maneuvering within the Persian court. This highlights

that God's creatives fully engage all the diverse gifts and talents possessed by his people. He does not require brute force or specific backgrounds; He uses each individual's unique strengths to accomplish his will. He uses the weak to shame the strong.

Moreover, the outcome of Esther's rescue mission saves not just the Jewish people but also the broader Persian society. Exposing the villainous Haman's plot, she turns a certain death into a new life, fostering peace within the empire. This act of courage and selflessness demonstrates the ultimate dream of God's vision of a world where all people, regardless of origin or belief, can live together in safety and harmony. Esther's story becomes a demonstration of ridiculous hope, reminding us that God's love and protection extend to all of creation.

New Testament

The following New Testament stories are not all-inclusive of the New Testament narratives. The following images express how God's vision for his creation was being accomplished. Those who accepted Jesus' invitation became witnesses to what happened to them and maybe more so to what happened through them.

The Gospel of John began with the creation story. It started with a moment in time when God declared the vision for all of creation.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

Jesus was in the beginning with a vision for the whole creation, which is a vision of life, not death. What became in this space and time was created by God for God.

Gerard Sloyan points out how “the Word’s coming as Jesus is important in our regard, which the purpose was to come to his home place and his people” (14). From the days of the prophets with the Abrahamic covenant, Jesus carried on with the vision of delivering blessings of hope and new life to all people. Jesus claimed to all of creation that “without him, nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3). Imagine a bridge, a place where the divine and human meet. This bridge materialized in Mary, a young woman of Israel known for her beauty and righteousness. Favored by God, she received a breathtaking calling to become the vessel for the arrival of Jesus, the Son of God. This was not just a pregnancy; it was a holy intersection, where heaven embraced earth within the very being of Mary (Luke 1:30). The totality of being obedient to God was contained within a dangerously gracious sacrifice. Mary willingly accepted God’s vision for her life. Mary said yes to being pregnant before marriage in the face of being outcast, ridiculed, disowned, or, at worst, stoned to death. The Law of Moses required capital punishment regarding such events (Deut. 22:23-27). The author, M. Eugene Boring, points out that “in Matthew’s time, this had been mitigated by rabbinic practice, but the penalty was still severe and humiliating” (134). In the face of such cultural, political, and societal realities, like Mary, those who heed God’s blessed visions are always willing to give it all to God’s will. In Mary’s words, “I am the Lord’s servant...may your word to me be fulfilled” (Luke 1:38). While online dating algorithms might prioritize superficial matches, God's choice of Mary reminds God’s children that true fulfillment comes from a deeper connection. He saw in Mary the perfect vessel for Jesus, recognizing not just outward qualities but her inner strength, purity, and faith.

When God's vision is caught, everything changes. All that is tied to Mary changes her future, her soon-to-be husband, and her old-age cousin Elizabeth. Whatever brilliant ideas Joseph might have had for his future, God stepped in and overwrote the agenda for his life forward. Accepting God's vision means accepting change, and what fuels change is hope. Change can be challenging, but God knows that, so God got personal with Joseph while sleeping. "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20). Again, God's creative communication comes in unconventional ways. The angel defined the problem as Mary being with a child. The angel offered the solution to the problem: Joseph, take Mary home as your wife. Joseph, you should do this. Mary being pregnant is the work of the Holy Spirit. Matthew describes Joseph's character as that of *dikaïos*, meaning "righteous or just." Boring said, "in Matthew's setting, to be *dikaïos* means to live by the law, God's revealed will. Joseph, contrary to the behavior expected of one who is *dikaïos*, had already decided not to go by the letter of the law but chose out of consideration for Mary to divorce her quietly" (134). The angel must have done an angelic job casting the vision. Joseph's idea of how to deal with his marriage was final before he went to bed. It seemed that while Joseph slept, brain and heart transplants took place. When he woke up, he enacted a new vision that had more to do with Mary instead of his own desire and reputation. The direction of God's vision does point outwardly (others) instead of inwardly (us) one hundred percent of the time.

The danger of accepting a vision

Age and experience are not deal-breakers: Jesus' family issues.

Mary and Joseph were among the crowd who made the annual journey to Jerusalem for the Festival of Passover (Luke 2). Remembering God's faithfulness in promising to deliver his chosen people from slavery to freedom, the Festival of Passover offered the opportunity to remember their story, which is rooted in God's faithfulness (Exod. 12). The gravitational pull for Jesus toward accomplishing his vision meant that he set his sights on restoring creation to the right relationship with the Creator God. At age twelve, instead of returning home with his family, Jesus stayed behind at the temple without his mother's or father's approval (Luke 2:41-52). Even with a clear vision for his life, Jesus faced troubles that pushed and pulled at his commitment to complete the vision. The devil manufactured a powerful and attractive plan to test how committed Jesus was, and Jesus sent him off defeated (Matt. 4:1-11). Despite his humanity suffering physical pains, Jesus refused to give in to anything less than obedience to his father. Hello David, a small and weak Goliath thought (1 Sam. 17:43). God's calling in the case of David suggested that age and experience were not deal breakers. Like David, Joseph had no professional degrees in dream analysis, interpretation, or application and yet got the job (Gen. 37:2, 41:1, 46). The God who took a risk on a young David did the same with young Joseph, affirming that age and experience were not prerequisites for God's commissions.

Fishermen - the family business

A group of professional fishermen were doing what they knew best: fishing. Jesus walked by and offered them an invitation to follow him. Matthew 4:18-22 and Mark 1:16-20 both said those fishermen "at once left their nets and father" and followed

Jesus. “Come, follow me” (v.17) is a dangerous invitation for those who accept the call, which could mean leaving the way life has been for just an invitation. Jesus had a much deeper vision for those fishermen to catch people, not just fish. Neither gospel told us anything about the fishermen’s experiences of fishing for people, which left me to wonder about the mental state of these professional fishermen. Talking about walking off the job, these fishermen running off the job does not seem very spiritual (in the spirit of discernment) and, worst of all, in a nutshell, a seemingly irresponsible decision (leaving their father and the family business). The fishermen had lost their livelihood, their social status, their means of provision and protection for their families, and their future as professional fishermen. Their reputation hinged on their soon-to-be career as fishers of men. The seemingly irresponsible choices of leaving their father and running off following a passer-by, who said nothing more than, “come follow me, and I will send you out to do something you know nothing about” (v.17) is a sign of how dangerous it can be when persons are inspired by a vision greater than themselves.

Lazarus – family friend

Unlike those fishermen, Jesus had a very intimate knowledge of and a personal relationship with this family of two sisters who were distraught by the death of their brother. They were close friends of Jesus. They knew Jesus, shared meals, and provided for him when he was in town. Lazarus, their brother, dies, and they send for Jesus. Finally, Jesus got to their home and asked where Lazarus was. He called for Lazarus, who had been dead for three days, to come out, and Lazarus came out. For the onlookers who witnessed the smelly man come out of the grave, Jesus gave them an opportunity to

free the dead man and then give the dead man life by feeding him. The passage in John 11:1-44 illuminates the profound impact of God's vision for a new life, as even the deceased have the capacity to hear and adhere to it. Furthermore, it underscores the role of the community in facilitating the liberation of individuals who remain entangled in the remnants of the past.

Community is at the heart of God's vision for all of creation. The body of Christ—the church—seemed difficult to imagine as just a church and not a community. God's vision for a new community is at the heart of the church. The feeding of the five thousand men, not counting women and children, told by Mark, reveals how God's vision was bigger than what his disciples conceived as the problem. It was late in the day, and Jesus had been teaching since they arrived at the solitary place—Bethsaida (Luke 9:10). The disciples exercised their leadership skills when they said:

This is a remote place,” they said, “and it is already very late. ³⁶Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” ³⁷But he answered, “You give them something to eat. (Mark 6:35-37).

On that day, everyone, including Jesus, knew how long they had been together as a community, yet they stayed and continued to listen. Jesus was not as concerned as his disciples about the community's need for food, for he did not say anything about it until his disciples brought him their concerns. Good for the disciples, for they did not only define the problem, but they also came up with a solution all on their own—imagine that. An unexpected response by Jesus, “you give them something to eat” (v.37), revealed that his solution to the community's problem (hunger) was from within the community (five loaves and two fish). As the disciples implemented the strategy of having the community sit down in groups of hundreds and fifties, unexpected results were discovered (v.39-40).

When the church community follows God's vision of serving others, it will be able to see miraculous baskets of leftover blessings like those disciples. They saw the miracle because they were the ones who gave away the loaves and fish.

Out of the Bible narratives flow many streams of stories that shine a spotlight on God's vision for a healthy and dynamic community. From the deep roots of love and fellowship in the daily life of the early church (Acts 2:42) to Esther's courage that secured peace for a diverse society (Esth. 8:9-16), the message is clear: God desires unity and well-being for all. Just as he used ordinary people like Esther and empowered unlikely vessels like Mary (Luke 1:30). God calls all believers to contribute their unique gifts to build communities that reflect his love. By embracing inclusivity, practicing compassion, and living with faithfulness, believers can strive to create a world that embodies God's grand vision for the small church, which is a place where all can flourish and experience the joy of belonging.

Theological Foundations of a God Vision

God's vision for all creation was to be in one accord, worshipping him as he cared for all creation in return. The selections from the Old and the New Testament stories I engaged as my biblical foundations for this project reveal God's intention and hope for the local church. Jesus taught his disciples in word and deed. Jesus' life took place in a community setting with relationships to his own people and those outsiders who came to see, hear, and be transformed. Jesus and the community did life together to show God's vision.

For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants^[a] and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵To one he gave five talents,^[b] to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶He who had

received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷ So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸ But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his Master's money. ¹⁹ Now after a long time the Master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' ²¹ His Master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master.' ²² And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' ²³ His Master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master.' ²⁴ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' (Matt. 25:14-25 ESV)

For this project, this parable is the central theological point of thinking through God's vision for the local church, specifically those churches that have fifty worshippers or less. Jesus painted three different dynamic pictures of three unique opportunities. Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come. Jesus said, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say. 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus replied to the Pharisees, declaring the kingdom is here, yet verses 22-23 pointed out to his disciples the coming of the days of the Son of Man.

Hearing Matthew's version of this story, the Master and his servants had been doing life together for some time. Matthew does not say how long other than the manner of trust the Master gave to his servants suggested that there had been personal knowledge between the Master and his servants. The local church has been around since Genesis. From the perspective that the local church is people, not location, and people are relational beings, since Adam and Eve, God has not changed his vision for his people,

which is to offer him worship as their king. The church's story is that of an undying relationship between God and his people and, thus, the intimate knowledge of each other. Such intimate knowledge carries within it both the joy of being in a relationship with God and the responsibilities of being in a relationship with God. Unlike the preceding “parables in (24:45-52), which focus on the accountability of the church leaders, nor on the general responsibilities of ordinary Christians in (25:1-13), vv.14-30 focused on the obligations of those who have been granted special gifts” (Hare 286). The local church has been granted unique gifts and must meet its obligations.

The following observations are central theologically to understanding this project. God gave birth to the church in a community context, which has not changed. The church was born by God for God’s vision. Although this is not an exhaustive exegetical reflection, specifically on small churches, a close observation of this text offers a place to start changing direction.

The Sovereignty of God

The Master has complete freedom to do what he wishes with what belongs to him. Matthew does not say whether this was the first time this event took place; however, Matthew said that the Master had just announced his upcoming journey and what he had done with some of his wealth. There could have been many factors that the Master considered how much to give to each servant; however, his personal knowledge of each one’s ability was how he made his decision (Matt. 25:15). This means the Master had spent time doing life together with his servants. “This point is important for the story

because the master has not laid a burden on them, but has given each an amount suitable for them to take off' (Senior 276).

Both testaments revealed that the Creator God created all things for his own purposes. The local church is no exception to this truth. God knows the local church; however, the looming question remains with the church and the ways they expressed their knowledge of God. Like the Master in Matthew 25 story, he gave each employee money according to the master's knowledge of each employee. Likewise, the master has given to every church of every size a mission according to the master's knowledge of each church. For this study, church size means the number of persons actively participating in the local church's life. Suppose the various church sizes meant the sizes of their ability and capacity to do ministries, like the various sizes of the talents in this parable.

⁴On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.⁵For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."⁶Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"⁷He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁹After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. (Act 1:4-9)

Jesus has been lifted, and yet he left behind a gift for the church. The blessed responsibility was to be the witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The Master left the church of many sizes with the gift according to what Jesus saw as each church's ability to accomplish the vision. The fourth-century theologian, Augustine, saw the church as the "City of God," a divinely established community

distinct from the earthly "City of Man." "For a house is being built to the Lord in all the earth, even the city of God, which the holy Church." The church, guided by sacraments and led by a divinely ordained hierarchy, represented the ongoing work of God's grace on Earth, engaging the gifts left behind by the Master. Augustine believed God distributed his saving grace through the church to humanity, drawing them toward the ultimate heavenly city (loc 9926).

Intimacy with God

One could wonder about the business intelligence of the Master. Two assumptions could be made regarding the Master's decision not to give the servants instruction on what to do or how to handle his portfolio. The first assumption could be that this is a high-risk, high-reward businessman. The second assumption could be that the servants have long-term relationships with the Master. Possibly, the Master was a hands-on type of owner—involved in his servant's personal life. By default, by being involved in his servants' daily lives, the Master got to know more of their potential than he could have by being observant from the office. The Master (God) is interested in big and small happenings in all of creation. Moses and the community knew this; when Moses "went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to their tent" (Exod. 33:9-10). The very close understanding in knowing, trusting, and respecting the secure relationship Moses experienced with God, Jesus prayed aloud his personal

experiences for all believers to hear, that they may be one as he [Jesus] and the father are (John 17:20-21).

The Master announced his upcoming journey and business plans, which involved giving each of them (servants) an unrestricted business opportunity. Many assumptions could be made regarding the Master's actions; however, Matthew did not give us any reason(s) regarding the Master's business strategies. Again, the Master is exercising his freedom as the rightful owner at the risk of his future business potential by trusting his servants. The servant's actions suggested that they were offered an opportunity to showcase their talents, creativity, and gifts, which they did. One could argue that the Master's business decisions were one of a high risk–high reward. William J. Abraham, thought that Wesley believed God [the Master] calls believers (servants) to a life of holiness, marked by a personal conversion and a growing love for God. The personal conversion resulted from a response to what God [the master] has done (freely given to the servant). To Wesley, the church was not simply an institution but a living body where this transformation could occur. Through small group meetings and a focus on social justice, Wesley envisioned a church actively engaged in the world, reflecting God's love through practical action (Abraham 35). The church is the Master's business, and it is the church's business to live out the will of God.

Known as the Great Commission, the disciples met Jesus where he said he would be, and they responded by worshipping him. Jesus said:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matt. 28:18-20)

God's vision for his people has always been and continues to be an inclusive invitation, not an exclusive entitlement. The elements of the commission are clear: go, make, baptize, and teach. Yet, Jesus did not provide them with a step-by-step guide on how to execute these tasks. The essence of the commission lies in the understanding that it is not a linear process of getting up, and GO, and make, and baptize and teach. Rather, a more dynamic interpretation of the commission would be to teach, to make disciples, and to baptize them as you go.

The Master has gifted the local church according to each church size's ability and capacity. This means that every church of every size already has within them all they need to accomplish the ministries they are capable of and willing to engage in. As it was with the giving of talents parable and the Great Commission episode, Jesus did not give detailed instructions on how to make disciples. One of the most identified fallouts in small-size churches had to do with members disagreeing on how to handle the activities of God's church. The local church would do so much more if only they embraced what Jesus had given to the local church as an opportunity instead of a burden. The Master left for heaven after entrusting the local church with a chance to show off their creativity, skills, gifts, talents, experience, adaptability, willingness to grow, intelligence, and understanding of the Master's vision.

Eschatology

The Master made up his mind regarding each servant's ability. Matthew did not say anything about any discussion between the servants and the Master. The conversation was instructional in nature and had an undefined time frame for when the Master would come back, but all parties knew the Master would return one day. The

author Donald Senior says, “with the return of the ‘master’ (*kyrios*, a title that in the Gospel context takes on Christological significance when applied to Jesus), the story begins to display its eschatological meaning” (278). Jesus told Judas, “You heard me say, ‘I am going away, and I am coming back to you’” (John 14:28). Also, Jesus said, “I am going there [my father’s house] to prepare a place for you and I will come back and take you to be with me” (John 14:2-3). The Master had given each of the three servants a gift, and they all knew that he would return someday and ask them about it. The freedom of God’s blessings given to the servants is what Martin Luther believed about God’s vision for the church: a church rooted in the message of “justification by faith alone, a message proclaimed through Scripture and received through faith” (loc 397). This focus on individual personal conversion and a direct relationship with God through Scripture reshaped Christian thought. God the Master was not obligated to share God’s blessings with anyone, yet God the Master does what God wants with what belongs to God alone.

Unknown as the details are of how the two servants increased the Master’s investment under each of their care, the Master returned to an increase in their capacity to do business. The five and the two talented servants must have been excited upon receiving unexpected blessings above and beyond what they had already received. It would be easy to imagine that their joy did not allow them to sleep much due to the excitement of putting into practice something they have been praying for and dreaming about if only the finances were available. The first two servants must have asked many friends, family members, neighbors, and associates to join them in their new business endeavors. The five and two talent recipients embraced the opportunity to showcase their dreams, not a burden of fear. They “risked their lives” hoping for a new beginning,

freedom, and opportunities (Fox 202). Well, applicable in this context is the saying “there is no shortcut to hard work,” and the five and the two talents servants reaped the fruit of their hard work. The risk they took in putting into action what it meant when they said yes by receiving the talents and engaging the skills in ways that increased their opportunities. The only thing riskier than saying yes to receiving the talents was the risk of putting those talents to work. Their reputations were on the line, their relationships were under observation, and each of their futures with the company could go in either direction (hired or fired)

At some point, someday in the future, the Master will return and will ask for what Tyler Smith and Alison Hofmeyer call “A boomerang comes back” (Boomerang, 10). At this point, every church of every size must give back to the Master what is his. The Master has gone on a long trip and left behind gifts with every local church. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples received their marching order “to be witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. After He had said this, they watched as HE was taken up, and a cloud hid Him from their sight” (Act 1:8 – 9). While they were still looking in awe, a strange-looking man suddenly appeared and asked them why they were still standing around – get on with it (vv.10-11). Robert W. Wall puts it best by saying:

The eschatological horizon of the church’s mission is the Lord’s return from heaven to complete his messianic vocation (John 14:3). The church’s mission, which continues the past of Jesus, is motivated by the hope of his future (3:19-21; 10:42). (43)

The church will not have to deal with the frustration of existing but not living, consuming but not producing, and ultimately hoarding instead of giving, as long as it

remembers who they are and whose they are. Nevertheless, this human condition will remain in the local church until the Master returns.

Relevant Literature on God's Vision

More books, tapes, films, arts, songs, and blogs have been written about God's vision for any human ideas and desires and are available in almost every language worldwide. However, this review focuses on major themes that exist in small churches: It will identify common themes of how small churches got to be small (if they were not), summarize major shifts that move small churches to be healthy small churches, and then finally this review will provide a starting place for the small church to move from being a "healthy" small church to a "healthy helpful" small church.

The Beginning of God's Vision

Knowing where this God idea began is critical to understanding this literature review. As of today, the church began with God attempting to create a community: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as one God, the community nature of the Trinity. The Community is where heaven touches earth. The Community is where God meets God's people. The storyteller of the creation painted an image of a perfect community, such as a church in which there was no separation. The church was Eve and Adam—the people and their God were in a perfect relationship, complete and whole. The relationship was foundational to the Trinity as well as to the community. God is a relational God. Community is a relational manifestation of God's vision. God is a communal God. The Creator God and his community were united in a harmonious relationship. Richard Rohr says:

When you even skim the edges of a relationship, you submit to mystery and lose control. Marriage would be so much easier if there were not another person involved, but then it would be meaningless, too. Relationships are entwined, entrenched, elusive, messy, enabling, enrapturing, maddening, exhilarating, frustrating, exposing, and too beautiful for words. (21)

The church and the community were one and the same. It was always about building a peaceful, loving, healthy, fruitful, beautiful, creative, caring, and unashamed community (Gen. 1-2; John 1:1-14). The perfect relationship in the perfect community between God and Eve and Adam got broken (Gen. 1-7). Although they initially lived in a perfect relationship with God, Adam and Eve surrendered to temptation. Since the first separation, God has relentlessly found ways to restore the broken relationship with his children and all of creation. God refuses to give up on his vision of a perfect unified community by launching a rescue mission that can only be understood when God is the highest priority. God tried again with Noah, Abram, Moses, kings, and exiles, and all the way to Jesus—Emmanuel (God with us). God is still working to implement and upgrade his vision of a perfect community through his church. Jesus came (Matt. 1:18-23; Luke 2:7) and worked at restoring this community; instead, he spent most of his time fixing the church. The disorder in the community reflects how dysfunctional and detached the church has become from the community. Before Jesus finished his earthly ministries, he gave the vision to the church as its marching order, known as the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). Although Jesus left his earthly ministries, the church was not without God's presence; the Holy Spirit descended to be with the church on the day of Pentecost (Act 2). The Holy Spirit, the Advocate, came in place of Jesus to teach all things and remind the church of everything that Jesus taught during his earthly ministries (John 14:26). Jesus affirmed God's vision by his commissioning the church as the means by

which the community shall be redeemed and restored into a more perfect and whole relationship with God again.

Howard Macy says:

At the mere mention of the word *community*, people often eye you as if you had dropped in from another world, smile tolerantly, and hope you change the subject. Good, sensible, Christian people. They fear that you are going to tell them they have to sell all they own, move to a farm, wear bib overalls, and raise peanuts. Or that they have to abandon their fertilized lawns and move to the inner city. Because they misunderstand the idea of Community, many Christians do not want to think about it at all.

To avoid thinking about Community simply because we misunderstand it will deprive us of one of God's greatest gifts. The idea of Community is, in a sense, from another world, a world very unlike our own.

Within the community are many gifts, talents, experiences, and possibilities that together enable human flourishing. Macy views the community through the lens of Ephesians 4:11-16 where some had the gift of apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, and some are teachers. With these gifts in the community, Macy says that the community becomes a way to see Christ in others, a place to pray and worship, a place to serve, a witness to the world, and an ambassador of God's love. This is the church in its perfect form. Thus, the community is the church – the church is the community.

However, political and economic policies in the West are designed to maintain an apparent distance, which is miles apart, between the community and the church. Legal measures have been put in place to ensure clear lines regarding the church boundaries in the community. These lines are in place to keep the church as far and as close depending on how much it benefits those in power. Here in the United States, the separation of state and religion is a separation of community and church.

After the resurrection, “the disciples went to Galilee where Jesus had told them to go” (Matt. 28:16). During one of their meals, Jesus told his disciples not to leave Jerusalem until they had received the gift his father promised (Acts 1:4). The Holy Spirit baptized them and then sent them into the community with a new vision. God’s vision for the community is now the disciples’ vision, which was to be God’s witnesses right where they were (Jerusalem) and to the ends of the earth as far as where all of humanity is today (Acts 1:8). The disciples, gripped by fear, abandoned Jesus just as some churches have faltered in faith. Yet, after his resurrection, Jesus was not interested in the powerful or those who condemned him. His first act was not for Pilate or the soldiers. Instead, with forgiveness and love, Jesus went back out to those same terrified disciples, demonstrating the unwavering reality of his grace. This small group of frightened disciples huddled behind closed doors, trying to protect their own lives. Jesus invaded their so-called safe place and commissioned them into the community as still the best vessels by which God chose to bless all the people. To that end, the church is still the redemptive hope of the world.

The Organic Life of the local church

In recent times, in the era of the megachurch movement, in rare cases, some churches start big. Almost every church started with just a few individuals. The Trinitarian God started with Adam and Eve; Noah started again with just his family, and Jesus walked around and invited a selected few to follow him. On the day of Pentecost, a select few of the twelve received three thousand into their faith community, fitting a simple definition of a megachurch today. That Pentecostal experience was not the typical

church growth as church leaders know it today, and yet there was a glimpse of the promise and hope God has for his children, the church, and the community.

Following their Pentecostal experience, “the disciples devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer” (Acts 2:42). It was just a small group of individuals getting together who were inspired by a common purpose. This type of gathering is how most churches began. The first-century churches were mostly in homes, known in the recent church growth movement as the House Church. According to Larry Kreider and Floyd McClung, “house churches are not organizations that require people with administrative skills or immense giftedness to coordinate and direct a group; they simply call for ordinary people who are in love with Jesus. House churches are what is commonly known today as small groups. Small groups were once known as Sunday Schools. Foundational to house church, small groups, and Sunday Schools were relationships within as set up for greater relationships with those outside. In his book entitled Church for the Unchurched, George G. Hunter III suggested two biblical precedents for groups: (1) for the Messianic movement, it was necessary to have “house churches,” and (2) the Christians in the city met in a common celebration which they know today as a congregation (Hunter 82).

Although varieties and sizes of gathered communities exist, all were built on the same foundation: relationship. Andy Stanley tells of a card he saw in Starbucks that caught his attention. The card read, ‘Create Community. Make a difference in someone’s day. When you work at Starbucks, you can make a difference in someone’s day by creating an environment where neighbors and friends can get together and reconnect while enjoying a great coffee experience” (Stanley and Willits 19). The not-

so-secret to Starbucks' success is all about relationships. The three founders of Starbucks had in common a love for coffee and tea. Around coffee and tea, people gathered, and the organic life of the church sought to discover people's needs and find the resources to meet those needs (Hunter 115). Small beginnings like these create a unique space for connection. Friends, along with any guests they invite, can lower their usual social barriers and open up to each other in a more relaxed setting, fostering deeper connections in a relatively short amount of time. Like going to Starbucks, small groups gathered with an agenda in mind. According to Hunter, small groups might look the same and could have some commonalities but are differentiated by their agenda much more than their context (82). TD Jakes, the founder and bishop of the Potter's House in Dallas with a membership of 30,000, said that big churches start small. Jakes went on to say the weight of responsibility of sharing with people what you believe is the same as when he was preaching to 7 or now to 7,000. The job is still the same; you take the small beginning seriously, and that is how you end up with thousands of people.

Even though house churches offer that which touches the depths of human longing, which is relationships, they also tend to change. A great small group has a consistent problem: growth, which is a part of the agenda of most small groups. Andy Stanley explains the organic nature of innovation. He says, "Every innovation has an expiration date. At some point, new is not new anymore, regardless of what the package says. Eventually, innovative ideas feel like yesterday's news. Nothing is irresistible or relevant forever" (265). Small groups change, communities change, people change, and the wisest man who ever lived attests to this truth by saying, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens" (Eccles.3:1).

The Familiar Life Patterns of Small Churches.

Starting with the more common experiences of most church-starts, it starts with a small group of individuals. From that starting point, churches will experience changes, including the following stages, although not an all-inclusive list: (1) Start small and stay small. (2) Start small and grow big (3) start small and die. Of course, many seasons of churches are found between the beginning and the end. The seasons are ongoing for those churches that have, as well as those that are still growing and or holding on to mere existence. The ongoing seasons mean ongoing adjustment, and that means CHANGE. The speed of change in many dimensions continues to increase (Kotter 4). Although change can be challenging, it is essential and unavoidable, just like breathing. At times, change can feel like inhaling smoke-filled air, while other times it can feel like taking in the fresh ocean breeze on a beautiful island in the South Pacific.

The following are common terms and definitions according to how are being used in this study:

Small Church

For this project, a small church or congregation means a worship gathering of fifty people or fewer.

Church growth

Church growth means increased numbers: increased butts in the seats, bucks in the offertory plates, and buildings on campus(es). Keep in mind that not all growths are good. Tumors are a prime example of how growth can go awry. These masses of cells multiply rapidly and uncontrollably, disrupting the surrounding healthy tissue. They can

cause pain, organ dysfunction, and even death. Tumors highlight that not every growth means healthy.

Church health

For this project, church health does not mean the same as church growth. Church health means both quantity and quality. Church growth is one of the evidence of church health.

Church: Commonalities among Small Churches

It began with these words:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20 NRSV)

Somehow, in reading and hearing the preceding action words, there seem to be exceptions in the application that are not in the writing of the so-called Great Commission. Carey Nieuwhof said “there are lots of great small churches, and there are lots of great large churches; there are some bad small churches, and there are some bad big churches; there is no perfect or biblical number for church size, and no one can claim moral high ground of this discussion. Not surprisingly, in his book entitled *The Small Church is Different!*, Lyle E. Schaller lists twenty common themes to most small churches, including key characteristics that set small churches apart. These churches demonstrate extraordinary determination, often surviving through challenges with the strength of their lay ministry. They rely heavily on one another to get through everything. One of the unique gifts of the small church is that family ties are a

tremendous source of power. Individuals rather than committees typically do the work for the church. Unlike clergy-driven large churches, small churches rely heavily on volunteers, fostering a culture that prioritizes relationships and personal connections over professional polish. This volunteer spirit extends to leadership, where individuals often take on multiple roles, streamlining operations through a participatory democracy.

Schaller emphasizes the unique way small churches function. Financial support hinges on perceived needs rather than rigid structures, and the pace of life revolves around an internal clock and a calendar dictated by seasons and family events. When folks miss church activities, most would automatically assume that whatever season (hunting, fishing, sports, travel, and more) is the reason. These churches offer a haven for those who might feel excluded elsewhere, creating a close-knit community where everyone has a place and is likely related to someone else. Many seminarians who served these small churches during their seminary training testified that these small churches were lifesavers during their seminary study. While resource limitations might necessitate an "attraction model" for new members and a reliance on the piano as the primary instrument, the small church thrives on its simplicity and the power of authentic connections (28-41).

Taking the observation deeper, Paul Flodquist writes: "there is a difference between a small church mentality and a small church reality" (loc.26). Flodquist continues, "the church mentality is a set of beliefs that inhibit the power of God's Spirit, and that is the failure of the church leadership, not the laity" (loc. 27). So far, the small church culture is one factor that has a more significant impact on visitors' (whenever there is a visitor) perceptions of what I call the church currency, which is "relationship."

In the church marketplace, transactions (transformation) depend on relationships as the essential factor. How different is the small church of 1982, according to Schaller, versus the small churches of 2022, according to SermonCentral? There are six things that church leaders need to know about small churches:

1. There are a lot of small churches: 90 percent of the churches on earth are under 200 people, and 80% are under 100 people.
2. Small churches are not broken, and they are normal: small does not automatically mean broken.
3. Small churches have different needs: most pastoral instruction comes from a big church perspective and carries underlying big church assumptions.
4. Small churches offer different benefits: A healthy small church can do many things that a healthy big church cannot do or not better, just different.
5. Small churches are driving the growth of the global church: one of the great advantages of small churches is that they can multiply much faster.
6. Small church loves big church brothers and sisters: there should be no division in the body (1 Cor. 12:25) (6 Things Church Leaders Need To Know About Small Churches)

Having such knowledge and leadership skills can help church leaders (decision makers) make better decisions about utilizing the available resources of the church according to the needs of the community. Church leaders having a better understanding of the culture of small churches leads to a higher chance of transformation. Transformation can increase the market value of relationships at all levels.

Church: Start Small and Stay Small

Many works of literature have been printed, blogged, posted on YouTube, on podcasts, and at conferences, offering techniques and strategies on how to grow the local church. Despite these resources being abundantly available, ongoing struggles with growth persist. What is intriguing about the ongoing struggles with growing a church is the increasing number of new resources entering the market on the topic. Growth is a

process, ever-changing, and not a one-time strategy fix-it-all type of experience; instead, it is a journey, not an event. Truth does not mean easy, such as the church is a living organism and is always changing (Stevens and Morgan 124). The structural, leadership, technological, process, legal, economic, and demographic changes meant that to change the world, they had to change the church.(Farr and Kotan 14).

Nieuwhof, an author, pastor, and famous blogger, suggests five reasons why most churches start small and stay small. He starts by saying, “almost nobody starts BIG.”

Here are the reasons most churches start small and stay small:

1. Big hopes but small strategy (Strategy trumps intention and hope is not a strategy). There is not a single leader who's planted a church (or started anything) who hasn't had big hopes. The challenge is that often those hopes have no strategy to back them up.
2. Underfunding (Vision always precedes resources).
3. Pastors who do everything (must define when to add staff)
4. No plans for anything bigger (plan today for what you want to be a part of tomorrow)
5. A selfish drift inward (unclear vision is a shortcut to self-centeredness)
(Nieuwhof).

Nieuwhof pointed out that doing these five things listed above does not guarantee healthy growth in the church; however, not doing them guarantees the church will not grow. For most pastors of small churches, the word strategy is not so familiar to pastoral thinking but rather understood as being how business people think. For the church to think it has a product to offer is a foreign and inhospitable idea to the local small church. Brian Johnston emphasizes that authentic growth is not a quick fix, and it is far more than a three steps technique:

We have to keep in mind that absolutely basic principle that it is God who gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:7). Furthermore, ‘Real biblical growth is not achieved by simply adopting smart business techniques, novel methods or giving people more of what they want. God brings about growth from things as small as a grain of mustard seed (92).

Since the day of Pentecost, the onlookers were invited by a power beyond their own abilities, which was the Holy Spirit, to engage their intellectual abilities expressed in questions regarding their understanding of what they heard and saw. The mystery that took place between the mouths of the disciples and the ears of the onlookers could only be the work of the Holy Spirit. The disciple's proclamations planted seeds of new hopes for that which no one knew was the beginning of the New Testament church.

Miseducation of Pastors

Most pastoral leaders who currently make the decisions at the highest level of mainline denominations did not take a leadership course at the seminary. The seminary did not offer leadership courses, nor was it a requirement at the local church. In his book *Small Church Essentials*, Vaters painfully points out three facts he wishes someone would have told him at Bible school about what to expect at the local church after graduation. The facts are as follows:

- Fact: #1. Most pastoral ministry students will never pastor a church larger than 250 people.
- Fact #2. Virtually all pastors will pastor a small church for at least some time in their ministry.
- Fact #3. Clergy can pastor a small church well without settling for less. (17)

The disconnect between seminary training and local church realities has been an issue across denominational lines for a while, and the rise of the megachurch movement shifted the landscape of conversation about where the local church is heading.

In Chapter 1, I pointed to the fact that I have never met nor heard a pastor (retired or active) who said I went to seminary to learn how to pastor a church that has already

arrived. The people have decided where they are emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, which is all they will ever be. Vaters says, “Look at the class schedules for any ministry training school or seminary. How many of them are teaching the skills needed to pastor a small church?” (17). The issue is leadership. In recent decades, Bible schools and seminaries finally gave in to the need for pastors to be developed in administrative leadership, not just spiritual leadership. Eddie Gibbs states, “The ministry training I received over forty years ago was for a world that now no longer exists, and even at the time it was undergoing radical change” (9). Craig E. Irwin and Robert H. Roller say, “While most pastors perceived that their spiritual preparation for ministry was adequate, most reported that their management training was inadequate. Pastors also perceived that their success as pastors was related to their ability to manage and lead their churches” (Irwin and Roller 53-67). Compare that to pastoral leadership training in 2024; here is one of the lists for training by Joshua Gordon of The Lead Pastor website:

10 Best Church Leadership Training Programs In 2024

1. Arrow Leadership – *Find Clarity for an uncertain future.*
2. Foundations in Missional Ministry and Church Leadership Curriculum – *Certificate and diploma courses in church leadership*
3. Pastoral Care and Leadership – *Short course for advanced pastors*
4. Mindful Leadership Training – *best-customized training for an all-around, healthy church.*
5. Certificate of Biblical Leadership Course - *Learn and grow in leadership for spiritual influence.*
6. Administration and Leadership Webinars and Online Classes - *Best courses for church administration*
7. Emotionally Healthy Discipleship - *Becoming the emotionally healthy leader your church needs.*
8. Equipping Leaders International Leadership training - *Courses for equipping leaders to transform their world.*
9. Building Church Leaders - *Practical training tools for team members*
10. Dallas Theological Seminary courses - *Free Christian courses for podcast lovers* (Gordon).

A shift in pastoral preparation from early 2000 is notable as it is no longer just theological only; instead, a leadership curriculum has been added. The seminary theological training in recent years is no longer the only primary focus of pastoral preparation. Leadership training as a priority counterbalance to pastoral theological preparation has become a prerequisite for pastoral leadership effectiveness, evident by the list above where the word “leadership” is stated eight times out of ten of the so-called best church leadership training programs for 2023. Theological institutions have incorporated leadership courses into their curriculum. Even with a seminary degree,

we (pastors) are often driven by the motivation to help others—but we seldom believe we have something to save others. Furthermore, if we did once believe that, chances are we have allowed our seminary training, our ministry peers, our denominational bosses, and the big chieftains in the churches we serve to cure us of that viewpoint. (Nixon 12)

Leadership training was deemed essential for effective leadership in the 21st-century church. Each church had to decide if it had been an investment worth making or if it could have allocated the money elsewhere.

Obviously, leadership readiness and pastoral readiness are not the same, and pastors are left to find solutions in their churches. Again, as in Chapter 1, this is one of the contributing factors for clergy burnout. Retired pastor and an active blogger, Joe McKeever says, “I know more about getting smaller churches to grow than larger ones. I pastored three of them, and only the first of the three did not grow. I was fresh out of college, untrained, inexperienced, and clueless about what I was doing.” For the better part of the life of the local small churches, they and their pastors spend nonrenewable resources at a high cost and an unpredictable rate of return, figuring out what McKeever identified only by personal experiences. McKeever’s experiences are not typical for most

pastors nor that of the local small churches. Here are the ten reasons why small churches usually do not grow, according to McKeever:

1. Wanting to stay small.
2. A quick turnover of pastors.
3. Domination by a few strong members.
4. Not trusting the leaders.
5. Inferiority complex.
6. No plan.
7. Bad health.
8. Lousy fellowship.
9. A state of neglect permeates the church.
10. No prayer.

For McKeever, many small churches unintentionally, and some intentionally, hinder their growth by clinging to a comfortable routine, making newcomers feel unwelcome. Small churches have a bad habit of making the past their hero. Frequent pastor changes and a controlling few within the congregation, even if well-meaning, can create an inhospitable environment discouraging visitors who might be considering the possibility of joining the church. Building trust requires open communication, rotating leadership roles when possible, and developing and empowering leaders to make sound decisions. Small churches can also get stuck in a cycle of self-doubt, comparing themselves to larger churches and setting unambitious goals or, at the least, setting nothing. Too often, the small churches cannot escape the “bigger is better” trap. Instead, they should focus on their unique gifts and talents, listening to God's special mission for their community. A lack of clear direction and planning leaves stagnant churches simply going through the motions and some just walking in circles. To thrive, McKeever suggests that “they need to develop a focused plan with specific goals and strategic use of resources.”

According to McKeever, small churches can be healthy and vibrant, but some struggle with high pastor turnover, internal and external conflict, and indecisiveness. As described in Romans 12, a healthy church focuses on personal transformation, engaging member talents, and fostering great fellowship. Conversely, a declining church shows neglect through a rundown building, unresolved issues, and dwindling community activity. The absence of prayer is a symptom of a deeper spiritual issue, not the cause, of a church's struggles. Pastors can test their congregation's heart through a call to prayer, and church leaders must remain open and willing to be responsive to God's will. The sense of urgency for all pastors to discern and learn leadership skills is inescapable. Rick Warren, founding pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church, in his best-seller book *The Purpose Driven Church*, is adamant about what he believes is the very first and most important task of the pastor (either planter and or established) is to find out the answer to the question, "Why do we exist?" For the established church, Warren said the pastor's first and most important task is to redefine the church's purpose. Forget everything else until the reason for existing has been established in the minds of the congregation (81). One of the difficulties of applying this leadership insight is that neither the clergy nor the local small church leaders begin to consider, pray, strategize, and distribute resources by posing Warren's leadership question. Pastors do not get this type of training, and the local small churches do not spend time in this way of thinking.

Tim Keller says:

One of the most common reasons for pastoral mistakes and missteps is blindness to the significance of church size. Size enormously impacts how a church functions; that being said, the 'size culture' profoundly affects how decisions are made, how relationships flow, how effectiveness is evaluated, and how its staff operates. (SermonCentral)

Keller's insights resonated with many pastoral experiences as theological training shifted towards leadership development. Small church leaders often struggled to maintain their missional focus due to a lack of understanding of church size and its dynamics. Similar to the parable in Matthew 25 about different talents, each church's size presented unique challenges, both related to its size and sometimes extending beyond it. Experienced leaders knew how to navigate these challenges, and sometimes, the size of the challenge led to new opportunities.

The decisions that local churches of all sizes make daily are more leadership-smart than theological evaluation. Professor of Practice in Management Operations and Faculty Director at Villanova School of Business, Matthew F. Manion says, in a 2018 article that:

In the last four years they have seen a 300 percent increase in students in Master of Science in Church Management degree and a similar increase in the non-degree certificate program. The church of today requires the innovation and creativity of the early missionaries, yet most church leaders were not trained for that reality. (ChurchExecutive)

The emergence of the mega-church movement seemed to align with the increasing emphasis on leadership training in seminaries. Individuals who spent their weekdays in the marketplace brought the language of leadership with them to church on the weekends. As a result, religious conferences quickly became known as church leadership conferences, attracting participation from local church leaders of various sizes and denominations in seminars and training sessions. Before the seminaries offered leadership courses, Mega-church conferences, and trainings where seminary-trained pastors and church leaders went to learn and find out what was working as best practices at the local church.

McKeever mentions the local “stay the same small church’s” psychological and emotional health as suffering from an “inferior complex.” The price for both pastors and local small churches has been and is just too high. In *Growing Plans*, Schaller says that “low self-esteem,” which he named “grasshopper mindset,” is the most critical problem faced by small churches (20). Most pastors begin their ministry in a small grasshopper mindset type church, and without leadership training or leadership experience; it is undoubtedly a perfect setup for resentment and burnout. However, the familiar practice for most pastors as they arrive at the next small church is creating new activities to get new energy and new life going. Rodney W. Draggon writes that both the newly arrived pastor and the church enter into their newly found relationship; each party comes with their own agendas. It is the pastor’s responsibility to deal with both agendas.

Church: Start Small – Grow

A powerful word from Jason Byassee states, “Books on the small church are usually recipes for suicide. That is, they tell small churches how to get big, and how to be no longer small churches, which is like destroying a village to save it” (7). A curious note regarding literature about a dying or dead church: A common theme I have observed in different forms of literature was the contrast between growth and decay. The authors often introduce the idea of decay first before showing how growth could emerge from it. I was intrigued by how they portray the church's life as opposite to the natural life cycle—birth, growth, and death. So, the Acts 2 church got sent out to communities of living people to teach, live, and witness to a living God. Nixon says, “Where Jesus is, there is life. There is abundant life, vigorous life, loved life and eternal life. There is life-before-death” (22).

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20 NRSV). The Great Commission is a call to action, to life, to move, to do, to pursue, and to keep the main thing as the most important thing that inspire those who heed the invitation. The voices of those who had led growing churches sound off the need to have a clear plan within the Great Commission. “If the churches across America do not begin strategically targeting specific segments of our populations. We risk losing ground in accomplishing the Great Commission” (Stevens and Morgan 32).

Ron Crandall gives a consolidated list of eight factors (by Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., who co-authored *In Search of Excellence*) that contribute to the success of an organization:

- a. *Having a bias for action*—encourage creativity and be willing to risk failure.
- b. *Being close to the customer*—have a genuine interest in meeting the needs of people.
- c. *Encouraging autonomy and Entrepreneurship*—utilizing small workgroup’s creativity kept free from bureaucratic red tape.
- d. *Engaging productivity through people*—Treat employees like adults with high expectations, direct communication, and plenty of affirmation for achievement.
- e. *Being hands-on and value-driven*—formulate a belief system expressing clear, qualitative values.
- f. *Stick to the knitting*—focus on your best product and avoid getting spread too thin.
- g. *Using a simple form and lean staff*—keep the management structure simple, flexible, and stable.
- h. *Keeping simultaneous loose-tight properties*—maintain the tension between creative chaos and disciplined adherence to the values. (qtd. in Crandall 4)

Peters and Waterman named these attributes as contributing to the organization’s success. These attributes were and are not being taught at Bible schools or seminaries, yet pastors who came out of seminary are expected to be excellent without being trained.

Whether these attributes make pastors more faithful and fruitful stewards of God's vision for the small church is unknown. Peters and Waterman finally invite leaders and organizations that want to be successful in some things to consider, evaluate, and possibly implement. Farr and Kotan are convinced that "the church is not going anywhere if the pastor is not willing to lead. We were not ordained to follow. That was not the point. Pastors are ordained and sent to lead a congregation. You were not ordained and sent so that you can follow that congregation wherever it wants to go" (17).

From Nixon's perspective, observing the Great Commission is to receive the commission more as a commandment. At the heart of the Great Commission is an unquestionable acceptance that Jesus knew what he said. Thus, Nixon says, "any church can blossom and grow anywhere" (10). To be sure that Nixon anchored his conviction to reality, he said the church would grow "if it will become healthy enough spiritually and pay attention to the needs, experiences, and sensibilities of those it seeks to serve" (10). Nixon suggests that the following are six critical mindset choices for pastor and laity:

- a. Choosing life over death
- b. Choosing community over isolation
- c. Choosing fun over drudgery
- d. Choosing bold over mild
- e. Choosing frontier over fortress
- f. Choosing now rather than later (10)

Growth is something that you do. Bola Akin-John writes, "Growth is not possible without a serious commitment to excellence" (Loc. 329). Growth does not just happen. Change is a requirement for growth. The church is much more precise in its intention about growth, which happens when it grows where it is planted, thereby living its mandate of "making disciples who make disciples" (Allen, Loc. 175). The making of

disciples process requires a structure described in Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus: "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-13). The work of the leaders is to prepare the laity by equipping them with the ministry tools to engage in the doing of the ministry fully.

The structure for growth ultimately depends on leadership and the system that allows all gifts and talents to be fully engaged in the work of the ministry. Johnston lists what growth looks like in a healthy church's system:

1. *Empowering leadership*—(Acts 6:3) The apostles shared their responsibilities through delegating and involving others.
2. *Effective Small Group Activities*—(Acts 4:23) Allow for more of the different spiritual gifts of the many believers to be utilized.
3. *Passionate Spirituality*—(Romans 12:11) something commanded of believers by the apostle Paul when he said that they should be "fervent in spirit; serving the Lord."
4. *Loving Relationship*—(1 Corinthians 13:2) When the church lived up to such a way of loving, the church would certainly be a healthy church.
5. *Fervent worship and prayer*—(Acts 4:31) Fervent worship and prayer have the power to transform and move people into action.
6. *Organization that works*—(Acts 15:24-27) The purpose is crystal clear, communication is clear, unified in support, and that shows leadership is caring.
7. *Gift-oriented ministry*—(Ephesians 4:11-12) Healthy leaders make space for all gifts and talents, and intentionally equipping people to do the work of the ministry.
8. *Needs-based evangelist*—(John 4:1-42) Leadership is at its best when it focuses on meeting the needs of others. Such care and love would open doors to transformation. (30-31)

While being a small church pastor can often mean taking on multiple responsibilities, it also offers the advantage of having more autonomy in decision-

making. With fewer leaders to consult, the pastor has the freedom to implement their preferred approach. Additionally, the pastor can form close relationships with all the families in the congregation, allowing for swift and effective change.

Caution about growth

Again, as stated throughout this study, not all growth is healthy. However, regarding the church and its mission, growth is about reaching people. No shortcut or magic trick exists to accomplish this mission; “the secret (if you call it that) of effective spiritual multiplication or reproduction lies in the ‘one-reach-one’ strategy (Johnston 92-93). When pursuing the Great Commission becomes a measuring instrument of status and success for both pastor and laity, Chris Vitarelli cautions the church about such a culture and mindset. “The obsession with growth is something close to an addiction” (12). A church’s preoccupation with success is reinforced by compulsive reliance on the latest church growth literatures, seminars, conferences, and strategies. The psychological challenge lies in how the big church handles such a pursuit versus how the small church handles the emotional investment in the same pursuit. The big church’s culture and mindset is about doing what is trending, and big churches can take care of themselves. The problem with church growth addiction is with “denominational officials and pastors and laypeople who think their small church should be big and are made to (or make themselves) feel like failures when it does not happen” (Byassee 10-11). The pursuit of the Great Commission to its fullness is rooted in nothing other than healthy growth.

Church: Start Small – Dying

Metairie United Methodist Church in the New Orleans district was brought up in Chapter 1. I asked the founding pastor about the life cycle of that church, to which he said, “I fear that the church was at its peak while I was still there – five to six years into his appointment” (Winn). He recalled the church worship attendance peaking in the sixties. That means that Metairie United Methodist church “focused on their own needs instead of others. They looked inwardly instead of outwardly. Their highest priorities were the way they have always done it, and that which made them the most comfortable” (Rainer 21). No one (same for both pastor and laity) wants to ask the question aloud, yet most pastors and laity of small churches never escape the wonder of how long the church can keep its doors open. Nieuwhof offers thirteen signs that a church is dying:

1. Your Leaders are Losing their Passion.
 2. Your Church is Afraid of Innovation and Change.
 3. Church Management is Replacing Church Leadership.
 4. Maintenance is Overtaking Church Mission.
 5. Your Church is Fixated on Singular Personality or Talent.
 6. You Criticize Younger, Upstart Leaders.
 7. Your Personal Relationships with God is on the Backburner.
 8. Your Staff and Volunteers are Burning Out Faster than You can Replace Them.
 9. Everyone in Your Church Looks and Thinks Just Like You.
 10. Your Church's Finances are Always in the Red.
 11. Your Church has Zero Presence in the Community.
 12. You are Focused More on Keeping Church Members than Reaching New People.
 13. You View Every Change in Culture as a “Threat” to Your Church.
- (“13 Signs”)

The prophet Isaiah 52:7 proclaims how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, the good news of peace and salvation, the news that the God of Israel reigns. The church's gift to the world community is to bring good news, which serves as the driving force behind all its actions. However, when leaders

lose passion for the ministry, it is a telling sign that the days of the church are numbered. The leadership of dying churches are often fearful of change, thereby closing any possibility of innovation. Instead of learning from young and upcoming leaders full of energy and innovative ideas, pastors and lay leadership can be dismissive, resistant, and sometimes ridicule them. The working habit of the leadership of a dying church is to spend more resources on protecting what they already have, such as placing more emphasis on the upkeep of the campus rather than adjusting the ministries to meet the needs of the community. Dying churches are willing to shape the daily operations around a single person's personality and talents, neglecting the development of individual spirituality, which is a costly mistake. As a result, the church neglects to prioritize its relationship with God, and unplugs itself from the power source of its passion and innovation.

Literature indicates that for the church's passion to exceed the leaders' passion for the ministry of the local church is rare. One of the reasons is that leadership spends more time doing for God than being with God, thus putting their time alone with God as an afterthought. A great indicator of spiritual starvation in the church is when volunteers and staffs are burning out faster than can be replaced – spending too much time doing for God and very little to no time being with God. One of the outcomes of burnout is a lack of creativity; thus, the leadership defaults to agreeability as a form of unity. It is not a good sign for the church when everyone thinks alike; in other words, no one is thinking. As a result, the church struggles to keep the finances out of the red. A dying church responds to financial unsustainability by turning inwardly and enacting its self-care plan: "Let us work hard on keeping what we have." The church becomes hyper-focused on

keeping up with the current members and has nothing left for any potential new people.

The routine of keeping up with health reports, prayer concerns, travel plans, and absences become a lifeline, which means that any new cultural and technological advancement would be viewed as a threat to the life of the church (Nieuwhof, "13 Signs").

Many of the common signs for the long walk of saying goodbye to church property, people, mission, hope, and memories are covered by the list from Nieuwhof. When stewardship of God's gift of "free will" is misaligned with God's vision, everything or everyone views life through the filter of power. All the indicators of a church's decline that Nieuwhof mentioned share a common theme: they are related to power and how the pastor and the church fail to be faithful and fruitful stewards of power. Power can be mismanaged in the working of the church. Nixon says:

The number one reason I observe that turnaround efforts fail is that certain controllers [power] in the dying church try to set up a power tug-of-war with the new leader. This happens just short of 100 percent of the time. In stagnant and dying churches, the members usually turn inward and become selfish in what they expect of the church; decisions are made based on what is most convenient and comfortable for the church members rather than what is expedient in effectively serving the community. The second most common reason that turnaround efforts fail is that the new leader fails to build a broad enough alliance for the changes she or he begins pursuing. (24-25)

Power has the potential to influence and change things and people, depending on how it is wielded. Throughout history, church leaders have used power to both build up and tear down. Literature has often explored the idea of the impact of power being misaligned with God's purpose, particularly in relation to the theological interpretation of suffering. The story of David versus Goliath serves as a powerful example of when power was not aligned with God's purpose.

“Churches do not have to close, but for many, a lack of decision results in a slow, painful death. Churches have choices—many choices. Churches can even intentionally choose to close (Kotan, Loc 184). Critical questioning remains a vital tool for holding pastors and local churches accountable, particularly when considering church closures. The leadership at all levels, from the conference office to the local church, were in disbelief at how the church had reached its then-current state of life (or lack thereof). Anthony G. Pappas labels it the culture and mindset that suck the life out of the small church. Pappas names six barriers the small church must overcome if it wants to go in a different direction.

- *Traditionalism threatens the future of our small churches*—traditionalism, namely, the attitude that tradition equals faithfulness.
- *“Niceness” threatens our small churches*—being nice is more a goal that says unity is uniformity.
- *A “club” mentality threatens our small churches*. A club exists for the satisfaction of its membership. The church of Jesus Christ does not!
- *Paralysis in the face of conflict threatens small churches*—the failure to trust others by allowing them to speak the kind truth.
- *Negative “scripts” threaten small churches*. Some small churches are dying by their own lines, lines such as “We are too small,” “Nothing we try ever works,” “What is the use?” or “Where are the ‘good old days.’”
- *The cost of our buildings is a threat to small churches*. Our church buildings do have spiritual significance beyond their bricks and boards. But the community of Jesus Christ must not be allowed to degenerate into a building-preservation club. (7-8)

Pappas uses different terms to describe the same aspects of culture and mindset contributing to small churches' decline into their final resting place. However, none of the pastors or laypeople in these churches would admit that they have such problems in their congregations. The two lists fall into two major categories: leadership and system. (1) Leadership - Simon Sinek states: “Leadership is not about being in charge; leadership is about taking care of those in your charge. Leadership is the ability to rally people not

for a single event, but for years” (28). The type of leadership Sinek discusses contrasts with what the world typically seeks in leadership. The worldly system often believes that "good leadership" requires a safe distance from those they are called to lead. Such distance is what is known as good medical practice: a one-way street relationship. This understanding of leadership does not align with John's description of a good leader, saying, ‘the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep’ (John 10:11). (2) System - Jethro advised his son-in-law Moses to stop limiting his ministry. He suggested selecting God-honoring and trustworthy men and organizing them into teams to meet the ministry’s needs (Exod. 18:21).

Leadership Training and Readiness

As a result of the church growth movement, megachurches’ leadership teams popularized the idea of leadership training as a necessary means of church growth. Ed Stetzer points to the missiologist Donald McGavran as the father of the Church Growth Movement. Stetzer points out the shift in the thinking of how to become more effective by reaching the masses (people) instead of the few (people). Stetzer says that as a missiologist, McGavran studied groups or people engaged in a scientific process to propose a better way of accomplishing the mission of reaching people . To achieve the mission, “it requires pastors and lay leadership to lead the congregation to see that *changes* are a critical part of the mission” (Branson and Martínez).

Change does not discriminate against any church size in any location. Darrell Patterson suggests the following reasons why small churches are unable to find a pastor when looking for one:

- *The Available Pastors Hate Establishment:* There is an anti-establishment spirit among younger (under 40) pastors who grew up in an unhealthy church culture and mindset.
- *The Available Pastors Only Do “Thought” Work:* Many seminarians enter the ministry to do “thought work.” If a young pastor only wants to discuss theological matters, prepare for Sunday’s sermon, and is not willing to trim weeds, vacuum, set up chairs, and take out trash, he will never make it in the small church.
- *The Available Pastors Can’t Teach Verse-by-verse:* Even though the young pastor is interested in “thought work,” he is often a failure at verse-by-verse Bible teaching. In large part, it is due to the fact that seminaries are teaching theological thinking but not teaching the skills for Biblical exegesis.

What the small Church Does to prepare for a pastor (Darrell Patterson proposal):

1. *Avoid the “Big Box” seminary:* While the big box seminary has many students, skilled professors, excellent facilities, and endless learning opportunities, they are doing an inferior job preparing young men to preach the Word from the pulpits of small churches. For the most part, they are entirely disconnected from the local church.
2. **SOLUTION** – Hundreds of small (maybe even tiny) Bible colleges and institutions are preparing young men for ministry. These colleges are often integrally connected to a local church, and all the professors are active in the church.
3. *Buy a House:* If your small church does not own a house for the pastor to live in, buy one. If it owns one, fix it up. I am convinced that this is essential for small churches in the future.
4. *Raise Up Boys to Preach:* In the end, the local church must call their pastor. It is equally their responsibility to raise up their future pastors. Men aged 50-60 years old may be great pastors in their retirement years, and a little training would enable them to carry out their ministry with strength.

Before leadership development and large-scale leadership events became popular a few decades ago, most mainline denominational churches followed a top-down power structure. The pastor’s role in the local church was more influential and authoritative than other church members. The pastor had a say in most of the local church’s decisions. Leadership training proposes a shift from a single leader to a team model. The shift embraces the power of creative leadership by aggregating the power of gifts, talents, experiences, and networking. Not all of what Patterson wrote might be reflective of most

small churches; however, it cannot be denied that theological training and leadership readiness is no longer the task of the seminary alone. What Patterson shared is the mindset and attitude that most disaffiliation churches from the United Methodist denomination are dealing with at this season. The local churches are looking for pastors, and the theological training might not be as critical at some point. Lovett H. Weems, Jr., reports that “Compared to all United Methodist churches, disaffiliating churches have pastors who are less likely to be an active elder and more likely to be part-time local pastors, associate members, lay supply, and retired clergy. Only 37 percent of disaffiliating churches were served by an active elder compared to 43 percent for all United Methodist churches.”

The old conversation is still ongoing about the necessity of seminary education in order to serve the local church. Jason Allen's book *Discerning Your Call to Ministry*, Rooted in 2 Timothy 2:15, Allen emphasized what Timothy was asked to do: prepare for his ministerial service. Allen's answer to the question is NO, seminary is not necessary, BUT it is strongly advisable considering the following:

1. *The complexity of our times.* Every generation of Christians faces unique challenges and new questions about social, political, legal, moral, and religious convictions. The question of war, sexual orientation, gender, equality, education, and climate issues, there are “torturously complex ramifications of sin, and a cultural elite doggedly committed to undermining Christians and their worldview. In the face of such challenges, “the lost need more than shallow answers from ill-equipped ministers. They need ministers prepared to bring the full complement of Christian truth to bear in a winsome, thoughtful, and compelling way.” This full complement of Christian truth is the core curriculum of any worthwhile seminary.
2. *The centrality of teaching the Scriptures.* The task of proclamation requires “a renewed and informed mind. There is simply no place in ministry for sloppy exegesis, shoddy interpretation, or shallow sermons. One can be a faithful minister without a seminary degree, but one cannot be a faithful minister without knowing the Bible well.” Is seminary the only means of

learning how to “rightly handle the Word?” No, but it is undoubtedly an effective and time-tested one.

3. *The consequences of ministry.* “There is an alarming inverse correlation between the seriousness of the ministerial task and the casualness with which it is often approached.” The new trend is everything “smart” – smart devices. We would never allow an untrained person to operate on us, but we settle for a flood of mediocrity when it comes to the health of our souls. “Satan is serious about his calling; ministers must be serious about theirs. The ministry is too consequential to be taken casually.” Does this necessitate seminary? No, of course not. Does it make it advisable? Perhaps so.
4. *The priority of the Great Commission.* The vision for this call is crystal clear about moving into the neighborhood due to “a great burden for the lost, a passion for the glory of God in the salvation of sinners, *and* an equipped mind to reason, teach, and persuasively present the gospel.” Getting to know the neighborhood people, their needs, hopes and dreams, fears, and concerns provides pastors with the context for the theological work required. The theological allocation that aligns with the missional context is knowledge gained through a seminary education, not a self-help adventure.”
(Jason Allen, Loc. 1379)

Healthy Church

Resources abound on church health, such as books, podcasts, videos, events, and workshops, from national and global perspectives. However, the annual reports on the state of the church's health show a consistent decline for over a decade. The effort has been to redefine the language and reframe the understanding of church health. Peter Scazzero aims “to move from the traditional discipleship model to a transformative one in which people experienced deep change” (xix). The big change in the organic life of the church is the setup for good health, and good health would yield transformation.

Nowadays, more than ever before, some new pastoral leaders have overcome the feelings of shame, fear, and failure and confidently introduced themselves as “Hi, I am _____ (Karl), and I am a Small Church Pastor” (Vaters, *Grasshopper Myth* Loc.

3151). This may sound familiar, it is because it is the way the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 Steps Recovery Program introduces and welcomes others into the gathering community. It is also a way of owning the “current reality” that has not been taught at seminary, nor is it an acceptable title for any pastor, let alone the local church, who does not want such title affiliation. Remember the twelve Hebrew spies who reported to Moses and said that they “seemed like grasshoppers in their own eyes?” (Num. 13:33). Brené Brown says that “Shame hates having words wrapped around it. If we speak shame, it begins to wither” (58). In the mind of the Hebrew spies, in their perception, it gave way to their fears if they were shamed by not being of the same gigantic stature as their enemies. Vaters suggests this way of introduction of not being ashamed to be a small church pastor is the first step toward becoming an “Ex-grasshopper” (*Grasshopper Myth* Loc. 3451)

Passing the first step and embracing freedom from shame, the Great Commission comes into focus, which was every follower’s first love. The labels of small church pastor and small church disappear. The Great Commission then becomes the source where all ministry life flows. Pappas says, “A healthy small church takes the prophetic stance that bigger is not always better! Powerful things are done in and through small churches for very few dollars. In the small church, people matter more than ‘success.’ The small church demonstrates a social ecology of stewardship and harmony. People are ends not means” (7).

Between January 4 and February 1, 2023, Tony Morgan surveyed 349 churches of 100 to over 7,000 in worship attendance. The survey was once again to observe the differences between growing and declining churches and found the following:

- Growing churches *are more likely to have small groups and more people connected to those smaller groups.*
- Growing churches *spend less on paid staff and have more volunteer engagement.*
 - Declining churches *have fewer people making decisions to follow Jesus or getting baptized.*
 - Declining churches *are more likely to have Sunday School.*
 - Declining churches *have far fewer first-time connections to the church – indicating that they have become insider-focused.*
 - Declining churches *are more likely to be connected to a denomination.*

A good report from the doctor frames a moment when the body is doing what it is supposed to do. The mindset of the people in a healthy church culture knows the church is not for them; instead, it is about them being on God's mission for "God's glory" (Vaters, "*100 Days*" 168). This project noted that churches are small for many reasons. Furthermore, healthy small churches do not spend time contemplating their smallness; instead, they do what healthy churches do: going with God where God goes.

Healthy Leadership for the Small Church

Healthy leadership is an essential priority for all churches, irrespective of their size, whether explicitly acknowledged or not. The era when trust was freely granted to individuals claiming a calling to the ministry at the local church has passed. In every work of literature and all other media platforms, leadership is identified as one of the highest, if not the highest, priorities for the operation of every organization, and the church is no exception. As an ADP Research Institute faculty member, Marcus Buckingham, in his blog asks how organizational leaders got to "think that excellence is the opposite of failure. Furthermore, we study disease to understand health and divorce to understand happy marriages. If we study bad to learn, understand, and do good, what we get is 'not bad' instead of good."

The church was believed to have the finest leadership model, as demonstrated by Jesus Christ and the leadership team he invited to learn from him. Leadership lessons learned from Jesus began with a clear vision. The vision Jesus proclaimed was not limited to just the disciples but was meant for the church until the end of days. Pappas reflected on leadership, saying:

The greatest single resource to appropriate God's tomorrow is quality leadership—leadership that seeks God's heart, loves the small church, understands the nature of the small church, and can act appropriately within it. This type of leadership cares about the small church. It believes that each congregation is a magnificent creation of the almighty God, and that each congregation is called to a ministry that it alone can accomplish. It believes that each congregation is a mission outpost in its time and place, no matter how small. And it believes that each congregation has its own wonder and beauty that can be released by believing in it. (9)

The church is healthiest when all its activities are anchor to the Great Commission. The leadership of local churches are most impactful when they spend more time with God. The church has it easy; it does not need to call a meeting to determine its purpose. Matthew 25 documented what Jesus had in mind as the purpose of the church. Many churches had designed their own version of the Great Commission according to their context. Not all churches that had developed their own church vision grasped the power and the clarity of what Jesus said in Matthew 25.

Here again, with the flawed educational process that Buckingham mentioned before, it is our human nature to spend a good part of our lives living in a dangerous world. In that dangerous world, avoiding danger shape how people lives. People identify what is unhealthy and dangerous and plan accordingly which Scazzero says that healthy leaders resist the gravitational pull of the following:

- Unhealthy Commandment 1: It's Not a Success Unless It's Bigger and Better.
- Unhealthy Commandment 2: What You Do Is More Important than Who You Are

- Unhealthy Commandment 3: Superficial Spirituality Is Okay
- Unhealthy Commandment 4: Don't Rock the Boat as Long as the Work Gets Done. (36-41)

Not to disappoint Buckingham, Rainer, the Founder and CEO of Church Answers in his online blog, identifies the “Seven Traits of a Healthy Church Leader”:

1. They embrace change - and are not afraid of change.
2. They have a healthy grasp of history – grateful for the past, but they do not dwell there.
3. They constantly evaluate methodologies – constantly asking how can we do better?
4. They intentionally interact with non-Christians – get out of the office and into the community.
5. They accept responsibility – they do not have time for the blame game.
6. They see reality – no fear of knowing the unashamed truth.
7. They invest in one (and only one) major outwardly focused effort at a time – it is one of focused simplicity.

For the last few decades, more than ever before, pastoral leaders have been leaving the ministry at an increasing rate. On April 27, 2022, on their website, Barna Research reported that “stress, isolation, and political division factor into pastors’ desire to quit. Over half of the pastors who have considered quitting full-time ministry (56%) say due to immense stress, 43% said it was the feeling of loneliness and isolation, and 38% wanted to leave the ministry because of political divisiveness”. Doubtless, health is a communal commitment for both the pastor and the local church. When either the pastor or the local church is unhealthy, the ministry suffers, and when both are healthy, the ministry will catch fish like never before, as John 21:6-8 says, and that would not be a fishing story.

Small Church vs. Big Church

I have never heard of Tongan churches comparing their sizes to one another. We are an island, so perhaps that's why, or perhaps it's because we just had villages to live in, which is all we had. I wonder whether we did not hear or think that way because we were all living in the village or island together. Mark is correct in real life when he says that "a house divided against itself will not be able to stand" (Mark 3:25). The comparison disorder had crept into church discourse and had done nothing positive for the church's overall mission.

Not too long ago, social media was very loud about Andy Stanley's interpretation of big and small churches. Stanley, who leads a large congregation in Atlanta, shared his vision for a big church accommodating many middle and high school students. He talked about the importance of having ministries that suit different age groups. Following is an excerpt from what he said in his sermon:

This is one reason we build big churches. People say, 'Why do you have to make them so big?' Let me tell you why we make them so big. You probably didn't know this. This is kind of an insider secret. We want churches to be large enough so that there are enough Middle Schoolers and High Schoolers that we don't have one youth group with Middle School and High School together. We want there to be so many adults that there will be so many Middle School and High School kids that we can have two separate environments. So, when I hear adults say, 'Well I don't like a big church, I like about 200, I want to be able to know everybody,' I say, 'You are so stinking selfish. You care nothing about the next generation. All you care about is you and your 5 friends. You don't care about your kids or anybody else's kids.' You're like, 'What's up?' I'm saying if you don't go to a church large enough where you can have enough Middle Schoolers and High Schoolers to separate them so they can have small groups and grow up the local church, you are a selfish adult. Get over it. Find yourself a big old church where your kids can connect with a bunch of people and grow up and love the local church" (Miller)

The discord within the family is a reality, and it is perplexing. The tendency to compare oneself with others is a two-way street. Small churches that are not healthy have exploited their benefits while voicing grievances about larger congregations. Similarly, large churches that are not healthy have leveraged their advantages, criticized other thriving large churches, and looked down upon all smaller congregations. The incident involving Andy Stanley exemplifies the unhealthy aspect of both clergy and congregation members who are so devoted to their local church that they forget who the church truly belongs to. Indeed, age-appropriate ministries should be implemented where necessary, but in many church settings, such segregation may not be the best fit. As Vaters pointed out, numerous “healthy small churches remain small” for various reasons. (*Small Church Essentials* 26). Christian Arnold, in his online article entitled, *What are the benefits of attending a small church vs. a large one?* listed the following:

Small Churches:

- Intimate relations with pastor and congregation
- Feel more significant or involved.
- More transparency with church operations
- Get to watch the church grow
- Intimate atmosphere of worship
- Decisions are made by fewer people.

Big Churches:

- More activities and events due to more resources
- More people meaning more relationships or more choice in relationships.
- More opportunities to volunteer.
- Generally better worship teams
- More young people in the Youth Ministry

(Arnold)

In *Small Church Essentials*, Karl Vaters suggests that “when things are regularly improving, change becomes part of the DNA of the church. A popular aphorism states, “there are three constants in life: death, paying taxes, and change.” Change can be

difficult, and yet everyone loves change: change from an old car to a new car, from old shoes to a new pair of shoes, from a diaper to a bigger diaper – you see, everyone loves that change. Change cannot be avoided; it is a part of our lives. Leaders and organizations that can adapt to their context properly and interpret how to appropriate the required adjustments will survive with vigor (Crandall 4). Healthy churches create an environment where change becomes the DNA of the culture and mindset. For churches that made changes a part of their DNA, Vaters said, “innovation becomes normal, but innovation needs a plan and a process if it is going to work consistently” (108). Big churches do not have a monopoly on innovation. One of the assumed privileges the laity of small churches has is the right to complain about the big church. The small churches in this study's outward expression of the “grasshopper” (Vaters, *The Grasshopper Loc.* 63) mindset, which I call the “comparison disorder,” signals a defeated attitude for losers. Comparison disorder is when someone replaces reality with incomplete knowledge to compare themselves to others.

The works of literature on both sides of the Christian church family lay out their invitation to be a part of their church, albeit a small church or, on the other hand, a big church. However, Nathan Lorick reminds both camps of the reason for the church, saying, “ministering to a large church does not make you successful; being faithful wherever God has planted you do [sic]. That could be a small, rural church or an urban mega-church. It doesn't matter as long as you are where God has placed you” (Lorick Loc. 383). Among many other authors, Lorick sang in unison that an unhealthy church means dying and a healthy church means living.

FOR a healthy Small Church

Words, theological perspectives, and biases of two uniquely gifted leaders in the United Methodist denomination opened windows by which United Methodist lay and clergy alike opened their emotions and took their stands on either side of the small church doors. Entitled, *Why Willimon is Wrong About Small Churches*, bishop Scott J. Jones filed a minority report on Bishop William Willimon regarding some points that needed correction. Jones argues the following corrections:

1. *Willimon neglects the Gospel mandate to preach the good news “to the ends of the earth.”* That includes rural communities where United Methodist churches will be small. In small towns all over America, the United Methodist Church is usually an outpost of love, joy, service, and the good news about Jesus. They are strategic and need to be strengthened as much as possible.
2. *Clarity* - Bishop Willimon has confused the issue in harmful ways by overgeneralizing about small membership churches. I have found that missionally effective and vital small congregations are doing amazing ministry in rural areas. Some are even open-country churches working hard to engage their mission field.
3. *Bishop Willimon never specifies what he means by “subsidy.”* No congregation should be paying for the pastoral leadership of another church, except for new congregations with a fixed number of years of declining support. Where such subsidies still exist, conferences should end them now. Subsidizing pastoral compensation is bad practice except in temporary and rare instances.

Though Jones's response to Willimon is uniquely United Methodist in its context, Jones's foundational correction is rooted in how the small church lived out the Great Commission. The one-on-one contact between individuals is the mandate, and that is the “pattern and strength of the small church” (Crandall 81). How the small churches lived out their evangelism mandate by “doing most naturally when they are excited about what God is doing in their lives – they invited people to church” (92). The step toward inviting others is a big deal for most people in the church. Inviting signals an open door to both parties, and it only works when the one who gives the invitation is meant to be the host

(to go and sit with). And “when the small church lives into its divine nature, the small church is a redemptive presence in society. The small church is often dismissed as quaint, old-fashioned, peculiar, filled with “characters,” and so on. While those labels are sometimes accurate, they can obscure a more profound truth: the small church is a subversive element in our culture” (Pappas 7).

Vaters has boldly articulated the emerging culture and mindset for pastors and laity of the “new small church.” The term “new small church” chosen by Vaters implies a fresh culture and mindset, signifying the energy and attitude that pastors and laity of small churches must adopt as their initial step towards health (loc 221-22) :

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. We are not sick. | 7. We are not incompetent. |
| 2. We are not failing. | 8. We are not limited in our vision. |
| 3. We are not stuck. | 9. We do not need to be fixed. |
| 4. We are not sick. | 10. We are not less than... |
| 5. We are not failing. | 11. We are God's idea. |
| 6. We are not stuck. | 12. We are small. |

Vaters' lists of “not” is an indictment on the church folks. As previously confessed, too many conversations have been held where this list painted the mental images that triggered an emotional self-righteousness toward the small churches. Vaters emphasizes the strength of small churches: the “sense of belonging. When someone is absent, others will notice” (Byassee 7). The concept of tough love in small churches is a relationship tool that shortens the spaces between people. Byassee refers to it as the “glory of small churches. In such settings, it is impossible to avoid someone you dislike. The church is too small for anonymity. It becomes incredibly challenging to avoid greeting or conversing with someone you'd rather not interact with” (58).

NOT FOR Small Church

Hearing from a United Methodist bishop who clearly stated a leadership perspective regarding his mindset, passion, personal experiences, and borderline distaste of the people in small churches was shocking. This stands opposed to Jason Byassee, who says that “small churches are just God’s primary way of saving people” (112), Willimon disagrees when he points out the small church culture and mindset that he says he often found to be characterized by “deadly, club-like interiority, insufferable triviality, and hostility toward newcomers” (“Tough Truth”). Uniquely United Methodist is the connectional structure that joins every United Methodist church under the local name of Annual Conferences. Whether small churches are a liability to the Annual Conferences is one of the ongoing conversations regarding small churches. Small churches can be a “marvelous work of God, but it can also exercise a stranglehold upon the denomination” (“Tough Truth”). Even Byassee, who believes in and is passionate about the small church, says, “I’ve seen Methodist churches that simply won’t close. District Superintendents and bishops do have to tell some congregations when to go to hospice, and as Christians, we know death is not the ultimate ill” (loc. 241).

Like Byassee, Rainer at Church Answer on his blog entitled, “Why We Have Been Discouraged from Putting a Stake In The Ground for Small Churches,” reports what others have said about why it is not a good idea to support or resource small churches:

- *More people are attending larger churches* – Only 8% of American churches have an attendance above 250, but the majority attend larger churches.
- *It is not good business to focus on smaller churches*- True if we are in the business of making money, but we are about making disciples.
- *Many smaller churches are barely surviving* – that is a true statement.
- *Smaller churches do not have the resources to train their leaders and equip their laity* – Yes, that is the current reality for most small churches, but we do not have to accept that.

The critique against small churches is directed explicitly at “unhealthy small churches.” These arguments are rooted in the life cycle and history of these institutions. Individuals like Willimon, who oppose small, unhealthy churches, make their decisions based on retrospection. Interestingly, this retrospective view is often where one finds the laity of dying churches, hopes and dreams.

Research Design Literature

The research design for this qualitative study is narrative inquiry (Sensing 179). A pre-intervention approach aims to excavate the culture and mindset of the small United Methodist churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference. For some time now, at the Louisiana Annual Conference Annual Meeting, the conference has voted to approve closing churches. The question that is subtly being asked, and sometimes even joked about in the hallways, is: Why are we closing? Like many other habits in organizational processes, leadership is typically where things land, so the first step for the research design was to ask the Shreveport district superintendent for help identifying churches that fit the parameters of this study. Typical of a top-down organizational power structure, information traveled downward with the assumption that detailed information would be readily available. The research was requested and was subsequently approved to be conducted by the Shreveport district superintendent's office.

After the 2023 Annual Conference, among the remaining churches in the Shreveport United Methodist District were twenty-two small churches. The district office provided the names and contacts of all seventeen pastors and identified twenty-two churches that fit the research design. Even though the sample size was small, pastors had

to be under appointment by the bishop in order to be in the study. According to Patton, “sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose, the usefulness, the credibility, and what can be done with the available time and resources” (184).

All twenty-two churches, their pastor, and the district superintendent were invited to participate in the study. Upon receiving the names and contacts for pastors, phone calls, text messages, Facebook video calls, and Zoom calls were made with a brief description of the project. All seventeen pastors were asked to participate and asked for the names and contact information of the lay persons to call for the same invitation. SurveyMonkey is the online survey platform that this research used. All available contacts were uploaded to the SurveyMonkey website. The contacts were entered into three groups: laity, pastors, and district superintendent. Each group had their own set of questions to answer. The study used self-developed survey questionnaires intended to find answers to the Research Questions.

The SurveyMonkey platform sent, collected, and analyzed the data according to what the study defined. Upon entering the SurveyMonkey site, each participant was provided a consent form. Those participants who clicked “yes” to the consent form continued into the survey, and those who clicked “no” were immediately logged out. Upon receiving the survey questionnaire responses, they were carefully read, sorted, re-read, adjusted, and coded. The same human protection protocol was observed regarding their name, church name, contact information, and all their stories. Each participant was matched to a signed consent form from each participant without exception.

As the researcher, I carefully upheld the ethical responsibilities of all the pastors and laity who participated in the study (Sensing 31). This encompassed safeguarding

their privacy, respecting their rights, and acknowledging their contributions. Protecting each one who voluntarily participated in this research is particularly pertinent in the United Methodist Church and the current climate of disaffiliation. As though the disaffiliation was not stressful enough, both pastors and laity navigated the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. No pastor desires to be labeled as the one who shuts down a church. Likewise, congregants may not readily disclose that their previous church had to close when they joined a new church. Such sensitive information was handled with utmost confidentiality and care.

Summary of Literature

This chapter lays out the biblical and theological foundation for the research. It scrutinizes the cultures and mindsets of small churches through the lens of biblical and theological narratives. From the beginning, God had a vision for his people. Jesus commissioned his followers to teach, baptize, and make disciples as they go. The Great Commission is for all churches, regardless of size, and no church is disqualified from fulfilling this mission. The church has been entrusted with a significant gift (the Great Commission) by the Master, who will one day return and ask for his gift back. A time will come when the church (the people) must account for how they have utilized the Master's gift.

The passion that pastors, laity, believers, and even non-believers have for the church, as seen in literature, is unsurprising. Small churches have identified several common themes as reasons for their decline. While there were many factors, some specific to their context, the primary underlying issue was God's VISION for the church.

Literature across all platforms was unequivocal about the causes and ultimate cost (a dead church). Rainer says, “A church that was probably born out of vision would be the church that died because she no longer had a vision”(4). Causes included lacking love, lacking hospitality, having an inward focus, possessing an attitude of ownership, fear, drama, and a few domineering individuals.

“Every struggling church can choose its future with dignity by actively trusting in these three assurances: God’s power is made perfect in weakness, new life is possible, and death is not the end. Nothing is assured if we choose to do nothing. Buildings do not last; we are merely stewards” (Kotan and Schroeder). Thus, the search for a solution to small churches’ unhealthy culture and mindset seems to involve many strategies and techniques apart from the Great Commission. Pastors and laity need to question whether pursuing a healthy church is merely a means to increase numbers, which are often used as a measure of health. If the actions you intend or are currently taking do not necessarily contribute to an increase in numbers, yet you still choose to proceed, then you are likely on the correct path.

“God’s Vision” for the church was the cornerstone of this research. The study extensively discussed major themes about God’s vision for his people from biblical and theological perspectives. This chapter explored critical aspects of God’s vision for his church, including dying churches, growing churches, small churches, large churches, healthy small churches, and unhealthy small churches. In addition, the research noted the unique current realities within the life of the United Methodist denomination, which was grappling with disaffiliation. These realities significantly influenced the direction of this

study. Lastly, Chapter 2 provided a summary of the research design and the data collection process used in this study.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter 3 provides the data collection plan for discerning why small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remain small, continue to decline, or even close, and then suggests best practices for reversing this trend. The data sources include a survey that was sent to the seventeen pastors and the laity of the twenty-two small churches whom they served in the Shreveport District. From all that the survey was sent, fifteen laity from seven churches, six pastors, and the district superintendent all voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. Narrative analysis engages qualitative narrative inquiry methodology to identify trends, commonalities, habits, patterns, and emotions by comparing participants' lived experiences and churches in reference to literature reviews. Steps were taken to evaluate, sort, re-evaluate, and sort all of the data collected again.

Nature and Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project was to discern reasons why small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remain small or continue to decline and even close and then suggest best practices for reversing this trend. The findings and observations throughout this research revealed the phenomenological patterns found in literature, blogs, and YouTube videos regarding the culture and mindsets of pastors and laypersons of small churches. The historical nature of the narratives that pastors and laity of small churches lived out in each ministry context illuminated the participants' strong yet delicate emotions about their connections to their local church. A plausible outcome of

the research was a better understanding that set pastors and laity in motion on a different journey away from inactivity. When the pastor and the laity got out of the church building on purpose, a plausible outcome was a diminishing burnout rate for both the pastor and laity alike. In addition, the impact of COVID-19 and the ongoing disaffiliation within the United Methodist denomination only intensified the drama that small church pastors and laity had been dealing with knowingly and unknowingly, which only accelerated the journey toward burnout for both pastor and laity.

Research Questions

RQ #1. In the opinion of pastors, lay leaders and district superintendents, why do small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remain small or continue to decline and even close?

In life, personal or organizational, all were going somewhere and would arrive at some destination, but only a few arrived on purpose. Research Question #1 sought to reveal pastors, laity, and district superintendent's intentions and understanding regarding where the church was heading and why the church was going that way. Each pastor and lay leader shared three common realities that shaped their mindset and uniquely fit each of their ministry contexts. The three were as follows: 1) educational level for both laity and pastor, 2) emotional attachment to the local church, and 3) a sense of possessiveness (mine) as opposed to ownership (stewardship). RQ #1 aimed at uncovering the essence of how pastors and laity assessed the current realities of their church. In other words, what were the pastor's and laity's diagnoses of their church after they gave their own church's "physical exam." The literature review affirmed the importance of the Great Commission in

explaining why Jesus called the church into being. It emphasized that the church's financial practices should align with the purpose of the church, and its activities at that time should have been in line with this purpose. Pastors addressed RQ #1 through the Pastor Survey Interview (B) 1, 4, 5, and 8, revealing pastoral leadership perspectives of why the church is where it is. The laity responded to RQ #1 through the Laity Survey Interview (C) 1, 5, and 8, giving reasons for making decisions that led the church to where it is. On the District Superintendent Leadership Survey interview level (D), responses to RQ #1 by 2, 5, and 6 revealed why decisions were made at the Conference Office level regarding the small churches.

To better understand the current realities of each church, each pastor was given a questionnaire requesting personal as well as professional information such as level of education, total years in ministry, length of service at the current appointment, age, and interview questions (B) that may have shaped his/her attitude about small church culture and mindset.

RQ #2. In the opinion of pastors, lay leaders and district superintendents, what practices could help reverse the trend of small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remaining small or continuing to decline and even closing?

As they say, in the political and for-profit business arena, “just follow the money,” which in church life meant that the allocation of the financial resources directly reflected the church’s priorities or investment. The distribution of money did not tell the whole story; pastors and laity unpacked the narratives of how decisions were made, the process, the alignment, and the evaluation. When pastors listed and explained their lived experiences

regarding pastor survey interviews 2,7 and 10 (Appendix B) in response to RQ #1, it revealed how their practice (or lack thereof) was aligned (or misaligned) with where the church was going (if they were going anywhere). The laity addressed RQ #2 when they described in laity survey interviews 2, 4, 6, and 10 (Appendix C) how they practiced their understanding of what their church was about. On the conference leadership level, the Shreveport District Superintendent shared in the district superintendent Survey Interviews 1, 7, and 9 (Appendix D) his leadership understanding and hopes for pastors and laity of the twenty-two small churches in Shreveport District.

RQ #3 Moving forward, what practices, based on participant responses and the literature review, could help reverse the trend of small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remaining small or continuing to decline and even closing?

No one could honestly deny that every church wants to grow regardless of size, location, race, or denomination. Not every church that claimed they wanted to grow really meant they wanted to grow. Growing meant growing in numbers, depth, maturity, influence, or health. Every church says they want to grow, yet not every church does what would lead to growth.

Pastors knew that throughout the survey interview, tough conversations would come. Their stories regarding B 3, 6, and 9 (Appendix B) revealed their deep assumptions about their church culture and mindset. The laity dealt with a deeper level of emotions, mostly emotions since most laity could keep the pastor distant from their church due to the itinerary process in the United Methodist denomination. As a result, the laity assumed that they cared deeper, more authentic care about their church than

pastors; although not necessarily so, that was the assumption. In C 3, 7, and 9 (Appendix C), the laity addressed the unavoidable reality of daring to walk in a different direction, do something different, and become what they believed their church was capable of becoming. The District Superintendent in D 1, 3, and 8 (Appendix D) added a big-eye view of the conference-level strategic plans for pastors and the laity of small churches.

Ministry Context(s)

Typical of United Methodist seminarians, ongoing conversations regarding which Annual Conference they would be serving was a common shared experience. Several of the United Methodist seminarians inquired whether I had lost complete touch with reality or if it was simply a matter of being excessively naive concerning the racial history of the southern United States. The idea of a big colored person who regularly wore a “skirt” in public, let alone to worship, as if that was not enough trouble, being married to a white female ordained United Methodist elder in full connection in the South, was nothing but trouble. My fellow seminarians’ reflections were rooted in two ideas: 1) the island kid was ignorant about the racial issues in the South, or 2) the island kid was straight-up crazy, neither of which was entirely wrong.

The online platform SurveyMonkey.com delivered the surveys to the laity and pastors, and after the surveys were collected, the unstructured interviews with the laity and pastors were the two primary instruments used for the study. The study of why the small churches ended up where they are was a personal yet critical encounter that pastors and laity who voluntarily signed the informed consent form were willing to have. Observations and tough conversations took place, setting pastors and laity in motion

toward their further discussion initiative. The global COVID-19 pandemic and the United Methodist disaffiliation process influenced the sample size for this study. Ironically, for this study, with the undercurrent of disaffiliation in the United Methodist denomination, a growing sense of distrust, suspicions, and hurts expressed in anger caused United Methodist people to become very reluctant to come together, whether they were United Methodist or not, and it was considered.

This pre-intervention qualitative study was particular in its definition, which was strictly for small United Methodist Churches defined as those whose worship attendance is fifty people or fewer. It had to be a United Methodist church, and it had to be in the Shreveport district of the Louisiana Annual Conference. Due to the time allotted, travel, finances, and the availability of participants, despite a small sample size, the depth of the narratives of lived experiences of individual and collective communal stories thickened the phenomenological perspectives of the study. After the 2023 Annual Conference, ninety-five churches requested to disaffiliate and were approved. Among the disaffiliated were small churches from the Shreveport district. Among the churches that remain in the Shreveport district were twenty-two small churches. SurveyMonkey sent the online survey questionnaire to the laities on the list that the pastors provided. Five of the twenty-two churches were African American and the other seventeen were white. Interestingly, most of these small churches were in rural area churches, and even those in town were located on the outskirts of town.

Participants

Criteria for Selection

This research was very specific in its selection criteria: 1) a small church was defined as having a worship attendance of fifty persons or fewer, 2) it had to be a United Methodist Church, and 3) only the United Methodist churches in the Shreveport District were considered. The selection of participants began with a conversation with Dr. Fowler, the former director of church extension and development of the Louisiana Conference of the United Methodist Church, regarding more than half of the United Methodist churches in the conference whose worship attendance was fifty or fewer. These small churches shared some common church life cycle patterns, such as being in the same location, same size, having the same process of studies for all ages, the same pattern of worship expression, and the same few people who did everything in the church, which meant that these individuals controlled most, if not everything, in the life of the church. Another major criterion in selecting these churches for this study was the racial ethnicity of the small churches. Given that this study took place in Louisiana (the South), despite the ongoing disaffiliation in the United Methodist denomination, it was critical to have minority churches represented in the study, which added depth to the commonalities and differences of cultural influences in decision-making.

Description of Participants

The core of this study was the common, shared, painful, and frustrating realities of year after year at the Louisiana Annual Conference, and the conference was approved by accepting those churches that decided to close. For the Louisiana Annual Conference, churches that were closed were of all races and of all geographical locations. Pastors

participated in the research study regardless of gender, race, age, level of education, level of theological training, or years of pastoral services; however, pastors must be under appointment by the bishop of the Louisiana Conference. The district superintendent of the Shreveport district was explicitly interviewed for his leadership role regarding his strategic planning, insight knowledge of the higher-ups in the conference level planning, and his narratives of lived experiences with small churches' culture and mindset. Each pastor invited their laity group who participated in the study voluntarily. Though the invitation for the laity was open to all ages, the historical narratives of their lived experiences were carefully listened to and observed to understand better the road they traveled to where they are now.

Ethical Considerations

Each participant was provided with a consent form (Appendix A) and asked to read it thoroughly before signing and returning it, indicating their voluntary participation in the study. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time. They were also advised to be mindful of the information they shared, as their stories might be included in the study without revealing their identities. All participants were informed that any digital information they shared would be stored on a password-protected computer, and all hard copies would be kept in a secure box. Both the password-protected computer and the secure box were only accessible to me.

This study aims to understand why small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remained small or continued to decline and even closed, suggesting best practices for reversing this trend. Due to COVID-19 and ongoing disaffiliation within the United Methodist denomination, the sample size for this study

decreased. Only twenty-two small churches remaining in the Shreveport District fit the parameters defined for this study. After the 2023 Louisiana Annual Conference (LAC) Annual Meeting, only twenty small churches with fifty or fewer attendees remained in the Shreveport District. Five of these twenty-two churches were African American, while the rest were white.

When the data was collected

Protecting the names of churches, pastors, laity, district superintendents, and any other conference staff who participated in the study was a high priority. For ease of reference to each church, laity, and pastor, an alpha-numeric coding system (Table 4-4) was assigned to protect their identity and stories. This Qualitative Interpretive Phenomenological analysis reflected the observations and findings in the online surveys and the unstructured interviews with pastors, laity, and the district superintendent. The survey questionnaires for pastors, laity, and district superintendent's responses and conversations were compiled according to the coding system, meaning all identifications were redacted. A few follow-up phone calls and zoom meetings clarified information and verified lived experiences to avoid potential injury to participants in this pre-intervention study. Some of the data were generalized, like the age range of the church members or worship attendees, to avoid being too specific, which could potentially suggest identifying a participant, a risk that must be avoided. Since this was a pre-intervention project to discern reasons why small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference remained small or continued to decline and even closed, and then to suggest best practices for reversing this trend, the phenomenological

analysis found common transferable principles that were true yet non-specific to any specific culture and mindset of every church, pastor, and laity.

Instrumentation Expert Review

The ministry project coach, Dr. Reid Thomas, along with Dr. Milton Lowe (the former DMin Associate Director) and Dr. Yvette Garcia (the current DMin Associate Director), helped shape how I aligned the research instrument with the research questions. They asked relevant questions about the research instruments, consent forms, data collection methodology, and how to handle the information and safety of human subjects. The experts made invaluable and informative suggestions on reorganizing, restructuring, and thus rewriting sections specifically for clarification purposes.

Reliability & Validity of Project Design

In addition to the author's personal experiences, the volume of literature reviews, the in-online surveys, and the unstructured interviews given to the pastors and laity compiled a range of understanding of the relationship between the current health of the church and the pastor and laity of small churches. Small church pastors' and laity's understanding and practices regarding the current health and the hopeful further health of the small churches fueled this study. The research instruments used in this study were reviewed and approved by the Ministry Transformation Project coach, Dr. Reid Thomas, and by the Asbury Theological Seminary Doctor of Ministry faculties: Dr. Ellen Marmon, Milton Lowe, and Dr. Yvette Garcia

Due to the small sample size for this research, participants were encouraged to share their true and relevant historical lived experiences, which gave meaning from a phenomenological perspective. I analyzed the participant narratives that responded to the survey questionnaire, follow-up phone calls, and Zoom calls to clarify information and validate historical narratives to verify the reliability of the findings. Based on the survey questions given to the participants, no limits were set to how they told the stories of their lived experiences regarding their understanding and practices of what they believed was why their church gathered weekly. The survey questions covered a range of avenues regarding the health of the church. Healthy? Why, what it is, who it is for, why some churches have it and others do not, and whether it has a desire but does not practice it. As these historical narratives from each church were analyzed, cultural and mindset principles that shaped the lived experiences of the worship attendees and the perception of new visitors surfaced.

This is not exclusive to small churches, but every church would agree they would like to grow; however, the tricky reality is still true as well that most churches are not willing nor have the stomach to do what it requires for their church to grow. This research study desires to help pastors and laity of small churches who truly meant what they said, “We are willing to do whatever it takes to grow our church,” by observing the pastor and the church’s culture and mindset. Based on the open-ended survey questionnaire, participants had unlimited opportunities to share their lived experiences and ask their own questions, revealing what matters most to them. The thoughts behind the questions were structured to allow the pastor, laity, and district superintendent the most space for detailed historical narratives and future hopes.

Most of the research utilized an online survey platform, SurveyMonkey, at SurveyMonkey.com as an instrument. The SurveyMonkey platform is software designed to deliver and collect surveys and analyze the results according to the Research Questions. Upon receiving the participants' names and contact information, SurveyMonkey sent out an online invitation to all participants. The SurveyMonkey invitation to the pastors included the consent form (Appendix A) and the survey questionnaire for pastors (Appendix B). Like the pastors, the laity whose names and contacts were provided by pastors, SurveyMonkey sent an email invitation to participate in the study, including the consent form (Appendix A). Like the pastors and laity, SurveyMonkey invited the Shreveport district superintendent of the Louisiana Annual Conference to take the survey, including the consent form (Appendix A) and the district superintendent conversation (Appendix D).

Data Collection

Upon approval by the Ministry Transformation Project coach Dr. Reid Thomas, Dr. Lowe, and IRB, the research began recruiting pastors and their lay leaders to take an anonymous online survey questionnaire via SurveyMonkey.com about their understanding and experiences. Pastors and laity were advised of their rights to participate and that they could stop participating in the study at any time. This is a pre-intervention project using narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly); though not a pure narrative inquiry study as defined by Clandinin and Connelly, it is qualitative research seeking a deeper phenomenological understanding from the lived experiences of small church pastors and laity regarding their reasons for the current health status of the church

or lack thereof. From the participants' narratives of their lived experiences, a historical methodology (Sensing) has shaped their church culture and mindset of where they have been to their current realities. The historical methodology was used to gain more insight from the participants by reframing questions asked, allowing pastors and laity to expand the retelling of their lived experience to more in-depth, a way of establishing trust given the current temperature regarding disaffiliation.

For data collection of the purposive sampling, the Shreveport district superintendent provided the list of all the small United Methodist churches that fit the parameter defined for this study. A small church was defined as a church that had fifty or fewer attending the weekly worship service. An in-person interview with the district superintendent was based on the survey questionnaire which was emailed to him prior to the in-person interview (Appendix D). Due to the uniqueness of the United Methodist as a top-down power structure organization, an in-person interview with the district superintendent was the proper communication channel organizationally, as it thickened the phenomenological communication in his storytelling from big-picture at the conference level and also as the supervisor for all of the clergy and church in his district. Upon receiving the list of the twenty-two churches, phone calls were made to all the seventeen pastors serving those twenty-two churches. Each pastor was given a concise verbal description of the purpose of the research and ended the description of the research by asking if they would be willing to participate in the research. In addition, the pastor was asked if they would invite their leadership team to participate in this study and provide a list of their names and contact information. One week was given to the pastors to recruit their team and provide the contact list. The contact information of pastors and laity who voluntarily agreed to participate was

uploaded to the SurveyMonkey platform. After completing the two weeks of collecting and uploading contacts, the survey questionnaires were distributed to those who used a computer via SurveyMonkey (surveymonkey.com) and some by phone. The first item on the online survey is a form of the consent form that every participant must sign. SurveyMonkey collected results electronically, transcripts from phone interviews, and any notes from further phone calls made for information clarification and/or verification. These results were coded manually and organized by churches, and then each narrative within each local church was compared against other small churches who participated in the study and to the analysis by literature review. Purposive sampling of participants was annotated and electronically entered into a spreadsheet in a Word document, saved to an external hard drive, copied and saved in a thumb drive stick, copied and saved on a cloud drive, and lastly, a copy was saved in the hard drive of my personal computer. These copies were saved in secure locations, which was agreed to by the participants in the informed consent form.

In-person interview time, location, and duration of one hour (established in a more central location, one of our local United Methodist churches). The unstructured interviews of pastors, laity, and the district superintendent were designed to capture non-verbal expressions and emotions, which thickened the phenomenological description of the participants' lived understanding and experiences. These results were coded manually and organized by churches, and then each narrative within each local church was compared against other small churches who participated in the study and to the analysis by literature review. Purposive sampling of participants was annotated and electronically entered into a spreadsheet in a Word document, saved to an external hard drive, copied and saved in a thumb drive stick, copied and saved on a cloud drive, and lastly, a copy was saved in the

hard drive of my personal computer. These copies were saved in secure locations, which was agreed to by the participants in the informed consent form.

Upon receiving the IRB approval, the launch of the data collection and analysis project took about two and a half months. The following steps were taken on recruiting, collecting, and analyzing the data: 1) It began with recruiting phone calls to all seventeen pastors of the twenty-two small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference (LAC) describing the purpose of the research, asking for their participation, and also asking them to provide a list of three to five laypersons who would participate in the research, and the list was to return in a week. 2) Upon receiving the layperson list from all the churches, their email addresses were uploaded to the SurveyMonkey website and sent to all the sixty-five laypersons and seventeen pastors. The participants were given a week and a half to complete the online survey. SurveyMonkey.com tracked, collected, and analyzed completed surveys daily. 3) During the online survey, final decisions were made regarding the interview time, place, and date. 4) Two weeks before the interviews, phone calls, text messages, and emails were sent reminding pastors and laity about date, time, and place where interviews took place. Most of the interviews were in local churches, and a few were in the public library. The instruments used for this qualitative research method were online survey questionnaires and unstructured survey interviews to collect data for analysis. The research used the SurveyMonkey.com platform to deliver, collect, and perform some analysis of the data. The data were screened, grouped, and coded accordingly.

Data Analysis

First, pastors were contacted for every signed informed consent form to verify the participants' information regarding church membership status, church engagement, and church contexts. Since this is a qualitative pre-intervention study, upon receiving the participant's answers to the survey questionnaires, they were manually coded (Sensing) for comparative and observational purposes of emerging and identifiable principles, themes, and/or trends. The whole narrative analysis process is summarized in Figure 3.1. Reading all the participants' narratives of their lived experiences and perspectives gave insight into their understanding of the health of their church and their hope for their local church. In reading these stories, careful notes were taken, and emerging ideas were noted and categorized. The emerging ideas were divided into categories, the categories formed themes, and the themes were used to compare and contrast within each church and other churches and what the relevant literature said about those themes. Following the narrative analysis of the participants' expressions in the survey questionnaire and the unstructured interviews, phone calls were made to validate and confirm my notes, observations, and interpretation of the shared experiences. Careful attention was given to any further conversations with any of the participants after the analysis in which any new information and/or new questions may arise that it not to be included.

Figure 3.1. Summary of Data Analysis Process

CHAPTER 4 EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

The previous chapters laid the theological foundation and literature reviews as windows through which this study looked at the mindsets of pastors, laity, and the district superintendent of small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference. This chapter reports the survey and interviews of pastors, laity, and the district superintendent of the twenty-two small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference. To protect the privacy of all participants within the historical and phenomenological approach to the research, the information shared is as close to the actual quotes as possible.

Chapter 4 delves into the culture and mindset of small churches, exploring why they often remain small, decline, and even close. I gathered personal stories (narratives) from both pastors and laypeople about how they practiced their faith within these communities. Chapter 5 delves deeper into these narratives, comparing and contrasting the findings. By analyzing these lived experiences, the project aimed to uncover potential strategies for small church leaders to consider, ultimately reversing the trend of stagnation. I approached this research with an open mind, avoiding preconceived notions about what "small" entails.

A big problem impacted the research or was rather revealing. However, the problem laid pathways to possible solutions, which is addressed in Chapter 5. This study aimed to excavate the culture and mindset of the small church. The research explored why small churches stay small, decline, and some even close. Qualitative data was collected from pastors, laity, and the district superintendent to gain insights into how best

to serve their needs within the constraints of their size. Yes, the big problem was the number of participants in the survey and the unstructured interviews.

Participants

The parameters of this research were very focused and localized in their definitions. As stated in previous chapters, it was a study of only small United Methodist congregations, their pastoral leadership, and their district superintendent in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Conference. Table 4.1. indicates the demographic summary of the small churches and their pastors upon which this study is based upon.

Table 4-1 Demographics

Demographic Summary Table: Small churches (n=22) & Pastors (n=17)

Metric	Average	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Membership	80	49	7	184
Attendance	24	13	5	55
Years of Service	20	16	2	43
Years in Current Position	4	2	2	10
Salary	\$13, 974	\$7,395	\$4, 345	\$28,000
Compensation, total	\$22,917	\$14,750	\$5,185	\$53,646

Only twenty-two small congregations remained after the Louisiana Annual Conference met in 2023. Those twenty-two small congregations were the remnants of the disaffiliation during the 2023 Annual Conference. The range of worship attendance was as low as five to thirty-six, which was the highest. There were five African American congregations, and the remainder were Anglo. Table 4.2. depicts weekly

worship attendance in these twenty-two churches. Table 4.3. is the membership of each of the twenty-two small churches in the Shreveport district. The axes displayed the records given to the Annual Conference, such as membership, in blue, and the weekly worship attendance in red. These metrics can be of tremendous help to the local church's leadership and their hopes and dreams, which will be unpacked in Chapter 5.

Table 4-2 Worship attendance and membership

Table 4-3 Membership of the twenty-two small churches:

It is no longer a discussion in the church arena whether pastors need to be more skillful as leaders than in years past. The tables below indicate the conference relations of the seventeen pastors who pastor the twenty-two small congregations in the Shreveport district. Out of the total of seventeen pastors, six of them were serving two churches each, and none of them were appointed full-time. Out of the six pastors serving a charge, one local pastor was serving less than $\frac{1}{4}$ time, three local pastors were serving $\frac{1}{4}$ time, one local pastor was serving $\frac{3}{4}$ time, and one Elder was serving $\frac{1}{2}$ time.

Table 4-4 Conference Relations

Demographic Summary Table: Small churches (n=22) & Pastors (n=17)	
Conference Relation	Number
1/4 Time Local Pastor	9
1/2 Time Local Pastor	1
3/4 Time Local Pastor	1
1/4 Time Retried Local Pastor	1
3/4 Time Retired Associate	1
1/2 Time Retired Elder	1
3/4 Time Retried Elder	1
Retired Elder	1
Full Time Elder	1

Chapter 5 discusses the conference relations of these seventeen pastors in much more detail. It raises many questions while giving a qualitative narrative of the lived

experiences of those who participated in this study. The pathways of time committed and expectations at all levels invite an in-depth observation.

Table 4.5. contains the alpha-numeric codes indicating the seven small United Methodist Congregations in the Shreveport district that voluntarily participated in the research. Privacy was a promise given to all participants; thus, personal information was redacted from all responses. When quoting a participant, a code was assigned to represent the participant.

Table 4-5 Church and Person Code Table

Alpha-Numeric Codes Assigned to Participants Table

Church Code	District Superintend Code	Pastor Code	Lay A Code	Lay B Code	Lay C Code	Lay D Code
H1	DS1	P1		LB1	LC1	
R2		P2	LA2		LC2	LD2
K3/F3		P3	LA3	LB3	LC3	
L4		P4	LA4	LB4		
A5		P5	LA5	LB5	LC5	
W6		P6		LB6	LC6	

Table 4.6. indicates the number of participants in this study. The SurveyMonkey software automatically counted the numbers of those who opened the link, inviting them to participate in the study. Indicated in Table 4.6. is the number of participants who opened the survey, which was forty. There were twenty-two individuals who completed the survey (YES). Eighteen individuals clicked “NO” (Declined) on the consent form, automatically stopping them from entering the survey.

Two of the six pastors who completed the survey were minorities; the other four were white. One of the two minority pastors pastored a minority congregation. The district superintendent's office provided what it had in the books of all twenty-two churches, a total membership of 1680, and a total weekly worship attendance of 499.

Table 4-6 Number of Participants

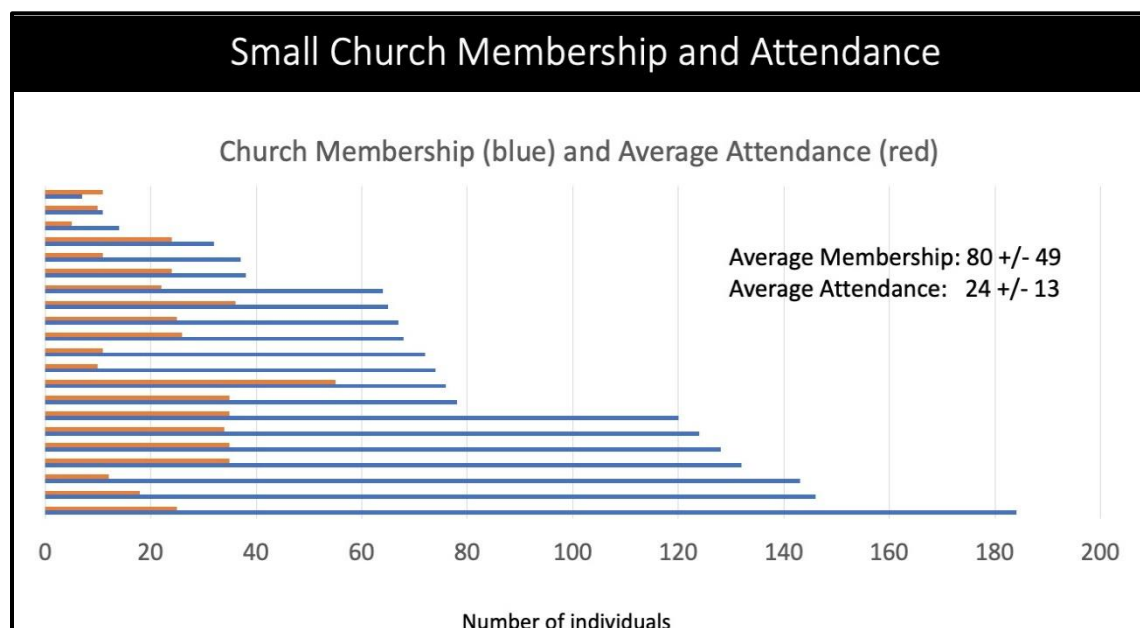
Number of people who viewed the survey Table.

	Review the survey	Completed (YES)	Declined (NO)
Pastor	13	6	7
Laity	26	15	11
District Superintendent	1	1	0
Total numbers	40	22	18

Research Question #1: Narratives of Lived Experiences as Evidence.

Life is a journey, and the journey has a beginning and an end. Successful organizations, people, and movements arrived at their intended destination on purpose, while others just arrived at some destination. Research question #1 seeks to excavate the leadership's understanding of how the local church got to where it is today and where it is going if it indeed is going somewhere. Though each congregation has its unique culture, mindset, and tendencies, commonalities exist among the small congregations. Historical narratives also create leadership tensions and disease on many levels within the conference lived locally among the small churches. Table 4.7. outlines one of the measurements that shows how many regularly attended these small congregations in relation to how many members were in their books.

Table 4-7 Number of Participants



Leadership

In the immortal words of John Maxwell in one of his leadership books entitled *The 360 Degree Leader*, “Everything rises and falls on leadership” (106). Matthew 28 tells the story of a missionary who contracted an incurable infectious disease that affected all five senses: smell, sight, taste, hearing, and touch. Many creative forces have tried to eliminate this infection throughout history, but none succeeded. Surprisingly, people from different cultures willingly chose to be infected by this disease.

The directive for this disease stated:

I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20 NLV).

The invitation to the commission to go has no exceptions nor exclusion of anyone. The sense of an open invitation for any age, gender, ethnicity, and language as long as one is

willing to fully engage in spreading the infection wherever one goes. The original twelfth started spreading the infection, and the disease has changed individuals, organizations, cultures, and even governments since then.

Leaders at three levels responded to this fatal disease in various ways, revealing how they understood the directive to “go, make, teach, and know.” In order to go somewhere, successful leaders believed that the first step was to identify where **HERE** is in order to understand where **THERE** is.

1). How did different leaders perceive their current circumstances?

Like most individuals who are diligent about their health status, they are sure to have their annual physical health exam done regularly. Similarly, the research was keen on understanding the district superintendent's unique perspective on the current circumstances of the small churches in the Shreveport District. The superintendent's insights were considered crucial in this process, just as the laities' inputs were.

There is a truism to the notion of trusting the people in the field who might know more about the ministry context and available resources to conduct ministries. However, the question regarding the appointment process of matching leadership gifts with local church and community needs to rise to the top. The district superintendent and the Louisiana Annual Conference can be helped by increasing their involvement in the lives of small church pastors and gaining a better understanding of the gifts and community needs of small churches. There is no better alternative to a stronger relationship than being in the relationship itself. Surely, within the United Methodist organizational structure, the ministerial discernment process via the Board of Ordain ministry is one of the relationship pathways in getting to know both the local ministry needs as well as the

pastoral leadership giftedness. The answer lies in a participatory approach, where everyone's voice is heard and valued.

The small church's leadership presented diverse perspectives on its current state. Some leaders, like DS1, held a more detached view, placing responsibility for growth solely on the pastor. When DS1 was asked about what his plans were for the small churches in the Shreveport district, the answer was direct and clear, saying, "It is not my responsibility." Such an answer left the researcher to wonder how the Louisiana Annual Conference could make any decision in terms of closing a small church based on anything other than money. Despite the DS1 hands-off leadership approach regarding the strategic plans for the small churches, laities like LD2, LB5, LB4, and LA5, focused on the church's positive qualities of their small church—its friendly atmosphere, focus on families, and welcoming nature. These descriptions paint a picture of a warm and supportive community, like a home (LB1) or a family (LB4, LC5, LB3). Undeniably, the small church's culture and mindset were rooted in family understanding and structures. Although each church context differs from others, what remains consistent in small churches is the integration of church activities and family activities. It is surprising to think that activities such as hunting, fishing, football, and, uniquely in Louisiana, Mardi Gras (the season of Lent) would be significant enough to prompt changes in church activities, but it is true.

However, beneath this positive surface, some leaders expressed concerns. LC5 and LC3 acknowledged the lack of younger generations, suggesting the need to revitalize the sense of community and attract a broader congregation. What LC5 and LC3 pointed out here, LA2 offered a more cautionary perspective, describing the church as "surviving

and tired," hinting at a need for renewed energy and purpose. LC6 and LB6 highlighted the church's prayerful nature and deep care among existing members, suggesting a desire to maintain those strengths while attracting new ones. This range of perspectives underscores the need for a balanced approach that preserves the church's warmth and welcoming nature while fostering growth and attracting a wider demographic.

2) Where does the leadership allocate their resources?

Many small and unhealthy churches have a prevalent culture and mindset of complaining about larger churches. This attitude is often driven by the belief that small churches lack the resources to do anything beyond what they have always been doing in their ministry. As a result, the leadership of the small churches made decisions that kept the church in the illusion bubble of being safe and protected. In certain instances, it was discovered that the church and its surrounding community had a mutual feeling of safety and being protected from each other. P1 was informed by the laity of H1 about their preferences for how things were done in the church, and he made sure to uphold those preferences until the day H1 closed the church permanently. Ultimately P1 said, "I do not think the community missed H1 at all."

The pastors' responses revealed contrasting approaches to resource allocation. Pastors P5 and P6 had dedicated significant resources to internal needs. Pastor P5 had focused on efforts to revitalize a declining congregation, suggesting an investment in outreach programs or activities to attract new members. Pastor P6 had prioritized the physical health of her predominantly elderly congregation, possibly allocating resources to health fairs, senior exercise programs, or accessible transportation for members in

need. Consistent among the small churches studied in this project, internal self-care meant that the priority of the pastor and the laity was to make sure that each family member was being cared for and acknowledged. The prayer concerns were about each other's families. It was unusual to offer a prayer about the church's mission or for someone in need of God.

However, other responses highlighted challenges that may have hindered effective resource allocation. Pastor P1 had described a church culture reliant on divine intervention ("God will come through") rather than proactive problem-solving, which might indicate resistance to allocating resources for facility maintenance or hiring cleaning staff. Additionally, Pastor P3 had expressed frustration with internal disputes that could impede collaboration and strategic resource allocation. While Pastor P4 had emphasized self-care, it was unclear if his focus on personal well-being had translated into effective leadership and resource management for the church.

3) What actions has the leadership taken, and what are they currently doing to adjust to the direction the church is heading?

Leaders understood that decision-making was a crucial part of their job. It was like a Christmas present wrapped in one complete package, containing many feelings that had the potential to impact everyone involved, including the giver, receiver, and onlookers. Pastors and laity recognized that their church's current health, activities, dreams, and hopes (if any) reflected their mindset and their choices. Pastors studied in this project shared some of the narratives of their lived experiences, which involved

various emotions that were not always easy to think about, let alone sharing them aloud with others.

P4 mentioned that one of the urgent needs is the lack of actual office hours. Despite the neighborhood not growing, the congregation is. This growth is attributed to two factors: it is the only United Methodist congregation within a fifty-mile radius, and people are retiring from Shreveport and moving to Lake Claiborne. The congregation has his phone number, and he regularly reaches out to them. P4 was a retired-reappointed pastor who had been asked by the bishop to become the first appointed pastor of a new church that was founded as part of the disaffiliation process. He had previously started a church and had been highly successful. Prior to his retirement, P4 had been one of the most successful pastors in the Louisiana Annual Conference, having led some of the largest and most influential churches in the conference. After retiring, he had been asked to serve as a pastor for several other churches and had eventually become the pastor of a new congregation. This research indicated that there was a valuable leadership lesson to be learned from P4 and H4's journey.

P5 has upgraded the audio and visual system in the sanctuary, as the old system was not adequate for the twenty first century. This was done while trying to maintain a vital ministry with a declining membership. The process of getting the church to agree that the upgrade was necessary was not easy, he said. Like most churches of all sizes, COVID-19 leveled the ground regarding how critical technology became in order to maintain connections and relationships. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, technology was a luxury and an optional discussion, and now it would be strange to think of a church without any streaming of any sort. Similarly, P2 has been there for the members of his

church, R2, when called upon. He said that no major adjustments were needed according to the laity's assessment of their current life in the church. They only improved and became better at what they had been doing. After the pandemic, the physical health of some church members was challenging in many ways, which equated to resource challenges. However, he now broadcasts services and Bible study every Sunday, which are broadcast to members and others.

P3 had undertaken some significant capital improvements in one of the churches he was pastoring. He led the church in remodeling the fellowship hall and purchased a new sound system at K3. There were no other major physical upgrades required at that time. At F3, he made the congregation understand why the church council was so important and ensured that they held council meetings as they were supposed to. P3 was concerned about how the church could grow further. One of the dual appointment pastors, P3, was an interesting case of a leadership challenge to observe. P3, a non-seminary trained pastor who was attempting to lead two churches with opposing cultures and mindsets. K3 is doing more and willing to do more, while F3 spent their time undermining each other, including the pastor. When P3 spoke of the dynamic differences between the two churches, his body language and voice reflected the emotions that he was living with. Similar to the culture and mindset present at F3, P1 was instructed by the church members at H1 to maintain the status quo, which he did. The church members' mindset was to simply attend the service, sit, listen to the music without participating, pray briefly, and then leave believing they had fulfilled their church obligation. Any suggestions for change or adjustments were not of interest to the churchgoers at H1.

P6 had mostly adapted to the congregation it served. The biggest change had been the addition of services beyond regular Sunday worship, such as Advent, Lenten, and Easter celebrations. The availability of these services depended on the members' physical health. The pastoral leaders of the small churches indicated that the ministry practices in these churches were consistent with what literature said about declining and dying churches. Some pastors had shared that the activities and life of small churches were shaped around family life and activities, and at times, even pastors had to adjust their ways to meet the demands of the laity.

4) How do leaders think their current practices influence the size of the church?

Based on the literature review, pastoral leadership plays a crucial role in the growth of a church. Therefore, the level of maturity of pastoral leadership can be determined by the outcomes of their decisions. This project studied various pastors, and despite some having more leadership training and experience than others, they all faced similar emotions during the decision-making process. I observed that the age and professional experiences of the pastors lent them a unique perspective, which contributed to their ability to tolerate pain. Similar to grandparents, most of them enjoyed their grandchildren, and this is due, in part, to their knowledge of which battles to fight, and which ones were not worth their resources.

In the survey, P4 shared that their new church (H4) was experiencing growth this season for the first time. According to him, three reasons accounted for this growth. First, the joy of the Lord was their strength. Second, disaffiliation sent people to them. Third, they offered one of the few opportunities for responsible sacramental theological

expressions. He felt that these factors had played a significant role in the growth of their church. A new church was planted by the Louisiana Conference, and P4 was appointed as the very first pastor of this new church. As mentioned in previous chapters, the church arrived at a small size from both directions, and H4 was a small church on its way up as it continued to pursue the Great Commission in its community context. Somewhat like the H4 church, P2 mentioned that their church was the only United Methodist Church in the demographic area, and other denominations surround them. While this proximity had helped them attract some members, it also made it difficult for them to differentiate themselves from other churches. Although H2 was not a new church, the fact that it was the only United Methodist one in that area offered a unique choice for those who might have been interested in trying a different church experience. In the case of P2 and his church (H2), the community had the choice of going with family tradition or investigating a relationship with God on their own apart from the family tradition.

P5, on the other hand, stated that the school system was not the best, and young people were moving away from the area. Their congregation was aging, and most members were unwilling to use social media or up-to-date worship methods. Therefore, they found it challenging to attract new members to their church. The literature review revealed that community migration contributed to the resizing of churches. In this community, young people often select universities far from their homes to distance themselves from their families. As a result, they only visited their homes occasionally.

One of the small churches in this study experienced growth, unlike the new church (H4). P3 shared that K3 had seen significant growth in the last two years, with 26 new members joining the church. In contrast, F3, an older congregation, had seen many

people leave because of the previous pastor. It was also located far from the highway, making it challenging for people to notice or find the church. A single non-seminary-trained local pastor is serving two diametrically opposite churches. It was not difficult to observe the dramatic fluctuations in the pastor's demeanor and energy and how he felt about his leadership ability, reflecting on two different churches' outcomes.

Not too far different from what P3 experienced at K3, according to P1, their church's mindset was that they liked being small, loved each other, and preferred familiar faces in the church over newcomers. This mindset influenced their practices, making it challenging for them to attract new members. The literature review clearly stated that when the church leadership turned its focus inwardly, the countdown was for that church to close its doors. Not too far behind H1 would be H6, as P6 shared that their church had been in decline for years as members aged and died. They had accepted their fate rather than attempting to attract new members, which had further contributed to the decline of the church. An observation of the current appointment process suggested that the cabinet, comprising of the three district superintendents and the bishop, consider the acceptance of fate by a local church. It would be fair also to suggest that they are comfortable appointing a pastor (and their family) to the local church that has accepted their "fate."

5) What activities do the church leadership believe give life to the church?

The laities' responses opened windows into the leadership's vision for activities revitalizing the church. What energized the laity to be part of church life is suggested to be of a higher concern than whether the current leadership vision aligned with the Great Commission. A strong emphasis is placed on spiritual nourishment through music and

Bible teachings (LD2, LA3, LB3, LC2). These elements, along with fellowship (LC1) and worship (LB4), created a holistic experience that catered to the congregation's spiritual and social needs. A closer observation of the laities' understanding of their commitments to the church, Jesus is nowhere in their list. It was much easier to tell in the small church activities that the regular members were arriving, and it was not just a setup for a launching place. Instead, it was more of a destination. The call of the Great Commission is still intended to go into the world instead of coming and stay in the church.

Beyond internal focus, the laities highlighted the importance of outreach and service. LC5 and LC3 actively emphasized inviting newcomers and helping those in need, reflecting a commitment to extending the church's love and care beyond its walls. This, along with the positive energy and desire to help others (LB1, LB6), positioned the church as a beacon of hope for the community. LA5's optimism suggested a belief that the church can expand its reach and do "so much good" in the future. Notably, LC6 found strength in the church's prayer network, underscoring the importance of a spiritual foundation for all activities. While LA2 valued the church's history, LA4 highlighted the potential for growth through disaffiliation, suggesting a willingness to adapt and evolve. This collective vision, encompassing spiritual development, fellowship, outreach, and a future-oriented perspective, provided a roadmap for activities that can truly breathe life into the church.

The laities' sentiment was aligned with what the literature review indicates is the missing part in the small church process. The church knew what it was supposed to do for the community and what the community needed. In practice, resources were

allocated to enable the self-care ministries instead of the community care ministries.

Essentially, maybe what was more fitting than to wordsmith how the laity experienced nourishment in the life of the church was expressed best in the “Prayer of Confession” in the communion liturgy and specifically the phrase “we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors”(Bennett).

6) Are there essential leadership skills and training required in order to set the church in motion toward a different future?

As reported, the small churches in the Shreveport district were pastored by reappointed retirees and by part-time non-seminary-trained pastors. DS1 observed that most pastors serving small churches were individuals who had chosen this as their second career. They received their training through Courses of Study. However, the pastoral leadership in these small congregations often lacked the same level of leadership exposure and experience as some of those serving in larger congregations.

- **Organizational Skills:** There is a significant need for more help and guidance regarding structuring processes and flows within the local church.
- **Commitment to Maturity:** Going deeper in faith is as important as growing in numbers.
- **Creative Communication:** It is crucial to reframe the definition of success according to the ministry context of each church.
- **Bias for Growth and Passion:** These are essential for the local church's mission.

The laity of the small churches has often been misunderstood and mislabeled regarding their attitude and mindset regarding who has been sent as a pastor. There could be an argument made regarding their concerns, and the study considered that in light of the appointment process. The following were the laities' narratives regarding their assessment and expectation of the pastoral leadership that has been and is currently serving at their local church.

Some of the laity looked back over the years of lived experiences, like LD2, who said, "Most if not all of the pastoral leaders who have been at their church have always been very devoted to their Christian beliefs, though some were better than others in their leadership roles." Most of the laity shared a similar attitude; however, the individual preferences of which pastoral leaders were favorite were obvious, and there were those that expressed not much care by not remembering those pastor's names.

The itinerancy process was unique to the structure of the United Methodist movement, and the laity expressed their attitude and mindset regarding its impact on their local church. The literature review indicates that healthy change takes appropriate and necessary time. Such change impacts the pastor, family, and the local church. Thus, both sides are being forced to make instant adjustments regarding leadership styles, local community context, local church context, and each other's expectations. These types of changes often result in unnecessary pain. Like LD5 said, "Our church changes pastors every three years or less, and while some of them were dedicated and passionate about their work, others treated it like just another job." However, he recognized that he had a part to play, and so he added, "Personally, I have been involved in several areas of the church during this time."

One of the hardest parts of developing leadership within the church involved reviewing the performance of each employee. According to a literature review, successful organizations had made it a critical part of their culture to provide every employee with an opportunity to learn about their position within the organization. In the case of the church, pastoral leaders were aware that they were under scrutiny every day during every church activity. Like LC5 said, “Our current leader seems to lack motivation and is simply trying to keep the church running as usual.” A church on maintenance mode of operation is a church that has forfeited its future and given up hope on the power of the Holy Spirit. DS1 mentioned that such tension, as LC5 mentioned, was frequent when his office got to hear from the laity at the local church. Tension, like LC3 described, “Some pastors did not take into account the desires or ages of the congregation, meaning the voices of the laity were not heard at the decision-making process.” As a result of not being heard, LC1 assessed that, with the current health of their church, no specific leadership skills were deemed necessary. The reason for that is that their church had accepted that their days were numbered and that any leadership skills and or training would not make any difference. On the other hand, LC2 said, “Our minister has been successful in creating programs and outreach, leading to increased laity participation.” LC5 shared a similar assessment of their pastoral leader, who was a retired-reappointed person who served two congregations, with our church being the secondary one. Despite how seemingly critical the laity’s reviews were of the pastoral leaders, LC3 said, “they are still capable leaders who have grown in their ability to lead effectively.”

Not all pastoral performance reviews were hopeless and hateful; instead, some of the laities were still committed to the ideal of their local church, and thus had the willingness to say, “Our pastors give excellent sermons, but he struggles with communicating the needs of the church and how we can reach more people” [LA3]. Part of the communication challenges had to do with the way changes were handled. LB1 said, “Changing pastors meant constantly changing things, which can be difficult for older members who may not handle change well.” In addition, “we had a pastor who was extremely disorganized and lacked communication skills, causing confusion and frustration among the congregation.” In contrast to the current pastoral leader, LB4 said, “who is skilled in leading the church week to week, even though communication could be improved,” the most important investment is being present with people. Small leadership skills can make a huge difference in improving communication between pastoral leadership and the laity. LB3 said “Some members appreciate those pastors who were more organized and dry approach, while others prefer the excitement brought by previous pastors.” Nonetheless, what was ultimately, the performance evaluation concluded that the laity felt that “they have had good pastors who take care of them like P4 is a particularly great leader.” Which meant that in the small church culture that was rooted in family structure and functionality, what mattered most was that “Our pastor is caring and encouraging, making our church a welcoming and supportive community.”

Summary

The responses provided by the laities seem to have no clear consensus on whether specific leadership skills and training are required to set the church in motion toward a different future. Some respondents noted that some leaders were better than others, but all

were very devoted to their Christian beliefs. Other respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their current leaders, with one noting that the current leader is not very motivated and is just trying to keep the church running as usual.

There were also mixed opinions on the importance of communication skills for church leaders. While some respondents noted that their pastor gives excellent sermons but is not good at communicating what and how their church needs to reach more people, others stated that their pastor is skillful in leading the church week to week, but communication of activities could be improved. Overall, it seems clear and effective communication is needed from pastoral leaders and, for that matter, maybe even from the conference level, as well as a dedication to the Christian faith and a willingness to adapt to change in order to set the church on a new course.

Research Question #2: Narratives of Lived Experiences as Evidence.

In his book *Autopsy of a Dead Church*, Rainer said, “A church that was probably born out of vision. A church that died because she no longer had a vision” (4). Literature affirmed the core of the Great Commission, which is an open invitation to whoever listens and dares to accept being sent to teach, to baptize, and to learn what it is like to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The essence of going or being sent is an outward reflection of an inward reality of what the Holy Spirit has been working on. The small churches in the study produced a product that each of their church processes set up to produce. The small churches were only reaping what they had sown for seasons.

In every leadership level, from the Shreveport district superintendent as the extension of the bishop's office, the pastors, and the laity, the qualitative data narrate the

lived experiences of their convictions regarding the Great Commission. From the conference level, the DS expressed the sense of a leader who is very cautious, deliberate, calculated, and even maybe protective. Due to the reorganization of districts in the Louisiana Annual Conference, the DS said that “most of my time is spent on the conference-level activities. That means the local churches and their pastor(s) work their ministries, and I am mostly called when there is a problem.” The most frequent kinds of problems heard about are as follows: “(1) We are not important; (2) Why don't we have preachers like the large church has? and (3) We do not have resources and can't pay our apportionment.” Furthermore, as disheartening as the thought is, small churches are a liability to the conference, and leaders must face up to the best stewardship decisions to be made. It does not matter what the size of the congregation is; each is expected to be able to provide insurance and finance. Small churches require all kinds of help from the conference, much more than contributing to the conference.

The data collected showed how church leaders aligned their practices or not with the community's needs. The responses were organized into four categories: community outreach, scarcity of resources, community pains, and discomfort about community needs. These are the mental and cultural practices that demonstrate how the small church understood the purpose of the Great Commission:

Community outreach. Laities like LD2, LB5, LC5, and LC3 emphasized community outreach and acceptance. Bring community outreach to a more intentional ministry by focusing on helping the aging population, such as building wheelchair ramps that provide safe access for many residents. That would be one way of being a Christian role model within the local community. Another opportunity would be to provide

funding for utilities, food, and medical needs. The importance of attracting more young people to the church, raising children to be kind, and respecting the law and rules was not lost in these laities.

Scarcity of resources. LC1 pointed out the lack of membership, knowledge about neighbors, and safety in the neighborhood. LC2 identified the lack of youth facilities and activities, facilities and food for people experiencing homelessness, and food and facilities for unwed mothers as critical issues. LA3 highlighted the community's emotional, financial, and food support needs.

Know too much about community pains. LB1 expressed concerns about poverty, drug and alcohol dependency, and lack of parenting or adult supervision. LB4 named food insecurities, drug rehab, and education assistance as the community's top three needs. LB3 stated that poverty, connection, and divisiveness were the main issues in their area. LA2 highlighted poverty, poor housing, and lack of jobs as significant problems. LA5 mentioned aging membership, lack of children or young people, and diminishing contributions. LC6 emphasized the need for increased membership, including younger members, increased outreach to the community, and growth that would merit a full-time pastorate. LA4 focused on the need for more youthful members. Lastly, LB6 identified the top three community needs as someone to listen, someone to provide financial help, and someone to calm fear.

Uncomfortable about the community needs. P4 identified community as the priority need and mentioned that they provide worship, Sunday School, Bible study, and monthly fellowship gatherings. They were studying the possibilities of some ESL classes, given that they had new members with that training. P5 named poverty,

education, and population, and their church had an active backpack ministry. P2 said that the church had a food outreach led by the UMW. P3 stated that the people required food, spiritual well-being, and wheelchair ramps for the elderly. P1 did not know what the needs were, and the church folks did nothing for the community. P6 shared that he was not really sure about the community's needs. When he asked about the community, members said that it was declining. When he asked others, they said that the community was thriving. His members were not really interested in serving the community as a congregation, but they did so as individuals.

Laity shared their concerns about their church in contrast to what pastors deemed valued and so measured. The laity responses were organized into four main themes: demographics, financial resources, leadership, and pastoral metrics.

Demographics. Several leaders expressed concerns about the age demographics of their congregations. LD2 mentioned the need for more young families. LC3 and LA2 pointed out the lack of young people and the potential for the church to close as a result. LB4 and LB3 discussed the challenges of an aging congregation and the need to attract new young families. LA5 and LC6 also highlighted the old age of membership and its impact on future sustainability.

Financial resources. Financial constraints were another common concern. LB5 mentioned the loss of people through death and insufficient funds to maintain the facility and programs. LC5 echoed this concern, citing very few young people and lacking funds. LA5 also mentioned financial stress as a significant issue.

Leadership. The role and effectiveness of leadership were also discussed. LC1 felt that pastors have total control of all decision-making for the church. LC2 expressed the need for a broader missions program and more encouragement for people to join the church. LB1 criticized the lack of quality leadership at all levels, as well as general apathy and lack of effort from the laity. LB6 felt that the church was too small to make a difference and was serving itself instead of serving God.

Pastoral metrics. The pastors measured what they deemed important. P4 focused on attendance in worship, Sunday School, Bible Study, and the growing number of first-time guests. P5 measured service, budget, and attendance. P2 focused on worship attendance and fellowship. P6 kept up with the members and how they were doing in terms of their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. However, P3 did not know what to measure, and P1 did not measure anything.

The table below shows how the laity's understanding of the church's mission aligns with the pastor's understanding. The laity and pastors are grouped by church. For example, P2 is paired with LD2, LC2, and LA2 laity from the same church.

Table 4-8 Laity and Pastor's Understanding of the Mission

Pastors and Laity's Understanding of the Mission Table

Church's mission according to the LAITY	The church's mission, according to the PASTOR
LD2 said the church's mission is to share God's love, mercy, and grace.	P2 believes the church's mission is to be one of the pillars of the community. The reason is that the church is to build and nurture the community.
LC2 believes the church's mission is to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to the United Methodist Doctrine, to save souls.	

LA2 added that the church's mission is to take care of each other	
LB5 stated the mission is to make disciples of Christ.	P5 said the church's mission is about sharing the good news in one community through witnessing and outreach.
LC5, the mission is to spread the gospel of Jesus and make new disciples	
LA5 Our mission is to survive and grow by Reaching up to Jesus and Reaching out to the world.	
LC3, our church's mission is to Love one another.	P3 The mission is to love God and love people, and help bring those who are lost or have fallen away from Christ back to him or those who have never heard the good news of Christ, make sure that they HEAR.
LB3 said that I wanted to be more a part of the community, but I did not know the best way to achieve that.	
LA3 sees the church's mission as spreading the word of Christ to nonbelievers and bringing them to know and accept Christ as their Lord and Savior.	
LB1 our mission is not to be extinct	P1 The purpose of this church is to stay alive and not close.
LC1 believes that the church's mission is to do God's work here on earth	
LB4 understood the mission is to be a community of Christian believers extending the love of Christ in word and deed	P4 For now, our church clearly focuses on older adults and the many health issues that come with age. There is a quilting ministry, extended communion service to our nursing home, and a card ministry for the homebound.
LA4, our mission is to be stable and growing	
LB6, we are all about sharing the good news of Jesus and making disciples	P6 for our church, the mission is to care for the members currently in attendance. It seems to be what they are most interested in.
LC6 said the mission is to spread the gospel and make disciples of others while praying for	

and meeting the needs of our membership and those around us.	
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Research Question #3: Narratives of Lived Experience as Evidence

Vaters, in his book entitled *The Grasshopper Myth*, penned these bold proclamations: Certainly, there are many failing churches of all styles and sizes, but size alone is not enough evidence to determine failure or success. I propose that the following is true about the New Small Church: We are not sick. We are not failing. We are not stuck. We are not incompetent. We are not limited in our vision. We do not need to be fixed. We are not less than... We are God's idea. We are small. Because we are small, we have blessings to offer the body of Christ, our communities and much more. In the higher level of influence and authority unique to the United Methodist denomination, Willimon reluctantly says, "Though our seminary-trained preachers have become too expensive to serve them, and though most of our clergy avoid them like the plague, and though most of our new Christians come in through our larger congregations, there is no indication that the plethora of small churches will go away" (qtd. in Byassee 113).

The data collected shows the level of leadership training of the six pastors who were leading seven of the twenty-two small churches in the Shreveport district. Only one of the six had completed the formal seminary disciplinary requirement trained to be ordained as a full member of the Annual Conference. This is an accurate and fair picture of what Bishop Willimon said of the United Methodist denomination in the United States and how the appointive system works. The extension of the bishop's office in the Shreveport District (DS) added, "We are just holding on during this denominational shift, and the small churches are struggling much more." DS continued, saying, "The small

churches' mindset and culture have not changed much. The lack of resources, deep caring for those inside the church, lack of vision, dull worship services, and the quality of most activities are organized around being small, but then again, it is not my responsibility to come up with strategic values for keeping the small churches going.”

What leadership training has the pastor received? Following is a chart summarizing the various leadership training those pastors studied in this project received. This chart provides a concise overview of each pastor's leadership training background, showcasing a diverse range of experiences and educational paths. The investment and strategic placement of pastors in small churches is an important aspect regarding the demanding nature of leadership skills in local churches.

Pastor	Leadership Training
P1	Professional management experience; leadership of teams of various sizes at the professional career. No theological leadership training.
P2	Course of Study training; exposure to different areas through visits and worship experiences
P3	Licensing schools (no additional formal leadership training mentioned)
P4	SMU - Perkins - MDiv; Emory Doctoral Study; National Institute Church Finance and Administration; College of Executive Coaching Certification
P5	Full-time pastoral leadership experience (33 years); theological education; continuing education workshops
P6	License to Preach training; ongoing enrollment in the Course of Study

Farr and Kotan researched turnaround churches and found that “in each case, the primary vision, spiritual energy, leadership, and motivation comes from the local congregation rather than from the conference or the denomination. The congregation

wants a different future and willingly invests the time and hard work to make it happen” (108). The data collected indicates that the laities were not totally in the dark about their ministry context. Community needs become ministry opportunities, as stated in the following:

LD2, LB5, and LC2 identify various groups as opportunities for ministry. These include the underprivileged, individuals needing emotional or physical support and the broader community. Specific demographics include youth, homeless individuals, and unwed mothers, particularly those who spend their lives in survival mode rather than learning about God in church.

LA3, LB1, and LB4 added that the ministry also focuses on local individuals who are poor, unable to work, or temporarily unemployed. Children, especially those from lower-income families dealing with pressures at school and home, are a key focus. The ministry extends to adults, teenagers, and infants affected by addiction and those lacking primary education.

LC5, LC3, LC1, LB3, LA2, and LC5 broadened the ministry context, saying the African American community and other minorities, as well as both older and younger generations, are also identified as opportunities for ministry. The scope of the ministry is not limited to external communities; it also includes all members of the church and the United Methodist Conference at local, state, and national levels.

LAC6, LA4, and LB6 included the entire congregation in these opportunities to fulfill God's call on the church. The focus was on attracting younger families and youth to ensure the church's future. The congregation was also considered for the upkeep of the physical plant to manage funds effectively. In essence, the ministry opportunities

encompassed almost everyone in the immediate community around the church, regardless of age, marital status, or family structure.

Simon Sinek says,

Very few people or companies can clearly articulate WHY they do WHAT they do. When I say WHY, I don't mean to make money—that's a result. By WHY I mean what is your purpose, cause or belief? WHY does your company exist? WHY do you get out of bed every morning? And WHY should anyone care? (39)

As previously mentioned, laities clearly name the needs specific to each of their communities, and according to Sinek's claim, these are the purpose, cause, and or belief of these small churches. However, in five of the small churches, despite their knowledge of causes in their immediate surroundings, their current ministry praxis did not connect to the community's needs.

What would be the implications for the church if the mission were successfully executed? If the mission were successfully executed, the church would experience several significant changes:

1. **Growth in Congregation:** The church would become a larger congregation with more children and additional programs for children [LD2]. This growth could be exponential, leading to increased enthusiasm and funding for missions [LC2].
2. **Increased Activity and Diversity:** The congregation would become more active and lively, with a cross-section of the community attending [LC5]. It would also become more diverse and open to new ideas [LB3].
3. **Enhanced Community Engagement:** As a contributing community member, the church would gain the community's trust and foster goodwill [LB4]. It would maintain its place in the community [LA4] and become a more vocal and connected community member [LB6].

4. **More Outreach Programs:** The church would have more members and be able to conduct more outreach programs [LA3].
5. **Inclusivity:** The church would work across all racial, economic, and gender groups of people [LA5]. It would become a more viable and inviting church [LC6].
6. **Care for each other:** The church would continue to take care of each other [LA2].
7. **Uncertainty:** Despite these potential benefits, it is important to note that the exact outcomes cannot be predicted with certainty [LB1].

What does the data show regarding how the leaders assessed what resources they might need and what they have done to fulfill their purpose? The laities believed that several resources were needed to advance the church's mission. These included:

Increased Membership: More members are needed. Despite numerous community outreach programs like backpack giveaways, angel trees, hayrides, and music festivals, the church struggles to attract regular attendees [LD2].

Dedicated Young People: The church needs more dedicated young people who have the time to minister to others [LB5] [LA2].

Listening to the Congregation: The leadership believes in the importance of listening to the congregation and understanding their needs and wants [LC3].

Pastoral Leadership: A pastor who loves and serves the people and works with the congregation to recruit new members is seen as essential [LC1].

Improved Facilities for the Elderly and Handicapped: There is a recognized need to improve the worship experience for elderly and handicapped individuals. This includes transportation from parking lots, safety rails in bathrooms, and occasional seating in hallways [LC2].

Empathetic Pastors: Pastors who listen to members' concerns and ideas, and show empathy are considered important [LA3].

Children and Youth Ministries: Increased focus on children and youth ministries is believed to bring in families and involve the surrounding neighbors [LB4].

Relatable Service Leaders: Having leaders, who can better relate with the congregation, is seen as beneficial [LB3].

Membership Growth: Membership growth, particularly inclusive of young families and kids, is seen as critical [LA5].

Younger Visionary Membership: The addition of younger visionary members is seen as critical to the long-term future of the church [LC6] [LA4].

Focus on Core Beliefs: Regardless of the outcomes of general conferences, the leadership believes in the importance of focusing on Jesus [LB6].

What have the pastors and lay leaders done to meet the needs of the community previously stated? Data shows that pastors and lay leaders have undertaken several initiatives for what purpose; the data speaks for itself:

P4: have fostered an authentic community within the church, focusing on its mission rather than its reputation. P4 also initiated discussions about changing the worship time to potentially attract young adults.

P5: have created an environment where people care for each other. A pastoral change was implemented on January 1, 2024, to further this goal.

P2: have encouraged a firm belief among the believers, fostering a mindset for growth. They have plans in place to be executed at the beginning of the year.

P3: have shown excitement in serving both churches, appreciating the faithfulness of the congregation. P3 is working on relaunching Sunday School for both children and adults, and adding more activities for the youth.

P1: Despite not finding anything exciting in the current church, he is considering disaffiliating from the United Methodist Church.

P6: look forward to the Sunday morning fellowship after the service, appreciating the kindness, care, and humor of the members. However, they are also aware of the financial challenges the church is facing, which may lead to its closure in about eight years if the current budget trend continues. This sensitivity to the thoughts of the members is part of their efforts to meet the community's needs.

The study has come full circle to the start of this chapter, where a detailed examination of the data enriched the qualitative narratives about small churches. Over the past decade, the number of districts in the Louisiana Annual Conference (LAC) has decreased from seven to six. Simultaneously, the number of district superintendents has been reduced from seven to three.



Figure 4-1 Louisiana Annual Conference - Districts Lines (Louisiana Conference Districts)

This map illustrates the location of the Shreveport district and clarifies that the district superintendent for Shreveport also oversees Monroe and Alexandria. The remaining two district superintendents are responsible for the Lake Charles-Acadiana and New Orleans-Baton Rouge districts.

Maxwell emphasizes that leadership is pivotal to the rise and fall of any organization. This raises questions about leadership support, the authenticity of relationships, trust among colleagues, leadership development and evaluation, and most importantly, support for personal self-care. The leadership connections or gaps between the conference level, the small churches, and every leader in between are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Summary of major findings

Chapter 4 presents evidence gathered for the project. This chapter reports the survey and interviews of pastors, laity, and the district superintendent of the twenty-two small churches in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Annual Conference. The research parameters were very focused and localized in their definitions and were limited to only United Methodist Small congregations, their pastoral leadership, and their district superintendent in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana Conference.

The study aimed to excavate the culture and mindset of the small church pastors, laity, and the district superintendent to understand how to meet their needs. The chapter presents a demographic summary of the small churches and their pastors, revealing that among the churches that remained United Methodist in the Shreveport District were twenty-two small congregations after the Louisiana Annual Conference met in 2023. The range of worship attendance was as low as five to thirty-six, which was the highest. There were five African American congregations, and the remainder were Anglo.

The chapter also highlights the conference relations of the seventeen pastors who pastor the twenty-two small congregations in the Shreveport district. The findings suggest that pastors must be more skillful as leaders than in previous years. Moreover, the survey results showed that there were 40 participants in total, with 13 pastors, 26 laity, and 1 district superintendent completing the survey. Out of those who opened the link, 21 declined to participate. The data collected identified the following findings which are discussed in detail in Chapter 5:

1. **LEADER READINESS:** Of the seventeen pastors who served the twenty-two small churches remaining in the Shreveport District of the Louisiana

Annual Conference, five were seminary-trained with one still in active status and the other four in retired-reappointed status.

1. How many seminary-trained
2. Retired – reappointed.
3. Less than part-time pastors
4. The lived experiences of the small church leaders studied in this project suggested that there are contributing factors to the smallness of these churches. Of the six pastors studied in this project, the only seminary-trained pastor was one of two retired-reappointed pastors.

The rest of the pastors served less than half-time as pastors.

2. **APPOINTMENT:** The research found that most of the small churches are served by less than half-time non-seminary-trained pastors. There were few retired-reappointed pastors. Both the less-than-half-time non-seminary-trained and retired-reappointed pastors shared common traits regarding their leadership role: tiredness, lack of creativity, lack of passion, and risk aversion. However, they had tremendous caring ability, high relational IQ, and much willingness to sit with folks for as long as it takes.
3. **FINANCIAL LIABILITY:** The research indicates that the small church's financial viability is unsustainable in comparison to its financial responsibilities. The Annual Conference typically supplements the small church financially for a season while making decisions. Hurricane Katrina exposed the awful reality of many United Methodist churches who were not

insured. The Annual Conference either pays the bills or closes the church and sells it. The Annual Conference had done both.

4. **GREAT OMISSION:** There is great detachment between the community and the church. The laity and pastor were very clear about their knowledge of the pains in the community, yet there were no signs of the churches responding or even a strategic plan to response.

Overall, the chapter presents the evidence gathered for the project in a professional and respectful manner. The privacy of all participants was protected within the historical and phenomenological approach to the research, and the information shared was as close to the actual quotes as possible. The chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the demographics and conference relations, setting the stage for an in-depth observation of the lived experiences of those who participated in the study. The findings of this dissertation are analyzed and presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5 LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

An Exploration of Small Church Health Practices

Chapter 5 delves into four key findings concerning the health of small churches (average worship attendance of fifty or fewer) within the Shreveport United Methodist district. A comparative evaluation was conducted by carefully examining existing relevant literature and historical narratives from both pastors and laity and through the lens of theological interpretations. This multi-layered approach aimed to gain a nuanced understanding of the current health realities faced by these smaller congregations.

The study placed particular emphasis on leadership dynamics, critically examining aspects such as readiness, adaptability, relational intelligence, perseverance (grit), and authenticity. Notably, a broader reflection was undertaken regarding the potential "downflow effects" of the United Methodist tribe's decision-making processes on the health of smaller churches within its organizational structure. Additionally, the study acknowledged the heightened global context of disaffiliation within the denomination, acknowledging its potential impact.

This study has inherent limitations. The sample size was intentionally small; however, the ongoing disaffiliation process within the denomination, which commenced during the study period, contributed to a high level of distrust among pastoral leadership, impacting potential participants. Despite the challenges faced by small churches, the research ultimately reaffirms the local church's enduring significance as a source of redemptive hope within its community, drawing upon the biblical principle of "where two or three are gathered."

Analysis of the Major Findings

First Finding: Leadership Readiness

The first finding in this study of pastors, laity, and district superintendent serves as the foundation that the other findings build upon, affirmed by literature reviews, and confirmed by the theological interpretation. The data in this study shows how leadership-related issues are at the core of all successful organizations, movements, and individuals. The study found leadership gaps at all levels: gaps between conference and district, gaps between district office and pastors, gaps between pastors and the laity, and gaps between church and the community. Literature reviews reported evidence that pastoral leadership ability determined their pastoral capacity to influence. Jesus asked Philip about his leadership capacity to solve the need for food for the five thousand (John 6:1-14). The pastors and laity studied in this project painfully demonstrate how leadership gaps set up an unproductive system.

I am drawing from personal knowledge and experiences as a clergy member serving in the Shreveport United Methodist district, immediately observed a significant issue: leadership woes. Biblical and theological narratives, literature reviews, and the organizational structure of the United Methodist Church all converge on the concept of leadership readiness for those called to serve. In this study, pastoral leadership in small churches fell into two main categories: reappointed retirees and part-time appointments. These categories were the norm when it came to conference appointments for small church pastoral leadership.

In Chapter 2, the literature identifies the miseducation of pastors, in which, in light of the system of appointing retired-reappointed pastors and non-seminary-trained

pastors to lead the small churches studied in this project, leadership readiness is still a key finding. Vaters makes the point of how pastors are trained at seminaries. He declares three facts that most pastoral leaders in small churches have never prepared for (1) almost all pastors will spend most of their pastoral leadership serving small churches; (2) many pastors will never serve a church of more than 180 attendees; and (3) pastors were not mentally trained to serve small churches without settling or at worst assuming failures (*Small Church Essentials* 17). In addition, Gibbs questions the relevance of the courses and training that seminaries offer (9). Two of the six pastors studied in this project were retired and reappointed. They were seminary-trained; the question of leadership readiness based on training cannot escape even them. The data collected indicates that the inactivity between the church and the community questioned the readiness of the pastoral leaders serving the small churches during this study.

As the local representative of the bishop, the district superintendent's role was twofold: to develop an intimate understanding of the local church's needs and to foster collegial relationships with fellow clergy, recognizing their unique gifts and talents. This knowledge of both the local church and colleagues became a critical resource for making better appointments and ensuring successful outcomes. However, the district superintendent's responsibilities have evolved. Most of their time and resources are spent on business managerial tasks of being the first responder to local church emergencies. From the district superintendent's perspective, there seems to be a one-way communication street from the local church, often the complaining one-way street. Lay leaders in small churches often express their desire for seminary-trained pastoral leaders, similar to those in larger congregations. While small churches appreciate retired

reappointed clergy, they also recognize that these retirees have earned their retired status. The re-appointed retirees are often asked to step in for a short time, which frequently extends to years rather than the initially offered months. Unfortunately, these retirees often lack the passion, creativity, and intention to create something new. Part-time pastoral leaders face similar challenges, sharing the fatigue and lack of focus experienced by their retired-reappointed counterparts. The biblical narrative of “The Sower” (Mark 13:1-23) is typical of Jewish teaching with multiple viewpoints; the conference approach to leadership readiness that seems fitting to serve the small churches can be viewed through the Sower’s action. The sense of a farmer without farming knowledge disregards the limited resources, which were the seeds, and the ridiculous recklessness of just tossing the seeds. The expectation is of a harvest that “may or may not” come. The conference, pastors, and laity expect harvest to come despite the lack of vision, strategies, action plans, follow-up processes, or a ministry evaluation. Oh, what a faith!

The literature suggests that leadership is a combination of innate talent and learned skills (Farr and Kotan 124). In the United Methodist denomination, ordination as an elder in full connection requires earning a Master of Divinity (M.Div). However, the cumulative time and money costs often deter pastors serving small churches from pursuing the seminary-trained path. While local United Methodist churches are designed to be led by seminary-trained pastors, many small church pastors lack comprehensive theological and organizational training. Consequently, the local church’s ineffectiveness is often the price paid by the small churches. The pastors included in this study lacked the leadership tools typically received by seminary-trained pastors during their education or post-seminary early subsequent appointments. Unlike their seminary-trained

counterparts, who often transition into local church leadership as associate pastors, those serving small churches rarely have such opportunities due to a few factors: age (often come into pastoral ministry later in life), finance (often do not have school loan), and most often the part-time pastors are tied to a physical location where they have their full-time job. A common sentiment expressed by these pastors is that the financial demands of seminary studies serve as a significant barrier to pursuing formal theological education.

Two pastors studied in this project are worth considering: one with seminary training who graduated with an M.Div. from Duke seminary, incurring a cost of approximately \$156,648, and another pastor without seminary training, possibly lacking significant financial burden or loan payments. The seminary-trained pastor received compensation of approximately \$77,243, while the non-seminary-trained female pastor serving small churches received \$22,792. This stark contrast exists between the two appointments: a seminary-trained individual (M.Div.) simultaneously serving two small churches and a non-seminary-trained female pastor also overseeing two small churches. Theological education alone does not explain these differences in how appointments are made; however, it suggests that the seminary-trained pastor is often given better appointments than the non-seminary-trained pastor. Literature reported that theological emphasis was no longer the core curriculum for pastoral preparation; it has shifted to add leadership preparation to the core curriculum per practical application demands. The non-seminary-trained pastors who serve the small congregation only have their previous leadership training (or lack thereof) from their job(s) in the marketplace in their pastoral role as leaders.

The passerby is a sandal-wearing Jew who calls professional fishermen to follow him, and he will be teaching them to become something they were not (yet), and they did (Matt. 4:18-20). The pastors in this study who faithfully served the small churches knew most of their lives the echoing voice of the passerby's invitation to follow; even in those years of their full-time employment in the marketplace, the passerby, the Jew named Jesus, still calling them by name, and they followed. Many forces have shaped them: early church experiences, family foundation experiences, young adult history, young professional experiences, and adulthood/empty nester experiences. Despite those personal growth experiences, those pastors studied in this project still heeded the invitation by Jesus to follow, trusting that the sandal-wearing Jew would make them into something they were not yet. Despite the imperfect system, the United Methodist denomination prescribes the structure to organize the church around, at the core, pastors, and laity returned week after week with the hope that the miraculous still can happen. Literature and the Great Commission both were uncompromised on why the church is the church. Outstanding leadership inspires people to stick with them through all seasons of life, and they do. Literature and the Great Commission also shared that great leadership can inspire followers not just for a season but for a lifetime, and the name for such a dynamic is loyalty. Jesus inspired the imperfect twelve to be on his leadership team, and they accepted the invitation even to their death. The disciples, by accepting the invitation, demonstrated their willingness to pay the ultimate price of loyalty, even with their lives. The pastors and churches studied in this project shared common leadership pains, such as pastoral communication skills. The church's connection with the community faces several critical roadblocks. An outdated vision, overreliance on

singular, charismatic leaders, siloed operations within the church, and neglecting the broader community all hinder its ability to fully engage and support the people it seeks to serve. To build a strong and sustainable connection, it is crucial to refresh the vision to reflect current needs, empower a wider range of individuals to participate, foster collaboration across the church, and actively build bridges with the surrounding community, creating a true sense of "Great Communion."

Pastors and laity studied in this project were committed to their small churches. Their imperfections made them fit for Jesus' vision for the church in each community. Paul knew about this imperfection and told the Corinthians the pains in his flesh that kept him humble in the knowledge that it was not about him; instead, all the work he could do was of grace alone (2 Cor. 12:1-10). The chasm between the church and the community can only be bridged by God's grace. The people of the church forgot to refer to the operation manual (the Great Commission) for the perfect instructions on how to refocus their mission to the community. Literature and theological interpretation affirmed that resetting the church according to God's vision brings healing to both the community and the church.

Jesus offered different talent sizes to each church and, with it, the invitation to do something with it. When he returned, he would want a report for what had been done with what he had entrusted to each laity, pastor, and church (Matt. 25:14-30). Literature reviews repeatedly emphasized how a clear vision set in motion the leadership attitude and mindset toward a fruitful season. Jesus' commission of the church is crystal clear, which is spelled out in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). The finding in this study

is consistent with the literature reviews and the theological interpretation that leadership readiness is uncompromised to becoming a healthy small church.

Second Finding: Mission Drift

A statement I often use in times of frustration—when the leadership team keeps on doing the same thing, meetings where information regurgitation is the norm, and bad stewardship is accepted—is this: “This is like swimming in peanut butter,” meaning the process only have the form of swimming yet not going anywhere. No church is immune to this study's second finding, which is what I call “Mission Drift.”

Pastors and churches studied in this project did not just end up where they were by accident at the time of this study. Despite their unique contexts, each church is conceived with a clear purpose and intention for what it can be and for whom it shall be. The clarity that Matthew 28 (the Great Commission) documented becomes the plumb line to measure every aspect of a church's life, operations, expression, hopes, and dreams that the church is sent out to do.

Before the study, I had baseless assumptions about small churches being unhealthy, lazy, and not representing the United Methodist denomination well. My assumptions were formulated in my early years right out of seminary, and in that season, I was an associate pastor in one of the three large churches in the Shreveport district. I have served small churches of the size that this study defines since then and learned how wrong I had been about pastors and small churches. The data collected activated a hyperlink in my mind about all of those small churches in Tonga (small is the only church size Tonga has) that shaped my spiritual being as a young boy.

Jesus did not conduct a survey but instead launched a vision campaign with a proposal on how to allocate resources. Literature reviews reported that vision leaks are real, and pastoral leaders and laity alike who have been infected by amnesia have a difficult time noticing how far they have drifted from the mission of the church. Mission drift is like seaweed that thrives in the ocean's depths. Seaweed roots hold fast to their location while they move according to wherever and whenever the wave pleases. Similarly, pastors and small churches studied in this project still held on to their roots as the body of Christ, moving not by its own purposes but by the other forces. The drift signifies that they have not been uprooted, thus completely displaced from their roots of faith in Christ.

However, the data collected affirmed the literature review and theological interpretation, which confirmed what others have found: thriving churches are like octopuses, their "tentacles" reaching out to address community needs. In contrast, the small churches studied were more like cuddly kittens, content to "get together" within their own circles. By the title of his best-seller, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Warren nailed the hands and the feet of the church to the cross known as "Purpose Driven." The pastors and churches studied in this project certainly had a purpose for their weekly gatherings, but one wonders what the gatherings have done for the Great Commission. Number six, of the ten reasons McKeever stated as the reasons why small churches usually do not grow, is that the small church often lacks a specific direction or plan. He went on to say that small churches tend to be small in vision, programs, and outreach (McKeever). Again, the data collected indicates a lack of vision, programs, and outreach, which contributed significantly to the "Great Omission."

Pastors and laity studied in this project were asked to identify the needs in the surrounding community where their small church was located. Unsurprisingly, the list was obvious, long, specific, and, in some cases, greatly detailed. Jesus taught that building a house on sand will not last; instead, build the house on a rock, and the rain comes, and wind will blow, yet the house will stand (Matt. 7:24-27). Jesus emphasized that the wise will not just hear, but put what they have learned into action.

The literature review reports that mission-driven churches reflect their nature in where they spend their money. The small churches studied in this project spend most of their finances in two big categories: the salary of the pastor and their apportionment to the conference. The small churches see the pastor's salary as their church's self-care and the apportionment of dollars to the Annual Conference as their mission expense, leaving the community's needs untouched. The H1 is a church that is no longer. The literature review states that when pastoral leadership no longer leads but instead adopts the wishes of the local church, it no longer answers to the Great Commission; instead, the church lives out the Great Omission. Pastor P1, when asked what changes he has made since his arrival, responded, "I was told (by H1) what they like and asked to keep it that way, and I did." To the day they turned off the lights for the last time and turned over the keys, H1 drifted off the mission field and entered into the fainting sound of "here its final resting place."

John recorded Jesus asking a man lying by the Pool of Bethesda if he would like to be healed. The man explained to Jesus why he had not been healed yet. The sick man assigned his limitation to the unnamed "no one," and only if he had "someone" (whoever and if ever 'someone' was) he would have been healed (John 5:1-9). Again, this

theological interpretation is consistent with the literature review in saying that unhealthy leadership and churches assign responsibility to everyone else but themselves. P1 tells the story of the funeral in Chapter 4. When he arrived at church (H1), trash was still in the sanctuary. He mentioned his findings to the laity, to which they said, “God will come through.” Pastor (P1) assigned the responsibility to the laity, and the laity assigned the same responsibility of cleaning the sanctuary to God—God will come through. This is a fascinating study of Acts 6:1-7 regarding leadership dynamics working out the complexity of organizational structure while keeping the main thing, the main thing. Again, this theological truth is consistent with the literature review on how thriving and healthy organizations and churches are very clear about their purpose. The pastors and small churches studied in this project demonstrate the behavior of being unclear on so many levels, such as administration and processes, vision and mission, powers and purpose, and church and community. The United Methodist organization stated its intention for its members to live out these practices of being present (be counted on to show up), in prayer (being in constant communion with God), in gifts (fully engage in sharing gifts and talents), in service (with both hands on the plow), and in witness (tell somebody what God has done – is doing in one’s life).

The L4 church is a new United Methodist church, and the data affirmed the literature review and the theological truth that salvation is available to anyone who would dare to respond, embodying a lifetime of transformation known in the Wesleyan tradition as “moving on to perfection.” P4 said that the church is growing; however, it must be noted that starting from zero, anything above is growing. Also, all United Methodist

churches of all sizes are living in the ongoing disaffiliation waves; it is just that – coming and going. L4 shows they received new people due to the disaffiliation.

Literature review and theological interpretation of hospitality is an open-door policy as in Hebrews 13, which emphasizes the mutuality of love one to another and, more than one another, paying particular attention to those outside the inner circle of the already convinced. The L4 church, a new United Methodist church, provided data supporting the literature review and the theological truth that salvation is accessible to all. Salvation comes from outside of the human own abilities and doings; only by God's mercy and grace are made available to all of creation to respond. Theologically, it aligns with the literature reviews that sometimes, outside forces can set in motion necessary change that would have been difficult and slow if the change were from inside the church. Pastors and laity must understand and be reminded throughout the year that transformation can only happen through God's mercy and grace—even through disaffiliation.

Third Finding: Leadership Maturity - The Comparison Trap

The third finding, which delves into a deeper and more personal yet communal issue for everyone studied in this project, is of significant importance. Pastoral leaders and laity studied in this project shared lived experiences that the literature review and theological interpretation affirmed, as well as how they measured their abilities by looking at others. Pastors and laity spend much of their limited resources on looking around instead of looking ahead, comparing instead of committing, and complaining instead of constructing.

The table below is not an all-inclusive list; however, it is a sample of what the literature review and the biblical narratives report as the categories of total losers known as ER and EST. James 1:23-24 deals with the painful reality of looking and not seeing, hearing and yet not heard, and looking and hearing but not doing. That is a man who looks at his face in the mirror, walks away, and immediately forgets what kind of a person he is.

Table 5-1: Categories of -ER and -EST

SAMPLE OF -ER AND -EST COMPARISON TABLE

Island of -ER	<i>Island of --EST</i>
Rich-ER	Rich-EST
Pretti -ER	Pretti-EST
Bigg -ER	Bigg-EST
Fast – ER	Fast- EST
Strong -ER	Strong- EST
Bett -ER	B -EST
Happi -ER	Happi - EST
Fatt -ER	Fatt -EST
Small – ER	Small - EST
Tall – ER	
Ugly - ER	
Dumb - ...	

The literature review indicates how ugly and destructive the power of comparison is. Pastors and laity studied in this project express what the literature and theological

interpretation affirmed as a leadership nightmare when it takes hold of individuals and/or the church. Most churches in this study named their need for more people, especially young families, and children. When asked about what needs to happen for the church to address the needs in the surrounding community, the unanimous answer is the need for people.

John recorded Jesus telling a story about a businessman that was preparing to go on a long trip. The businessman called three of his workers and gave them more money, above and beyond their regular pay, to do something with it, and when he returned, he wanted a report on what they had done with what they had been given (John 25:14-30). The one talent guy gave his report by comparing his inactivity to the Master's activity. From a different perspective, there is a sense the one talented guy compares his irresponsibility to the responsibility of a master. The one talent report also suggested that he compares his fear to the Master's faith in the one talent's abilities.

The question remains for the pastors and laity studied in this project of what they have done with what they had been given: people, leaders, collective experiences, land, community, friends, and a mission to live out. Pastors and laity answered that they need more resources: seminary-trained pastors, young families, children, money, and more people. The literature said that leaders measure what is important. Willimon expounded on the difference between count and measure, saying, "Counting asks, How many did we get? Measuring asks, How far have we come?" He went on to say, "Stop comparing your current attendance with the pre-pandemic attendance; instead, ask Who have we met? How could we open our doors wider?" (*Don't Look Back* 122).

Table 5.1. indicates the psychological and emotional reality in which no one is immune. Literature reports that seminary training does not prepare pastors to handle and get out of the comparing trap. Pastors and lay leaders attend conferences, seminars, and training to make up for the seminary training gap. After attending these leadership trainings, the unspoken outcome is often the feeling of inferiority created due to comparing what they have to what the speaker talked about. N. Jones framed such an experience, “The pastor who felt like a failure because he compared his church’s lack of growth with the growing churches around needed a new definition of success” (10).

King Solomon, the wisest man, observed that most people are motivated to succeed because they envy their neighbors. However, this, too, is meaningless—like chasing the wind (Eccles. 4:4). The churches studied in this project shared their imagination of the preferred future church if only they had the resources to meet the needs of their surrounding community. The sad reality is that most of the small churches studied in this project refused to accept their potential based on the resources within their churches. Literature has again shown the truth regarding how critical it is to have leadership who has clarity regarding the mission and is leading the church toward that mission.

Fourth Finding: Identity Crisis:

Long-term pastoral isolation and laity dwindling numbers caused by many factors have taken a toll on self-esteem. Three of the gospels record that Jesus gave sight to the blind. Mark gave the man’s name. Matthew and Luke did not have a name for the man except to identify him by his condition (Matt. 9:27-31, 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke

18:35-43). All reports identify the man by his limitation. It was not enough for Mark that the man's name was Bartimaeus; for some reason, Mark needed to describe Bartimaeus as a blind beggar. In this case, Bartimaeus was not enough, better identify him as the "blind" one. Well, they are still more identifiable for clarity purposes: the man is Bartimaeus, blind, and he is the beggar, and he is the son of Timaeus. Maybe because it helped, was easy, and or maybe it really meant what it says, but pastors and laity studied in this project are identified by their limitation, known as "small church."

Marriage literature reports that financial issues in marital relationships are a symptom of something much deeper. The same has been said about the local church; financial struggles are a sign of spiritual discontent. Pastors and laity studied in this project identified their lack of financial power, which is one of the major reasons why they are the size they are. Lack of money meant they could not afford to do the missional activities they would like. The reason for the lack of funds was directly tied to the demographic make-up of the church, which meant fixed income and retirement status. The small church seems to have a monopoly on the culture and mentality of scarcity. N. Jones says, "no matter how large your physical church or Facebook campus grows, none of that matters if people aren't discovering and following Jesus more than they're following you"(150). Crandall said the church that dares to take a new pathway forward must develop a culture and mentality of a "bias for action in which it encourages creativity and be willing to risk failure" (4).

The physical presentation of the church buildings in small churches is similar among the small churches with feelings of loneliness, aloneness, borderline depression, and rejection. The story of H1 is about when the pastor arrived at the sanctuary, and

trash and bulletins from the previous Sunday were still on the pews and floors; when P1 mentioned it to a few laity, they said, “God will come through.” The culture that is strong among the small churches depends on each other. Again, the literature named the attitude of commitment as a strength that leaders foster and encourage. Jesus elevates that sense of commitment and directs those to the next level. Jesus told his leadership team, “The Father alone has the authority to set those dates ... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:7b-8). Most small churches arrived at the commitment step and stayed there; thus, the financial energy and willpower stayed within the church's walls.

The demographics of the churches examined in this project significantly influenced their activities. Among these churches, the United Methodist Women of Faith (formerly known as United Methodist Women) remained a potent force, if not the most powerful, within the United Methodist Church. Literature suggests that when an organization's vision is unclear, internal competition arises for the available resources. In many United Methodist churches, the UMW consistently outlasts other ministry areas, positioning itself as the driving force that often redirects resources away from the Great Commission.

Successful pastoral leaders know how critical the buy-in factor can be for effective leadership. Pastors have the ability to ignite new energy and vitality within the church, and effective communication plays a crucial role in inspiring people to contribute their resources. As part of this project, pastors and laity were surveyed about their understanding of the church's mission and their efforts to achieve it. The data revealed

that the churches were fully aware of their community challenges and yet were not doing or planning anything to meet the needs. The prevailing sentiment seems to be, "If we had the financial resources of larger churches, we would also undertake those initiatives." According to the literature, healthy small churches maximized their limited resources by collaborating with existing community efforts.

The most potent ammunition in the church arsenal is stories. One of the funniest things about grandparents is how proud and unashamed they are about voluntarily showing off pictures of their grand and great-grandchildren. Oh, how silly these dignified pastors and laity are when they pull out their smart devices. The joy and energy shown through their big smiles are contagious, and no one ever cares that most have shaky hands or cannot put their finger on the right app icon.

Not much literature is available on senior citizens in churches leveraging social media to promote and tell the stories of what God is doing in the community. However, the theological interpretation of the relationship between the master and the workers who were given talents is fitting here. The workers' endless possibilities are the same as the pastors and laity in the small churches studied in this project. The master did not tell the workers what to do or how to use what they had been given. Like the master in this story, the conference did not tell pastoral leadership and the laity what to do or how to use what they had been given. By no means is the conference just disconnected; no, like the master when upon his return, workers report what they have done; thus, the pastor and lay leaders give their report of what they have done with what they have been given.

The COVID-19 pandemic put to rest the church fights about the need for media technology in the church, whether it is necessary or just a contemporary worship

expression. During the national pandemic shutdown, the church, by necessity, reached for every technology available in order to stay connected to each other. Every church, no matter what size, stepped into the world of social media. Some churches were good at it, and some churches needed more help, which is the two-edged-sword. The literature indicates that hospitality starts way before people arrive on campus, and in most cases, visitors visit churches' social media before they decide whether to visit or not. Again, regarding the financial requirements for social media, which is the church's front door, pastors and laity must decide if they are willing to open the front door (social media) to the church or not.

The disconnect between the joy and energy that pastors and laity manifest showing off their grandchildren and great-grandchildren versus using the same technology (smart devices) to show off their church is concerning. The literature and theological truth highlight the revolutionary power when leadership and organization are clear about the “why” they are organized. More than any other generation, social media has expedited human activities. Pastors and laity studied in this project have not taken better advantage of their potential using social media.

Literature continues to affirm how prevalent amnesia is in the work of pastors and laity in the small churches studied in this project. Discussions about the community lacked depth and action, reflecting a disconnect similar to a long-distance relationship with no shared activities. Memories of past events the church hosted and the community was invited to come and participate became a historical reference instead of being a history-making church. Also, there are stories of the church doing some missional activities like packing books and feeding. The interesting reality of the churches studied

in this project was their knowledge of the needs in the surrounding community where each of their churches was located. It seems to be the progression of how the small churches lived out their connection to the community. In the early days, the church went into the community and participated in whatever took place. However, it became evident that the church now puts events and activities together at the church campus and expects the community to stop by.

The painful reality of the Great Commission is the direction the command is given – GO! Again, pastors and lay leadership must be willing to follow the direction of the Great Commission to GO if only they understood WHY they were going. Literature and the Great Commission merged on this one truth: without a vision, the people perish. Of course, the physical doors of the churches were still open, and pastors and laity were still gathering, but they gathered to perish. The GO has become COME. One of the ways churches explain how they are still on a mission is by making the past their hero. New pastoral leader or a repeat visitor who might wonder about the church meeting a need in the community, the typical response was, “we have done that before.” The behind-the-scenes attitude here is that the local church is still connecting to the community via the actual work in and for the community.

As mentioned before, small churches see their apportionment dollars given to the Conference as their mission. The mindset is that they give the money, which is their part, and someone else will do the work. Literature reports that communication suffers when the vision is unclear, and internal competition for limited resources occurs. Very much the attitude of the “one talent worker,” pastors and laity in the small churches refuse the opportunity to try something and rather do nothing. The master decided to take whatever

he had given to the one talented worker and give it away. Some of the laity studied in this project have been in other small United Methodist churches where the Louisiana Conference closed the church, took what they were given, and gave it away. There is the question the author asked of the laity in this project about what they will do with what they know the community needs. Some of the answers were as follows: pastoral change not in mid-year, disaffiliation, conversation about changing worship time, waiting until next year, and trying to do something for youth and children. The Great Omission continues.

The disaffiliation cancer continues to spread. Interestingly, the geographical areas where it is very aggressive seem scary. Pastors and laity were not asked any questions regarding disaffiliation; however, neither the survey nor the interviews discouraged anyone from talking about it. Two churches shared how disaffiliation impacted their church. P1 told his church that he was disaffiliating from the United Methodist denomination, and the church voted to go with P1. P4 mentioned that part of L4's growth was people whose previous United Methodist church disaffiliated and joined the L4 United Methodist church.

The disaffiliation caused so much damage to families, friends, and churches. Theological interpretation regarding human sexuality called to question many values and systems: cultural values, academic values, humanity, individuality, and freedom, and in many cases, God has been blamed for all of human self-centeredness. Churches and pastors studied in this project acted in a more protective posture. The theological interpretation of human sexuality fallout created an environment of distrust and fear about pastors and laity.

The United Methodist denomination is paying a very costly price for disaffiliation. This theological tension in so many churches, worst in the small churches, cost the United Methodist the Great Commission. The Great Commission is no longer the rallying cry for the United Methodist denomination; instead, the rallying cry is self-interest. Small churches' unique strengths and vibrant potential disappear, replaced by a sense of inadequacy and a fear of closure.

Ministry Implications of the Findings

Conference Misalignment: A Call for Strategic Change

Root problem

The current conference leadership model for small churches fails to meet the needs of both local small congregations and clergy. Previously, district superintendents focused on understanding local churches' needs through pastors and lay leadership, fostering collegial relationships. One of the major benefits was the ability to make better strategic appointments based on clergy competencies matching to the potentials of the local church and the ministry context. This ensured successful pastoral leadership in diverse contexts.

The current working model:

- **Focus:** Now, district superintendents are primarily occupied with administrative tasks and emergency responses (meaning responding to complaints).
- **Communication:** One-way communication from local churches dominates, often expressing a desire for full-time, seminary-trained leadership. Most information is communicated upward from laity to DS regarding the dissatisfaction of a sort.
- **Clergy options for the small churches:**

- **Retired clergy:** While appreciated, they often lack the passion and innovation needed for growth. Additionally, their intended short-term placements frequently extend, creating inconsistencies for churches.
- **Part-time pastors:** They face similar challenges to retired clergy, struggling with fatigue and divided focus.

Consequences

These misalignments create an unsustainable situation, similar to the parable of the "Sower," which lacked proper resources and strategy. The small church feels smaller in so many ways due to the relational distance between them and the Conference level. The emotional, mental, and spiritual toll on the small churches and pastors can only be measured by how many churches are closed.

Misplaced expectation. Conferences, pastors, and laity *unrealistically* expect growth despite the lack of:

1. **Vision:** A clear vision for thriving small churches is absent.
2. **Strategies:** No concrete plan exists to implement the desired vision.
3. **Action plan:** There is no defined course of action to achieve the goals.
4. **Follow-up:** No process exists to monitor progress and adjust as needed.
5. **Evaluation:** No system is in place to assess the effectiveness of the chosen approaches.

The Call. A fundamental change in the conference's approach to small church leadership is crucial. By prioritizing relationships, strategic planning becomes a matter of faithful stewardship. Therefore, investing in leadership development, and ensuring

realistic expectations will not be a conversation about money; instead, the conference can cultivate a system that empowers both small churches and clergy to flourish.

In the Greenhouse of New Creation, a vital interplay exists between the pastoral leadership, the laity, and the surrounding community, each playing a crucial role in cultivating a thriving church. The thriving church played a vital role in cultivating a thriving community.

The Pastoral Leaders - the Gardeners. Heeding God's call, the pastoral leaders act as dedicated gardeners. Their primary responsibility lies in organizing the church, the "Christ body," around the mission of Matthew 28:18b-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," (ESV). They provide guidance, nurture, and cultivate an environment conducive to spiritual growth. Like the good gardener who knows about seasons, timing, weather, types of seeds, types of soil, and so much more; the pastoral leaders know by spending time listening to God.

The Laity - the Indwelling Seeds. Representing the indwelling of God's divine seeds, the laity is the foundation of the church. Within each individual lies the potential for immense growth and contribution, carrying the inherent potential for a bountiful harvest "in due season." Each member possesses unique gifts and talents waiting to be nurtured and utilized for the benefit of the entire community.

The Community - the Fertile Ground. The surrounding community serves as the fertile and nutritious mixed dirt where the seeds of the laity (the church) are transplanted and take root. Just as enriched soil provides essential nutrients for growth, the community presents a wealth of opportunities for the church to engage and serve.

Understanding and addressing the community's pains and needs allows the seeds to flourish and bring forth a harvest of positive change and personal fulfillment.

Through collaborative efforts, the Greenhouse of New Creation flourishes. The gardeners guide and nurture, the seeds possess the potential for growth, and the fertile ground provides the necessary nutrients for a bountiful harvest, where both the church and the community benefit from the shared journey.

Limitations of the Study

This study has too many limitations. First, the ongoing disaffiliation season within the United Methodist denomination significantly influences this study. The primary currency the church has for its work is **relationship**. The disaffiliation has lowered the market value of relationships to an all-time low. When disinformation proliferates, especially on platforms like Twitter, the market value of relationships further depreciates. Additionally, the acceptance of gaslighting misinformation among Methodists erodes trust and diminishes the market value of the relationship among Methodists where it is so low that there seem to be no buyers in the market for what the Methodists are selling.

Most of the data depend on self-reporting by pastors and laity. While cumulative data from conferences remains relevant, it is often dated. Many pastors serving small churches continue to work full-time in the marketplace, relegating church work to weekends. Consequently, the depth of relationships between pastors and laity remains somewhat surface-level. The study aims to uncover where life's purpose can be found and identify new possibilities for healthy small churches. Despite the limitations, the author seeks to delve into the roots of these issues.

Similar to how any illness today is often attributed to COVID-19, disaffiliation tends to be implicated in various situations. Whether or not it is the sole cause, it frequently surfaces as a contributing factor.

The sample size, theoretically sufficient, encounters challenges due to the fear and hurt experienced by Methodists. This emotional turmoil, often related to disaffiliation, manifests as distrust of others. Consequently, deeper truths and possibilities remain obscured behind an invisible wall. Across small churches, a consistent demographic emerges: older generations who are retired, dealing with health issues, and settled in their current life status. Understanding their perspectives is crucial for addressing the unique challenges faced by these congregations. One thing about the older generation is that they have experiences that can either positively or negatively impact the culture and mindset of the church. The mobility and accessibility of the older generation were limitations to the study. The limited accessibility of technology to the older generation shrank the sample size, which was already much smaller. It did not help that my time and schedule were also limited.

Unexpected Observations

Throughout this study, it became clear how critical the emphasis on the value of leadership is. In Chapter 2, relevant literature review indicates how seminaries' curriculums changed due to the suggested demand for leadership skills at the local church level. Seminaries were no longer just a theological training place; leadership courses were being offered and, in some cases, required. However, one of the surprises was the lack of focus leadership training investment for pastors on how to be great, healthy pastoral leaders leading small, declining, or even dying churches. A couple of the

retired-reappointed seminary-trained pastors participated in some continuing education via conference and seminar training; however, the rest of the part-time local non-seminary-trained pastors did not have such financial support available to them. The following were personal stories:

Three Unexpected Encounters Along This Ministry Preparation Journey

Disaffiliation Debris

Prior to COVID-19, I was leading two small churches in the New Orleans United Methodist district. The disaffiliation conversation was getting louder and talked about more often. I intentionally communicated with the laity about their concerns and the information available to the public. I approached all conversations regarding disaffiliation as Q and A time, and as a conversation among friends and family and concluded with a time of prayers.

During the shutdown required by the health department, it was a challenge for the small churches to quickly move to different ways of keeping in close connection with one another. At the same time, it was simpler to close the loop of communication due to the smallness of the churches. Shifting the church from the physical room where people sit by and with each other to a screen was challenging. Along the way, I learned how the shift from pews to the screen lightened the relational values that people developed when they sat next to one another.

A similar relational reality happened among pastoral leaders, where once relationships were close, they were still there, but there was a feeling that it was not as strong. Like how the government handled the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that no one knew anything, and as a result, everyone knew everything

because everyone made choices according to their interpretation. From a leadership perspective, the high price of lack of clarity set up a prime opportunity for poor communication. The lack of clarity regarding disaffiliation created an environment where trust was called into question. Pastors, laity, and churches that once had close relationships seemed to move their relational interests elsewhere. It seemed that everyone made choices according to their own interpretation of every political, social, or spiritual issue. Disinformation took the wheel, driving on the highway of distrust heading “nowhere” and getting off at “nowhere,” specifically the faith community; this surprised me.

As mentioned above, communication among clergy slowly deteriorated when disaffiliation was enacted at the conference level. It took me by surprise when I realized how wide the gap was between me and the seventeen pastors serving the twenty-two small churches in the Shreveport United Methodist district. I did not anticipate how challenging communication with the seventeen pastors turned out to be. I assumed that an email, text message, Facebook message, phone call, zoom invitation, and even face-to-face conversation with the other pastors would naturally trigger a response as a simple matter of respect—most were not the case.

My level of disinterest and unsupportive attitude surprised me. Again, I am still too naïve to believe that education is still essential and must be supported in any way possible. Due to the level of “distrust” among United Methodists, I had to explain why I called, asked, emailed, texted, and asked again in detail about my intention, which is school. The high level of distrust factor, meaning that whatever my intentions were, pastors and laity were fearful of the unknown regarding their church, the Louisiana

United Methodist Conference, and the United Methodist denomination. Even when I begged pastors for help with my research, the level of nonresponse was shocking, and it still does not make any sense to me both personally and collegially.

What was shocking to me more than anything else I encountered in this study was how thin the RESPECT was for one another among the United Methodists. Whatever working relationships the organization of the United Methodist denomination had, we no longer have. We enter into a different sphere where it is unclear how we can be in prayer, present, gift, service, and witness relationships with each other as United Methodists.

Two experiences I encountered during this study that embodied the disrespect are as follows:

Experience A - I called Pastor A for the very first time regarding my study. After introducing myself, he responded, "I know you." Oh great, I said and began to explain the purpose of my study and how his pastoral leadership and the church he is serving fit into my study. While I was still explaining, Pastor A said, "My church is very small," and so then hung up the phone.

Experience B – I called Pastor B, and he answered. I introduced myself, to which he said, I know. I said, "Great," I explained the purpose of my study and asked for his and his congregation's help taking the survey. By his silence, I assumed that I was doing well explaining and Pastor B is considering the possibility. I sense the likelihood of being supported might be coming, so I offered Pastor B the opportunity to have a weekend off, and I will preach for him any weekend. I could take that opportunity to share with the congregation how

participating in my study could give them feedback that could help their church.

Pastor B responded decisively, saying, “NO, do not come here and thank you for calling,” and then hung up the phone.

I did not know the disaffiliation debris sank that deep past the professional and personal levels.

Recommendations for Future Study

The potential for a future study of this segment of churches could yield a healthier small church with more robust and deeper relationships from the conference down to the church, each with its unique ministry context. I recommend the Louisiana Annual Conference aimed to make a healthier impact by gaining a deeper understanding of the local church and the needs of the community in which it was situated. The following are possible outcomes of such a study.

- The pastoral and lay leaders of the small churches know they matter and are a critical part of God’s work in the community through the Louisiana Annual Conference.
- Making better appointment decisions (matching the pastoral gifts/talents with the leadership needs of the community and church)
- Better stewardship of the conference’s limited resources – pastors
- More strategic investments of funds, training, and targeted relational supports.
- Elevate the likelihood of making healthy disciples of Jesus Christ who are fully committed to the transformation of the community.

Another reason to consider conducting this type of study is to embrace what literature predicts where the church is heading. Literature sometimes reported the shift in conversation, culture, and mentality of how to do church. The trend of church leadership training and conferences these days does not emphasize church growth as it once was. The conversations have slowly shifted to stability and much more about the health status of the church. Health status meant that the church was operating with the understanding

of the need for an annual health check. I suspect such clarity will free pastors and lay leaders to be more creative, innovative, and risk-taking in ways God moves them to ministry.

Finally, I believe the higher reason for conducting a similar study with small churches and pastors who serve alongside is for healing. The distrust is growing between the clergy and district superintendent, between the conference leadership and laity, between clergy and other clergy, and between clergy and laity in the local church which they serve. A similar study would help healing. The laity would be encouraged to take their membership vow of being in prayer, be present, engage their gifts, put the Great Commission into action through their services to others, and tell somebody along the way what God has done and is doing in their lives. Such study would bring healing among the clergy, for they are being trusted to lead as the Holy Spirit directed them, and when it is time to give account for what they have done with what they have been entrusted, they give account to the Great Commission, not to others.

I believe this study's findings could be helpful to the laity and small church pastors in the Shreveport district.

Postscript

Out of frustration, I started this study. Quickly, I realized how my ego pulled me into this study, and then, as quickly, I asked for forgiveness. I told my fellow seminarian on this journey with me, "I am in the confession booth," every time I worked on this research. My ugly assumptions regarding small churches, pastors of small churches, and the community where small churches are located did not just sit in my mind. Shamefully,

I have said some of my small-minded and ridiculous assumptions aloud, and I wonder why nobody has smacked me.

Not until I got deep into this study could I see a way forward for the small church to become a healthy small church. The moment of clarity came when I went back to Tonga. Every church in Tonga is small, according to the church growth literature. However, not a single church in Tonga is considered to be a small church. Why was that? I asked myself. The answer is that Tongans do not think about churches in size. Instead, they think about people in churches. At the root of such thinking is the primacy placed on people. Nothing in the Tongan Free Wesleyan Methodist church separates the seminary-trained clergy from lay preachers; instead, the appointments are based on each clergy's spiritual and relational maturity. The Tongan conference uses specific metrics to gauge spiritual and relational maturity. Remember, Jesus told the story of the master who gave three of his workers' talents before he left on a long trip; John said he gave to "each according to his ability" (John 25:15). However, the master knew, somehow the master was close enough, maybe even did life together in many ways. The point is the master knew how much risk he was willing to take on each of his workers according to what he knew. That is how the Tonga Conference gauges maturity; it is based on close proximity to the personal lives of each clergy member.

I fear that I may have forgotten how Tongans do church, which is not about the size of the church, but about the size of the people in the church. Despite the ongoing disaffiliation that looms large over the United Methodist denomination, I am still naïve enough as a Tongan pastor serving in Louisiana (the South) to believe that God's grace is

still working in and through the imperfect system and structure known as the United Methodist Church.

APPENDICES

A. Consent Form for the Voluntary Release of Information

Date: _____

Dear _____

My name is Sione, and I am a Doctor of Ministry student at Asbury Theological Seminary. I am conducting research on the topic of small churches with worship attendance of fifty or fewer. Will you be willing to help with my study by answering some questions about your understanding and your experience regarding why small churches stay small, continue declining, and even close?

Thank you for being so willing to share your understanding and experiences of your church. This study aims to determine the reasons for your church's current health. You will be asked questions that have been carefully selected for the purpose of hearing you and your stories of where your church has been to where you are now. Please do not share one another's stories or information that identifies or damages the reputation of any person or organization.

I want you to know the information you share will be used in this study without your personal information regarding your identity: name or address. By May 2024, all research-related information, hard-copy documents, and digital recordings, such as video and sound, will be destroyed. There are no known risks to this study.

Since your participation is completely voluntary, I want you to know that you can choose to get out of the study at any time; it is your choice. Thus, I am truly grateful for your willingness to share your blessings of time, stories, hopes, and yes even your pain.

Ultimately, I hope this study will help you, your pastor, and other small United Methodist churches. I can be reached at the following contacts: 318-469-9106 or by email sione.tuuta@asburyseminary.edu

Please click YES, to participate in this study.

Please click NO to NOT participate in the study.

Blessings,
Rev. Sione Tu'uta sione@fumcbossier.org
Bossier First United Methodist Church
201 John Wesley Blvd,
Bossier City, LA 71112

B. Pastor Survey Questionnaire

Name: _____ Male or Female

Your age: <30, 35-45, 46-56, 57 – 67, 68 >

Years of Service: _____ Years of service at current church _____

Level of Theological Training: MDiv, Course of Study, BA/BS, some college,

Appointment: Full-time, Part-time, Retired yet reappointed,

Church: _____

Address: _____

Website: _____ Email _____

Phone: _____ Facebook page: _____

Last three years Statistical Report

Membership	Worship Att.	Visitors	Budget	Income	Expenses

Pastor Survey Interview

- What concerns about this church keep you awake at night?
- What are the three most significant needs of the community? How is your church addressing these needs?

- What kind of leadership training have you received in preparation for your pastoral leadership? Please explain the type of training, where you received it, and whether it was a university course/degree, seminary course, professional coaching, or independent course.
- What aspects of this church drain your energy? Please list and explain.
- Can you list and explain three reasons why your church is its current size?
- What excites you the most about this church? Please list and explain.
- What aspects of this church's life do you measure, and how do you measure them? Please list and explain.
- What adjustments and changes have you made since you arrived at this church, and why? Please list and explain.
- What is the next big step for this church, and when do you plan to take it? Please list and explain.
- How would you define the purpose of your church, and why?

C. Laity Survey Questionnaire

Name: _____ Male or Female

Your age: <30, 35-45, 46-56, 57 – 67, 68 >

Years at previous denomination: _____ Years at current church

Level of Education: some high school, high school grad, some college, college grad, Master's degree, Postgraduate (please circle)

Economic Status: Employ full-time, Retire, -retire, Senior Citizen (please circle)

How long have you been an active Christian: _____. How long have you been a Methodist_____

Name of your church:

1. Can you describe your church using two words, images, or pictures? Please explain your choice.
2. What are the top three needs your community is currently facing? Please list them and explain each.
3. Who is affected by the needs or problems you have listed above? Please list the affected groups or individuals and explain how they are impacted.
4. How would your community change if your church were to eliminate the problems listed above? Please list and explain these changes.
5. What aspect of your church excites you the most? Please list and explain.
6. What are your two biggest concerns about your church, and why? Please list them and explain each.
7. Describe what your church will look like once you have accomplished what you and your church have been working towards.

8. How skillful is your pastor in communicating, strategizing, and leading your church? Has your level of engagement increased due to the pastor's leadership?
9. What is the number one change you want to see in your church that would significantly revitalize it? Please list this change and explain why it is crucial.
10. How would you define the mission of your church?

D. District Superintendent Survey Questionnaire

Name: _____ District _____

Email: _____ Phone: _____

Years in your current appointment: _____

- What excites you most about the small churches that have fifty or fewer in worship?
- What are your top two goals for the small churches in the Shreveport District?
- What are your top two strategic values for keeping small churches going?
- Are the small churches a liability for the Louisiana Annual Conference (LAC)?
- In your opinion, are the pastors serving these small churches well-trained, prepared, knowledgeable, and passionate about their service? Please list and explain your reasons.
- As the supervisor of pastors in small churches, what are the top 3 leadership qualities these pastors must possess to significantly improve their pastoral leadership experiences? Please list and explain.
- What are the 3 most common complaints, concerns, or wishes expressed by the laity of small churches regarding their ministry and community? Please list and explain.
- Could you share your personal experiences with pastoring small churches as defined in this study (worship attendance of fifty or fewer)? What have been the most significant differences (if any) in church culture and mindset between your experience and those of pastors/laity currently serving in small churches? Please list and explain.
- What is your next step that will significantly improve the lives of both pastors and laity in a small church? Please list and explain.

E. District Superintendent Letter of Approval

ALEXANDRIA - MONROE - SHREVEPORT DISTRICTS

The United Methodist Church

LOUISIANA CONFERENCE

Rev. Dr. Tom Dolph

Katie Wilson

District Superintendent

Administrative Assistant

10/23/23

To whom it may concern:

Rev Sione Tu'uta has shared with me his research project related to his pursuit of a DMin. I have granted him permission to reach out to the pastors and churches in my districts for the purpose of gathering his needed data. Churches and individuals are free to participate or not as their desire dictates.

Should you have any questions or concerns, feel free to reach out.

Grace & Peace,

Superintendent - Alexandria, Monroe & Shreveport Districts

Louisiana Conference

The United Methodist Church www.la-umc.org

O: (318) 869-5729 C: (225)405-5927 tdolph@la-umc.org

EMAIL: tdolph@la-umc.org · SHdistrict@la-umc.org · MNdistrict@la-umc.org · AXDistrict@la-umc.org

F. Asbury Theological Seminary's IRB

Approval by Asbury Theological Seminary's Institutional Review Board

(IRB) Committee

The signature below indicates that John Sione Tu'uta's proposal (# 0223-52) has been reviewed by the IRB Committee, necessary changes have been made by the researcher(s) to protect the research subjects, as determined by the IRB Committee; and the proposal has received the final approval by the IRB Committee.

SIGNATURE

DATE

CHAIR, ATS IRB

TITLE

JANET B. DEAN, M.DIV., PH.D.

10/24/2023

G. Louisiana DHH IRB

From: seminary sione.tuuta@asburyseminary.edu

Subject: Re: Please help

Date: February 10, 2020 at 4:54 PM

To: DHH Institutional Review Boa DHHInstitutionalReviewBoa@LA.GOV

Thank you so much...

On Feb 10, 2020, at 4:53 PM, DHH Institutional Review Boa

<DHHInstitutionalReviewBoa@LA.GOV> wrote:

If you are not surveying/interviewing our clients/staff nor utilizing our data, then you do not need to seek our approval. You should work directly with your institution.

From: seminary <sione.tuuta@asburyseminary.edu>

Sent: Monday, February 10, 2020 3:00:49 PM

To: DHH Institutional Review Boa

Subject: Re: Please help

LDH is for Louisiana Department of Health, right?

SO, I hope this will be my last question.

So my research will be survey, one on one interviews, and phone interview when needed. It will be with my fellow Methodist clergy and lay leaders of about 15 churches in New Orleans District. SO, the QUESTION is - what would be a reason for the LDH to be involved? Again, thank you for being so helpful.

On Feb 10, 2020, at 11:18 AM, DHH Institutional Review Boa

<DHHInstitutionalReviewBoa@LA.GOV> wrote:

If your research involves LDH, then yes, both IRB approvals are required. You must obtain approval from your institution first.

From: seminary <sione.tuuta@asburyseminary.edu>

Sent: Monday, February 10, 2020 11:04:20 AM

To: DHH Institutional Review Boa

Subject: Re: Please help

I want to be sure I am communicating what I am thinking I am asking. I am applying for IRB with the Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. What I am asking here is whether the University in Kentucky IRB standard satisfy the Louisiana Standard?

Rev. Sione

H. Data Matrix

LAITY SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

<i>RQ1-Q1 Can you describe your church using two words, images, or pictures? Please explain your choices. (Answered: 15 Skipped: 11)</i>
RESPONSES
LD2 - Small Friendly Faithful
LB5- Family-friendly, Sunday school, all ages, nursery
LC5- Small church Like a Big Family Not many young people
LC3- Loving and Caring - greet you at the door, introduce themselves, and invite you to join.
LC1- Friendly and comfortable. From the first time I walked into the good, I felt welcome. Everyone was so friendly, and I was comfortable, the same in Sunday school class as well as church services.
LC2- Loving and giving. Our church, I believe, has a warm, welcoming congregation.
LA3- Caring & Loving Members are willing to pray for you when you are having problems and also want to help in any way they can.
LB1- Home. It was so much fun to go to church every Sunday. We were like family. I didn't know how much support we would give each other.
LB4- Peaceful, friendly. I feel welcomed into the church family.
LB3- Friendly. Involved. I was welcomed into the praise band with no questions asked. I felt like family early. The church always seems to be reaching out to the community and offers programs for anything you might be going through.
LA2- Survival and Tired
LA5- Warm and welcoming.
LC6- Praying, intimate: We are a small praying church that cares deeply for each other and are strengthened by each other.
LA4- Welcoming new people are smothered with kindness. Caring, everyone is always checking on everyone else.
LB6- Prayerful Traditional We are a Church that prays for members, nonmembers, for families we know and families we don't know yet. We have been around since 1839
<i>RQ2-Q2 What are the top three needs your community is currently facing? Please list them and explain each. (Answered: 15 Skipped: 11)</i>
RESPONSES
LD2 - community outreach and acceptance

LB5 - Help with aging population, Christian role models
LC5 - Funding help with utilities, food and medical
LC3 - 1. More young people going to church 2. raising your kids to be kind 3. respecting the law and rules
LC1 - 1. Lack of membership 2. Lack of knowing who our neighbors 3. Feeling safe walking around the neighborhood.
LC2 - Lack of youth facilities and activities. Lack of facilities and food for the homeless. Lack of food and facilities for unwed mothers.
LA3 - Emotional Support - when someone is having troubles, they need the church to support them and talk to them. Financial Assistance - Some in the community have fallen into hard times and need help finding work or paying bills. Food Assistance - If out of work, they need help with food or vouchers to get food for their family.
LB1 - My opinion. Poverty issues. Drug and alcohol dependency, lack of parenting or adult supervision. It seems like more often; I see parents taking less interest in their kids.
LB4 - (1) Food insecurities. Many children in the community go without food (2) Drug rehab, and there are numerous pockets of drug activity in the area along with drug manufacturing (3) Education assistance- tutoring programs for at-risk students or adults that need basic educational needs.
LB3 - (1) Poverty. The area around the church is now a low-income neighborhood.
(2) Connection. We need to find a better way to connect with our neighbors. (3) Divisiveness. We do have several ethnic groups attend our church, but it is predominantly white.
LA2 - poverty, standard of living - poor housing, lack of jobs
LA5 - Aging membership. No children or young people. Contributions are diminishing.
LC6 - (1) Increased membership that includes younger membership (2) Increased outreach to our community (3) Growth that would merit full-time pastorate
LA4 - (1) Youth, we are an aging membership and need new members. (2) Funds: most are on fixed income, and we are limited in our outreach.
LB6 - (1) Someone to listen (2) Someone to provide financial help (3) Someone to calm fear
<i>RQ3-Q3 Who is affected by the needs or problems you have listed above? Please list the affected groups or individuals and explain how they are impacted. (Answered: 15 Skipped: 11)</i>
RESPONSES

LB1 - Kids. I think kids, especially lower income, have a harder time dealing with all that goes on in school and at home. There is pressure from classmates, sometimes family and social media like bullying and such.
LD2 - the underprivileged
LB5 - Most people need help sometimes in this life; emotionally, physically, and need a friend.
LC5 - Numerous people in the community
LC3 - All people are affected by not loving your neighbor.
LC1 - Everyone
LC2 - Youth, homeless individuals, unwed mothers. Most tend to be youth or young adults who necessarily spend their lives in the survival mode rather than being in church learning about God.
LA3 - Poor people in our area who either can't work or have temporarily lost a job.
LB4 - Children- children have developing bodies and brains and will not thrive. or function well without good nutrition 2. Adults, teenagers, children, infants- Addiction starts with the adult and trickles down through the family. Infants are born to addicted mothers creating developmental delays 3. School age children and young adults- lack of basic education makes it hard for families to earn a living and manage. finances and meet basic human needs.
LB3 - The African American community. I see the neighbors walk past our church. Every time I'm there I notice they seem needy.
LA2 - Minority, older generation as much as the younger parents
LA5 - All members of our church. Our community. United Methodist Conference, locally, statewide, and nationally.
LC6 - Our entire congregation is affected by these needs as we seek to fulfill. God's call on His church. Increased younger families and youth would better ensure the future of our church.
LA4 - Entire congregation, without youth to help with upkeep of the physical plant we have to tap into the limited funds.
LB6 - In my view almost everyone in the immediate community around our Church, regardless of age, marital status, family with small children, family with no Children
<i>RQ2-Q4 How would your community change if your church were to eliminate the problems listed above? Please list and explain these changes. (Answered: 15 Skipped: 11)</i>
RESPONSES
LD2 - better place to live

LB5 - We're all in this together attitude, so let's help each other.
LC5 - There would be many people coming to the church to help these areas. We could disciple these people.
LC3 - Everybody would help their neighbor and have respect for others
LC1 - A great Christian community
LC2 - I believe there would be less crime, and the afflicted could live a meaningful life and more likely to be or become Christians
LA3 - I think some of the people who we have helped & shown our faith in Jesus may come to know & accept Christ as their savior & also join the church.
LB1 - I don't think they can be eliminated but everything can always improve. I'm probably always going to go back to kids when talking about these things. I have somewhat given up on adults and think we need to get to the kids before the negatives do.
LB4 - More cohesiveness of communities. Better quality schools. With successful schools and communities, more business adventures to the area
LB3 - It would be more inclusive of the African American community.
LA2 - the church do not have the resources to meet the needs of the community
LA5 - I am having trouble with your muse of community. Does your use of it target our church or the community we serve? Assuming only our church, hopefully, we would be more vibrant, more financially secure. Assuming our community, our outreach and influence would be much greater.
LC6 - Larger impact in our community and more things that could impact the growth of our church allowing us to reach more with the Gospel message.
LA4 - We would have more outreach with more youthful members.
LB6 - Our community would be stronger if our church took a more active role
<i>RQ1-Q5 What aspect of your church excites you the most? Please list and explain.</i> (Answered: 15 Skipped: 11)
RESPONSES
LD2 - music bibles teaching Sunday School
LB5 - We're trying to do our best with new groups setting for daily and nightly availabilities.
LC5 - Members in the church invite and work towards bringing others into our church.
LC3 - Helping people when they have sickness or need
LC1 - Fellowship
LC2 - I participate and love our Contemporary Music praise band.

LA3 - Reaching visitors through our music ministry. Music and the words have a way of speaking to those who are in search of a new life & need hope.
LB1 - I'm answering as if it was still open. Positive energy and hope to help others.
LB4 - Worship- it refreshes my soul for the upcoming week.
LB3 – Definitely music. I am part of the praise band, and I wouldn't be there if that was not offered.
LA2 - history
LA5 - Possibilities! There is so much good this church could and can do in the mid to long term if we are able to survive and round the corner. I am convinced this will happen.
LC6 - Our love and commitment to each other and the number of prayer warriors our church contains.
LA4 - Membership is growing with the disaffiliation.
LB6 - We have good news to share.

RQ2-Q6 What are your two biggest concerns about your church, and why?

Please list them and explain each. (Answered: 15 Skipped: 11)

RESPONSES
LD2 – We need younger families
LB5 – (1.) Losing people thru death (2.) Not enough money to keep the facility and programs up very few young people and (3.) a lack of funds
LC3 – (1.) There are not enough young people to carry on. (2.) the church will close. (3) Pastors have total control of all the decision-making for the church.
LC1 - (1) Lack of an altar call and a need for a broader missions program. (2) I think people should be encouraged to join the church and reeducation of their lives. (3) More mission outreach.
LC2 - (1) Because we are not a large church with a whole lot of programs for children & youth, we lose young couples to larger churches with more to offer. (2) Also we have trouble getting enough volunteers to help with the nursery & teaching Sunday school classes.
LA3 - (1) Again. I'm answering as if it didn't close. (2) Lack of quality leadership at all levels, and (3) apathy and lack of effort from the laity.
LB1 - (1.) Aging congregation- as the elderly age out you will need people to replace what they do (2.) Are we meeting the needs of the surrounding neighbors. (3.) What does the population look like. African American? Hispanic??

LB4 - That we will not consistently bring new young families as the older members pass on.
LA2 - aging and no young people
LA5 - (1) Old age of membership. (2) Financial stress.
LC6 - (1)Size and the age of most of our membership for future sustainability. (2)Ways to reach more with the Good News of Christ.
LA4 - (1) Declining membership could close the doors. (2) Physical plant is aging and upkeep is getting more expensive.
LB6 - (1) Thinking we are too small to do anything (2) Serving ourselves instead of serving God
<i>RQ3-Q7 Describe what your church will look like once you have accomplished what you and your church have been working towards. (Answered: 15 Skipped: 11)</i>
RESPONSES
LD2 - larger congregation, more children, more programs for children
LB5 - Active and friendly congregation for all classes of people
LC5 - It would be a more active and livelier congregation with a cross-section of the community attending.
LC3 - The pews would be packed to the brim
LC1 - Non
LC2 - I think our church could grow exponentially, garnering more enthusiasm and funding for missions.
LA3 - More members & more outreach programs.
LB1 - Oh man! We will never know.
LB4 - As a contributing member of the community, you will gain the trust of the community and be able to foster good
LB3 - More diverse and open to new ideas.
LA2 - we are just taking care of each other and that is all we can do
LA5 - Our Church recently celebrated its 75th anniversary. At its peak approximately 600 people were members. Sadly, Church attendance each Sunday is 20 or less with an average of 82+. If our plans are successful, we will resemble our former self in membership numbers, but we will be much more diverse and committed to work across all racial, economic and gender groups of people.
LC6 - Larger more viable and inviting church
LA4 - Maintaining our place in the community
LB6 - A more diverse, more vocal, and more connected community member

<i>RQ1 - Q8 How skillful is your pastor in communicating, strategizing, and leading your church? Has your level of engagement increased due to the pastor's leadership? (Answered: 15 Skipped: 11)</i>
RESPONSES
LD2 - some were better than others, but very devoted to their Christian belief.
LB5 - We change pastors every three years or less. Some were dedicated, and some it was just a job. I have been engaged in several areas.
LC5 - He is not very motivated and so just trying to keep the church running as usual.
LC - No, at all - didn't listen to what the people wanted and considered their age to be able to do.
LC1 - Non
LC2 - Both of our ministers are very good at creating programs and outreach. My participation has increased.
LA3 - Gives great sermons, but not good at communicating what & how our church needs to reach more people. Wants to constantly make changes to everything we do. Older members do not do well with constant change.
LB1 - Once again I'm answering as if I was still able to worship at love chapel/legacy. The last pastor was absolutely inadequate when it came to communication. We were suppose to read his mind. Nothing was written down or records kept so no one knew what was happening. He was as disorganized as I had ever seen a person in a leadership role ever. Strategies were changed weekly or more and we were supposed to know they changed without being told. My level of participation went from being on a board and Many committees for 20 years to not being able to breath when I drove into the parking lot. Not only was my clear and dedicated effort cast aside but most others as well.
LB4 - The pastor is skillful in leading the church week to week. I think communication of activities could be improved. There is online calendar but it is hard to follow
LB3 - Different pastors bring different church aspects. One can be more organized and somewhat dry and others can be full of life and brings an excitement. That is the main reason I attend church.
LA2 - we have a good pastor and he take care of us
LA5 - Our Pastor is "retired" serving 2 church congregations. His primary church is not us. Enough said.
LC6 - Our pastor is a capable leader who has definably grown in his ability to lead effectively.
LA4 - Fred is a very able pastor and is a great leader.
LB6 - He is caring and encouraging

<i>RQ3 - Q9 What is the number one change you want to see in your church that would significantly revitalize it? Please list this change and explain why it is crucial. (Answered: 15 Skipped: 11)</i>
RESPONSES
LD2 - Need more members. we have tried so many community outreach programs like backpack giveaways, angel trees, hayrides, music festivals, etc. People come but non come to church
LB5 - More dedicated young people who are dedicated and have the time to minister to them.
LC5 - more fully dedicated members
LC3 - Listen to the congregation and their needs and wants
LC1 - A pastor who loves people, serves the people, and works with us to recruit new members.
LC2 - One thing that I'm aware of, is the need to improve the worship experience for elderly and handicapped individuals. Transport from parking lots into and down long hallways in the building. More safety rails, grab rails in ALL bathrooms, occasional hallway seating(rest). This would encourage more Senior adult attendance and personal safety.
LA3 - For pastor to listen to members who have concerns & ideas & not always want things his way. To show more empathy for people.
LB1 - It's closed. I don't think the effort would be there to revitalize it. I and others are going to Fellowship UMC Bossier. This is the only change I see possible. I don't have the desire or fire inside I use to and don't think I'll ever be able to get it back. I will try at my new church and we will see.
LB4 - Increased Children and youth ministries will bring in families and perhaps involve the surrounding neighbors
LB3 - I want to see pastor lead the service with passion. To me, he do better to relate with that congregation. It is a feelings thing for me.
LA2 - young people
LA5 - Membership growth particularly inclusive of young families and kids.
LC6 - Addition of younger visionary membership. This seems to be critical to the long term future of our church.
LA4 - To have a younger membership that will step up when we are gone
LB6 - Get past general conference. Whatever the outcome, focus on Jesus

<i>RQ2 - Q10 How would you define the mission of your church? (Answered: 15 Skipped: 11)</i>	
RESPONSES	
LD2 - Sharing God's Love, Mercy, and Grace.	
LB5 - Make disciples of Christ.	
LC5 - To spread the gospel of Jesus and make new disciples	
LC3 - To Love one another.	
LC1 - Do God's work here on earth	
LC2 - To present the Gospel of Jesus Christ, according to the United Methodist Doctrine, in order to save souls.	
LA3 - To spread the word of Christ to nonbelievers and bring them to know and accept Christ as their Lord and Savior.	
LB1 - Extinct	
LB4 - A community of Christian believers extending the love of Christ in word and deed	
LB3 - I want to be more a part of the community, but I do not really know the best way to achieve that.	
LA2 - take care of each other	
LA5 - Our mission is to survive and grow by Reaching up to Jesus and Reaching out to the world.	
LC6 - To spread the Gospel and make disciples of others while praying for and meeting the needs of our membership and those around us.	
LA4 - Stable and growing	
LB6 - Share the good news of Jesus and make disciples	
PASTORAL SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE	
<i>RQ1 - Q1 What concerns about this church keep you awake at night? (Answered: 6 Skipped: 7)</i>	
RESPONSES	
P4 - This church is growing, though the neighborhood is not. To facts: (1.) It is the only United Methodist Church congregation in a 50-mile radius. (2.) people are retiring from Shreveport, Louisiana, and moving into Lake Clairborne	
P5 - Trying to maintain vital ministry with declining membership	
P2 - After the pandemic, it was challenging. I do have broadcast services every Sunday and bible study broadcasted to members and others.	
P3 - There are no concerns at K3 at this time. Now, F3, I'm concerned with how we/I can make this church grow.	

P1 - The church folk's mindset is to come to church, sit, listen to the music because they do not sing, pray a little, then go home and believe that is what it means to be a church
P6 - The physical health of my members.
<i>RQ2 - Q2 What are the three most significant needs of the community? How is your church addressing these needs? Answered: 6 Skipped: 7</i>
RESPONSES
P4 - Community: We provide worship, Sunday school, Bible study, and monthly fellowship gatherings. We are studying the possibilities of some ESL classes given we have new members with that training.
P5 - Poverty, education, population, active backpack ministry
P2 - Food outreach-UMW. Community conns-myself and members, nurturing-members and myself
P3 - People require food, spiritual well-being, and wheelchair ramps for the elderly. K1 church feeds anywhere from 25 to 30 families a month from our food pantry; as for spiritual well-being, we offer church services. Bible study and a recovery group weekly . As far as the wheelchair ramps go, we helped FB church with ramps within the district and built small ramps for people in need in our community.
P1 - I do not know, and the church folks do nothing for the community.
P6 - I'm not really sure. When I ask about the community, members say that it is declining. When I ask others, they say that the community is thriving. My members aren't really interested in serving the community as a congregation, but they do so as individuals.
<i>RQ3 - Q3 What kind of leadership training have you received in preparation for your pastoral leadership? Please explain the type of training, where you received it, and whether it was a university course/degree, seminary course, professional coaching, or independent course.</i>
<i>Answered: 6 Skipped: 7</i>
RESPONSES
P5 - SMU - Perkins - MDiv Emory Doctoral Study National Institute Church Finance and Administration College of Executive Coaching Certification
P6 - 33 years of experience, theological education, and many continuing education workshops.
P4 - The course of study, visiting and worship in other areas
P2 - Other than licensing schools - none

P3 - In my professional life, I've managed lots of people and led teams of different sizes, which has given me all the leadership experiences that I am using in my pastoral leadership.
P1 - I went through License to Preach and I am currently working toward completion of Course of Study. I have completed 6 courses and am enrolled in my 7th.
<i>RQ1 - Q4 What aspects of this church drain your energy? Please list and explain. (Answered: 6 Skipped: 7)</i>
RESPONSES
P4 - none
P5- Trying to offer leadership to a dying congregation
P2 - No drain; I take time for myself.
P3 - There is bickering between members at F1, and certain ones do not want to run stuff past the pastor or church council before acting on some issues.
P1 - I was out of town when I received a call regarding a funeral when I got back. When I got to the church a few minutes before the service began, the sanctuary was dirty, and trash from the previous Sunday was still all over the place. I mentioned it to a few church members, and their response was, "God will come through." This is the culture and the mindset that drained my being.
P6 - Trying to keep up with the physical health of my members, who are generally elderly.
<i>RQ1 - Q5 Can you list and explain three reasons why your church is its current size? (Answered: 6 Skipped: 7)</i>
RESPONSES
P4- (1.) The joy of the Lord is our strength (2.) Disaffiliation sent people to us (3.) It is one of the few opportunities for responsible Sacramental theological expressions.
P5 - The school system is not the best, so young people move away. We have an aging congregation that is unwilling to use social media or up-to-date worship methods.
P2 - Surrounded by other denominations, we are the only. United Methodist Church in the demographical area
P3 – K1 has seen pretty lovely growth in the last two years. I believe that there have been 26 members since I've been there. Fairview, I would say, is an older congregation, and lots of people left there because of the previous pastor. It's also so far off the highway that nobody can see it.
P1 – (1.) They like being small. (2.) they love each other. (3.) their preference for familiar faces in the church outweighs their willingness to embrace newcomers.

P6 - The church has been in decline for years as members die. They seem to have accepted their fate rather than attempt to attract new members.
<i>RQ3 - Q6 What excites you the most about this church? Please list and explain. (Answered: 6 Skipped: 7)</i>
RESPONSES
P4 - Authentic Community. The church is not trying to make a name for itself.
P5 - People are very caring about each other
P2 - Standing firm and believing believers.
P3 - At both churches, it's the people and their faithfulness!!!
nothing
P6 - Sunday morning fellowship after the service. These members are truly kind and caring. And funny.
<i>RQ2 - Q7 What aspects of this church's life do you measure, and how do you measure them? Please list and explain. (Answered: 6 Skipped: 7)</i>
RESPONSES
P4 - Attendance: - in worship - Sunday School - Bible Study. The growing number of first-time guests.
P5 - Service, budget, attendance
P3 Worship attendance and fellowship. That is their attitude is being.
P2 - I don't know.
P1 - none
P6 - I mostly just keep up with the members and how they are doing - their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.
<i>RQ1 - Q8 What adjustments and changes have you made since your arrival at this church, and why? Please list and explain. (Answered: 6 Skipped: 7)</i>
RESPONSES
P4 - No actual office hours. The congregation has my phone number. I call on them regularly
P5 - Upgraded audio and visual system in the sanctuary, the old system was not adequate for the 21st century.
P2 - I worked with the members being there when called upon. No adjustments were needed; we only improvised what we had and were better at being better.

P3 - Remodeled the fellowship hall and purchased a new sound system at K3. F3, I have made them understand why the church council is so important and made them have the council meeting like they should.
P1 - I was told what they like and to keep it that way, and so I did just that.
P6 - in addition to regular Sunday worship, for example Advent, Lenten, and Easter celebrations.
<i>RQ3 - Q9 What is the next big step for this church, and when do you plan to take it? Please list and explain. (Answered: 6 Skipped: 7)</i>
RESPONSES
P4 - Conversations are ongoing regarding a possible change of worship time from 8:30 AM to a later time. - Some think it might attract young adults. - it is not easy to mess with success.
P5 - Pastoral change, January 1, 2024
P2 - Envisioning is a mindset for growth, and we have it in process. At the beginning of the year, we will place plans in action and in place
P3 - We are trying to launch Sunday School once again for both the children and the adults and add more things for the youth to get excited about after the fire of the year.
P1 - Disaffiliate from the United Methodist church.
P6 - Closure. I'm not sure when, but I try to be sensitive to the thoughts of my members. If their budget continues as it is currently, they won't be able to afford to stay open for more than 8 years.
<i>RQ2 - Q10 How would you define the purpose of your church, and why? (Answered: 6 Skipped: 7)</i>
RESPONSES
P4 - Clearly, our focus is on older adults and the many health issues that come with age. There is a quilting ministry, extended communion service to our nursing home, and a card ministry for the homebound.
P5 - Sharing the good news in one community through witness and outreach.
P2 - It is being at one of the pillars of the community. The reason is that the church is for the purpose of building and nurturing the community.
P3 - To love God and love people, and help bring those that are lost or have fallen away from Christ back to him or the ones that have never heard the Good news of Christ, make sure that they HEAR.
P1 - The purpose of this church is to stay alive and not close.

P6 - To care for the members currently in attendance. It seems to be what they are most interested in.
<u>DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE</u>
<i>RQ3 - Q1 What excites you most about the small churches that have fifty or fewer in worship</i>
RQ-3-DS We are just holding on during this denominational shift, and the small churches are struggling much more.
<i>RQ1 - Q2 What are your top two goals for the small churches in the Shreveport District</i>
RQ-1-DS is not necessarily my responsibility; instead, it is the appointed pastor's job.
<i>RQ3 - Q3 What are your top two strategic values for keeping small churches going?</i>
RQ-3-DS Again, that is not my responsibility.
<i>RQ2 - Q4 Are the small churches a liability for the Louisiana Annual Conference (LAC)?</i>
RQ-2-DS Yes - Insurance, finance, and the small churches require all kinds of help from the conference, much more than contributing to the conference.
<i>RQ1 - Q5 In your opinion, are the pastors serving these small churches well-trained, prepared, knowledgeable, and passionate about their service? Please list and explain your reasons.</i>
RQ-1-DS 1. Leadership Capacity: Most of the pastors serving our small churches are second-career individuals. They are trained through Courses in Study. The pastoral leadership of the small congregation does not have the same level of leadership exposure and experience as those who are serving in the larger congregations. 2. Administrative skills: most needed much more help and guidance regarding structuring processes and flows of the local church.
<i>RQ1 - Q6 As the supervisor of pastors in small churches, what are the top 3 leadership qualities these pastors must possess to significantly improve their pastoral leadership experiences? Please list and explain.</i>
RQ-1-DS Personal commitment to maturity - God deeper is as important as growing in numbers. Good communicator - Reframing the definition of success according to the ministry context of each church. Positive Attitude and Passionate about the mission of the local church.

<i>RQ2 - Q7 What are the 3 most common complaints, concerns, or wishes expressed by the laity of small churches regarding their ministry and community? Please list and explain.</i>
RQ-2-DS 1. We are not important 2. Why don't we have preachers like the large church have? 3. We do not have resources and can't pay our apportionment.
<i>RQ3 - Q8 Could you share your personal experiences with pastoring small churches as defined in this study (worship attendance of fifty or fewer)? What have been the most significant differences (if any) in church culture and mindset between your experience and those of pastors/laity currently serving in small churches? Please list and explain.</i>
RQ-3-DS The mindset and the culture of the small churches have not changed much. The lack of resources, deep caring for those inside the church, lack of vision, dull worship services, and the quality of most activities are organized around being small.
<i>RQ2 - Q9 What is your next step that will significantly improve the lives of both pastors and laity in a small church? Please list and explain.</i>
RQ-2-DS Due to the re-organization of districts in the Louisiana Annual Conference (LAC), my time is spent much more on conference-level activities. That means the local churches and their pastor(s) work their ministries, and I am mostly called when there is a problem.

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