

CHURCH REVITALIZATION: RECONNECTING DISCONNECTED NAZARENE
CHURCHES AMONGST DECLINING CONGREGATIONS
ON THE SOUTHWEST OKLAHOMA DISTRICT

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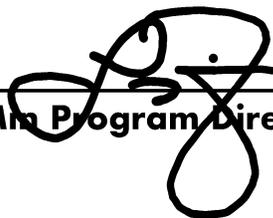
We, the undersigned, determined that this dissertation has met the academic requirements and standards of Nazarene Theological Seminary for the Doctor of Ministry program.



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GLOSSARY

This glossary is provided to define key terms and phrases as they are used in this work.

Attending to new people	Includes having conversations with them about what concerns them; it can include sharing information about the local church
Awareness of the church by outside community	knowing of the presence of a local church in the community
Bodily focus	awareness of and care for physical needs such as hunger, clothing, shelter
Biblical call to evangelism	centered on the commission of Jesus to His disciples to go and make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20)
Building relationships	sharing life with and care for others
Caring for the congregation	offering Scriptural practices of worship and sacraments to those who gather to receive them
Caring for the community	includes awareness of and working to meet the identified needs of the parish
Changing culture	different views and understandings of previously held perspectives
Church community	a group of people who share fellowship; can also refer to the spirit of closeness within and local congregation
Church cultures	local congregation's ways of thinking or doing things
Church life cycle	a sociological measure of the phases local congregation experience
Church splits	a division in a local congregation that can be caused by differing opinions or immoral behavior
Community	can refer to geographical location; can refer to closeness or connection of a gathered group
Community connectedness	ways in which a group of people relate to each other
Community mission	sharing the work of God outside the local congregation

Come-to events	occurrences designed to invite people to gather at the church building
Compassionate evangelism	caring for bodily needs alongside sharing the gospel
Compassionate mission	caring for physical and social needs
Congregational surveys	written inquiries to determine views, attitudes, and behaviors
Demographic report	statistical study of a local congregation that includes numerical, geographic, cultural, and economic facts
Denominational demographic research	statistical information provided by the research arm of the Church of the Nazarene
Disconnection (church)	refers to a lack of relationship with
Disorganized churches	congregations closed by actions of a district
ESL classes	teaching English as a second language
Evangelistic mission	efforts of a congregation to share the gospel; can be local or global
Gathering for worship	people assembling to offer praise to and receive inspiration from God and the Body of Christ
Growth mode	a continuing increase in attendance
Habitus	the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors of a person or group
Inactive churches	congregations which no longer gather for worship or other services
Inside the church care	ministry focused on a congregation which gathers at a local church building
Invitational practices	actions to request someone to attend an event
Inwardly focused	attention centered on a gathered congregation
Measurable characteristic	an attribute that can be quantifiably or qualitatively shown
Mission focus	attention of a congregation toward the mission of God

Message of the gospel	the love of God is offered to all creation through God's Son
Mission of God	to save the world from separation from God and other human beings because of sin
Mission of the church	to proclaim the Good News of Christ and to share the blessings of God with the families of the world (See Gen 12:3 and the Abrahamic covenant)
Missional agent	a person or group who acts on behalf of God
Missional attitude	aligning with the mission of God for the people of God to be a blessing to the families of the world (See Gen 12:3 and the Abrahamic covenant)
Missional church	a local congregation aligned with the mission of God
Missional ecclesiology	a theology which holds that evangelism of and care for the people of the world are the responsibility of the church
Missional practices	actions that engage congregations in the mission of God
Missional responsibility	a call for the church to care for those gathered for worship and those outside the gathered congregation
Ministry to non-attending near neighbors	the spiritual and physical practices of the gathered church extended to those who do not attend it
Near neighbor care	ministry offered to people living within a three-mile radius of the church building, an area included in the parish
Near-by neighbors	people residing near the church building, within a three-mile radius
Negative population growth	demographic statistic that reflects a decline in the number of residents of a city or area
Neighborhood exegesis	a walk taken in a neighborhood to determine the accuracy of demographic statistics
Parish communities	people outside the circle of congregations gathered for worship in a building
People not like us	elements of xenophobia expressed by members of a congregation about near neighbors

Permanent pastor	a pastor elected by a congregation
Practices	common actions of a congregation
Preparing congregation for ministry	offering spiritual practices that enable a congregation to serve the congregation and parish
Proposed remedy	an offered solution to a problem
Purpose of the church	to engage in the mission of God
Relational tools	skills that enable new friendships
Remedy	an action that relieves or counteracts a negative condition
Residual Christendom	remaining effects of cultural Christianity in a pluralist society
Self-delusion	failure to recognize reality
Shaping influences	events and circumstances that are catalysts for ways of thinking and being
Shaping methods	ways of influencing thinking and actions
Shrinking communities	declining population in a bounded area
Spiritual focus	attending to the human spirit
Ten-year attendance decline	a decadal shrinking of Sunday morning worship attendance
Turn inward (Church)	a congregation's focus on the people and practices of those who gather for worship and church practices
Turn outward (Churches)	a congregation's focus on caring for its parish
Unsheltered people	people without permanent housing

ABSTRACT
Gary L. Reynolds

What has caused small Churches of the Nazarene on the Southwest Oklahoma District to decline in Sunday morning attendance and be in jeopardy of being closed? A 2023 district report shows that seventy-seven percent (34) of the churches on the district have Sunday morning attendances of seventy-five or less.¹ Twenty percent (9) of those are fifty years old or older. These nine have been in Sunday morning attendance decline for a decade or more (2012-2022).

Using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods, this dissertation reports, describes, and analyzes data received from pastors, lay leaders and congregations who participated in phone interviews and surveys. This information supports a propensity to focus their gatherings on traditional practices like worship, Sundays School, Bible studies, sharing meals, etc. Not included in these gatherings are non-attending near neighbors who live within a three-mile radius of the church building and were identified through demographic studies and neighborhood exegeses. This research paper speaks of an “inward turn” of these congregations, a turn away from a more robust missional nature to which Christ calls the church. Congregational decline is multifaceted. This is a study of the practices and attitudes of these local congregations. The goal of this study is to understand what has shaped and continues to influence these small Nazarene congregations and their potential demise.

¹ “Quick Report of Membership, Worship, and Discipleship 2023,” an unpublished paper retrieved from the Southwest Oklahoma District office, August 2023.

Chapter One – The Church Turned Inward

I. The problem stated

Based on a preponderance of anecdotal evidence, there is a significant number of churches on the Southwest Oklahoma district in danger of being closed because of dwindling Sunday morning attendance. Each church identified in this study is more than fifty years old. They have been in an attendance decline for more than ten years. Their Sunday morning attendance averages less than seventy-five people. The research that follows provides evidence that these churches have centered their care on their gathered congregations. This has disconnected them from their near neighbor mission field which is found within a three-mile radius of their church building. Little is being done in the way of outwardly attentive missional practices. Instead, attention is focused on those who gathered for worship, Bible Study, and other traditional practices. This has been done in an attempt to deal with sustainability issues like maintaining Sunday morning attendance. These churches have long depended on invitational practices.² The intent of these was to get people to come to the church building for a variety of ministries, including Sunday morning worship services. As supported by the ten-year record of statistical attendance decline, these soliciting methods have not been successful.

According to a 2020 Faith in Communities Today (FACT) study of 15,000 US congregations, seventy percent of them have 100 or fewer people in attendance on Sunday morning. There is a large number of small churches in the US. The study noted that seventy percent of people who attend a Sunday morning worship service are part of congregations with more than 250 in attendance.³ Many people attend large churches, but there are fewer of them.

² “Invitational practices.” See glossary.

³ Aaron Earls. “Smaller Churches Continue Growing—but in Number, not Size.” <https://research.lifeway.com/2021/10/20/small-churches-continue-growing-but-in-number-not-size/>. Retrieved September 2023.

In a 2021 article, Aaron Earls, a senior writer at Lifeway Research, noted an increase in the number of smaller church buildings that seat around 200 people which have an attendance of less than sixty-five.⁴ The issue for this dissertation is not the number of small churches compared to the number of large churches in the United States, but rather to seek reasons for the decline of the small Nazarene churches on the Southwest Oklahoma (SWOK) district.

According to a SWOK district report on membership, worship, and discipleship for 2023,⁵ the number of churches that reported an average Sunday morning attendance of seventy-five or less totaled twenty-one churches. These are forty-four percent of the district. The report includes churches designated as inactive⁶ (1 church) and disorganized⁷ (2 churches).

The delimiters of (1) churches more than fifty years old and (2) in decline for ten years or more, (3) garnered a total of seventeen churches from the district churches list. Of those, nine agreed to be part of this study. Eight churches, or 18.6% of the active churches on the district, participated. Each of these completed the interviews requested. All but one completed the congregational survey. (See Appendix two and three.)

Practices⁸ reflect the way congregations live out their beliefs. The research found herein gives a picture of the practices of these churches. A key finding of this study is that the attendance decline can be connected to a prioritization of attention given to the local congregation to the detriment of the church's mission to its neighbors.

Rushing to find solutions to problems—sometimes referred to as magic bullets—can be the source of other problems. Such a push for quick answers can cause some church leadership

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Quick Report of Membership, Worship, and Discipleship 2023. An unpublished Report dated July 17, 2023 retrieved from Southwest Oklahoma District COTN office.

⁶ “Inactive churches.” See glossary.

⁷ “Disorganized churches.” See glossary.

⁸ “Practices.” See glossary.

(local, district, and general) to give up on churches in trouble. Some of the reasoning for coming to such a decision stems from conclusions drawn from church life cycle⁹ research, like that of the Alban research cited at Duke University.¹⁰ This research has led some to think it best to let churches with long lifecycles and in attendance decline close and be done with them, rather than to determine causes and offer a remedies.

This dissertation explores how churches are called to serve their local non-attending community alongside commensurate care for their Sunday morning gathered congregation. The goal is to integrate a growing awareness and actualization of the scriptural call of the church to the mission of God. A missional character enables the church to align with the great commission of God first found in Genesis 12:3 with its goal of providing a blessing to all the people of the earth. With such a basis at its heart, the congregation can embrace both the gathered congregation and its near-neighbor parish community.

Research among the churches in this study offers that the congregations have a lack of understanding regarding their missional responsibility¹¹ as established by the Bible. This is demonstrated in the responses of the congregational surveys¹² found herein (see Appendix Three). Through these surveys we can discern the attitudes and actions of inwardly focused¹³ congregations. Demographic studies (see Appendix Five) done within a three-mile radius of each of the church buildings show a robust community of people to whom the congregations could minister. This was true even in towns with a negative population growth.¹⁴

⁹ “Church life cycle.” See glossary.

¹⁰ “From Birth to Death: Exploring the Life Cycle of the Church. <https://alban.org/archive/from-birth-to-death-exploring-the-life-cycle-of-the-church/>. Aug. 11, 2006. Retrieved Sept 2023.

¹¹ “Missional responsibility.” See glossary.

¹² “Congregational surveys.” See glossary.

¹³ “Inwardly focused.” See glossary.

¹⁴ “Negative population growth.” See glossary.

These churches were filled with human beings valued by God despite their small number. One could conclude that best practice would be to simply allow these small congregations to continue their decline and die a sociologically natural death. That is a conclusion of church life cycles studies. But is the demise and closure of these churches the only answer? According to the research, some members of these churches wondered if anyone cared about them. This became apparent when one lay leader enthusiastically responded to an invitation to participate in this small church study. She said, “Finally someone is paying attention to us and the other small churches on the district.”¹⁵

The 2018 research by Greg Wiens reported that church life cycle research offers a general rule of thumb. It is typical for the type of small churches like those being studied herein to experience a “slow decline between thirty and forty years.”¹⁶ In a recent DMin class interview, a General Superintendent of the Church of the Nazarene cited this forty-year life cycle of churches as a reality. This leader has recently published a book which cites the fact of growing cities and the need for the Church of the Nazarene to be at work in these large metropolises.¹⁷ While this is a reality, as sociologically shown, is it a forgone conclusion that the future of these small bodies of Christ is only that of decline and death? Is there a respite? Could it be that studying not only their sociological realities but also the causes of their decline can be helpful. Such a study may offer possible remedies,¹⁸ which could offer more than mere survival for these churches? Might it be that this could mean a robust life for the small church found doing the mission of God?

¹⁵ Personal interview with Snyder Church of the Nazarene lay leader. August 2023.

¹⁶ Greg Wiens. “A Season for Everything—Life Cycle of a Church. Healthy Growing Churches.com <https://healthygrowingchurches.com/a-season-for-everything-life-cycle-of-a-church/> (Accessed September 2023).

¹⁷ Busic, David A. *The City: Urban Churches in the Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition*. (Kansas City: The Foundry Publishing, 2020).

¹⁸ “Remedy.” See glossary.

II. Evidence determined through phone interviews, surveys, and demographics

All the churches studied had pastors and leaders who participated in one-to-one phone interviews with me. These consisted of responding to fifteen questions that were mailed to them.¹⁹ Twelve of those nineteen leaders (63%) said their congregation was primarily engaged in caring for the local congregation. This defines the meaning of the identifying phrase “turned inward.” Four pastors (21%) believed that their church people had a combination of both an inward and an outward turn. Only three (16%) of the leaders believed their church leaned outward toward the community.

In the congregational surveys²⁰ I found that that thirty-seven percent of the respondents felt their church’s lean was inward toward the congregation,²¹ while fifty-nine percent felt that there was a balance between an in inward and outward focus. Only three percent of the respondents felt their church had an outward lean toward caring for the community.²² The congregation’s perception, as measured by this question, suggests the majority felt like their current practices were balanced in offering care to the congregation and their near neighbor.

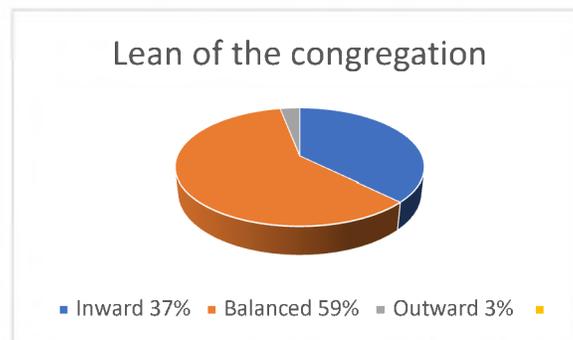


Fig. 1. Ministry balance toward congregation and surrounding neighbors

¹⁹ See Appendix One: Pastoral and Lay Leader Phone Interview Questions

²⁰ Congregational survey questions and answers are found in appendices two and three.

²¹ Congregational survey question 1. See Appendix Three.

²² “Community.” See glossary.

In a separate question about balance of ministry between the congregation and its near neighbors, forty-four percent believed that their church was balanced, while fifty-one percent registered as either neutral or disagreed.²³ Such metrics suggest somewhat evenly divided congregations.

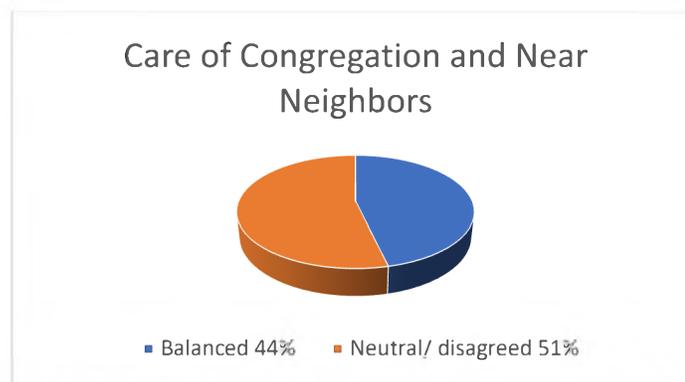


Fig. 2. Ministry care balance of the congregation and surrounding neighbors

The gatherings of these churches display practices which support either an inward or an outward lean. Worship services, Bible studies, and Sunday School classes, particularly those held at the church building, were come-to events,²⁴ reflecting care of the gathered congregation. These contrasted with the church at work serving in their near neighbor community and sharing the Gospel with non-attenders. Of the gatherings discussed in the phone interviews, fifteen of nineteen pastors and leaders (79%) said gatherings held at the church building reinforced the church's inward turn.

The congregational surveys revealed that sixty-five percent believed that the church should participate in community-wide events on a monthly or quarterly basis. The outliers of this

²³ See Congregational Survey question 17. Appendix Three.

²⁴ "Come-to events." See glossary.

view are seen in the group who answered the church should never participate in community events (2%) while another group believed they should participate weekly (2%). All but one of the pastors and leaders of these churches felt that evangelistic mission²⁵ ranged from very important to important with fourteen of the nineteen (74%) who believed it was very important. One respondent had no opinion. When considering the importance of evangelistic mission to the congregation, seven of the group (36%) reported it was very important to them, while eight (42%) rated it as important. One of the lay leaders (representing 5%) felt the congregation was too old to consider being part of such a mission, and another (representing 5%) felt this was not very important to the congregation.

The congregational survey asked about two ministry practices: Evangelistic Mission²⁶ and Compassionate Mission.²⁷ While the two can be—and often are—combined, these questions sought to uncover the emphasis that was placed on ministry to people’s spiritual orientation over against care their physical needs. Evangelistic Mission gives attention to the sharing of the Gospel story using words. Compassionate Mission is about providing care for physical needs of people—needs like food, clothing, shelter, etc. This form of mission serves as a proclamation of God’s compassion demonstrated through the Body of Christ. Asking what role these two play in the life of the church garnered the sixteen answers seen below. (One of the answers was repeated.) The question asked was “What role do evangelistic mission and compassionate mission play in the life of your church?” The answers show a range of involvements and commitments provided by the Pastors, Lay Leaders, and their churches.

²⁶ “Evangelistic mission.” See glossary.

²⁷ “Compassionate mission.” See glossary.

Fig. 3. Variety of answers received regarding evangelistic and compassionate mission

1-2	The church is compassionate and willing to help, but in practice the church donates to another organization which cares for physical needs.
3	The church does not do compassionate evangelism as a church.
4	They do not have a clear picture of what compassionate practice is though their church contributes to a church-type mission venture.
5	The church takes offerings to meet physical needs of those outside the church.
6	The church takes meals to those in need.
7	Compassionate ministry is a “middle priority” for this church.
8	The church was better with compassionate mission than evangelistic mission.
9	Their church leans more toward evangelism than meeting physical needs.
10	Compassionate evangelism is huge in the life of this church, things like helping unsheltered people with motel rooms and serving dinner to them there.
11	This leader knew compassionate evangelism was important but was not sure how to do it.
12	The church adopted a homeless person—gave blankets, fast-food gift cards and assisted with connections to city organizations.
13	The church has a “blessing box” from which anyone in the community can take food or clothing or add such items to the box.
14	The church donates to various ministries that provide compassionate ministry.
15	In this church all the people in this church are compassionate.
16	Compassionate ministry had not been good for their church in the last few years.
17	The pastor of this church gave to another church to serve as their church’s part in compassionate ministry.

The message stemming from these testimonials established that the practice of compassionate ministry by these churches was performed either by donating to other organizations who care for such things, or by offering direct help to individuals as needs became apparent. Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed said compassionate evangelistic mission was essential to the life of the church, while seventeen percent said it was important but not essential. About one-fourth (24%) of the people answering the survey said compassion was something the church should do when possible, and five percent said that such practices were nice but not necessary.

In answering what steps had been taken to address the Sunday morning attendance those interviewed by phone offered the following:

- Talking about the problem;
- hiring more staff to address needs;
- redecorating and updating the building;
- consistently putting out the message of the gospel²⁸ to reach neighbors;
- holding festivals to which the neighborhood was invited;
- holding kids' crusades with other churches;
- starting a Spanish-speaking church;
- partnering online with a neighboring Nazarene church.

One lay leader admitted that they could not think of any steps that had been taken to address their attendance losses. Another believed that their current leadership was stronger now compared to the four different pastors it had in recent years. To them, this recent stability would be the answer to the problem of their attendance decline.

Reviewing the practices of the churches found similarities among the congregations. The leadership reported that gathering for Sunday morning worship was common to all the churches. Most of them had some sort of mid-week gathering at the church, and a few reported having Sunday School. Several reported other practices including:

- Mid-week classes at the church to help people get out of poverty;
- a children's church during the Sunday morning worship hour;

²⁸ "Message of the gospel." See glossary.

- coffee and donuts prior to Sunday morning worship;
- a monthly serving of unsheltered people at a community food kitchen;
- hosting a booth at the county fair to advertise the church;
- providing backpacks to school children and supporting a nearby pregnancy center;
- holding monthly dinners after morning worship;
- offering a native health care program and recovery programs;
- summer VBS;
- game nights and movie nights;
- online gatherings for worship and Bible study.

The surveys revealed that more than half of the respondents (58%) believed that the mission focus²⁹ of their churches included gathering with the people who lived near their church buildings to do work together.³⁰ A little over one fourth (27%) were neutral on the issue. Thirteen percent mildly disagreed. This suggests that for the majority of those taking the survey being bodily present with neighbors was an important element of the mission of the church.³¹

Time is a valuable and limited commodity, so it was appropriate to ask these leaders and congregations that if they were going to do community mission³² work when they would do it. Was there a best time? Three percent said that they were too busy. Another three percent suggested that Sunday was the best day for such work. Over half (53%) responded that evenings during the week would be their choice. About one fourth (22%) believed that any day of the week was the right time for such ministry.

²⁹ “Mission focus.” See glossary.

³⁰ See question nine in Appendix Two.

³¹ “Mission of the church.” See glossary.

³² “Community mission.” See glossary.

The majority of those taking the surveys held the belief that working together with neighbors who lived near the church should be an integral practice of the church. Could these efforts be community building events? First, there was a need to determine what the word community meant. The word “community” elicits different understandings in varying contexts. In the phone interviews, a variety of examples of community definition were given. These included:

- people who attend a local church and their nearby neighbors;
- the town in which a church building is located and its surrounding towns;
- people living in the same place with things in common;
- people living near the church;
- a gathering of people who love God and seek to include others;
- a spirit that should be felt in the church;
- a sense of belonging—our church;
- people within ten blocks of our church;
- the neighborhood around our church who are like-minded people with common interests;
- people bound by location;
- not just the immediate neighborhood but including people within a several miles radius;
- where you live.

Definitions such as these speak of both a physical and geographical nearness to a church building as well as the spirit of a gathered group of people.

When those answering the congregational survey responded to a question about the meaning of being community-connected as a local congregation,³³ two-thirds (66%) said it meant creating a balance of inside-the-church care³⁴ with a matching near-neighbor outside-the-church care.³⁵ For them, these two served as a dual-focused mission. The rest of the respondents favored one side of that balance over the other. Seventeen percent thought it meant that missional focus should be on the congregation, while fourteen percent thought more attention should be given to near neighbors.

When asked about the issue of prioritizing care toward the congregation,³⁶ forty-two percent of the respondents thought that caring for the people inside the walls of the church came first. Thirty percent were either neutral on the matter or disagreed with such a view. Seven percent strongly disagreed with such a priority. As to their church's ministry caring for neighbors through mission activities,³⁷ one half of the respondents (50%) said that they agreed or strongly agreed with such an inclusion, while the other half were divided along lines what were either neutral (27%), disagreed or strongly disagreed (17%). Through these responses we hear a large segment of these congregations who put the local congregation ahead of the neighborhood in missional care.

When the leadership of these churches was asked what mission looked like in their churches, there were various responses. They included:

³³ Question 20 of the congregational survey. See Appendix Two.

³⁴ "Inside the church care." See glossary.

³⁵ "Near neighbor care." See glossary.

³⁶ Question 22 of the congregational survey. See Appendix Two. Answers to this question are found in Appendix Three.

³⁷ Question 25 of the congregational survey. See Appendix Two. Answers to this question are found in Appendix Three.

- It is focused on local mission and things that the congregation can be involved with outside the church, things like health clinics, teaching on poverty, and giving to others in support of our community.;
- it involves reaching the outcast and those without a place in the community;
- it means doing mission work and discipleship;
- it means taking offerings for missions and having speakers from different places talk about missions;
- it means reaching out;
- it is reaching beyond the walls of the church to unknown neighbors for intentional engagement;
- mission is simply responsibility;
- it should be ministering around the world;
- one leader wondered what their mission was;
- it means reaching others for Jesus;
- it was reaching to a hotel one-half mile from the church where people with lower incomes lived including people addicted to drugs;
- it is belief in mission, but it is more monetary than sending people;
- it means being open to anyone coming to church;
- it means holding a breakfast club that ends with attendees going to mow yards for free, and letting people know that those mowing are part of a local church; however, this practice had not been fruitful in getting community people to attend the church;

- it means a gathering church mentality with strong prayer and financial support for those who feel sent to do mission;
- it means getting people to come to church and help them to know or draw closer to the Lord;
- it means trying to reach everyone;
- it means caring for everyone with more caring for those inside the church;
- it means caring; but their church did not have a mission.

In answering how well their church reached the community with the gospel, twenty-four percent of the survey respondents believe they ranged from very effective to mildly effective. Twenty-nine percent believed that as a congregation they do okay, while forty-four percent believed they either came up short or were ineffective in connecting with their near neighbors.

The congregational surveys reported that eight of ten of the respondents believed their church leadership encouraged the congregation to be active in the community. Only twelve percent disagreed or were neutral with that issue. Fifty-four percent said that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their outreach of their local church to its near community, while forty-five percent were either a little satisfied or not satisfied at all.

When asked if the community would notice if their church were to suddenly disappear, the respondents were evenly split with half believing the community would notice and the other half believing they would not. Statistics show that there is a willingness of these local churches to meet new challenges. Seventy-one percent affirmed that view, while twenty-nine percent, almost one third, felt their churches were either not up to dealing with more than what they were already facing or that they did not have the band-width for tackling fresh issues. Thirty percent

of the respondents held the view that changing mission direction is mildly difficult, while twenty-two percent believed it was easy or mildly easy.

Awareness of the church by its outside community³⁸ was measured in the survey. Answers were spread evenly between everyone in the community knowing about the local church (20%) to one half of the community knowing about it (27%), to few people in the community knowing (25%). A quarter of the respondents (26%) did not know whether the near neighbors knew about the church or not.

Regarding the church leadership's awareness of reasons for Sunday morning attendance decline, sixty-three percent felt they were aware. Thirty-two percent were either neutral on the issue or disagreed. As to whether their leadership had a strategy to address the decline, thirty-seven percent felt they did while the majority (58%) were either neutral or disagreed.

People answering the congregational surveys felt that the most important task for the future of their church was

- gathering for worship³⁹ (10%);
- building relationships⁴⁰ in the congregation (8%);
- building relationships in the community (22%);
- preparing the congregation for ministry⁴¹ during the week (5%);
- or that all these were equally important (42%).

³⁸ "Awareness of the church by outside community," See glossary.

³⁹ "Gathering for worship." See glossary.

⁴⁰ "Building relationships," See glossary.

⁴¹ "Preparing the congregation for ministry." See glossary.

In ranking attitudes of the survey respondents regarding whether their church was worth attending or not, the following responses were received. Note that a majority felt theirs was a good church to attend.

Figure 4. Ranking attitudes about quality of church to attend

This church is an excellent one to attend	20%
This church is a good one to attend	52%
This church is a fair one to attend	12%
This church is a poor one to attend	2%

When asked, would you recommend your church to others, the following answers were given:

Fig. 5. Percentages of people recommending church to others.

Answer given	Percentage answering
Absolutely	72%
Probably	19%
Maybe	5%
Not likely	3%

The survey asked about the church's Sunday morning attendance. Eight percent of the respondents were strongly encouraged by the numbers of people who were currently attending, seventeen percent were encouraged, and twenty-nine were neutral on the issue. Forty-four

percent, just under one half of those responding, were either discouraged or strongly discouraged. On the issue of ministry to non-attending near neighbors,⁴² thirty percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the church has always been focused on this, while sixty-eight percent were either neutral or mildly disagreed on the issue. When asked about the role of the congregation in attending to new people⁴³ who visited Sunday morning worship, nine out of ten (91%) either agreed or strongly agreed that it was important for them to greet new people each week, while 7% were neutral on the issue.

When the leadership of the churches addressed whether the future of church looked like growth or decline, their responses were varied and included the following:

- unless people change, we will decline;
- they will decline unless young families begin attending;
- leaning toward decline because our older people will get sick and die, and these older people were not as active as they once were;
- given more to decline because younger people are moving away from the community and because of a lack of job opportunities;
- we are far more optimistic toward growth because the church is realizing that mission is beyond the walls of the church to neighbors they don't know;
- given to decline because the church needs more young couples; and church leaders are in their fifties and sixties;
- unless some changes are made, we will decline;

⁴² "Ministry to non-attending near neighbors." See glossary.

⁴³ "Attending to new people." See glossary.

- given to decline because we don't seem to reach the right people to get people to come to church;
- except for the growth of our Latino church, we will decline;
- we are in a growth mode⁴⁴ because we see some children beginning to attend;
- we are losing funding but are starting to bring new people in whereas we had been in a decade of decline;
- we believe we are in a growth mode now;
- we believe we will grow over the next decade, though now we are dealing with the shift in the culture that has added to our decline;
- given to a growth mode once school starts;
- given to a growth mode with twenty-five new members being added since January 2022;
- after the pandemic it is hard to get people to come back, but we're hopeful;
- our appraisal is that the church is in decline.

Seven of the leaders said that they were experiencing growth while ten believed they were continuing in decline. The variety of reasons cited by the pastors and lay leaders for their decline included:

- a congregation not willing to embrace people not like us;⁴⁵
- being located in a military town which is transient; people regularly moving away;
- people dying;
- being in a dying community,
- people of the church stopped adapting to change;

⁴⁴ "Growth mode." See glossary.

⁴⁵ "People not like us." See glossary.

- the pandemic closure;
- loss of trust of leadership by the congregation;
- old building limitations;
- the many interim pastors;
- lack of younger people;
- past church splits;
- the lack of a permanent pastor.⁴⁶

The essence of these answers was rooted in negative events that the churches had experienced. Added to these reasons for decline was that churches were experiencing a changing culture in which the role the church played in people’s lives has changed.

There is one last assessment gleaned from interviews with church leaders. When asked to rate their church on a ten-point scale with 1 being most connected to community and 10 being least connected to community, fifteen leaders responded.

Fig. 6. Rating churches most/least community connected

Rating	Number of people selecting this number
1	0
2	0
2.5	1
3	3
4	1
5	5
6	1
7	0
7.5	2

⁴⁶ “Permanent pastor.” See glossary.

8	0
9	1
10	1

No church claimed to be the best community connected and only one church claimed to be the worst. The largest group, ten churches, were on the positive side of the rating while five churches leaned on the negative pole.

III. Demographic Reports for Studied Churches

A demographic report was mailed to each of the churches in the study.⁴⁷ This information was taken from the Nazarene.org Stats and Research webpage⁴⁸ and was based on a three-mile radius from the church buildings. The report considered seven areas of concern:

- (1) Population and Growth,
- (2) Family Structure,
- (3) Age Groups,
- (4) Housing Types,
- (5) Education levels,
- (6) Economic Indicators, and
- (7) Culture.

This demography also included numerical estimates and percentages of people unclaimed by any church or who claimed no connection to any religious group. Narratives built on these demographic reports were given to each of the studied congregations to help them analyze how

⁴⁷ These reports can be found in Appendix Five.

⁴⁸ Nazarene Reseach. "Community Demographics for the United States." <https://maps.nazarene.org/DemographicsNazarene/>. Accessed August 2023.

they might shape methods⁴⁹ for reaching these people. The statistics showed that not all the churches in this study were in growth areas. Still, there were substantial numbers of people who did not identify with a local body of Christ.

The Family Structures category identified married couples who were non-attending near neighbors. Developing and offering guides for strengthening marriages is a rich ministry that a local church should develop provide. This can serve as a good connection point for developing relationships with near neighbors and strengthening both marriages and congregations. There were a significant number of single parents living near these church locations. Specific questions for the churches should consider what unique needs do single people have that the church can help meet, and what unique talents do they have which are being underutilized for the community?

The age groupings in these demographic groups were found to be spread relatively evenly. Here are several questions to be asked:

- What are the needs of these various populations?
- How can the church be part of community activities with these groups and be actively establishing relationships?
- Is the community at-large meeting the needs of this group and how could the church supplement that work?
- How could the church be part of or help establish local programs expressly designed to build relationships within this community?

⁴⁹ “Shaping methods.” See glossary.

The housing types within a three-mile radius of these churches are largely single-family houses (79%). Neighborhood exegeses revealed that those in single family houses include people who do not know their neighbors. How could the church become part of a helping culture that creates events in the community through which people can build relationships with each other and which could create opportunities for the church to share the gospel message of loving the neighbor?

The educational levels of those living near each of these church building show people with high school, college level educations, and higher. These people may respond to well-crafted invitations to community-building events designed to improve community relations. Such events offer opportunities for the people of the church to join with near neighbors in relationship-building events.

The poverty rate of people living in the three-mile radius near each of these churches ranged from 12.2% to 28.5%. Each church should be asking what is being done in their community to help alleviate financial burdens of their neighbors? This should include more than financial benevolence. Many people working at minimum wage jobs are underemployed. How could the church be active with local businesses to promote fair wages and working conditions? The Church of the Nazarene was born doing work among the poor. We should not lose this part of our tradition.

While English is the language most often used in homes throughout Oklahoma, other languages, particularly Spanish, make up a significant percentage of the population.⁵⁰ To reach these groups, local churches should be asking about the lingual needs of its community. What

⁵⁰ See demographic reports for specific cities to see actual percentages. Appendix Five.

possibilities are there for the church to assist with ESL⁵¹ classes by offering space for classes to be held? How could such practices be relationship-building events?

III. Conclusion—a problem in search of a solution

The statistics offered in this chapter bear witness to a problem, specifically the decline of small suburban and rural churches throughout the US. A slice of this population includes churches of the Nazarene on the Southwest Oklahoma District. Eight churches (18.6%) of this district fit within the parameters of churches that are more than fifty years old with seventy-five or fewer people attending Sunday morning worship services. Annual reports to the district show that these churches continue an attendance decline begun more than a decade ago. Some reasons offered for these declines are found in the Pastoral and Lay Leader Interviews.⁵² They include shrinking communities,⁵³ lack of church leadership, church splits,⁵⁴ and a changing culture.⁵⁵ A goal of this study is to identify the current practices and mindset of these local churches and see if these contribute to their Sunday morning attendance decline. Another goal is to discover the shaping influences⁵⁶ of past and current thinking and practices that have resulted in disconnecting the local congregation from its local neighbors. This means overcoming such influences and adopting a missional attitude⁵⁷ which aligns with the mission of God for the church.

⁵¹ “ESL.” See glossary.

⁵² See Appendix Four.

⁵³ “Shrinking communities.” See glossary.

⁵⁴ “Church splits.” See glossary.

⁵⁵ “Changing culture.” See glossa

⁵⁶ “Shaping influences.” See glossary.

⁵⁷ “Missional attitude.” See glossary.

CHAPTER TWO: SELECTED LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review seeks to interconnect a variety of voices that work to establish the mission of God as the core purpose of the church in its local expressions. It is this core that can serve as a guide for the local church to be both Christocentric and missional in its practices.

I. TWIN PURPOSES OF THE MISSIONAL CHURCH: EVANGELISM AND MISSION

In his argument for a double meaning of missions, Lesslie Newbigin stated succinctly, “The church is mission.”⁵⁸ This does not relinquish an understanding of the nature of the local church as part of the global missionary venture. It is an argument for the missional practice of congregations to be realized on both a local and an international stage. Michael Goheen identified Lesslie Newbigin’s reasoning for the need to differentiate mission and missions because nineteenth and twentieth-century practices had reduced mission to cross cultural missions. These “came to be viewed as oppressive in the postcolonial period.”⁵⁹ Goheen recognized that Newbigin used the singular word, mission, as “the total calling of the church to make known the gospel as it participates in God’s mission,”⁶⁰ whereas the plural word, missions, operated as “particular enterprises within the total mission of the church”⁶¹ for reaching people with the gospel where the gospel had gone unheard.

⁵⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, “Crosscurrents in Ecumenical and Evangelical Understandings of Mission.” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 4 (1982), 149, quoted in Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 77.

⁵⁹ Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 77.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Thus, the missionary task of the church is to continue its biblical call to evangelism,⁶² while taking on its missional task in which the church acts as a missional agent.⁶³ In Newbigin's world, cross-cultural missions had come to be done "more through social and economic development than through evangelism and church planting."⁶⁴ But, evangelism and mission were and are the both/and-life of the local church. Newbigin wrote that while "church is mission, we still need missions."⁶⁵ The church functions as an expression of this need. It operates as a sending institution for reaching the world where the gospel is unknown. It also is engaged in supporting activities which help to mature new believers to become fully devoted disciples of Christ through involvement in mission action at home.

At points in the history of the church, evangelism and mission were confused as one and the same. John R. Franke identified a corrective to this confusion in 1921 at an International Missionary Council conference which met in Edinburgh. Its goal was fostering better cooperation among various mission groups. Generally, participants thought that evangelism was "synonymous with mission. Mission was assumed to be evangelism."⁶⁶ This was the Christianity of the West as distinguished from the Non-Western, non-Christian world.

With the "emergence of the *Missio Dei* theology ... the rationale for mission found its basis in the very nature of God."⁶⁷

This broader understanding of mission led to a missional ecclesiology⁶⁸ that was inclusive of both evangelism and an accompanying missional practice. These cared for the community

⁶² "Biblical call to evangelism." See glossary.

⁶³ "Missional Agent." See glossary.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Newbigin, "Crosscurrents," 79, in Goheen, *Vocation*, 77-78.

⁶⁶ John R. Franke, *Missional Theology: An Introduction*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 2020), 2.

⁶⁷ Franke, 3.

⁶⁸ "Missional ecclesiology." See glossary.

through both word and deed. It necessitated understanding and addressing the culture in which evangelism and mission was to be presented and lived out.

Identifying culture should be a normative issue for the community of faith. The people of God must grasp how gospel presentations operate out of the habitus⁶⁹ of the presenter and how they are received in the context of the recipient. As Newbigin identified it, the gospel is culturally conditioned. Goheen would later extrapolate on Newbigin's thought as he described a missionary encounter and its cultural limitations,⁷⁰ recognizing that "all Christians are born into a particular culture."⁷¹ Benjamin Valentin laid out some complications of culture for Latinos/as who have experienced "oppression other than economic ... causing the sufferings of many people in our society."⁷² He pushed for the creation of a theology focused on more than the issues of a particular culture, its identity and difference, which became the foci for many Latino/a theologians. He argued for the development of a public theology that was understood as more than "entirely a work of the church and for the church."⁷³ It must be "tied to the life of a broader culture"⁷⁴ and deal with "a wide matrix of human experience that transcends church life."⁷⁵

Some theologians, like some local churches, can be given to a narrow way of thinking about the life of the church.⁷⁶ Valentin argued that the Latino theological enterprise had much to offer

⁶⁹ "Habitus." See glossary.

⁷⁰ Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 1986), 4. See also Goheen, *Church and Its Vocation*, 142. "[...] all cultures have a religious and comprehensive *credo* at the center or foundation of their life together that is incompatible with the gospel."

⁷¹ Goheen, *Vocation*, 144.

⁷² Valentin, *Mapping Public Theology*, 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ In *A Theology of Love* Mildred Bangs Wynkoop identified and labelled such thinking as "provincialism in theology." See Mildred Bangs Wynkoop. *A Theology of Love*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1972), 18.

in the way of adding to the theological conversation instead of being narrowly focusing on culture, identity, and difference to provide answers to oppressive histories and circumstances. The more limited focus missed an opportunity and failed to offer the responsibility for developing a public theology among Latinos that would allow for a more robust embrace of the needs of the community at large. At the same time, this larger embrace expanded the community of the people to be included in a missional reach. This encompassed not only Latinos but all other races as well.

This coheres with the thinking of Franke's alternative to the individualist tradition in favor of a communitarian one which "emphasizes the social nature of human existence."⁷⁷ Such a nature is made through "connections with other people, institutions, and traditions." It also aligns with the writing of Munther Isaac in "Ecclesiology and the Theology of the Land."⁷⁸ There he recognized the role of the community alongside that of the individual as being found in the biblical narrative. "The focal point in biblical theology is the community and not the individual."⁷⁹ God meets the individual where they are. Once they believe the gospel and the reign of God, they become a member of the community and are accountable to the community who in turn is accountable to them. This social interconnection reflects the communal nature of the Triune God who offered good news by sending Christ, an evangelistic move, and encouraged participation in the mission of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, a missional move. This is the life of the Body of Christ in the world, an enterprise carried out using both words and deeds as it works to meet the holistic needs of the community.

⁷⁷ Franke, 37, 38.

⁷⁸ Munther Isaac, "Ecclesiology and the Theology of the Land: A Palestinian Christian Perspective" in *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue: Ecclesiology in the Majority World*. Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, K.K. Yeo, Eds. (Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2018), 153-172.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

One of the valuable goals of becoming a missional church is inclusivity. This begins with a conscious turning outward toward near neighbors rather than remaining fixated on the life of the local church. In this broader process, the local church becomes co-participants with God in the mission of God. The ecclesial community that fails to consider and to work through issues beyond the immediate needs of the isolated community fails to embrace the benefits of learning and growth. These result when the church becomes listeners to a larger community. Such consideration of this larger context allows for a more holistic understanding of all for all. A congregation devoted exclusively to the care of the congregation fails to heed the missional call of God to reach the world with the gospel. Franke asserted, “From a Christian theological perspective, human beings are individuals created for community.”⁸⁰ Thus, this should resonate with all followers of Christ. Community connections are to be part of the reign of God.

II. PURPOSE OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD

In one of his books, Michael Goheen included the word “vocation” in its title,⁸¹ tying the mission of the church to that of a lived-out career rather than simply one of its functions. He noted the work of the church was mission, which had been defined by Newbigin as “participation in the mission of the Triune God.”⁸² This finds its center in Christ, a Christocentric center,⁸³ and as the work of the Spirit, a Pneumatological work.⁸⁴ It has a clear narrative shape⁸⁵ and is eschatological⁸⁶ in its practice and lived hope.

⁸⁰ Franke, 39.

⁸¹ Michael W. Goheen. *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

⁸² *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

These four characteristics (Christocentric center, Pneumatological work, narrative shape, eschatological hope) give direction to the missional activity of the church. Worship of God in the name of Christ is a foundational activity for the gathered church which is empowered by the Spirit to make worship a “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1) in daily living. This work of the Spirit is expressly for “those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” (Rom 8:5).

This living sacrifice finds examples of in the narrative of the Bible, a book of books filled with stories which reveal God and the purpose of God to reach and reconcile the world. These stories are intended to help the people “know the story they are part of.”⁸⁷ The Christian narrative is more than a call to personal salvation. It is the church finding its purpose and life in the story that, as Wright described it, “begins with creation and ends with new creation.”⁸⁸ In such a reading of the Bible we come to understand that the Great Commission of the New Testament in Matthew 28:19-20 is not the first or only place for the church to find a biblical theology of the church’s mission. As Wright wrote, “The mission of God’s people is not only driven forward by the command of Christ, it is also drawn forward by the promise of God”⁸⁹ as expressed in Revelation 21:3-5. “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” Participation in the missional work of God is eschatological. It is a story that points to and draws us into its goal to be part of the new creation plan of the story of God and God’s people. Wright

⁸⁷ Christopher J. H. Wright, gen. ed. Jonathan Lunde, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 35.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

noted that it “spans the gap between the curse on the earth in Genesis 3 and the end of the curse in the new creation of Revelation 22.”⁹⁰

III. MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY: THE CHURCH AS MISSIONAL

The church, as the people of God in the world, is to be the life of God in flesh reflecting the character of God who is by nature a missionary God.⁹¹ In his missional theology, John Franke incorporated Jürgen Moltmann’s thought on the Trinitarian nature of God. Moltmann wrote that “it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father.”⁹² This is missional ecclesiology. God-sent people operate in the way of Christ. “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,” (John 20:21), was the way Jesus described it—a favorite verse of Newbiggin.⁹³

In *A Light to the Nations*, Michael Goheen described a double orientation for the life of the church. It is to be oriented first to God and then to the world.⁹⁴ To focus on God alone or the church alone misses the missional intention of God for the people of God. The former reflects a perichoretic understanding of the Triune God. The communal God lives in loving, relational connections among the Godhead. These interconnected relations are meant for all of creation in the hope that all of creation might reflect the missionary nature of this relational God.

“What was it that made Christianity a missionary faith from the very start?” asked Christopher Wright in *The Mission of God’s People*.⁹⁵ Using the book of Isaiah, he argued that

⁹⁰ Wright, 46.

⁹¹ Cf. Part I, New Testament Models of Mission, in David J. Bosch, in *Transforming Mission. Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 15-55.

⁹² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church and the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 64. In Franke, 1.

⁹³ Goheen, *Vocation*, 71.

⁹⁴ Michael W. Goheen. *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2011), 191.

⁹⁵ Wright, 35.

the people of God should know their story. Wright quoted a version of the God-given mission first given to Abraham and later quoted by the Apostle Paul in Acts 13:47:

“For this is what the Lord has commanded *us*: ‘I have made you a light to the Gentiles: That you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”⁹⁶

The salvific language of God to Abraham for the people of the world is found in the Genesis story in which God blessed Abraham and extended the purpose of that blessing as a benefit for “...all the families of the earth...” (Genesis 12:3). God, who is a missionary God, formed and forms a missionary people who hear and answer the call to mission to fulfill God’s promise first made to Abraham.

Being a missional community is answering the call of God to the contemporary church who began as the people of God, Israel, in the Old Testament. Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen made the argument that “The widest and most comprehensive biblical image of the church is the people of God. In the Bible, peoplehood is based on divine election ... Yahweh’s choosing of Israel as his people.”⁹⁷ This people of God as the church finds its root in Jesus’ words to Peter in Matthew 16:18, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” This is a community that was built on the testimony of those who recognized Jesus as the Son God. God’s intention for this community is missional because God loves and desires to redeem and reconcile all of creation.

The modern church became entangled with modern cultural value that centers the church on itself rather than its mission. This is what George Hunsberger, who drafted chapter four in

⁹⁶ Italics by Wright, 37.

⁹⁷ Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Ecclesiology and the Church in Christian Tradition and Western Theology” in *The Church from Every Tribe and Tongue: Ecclesiology in the Majority World*. Gene L. Green. Stephen T. Pardue and K. K. Yeo, Eds (Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2018), 15-34.

Missional Church,⁹⁸ wrote. In paraphrasing David Bosch, George Hunsberger identified the Reformational marks of the “true church” as inclusive of a place where “the gospel is rightly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, and (they sometimes added) church discipline exercised.”⁹⁹ All good things! However, over time, these marks “narrowed the church’s definition of itself toward a ‘place where’ idea.”¹⁰⁰ The church became a “come-to” place rather than the “sent people” of God. When the primary focus of the church becomes activity-centered in the gathered church, rather than God’s call to mission, the church has lost its *raison d’être*: the mission of God. Goheen noted that lack of a missional identity on the part of a congregation led to an “introverted body that caters to its own members and is not concerned with missions to the world.”¹⁰¹

IV. MISSIONAL HERMENEUTIC: THE MISSIONAL GOD REVEALED IN BIBLICAL TEXTS

God intends for the people of God to walk in God’s ways. As such, the Bible reveals the ways of God. In his chapter, “People who walk in God’s Way,”¹⁰² Wright wrote that the commands of God “are frequently related to the character or values or desires of God”¹⁰³ which are revealed through the story of the world as told in the Bible. What are these ways? Goheen identified them as the way of condescending love. Mission is capsulized in the people of God

⁹⁸ David Bosch in in Darrell L. Guder. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 79.

⁹⁹ Ibid. “These marks of a true church are from six lectures given by David Bosch at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. There are audio and videotapes of the lectures in the seminary’s library collection.” 79, footnote 5.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰¹ Goheen, *Vocation*, 100.

¹⁰² Wright, 82,

¹⁰³ Ibid., 89.

“doing for others what God wishes to have done for them”¹⁰⁴ For example, Israel was set free from captivity and given all necessary provisions for their wilderness wanderings. The people of God were to reflect God through their loving behaviors and in renouncing the ways of the world that oppress others, “to do righteousness and justice for the oppressed and against the oppressor.”¹⁰⁵ This is meant to be the side-by-side outcome of God’s mission and ethics.

God blessed Abraham so that he could be a blessing to the nations. This would be accomplished through “the existence in the world of a community that will be taught to live the way of the Lord in righteousness and justice (ethics).¹⁰⁶ It would be revealed through the activity of a revealed righteous and a just God engaged in the mission of loving the world, a God perfectly revealed in Jesus of the Bible. Goheen wrote of Jesus teaching his disciples a distinctive way of life “that will stand as a contrast to the surrounding culture,”¹⁰⁷ a life characterized “in the threefold context of eschatology, community, and mission.”¹⁰⁸

Jesus, the Son of God, revealed this characterization of a kingdom of God come and yet coming, calling a community of disciples and followers to the mission of God, sending them even as He had been sent by His Father. All of His disciples were to proclaim this gospel in their daily lives through their words and the lives they lived ultimately declaring it among the Gentiles. The promise of God to Abraham was to be realized through them and others who would follow in their steps.

V. MISSIONAL VOCATION: COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS¹⁰⁹ AS A PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁷ Goheen. *Light to the Nations*, 88.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ “Community connectedness.” See glossary.

Linell Cady of Arizona State University, who identifies as “a theologian in a public university”¹¹⁰ notes a serious weakness in communitarianism when it is applied without constraint, that is without careful consideration of the individual. Valentin spoke favorably of her writing against unrestrained individualism, alerting us to the “corrosive effects”¹¹¹ such a view can have on public life. But he critiqued her view as resting on “the mythology of classical liberalism,”¹¹² which he defined as “deify[ing] the atomistic individual and the rights-bearing rebel.”¹¹³ This can be identified as a by-product of what I label residual Christendom¹¹⁴ at work in our culture. Newbigin pressed the church to “acknowledge that there is no such thing as a pure gospel unencumbered by the trappings of a particular culture.”¹¹⁵

Likewise, the church must be alert to methodologies appropriated which retain parts of a culture that may lead away from its missional ecclesiology. Such a caution was offered by Valentin about a subtle message within the community model. This should cause concern for those developing projects built on the notion of community connection as the driving missional force for the church. Failure to consider how community can exclude as well include can result in the people of God not reaching to all people with the gospel in favor of honoring a communitarian view. Community connection can be a purpose of the church in order to be about the mission of God, but it should never become its primary purpose. God values individual persons and calls them to share a diverse community. It is an example of a both/and philosophy in the life of the church.

¹¹⁰ Linell E. Cady. “Religion, Theology, and American Public Life.” *Journal of Church and State*. 37:2. 1995. <https://academic.oup.com/jcs/article-abstract/37/2/421/794690?redirectedFrom=PDF>. Retrieved April 2022.

¹¹¹ Valentin, 96.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 95.

¹¹⁴ “Residual Christendom.” See glossary.

¹¹⁵ Franke, 65.

Valentin wrote of communities becoming bounded. A bounded community exists for itself. Its practices enable an inward turn and rids it of community connection. A local church can be or can become a closed culture, limiting the exposure of its local members to people outside the community of faith. Such is the basis of what is sometimes referred to as a cult. The justification for such a practice is that it protects insiders from outsiders. It can be a culturally laden practice, much like the one the Shaker movement embodied. To protect their community, they isolated themselves from the world, thereby condemning themselves toward a slow demise. Such isolationist views push against the missional ecclesiology of the church. The cultish practice of locking members into a community can inadvertently lock outsiders out.

Goheen offered a perspective for a both/and understanding of community. The church, through its insistence of remaining separate from the world, can lose solidarity with its culture as the church “turns inward upon herself as a bulwark in an evil world.”¹¹⁶ In other words, the church can become so desirous of building an introverted community that they lose the missional call to share the transforming message of Christ. The other extreme is for the church to become so identified with culture in its attempt to win those outside the life of the church that the church becomes “as much as possible assimilated and conformed to the world.”¹¹⁷ Such syncretism waters down the gospel with an acceptance of all beliefs and all comers. The mission of church as central to the call of the church must remain as God’s mission.

Wright addressed the wholeness of the gospel in terms of recovery because of the human penchant to “separate the individual from the cosmic and corporate dimensions of the gospel, and then to prioritize the first.”¹¹⁸ Thus, the me-first and me-alone lean that stems from Western

¹¹⁶ Goheen, *Vocation*, 7.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Wright, 273.

Enlightenment pushes those in its thrall toward “individual salvation and personal evangelism at the centre of all our efforts,”¹¹⁹ versus a New Testament picture of the order of the gospel as painted by Paul (in Ephesians and Colossians) as “creation ... then *church* ... and then individual Gentile *believers*”¹²⁰ This Pauline perspective found in the New Testament is inclusive of both community and individual with the community placed ahead of the individual. Wright reflected that those who shifted individuals to the fore of the gospel “have little interest in the world, the public square and the nations, and even less understanding of God’s intention for creation itself.”¹²¹

The individualist lean of Western Culture fights God’s missional purpose for the church. Despite its dangers, the value of community must be felt in the life of the gathered church to live out the call of God. This goes beyond conversations about sustainability. This is so that evangelism’s full effect might be experienced by all. It includes those who have not yet heard. It also includes those who may have heard but not yet responded to the call of the Gospel.

The local church must not be averse to being for the community. They can and should learn from the community even appropriating what Valentin called “the critical questions raised by the modern, and now, postmodern world.”¹²² This should occur while never disassociating itself from its “tradition, its categories, narratives and images,”¹²³ holding to these while open for a post-Christendom world. Goheen stated in no uncertain terms, “the church must be oriented toward the unbelieving world,”¹²⁴ which is the unbelieving community just outside the doors of the gathered believing community.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 274.

¹²² Valentin, 80.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Goheen, *Light to the Nations*, 175.

VI. EVANGELIZING THE COMMUNITY THROUGH MISSION

Newbigin recognized twin dangers in the evangelical tradition: (1) sterile and repellent sectarianism in its effort to protect the gospel and (2) solidarity without separation in its desire to sympathize and struggle in their attempt to remain relevant with to the needs of the world which can lead to apostasy.¹²⁵ Goheen wrote of the impossibility of total withdrawal from culture while acknowledging the vulnerability to syncretism.¹²⁶ Each extreme must be avoided. He argued for “faithful contextualization”¹²⁷ as a preventative tool for avoiding the extremes, a process which Newbigin labeled, “subversive fulfillment” and “challenging relevance.”¹²⁸ This argues for allegiance to the biblical story.¹²⁹

Wright affirmed that the mission of God’s people was “to bring *good* news to a world where bad news is depressingly endemic.”¹³⁰ This necessitates an awareness of the world to whom the church is sent. It also calls for understanding the message of the good news which “begins in Genesis, not in Matthew,”¹³¹ in the promise first made to Abraham that all that families of the earth would be blessed through him (Gen 12:3). The church is part of the unfolding story of God, first begun in the calling of a man and a people and resting in the revelation of the Son of God who was sent by God to call people to deny themselves and follow Him. The story has been extended by God and Christ who through the Holy Spirit sends the church to the world to fulfill the promise first made to Abraham.

¹²⁵ Goheen, *Vocation*, 155.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹³⁰ Wright, 179.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

Wright titled one subsection of *Mission of God's People*, "The Gospel is a New Redeemed Humanity, a Single Family of God."¹³² "The good news about Jesus was a universal message for all the nations."¹³³ This is good news to be announced to all, for it is a message for all. The mission of God taken up by the church falls short of its communicative effort to all when, whether through words or deeds, it disconnects its church activities church from reflecting the missionary nature of God and instead becomes self-focused.

The gospel message "confronts things that contradict it or people who deny or reject it."¹³⁴ Thus, Newbigin's language of subversive fulfillment and challenging relevance means this gospel will prove a difficult path for the church in the world, much as was Jesus' path to the cross with all its roadblocks. This included encountering religious and non-religious people who attempted to be hindrances to its fulfillment. The mission of God is a collaborative venture between God and the church. It is also between the church and the ones in need of the gospel's message of cleansing, power, and transformation. As Franke noted, "This is a communal world in accordance with the nature of God as social."¹³⁵ The social God is best understood in God's Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit each working together ceaselessly in love.

In a press for ecumenism, Franke cited a strategy offered by Raymond Fung that called for local congregations to be in partnership with other people.¹³⁶ These partnerships can serve as relationship builders being built to do mission together. They can lead to a point in which these

¹³² Ibid., 191.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 197.

¹³⁵ Franke, 53.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 55

others are invited to a “friendship with Jesus and fellowship with the church.”¹³⁷ This “othering” evangelistic process Franke cited as “a sign of the kingdom in making disciples ... working for a better world for those who are vulnerable ... a foretaste of the kingdom in worship and life together.”¹³⁸ This is the mission of God engaging with others to whom the church is called to evangelize as part of the mission. Guder spoke of an ecumenical connection he labeled as “evangelical unity”¹³⁹ which is found when “communities practice accountability toward each other.”¹⁴⁰ This is seeking unity “for the sake of faithful witness.”¹⁴¹

The *Misión Integral* Movement, of which Ruth Padilla DeBorst wrote, “[sought] to engage followers of Jesus in linking the whole gospel to the whole of life.”¹⁴² Her father, Carlos René Padilla is credited with the beginnings of this movement. He sought to overcome an Evangelical model that had become “dominated by the large movements of the richer nations.”¹⁴³ These had “separated evangelism from social action.” It was the intention of *Misión Integral* to reconnect these two. Both DeBorst and Padilla, along with Samuel Escobar and Pedro Arana, were responding in their context with ways to strengthen “the capacity of the church to contribute ... to the transformation of society.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, the salvation offered here is a picture not comprised solely of lone individuals who are saved, but an evangelism that answers the promise of God made to Abraham to bless of all families of the earth through him—a transformation of society!

¹³⁷ Raymond Fung, *The Isaiah Vision: An Ecumenical Strategy for Congregational Evangelism* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992), in John R. Franke, *Missional Theology: An Introduction*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 56.

¹³⁸ Franke, 57.

¹³⁹ Guder, 264

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Green, et al, 43.

¹⁴³ David Smithard in Health and Justice Track blog. “C. René Padilla and the Birth of the Integral Mission.” <https://integritashealthcare.org/hj-blog/the-birth-of-integral-mission>. Retrieved Jan 2024.

¹⁴⁴ Green, et al, 43.

VII. CULTURAL LIMITATIONS

What are the hindrances of culture and its influence on the practices of church? Are these the residual effects of Christendom? Under Christendom Guder argued, “mission became one of the many programs of the church.”¹⁴⁵ Goheen held “Ecclesiology is first about identity and self-understanding ... of the church.”¹⁴⁶ Once this is established “the life of the church must be oriented toward the unbelieving world”¹⁴⁷

This life of the church is established when the church identifies in which story it is playing a role. Is it the story of the West and “our culture’s story and its images, which have too often dominated the church’s sense of itself and informed its life,”¹⁴⁸ or is it the biblical story and its images? Wright wrote, “first believers knew the story they were in ... they knew their Scriptures. They were the Jews, chosen to be the people of God.”¹⁴⁹ For New Testament believers in Jesus the story reached a climactic moment and “they knew what the rest of the story demanded.”¹⁵⁰ With the establishment of Christendom under Constantine, “the missional identity of the established church began to fade. There was no longer a call to live as light in the midst of a dark world. Consequently, the church became preoccupied with its own welfare and maintenance.”¹⁵¹

Goheen identified at least nine “legacies” that were chosen by churches under the label ministry that was the result of the influence of Christendom.¹⁵² He quoted Steven Miles, CEO and consultant, who wrote, “consumerism ... is arguably *the* religion of the late twentieth

¹⁴⁵ Guder, 6.

¹⁴⁶ Goheen, *Light to the Nations*, 6.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴⁹ Wright, 36.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵¹ Goheen, *Light to the Nations*, 9

¹⁵² The nine legacies of Christendom identified by Goheen were the Church as (1) mall/ food court, (2) community center, (3) corporation, (4) theater, (5) classroom, (6) hospital/spa, (7) motivational seminar, (8) social-service office, (9) campaign headquarters/ social-advocacy group. Goheen, *Light to the Nations*, 15-16.

century”¹⁵³ So, to those nine legacies, Goheen added consumerism. Rather than serving as a critique to Western Culture, the modern church embraced it, and the light of mission dimmed. Noting the danger of a lack of missional activity on the part of the church led Goheen to identify its outcome. The church becomes an “introverted body that caters to its own members and is not concerned with missions to the world.”¹⁵⁴

In his Latino context, Benjamin Valentin wrestled with another cultural issue. In attempting to loosen the bonds of prejudice and social injustice, a theology “must guard against giving most of its sustained and mature attention to matters of particular culture, identity, and cultural difference.”¹⁵⁵ He argued for a broader reach for the gospel which is attentive not only the needs of ‘local’ theologies, but also to the possibilities of ‘public’ theologies. The story of the Gospel is both local and global and should not become servant solely of one or the other. Valentin used the language of “translocal and transcultural”¹⁵⁶ to call for a public discourse that considers not only the immediate needs of a community, but also “takes into account the justice demands of our age.”¹⁵⁷

As Samuel Escobar said, “All theology is contextual.”¹⁵⁸ Green noted “that does not mean that these theologies and biblical reflections are simply for a particular time, place, and people.”¹⁵⁹ This is a push against provincialism¹⁶⁰ and is needed as each culture defends a localized presentation of its beliefs and practices. Likewise, the church, as a culture within

¹⁵³ Steven Miles, *Consumerism as a Way of Life*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 1. In Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 209.

¹⁵⁴ Goheen, *Vocation*, 100.

¹⁵⁵ Valentin, xvi.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Green, et al, *Church from Every Tribe and Tongue*, 1.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1972), 63. Wynkoop wrote against the attempt to “compress Wesley’s concept of sanctification into a narrow provincialism (particularly American)” in her writing about Wesley’s “catholic interests.” For Wesley, the scriptures spoke to all of creation.

culture, is susceptible. For the church, this influence must be overcome by remaining true to the Bible that “tells the story of universal history, and the election of a community”¹⁶¹ by God.

VIII. THE ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY

In *Theology of Mission* John Howard Yoder called for a balanced alternative between two influential paradigms: Christendom and Pietism. Christendom, historically pursued by mainline denominations, identifies, and in some formats equates, Christianity with society. In its missionary venture, Christendom exports culture as much as it does the gospel. On the other hand, in Pietism, “a historical phenomenon [that] has been at the origin of what we call the modern missionary movement,”¹⁶² mission is conducted through voluntary societies with “alternative types of churches that come out of that movement.”¹⁶³

In Yoder’s *The Politics of Jesus* we can glean church as an alternative community. Here we come upon arguments for the church being, like Jesus, a servant. Yoder states confidently, “It is the ethic of Jesus himself that was transmitted and transmuted into the stance of the servant church within society.”¹⁶⁴ This servanthood nature of Christ is the call of the church. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:5-8). As a servant the question should be asked servant of whom? Certainly, the servant of God is an appropriate answer,

¹⁶¹ Goheen, *Vocation*, 38.

¹⁶² John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective*. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2014), 175-6.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 176.

¹⁶⁴ John Howard Yoder. *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 187.

but can one serve God without simultaneously serving their neighbor in need? The two are inextricably linked as is the love of God and love of neighbor. When the practice of loving our neighbor comes into full view, we see this love for what it is: a love which is inclusive not only of those within the church body but our neighbors as well (even our enemies!). Such love is connected to the servanthood life of the church, a love that must adequately address not only those who are spiritually well-nourished in the body of Christ but those outside the ecclesial community, too. Such practice may well create an alternative community among those who call themselves church, if indeed such servanthood is seen in their practices.

In *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation*, a dozen of its authors wrote about the various elements of integral mission, a term that can be understood as holistic mission. This is “the mission of the whole church to the whole of humanity in all its forms, personal, communal social, economic, ecological, and political.”¹⁶⁵ In this text, C. Rene Padilla, wrote, “There is abundant evidence to show that for a growing number of Christians and churches, the phrase integral mission encapsulates a distinctive way of perceiving their role in the world as disciples of Christ.”¹⁶⁶

IX. NEW FRAMEWORKS AND PERSPECTIVES

The literature reviewed for this dissertation offers some new frameworks and perspectives for the church to develop and live out a missional ecclesiology. Michael W. Goheen concluded that “All that is done in the gathering congregations ... forms God’s people for their missionary calling in the world.”¹⁶⁷ This is God’s desired outcome for the gathered church. For it

¹⁶⁵ Tetsunao Yamamori and C. René Padilla, eds. Brian Cordingly, Trans. *The Local Church, Agent of Transformation: An Ecclesiology for Integral Mission*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Kairos Edition, 2004), 9.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 19.

¹⁶⁷ Goheen, *Vocation*, 6.

to be realized, the church must add outwardly aimed missional existences to inwardly turned centers of attention. The latter limited introspection keeps the people of the church working on sustaining the local church with their methods (albeit unintentional!) of excluding the seeking, finding, and caring of those outside the body of Christ. To reach the missional goal there must be both solidarity with culture and separation from its idolatries.¹⁶⁸ Such a mission calls the church to be turned outward and inclusive of ministries toward the other alongside those ministries that are exclusively inwardly turned for the life of the congregation.

The people of God are to be engaged in establishing the practice of transformational community building, tying together what Hendrikus Berkhof's ecclesiology described as a practice that interlaces the church as an institution, a community, and a mission.¹⁶⁹ The church is to embrace the totality of personal relationships within the congregation alongside the activity of the mission of God which engages with the personalities and relationships of the community outside of the congregation. God chose a people, a community, to restore the "relationships fractured in the fall."¹⁷⁰ There was an election of a community—the people of God—whose role was, and is, to be a blessing to the families of the earth. God's giving of the Spirit in the New Testament, "is always to a community."¹⁷¹ This is a distinctive, alternative community¹⁷² and its mission is its *telos*.

Citing Lesslie Newbigin, Goheen summarized the church as a community whose "story is *communal*: at its center is a community."¹⁷³ It is a community that has been chosen by Christ to "enact his reconciling purpose for the world."¹⁷⁴ This results in the building of an enlarged,

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Goheen, referencing Hendrikus Berkhof, Goheen, *Vocation*, 6

¹⁷⁰ Goheen, *Vocation*, 31.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷² Ibid., 78.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 201.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

interconnected community through the joining of the gospel of God's love and grace with those who form the local church and its parish community composed of near neighbors. Goheen posited that Jesus' teaching was a strongly communal one that sought "to form a visible and identifiable community living as a body under the rule of God."¹⁷⁵ It has "an eminently social dimension."¹⁷⁶ It is a community of connections to people in communities.

In his chapter titled, "The Community as Union with Christ in the Midst of Conflict"¹⁷⁷ author Xiaxia E. Xue recognized Paul's description of the church facing crises. He noted this was a "dynamic community in the process of growing into its fullness [...] growing toward "greater maturity."¹⁷⁸ This Chinese perspective offers much to the church in the midst of identifying and shedding effects of residual Christendom. Such effects can keep the church turned inward on itself rather than answering God's call to a sent mission.

Valentin spoke of public discourse as a tool that can be useful in "reshaping our social claim,"¹⁷⁹ and of celebrating both the idiosyncrasies of particular identity as well as the commonalities that we share in the community at large with people who, like us, have "common problems, aspirations, hopes, and humanity."¹⁸⁰ These are the makings of community connections through identifying needs within a local congregation along with those needs found outside the community of faith.

Franke explicitly labeled the church as community.¹⁸¹ He argued for the "social nature of human existence." It stands against the individualist tradition and the individualism of

¹⁷⁵ Goheen, *Light to the Nations*, 89.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Green, et al 114.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Valentin, 107.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Franke, 36.

“seventeenth and eighteenth-century thinkers.”¹⁸² While he accepted that individualism continued as a powerful influence in contemporary American society,¹⁸³ he offered an alternative—the communitarian tradition with its understanding that the self is “formed by connections with other people, institutions, and traditions.”¹⁸⁴ Such a tradition “elevates the importance of relationships for personal existence.”¹⁸⁵ He defined a community as “a group of people who are conscious that they share a similar frame of reference.”¹⁸⁶ He concluded, “It is part of the mission of the church to establish communities that faithfully participate in the mission of God.”¹⁸⁷

The mission of the church is the mission of God which is to redeem and reconcile all creation through the love of Christ. While the local congregation may be filled with people committed to sharing that frame of reference, it must also include the understanding and practice that reaches to those who do not know the real story of God. It is the history of the universe begun by God’s creative act who sent Jesus to save and send people everywhere with a gospel message for all—even near neighbors—so that the promise first made to Abraham would be fulfilled.

Some of the new frameworks and/or new perspectives found in this literature include the following:

1. A strong emphasis for the church as community is found in these authors, either explicitly or implicitly. The heart of this community is mission; it is to take up the mantle of the mission of God for the world. This is the *telos* of the Abrahamic

¹⁸² Ibid., 37,

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 38.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 41.

blessing in the Old Testament. This is the missionary task of the church as it reflects a missionary God. One of the downsides of community is found in its boundary-making. Such a practice can isolate the people of God from the mission to bless the nations with the love of God.

2. While evangelism is a primary task for the church, mission is not secondary. The church—whether it be a global organization or a local congregation—that fails to engage in a missional ecclesiology will fail to answer God’s sending call of the church to the world. For the individual and the community, salvation is not the goal, being a blessing to the families of the earth is. These are the nations which begin as closely as our near neighbors and extend globally meant to be inclusive of all creation. Thus, this has implications not only for denominations and movements, but for local congregations and individuals.

3. The language of community building found in these texts speaks of more than starting new churches and growing old ones. It speaks to the essential relational nature of God in community as the Three-in-One Being for the world. The church must be reflective of this nature in its approach to others. It cannot be consumed by its cares and concerns for sustainability. Its twin foci must be evangelism and mission, serving as missionaries *for* those who have never heard the gospel and agents of mission *with* those who are to bless the world with the good words and deeds that radiate from the gospel.

4. The church must gain an increasing awareness of its culture. It must be aware of hindrances it can implicitly create. Lesslie Newbigin considered this was

needed to develop a missional ecclesiology, specifically, a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and culture.¹⁸⁸

5. The value of a missional ecclesiology is the turning of church eyes outward in response to the missional call. This allows for community building and denies community bounding. The latter isolates rather than facilitates the gospel. The church as community is the church for all people that works through words and deeds.

Such new perspectives have the real-world possibility of revitalizing the church in a post-Christian culture making it the servant of God to the world that God purposed it to be. May every perspective be lived out of the power and to the glory of the Triune sending God. Other fresh perspectives for local churches are discerned in the writing of Kenneth Carter and Audrey Warren who wrote of experimental churches begun within Methodism, specifically for people not in church (the subtitle of their book).¹⁸⁹ This text speaks of church communities specifically focused on reaching people outside the church, who, like the traditional church, gather regularly to make disciples. Their work speaks of distinctive marks of the gathered church including (1) searching the scriptures, (2) singing our faith, (3) sharing Holy Communion, (4) relationships of friendship and advocacy with the poor, (5) small group support and accountability, and (6) the power of testimony about the work of God in our lives.¹⁹⁰ Here is text addressing how the world around the church has changed.¹⁹¹ Rather than having the church gather only to pray for better

¹⁸⁸ Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 1.

¹⁸⁹ Kenneth H. Carter Jr. and Audrey Warren. *Fresh Expressions: A New Kind of Methodist Church for People Not in Church*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 25.

days,¹⁹² the authors cite practical examples of churches responding to a changed world by “listening to the stories of the residents, seen as outcasts in our culture, to incarnational presence (simply showing up) to service (offering and receiving gifts) to making disciples (making time and space for worship).”¹⁹³

In referencing strategic partnerships of smaller churches with larger churches, Michael Beck and Jorge Acevedo dealt with overcoming local church suspicions of nearby churches in order to reach an unreached population in a community. This text tells of small, older churches and their advantages, one of which was “desperation.”¹⁹⁴ Desperation can be a motivating factor in a local church seeking to overcome its reliance on the ways they have always done things. Despite their diminishing numbers, they come to embrace and adapt to a missional attitude. This recenters the church on the mission of God and reestablishing its purpose and future.

John Wesley wrote of multiple means of grace. Likewise, practices of the church habitually reserved for inward focus can be used as a vehicle to help the church turn its eyes outward. Engaging the grace of hospitality is one way of re-envisioning a long-held practice of the church as a community which reaches out from the life of Christ at work in itself. This tradition builds new opportunity in the process. Kendall Vanderslice uses the foundation of the church gathering for worship and adds inviting people to share meals as a part of that worship. This then becomes a community building event.

While plenty of churches eat together after their services, very few do so with the intention of drawing in those who are hungry... offer meals to folks without homes, but rarely do men and women with secure incomes attend to eat and enjoy the communion. But Jesus did not separate the practice of feeding the hungry

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁹⁴ Michael Adam Beck and Jorge Acevedo. *A Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 83.

from that of feasting with friends. He enjoyed communion with them all Jesus hosted dinner parties that turned the forgotten into guests of honor.¹⁹⁵

While hospitality can become a tool used only for inwardly focused purposes of the church, it offers the possibility of sending the church out to feast among the community. The many ways this could occur are limited only to local imaginations.

The twenty-nine theoretical propositions found in in Carl Green’s dissertation, “Pastoral Leadership, Congregational Size, Life Cycle Stage, and Church Culture: A Ground Theory Analysis,”¹⁹⁶ are helpful for churches growing from smaller to become larger congregations. These theories can also be useful in thinking through adaptive procedures for small churches in decline. The goal of these small churches may or may not include numerical growth. This dissertation asserts that these churches have turned inward in their efforts to care for their congregation by finding ways of sustaining themselves. Intentionally or not, an inwardly turned church may be doing two things: (1) concentrating care on the congregation of diminishing numbers, and (2) dismissing the missional call of God on the life of the church to be for the world. In effect, the church turned inward disregards those who God loves just outside the doors of their church building.

For individuals, self-delusion¹⁹⁷ can be a problem, particularly when dealing with decisions and directions for their lives. Worst of all is when they are blind to mistaken understandings of themselves. Becoming aware of such unrealities and the shaping influences that have made them who they are is one of the necessary steps for creating new attitudes and

¹⁹⁵ Kendall Vanderslice. *We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship, and the Community of God*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019), 108.

¹⁹⁶ Carl C. Green, “Pastoral Leadership, Congregational Size, Life Cycle Stage, and Church Culture: A Grounded Theory Analysis.” (Ph.D. diss., Gonzaga University, 2005), 273-309.

¹⁹⁷ “Self-delusion.” See glossary.

taking new actions. While such false views of self can be true for individuals, and they can also impact the way individuals work together in groups to make decisions and set directions for groups of which they are part. In *The Self Delusion*, Emory psychologist, Gregory Berns presents scientific studies that show how individuals invent and reinvent themselves. Berns wrote, “The future is problematic because all we can do is rely on past experience to make predictions about what we will be.”¹⁹⁸ This can lead individuals working in groups to depend on past attitudes and behaviors, unwittingly repeating past actions. Such practices can become sacrosanct in church communities, using the logic of “that’s the way we have always done it.”

While the goal may be to change the past decline of the local church, it cannot be done without remembering the past. In fact, Berns says, for the individual, selectively recalling good memories should yield a kaleidoscope of future-yous.¹⁹⁹ With critical thinking and with prayerful attention to the past, church leadership and the congregation can begin to imagine and adopt new ways of being the church, adopting these ways with the goal being to attend to the mission of God and to be a blessing to the world. This cannot be done without accurately examining the past and determining causes for past actions. Records of past practice and outcomes are important for looking at where the local church is now. These past actions and outcomes need not be determiners for the future, but they can give insights to past shaping influences that led to decisions and actions. Determining what these actions and influences were and recognizing that they do not need to be the way we do things now is part of overcoming a culture by recognizing it.

¹⁹⁸ Gregory Berns, *The Self-Delusion: The New Neuroscience of How We Invent—and Reinvent—Our Identities*. (New York: Basic Books, 2022), 21.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 251.

When dealing with church cultures, especially when culture gets defined as “the way we do things around here,” it is helpful to think about a definition of organizational culture offered in an article by research librarian and administrator, Michael Jason Martin. This common phrase—the way we do things around here—represents a buy-in to let things be as they are, even though such actions might be leading to an organization’s demise. Martin stated, “Organizational culture consist of three parts: artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions.”²⁰⁰ It is this latter part that can be debilitating to churches trying to change a pattern of decline. Asking about the reasons for decline and what potential solutions might be it can be a way of discovering unknowingly embedded attitudes and actions. Such historic ways of being the church can shape the body of Christ in its thinking and can prevent necessary adaption to a culture that has changed.

For the local congregation filled with people who think they are too busy to do the work of the kingdom, a helpful text on time management and learning how to focus on what matters most is a practical book by UCLA school of management professor, Cassie Holmes.²⁰¹ It is replete with her own research and that of her colleagues “across the fields of psychology, behavioral economics, marketing, and organizational behavior.”²⁰² *Happier Hour* is filled with exercises designed to help people overcome the tyranny of what they believe to be urgent. In a section identifying “Importance over Urgency,”²⁰³ she noted that research warns that people “tend to spend time on what’s urgent, *regardless of its importance*”²⁰⁴ (italics Holmes). Instead,

²⁰⁰ Michael Jason Martin. “That’s the Way We Do Things Around Here,” *Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship*, v. 7 no. 1 (Spring 2006.) Retrieved from https://southernlibrarianship.icaap.org/content/v07n01/martin_m01.htm.

²⁰¹ Cassie Holmes. *Happier Hour: How to Beat Distraction, Expand Your Time, and Focus on What Matters Most*. (New York: Gallery Books, 2022).

²⁰² Ibid., 14.

²⁰³ Ibid., 221.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

findings from her research “urge you to take a broader view of time,”²⁰⁵ and remind you “to spend your hours on what is important to you, and not just on what seems urgent,”²⁰⁶ living life filled with “moments that are consonant with your values,”²⁰⁷ and recognizing that “shared values can help forge greater community.”²⁰⁸

X. SUMMARY

This literature review gives evidence of historic and current thinking about the evangelical and missional nature of the church. This missional nature is to be interwoven into the life of the local church alongside its evangelical practices. These two, evangelism and mission, call the church to care for the congregation and the community parish outside its worship gatherings. The church, like God, is to be missionary. They are to share the Biblical story of the missionary God with both those who gather in the church in worship and those in need of connection to God and the people of God. The act of evangelizing is sharing the gospel in both word and deed. This is an incarnational act of worship. Cultural limitations are to be overcome by remaining true to the story of which the church is part. The church is to express itself as an alternative community. This alternative embraces the value of the individual who shares in the mission of the community of God. The boundaries of the community are not meant to exclude but to embrace all that God loves. In the process of time, new ways of being the church are ever

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 221.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 222.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 225.

being discovered. These remain true to the gospel message and mission but find new ways for these to be shared.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

I. Methods Used

This chapter describes the various research methods used to develop the statistics cited in this dissertation. While national studies²⁰⁹ are helpful in identifying problems that churches are facing, such studies have not offered remedies for small churches with declining numbers. Similarly, Church Life Cycles Studies reported by the Alban Institute,²¹⁰ prognosticates that the future of small churches is shrinkage and death. It does not suggest a very optimistic outlook.

To determine if the problem about which I have written is real, I used both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide real-world statistics. The metrics found in this dissertation are based on these devices. I relied on five methods to substantiate the reported decadal decline of these small churches. They included: (1) phone interviews of the church's pastors, (2) phone interviews of lay leaders chosen by the pastors, (3) random surveys of each of the congregations, (4) a three-mile radius demographic study for each church, and (5) a sampling exegesis of several of the neighborhoods which tested a one-mile radius around some of the church buildings being studied.

Ethnographic interviewing was part of the methodology used in this dissertation.

“Ethnography is a qualitative method for collecting data often used in the social and behavioral sciences. Data are collected through observations and interviews, which are then used to draw

²⁰⁹ “Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview,” retrieved from <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>, 3. The 2020 study by Faith Communities Today, a multireligious and collaborative research initiative of 15,278 religious communities from 80 different denominations and faith traditions, offers insights to patterns of a variety of churches.

²¹⁰ “From Birth to Death: Exploring the Life Cycle of the Church. (Aug 11, 2006). *Alban at Duke Divinity School*. Retrieved from <https://alban.org/archive/from-birth-to-death-exploring-the-life-cycle-of-the-church/>.

conclusions about how societies and individuals function.”²¹¹ Ethnographic interviews are rooted in an expectation of an interviewer engaging in attentive listening. They should approach those being interviewed with the goal of learning something they do not know. “Ethnography starts with a conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance.”²¹² The result of such a practice “leads to envisioning and empowering, which then leads to transforming the world.”²¹³

In his Ph.D. dissertation on issues regarding large church growth, Carl C. Green noted, “Qualitative methodology is often interview-based, with the research functioning as a participant observer and the participants functioning as co-researchers. The researcher is thus positioned to let themes emerge from participants rather than imposing assumptions (perhaps artificially) on respondents.”²¹⁴

The source of the interviews and surveys in this study were eight Churches of the Nazarene on the Southwest Oklahoma District. Each of these churches is more than fifty years old. They average fewer than seventy-five people attending Sunday morning worship. These churches have been in decline for more than a decade (2012-2023). This decline was determined based on annual attendance reports to the Southwest Oklahoma District Office of the Church of the Nazarene. The eight churches studied represent 18.6% of the Southwest Oklahoma district.²¹⁵

²¹¹ “Ethnographic Research,” IRB-SBS (University of Virginia). Retrieved October 2023 from <https://research.virginia.edu/irb-sbs/ethnographic-research#:~:text=Ethnography%20is%20a%20qualitative%20method,how%20societies%20and%20individuals%20function.>

²¹² James P. Spradley. *The Ethnographic Interview*. (Long Grove Ill.: Waveland Press, 1979), 4.

²¹³ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore of Candler School of Theology foreword to *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, by Mary Clark Moschella (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), ix.

²¹⁴ Carl C. Green, “Pastoral Leadership, Congregational Size, Life Cycle Stage, and Church Culture: A Grounded Theory Analysis. (Ph. D. Diss., Gonzaga University, 2005), 98.

²¹⁵ *Southwest Oklahoma District Directory; Seventy-fifth Journal Record*. 2023. (Mustang, OK: Southwest Oklahoma District Church of the Nazarene). The 2023 Journal of the Southwest Oklahoma District reports 43 active churches.

One of the methods used to research these churches was interviewing pastors of these churches and local church leaders recommended by them. These interviews provided a glimpse into both the thinking and the practices of the churches. Each of the eight pastors was emailed a list of fifteen questions to be answered in a telephone interview.²¹⁶ Each pastor gave a list of names and contact information for leaders they selected to be interviewed. These leaders were board members, Sunday School teachers, or members of long-standing in their church. Each of them was interviewed by telephone. They were given the same questions that were given to the pastors though there was one additional question for the pastors regarding their recruiting lay leaders to be interviewed. After the interviews of pastors and lay leaders, a narrative was developed based on their answers.²¹⁷

Interviewers need to develop a level of trust between themselves and those being interviewed. This foundation for that trust for these interviews was built on a new relationship with someone who cared about the situation the interviewees were facing. It was discovered in the interviews that these were groups of people from small churches who in some sense felt as though they had been written off by some church leadership (district and general). Having someone interested in and listening to their situation, someone not given to offering quick solutions but simply asking questions and listening closely, helped build the necessary trust between interviewer and interviewee. Those interviewed discovered not only that someone was interested in the problems their churches faced, but their interviewer was interested in, desirous of, and searching for potentialities for overcoming those problems.

It was important for the interviewer to remain aware that these interviews should not be insensitive to the feelings of the people being interviewed. These were people who had been

²¹⁶ See Appendix One.

²¹⁷ See Appendix Four.

dealing with church decline problems for many years. It can feel insulting to have someone tell you that you have been failing to meet someone's expectation of you. It was necessary for those being interviewed to understand that while this was simply someone doing research behind it all was hope for a new future with new outcomes.

Doing interviews takes a skill set that can be learned. One source for learning the skills needed for doing robust interviews is found in a book by author, professor, and professional interviewer, Dean Nelson.²¹⁸ A key element Nelson listed in his book was preparation. He noted the ubiquity of interviewing situations.²¹⁹ He defined an interview as “a purposeful series of questions that leads to understanding, insight, and perspective on a given topic.”²²⁰

In a phone interview, Nelson asked a key question for this dissertation, “How do you define the church?”²²¹ He went on to identify the church as more than a Sunday gathering.²²² He suggested the importance of interview as one of the methodologies for discovering the life of the church, and that using interviewing as a regular practice of the pastor could be helpful in establishing meaningful dialogue with the congregation. Interviews not only uncover what is unknown, but they have a way of “honoring the other person's story.”²²³

Following these interviews, random congregational surveys were provided to broaden an understanding of local church thinking and its accompanying practices and beliefs. Survey questions were formed and then reviewed by Rich Houseal of Nazarene Research at the Global

²¹⁸ Nelson, Dean. *Talk to Me: How to Ask Better Questions, Get Better Answers, and Interview Anyone Like a Pro*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2019).

²¹⁹ Ibid., 7. Nelson lists “insurance adjusters, social workers, lawyers, teachers, investigators, therapists, podcast hosts, customer service representatives, bankers and police officers.” I was surprised that pastors of churches did not make his list!

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Interview by author. October 2, 2023.

²²² Nelson's church definition rings true with me and this study.

²²³ Interview by author. October 2, 2023.

Ministry center.²²⁴ These questions were then edited as necessary before being placed on the survey. This step worked to ensure the questions being asked would be understood by those taking the survey. The congregational surveys used for this project were an effective way to gather information. The surveys added a broader perspective to the interviews.

In reporting on various types of sociological research, the website of Cosumnes River College states, “The survey is the most common method by which sociologists gather their data.”²²⁵ Moreover, “Many people can be included. If given to a random sample of the population, a survey’s results can be generalized to the population.”²²⁶ While it may be true that the information gained may be relatively superficial, it can provide a significant pattern based on real world experiences.

Each of the eight church pastors was given twenty congregational surveys to be passed out randomly among their congregation. Of these 160 surveys, fifty-nine (36.8%) were completed and returned. A demographic analysis was performed for each church. These analyses²²⁷ allowed for an eleven-category sociological snapshot²²⁸ of the near neighbors living within a three-mile radius to the church building. Sample neighborhood exegeses were conducted within a 1-mile radius of some of the churches studied (Altus, Anadarko, Chickasha 1st, El Reno Cross Bridge, and Snyder). This substantiated the veracity of the demographic studies by physically observing the areas in question to check for accuracy of elements of the

²²⁴ Appendix Two.

²²⁵ “Introduction to Sociology” (Ninh). Retrieved from

[https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Courses/Cosumnes_River_College/SOC_300%3A_Introduction_to_Sociology_\(Ninh/06%3A_Recognize_the_various_methods_of_research/6.01%3A_Research_Design_in_Sociology#:~:text=The%20survey%20is%20the%20most,to%20a%20group%20of%20respondents.](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Courses/Cosumnes_River_College/SOC_300%3A_Introduction_to_Sociology_(Ninh/06%3A_Recognize_the_various_methods_of_research/6.01%3A_Research_Design_in_Sociology#:~:text=The%20survey%20is%20the%20most,to%20a%20group%20of%20respondents.)

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ See Appendix Five for demographic data of the selected churches.

²²⁸ Eleven categories of the demographic analysis: population, unclaimed population, family structure, age groups, housing types, housing values, educational levels, household income, culture, language at home, foreign born population.

demographic study. The neighborhood exegesis identified the socio-economic conditions of the neighborhoods near the churches being studied.

A reason for the declining attendance numbers was often voiced during the pastor and lay leader interviews. Some of these were based on conclusions drawn from the leadership’s understanding of shrinking numerical populations in their town. However, despite small numerical growth of these communities, demographic studies demonstrated that within a three-mile radius of the churches there remained significant numbers of people who were unchurched. The unclaimed-by-any-denomination group (see figure 7) ranged from a low of 479 people living around the Snyder COTN to a high of 29,933 surrounding the Oklahoma City May Ave. COTN. These are people whose spiritual and physical needs were in need of consideration by the churches in this study. Ways to connect with these near neighbors had yet to be discovered. These people offered a harvest field yet to be reached.

Fig. 7. Unclaimed people around selected churches

Unclaimed People for 7 Southwest Oklahoma District Churches of the Nazarene		
2010 U.S. Religious Census²²⁹		
Church Name, Location	Unclaimed population, Percentage	City Growth Rate
Altus COTN, Altus, OK	9,032 (44.4%)	-1.2%
Anadarko COTN, Anadarko, OK	2,140 (21.7%)	0.0%

²²⁹ “Community Demographics—Church of the Nazarene. Retrieved September 2023 from <https://maps.nazarene.org/DemographicsNazarene/population.html?y=4233337.290367967&x=-10879577.809223536&b=3>

Chickasha 1 st COTN, Chickasha, OK	12,753 (53.3%)	0.3%
Clinton COTN, Clinton, OK	2,929 (25.3%)	0.9%
El Reno Cross Bridge COTN, El Reno, OK	12,543 (56.0%)	1.8%
Elk City COTN	5,005 (32%)	0.4%
OKC May Ave. COTN, Oklahoma City, OK	29,933 (27.5%)	0.2%
Snyder COTN, Snyder, OK	479 (17.5%)	-1.5%
Total Near Neighbors Unreached	69,809	

II. Summary

The methodology used to do this research is standard practice. Using one-to-one interviews and congregational surveys, a picture was developed which revealed the attitudes and behaviors of these local congregations. They included both individual and group perspectives. These yielded statistical data from which conclusions could be drawn. This dissertation now turns to consider the scriptural and theological basis for turning an inwardly focused church to the biblical picture of the church turned outward.

CHAPTER FOUR: A SCRIPTURAL/THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE FOCUS AND EMBRACE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

I. Embracing Community Connectedness

The research in this dissertation found that these shrinking churches are disconnected from their near neighbors—part of their parish. The goal of this chapter is to offer a scriptural and theological foundation for the church being a community-connected entity. Each of the churches in this study stand in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. As such, they embrace the Bible as foundational for the beliefs and practices of the church.

The need for these churches to be connected to their near neighbors is scriptural. Psalm 133 speaks of the goodness and pleasantness of kindred living together in unity (Psalm 133:1). Beginning with those who comprise the family of God, such connections reap the blessing of God. “For there the LORD ordained his blessing.” (Psalm 133:3). Hebrews 10:24 invites consideration of “how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.” One text notes that it is the example of loving care displayed among those gathered as church that allows how everyone will know who the disciples of Christ are. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). While such love is to be exhibited within the Body of Christ, its influence is not to be left there. Loving deeds toward those outside the gathered practices of the church are incarnations of Christ in the neighborhood. A loving connection is to be exhibited in the inclusive embrace of both the gathered congregation and near neighbors.

The data supports that the churches studied here currently hold an inward focus which caters to the local congregation. This has been supplemented with small, irregular attempts to

evangelize and serve the local community. Each of the churches exhibit a preponderance of care for their local, attendance-diminished congregation. There is need for a robust outward focus to stand alongside this inward one. While their inward focus includes isolated attempts to connect with their disconnected community, an outward focus will more robustly embrace near neighbors. Near neighbors are people who reside within a three-mile radius of the church and form part of the basis of a parish community for the local church.

Of the churches studied here there is evidence of a disconnect from near neighbors. This has been made clearer through the interviews and congregational surveys. These churches' attentions are faced toward the care of their congregation. Solitary points of convergence have been preventing them from answering the biblical call to reflect the missionary God of the Bible in their parish. This is contrary to the biblical understanding of the church as missional.

The biblical texts found below support an understanding of the church as a community that connects evangelistic practice with providing care to near neighbors. The two-fold mission of congregational and near neighbor care is supported by a four-fold picture of concern found in Scripture. Jesus cast an evangelistic vision in Acts 1:8 where he taught His disciples that they would be witnesses to the world. This world includes "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth." The church community receives this text as their inheritance.

Jerusalem was the religious home of early Jewish Christians. The missionary ventures of those called by Jesus would extend to distant communities. The picture of the early church and the missionary ventures of Paul and others supported the spreading of the gospel to foreign lands. New Testament Christians were those who had roots in local congregations and answered Christ's commission to share the gospel with the larger world. Today, this missionary message rings in the ears of those who gather each Sunday for worship. While the names of the Oklahoma

cities where these studied churches are located (Altus, Anadarko, Chickasha, Clinton, El Reno, Elk City, Oklahoma City, and Snyder) are different than the biblical ones, each serves as a metaphor for the Jerusalem cited in the Acts text.

It is to be the evangelistic goal of the people of God to carry out the mission of God to be a blessing to the families of near neighbors by sharing the good news of the gospel wherever they go. It is the missional goal of the church to be the incarnational presence of Christ wherever the gospel is shared. These twin goals, evangelistic and missional, reflect the call of the church to care for both the spirit and body of people who form congregations and their neighbors.

II. The Metaphorical Facing of the Church

A creative reading of Psalm 104:27-30 finds a metaphor for God's life-giving breath breathed toward all creation, including human beings. The result is life. This has implications for the church.

- ²⁷ These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
²⁸ when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
³⁰ When you send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

Theologian Michael Lodahl has noted that this psalm depicts a relationship between God and creation.²³⁰ The "all" of verse 27 is the culmination of creation. Creatures created by God are dependent upon God for food. Moreover, they are dependent upon the breath of God for life

²³⁰ Michael Lodahl, *The Story of God: A Narrative Theology*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2008), 135.

itself. It should not be lost on readers of the text that “breath” in verse 29 and “spirit” in verse 30 are the same Hebrew word, *ruah*. The text speaks of the spirit of God—the life-giving breath of God first breathed into man (*adam*)—which caused him to become a living being. “Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7).

Breath is a vehicle used by God to give life. If God’s face is hidden, breath no longer flows toward the creature and death follows. In this psalm, the facing of God toward creation and creation toward God is essential for the continuance of life. Creation’s facing toward God allows for the reception of this divine breath. Creation in this metaphor is not only a receiver of God’s breath but is also a divinely animated agent with the God-given ability to look to God and receive that which sustains it.

27 These all look to you
 to give them their food in due season;
28 when you give to them, they gather it up;
 when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
29 When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
 when you take away their breath, they die
 and return to their dust. (Psalm 104:27-29)

The implication for the church is the metaphorical direction in which a church is faced. Orientation reflects where the attention of the church is being given, and, conversely, where it is not being given. The figurative upward face of the church toward God and the downward flow of God’s life-giving breath to the church connects the church to its dependent source. However, the church is also called to be a reflection of God and thereby offer the life of God to all. The church must resist enjoying a symbolic vertical relationship with God without also offering a horizontal one in relation with all who God loves. This life-giving breath reaches not only the gathered

church but its parish as well. The facing of the church, then, is not only upward, but it is also inward to the congregation and outward toward its nearby neighbors.

A wonderful picture develops. The breath of God comes down to loved creation. Creation receives and offers thanks back to God creating a vertical channel of life and praise. Moreover, life giving breath of God received by the people of God is breathed out upon all who share fellowship and community. Together this enlarged body gives praise to the One who gives life, and the horizontal sharing of breath resumes its upward turn to the Creator and Lover of all.

The church can be faced in ways which suit the desires of the church rather than the desire of God. The church turned inward cares for the local congregation, an essential part of the life of the church. But if that inward turn excludes an equal outward embrace of the parish, the church loses its biblically described evangelistic and missional character. As shown by the statistics found herein, these are churches that have become solely inwardly faced. This is the picture of a church with a missionally unbalanced ministry.

An opposite picture is the church which is solely faced outward. While the former could be accused of pious exclusion of the world God loves, the latter could be found guilty of holding to a social gospel that disallows the commensurate and necessary means of grace. Wesley often referred to these means of grace, the chief being “prayer... searching the Scriptures, and receiving the Lord’s Supper,²³¹ as well as other practices.

The church is called to love both the people of God who gather as congregations and the people whom God loves who may not be among those congregations. This the both/and-life of the church. It is the basis for community connection. In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer

²³¹ John Wesley. *The Works of John Wesley: Complete and Unabridged*. V. 5. “The Means of Grace,” II.1. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1986).

began the book with a chapter titled simply “Community,” and tied it to Psalm 133:1.²³² “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” The scripture text evokes a pleasant picture of a family that shares life. Bonhoeffer used the text to push against a reading that supported a cloistered life. Instead, he noted that “Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies.”²³³ In this shared life the people of God embrace all who are loved by God—and all creation! While it is good and pleasant for the congregation to care for the congregation, the church is not missional if that is its only caring practice.

Central to a biblical understanding of being properly faced for the mission of God is the servanthood example of Jesus. Philippians 2:5-11 was likely an early hymn of the gathered church. The text offers a contrast-life for followers of Christ away from the notion of their serving themselves and illuminates our understanding of Jesus as the servant of God who served others.

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-7)

Laying aside privilege to become a servant means having the God-given ability to identify privilege and forgo its pleasantness. Then, with the help of divine grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, there is a move outward to the world of the ungathered community and, accepting the servant of all character of Jesus which embraces all. This Jesus-like quality is essential for the church that would be both congregational-caring and community-connected.

²³² Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together: A Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1954.), 17.

²³³ *Ibid.*

In his book, *Everywhere You Look*,²³⁴ author Tim Soerens wrote about the need to “train our attention on God’s activity.”²³⁵ He connects this attention training with Matthew 6:33, a command of Jesus, that his followers “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Getting our attention rightly faced is not merely an event; it is a practice. Jesus’ encouragement for the hearers of this text was for them to “strive.” This entails aligning our practices with Jesus’ central message: the kingdom of God.

While caring for the congregation may have historically captured a large portion of the initial intent of these churches, this diminished to secondary status the more inclusive kingdom work on which Jesus focused. This kingdom is inclusive of the church, but it is larger. The Matthew 6:33 text states that by striving for the kingdom first other necessities of life will follow. The product of such an application means that the needs of the congregation will be cared for as the reign of God in the life of the church makes itself known through the breath of God flowing to and through the church.

What are the focal points of the kingdom of God? The Bible lists priorities in both Testaments. What is good and required of people who live in the kingdom? The prophet Micah noted that doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God are expectations of God. “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). While this includes life among our congregations, it is needfully expressed through the compassionate ministry that the church offers in our neighborhoods. In the New Testament, the great commission of Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20) puts an emphasis on disciples going to “make disciples of all nations.” It is

²³⁴ Tim Soerens. *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are*. (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 2020).

²³⁵ *Ibid*, 49.

akin to the commission given by God to Abraham who was to be blessed so that “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

While Jesus never called people to gather at the church (synagogue), He did so habitually. “He went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom” (Luke 4:16).

While this gathering is important, it neither overrides nor diminishes Jesus’ central message and practice of going. We are to be a sent people.

III. Compassion Includes Action

In Matthew 25, Jesus spoke of those who would inherit the kingdom of God that had been prepared by His Father. “Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ (Matthew 25:34). Who are these inheritors? The next two verses offer an answer. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35, 36).” The inheritors of the kingdom of God are those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned. This is sent language.

As important as our gathered worship practices are for encouraging, instructing, and building up the Body of Christ, they should not be isolated from acts of compassion. It is these which serve as entry points to the kingdom of God. Matthew 25:35-36 speaks of a compassionate people who not only have a heart for compassion but show it with acts of mercy. It speaks about more than distributing tracts, providing food boxes where people can come get food, and giving

blankets to unsheltered people. Though all of these are helpful, they do not reveal the true heart of compassion as described in Matt 25.

“The Latin root of compassion is *pati*, meaning to suffer.”²³⁶ The prefix “com-” means “with.” The idea of suffering with is embedded in the word compassion. It includes connection with another person. In *The Community-Minded Church*,²³⁷ author, pastor, and former General Superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene, Stan Toler, encouraged pastors to “Challenge your church to have compassion for the needy.”²³⁸ He offered two biblical examples of such compassion.²³⁹ The first is in Deuteronomy which informed the people of God to leave fruit for “the alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Deuteronomy 24:21) rather than stripping plants bare. This meant that gatherers would be self-sacrificing what was theirs for the benefit of others. These others resided in nearby locales without the benefits enjoyed by landowners.

Toler also cited a New Testament encouragement to act compassionately toward those outside the circle of relatives and acquaintances. Jesus taught that those holding luncheons and dinners should include more than “friends, or brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors” (Luke 14:12). Followers of Christ were to invite, “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14:13).” There was a reward for such actions. Those who did what Jesus instructed would be blessed. Here is an eschatological picture of the church painted by Jesus. Their blessing would not be the immediate restoration of what the luncheon holders had shared. It would be found in the reward given them “at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:14). While living in the

²³⁶ “Christian Faith: Understanding the Means of Compassion. Retrieved Oct 2023 from <https://www.compassion.com/child-development/meaning-of-compassion/#:~:text=empathy,into%20the%20realm%20of%20empathy>.

²³⁷ Stan Toler, comp. *The Community-Minded Church*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2009).

²³⁸ Ibid., 15.

²³⁹ Ibid., 17.

present moment, seeing past current circumstances and living beyond immediate gratifications are characteristics of the people of God.

Jesus' teaching on compassion reinforced the original great commission of God first given to Abraham.²⁴⁰ For obediently going where God led him, God would bless Abraham. This blessing, however, was not simply something to be accrued by Abraham. He was blessed so that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Abraham, being seventy-five at the time of God's commission could surely have offered the "but I am too old" excuse. This excuse was offered by many of those leaders who responded to the interviews of this study. While many of these leaders are close to (if not past!) the seventy-five-year mark, in light of the call of God to Abraham, the too-old defense rings hollow.

An exposition on compassion is offered by authors McNeill, Morrison, and Nouwen in *Compassion*.²⁴¹ They wrote, "Compassion is not an individual trait, a personal attitude, or a special talent, but a way of living together."²⁴² Referencing Philippians 2:4, "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others," the authors focused on compassion as a way of living. This is to be more than an occasional foray into meeting people's needs at holidays, or when the face of need appears at the church door. This is compassion as a way of life—a practice that flows from a heart that conjoins the people who gather to share worship with nearby neighbors who, like them, have hurts and heartaches. The authors referenced Romans 12:2, a text that speaks to the necessity of a change for the one who would be compassionate: "Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour

²⁴⁰ Wright. *The Mission of God's People*, 41. Wright makes explicit the notion about the election of Abraham by God as the "first great commission."

²⁴¹ Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J. M. Nouwen. *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982).

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 50.

change, modelled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do” (Romans 12:2, *Jerusalem Bible*). While change entails something people may not crave, it is at the heart of becoming and living like a new creature of Christ. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17).

The good that is the “perfect thing” mentioned in Romans 12:2 emanates from a changed mind, like the mind of Christ as noted in Philippians 2:5. It is modeled after a mind change that surrenders old ways of thinking and takes on a daily life of compassion—not merely one lived one day of the week in gathered worship. This mind change and new life gives daily witness through the compassionate acts of mercy enabled by the power of Christ who through divine grace enables change.²⁴³

Scripture reminds us that we are not our own. We are a chosen people. We are a people who have received mercy. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10). As such, we understand what it means to be shown mercy. We, of all people, should be compassionately merciful. Like Abraham, we have been blessed so that we may bless. This is an interlaced scriptural theme of a compassionate God and an obedient people.

IV. The Purpose of the People of God Community

²⁴³ The word “mind” as it is used here is more than “changed my mind, opinion.” It is a change of disposition.

The first appearance of the word “church” in the Bible is found in the gospel of Matthew. Following Peter’s declaration that Jesus was “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” (Matthew 16:1), Jesus announced, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). This church was to be a community of people gathered around the announcement of the Messiahship of Jesus. While this rock of truth about Jesus is central to the beliefs of the church, it is also key to the practices of the church. Beliefs held by believers are proven as their real beliefs as they are seen in actions that flow from their lives. For Jesus, in the declaration moment of Matthew 16:16, this life of the church would be seen as believers were “binding and loosing” so that earth would reflect heaven (Matthew 16:19). Here, action was attached to belief.

Jesus taught His disciples to pray that the kingdom of God would come, that God’s will would be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). The purpose of the church includes a living body of believers who pray for the coming kingdom of God and who live eschatologically reflective of the kingdom begun in Jesus. Their kingdom-like behaviors were to align with their belief in the kingdom of God.

The church described in Acts 4 is one of unity and purpose. “Those who believed were of one heart and soul,” Acts 4:32. “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 4:34-35). In *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today*, S. Scott Bartchy noted that in this passage in Acts, “Luke’s conviction seems to be rooted in ... Deut. 15:4-5.” The passage in the New Revised Standard version reads, “There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you” (Deuteronomy 15:4-5).” Here again, as in God’s blessing of Abraham in Genesis 12, the purpose of God’s blessing the people of God was so that they

could be a blessing to others. Bartchy added, “This description [of the shared blessings of Acts 4] should not be seen as simply Luke’s idealized projection into his narrative about the followers of Jesus at Jerusalem, but rather understood as his use of traditionally loaded terms to present what he regarded as *the social reality practiced by these early believers and a practice that he desired to stimulate among all his readers.*²⁴⁴ [Italics mine.]

Luke wrote of these behaviors in Acts not merely to identify some abstract beliefs of early believers upon their conversion to Christ. It was to note “their cooperation with this true God[ly] character and purpose.”²⁴⁵ The beliefs of the church are more likely understood when practices show up in the neighborhood. When Christian acts of mercy occur in the parish, the doors to community formation open.

The Scriptural purpose of the church is clearly missional. Jesus established it with His words in John 20:21. Jesus wanted to comfort disciples in need of comfort because of their “fear of the Jews.” His post-resurrection appearance startled them. Jesus offered, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19), a traditional greeting of the day. Then, He showed Himself to them. He showed his wounds, again accompanied by, “Peace be with you.” He shared two reasons for this gathering. First, they would find their purpose as His disciples in His sending words—words offered to fearful disciples cloistered in hiding. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). This being sent would not be possible without the second reason for this occasion. Jesus “breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:22). Jesus’ purpose for these disciples was their carrying out the mission begun with His incarnation. In Luke 4, Jesus had identified His mission to His hometown synagogue.

²⁴⁴ S. Scott Bartchy. “Divine Power, Community Formation, and Leadership in the Acts of the Apostles” in Richard N. Longenecker, ed. *Community Formation in the Early Church and in the Church Today*. (Peabody Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 92.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19).

The connection of the mission of God with the Spirit of God was plain to Jesus. He wanted it to be plain to His disciples, too. Offering good news to the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed had always been the mission of God. It was time for these disciples to move out of the presumed safety of their hiding place. It was time for them to take their place as proclaimers of good news, sent by Jesus, empowered by the Spirit of God.

This is not a new message to the church. The purpose of those disciples is the purpose of the church today. As followers of Jesus, we are caught up in this story. While the traditional practices of the church have a way of turning the church inward toward caring for the comfortable rather caring for those in need of comfort, the Spirit of God guides us to truth-filled living. The church does not exist for itself. The purpose of the church includes offering the caring love of God enabled by the Holy Spirit to other caregivers gathered at the church as well as those in need just outside its doors.

The missiological message of Lesslie Newbigin used the term *missio Dei*, "mission of God." This is the mission of the "missionary God,"²⁴⁶ who sent Jesus, who came and sent disciples. This same mission is given to us as faithful followers of Jesus. It moves us out of our comfortable environs and into our near neighborhoods with a message to share hands to help those in need. We stand with them like Jesus who stood with us. This is the primary purpose of the church, and it is the *missio dei*.

²⁴⁶ Guder, *Missional Church*, 4.

It is clear in Romans 13 that Paul was seeking a gift from the people of the church at Rome. It was not a gift for himself, but a gift that would allow ministry in other places to continue. Why should believers give to such a cause? They had needs and concerns of their own. A principle for the contemporary church is offered here. When we turn inward to focus on our needs and concerns, we simultaneously turn away from an outward focus. This does not mean that we should fail to care for the congregation. While it is right and good that our attention should focus on others, we should not forget that Jesus taught an inclusive love that begins with loving God who first loved us.²⁴⁷ This love extends to our neighbors and includes us, too. (See Matt 22:37-38) Jesus said, on these two commandments, love of God and neighbor, hangs all the law of God. How can we say that we love God with our whole heart yet neglect loving our neighbors?²⁴⁸ We are to be like Jesus who preferred others over Himself while not disregarding His own needs. Congregation and community belong together. God means for them to be connected. It is not good for the church to be alone.

In his book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*,²⁴⁹ author-pastor Rick Warren wrote that his church, (Saddleback Valley Community Church) “exists to benefit the residents of Saddleback Valley by providing for their spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual, and social needs.”²⁵⁰ This holistic purpose of caring for community needs outside the confines of the church building is biblical. It understands ministry to be toward both the congregation and toward the parish. This is the result of having the mind of Christ who took on the form of a servant (Philippians 2, 5, 7). This means understanding that service includes meeting the physical needs of people as

²⁴⁷ 1 John 4:19.

²⁴⁸ Parents who have more than one child know the difficulty of this!

²⁴⁹ Rick Warren. *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth without Compromising your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

listed in Matthew 25:35-36. This includes caring for body needs like hunger, thirst, clothing, and health, as well as and emotional-social needs, like the need to feel welcomed and be visited.

While some of these needs are met when the congregation gathers for worship on Sunday, they extend to the parish as needs are discovered through connection with near neighbors. The means of grace are available to help meet these needs. This grace is made available through the hands and feet of the congregation.

V. A Theological Picture Develops

Through the scriptures listed above and through the interview responses of the pastors and leaders of the SWOK churches studied, we can see a classic theology at work—ecclesiology. Of ecclesiology, theologian E. Elizabeth Johnson wrote, “Technically, ecclesiology is the study of the nature and the mission of the church.”²⁵¹ This two-fold description of the church (nature and mission) aligns with the premise of this dissertation; specifically, the church is to be a both/and expression of its being and practices. The nature of the church is the church in its being—what the Apostle Paul described as the Body of Christ. The mission of the church speaks of its doing—the practices of the church. As Johnson asserted, an ecclesiology connects the two for study.

The Article of Faith of the Church of the Nazarene regarding the church is found in its *Manual*. For these studied Churches of the Nazarene, the *Manual* is a faithful expression of how the church is to be the church and speaks of its practices. Of the church, Article 11 says,

We believe in the Church, the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, the covenant people of God made new in Christ, the Body of Christ called together by the Holy Spirit through the Word.

²⁵¹ E. Elizabeth Johnson. *Ecclesiology in the New Testament*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), x.

God calls the Church to express its life in the unity and fellowship of the Spirit; in worship through the preaching of the Word, observance of the sacraments, and ministry in His name; by obedience to Christ, holy living, and mutual accountability.

The mission of the Church in the world is to share in the redemptive and reconciling ministry of Christ in the power of the Spirit. The Church fulfills its mission by making disciples through evangelism, education, showing compassion, working for justice, and bearing witness to the kingdom of God.²⁵²

This article expressly states the church is a community. This community is to be realized as a unity not only through its beliefs but also through its practices. These practices are inclusive of both its means of grace (preaching, observing sacraments, etc.) and its redemptive and reconciling ministry (evangelism and compassion which bear witness to the kingdom of God).

This *Manual* language supports the notion of the church as a group of people who care for the gathered congregation and its parish. The parish includes its near neighbors (and the whole world!). Should a church fail to care for either of these it, in some sense, fails to be the church that Christ called into being. The pastors and lay leaders in this study described their churches as a community within a community. One pastor defined the church community as “people who attend the church as well as those living nearby.”²⁵³ Another interviewed pastor spoke of the church as “a gathering of people who love God, and love people, and seek to include others in the process.”²⁵⁴ Still another pastor described the people of the church as “a formed community.”²⁵⁵ Lay leaders of these churches concurred with their pastors. One lay leader currently serving as a pastor stated, “the church is a community.”²⁵⁶ Another defined the community as both “our town and our church.”²⁵⁷

²⁵² Church of the Nazarene. *Manual*. Article XI. “The Church.” (Kansas City, MO, 2017-2021), 33.

²⁵³ Personal interview of Altus COTN pastor by author, August 2023. See Appendix Four.

²⁵⁴ Personal interview of Chickasha 1st COTN pastor by author, August 2023. See Appendix Four.

²⁵⁵ Personal interview of El Reno Crossbridge COTN pastor by author, August 2023. See Appendix Four.

²⁵⁶ Personal interview of lay Snyder COTN lay pastor by author, August 2023. See Appendix Four.

²⁵⁷ Personal interview of Clinton COTN lay leader one, August 2023. See Appendix Four.

The mission of the church was represented by these pastors variously as “receiving offerings for global missions and building buildings on global mission fields,”²⁵⁸ and as “a small group of well-intentioned individuals who are more concerned about good fellowship than about outreach.”²⁵⁹ Another pastor expressed mission as “having breakfast with members of the congregation and then going out to mow neighborhood yards for free.” He noted “getting people to the church building is not missional but marketing.”²⁶⁰ From one lay leader’s perspective, the mission of the church was “to do what Jesus wants us to do,”²⁶¹ while another thought it was “to look and act as Christians everywhere they go so that people will want to come to the church.”²⁶² Another lay leader defined the mission of the church as “lov[ing] our community.”²⁶³

While there is some similarity in these findings, there is a marked dissimilarity. It is heard between understanding of mission as driven by getting people to come to church or as simply doing kind acts for near neighbors. What is the nature and mission of these churches? One way to answer that question is to ask what is the focus and embrace of the churches studied? The congregational surveys offer some insights from a congregational perspective. Below are some of the findings.²⁶⁴

- **Regarding a mission focus.** Question nine of the congregational survey asked whether the mission focus of their church included working together with near neighbors. Fifty-eight percent answered yes. Only thirteen percent disagreed. This suggests that the majority of those answering believed that their church was engaged in mission with near neighbors.

²⁵⁸ Personal interview of Altus COTN pastor by author, August 2023. See Appendix Four.

²⁵⁹ Personal interview of Chickasha 1st pastor by author, August 2023. See Appendix Four.

²⁶⁰ Personal interview of Elk City COTN pastor by author, August 2023. See Appendix Four.

²⁶¹ Personal interview of Elk City lay leader by author, August 2023. See Appendix Four.

²⁶² Personal interview of OKC May Ave. COTN lay leader by author, August, 20203. See Appendix Four.

²⁶³ Personal interview of Altus COTN lay leader by author, August 2023. See Appendix Four.

²⁶⁴ See Appendices Two and Three for questions and responses of the congregational survey.

- **Regarding a focus on non-attending near neighbors.** Question sixteen asked about their church's focus on ministering to non-attending neighbors. Only thirty percent of those surveyed believed that their church has always been focused on ministering to non-attending near neighbors, leaving the majority as either neutral on the issue or disagreeing that their church had such a focus.
- **Regarding the balance of care between congregation and parish.** Question seventeen asked about the balance of care offered by the church for the congregation and its parish. While forty-four percent of those surveyed believed that their church had a balanced approach, the majority were either neutral or disagreed that there was such a balance.
- **Regarding the priority of care.** Question twenty-two asked about whether the priority of the church was its care for the congregation or its parish. Forty-two percent of the respondents believed either (1) congregational care should be prioritized over that of caring for the parish or (2) held no opinion on the issue. Twelve percent of those surveyed disagreed with putting the congregation ahead of the parish.
- **Regarding the focus of these churches.** The last question of the survey asked whether the focus of their church included care for near neighbors. Forty percent of the respondents believed that it did, while more than half either were neutral on the issue or disagreed.

These responses show that these congregations are made up of people who generally agreed (58%) that the mission of the church embraces working with near neighbors, while only 30% believed that their church has always focused some ministry toward non-attending

members. More than half of those responding believed that there is a balance of ministry offered between the congregation and parish. Almost half of those responding believed that care of the congregation should be prioritized over that of the parish. Only forty percent of the respondents believed that their church's focus included care for near neighbors.

While there is similarity in these findings of what the church is believed to be, there is also a marked dissimilarity in understanding what it is called to do. The nature and mission of these churches stands divided. In her definition of ecclesiology, Johnson spoke of it as the study of the nature and mission of the church.²⁶⁵ If the nature of the church describes the being of the church, and the mission describes the doing of the church, and Article 11 of the Church of the Nazarene holds that the church called by God is one of unity and fellowship, then the being and doing of the church should be united in its focus as the church and its embrace of the mission of God.

VI. A Theology of Connectedness.

A theology of connectedness is one of focus and embrace. The focus is the church unified in its life as the Body of Christ whose embrace is the mission of God. It holds that the church is both inwardly focused for the life of its congregation and outwardly focused for the life of its parish—inclusive of near neighbors in a three-mile radius around the church building. This theology of connectedness aligns with the picture of ecclesiology offered by Johnson that connects the nature and mission of the church. Each contributes to participation in the mission of God as missional beings and practices. This theology develops from the picture created by

²⁶⁵ Johnson, *Ecclesiology*, x.

research of these small SWOK Churches of the Nazarene. It suggests the need for these churches to connect these congregations to an ecclesiology of being and doing.

This connectedness extends from a Trinitarian belief in God as Father, Son, and Spirit mutually indwelling and caring for each other and for the world. It is both physically and spiritually expressed in the eschatological life of the church through actions enabled by grace and the Spirit of God, which reflects the Christology of the Messiah Jesus who surrendered his privileges and took on the form of a servant. A theology of connectedness conforms to the biblical unity of the church while allowing for the diversity of God's creation. A theology of connectedness provides the foundation for the church who considers itself community connected. The life of this church offers the church as an alternative community, a community of faith for the interlaced congregation and its parish. It is to this understanding of communities that this dissertation now turns.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE CHURCH AS AN ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY

This chapter will focus on the church as an alternative community which operates with a different methodology than that of traditional churches—particularly in their evangelistic and missional practices. A goal of these last two chapters is to offer a plausible correction to the broken connection between these local churches and their parish community.

I. Change is needed

In the process of doing research for this dissertation, one of the perspectives gained was the appreciation that the church leaders in the study had for people doing research on small churches. They recognized that this research addressed the problem of the attendance decline these churches had experienced. I discovered that those interviewed were aware of studies available for large churches but unfamiliar with any studies available for small suburban and rural churches. Few were aware of the FACT study of more than 15,000 U.S. religious congregations.²⁶⁶ The FACT study announced a proliferation of small churches but noted that accompanying this increase was a commensurate decrease in Sunday morning attendance. Those interviewed for this research were favorable toward interviews they believed might lead to an answer to this problem. They were interested what the findings of the research would reveal. These interviewed leaders were aware of a need for their churches to change. They were interested in what these changes might mean and wondered about the specifics of how they might implement them. Much of this change is fodder for research yet to be done.

²⁶⁶ “Twenty Years of Congregational Change” <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>.

One twenty-year old Barna study concluded, “The greatest attention flows to large churches, especially to the two percent of churches that attract more than 1000 adults on a typical weekend.”²⁶⁷ This Barna study noted that the type of people attending a local church impacted those who chose to attend there.²⁶⁸ More on this impact and its cause is addressed later in this dissertation. Below are two conclusions from this study answering why small churches remain small. Based on its research the study found the following:

1. Small churches may remain small for a variety of reasons—one being the methods they chose to use to increase attendance. These methods were found to be ones that relied on attractional events which invite people to come to church versus missional events which engage the congregation in going to be with near neighbors in their neighborhood.²⁶⁹
2. Small churches that remain small are linked to the type of people who attend them.

As supported by the interviews found in this study, these churches have turned inward. One pastor stated that his people had “an unwillingness to embrace people who are not like us.”²⁷⁰ Such inward thinking and language identified not only the way the congregation is faced—inwardly—but also offered a picture of their non-acceptance of people who were “unlike” them. As elicited in the research diversity was not a value for these churches.

Church growth cycle studies indicate a diminishing attendance for churches that are more than forty years old.²⁷¹ People attending small churches who are committed to status quo

²⁶⁷ “Small Churches Struggle to Grow Because of the People They Attract.” Retrieved Oct 2023 from <https://www.barna.com/research/small-churches-struggle-to-grow-because-of-the-people-they-attract>, Sept 2, 2003.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ It is evident by the results of my study that invitational methods once relied upon are not as effective as they once were.

²⁷⁰ Personal interview of Altus COTN pastor with author. August 2023. See Appendix four.

²⁷¹ Ryan P. Burge. “What is the Life Cycle Effect? Does it Appear in the Data?” September 4, 2019. <https://religioninpublic.blog/2019/09/04/what-ist-the-life-cycle-effect-does-it-appear-in-the-data/>. Accessed October 2023.

are resistant to change. They support a culture within the church that will keep it from connecting with its non-attending near neighbors. Unless these churches implement alternative ways of being and doing church, they will remain in jeopardy of being closed. Should that happen, their community will lose the voices of the people of God who attend there. In listening to the voices of the churches studied, there was evidence of a desire for change on the part of some people.

The standard way of being the church as practiced by these churches focused primarily on gathering events. Part of the finding of the interviews of pastors and leaders of these churches is that the churches were desirous of an increase in people who attend—particularly young parents with children. However, as the research indicates, the majority of these churches continued to use attractional/ invitational methods to gather people. They were not (1) engaging in relational-building events in near neighborhoods, nor (2) finding ways to be present with near neighbors in mission. Missional methods involve going to the parish, being among the people, and developing relationships with those outside the gathered fellowship of the church. For these churches, this would mean adapting a new way of embracing near neighbors in outwardly faced ministry. One pastor’s summarized his estimation of the future of his church when he said, “Unless the people change, we will decline.”²⁷²

The El Reno Crossbridge COTN recently took steps to connect with its changing demographic by beginning a Spanish-speaking church within their church. It is being led by a new Spanish-speaking pastor. This offering of an alternative to the English-speaking congregation has opened new doors to the community and brought new people to the church. By recognizing a community with different needs and adapting to meet those needs, this

²⁷² Ibid.

congregation has opened itself to a different future. It now has new opportunities for ministry in their parish. This was an alternative to their formerly exclusive “come attend” model. However, this new adaptation is still based on the earlier model. It must find expressions in the community in addition to at the church.

The pastor of the Anadarko COTN noted that their church had once been open to change, but that “the church stopped changing.”²⁷³ He noted this push against change began in the late 1980s when the city of Anadarko was still a thriving community. He noted that more recent steps to address their decline have been focused on “praying for new people.”²⁷⁴ Prayer is an essential tool. Creating a welcoming environment is also important. To that end the pastor and his wife redecorated and updated the building, making it a more pleasing place to which to come. However, a pleasing place is rooted in the old attractational model. The emphasis of this Anadarko pastor’s interview was fixed on inviting people to come. Still, the pastor said that he believed that the congregation was “learning to exist for others.”²⁷⁵ Yet, their practices continued to be centered on inviting people to come to the church. Some recent new attendees at their church have encouraged the congregation to believe that “God is not finished with them as a church.”²⁷⁶

In the interview with the pastor of the Chickasha 1st COTN, it was learned that while he believed that their definition of community was changing, his congregation was “mostly concerned about protecting what they have.”²⁷⁷ If attention is given solely to conserving the present life of the church with its pattern of decline, their future is connected to the attendance decline they have experienced for the past ten years.

²⁷³ Personal interview of Anadarko COTN Pastor by author, October 2023. Appendix Four.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Personal interview of Chickasha 1st COTN Pastor. October 2023. Appendix Four.

The church is called to a dual focus: (1) caring for the congregation and (2) caring for its parish. The Bible describes the people of God as the church sent by God to do the mission of God among the people in their near neighborhood—their Judea. This means doing more than concentrating attention on those who gather for worship and Bible studies—a focus that centers solely on the congregation—their Jerusalem. The churches in this study do not want to be in jeopardy of closing. However, the research supports their failure to make outwardly faced changes that could lead to new outcomes. As substantiated by the interviews of these pastors and leaders, they are being the church they have been, and they are doing the things they have done. This will bring the same result—decline.

II. The church is made up of people freed to serve.

To examine the purpose of God in redeeming people as found in the Scripture includes hearing the redemption story of Israel. Building on the story in Exodus, Michael Goheen wrote that in birthing Israel God established an alternative community. “The people of Israel [were] freed from service and loyalty to other gods, so that they might serve the Lord in every area of their lives: social, economic, and political. God established an *alternative community* to that of idolatrous Egypt.”²⁷⁸ (Italics mine.)

The people that God has freed are meant for more than gathered worship. They are empowered to be ministers of prevenient grace—faith lovingly at work in the daily lives of the people of God and extended to all whom God loves. No one is excluded from the love of God! The being of the church is connected to its identity. One challenge for the churches in this study is for them to become aware of their current self-understanding. Israel was called to be the

²⁷⁸ Goheen. *A Light to the Nations*, 34.

people of God “who [were] to embody his purposes for the sake of all nations.”²⁷⁹ That same understanding and reach is true for the people of God today. To limit the mission of God to the gathered congregation is to be at cross-purposes with that mission.

For Goheen, “Israel is obliged to learn to nurture its unique missional identity and role in this new context.”²⁸⁰ This should not be lost on these studied churches who reported that the changing culture outside their churches was one of the factors that led to their decline. The question is, are these churches open to the fundamental adaptability necessary for mission-driven outreach? If they are, are they ready to accept a new outcome that allows for more than local inside-the-walls church growth? Welcoming modifications in behaviors will result in a changed congregation that desires to be connected to its parish. Goheen assessed such a challenge for Israel when he wrote: “The primary threat to those ancient Jews was that the members of the community would decide Jewishness is too demanding, or too dangerous, or too costly, and simply accept Babylonian definitions and modes of reality.”²⁸¹ For the churches of this study, reflecting on the experience of those Jews, two questions need to be answered by them:

(1) Will being a group of disciples of Jesus push against current understandings of the church as established by its current practices and traditions?

(2) Will they readily adapt their methods and focus in order to join the mission of God at work in their near neighborhoods?

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

In their book, *The New Parish*,²⁸² authors Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen identify four modes of being church that represent underbalanced understandings of the church and its attempts to reach community. The four modes, Seeker, Heritage, Community, and Missional, each offer unique contributions. However, the goal for the local church is a holistic one. It embraces each mode to get to the purpose of the worship life of the church. They wrote, “The life of worship is more than what you do together at your Sunday gathering; it encompasses the whole of your collective lives together.”²⁸³ They grounded this understanding on Romans 12:1. *The Message* paraphrase of this text speaks most concretely to the everyday-ness of the nature of the church. Paul begged the people to offer “your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life” (Romans 12:1, *The Message*).²⁸⁴ In this daily ordinariness the life of the worship of God is realized. It is this everyday life of the church that engages the local church in its mission as the people of God living out a daily sacrifice. Is this too demanding, too dangerous, too costly? This dailyness is a push against these churches being and doing church in their current mode. Here is an option to become an alternative church connected to its community. Become daily witnesses to the grace of God at work in their community.

It is to this “everyday life” of the church that Tim Chester and Steve Timmis wrote. Quoting from a report by the Archbishop’s Council on Mission and Public Affairs England they found that the Church of England

bases a significant part of its identity on its physical presence in every community, and on a “come to us” strategy. But as community becomes more complex, mere geographical presence is no longer a guarantee that we can connect. The reality is that mainstream culture no longer brings people to the church door. We can no longer assume that we can automatically reproduce

²⁸² Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight J. Friesen. *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Church are Transforming Mission, Discipleship, and Community*. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 78-84.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁸⁴ Romans 12:1. *The Message*.

ourselves, because the pool of people who regard church as relevant or important is decreasing with every generation.²⁸⁵

While this Anglican report deals with churches in Europe, the context of the churches in Oklahoma aligns with its findings. The churches studied in this dissertation need to realize that their “come to us” strategy no longer works like it once did. Moreover, in *Everyday Church* Chester and Timmis cited 1992 research by John Finney which found that in the United Kingdom context: “The most important evangelistic work of the minister appears to be not in the church and the pulpit but in two other kinds of relationships: one-to-one meetings with non-Christians and the ‘lapsed [and] group situations, particularly those where there is an opportunity to talk about the nature of faith.’”

III. Influences that hinder

One lay leader noted a growing cultural acceptance of “people not seeing church as a necessity anymore.”²⁸⁶ Acceptance of that view had been adopted by some people who had previously attended the leader’s church. He believed their adoption of this cultural view bore responsibility for the decline of his church.

In their book, Chester and Timmis noted an old claim which reflected the influence of residual Christendom in the UK. The authors wrote that churches there unrealistically believed that they were engaged in proclaiming the gospel to the lost even though most of those considered lost no longer attended the church; therefore, they never heard the proclamation!

²⁸⁵ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis. *Everyday Church: Mission by Being Good Neighbors*. (Nottingham, England: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 27, quoting from Graham Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions in a Changing Context*. (Church House Publishing, 2004), 11.

²⁸⁶ Personal interview of Elk City lay leader. August 2023. Appendix Four

Chester and Timmis concluded that if the gospel is to be heard, “We need to do mission outside the church and church events.”²⁸⁷ This is the sent church message of Christ that needs to be heard and acted on by these churches.

A similar residual Christendom has influenced the congregations of these studied Oklahoma churches. All of them are located in what is frequently referred to as the Bible Belt. A mentality exists among non-attending church people in Southwest Oklahoma that non-attenders know and accept the gospel and only stand in need of being invited (or re-invited back) to church. The churches there hold onto a hope. Simply inviting non-attenders (and former attenders!) to their church services and events, their churches can return to days when their churches were filled, and the gospel was proclaimed to non-believing people or lapsed Christians. The ten-year decline in attendance should be a wakeup call to the fact that culture—both within and just outside the walls of the church—has changed. As Chester and Timmis found in their context these churches need to do mission work outside their church and church events.

In *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*, Darrell Guder quoted David Bosch who recognized the need for a reorientation of the church from a “church centered mission...to a mission centered church.”²⁸⁸ This reorientation is key for these Oklahoma Churches of the Nazarene. It speaks to the missionary nature of the early Church of the Nazarene which centered its ministry among the marginalized and the homeless poor. The missionary nature of the church was recognized by the Vatican II Council following a meeting of leaders of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. This meeting included and was led by led by Lesslie

²⁸⁷ Chester and Timmis, 30.

²⁸⁸ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005) quoted in Darrell L. Guder. *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, Publishing Co., 2015), 8.

Newbigin.²⁸⁹ Newbigin was an early voice on the negative influence of Christendom on the church in Europe. In *Foolishness to the Greeks*, he noted how the gospel was “embodied in some cultural form.”²⁹⁰ Guder, Bosch, the Vatican Council, and Newbigin all spoke of the influence of culture on the church.

Culture is a powerfully shaping force that can go undetected in the church. It can result in the church replicating practices which no longer result in the outcomes they once produced. Failure to recognize such shaping influences can keep churches on the pathway to decline. In appraising the future of his church, one interviewed pastor said it was “dim.”²⁹¹ He concluded, “unless the people change, we will decline.”²⁹² An initial step to seeing this desire for change become a reality is for the pastor and congregation to investigate their church culture. That means identifying and examining their practices by asking questions like, (1) why do we do things the way we do, and (2) what influences us to continue these practices when they do not bring in the outcome we desire?

In his interview, the pastor of the Altus COTN identified his congregation’s “unwillingness to embrace people who are not like us.”²⁹³ Are his people aware of this unwillingness? It is a shaping influence. Where did it come from? Certainly, it is not from the gospel as presented in the Bible where we hear of the love of Christ who died for all. Rather, this exclusionary attitude is part of a culture that has formed within and attached itself to the church. This same pastor reported that when his congregation had social gatherings in the neighborhood with their near neighbors, “It’s the same five people [who attend the church] who show up. But if

²⁸⁹ Footnote 24 in Guder, *Called to Witness*, 8-9.

²⁹⁰ Lesslie Newbigin. *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986.), 21.

²⁹¹ Personal Interview of Altus COTN Pastor. August 2023. Appendix Four.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

they have a social gathering at the church, everyone [who attends the church] comes.”²⁹⁴ This is a picture of the repeated pattern of an inward turn on the part of this congregation. Such inward focus fails to connect the whole church with the whole community just outside its doors. This pattern can be understood as part of the culture of this church. For this church, a church-centered mission has wrapped the gospel in its inwardly-faced culture. The gospel’s proclamation is not reaching its intended inclusive targets of both congregation and parish.

If this congregation were to adopt Bosch’s thoughts and adapt to the need to reorient their church, they could prayerfully work on changing from being a church-centered mission to becoming a church with a mission center—the mission of God. The church, its parish, and the kingdom of God would all be the beneficiaries of such a change. Presently, a singular focus is given to gathering at the church building for worship and events. Their thinking has been captured by continuing to do things that they believe will result in people coming to church. Being present in their neighborhood to do missional work is a step that is needs to be considered and taken.

The Elk City COTN pastor recognized that “getting people to the church building was not missional but marketing.”²⁹⁵ Marketing may be a good business principle, but it is not a biblical one. Beyond inviting people, lovingly engaging with all the people who God loves is central to doing the mission of God. Gathering at the church for worship includes practices that build up the Body of Christ and equips them for “the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:11, 12). This is a task given to pastors by the scriptures. However, if the congregation gathers to be built up but does not engage in those works of ministry in their parish, as well as their congregation, their equipping falls short of its intended purpose. The being and doing of the church should result in

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Personal interview of Elk City COTN Pastor. August 2023. Appendix Four.

the preparation of the people of God to be the servants of God. This is the both/and purpose of the church. It means both caring for the congregation and caring for the parish. This is the identity of a church linked with mission.

Caring for the parish begins with the congregation who is built up as the Body of Christ in their gatherings. The equipped congregation then scatters to their everyday lives becoming the embodiment of the Gospel. This must find connection with near neighbors expressly to build relationships in their parish. Strategic, prayerful, Spirit-led planning and execution by the congregations and their leaders is needed. This relational effort affords the opportunity to share the gospel that ministers to both the bodies and souls of the community. It calls for a different methodology than the one that has captured by these churches. A methodology that has captured them! This alternative relational methodology is the basis for becoming an alternative community, a community that stands in contrast to the existing one. If adopted, these churches could become communities which are is faced both inwardly and outwardly.

IV. An Alternate Community is needed

The research has found that the voices of the churches studied longed for a change that would return them to days when their churches were filled with people. When these congregations were surveyed regarding the importance of evangelistic mission to their near neighbors, almost half of the respondents (49%) thought that it to be an essential practice.²⁹⁶ When asked about compassionate mission—understood as caring for the bodily needs of people—more than half (59%) responded that it was essential.²⁹⁷ But when asked whether their local congregation’s focus included mission care for neighbors, only forty percent agreed that it

²⁹⁶ Congregation Survey responses. See answers to survey question six found in Appendix three.

²⁹⁷ Congregation Survey responses. See answers to survey question seven found in Appendix three.

did, while fifty-eight percent were either were neutral or disagreed with the issue. A small minority (2%) of them strongly disagreed.²⁹⁸ These statistics suggest that more than one-half of the respondents said that the current ministries and practices of the church were not caring for what is deemed to be an essential mission practice of the church. Some alternative practices—ways of being and doing church—are needed if the evangelistic and compassionate mission of these churches is to be realized.

In identifying the communal mission of Israel, Michael Goheen noted the ways that the law of God shaped the life of Israel. It included their looking backward to creation and an embodying of God’s original design for the whole of human life, as well as a looking forward to a realized future. “Their lives are to face outward to the nations; they are to be a contrast community.”²⁹⁹ This practice of looking backward to remember foundational truths of the church is essential for the present church. Likewise, the practice of looking forward and anticipating where God is leading can establish the way to a flourishing future. For these churches, an alternative community has a dual focus—inward and outward. It would give priority to its missional practices. This would give evidence to the birth of a theology of connectedness. The primary focus of the church would be the mission of God that is focused on and embraces both the congregation and the parish composed of near neighbors.

In a chapter titled, “The Servant Community,” Stanley Hauerwas centered on the social ethics of the church. He wrote, “The first social ethic of the church is to be the church—the servant community.”³⁰⁰ The identity of the church is rooted in servanthood. Like Jesus, who emptied Himself of privilege and became a servant, the people of God are called to serve. Jesus

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Goheen, *Light to the Nations*, 193.

³⁰⁰ Stanley Hauerwas. *The Peaceable Kingdom*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.), 99.

announced that he “did not come to be served, but to serve.”³⁰¹ Like Jesus these churches are not called to isolationist exercises which only serve themselves. They are called to others. In *Called to Witness*, Guder noted that the influence of Western Christendom “separated the benefits of the gospel from the missional mandate of the gospel. This has resulted in a highly individualized understanding of the gospel of salvation that finds its very questionable expression in North America in the consumerist reduction of the gospel to the question, What do I get out of it? What does Jesus do for me?”³⁰²

An alternative community lives out the missional role for the church given them by God. Mission for the alternative church is what Goheen described as “the presence of God’s people in the midst of the world and the powerful presence God’s Spirit in the midst of his people for the sake of the world.”³⁰³ It is this “in the midst the world... for the sake of the world” that differentiates the alternative church from the one turned inward. The life of the community-connected church gives eschatological witness here and now to the life of God in the world loved by God. This is the church living out of the life of the Triune God intermutually dwelling the godhead. The church is called to live among—in the midst of and as part of—the world that God loves. These studied churches long for a new future. It will only be found as they live out the resurrected new life and mission that centers on the priority of God for the church. Of such a church Goheen wrote, “The church, then, lives as a preview and sign of the coming kingdom of God.”³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Matthew 20:28.

³⁰² Guder, *Called to Witness*, 52.

³⁰³ Goheen, *Light to the Nations*, 197.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

In his *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective*, John Howard Yoder wrote of the biblical search for a mandate to send missionaries to carry the message of the gospel to distant lands. Instead, he and others discovered the reality of the Christ-life at work in New Testament people. Their life was the message. They became the vehicle for proclaiming the message through their daily lives.³⁰⁵ This people-who-are-the message is at the heart of the connected community of the alternative church. They will have to be open and committed to change as they reach into unfamiliar neighborhoods next door to the church building (as well as in the neighborhoods where the congregation lives!). They will have to appreciate (love) and absorb (embrace) people unlike themselves. They may need to learn new languages even though the spoken language around them is English. They will have to shape and reshape their theology to interpret how God is already at work in their neighborhoods. There will be issues of lifestyle that will need to be dealt with.³⁰⁶ This Christ-life, openness to change, absorbing of new people, and new ways of speaking are all shaping influences that will enliven the community-connected alternative church. One final word from Yoder: “A missionary church cannot be culturally rigid.”³⁰⁷

V. Summary

The interviews give several reasons for the attendance decline of the churches: too many short-term pastorates, church splits, aged congregations and dying towns, bedroom communities where people sleep but do not live, and mismatched pastoral leadership where older pastors do not connect to younger attenders. None of these reasons mentioned the problem of an inward

³⁰⁵ John Howard Yoder. *Theology of Mission: A Believer's Church Perspective*. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2014.) 124.

³⁰⁶ The ideas presented here are borrowed from Yoder in *Theology of Mission*, 177.

³⁰⁷ Yoder, *Theology of Mission*, 177.

focus of these congregations or suggested a need to change from simply inviting people to come to the church to becoming a sent community. However, the gospel is a message of compassion and turning from centering on self to serving the other. Therefore, there is a need for an alternative to these churches who have become shaped by their inwardly leaned cultures. They must be reshaped so that the mission of God can become their primary objective. There is a need for these churches to be and do differently to create a future with a new outcome.

What became evident through the voices of the pastors, leaders, and congregations of the churches in this study was that a change was needed to address ten-year attendance declines. In the process of seeking the heart of this change, we hear the voice of Scripture reminding us that the church is comprised of people freed to serve. However, there are influences that push against the nature of a servant. One of these influences is turning inward to care for the congregation when congregations begin to focus more on sustainability than mission. To make congregational care the priority of the church is at cross purposes with the mission of God. We now turn to pictures of alternative community-connected churches.

CHAPTER SIX: PICTURES OF AN ALTERNATIVE CONNECTED COMMUNITY

The interviews of pastors and leaders of the churches studied allows pictures to be created which offer conceptual insights into their condition. Also developed here are snapshots through the lens of missional practices that connect church and parish life when they are engaged in the mission of God. The latter is to serve as views which offer alternative practices to the ones currently used by the small churches researched here. An understanding of a church is helped by pictures, however inadequate they might be. For example, looking at pictures of individuals that display the shape and contours of a person and using those pictures to determine their character and qualities is like trying to understand a church by looking at a picture of the church building. Much more is needed for a comprehensive portrait. However, pictures reveal part of the story, and it is to that end that I offer some pictures developed from the research found in this dissertation.

I. Pictures created by the churches studied

While this dissertation has already provided data on the churches studied, there are some other findings gleaned from the pastoral and lay leader interviews that will offer even more clarity. Using the interviews, it is easy to imagine people gathering for Sunday morning worship and Sunday school, even though not all the churches are able to staff or populate the latter. Worship gatherings and study practices are key elements for building and shaping the foundation of the people of the church. It is on this foundation that the missional nature of the church is built. Key to these gatherings is the formation of community within the church. However,

pastoral and lay definitions of community found in the interviews create a picture of a disconnected community.

The Altus pastor defined community as “people outside the church, particularly poor people who the pastor can reach.”³⁰⁸ This language of “who the pastor can reach” came from a pastor who understood the expectation of his congregation. The words of “outside the church” demonstrates an insider-outsider understanding. Here is a picture of a congregation who relegates care for these outsiders to their pastor. It offers a view of a pastor whose reach to the nearby community is disconnected physically from his congregation. The church’s missional reach to its parish is delegated to the pastor.

A lay leader from the May Ave. COTN stated that her neighborhood community was comprised of people who are “Hispanic.” She said that language was a problem for their church. She added that the low income of these community folk was “a barrier for the church... [as are] the many rental properties where people are more transient, and [where] there are many homeless people.”³⁰⁹ Here is a snapshot of a gathered people who are not Hispanic and who do not speak Spanish. They have not found ways to translate their neighbors’ language to one they understand. These are a gathered people who are not poor, who do not live in rental properties and who are monolingual. It is an ominous picture of segregation and prejudice.

The interviews in this study include pictures of practices labelled missions. They include reports of congregations “receiving offerings for global missions and building buildings on global mission fields.”³¹⁰ A lay leader from the Anadarko church mentioned the church takes “offerings for missions and that they have speakers from different places come to talk about

³⁰⁸ Personal Interview of Altus COTN pastor by author, August 2023. Appendix four.

³⁰⁹ Personal Interview of OKC May Ave COTN lay leader by author, August 2023. Appendix four.

³¹⁰ Personal Interview of Altus COTN pastor by author, August 2023. Appendix four.

missions.”³¹¹ While receiving offerings and being informed of global missions is important, do they provoke the congregation to the love and good works? Hebrews 10:24 says: “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good works.” Rather, here we see the practice of keying on global missions without an inclusive focus on localized mission and assuming that the mission of God is complete having shared in such ministries.

Are these congregations too old to go to mission fields? It is reported to be so. But are they too old for a conversation with a near neighbor? The Anadarko COTN pastor defined mission as “being the hands and feet of Jesus and serving the community,”³¹² a picture easily envisioned. But his definition seems to run counter to the practices of his congregation who he said were “really good at taking care of our own people.”³¹³ The contrasting pictures are a church turned inward in their missional practices versus a sent congregation serving incarnationally.

The pastor of the El Reno COTN noted that the attitude of the congregation was “more about giving money than being a sent people.”³¹⁴ The picture developed here is one that shows money serving as a substitute for God’s call to for followers of Christ to be physically in their neighborhoods. Picture people leaning forward to pick up a purse or to take out a wallet and smiling with satisfaction thinking that they have done everything necessary to fulfill the mission of God.

See the picture people of preparing food for guests, food which ends up being “eaten by the people who prepared the food.”³¹⁵ The pastor of the Elk City church noted that this inward behavior has been a “demoralizing” but normal practice for them. Were invited guests who had

³¹¹ Personal Interview of Anadarko COTN lay leader by author, August 2023. Appendix four.

³¹² Personal Interview of Anadarko COTN pastor by author, August 2023. Appendix four.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Personal Interview of El Reno COTN pastor by author, August 2023. Appendix four.

³¹⁵ Personal Interview of Elk City COTN pastor by author, August 2023. Appendix four.

failed to come the hungry of the parish who were not fed? Is it the congregation's cultural expectation that if you fix food they will come? This disconnection from near neighbor invites results in hungry people and unrealized friendships.

We should not forget that these churches are filled with good people who love God. They do kind, compassionate acts toward people outside their congregation. One Anadarko lay leader reported their church had "gathered money for funeral expenses for community people."³¹⁶ This was offered as an example of how this Body of Christ cared for its neighbors. But isn't this the sort of thing that non-believers do, too? Certainly, congregations should give to help those in need. This is something of what it means to be community. What other relational connections that are possible at such traumatic times? These should be explored.

The pastor of the Chickasha church was hopeful. He believed that his congregation was coming to the realization that "mission is reaching beyond the walls of the church to neighbors they don't know."³¹⁷ He said that his church consistently proclaimed the message of the gospel which informs his congregation of their responsibility to reach out to their neighbors. Positive pictures can be developed here that show that at times these churches are able to do ministry that includes both the congregation and the parish. Below are the pictures developed from the interviews which point to disconnecting behaviors.

- Churches that relegate community care to their pastor alone disconnect pastors from their congregations in this area of service and miss opportunities to engage with members of their parish;
- Churches that allow barriers of language, transience, homelessness, and low income to become barriers to active caring fail to realize that while these are difficulties, they

³¹⁶ Personal Interview of Anadarko lay leader by author, August 2023. Appendix four.

³¹⁷ Personal Interview of Chickasha 1st pastor by author, August 2023. Appendix four.

can be overcome. They need not prevent the church from caring for those who are experiencing them. In fact, such difficulties open opportunities for the congregation to pray, listen, and converse with those who are facing them. These are opportunities to do active learning and caring.

- Churches that substitute giving money for doing mission miss the opportunity for connecting with communities in need. While giving generously is both helpful and good, it does not replace the importance of human presence and touch—something many congregations relearned during the recent pandemic.
- Churches that confuse missions with mission are not realizing the specific purpose of each. Both are essential to the life of the church. These homonymous-like words mean different things. Missions reflects the language of the Acts 1:8—the commission of Jesus for His disciples. They were to be witnesses to the “the ends of the earth.”³¹⁸ But Christ also called them to be missionaries to Judea and Samaria. Mission recognizes the local-ness of the work of God—expressly the parish inclusive of near-neighbors.
- Churches that are in survival mode tend to remain inwardly turned to their detriment. The first step toward moving out of survival mode is hands-on caring for others.
- Churches made up primarily of older folks often use the we-are-too-old for ministry excuse. What if Abraham, at 75, had said, “I’m too old” when God made covenant with him and promised to bless the families of the world through him? We should remember that who God calls, God enables. Philippians 4:13 reminds believers, “I

³¹⁸ And should we, in this day and age of space exploration, consider our mission field even larger—even to the multiverse?

can do all things through him who strengthens me.” It is not a verse for doing only the easy things.

- Churches that favor nurture over mission should remember that the purpose of nurture is *so that* they can do mission. To receive nurture and not exercise is to grow fat.
- Church people with satisfied smiles on people’s faces—after they’ve given dollars to help others but who have yet to develop calloused hands and tired feet earned by going to the parish—have done the first but failed to do the other. To such a practice Jesus said, “It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others” (Matthew 23:23). Jesus was harsh toward religious leaders who conscientiously gave tithe but neglected “weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.”
- Churches with unrealized expectations of caring for neighbors who fail to come and eat but stop short of allowing hospitality to have its full impact by eating with neighbors in the neighborhood, who instead fill their own stomachs with food originally prepared for neighbors, have failed to hear and answer the call of mission work.

II. Creating different pictures as a community connected church

In writing about the church’s identity and role, Michael Goheen wrote, “Ecclesiology is about understanding our identity, *who* we are, and why God has chosen us—*whose* we are.”³¹⁹ Understanding identity as congregations can be aided by pictures created from their practices, even though they show only a small slice of who they are. They do little to explain a notion like

³¹⁹ Goheen, *Light to the Nations*, 5.

whose they are. Sparks, Sorensen, and Friesen wrote of “reconfiguring the contemporary meaning of church by incorporating the relational life with a particular place into the definition. This understanding is drawn from our discoveries in neighborhoods, reflection on the Scriptures, and practical experiences in our own contexts.”³²⁰ A picture of the life of the Church can be created from Romans 12:1, a passage that calls people to life as “living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” We should not fail to pick up on this Pauline connection between that which is spirit and that which is body. The Bible supports the two working together in the redemptive work of God.

In its attempt to rejuvenate the United Methodist Church, a movement known as Fresh Expressions has taken root. Pastor Jorge Acevedo overcame his aversion to the ideas and actions of this missional strategy. He admitted that he was given more to “cool preaching podiums, flashing lights, drum cages, and comfy seats.”³²¹ But he, like John Wesley who had struggled with field preaching but who finally yielded to its methodology, came to acknowledge what was a glaringly real picture provided by research. Acevedo wrote, “Our teams discovered that an attractional church, which had brilliantly worked for us during the first fifteen years, dramatically slowed down since the Great Recession in its effectiveness to reach pre-Christian people for Jesus.”³²² At the heart of this new strategy was a consideration of “new ways to reach people.”³²³ This meant his having to “intentionally discover, develop, and deploy”³²⁴ those of his congregation who were more given to sitting in the chairs of the sanctuary. His approach to not

³²⁰ Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, *The New Parish*, 84.

³²¹ Michael Adam Beck and Jorge Acevedo. *A Field Guide to Methodist Fresh Expressions*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), viii.

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

only reach new people but to engage his congregation is at the heart of reconnecting the disconnected church.

The churches studied in this dissertation should not fail to connect with Wesley's struggle regarding field preaching and the revival it brought to England. Wesley set out to *go to* "people who had no relationship with the church."³²⁵ When the church who confesses to having unfamiliarity with people living in the shadow of the church building are awakened by the Spirit, change cannot be far away. But a learning curve is needed for those rooted in past practices. It includes learning how to multitask in their listening—turning ears to both God and culture. This is a picture of people with servant hearts answering God's call as they are led by the Spirit. They have discovered that what may seem impossible for people is possible with God. For these SWOK churches, it can become a fresh expression of listening and responding to the mission of God rather than sitting and despairing over a looming future of a church in jeopardy of closing.

In illustrating the change experienced by pastors who have accepted that their churches need change, Beck and Acevedo recount the story of Jim, a large-church pastor. He had acquiesced to the thought that "It's not enough to sit back and wait for people to come visit the shiny new building."³²⁶ Instead, he blended what became emerging forms for his church. He remained equally committed to both attractional *and* missional forms. This meant he needed to help his congregation learn that worship, prayer, and effectual reasoning are foundational. But these cannot replace experimenting with new ways—even if it means experiencing some failure along the way.

For the churches studied in this dissertation, there is a picture that suggests these congregations are in a pause mode because of difficulties that they face. Instead—with prayer

³²⁵ Ibid, xi.

³²⁶ Ibid., 84.

and the guidance of the Holy Spirit—they can move from the pause mode to the sent mode while continuing to care for their congregation. In fact, this care for the congregation opens the opportunity for learning together how doing church embraces those who are not yet part of it. This entails creatively experimenting with ways through which they can connect with their non-attending near neighbors. There should not only be efforts to gather them at the church building but should also be learning experiments of how they can be in the community with near neighbors—even learning to serve together. It can begin with simply sharing events already staged and hosted by the community-at-large. For some of the churches in this study this means overcoming the fear of collaborating with community people. Beck and Acevedo wrote, “We have learned that when churches can move beyond the fear of protecting territory, catch a kingdom vision, and collaborate, then amazing things can happen.”³²⁷ These “amazing things” include envisioning the church as more than a gathering place. The church, as the Bible describes it, is meant to be a people-building space which becomes a people-launching pad. But for this to happen, these churches will need to let go of some old pictures that currently constrain them.

The word “adaptability” is central to Tod Bolsinger’s book, *Canoeing the Mountains*.³²⁸ A key discovery for these churches—like Bolsinger discovered—is that “the world in front of us is radically different from everything behind us.”³²⁹ Yet these studied churches continue to practice the same practices that keep them disconnected. Change must come, and it must come soon if these churches are to continue as gathering spaces. Learning to adapt to new situations is not impossible, especially with our God of the impossible helping us.

³²⁷ Ibid. 85.

³²⁸ Tod Bolsinger. *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

³²⁹ Ibid, 27.

In the past, solutions and new pathways for addressing the difficulties currently facing these churches were addressed by “experts.” Bolsinger identified, “We are in uncharted territory trying to lead dying churches into a post-Christian culture that now considers the church an optional, out of touch and irrelevant relic of the past.”³³⁰ When faced with such a situation, what should be done? Bolsinger wrote, “If you are like me, indeed like most people, what you do is default to what you know. *You do again, what you have always done before.*”³³¹ How do we adapt in this situation? Bolsinger responded to what is needed: “A spirit of adventure where there are new, unexpected discoveries (serendipities) and ultimately ‘new perceptions.’ To be sure, this is an adapt-or-die moment... *The answer is not to try harder but to start a new adventure.... An adventure that requires adaptive capacity.*”³³²

What is the adaptive capacity of these churches? They need only look back to realize that along the way of their long histories they adapted. Those changes afforded them a future. Now, they are in a back-against-the-wall moment. However, it is not the time for despair, though desperation can be a great motivator.³³³ It is the time to create a new picture. Another word from Bolsinger includes his citing of John Kotter’s Eight-step Process for Leading Change. It offers a helpful maxim. It is found in Bolsinger’s chapter titled, “The Mission Trumps!” where he suggested a four-fold maxim: “Start with conviction, stay calm, stay connected, and stay the course.”³³⁴

These churches should remember that their role as the church is to cooperate with our missionary God who is on mission to redeem the world. This work is to include caring for both

³³⁰ Ibid, 31.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid., 33.

³³³ Desperation as motivator deserves more study than it is given here. I have listed it as an item for further research. See “For Further Study” at the end of this study.

³³⁴ Bolsinger, *Canoeing*. Footnote 11.4, 128.

the congregation and its parish. For these congregations, turning inward and focusing only on their congregation is not adequate. Likewise, the other extreme of caring only for those outside the church is a wonderful social project, but it does not fulfill the mission of God. Reconnecting the disconnected church is a both/and project.

Kenneth Carter and Audrey Warren address an important issue for the churches in this study. They compose what they called an “inherited church.” Carter and Warrant wrote, “Inherited church speaks of the orderly process by which a generation passes the faith, wedded to participation in a particular congregation, to the next generation or two. And thus, in some churches there are multiple generations of kinship; grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren.”³³⁵ As learned through research done on the churches studied in this dissertation, many spoke of young people who had left their church leaving only older people to attend to and care for the church. Both pastors and lay leaders spoke of an absence of children and young people in their churches. An El Reno COTN lay leader reported, with renewed hope, that their church now almost has a junior high group,³³⁶ though they admitted that the church remains made up of an older population.

The churches studied are caught in a web that necessitates change. Carter and Warren addressed the obvious why question: “Why can’t we stay as we are and just keep praying for better days?”³³⁷ In practice, that is what these churches have been doing. Carter’s and Warren’s answer paints a picture of reality that every church should embrace: “While we have been

³³⁵ Kenneth H. Carter, Jr. and Audrey Warren. *Fresh Expressions: A New Kind of Methodist Church for People Not in Church*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 28.

³³⁶ Personal Interview of El Reno COTN lay leader by author, August 2023. Appendix four

³³⁷ Carter and Warren. *Fresh Expressions*, 25.

working as the church to ‘change the world,’ the world has changed around us.”³³⁸ This changing culture necessitates a new focus using old roots—old made new.

The missional nature of the church is as old as the church that was born on the words of Jesus to Peter, “On this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). The church finds its root in the covenantal promise first made with Abraham by God blessed him so that through him all the families of earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). This is a picture of the world connected with the love of God that flows from the people of God.

III. Snapshots of a theology of connectedness

In an ethnographic interview with Chris Pollock, the pastor of the 8th St COTN in mid-town Oklahoma City, he shared the story of his preparation for becoming the pastor of the church. He had served as the executive pastor of a large Oklahoma church. While in a conversation with a good friend who pastored another large Oklahoma church their talk reflected on their ministry as pastors. They wondered that if they were able to start over whether they would do it differently. Pollock remembered the large church where he had previously served. “It was a monstrosity, and he had a lot of responsibility.”³³⁹ In that church was a group of people interested in restarting what had become a defunct church in mid-town Oklahoma City that was miles from where they gathered for worship. They proposed rejuvenating the old church building and starting a new church. Pollock noted that the team of people preparing to re-launch the church had asked the

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Personal Interview of Chris Pollock, pastor of 8th Street Church of the Nazarene, Oklahoma City by author. October 27, 2021.

question, “Can a church recover what it once was when it’s no longer what it was?”³⁴⁰ Both Pollock and the team faced what seemed to be an impossible task, but they were convinced that God was leading them to do it.

Adding to the difficulties they faced was a boundary issue. They would need to connect two Nazarene districts to start this new church. They would be using funds and people from one district and rebuilding the church on property located in another. Amazingly, both districts agreed to the project. The 8th Street Church of the Nazarene was born with a population of people and most of its funding coming from a congregation on the Oklahoma district, while the building was situated on the Southwest Oklahoma district.

Additionally, the new church would embrace a parish focus. From the beginning, the neighborhood where the church was to be started would be included in the life of the church. When asked about this innovative attempt to revive an old building and begin a new church Pollock, pushed back. “So, for me,” he said, “there’s not really any innovation. The language that I like to use is ‘to make old things new.’”³⁴¹ Those responsible for this new-old 8th Street church took care to investigate and understand the history of the building—including its historical significance for the community. They were committed that this be a church which embraced not only its congregation but its neighborhood. This meant more than simply being a church in a neighborhood. It was to be a church that focused its care on the neighbors around this old church while simultaneously caring for those who gathered for worship each week. From the beginning, the notion of the neighborhood as a parish was integrated into the thinking and re-

³⁴⁰ Personal Interview of Chris Pollock, pastor of 8th Street Church of the Nazarene, Oklahoma City by author. October 27, 2021.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

making of this neighborhood church. Now this new-old church thrives in a burgeoning section of downtown Oklahoma City.

The Canadian Hills Church of the Nazarene practices a unique 5th Sunday ministry that connects its gathered congregation with near neighbors who do not attend the church.³⁴² The relatively new pastor of the church, Chad Penner, recognized that his church was in decline. He prayerfully proposed to the church board that the church should add an outwardly focus mission to reach their near neighbors. They would continue to gather for worship on Sunday as normal, but on the 5th Sunday of every month their gathering at the church would be different. It would begin with breakfast and be followed with the congregation going to serve in their neighborhood. The pastor would identify a particular need in their parish, and the small congregation would go as the hands and feet of Jesus to meet that need. The church board agreed to the proposal, and before long the congregation was at work among previously unknown neighbors. Stories of new connections began to flow. The life of Christ was being incarnated in the neighborhood, and the life of the church now includes what had been a missing characteristic of the church: an outward focus.

The Yukon First Church of the Nazarene sits on 15-acres of land beside historic Route 66, the mother road of John Steinbeck's book *The Grapes of Wrath*. This 98-year-old congregation meets in a nice, well-kept building with a sanctuary that that can seat 300—though normally only seventy-five gather for Sunday worship. The building also has ten classrooms with moveable walls, a gymnasium, and a new youth building. The ground and buildings are debt-free.

I became pastor of this church, coming directly from working in the education field in several large cities where elementary and junior high children were being taught in underperforming

³⁴² Phone interview of Canadian Hills COTN Pastor by author, October 2023.

schools. My role in that project was to locate these children and then to recruit, train, and hire college students who were training to be teachers. These novice teachers would serve as in-home tutors. They would be paid using “No Child Left Behind” federal funds.³⁴³ They would creatively engage these children in mathematics and language arts—helping them to succeed where previously they had failed. It proved to be a successful community event in a dozen cities around the US. Previous to this educational work, I had spent thirty years as an ordained worship pastor for several churches—both small and large. My inner-city education experience taught me what would be a major focus of my pastoral leadership in Yukon—connecting the church with its community.

The buildings of Yukon COTN once sat empty for most of the week—as most churches do. Except for the grounds being mowed by volunteers from the church, the property was largely unused by either the church or the community. That all changed when the church board gave permission for a variety of community groups to use the buildings and grounds for providing care for local neighbors. The buildings and grounds became meeting places for Scouts, a Network church which sponsored Trail Life and American Heritage Girls (a Bible-based Scouting program for children) and UPMA (Unlimited Possibilities Martial Arts), Celebrate Recovery, and a softball program that manages the four softball fields that they re-created on the grounds. These new softball teams made up of non-attending community people who paid for all of the necessary upgrades with no contributions from the local congregation!

The church leadership is now challenged with four questions: (1) How do we connect with the many people who join on the campus of this church each week? (2) What are the needs of

³⁴³ “No Child Left Behind” was a product of the US government’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act begun under President Johnson’s administration and reauthorized under the Bush administration.

our immediate community (our parish)? (3) How can we effectively meet those needs as an outwardly focused expression of the gospel? (4) How can we be both a gathered and a sent people of God?

IV. Hospitality as a practice of the Connected Church

The practice of biblical hospitality as a church is an important part of being connected—despite that fact that hospitality is countercultural for much of current US culture. Paul’s admonition to the church at Rome was two-fold: “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers” (Romans 12:13). While it is likely that the Roman church’s hospitality was extended to traveling missionaries, there is no reason not to conclude that needs of others were included in their care. This reflected the eschatological kingdom of God. Jesus encouraged His followers to care for “the least of these,” as heard in Matthew 25:25. In Romans 12:20 Paul seems to be quoting from instructions of Jesus found in the earlier passage: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.”

In *Go! How to Become a Great Commission Church*, author Mark Teasdale wrote of how the church that he pastored had made a turn outward. “Before then, the congregation was just comfortable enough, even in its steady decline, to avoid turning seriously to God.”³⁴⁴ This turn was precipitated by their “desperation.” In a chapter titled, “It’s OK to Party,” Teasdale picks up the theme of hospitality. He asked about how to make mission a joyous part of the life of the church. “Hospitality is an important first step, By hospitality, I do not mean the brief period after worship when snacks are served. I mean a much deeper practice in which we share the gifts of God given us in a mutual way. We first practice hospitality among those who are already part of

³⁴⁴ Mark R. Teasdale. *Go! How to Become a Great Commission Church*. (Nashville: Wesley’s Foundry Books, 2017), 146.

the congregation.... As we learn ... we can show hospitality to those outside the congregation. We do this by sharing the best we have: the best food, the best experience of worship, and the best of everything else.”³⁴⁵ Like Teasdale’s experience, the churches studied here speak of desperation, yet their continued inwardly-focused practices show that they have not yet become desperate enough to realize the second of the dual foci to which the church is called—to love the neighbor as a primary ministry of the church. They have answered the great commission’s call to Jerusalem, a metaphor that depicts the local church, but are they are not actively responding to the Judea of the same text (Acts 1:8). The Judea for these churches is the community just outside the doors of their churches.

In an article in the Spring 2000 *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, M. Brandon Winstead wrote about a common problem: changing people’s ideas. So, he tried to change a congregation’s perception about what they ate. His purpose was to challenge his Wesleyan teenagers in their consumption of meat, establishing that “eating should be an eschatological act.”³⁴⁶ This was to pick up on “John Wesley’s vision for the final redemption of all creation, particularly when it comes to the consumption of animals.”³⁴⁷ In closing his article, Winstead cautioned, “Whatever particular methodologies, approaches, or programs are utilized, it’s important to remember that constructing such a ministerial and theological culture takes patience.”³⁴⁸ The same caution is offered to these churches as they consider how they might consider changing long-standing congregational practices and engaging a broader understanding of the mission of the church. Each attempt will take time, but each step to encourage and engage the church toward an

³⁴⁵ Ibid. 133.

³⁴⁶ M. Brandon Winstead. “Consuming the Other Neighbor: Eschatological Eating and Christian Formation in Wesleyan Youth Ministry.: *Wesley Theological Journal*. 55:1 Spring 2020, 63.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid, 80.

outward turn in the life of an otherwise inwardly focused church will result in a move in a missional direction.

Novel ideas for doing church are not out of the realm of possibility, if the leadership spends time prayerfully seeking the leadership of the Spirit. However, the goal should not be focused on sustaining the life of the church. It should be for the church to cooperate with the mission of God in all its spiritual and physical dimensions. Facing and overcoming an inward turn of a church, as difficult as that may be, is not impossible if the leadership is in touch with God. At the same time, the congregation and its parish should heed Winstead's call for patience. This aligns with the fourth maxim offered by Bolsinger and Kotter earlier: "stay the course."

In *We Will Feast* author Kendall Vanderslice identified, "Eating together [...] fosters community because everyone shares the need to eat."³⁴⁹ Earlier in the text she noted that humans have primary needs: to draw nutrition and energy from food, to sustain life, and to find companionship in sharing life with others.³⁵⁰ Later in the same text she highlighted a function of the church alongside a missing practice. "While plenty of churches eat together after their services, very few do so with the intention of drawing in those who are hungry. Plenty of soup kitchens offer meals to folks without homes, but rarely to men and women with secure incomes attend to eat and enjoy communion. But Jesus did not separate the practice of feeding the hungry from that of feasting with friends. He enjoyed communion with them all."³⁵¹

Fostering community using hospitality should be an ongoing practice of the church—not only among the congregation but for its parish as well. Community formation often happens around a table. It is a picture seen the practices of New Testament churches. The table gathering

³⁴⁹ Kendall Vanderslice. *We Will Feast: Rethinking Dinner, Worship, and the Community of God*. (Grand Rapid, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019) 25.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

ministry of Jesus included tax gatherers and other sinners and even one who would betray Him. Gathering to eat together offers relational building opportunities as well as accomplishing the mission task of feeding the hungry. Many of the churches in this study speak of gathering the congregation for meals after services and inviting the neighborhood. What more could be made of this gathering? How could they be expanded so that the congregation could gather *with* the community. This would interlace the practice of inviting people to come and dine with the practice of joining with people *in* the parish as neighbors loved by God. This is a missional, community-connecting exercise.

V. Reflecting on some pictures

For churches today who ask, “Do we need to throw out what normally has worked and start from scratch?” The answer is yes and no. While old invitational models will not work in the current culture which includes many who have escaped the gathering church, they need not be abandoned. However, new models offer ways which can more fully embrace the parish life once enjoyed by Wesley. Near neighbors who drive or walk past the local church building—people who are “unclaimed” but whom God loves—are the parish that should be included in the missional reach of energy, prayer, and communion of local congregations. The churches in this study are doing all they can to survive while catering mostly, if not exclusively, to their congregations. Many of their people drive relatively long distances to attend churches with which they have a shared history. Should these churches start over from scratch? Not exactly.

The innovative model of the 8th street church in OKC relies on a philosophy of “making old new again.” This small church has embraced a parish model. Its history embraced an old, closed church in a mid-town area where now they have now implemented their two-fold purpose: (1) to

care for their gathered congregation, and (2) care for their parish. Is Canadian Hill's 5th Sunday dismissal from gathering for worship a final solution? Not exactly. But it allows the congregation to participate in community service during what was formerly limited as a worship-gathering time. This is a creative response for helping to connect with disconnected people and near neighbors. For Yukon First leadership to allow the community space in otherwise unused facilities is not only more efficient use of resources, it also offers potential connections to people who otherwise did not know that the church was there. Now, when members of Yukon First are asked, if some horrible event suddenly removed the Yukon First Church building from the town would anyone notice? Their answer is resoundingly, yes. The town gathers here each week. Is this the final solution for making this church truly community connected? Not exactly. But it is a creative piece of the puzzle.

For the churches in this study, there is a need to rethink pretty much everything to come up with a sustainable model for them. But building on the bi-directional theology of connectedness offers a remedy that encourages both the continued care of the congregation and its parish. Resetting expectations is messy work, but perhaps no messier than closing churches with long histories in a community. It is unglamorous. The theology of connection is not meant to build large church models.

- It is designed for leaders and congregations of small churches.
- It can be a hopeful alternative to closing churches.
- It is an alternative church model that is not meant for the masses.
- It is focused on the people who gather for worship who God loves offering care and doing worship among for the non-gathered people who God loves.

A central value of this dissertation is that the church is to be both a gathered and a sent people. It values the small, rural, suburban, and urban church. The hope is to prevent their continued demise by refocusing their inward turn that cares for the congregation alone to one that includes the missional value of incarnationally sharing the gospel in the near neighborhood. A theology of connectedness may be a next phase for small rural, suburban, and urban churches who have endured the cultural shift that has encouraged people away from church attendance. These are people in need of experiencing the love of God as it is shared by the church.

This dissertation works from the principle of the church being a gathering and equipping place called and enabled to the mission of God. The current inward focus of the small churches studied herein has been shown through the interviews and surveys taken. An exclusively inward focus supports the view that the church exists for itself. In a church with such a view this becomes the primary ministry rather than the twin-focused scriptural teaching of the church as the sent people of God. Gathering is essential in the Wesleyan model of churches who assemble for holy practices. But such gathering is not meant to be an end-in-itself. Rather, gathering is an opportunity to prepare for service. In the churches included in this study, “service” (gathering for worship) needs to be seen as the service preparation for service in the everyday world.

Experiments performed by neuroscientist Gregory Berns³⁵² suggest that sacred values are significant shaping elements in people’s lives. People who belong to an organized group have met the requirement for considering the opinions of others. These have a tempering effect on our self-centered impulses—impulses that are part of the inward turning of a local church. Instilling sacred values comes over a lifetime. Many of such values were first encountered during our earliest years. They can be influential in our decision to act for the common good over against

³⁵² Gregory Berns. *The Self-Delusion: The New Neuroscience of How We Invent—and Reinvent—Our Identities*. (New York: Basic Books, 2022), 163.

only caring about our personal preferences. These churches must examine the shaping influences that have led them to become the churches that they are. Having acknowledged these influences allows space for changes that match the mission to which God has called the church. Berns argues that “very few thoughts are truly originally ours.”³⁵³ Shouldn’t it be right and good then for the church to gather as a people and creatively reflect on what it means to be for “the other”? Such is the theology of connectedness, a way of understanding and implementing the tools necessary for reconnecting the disconnected church.

³⁵³ Ibid.

APPENDIX ONE

Pastoral and Lay Leader Phone Interview Questions.

1. How do you define community?
2. In your opinion, how does your church define community?
3. What does mission look like in your church?
 - a. When was the last time a new person came to your church?
 - b. What or Who got them to come?
4. Other than Sunday morning worship, what kind of gathering does your church do? How often?
5. What does the future of your church look like, growth or decline?
 - a. If it is decline, what needs to happen to change that future?
6. What do you identify as the causes of your church's decadal Sunday morning attendance decline?
7. What is your definition of the mission of the church?
8. Is your church's focus more a lean outward to the community or more inward toward the care of the congregation?
9. What steps, if any, have been taken to address the decline in Sunday morning attendance?
10. What are some of the "practices" of your church?
11. On a scale of 1 to 10 with one being best and 10 being worst, how would you describe your church's community connection?
12. How important is evangelistic mission outreach to you?
13. How important is evangelistic mission to your congregation?
14. What role does compassionate evangelism play in the mission of God for your church?

15. Are there a couple of leaders (board members, congregational members) that I could phone to talk about the history and practices of the church?³⁵⁴

³⁵⁴ Question 15 was not asked of lay leaders.

APPENDIX TWO

Congregational Survey Questions

The goal of this survey is to determine the behaviors and attitudes of our local church concerning our relationship to the surrounding community.

Select one answer for each question.

1. Does the mission of our church lean more outwardly toward the community or more inwardly toward the care of the congregation?
 - a. My church is focused inward toward our congregation.
 - b. My church mostly focused inward to our congregation.
 - c. My church's focus about evenly split between inward and outward.
 - d. My church is mostly focused outward toward the community.
 - e. It is focused outward toward the community.
2. How often should our church participate in community-wide events?
 - a. Never
 - b. Once or twice annually
 - c. Monthly
 - d. Quarterly
 - e. Weekly
3. Our church is willing to change to meet new challenges.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Disagree
 - d. Strongly disagree
4. How easy is it for our church to change its mission direction?
 - a. Easy
 - b. Somewhat easy
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Mildly difficult.
 - e. Impossible
5. Is the outside community aware of our church?
 - a. Everyone in town knows we are here.
 - b. About ½ of the people in town know our church is here.
 - c. Few people in town know our church is here.
 - d. I don't know.
6. How important is it for our church to engage in evangelistic mission with the outside community?
 - a. It is essential.
 - b. It is important but not essential.
 - c. It is something the church should do when possible.
 - d. It is nice but not necessary.
 - e. It is outside the scope of the ministry of the church

7. How important is it for our church to engage in compassionate mission with the outside community?
 - a. It is essential.
 - b. It is important but not essential.
 - c. It is something the church should do when possible.
 - d. It is nice but not necessary.
 - e. It is outside scope of the ministry of the church.
8. How well does our church reach the community with the Gospel?
 - a. It is very effective.
 - b. It is mildly effective.
 - c. It does okay.
 - d. It comes up short.
 - e. It is ineffective.
9. The mission focus of our church includes gathering with the people of our near community to do work together.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Mildly disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
10. It is important for me to greet new people who attend the Sunday morning worship service.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strong disagree
11. Our church leadership encourages the congregation to be active in the community.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
12. Thinking about our church, how would you rate it as a church to attend.
 - a. Excellent
 - b. Good
 - c. Fair
 - d. Poor
13. How satisfied are you with the outreach of our church to its near community (within three-mile radius of the church building)?
 - a. Very satisfied
 - b. Mostly satisfied
 - c. A little satisfied
 - d. Not satisfied

14. Would you recommend our church to a non-attending friend?
 - a. Absolutely
 - b. Probably
 - c. Maybe
 - d. Not likely
 - e. No
15. The best time for our church to do community mission work is
 - a. On Sunday
 - b. During evenings of the Week
 - c. On Weekends
 - d. Every day of the week
 - e. We are too busy.
16. Our church has always been focused on ministering to non-attending near neighbors in our community.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Mildly disagree
17. Our church has a balanced approach in its care for the congregation and the people of our near non-attending community (within three-mile radius).
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Mildly disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
18. Are you encouraged or discouraged with Sunday morning attendance?
 - a. Strongly encouraged
 - b. Encouraged
 - c. Neutral
 - d. discouraged
 - e. Strongly discouraged
19. If our church suddenly disappeared, the community would miss it.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Mildly disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
20. What does it mean for our church to be community connected?
 - a. Strong missional focus on the congregation.
 - b. Balanced missional focus on congregation and near community (three-mile radius)
 - c. Strong missional focus on the near community (three-mile radius)

21. The most important weekly task for the future of our church is
 - a. Gathering for worship
 - b. Building relationships in the congregation
 - c. Building relationships in the community
 - d. Preparing our congregation for ministry during the week
 - e. All of the above
22. Caring for the congregation is the first priority of our church.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
23. Our church leaders are aware of the reasons for the decline in attendance in our church.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
24. Our church leaders have a strategy to address the decline in Sunday morning attendance.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
25. Our church focus includes engaging in mission care for our neighbors (within a three-mile radius of the church building).
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree

APPENDIX THREE
CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY RESULTS³⁵⁵

160 surveys distributed. Total surveys returned= 59							36.8% response rate						
Congregational Survey Results Sheet							Q 1	Q 5	Q 9	Q 13	Q 17	Q 21	Q 25
Q	A	B	C	D	E		A 15%	A 20%	A 12%	A 12%	A 5%	A 10%	A 8%
1	9	13	35	2	0	B 22%	B 27%	B 46%	B 42%	B 39%	B 8%	B 42%	
2	1	9	24	14	1	C 59%	C 25%	C 27%	C 25%	C 34%	C 22%	C 27%	
3	6	36	13	4	0	D 3%	D 26%	D 13%	D 20%	D 14%	D 5%	D 15%	
4	4	9	27	18	0	E 0%		E 0%		E 3%	E 42%	E 2%	
5	12	16	15	14	0								
6	29	10	14	3	0	Q 2	Q 6	Q 10	Q 14	Q 18	Q 22		
7	35	10	12	1	0	A 2%	A 49%	A 61%	A 72%	A 8%	A 5%		
8	3	11	17	22	4	B 15%	B 17%	B 30%	B 19%	B 17%	B 37%		
9	7	27	16	8	0	C 41%	C 24%	C 7%	C 5%	C 29%	C 25%		
10	36	18	4	0	0	D 24%	D 5%	D 0%	D 3%	D 32%	D 5%		
11	17	30	4	1	2	E 2%	E 0%	E 0%	E 0%	E 12%	E 7%		
12	20	31	7	1	0								
13	7	25	15	12	0	Q 3	Q 7	Q 11	Q 15	Q 19	Q 23		
14	42	11	3	2	0	A 10%	A 59%	A 29%	A 3%	A 14%	A 19%		
15	2	7	31	13	2	B 61%	B 17%	B 51%	B 12%	B 37%	B 44%		
16	2	16	31	9	0	C 22%	C 20%	C 7%	C 53%	C 27%	C 20%		
17	3	23	20	8	2	D 7%	D 2%	D 2%	D 22%	D 8%	D 5%		
18	5	10	17	19	7		E 0%	E 3%	E 3%	E 15%	E 2%		
19	8	22	16	5	9								
20	10	39	8	0	0	Q 4	Q 8	Q 12	Q 16	Q 20	Q 24		
21	6	5	13	7	25	A 7%	A 5%	A 20%	A 3%	A 17%	A 5%		
22	8	27	15	3	4	B 15%	B 19%	B 52%	B 27%	B 66%	B 32%		
23	11	26	12	3	1	C 46%	C 29%	C 12%	C 53%	C 14%	C 44%		
24	3	19	26	7	1	D 30%	D 37%	D 2%	D 15%		D 12%		
25	5	25	16	9	1	E 0%	E 7%				E 2%		
Answers	291	475	411	185	59	1421							

³⁵⁵ Data entry help from Jenny Reynolds

APPENDIX FOUR

Narrative Results of Interviews with Pastors and Lay Leaders

Results of Altus COTN Pastoral Interview

The definition of community offered by the pastor includes people who attend the church as well as those living nearby. He thinks the congregation of Altus COTN define community as people outside the church, particularly people who the pastor can reach. His indication was that his congregation believes that the community of people outside the church are to be primarily his concern as pastor.

In describing mission for his church, he identified mission practices include things like receiving offerings for global missions and building buildings on global mission fields. He wants the church to give greater focus on local mission, particularly for his congregation to become engaged in compassionate ministries outside the church, ministries that would include health clinics and teaching on poverty in order to give the congregation tools for the supporting their community. For him, this has been a sporadic process with some progress within the last couple of months. New attendees at the church have been the result of the pastor's son who serves as the children's pastor. He has met new people in the community and invited them to come to their church. Other than gathering for Sunday worship, the pastor said ministry activity is limited to a Mid-week service, a monthly ladies' gathering for fellowship and a twice per month Bible study. The pastor's appraisal on the future of the Altus Church of the Nazarene was dim, concluding that "unless the people [of Altus COTN] change, we will decline,"³⁵⁶ a decline his church has

³⁵⁶ Personal Interview by Altus COTN Pastor by author, August 2023.

experienced for the past decade. He thinks that a reason for this decline is rooted in his people's unwillingness "to embrace people who are not like us."³⁵⁷

The pastor's definition of the mission of the church aligns with his desire to reach people outside of the local church and his acceptance that members of his congregation are unwilling to do such reaching. For him, mission is incarnational. It means becoming part of the people of the community. He is optimistic that over the past few months he has seen a change in attitudes of the congregation toward those in the community outside the church. This change includes a new monthly meal for the community in partnership with other churches. However, he admits that when the Altus congregation has social gatherings *in* the community, it's the same five people who show up, but that if they have a social gathering *at* the church and "everyone comes."³⁵⁸

In addressing ways to change their Sunday morning attendance decline, the pastor said he uses modeling as examples to be duplicated by the congregation. He, along with his wife and son, makes forming relationships with those outside the church a priority. He believes such modeling will make the congregation more willing to do the same. He makes this a conversation point at church board meetings.

Altus continues several traditional practices of the Church of the Nazarene: Sunday School, Sunday morning worship and a midweek gathering of teens and adults. Non-traditionally, there is a group that gathers people on Thursday evenings for teaching people how to get out of poverty and a monthly outreach to the hungry of the community. Numerically, on a ten-point scale from 1 to 10 (with one being most connected and 10 being least), the pastor rates his church's community connectivity as a 6. When thinking about evangelistic mission, the pastor is relationally driven. He needs to make some connection with un-evangelized people

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

before delving into evangelism. He believes the congregation thinks such mission is the staff's responsibility, though there are some congregational "go-getters."³⁵⁹ When thinking about compassionate evangelism, the pastor believes the congregation to be very compassionate and willing to help in any forms of giving offerings, and serving meals, and praying. The Altus church is part of a community-wide organization that tracks such missions.

Results of Altus COTN Lay Leader Interview

The lay leader's definition of community is "my town."³⁶⁰ She feels that the congregation's definition is "the town and the surrounding towns."³⁶¹ For her mission at Altus is reaching out to the outcast, to those who do not have a place in the community and ministering to them. Other than Sunday morning worship, gatherings at Altus include teen and children's groups that meet at the church on Sundays and Wednesdays, and Prayer meetings on Weds evenings. Their Women's ministry meets monthly, and it includes "people outside the church."³⁶² This leader feels that, based on Sunday morning attendance, the church is slowly growing, though the numbers do not reflect it, because some people do not attend every Sunday. She said that there are a few new families who are attending. She has heard that older people did not return after the pandemic. Also, she noted, that Altus is a military town where people are transient because of reassignments. She defines the mission of the church as "love of our community"³⁶³ and feels that though the church is not very big, it is a unit that cares for its own and looks outward to reach others. For her, past steps to address the decadal decline included the hiring a Children's pastor, the updating of children's areas and the creation of a new

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Personal Interview of Altus Lay Leader by author.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

Welcome Center to make the church feel like a more welcoming place. She said that other than Sunday morning worship, practices of the church include prayer on Wednesdays, gathering with the Ministerial Alliance each month, and the Wednesday Children and Teen ministries along with Sunday School.

On a ten-point scale with one being best, this lay leader gives the church a 5 for community connectivity. Evangelistic Mission Outreach is important to her but she feels her calling is more to the body. For the church at large, though, she feels it is “pretty important.”³⁶⁴ As far as Compassionate Evangelistic Mission is concerned, she feels it is “pretty big,”³⁶⁵ as demonstrated by their continuing support of Operation Care, a monthly feeding of the community and through providing things like their annual Trunk or Treat for the community.

Results of Anadarko COTN Pastoral Interview

The pastor of the Anadarko COTN defines community as “a group of people living in the same place or area and having things in common”³⁶⁶ He believes the congregation’s definition would be similar, specifically that they think of community as the people who live in Anadarko along with some people who drive from neighboring Chickasha, OK to attend Sunday morning church at Anadarko COTN. The pastor’s vision of mission is connected to doing projects like fixing up a house. When asked his understanding of the word missional, he responded, “doing mission work, mission like discipleship.”³⁶⁷ He reported that the life of the Anadarko COTN centers on their Sunday morning gathering for worship. During the pandemic the church stopped

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Personal Interview of Anadarko COTN pastor by author. August 2023.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

gathering for Sunday School, and it has not resumed it because “no one wants to teach.”³⁶⁸

Recruiting leadership is difficult because similar to teaching, “No wants to volunteer, and no one wants to be a board member.”³⁶⁹ He reports that they have not received any new members. His prediction is strongly for continuing decline. For change to happen, he believes, “We need young families to start attending.”³⁷⁰

The pastor believes the decline of the church was caused by older people dying and that Anadarko, which he says is a dying community, used to have a lot more to offer. Specifically, he noted that “³⁷¹the church stopped changing” beginning in the late 1980s when Anadarko was still a thriving community. The Pastor’s definition of mission is “being hands and feet of Jesus and serving the community.”³⁷² That mission definition seems to run counter to the practices of Anadarko COTN people who the pastor says are “really good at taking care of our own people,”³⁷³ our people meaning those who attend the church. He believes the church’s lean is inward toward caring for the immediate congregation versus outward and toward a community orientation while still holding onto a desire to have young people attend the church and for his church to be the church they used to be, a church full of kids. The congregation is used to having church like it’s always been, even though it’s not been that way for more than ten years. He said steps taken to address the Sunday morning attendance decline have been focused on “praying for new people.”³⁷⁴ The pastor and his wife have redecorated the building, updating it. He would like to start new programs at the church, programs like free tutoring. On a ten point scale with one

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

being most connected and ten being least, when thinking of community connection the pastor rates the church a 10.

Evangelistic mission is important to the pastor. He believes it is a very important part of reaching new people. Responding for his congregation, he believes that they want to be evangelically engaged “but no one wants to volunteer; they’re too old,”³⁷⁵ since most of the congregation are 70 and older. Asked about a compassionate evangelism mission, he did not have a clear picture of such a practice. The pastor said that the church has recently been part of a joint venture with a successful Oklahoma City mission venture called Jubilee Partners as a way of caring for “some poor families in our community.”³⁷⁶

Results of Anadarko COTN Lay Leader Interview One

The first lay leader interviewed defined community as “the town.”³⁷⁷ She thinks her church would define community as similar. When asked what mission looked like in her church, she said the church takes offerings for mission and that they have speakers from different places talk about missions. She said that gatherings for her church consist of Sunday morning, and that since the pandemic they no longer meet on Sunday evenings. They do have a Bible study on Wednesday evenings.

She said that she feels that her church is in decline, and that the causes of the decline include an older congregation who get sick and die and a congregation which is not as active as once it once was. Her definition of mission was missionaries going to other countries. When asked about the church’s lean toward caring for the congregation or outward toward caring for

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Personal Interview of Anadarko Lay Leader #1 by author. August 2023.

the community, she said it was inward. This lay leader said that the practices of the church include Sunday morning worship and Children's church on Sunday morning. During the pandemic, the congregation got used to staying home rather than gathering for church services. Regarding the church's community connectivity, on a ten-point scale with 1 being most connected, she gives the church a 9. For her evangelistic mission outreach is very important, and she believes it is very important to the congregation as demonstrated by the offerings for missions and having speakers come to the church and speak about missions. Regarding compassionate evangelistic outreach mission, she said that if the church knows there is a need, they take up special offerings and that "the congregation is for that."³⁷⁸

Results of Anadarko COTN Lay Leader Interview Two

The second Anadarko Lay Leader interviewed said that her definition of community was people near the church, although the church has people coming from all over. She believes the church would define community as people closer to the church, people who live in town. For her, mission is reaching out. Several times the church has tried to get children involved in community-type tutoring at the church, but they were not successful. They hold Narconon meetings at the church as one of the ways they care for the community.

The gatherings of the church include coffee and donuts prior to Sun AM service. The pandemic closed down their Sunday School, though there are plans to begin it again. They used to have Sunday night services along with NYI for teens. Those services have not been being held since the pandemic. They do have gatherings via Facebook. This lay leader feels that the church is beginning to grow again, particularly since the restart of Sunday School. Jubilee Partners, a

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

district urban mission, is beginning at their church with plans to draw in neighborhood children to the church. She believes that there are two causes for the church's decline, (1) the death of older members, it is a church with older members, and (2) that younger people move away from the community because of a lack of job opportunities in Anadarko. For her, mission is defined as reaching out as far and wide as we can with the gospel of Christ. As far as the church's leaning inward or outward, she feels it is equally strong in both directions. They currently have a bi-vocational pastor who brings contacts from the community to the church. She stated that the practices of the church include Sun AM worship, with Sunday School to begin again soon, a fellowship before church on Sun AM that includes coffee and donuts.

Regarding the church's community connectivity, using a ten-point scale with 1 being most connected, she gives the church a 5 or 6. For her evangelistic mission outreach is very important, though it is harder to do since the pandemic, and she feels it is very important to the congregation, too, even though they are an older congregation. When considering Compassionate Evangelism, she says that the church has gathered money for funeral expenses for community people and taken meals to those in need.

Results of Chickasha 1st COTN Pastoral Interview

The Chickasha 1st COTN pastor defines community as a "gathering of people who love God and love people and seek to include others in the process."³⁷⁹ For him, people gather to form community. He did not speak of a community that is sent. For his congregation, he believes that

³⁷⁹ Personal Interview of Chickasha 1st COTN pastor by author. August 2023.

their definition of community is changing, though he described his congregation as “mostly concerned about protecting what they have.”³⁸⁰

Mission for the Chickasha 1st COTN is evolving. The congregation is coming to the realization that “mission is reaching beyond the walls of the church to neighbors they don’t know.”³⁸¹ He said that these are the people the congregation wants to engage with intentionally. Recent new attendees include a family from Mississippi who had background with congregational Methodists, a family that has joined themselves to the Chickasha COTN church. This is the first time in recent history that a family has stayed for more than one year.

The only gathering of the church is on Sunday morning. The pastor is optimistic about growth. He bases this optimism on the response to the desperate situation the church has faced even facing closure. The pastor thinks causes for the attendance decline include the recent pandemic with the inability of the church to gather for worship and leadership’s strategic and personal decisions that “damaged the trust level,”³⁸² as well as deaths of people in this older congregation. He considers mission as “a movement for all people to discover and deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ.”³⁸³

The Pastor believes that the congregation is “learning to exist for others.”³⁸⁴ They have experienced a shift in their thinking in the past six months. The church is “finally gaining traction,”³⁸⁵ with a few new people beginning to attend the church. Because of these new attendees he believes the congregation was encouraged to believe that “God is not finished with

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

them as a church.”³⁸⁶ They have enjoyed a district after school program that brought traffic, children, and youth in the building.

Steps to overcome the Sunday morning decline include consistently proclaiming the message of the Gospel which calls them to reach their neighbors. Current practices of the church include a monthly service to hungry homeless people and providing backpacks for students alongside their weekly Sunday morning worship gathering. They recently put up a booth at the Grady County fairgrounds that advertised the church. The pastor noted that this activity got them out of their building.

The pastor believes the church is about 7.5 on a ten-point community connectivity scale with 1 being most connected and 10 being least. Evangelistic mission outreach ranks at the top of the pastor’s priorities, while he thinks it is only a midlevel priority for the congregation. Compassionate evangelism mission is a middle priority to the congregation.

Results of Chickasha 1st COTN Lay Leader Interview

The lay leader defines community as “a spirit that should be felt in a church”³⁸⁷ and the larger community to which the church is connected, as well as the larger community which is the town. He believes the church would define community as “their group.”³⁸⁸ For this lay leader, mission is a responsibility to the town and broader outreach throughout their denomination. Other than Sunday morning worship, gatherings at Chickasha 1st take the form of a lunch held for an area high school graduate. He believes the church is in decline and believes one cause was

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Personal Interview of Chickasha 1st COTN Lay Leader by author, August 2023.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

a previous pastor's son's decision to transition to another gender. This, he said, created controversy and several people left the church.

The lay leader believes the mission of the church is to reach people for Christ. He believes the lean of the church is outward, citing the church's recent giving of 300 backpacks to school children and their continued support of a nearby pregnancy center. For him, practices of the church include providing Sunday School for children that attend and an adult class viewing of videos. It has been a long time since communion was celebrated, he thinks it might be as much as 6 months.

Rating the church on a ten-point scale, with 1 being the most connected, the lay leader believes the church's community connectivity would be a 3. He said that evangelistic mission outreach is not what it should be, he said. He believes the church is in survival mode, but he believes evangelistic mission outreach is important to the congregation. When it comes to Compassionate Evangelistic Outreach, he said that they had done better with that than with Evangelistic Outreach.

Results of Clinton COTN Pastoral Interview

The pastor's definition of community is groups that have a sense of belonging among different peoples. The pastor believes that the congregation's definition of community is a "two-sided coin,"³⁸⁹ that includes "the congregation focused on themselves, e.g., prayer times with lots of request for hospitals, illnesses, personal needs—items which bog down prayer time."³⁹⁰ The pastor of the Clinton church who was interviewed was an interim pastor who said, "We need a

³⁸⁹ Personal Interview of Clinton COTN pastor by author, August 2023.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

pastor”³⁹¹ and “the church should be functioning as a church and ministering to the worlds around us.”³⁹² He reported that the last new people to attend the church were a couple with two little girls who attended on Mothers’ Day. The next Sun only the husband came and has continued to come one half of the time. This couple came at the invitation of a high school senior who works with the mother.

Gathering times other than Sunday morning include a Thursday evening Women’s Bible study in a home, a gathering that is currently on hold. There is a monthly dinner after Sunday services that is open to all people, but only one half of the people come. The pastor believes the future looks like decline. The church needs more young couples, and it takes time to get them settled in and to feel like they belong. The current group is “primarily older folks.”³⁹³ Their leaders are all in their 50s, 60s.

This pastor believes a cause for decadal decline is their practice of “saving money for the new church.”³⁹⁴ He said there once was a strong motivation but they sold the old building and started worshiping in an insurance building which had no space for Sunday School, so now they hold only Sunday morning worship. He noted that there have been lots of interim pastors, and there has been a lack of leadership for the congregation. He defined the current mission of the church as a small group of well-intentioned individuals that are more concerned about good fellowship and feeling good than about outreach. He believes the church lean is toward caring for the congregation.

Of steps taken to overcome the decline, the pastor includes holding fall festivals and inviting the neighborhood to come to them, along with giving meals to poor individuals who are

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

living at a nearby motel and the holding of children's crusade with other small churches. The pastor noted that the practices of the church include a Sunday morning worship service and a Ladies' Bible study. The pastor rated the community connection of the church on a ten-point scale with 1 being most connected and 10 being least. To this pastor, evangelistic mission is the primary objective of the church, but not the only objective. But if that is left out, he said, they would not be the church. For the congregation, the pastor felt evangelistic mission was not very important. To them, nurture is more important. The pastor feels that compassionate evangelism is very important and believes that it is extremely important to the congregation as well. He said of them, they love to provide food. The congregation always shows interest in those who visit the worship service. For them compassion is more oriented to evangelism than caring for the bodies of people in the community.

Results of Clinton COTN Lay Leader One Interview

The first lay leader interviewed defined community as (1) our town and (2) our church. She said that it depends on what you have going on as to whether most of their active members are or present or not. She included in her definition of community, that it is a large group. As for the church's definition of community, she believes people in the church define it as being involved in our city and its activities. When asked about the definition of mission, this lay leader responded with the fact that they are struggling without a pastor, and so they are wondering what their mission is, what their purpose is. They have a brand-new facility, but the pastor left, and now they do not have a full-time pastor.

This lay leader said that beside Sunday morning worship, gatherings of the congregation consist of a monthly potluck and an occasional teen activity. They have held all-church yard

sales to fund activities for youth. They have also had Fall Fests, Spring Fests, and Easter Egg hunts, but that these had not gotten a great response from the community. For a Thanks Dinner gather the church invited other small churches to share with us, though it was a great relationship builder.

When asked whether the church was growing or declining, she said that unless some changes are made, their future is one of decline. As to the cause of the past decadal decline this lay leader cited past years with no pastor. She said they feel in limbo. She spoke of losses due to death, the age of congregation, and the lack of young people and young families to replace those who have died. There is a lack of leadership around which people can get excited. Her definition of mission is that act of reaching others for Jesus. She believes the church has an inward lean, a focus on taking care of the congregation.

Of the practices of the church the lay leader cited that for a couple of years there was a desire to have a ladies' home Bible study, but some key people have been losing relatives, so this study is now hold. She noted that the pandemic stopped a lot of the activities of the church. In rating the church regarding its community connectivity using a ten-point scale with one being most connected and ten being least, she said the church was either a 7 or an 8.

For her, evangelistic mission is very important, but that they don't have enough. How else are we going to reach people, she asked? As far as the church goes, for old-timers evangelistic mission is outreach and reaching into the community and being part of the community. It is about preaching Jesus to sinners. She believes that compassionate evangelistic mission has played a huge role in their church, where at a motel with homeless people, marginalized people, the congregation served dinner a number of times. The church gives Thanksgiving boxes to those in the community who have a need. She said that where there is a need, and the congregation is

informed, our people respond. The same thing holds true at Christmastime. Our church is very compassionate, and when there is a need they step up.

Results of Clinton COTN Lay Leader Two Interview

This lay leader defined community as the few blocks around us, within 10 blocks. She believes the church would define it as a little further out, looking to the whole city. When asked about mission, this lay leader said the church had tried reaching out to a hotel that was one half mile from the church that housed lower income drug addicts. She said that the church has taken meals and served them to those living there. They have tried to reach younger people using various things, but they don't know what to do. She noted that Clinton has a lot of Hispanic people and a lot of drug usage, that there is a lot of opportunity if you know what do to.

Other than Sunday morning gatherings, the church has none. They used do to a monthly gathering and invite other churches for fellowship. She said that for two years in a row they have had Thanksgiving gatherings and have invited different churches to join with them. Of that she said, it was awesome. When asked about the church's Sunday morning attendance decline, observed that they don't seem to reach the right people to get people to come to church. As to the cause of the decadal attendance decline, she confessed that she didn't know. She noted that younger people want something in place. They have no younger people and very few children, maybe 2 or 3. She concluded that this is not going to carry this church. In defining mission, she said it is to reach out and help in the community with people that don't have the ability to do what is needed, like helping with yard work, etc. Despite all this she believes that the church leans outward toward the community. Of steps that have been taken to address the attendance decline, she cannot think of any.

Of the practices of the Clinton church, she listed Sunday morning worship, and that there was nothing else during the week. In rating the church on its community connectivity using a ten-point scale with 1 being most connected, she gave it a 5 or 6. For this lay leader, evangelistic mission outreach is very important to her, and she believes it is the same to her church. Of compassionate evangelistic mission, she believes it is important but said that she is not sure how they can do it.

Results of El Reno Crossbridge COTN Pastoral Interview

The Pastor defines community as “the neighborhood around the church,”³⁹⁵ as well as the people of the church who also are a formed community. For him, a community is a group of like-minded people. He believes the congregation defines the community with a more inward focus; community is about “our group.”³⁹⁶

According to the pastor, mission at El Reno COTN is more about giving money than about being a sent people. This includes things like creating and distributing crisis care kits. As for new attenders at the church, the pastor noted that there had been 4 new people in past 4 weeks. They came because of a new Latino ministry. A Latino ministry sign has become an inviter. This church is made up of an “older congregation.”³⁹⁷ Other than Sunday morning worship, gatherings include a Wednesday evening Mid-week prayer focus, which consists of a prayer time that is a “come and go”³⁹⁸ event. The pastor struggles to get people to come back to church midweek. There is a Sunday evening Bible Class, and there are fellowships on other nights.

³⁹⁵ Personal Interview of El Reno Crossbridge COTN pastor by author, August 2023.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

The pastor believes that the future of the church looks to both grow and decline. Most of the congregation is older; they are physically unhealthy. There will be people dying off in the next few years, but there is growth because of the recently begun Latino Ministry. He said that they have a population to reach. The pastor believes that part of the reason for the decadal decline is the societal shift away from attending church. Society, he said, is busier now. With an aging church, young people who attend see mainly older people, and they don't want to be part of a church like that. He believes that if they had a few younger couples with a willingness to stay and lead, there might be more growth in the "white church."³⁹⁹

The pastor defines mission of the church as reaching people and sharing the Good News. He believes that the church's lean is inward toward caring for the congregation; however, they do recognize they need to do things to reach the community. The congregation looks to the pastor to do the outreach that they cannot do because of their age. To change the decline, they began a Latino church with a new Latina pastor. Every other Sunday the Anglo church is using blended music to keep older congregation satisfied and appeal to younger people. The practices of El Reno church are standard fare plus Pastor Martha teaching the new Latino congregation. The pastor includes in his church's community connection that 6-7 people are active in the local community and government. They serve on the school board and help run a mentoring program.

For the pastor, evangelistic mission is important. He believes it is what they have to do. It is why they are in El Reno. They are there to reach people. The pastor works part-time at a local McDonald's and sees this as an outreach opportunity. There are people there who ask him questions. They have yet to come to church. He believes that evangelistic mission is important to

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

the congregation, too, but that they are not physically able to do it. They want people to know Jesus, to come to church, to kneel at the altar. Regarding compassionate evangelism, the congregation has been helping a homeless man who sleeps on the front lawn of the church. At times he disappears. They have given him food and blankets. In April he reappeared. They decided to “adopt him,”⁴⁰⁰ giving him food gift cards. They have been connecting this man with city organizations.

Results of El Reno COTN Lay Leader’s Interview

Her definition of community is that the town is open and friendly. The church is open to people coming. She thinks that the Church’s definition of Community means being open to anyone coming to church. She said that other than Sunday morning worship gatherings, the church has a Sunday evening Bible study, and that was all besides some gatherings for birthday parties. When asked about growth or decline of the church, she said that it is in a growth mode; after the pandemic they began getting some children in. They have an older population in the church, but now they almost have a junior high group.

She cited two conflicts in the church as a reason for its decline. This conflict surrounded the loss of a young pastor who had been teaching a young adult class. The church then called an older preacher that the younger people did not like as much, so they left. Another conflict was caused when a pastor began telling congregational members to turn in their wedding rings.

The lay leader’s definition of mission is “trying to reach people.”⁴⁰¹ She mentioned that every month “we do a thing from the pulpit on missions”⁴⁰² which includes a map and a presentation about a country being represented. She said that they are always talking about

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Personal Interview of El Reno Crossbridge COTN lay leader by author, August 2023.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

inviting people, but that they don't have a visitation program. When asked if the church leans inward focusing on its care for the congregation or outward in order to care for the community, she responded, "Both,"⁴⁰³ and added that they have a nice comfortable church, that they are always inviting people, that they are very welcoming of new people. Beyond Sunday gatherings, she said that the church has Sunday School, Sunday morning Worship, and a weekly Bible study. When asked about how she would rate her church on community connectivity, she said the pastor does that and rated the church a 5 on a ten-point scale with 1 being most connected.

Results of Elk City COTN Pastoral Interview

The pastor defined community as a group of people with common interests but maybe not the same goals. As for the church's definition of community, he said it was basically the town. In defining mission, the pastor used the example of their breakfast club which follows breakfast with those gathering going out to mow neighborhood yards for free. This has little to do with getting someone to the door of the church. He believes getting people to the church building is not missional but marketing. During their going out to mow, they will let people who they are, but this has not been fruitful for getting new people to gather at the church. He believes that people are more comfortable in coming to the park rather than their little church, a place where you cannot easily blend in. Rather, he believes that playing games and eating food together allows for blending in.

As for the practices of the church beyond Sunday morning gatherings, the youth group used to meet on Sunday, but the pandemic shut that down. He again mentioned the Saturday breakfast clubs. The church is facing financial decline, but there is a growth of excitement

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

among young people. He noted that while they are losing funding, they are starting to bring in new people. In talking about the attendance decline of the church, the pastor cited past church splits as a cause, and a previous pastor who had not followed the leadership of the church board. He believes the mission of the church is to spread the gospel to a wider community. He believes that the church is leaning inward, which he noted was demoralizing, stating further that the food prepared for guests was normally eaten by people who prepared the food. Still, he believes this is changing.

Regarding steps take to address the decadal decline he reported that they no longer have a children's pastor, and that they are down to bare-bones leadership on Sunday morning. They hope to hire a part-time youth pastor to help relieve the pastor of some responsibilities. In speaking of practices, the pastor noted that they do monthly communion, and always serve breakfast before Sunday morning worship services. Their church facility is used by a Batterer's Recovery program and that they allow a native health program to offer services in the church building.

He rates his church a 3 on a community connectivity based on a ten-point scale with one being most connected. He rates evangelistic mission outreach very important and believes the congregation rates it the same. Of compassionate evangelism, he believes his church is engaged through practices of caring for the Native American community and helping with people addicted to drugs and living in nearby hotels. He said that because of the history of relations between White people and the Native Americans, the Native American community does not trust them as a church.

Results of Elk City Lay Leader Interview

The lay leader's definition of community was people living around our church, around our city, and the people we know. She believes that the church defines community similarly. She believes the mission of the church is to reach people, to reach others who need help, and to reach people with whom we can show our love and concern.

Other than Sunday mornings, gatherings at Elk City include times when the church gathers at the park for a picnic. The goal of this gathering is "to reach people."⁴⁰⁴ Their hope is that people will "start to come."⁴⁰⁵ There has been talk of a women's Bible study and an embroidery class, but this has not happened yet. They hold a monthly breakfast club at a nearby restaurant, and afterward those who have come follow the pastor to where he can find a place for them to serve. Ways of serving including cleaning up yards, cutting grass, etc. Teens are not often found in this group, because they have football on Saturdays.

This lay leader believes the church is now in a growth mode as opposed to their decade of decline. One of the reasons offered for the past decline was a church split. It is also believed to have been caused by a cultural acceptance of "people not seeing church as a necessity anymore."⁴⁰⁶ Her definition of the mission of the church is "to do what Jesus wants us to do."⁴⁰⁷ For them, this includes a food box called a "Blessing Box," that sits outside the church under a tree. There anyone in the community can take food that has been placed inside or can donate to the box. She said that they try to help people, but they do not have many resources because the church has a small attendance.

⁴⁰⁴ Personal interview of Elk City COTN lay leader by author, August 2023.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

Of the regular practices of the church, the lay leader noted the regular meeting of a Batterer's Intervention Recovery group. This is offered at the church building. Also, they have begun using the church van to pick up Native Americans in the community who do not have transportation. Both youth and adults ride the van. The church used to have an in-person weekly prayer meeting which was converted to a zoom meeting, but the zoom meeting stopped when people began attending the church again after the pandemic had become less rampant. The church offers its facility for community use "as long as it's not too crazy."⁴⁰⁸ There are times when Indian Health Services are made available at the church for the Native American population.

On a ten-point scale, with 1 being most connected, the lay leader says that the church's community connectivity number is a 3 one being most connected. She believes the church is now leaning outward. To this lay leader and the congregation, evangelical mission outreach is very important. In regard to compassionate evangelistic mission outreach, she remarked, if it wasn't important to them they would not have the blessing box under the tree in front of the church. They also hold a breakfast every Sunday morning to which anyone can come.

Results of OKC May Ave. COTN Pastoral Interview

The pastor defines community as a group of people bound together by location, belief, or culture. He believes his congregation defines it similarly. For this pastor, mission includes a gathering church mentality with strong support for the financial part of being a sent people. For him mission includes events like VBS for children, a Fall Festival for gathering people at the

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

church and giving window air conditioners to families in need. Recent new attenders have include one couple in the past month, a couple related to someone in the congregation.

Gatherings for his church include Sunday morning worship, an online Wednesday Bible study, a weekly prayer meeting and a gathering of teens at the church on Tuesdays. The pastor believes the church leans inward in its care for the congregation. He believes that the church will be in a growth mode over the next decade. For the past decade, there was nothing offered for working parents in the 40-50 age range. There was programming for young adults and senior adults. He believes that causes for the decadal decline include the death of older people in the congregation and the shift in culture away from church attendance.

The pastor believes mission of the church matches the stated mission of the Church of the Nazarene with a twist, "To make Christlike Disciples in OKC." He believes that the church leans more inward to caring for the congregation than outward and caring for the community. Attempts to address the decadal slide include addressing the issue of short term, multiple pastors who led the church over the years. He believes that now leadership is stronger than it has been.

The pastor lists several practices of the church including Sunday morning gathering for worship, using blended music and hymnals for worship, holding communion 5-6 times per year, having strong advent practices and holding programs like VBS for children. The pastor rates his church a 4 one a ten-point scale regarding its community connectivity with one being most connected. He cites their day care as helping the church to connect with families. For him evangelistic mission outreach is very important and believes it is the same for the congregation. When asked about the role compassionate evangelism mission plays in his church, he noted various ministries including participation with Jubilee Partners, an urban ministry education program for children and sharing in pounding for district ministry families.

Results of OKC May Ave. COTN Lay Leader Number One Interview

The first lay leader interviewed for this church stated that she believes that community is always something outside or inside of the church. She believes the church would respond the same way. She believes that community is not just the immediate neighborhood around the church but includes people who live several miles away. For her, the mission is “to get people here but also to help them to know the Lord or to draw closer to the Lord.”⁴⁰⁹ As for gatherings, she said that currently they only gather for Sunday morning worship, but that the pastor offers a Bible study on Facebook.

She considers her church to be in a growth mode. In the summer lots of people are gone, but generally once school starts, she said, they have a good crowd. She believes the decline in Sun AM attendance was caused by people sleeping in. They say that Sunday is their only day to do this. She defines the mission of the church is to look and act as Christians everywhere they go so that people will want to come to their church. If they don't come, we should go to them. While she believes the church should both lean inward in caring for the congregation as well as leaning outward to care for the community, she thinks their current lean is inward.

Of practices of the church, in addition to Sunday morning worship, she mentioned a Thursday night Zoom which serves as a prayer meeting. This is done by the people of the church. This is helpful in discovering how many people need and want prayer. On a ten-point scale that identifies the community connectivity of the church, with one being most connected, she gives the church a 2 or 3.

⁴⁰⁹ Personal interview of OKC May Ave COTN lay leader number one by author, August 2023.

Evangelistic mission outreach is very important to her, but she doesn't feel as though the church has done this enough. She talks in terms of distributing tracks and talking with people about Jesus. Her feeling is that the church thinks of this as important, but it considers events done for the community as important, too. She says those 25 and older think evangelical mission outreach is very important but wonders how much time they would be willing to do it.

Results of OKC May Ave. COTN Lay Leader Number Two Interview

The second lay leader defined community as the people around the church. She believes the church defines community similarly. A lot of these people are Hispanic. She said that there are a few Catholic Churches where Spanish is spoken. She noted that language is a problem for their church. These neighbors are low-income people. Community is a barrier for the church because of the neighbor's low income and the many rental properties where people are more transient and there are many homeless people. This leader defines the mission of the church trying to reach everyone.

Besides Sunday morning worship, gatherings for the church include an annual VBS and weekly Wednesday evenings online, a Bible Study on Thursday and occasional game and movie nights. At times, they also participate in parades with the nearby stockyard. She believes the church is in a growth mode. They are about to have another membership class. She says that they have gained 25 new members since January 2022. She believes the past decline was caused by an aging congregation with 6 members dying in recent years and the changing leadership that they have experienced with 3-4 different pastors. She believes the mission of the church is to reach out to souls and get new people. In considering whether the church leans more inward toward care for the congregation or more outward in caring for the community, she said their

lean is inward. Other than Sunday morning worship, the practices of the church include Wednesday Bible study and Thursday Prayer. On a Ten-point scale rating the church's community connectivity with one being most connected, she gives the church a 5 or 6. Evangelistic outreach Mission is important to her, and she believes the congregation is "all for it."⁴¹⁰ Regarding compassionate evangelistic outreach, she responded, "We all are compassionate."⁴¹¹

Results of Snyder COTN Pastoral Interview

The woman serving as lay pastor of this congregation is just beginning her preparation as a Deaconess in the Church of the Nazarene. There being no assigned pastor, she responded to the interview as the pastor of the Snyder Church. She believes that community is defined as "where you live and/or work."⁴¹² For her, the church is a community. For the people of the church community is both the church and their small town. She said that mission looks like outreach and caring for everyone outside the church more than caring for those inside. She says it has been a couple of years since anyone new came to church. There are area harvesters who have visited during the years. Being transient, none stayed. Of practices of her church, other than Sunday morning gathering for worship, the Snyder church goes one Sunday each month to the Walters COTN.

Regarding the future of the church, she says that it has been hard to get people to come back after the pandemic. They have hope. The Nazarene district did not close them down. They have invited people to attend, but they do not have "a lot of luck."⁴¹³ She believes that causes for

⁴¹⁰ Personal interview of OKC May Ave COTN lay leader number two by author, August 2023.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Personal interview of Snyder COTN lay pastor by author, August 2023

⁴¹³ Ibid.

the church's decline include the aging population of the church and having preachers who are not part of the community. Snyder is a bed and breakfast place. People work out of town. She believes the mission of the church is "to spread the Word of God and be part of the community, to work with other Christians in spreading the word that the people of the town are loved."⁴¹⁴

The lay pastor said that the church used to lean outward toward the people of the community, but in the last decade they have been focused solely on giving care for the congregation, an older congregation. Steps to address the attendance decline include partnering with the Walters COTN who offers them a live stream of their pastor preaching each Sunday morning, while members of the Snyder church lead worship music, prayer, etc. She rates her church a 5 for community connectivity on a scale of 1 to 10 with one best.

She considers evangelistic mission to be very important and believes other members of the congregation feel the same way. Regarding Compassionate Mission outreach this lay pastor said, "People need to know they are cared for, but in the last few years this has not been good in actual practice."⁴¹⁵

Results of Snyder COTN Lay Leader Interview

This lay leader defines community as "people of the town."⁴¹⁶ She believes the congregation's definition to be the same thing. When asked what mission looks like in the Snyder church, she replied, "We don't have a one."⁴¹⁷ She defined mission as serving, particularly as going across the country and doing missionary work. She said the church gatherings consist solely of gathering for worship on Sunday morning. Her appraisal of the

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Personal interview of Snyder COTN lay leader by author, August 2023

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

church is that it is in decline. The cause of this decline is that they do not have a pastor which prevents their ability to reach out into the community and bring people in. She believes their lean is an inward one of caring for the congregation. They invite people but get no response. As far as practices go, they no longer gather for Sunday School, but only for Sunday morning worship. There is no longer a Wednesday evening service.

In rating the church on a ten-point scale regarding community connectivity, with one being most connected, she gives the church a 5.

To her, evangelistic mission outreach is very important. She believes it is very important to the congregation, too. When it comes to compassionate evangelism, their lay pastor contributes to the Walters church for their church.

APPENDIX FIVE
DEMOGRAPHIC STUDIES of Selected SWOK Churches

Altus COTN

Altus COTN Demographics and Narrative

700 Main St. Altus, OK 73521

Pastor Steve Lehew

Originating Year: 1909

Reported Decadal Growth of Sun AM Attendance:

- 2023:38 2012:45 -7

ALL STATISTICS ARE FROM NAZARENE.ORG STATS AND RESEACH AND SET FOR INCLUSION OF A 3 MILE RADIUS AROUND THE CHURCH BUILDING

POPULATION

2014 Population:21,6202019

Population:20,3462024

Population:20,353(if current population trends continue)

Annual Growth Rate 2014-2019:-1.2%

The estimated unclaimed population is 9,032 (44.4%).

The unclaimed figure is an estimate based on the [2010 U.S. Religion Census](#) of 236 denominational groups. This estimate is only a guide to the religious condition of the area, and should be supplemented by information from local sources, such as ministerial associations or newspaper religion editors.

Family Structure:

Married Couples with Children:1,610(20.2%)

Married Couples No Children:2,214(27.7%)

Male Single Parent:217(2.7%)

Female Single Parent:631(7.9%)

Other Family, Male Head:118(1.5%)

Other Family, Female Head:343(4.3%)

Total Families:5,133(64.2%)

Non-Family, Living Alone:2,430(30.4%)

Non-Family, Not Living Alone:427(5.3%)

Total Households:7,990

Never Married:4,874(30.3%)

Married (not separated):7,694(47.8%)

Separated/Spouse Absent:854(5.3%)

Divorced:1,662(10.3%)

Widowed:1,000(6.2%)

Total People 15 and Over:16,084

Age Groups

Ages 0 to 4:1,607(7.9%)
5 to 9:1,442(7.1%)
10 to 14:1,213(6.0%)
15 to 17:809(4.0%)
18 to 20:820(4.0%)
21 to 24:1,447(7.1%)
25 to 34:3,374(16.6%)
35 to 44:2,623(12.9%)
45 to 54:1,974(9.7%)
55 to 64:2,320(11.4%)
65 to 74:1,530(7.5%)
75 and up:1,187(5.8%)

Housing Types

Single Family Houses:7,753(79.0%)
Duplexes or Townhouses:308(3.1%)
2 to 4 Units at Address:306(3.1%)
5 to 9 Units at Address:402(4.1%)
10 or More Units at Address:676(6.9%)
Mobile Homes:375(3.8%)
Boats, RVs, Vans:0(0.0%)

Owner-Occupied and Housing Values

Less than \$50,000:908(20.9%)
\$50,000-\$89,999:1,079(24.8%)
\$90,000-\$149,999:677(15.6%)
\$150,000-\$199,999:691(15.9%)
\$200,000-\$299,999:589(13.6%)
\$300,000-\$399,999:222(5.1%)
\$400,000 or more:177(4.1%)
Total Owner-Occupied:4,343

Educational Levels

Less than 9th grade:968(7.4%)
High School, Non-grad:1,100(8.5%)
High School Graduate:3,374(25.9%)
Some College:3,050(23.4%)
Associate Degree:1,373(10.6%)
Bachelor's Degree:1,986(15.3%)
Grad Program/Degree:1,157(8.9%)
Total Adults 25 or Older:13,008

Household Income

Less than \$25,000:1,964(24.6%)
 \$25,000-\$44,999:1,782(22.3%)
 \$45,000-\$74,999:1,850(23.2%)
 \$75,000-\$124,999:1,635(20.5%)
 \$125,000 or more:759(9.5%)
 Total Households:7,990

Poverty level is computed for individuals based on household size and community costs of living. For this area, 3,482 (17.7%) were classified as living in poverty. Another 979 (5.0%) were considered to be close to the poverty level (less than 25% above that income level).

Culture Report

Asian (non-Hispanic):284(1.4%)
 Black (non-Hispanic):1,601(7.9%)
 Hispanic:5,229(25.7%) Native American (non-Hispanic):317(1.6%)
 Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic):15(0.1%)
 White (non-Hispanic):12,190(59.9%)
 Other:710(3.5%)

Languages spoken in the home:

Arabic:	2	(0.0%)
Chinese (incl. Mandarin, Cantonese):	87	(0.5%)
English only:	15,520	(82.8%)
French, Haitian, or Cajun:	38	(0.2%)
German or other West Germanic languages:	86	(0.5%)
Korean:	32	(0.2%)
Russian, Polish, or other Slavic languages:	29	(0.2%)
Spanish:	2,638	(14.1%)
Tagalog (incl. Filipino):	98	(0.5%)
Vietnamese:	0	(0.0%)
Other:	209	(1.1%)

Top 15 foreign born population nationwide:

Canada:	12	(0.1%)
China, excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan:	0	(0.0%)
Colombia:	0	(0.0%)
Cuba:	0	(0.0%)
Dominican Republic:	11	(0.1%)
El Salvador:	0	(0.0%)
Germany:	39	(0.2%)
Guatemala:	48	(0.2%)
Haiti:	0	(0.0%)
India:	0	(0.0%)
Jamaica:	5	(0.0%)
Korea:	21	(0.1%)
Mexico:	785	(3.9%)
Philippines:	43	(0.2%)
Vietnam:	0	(0.0%)
Total Foreign Born:		

Anadarko COTN

Anadarko COTN Demographics

601 W. Virginia, Anadarko, OK 73566

Pastor: Matthew West

Originating Year: 1939

Reported Decadal Growth of Sun AM attendance

- 2023: 58 2012: 74 -16

ALL STATISTICS ARE FROM NAZARENE.ORG STATS AND RESEARCH AND SET FOR INCLUSION OF A 3 MILE RADIUS AROUND THE CHURCH BUILDING.

Population

2014 Population:9,845

2019 Population:9,860

2024 Population:9,917(if current population trends continue)

Annual Growth Rate 2014-2019:0.0%

The estimated unclaimed population is 2,140 (21.7%).

The unclaimed figure is an estimate based on the [2010 U.S. Religion Census](#) of 236 denominational groups. This estimate is only a guide to the religious condition of the area, and should be supplemented by information from local sources, such as ministerial associations or newspaper religion editors.

Family Structure

Married Couples with Children:563(15.9%)
Married Couples No Children:835(23.6%)
Male Single Parent:130(3.7%)
Female Single Parent:318(9.0%)
Other Family, Male Head:157(4.4%)
Other Family, Female Head:325(9.2%)
Total Families:2,328(65.8%)
Non-Family, Living Alone:1,007(28.5%)
Non-Family, Not Living Alone:204(5.8%)
Total Households:3,539

Never Married:2,497(32.9%)
Married (not separated):2,782(36.7%)
Separated/Spouse Absent:433(5.7%)
Divorced:1,169(15.4%)
Widowed:703(9.3%)
Total People 15 and Over:7,584

Age Groups

Ages 0 to 4:824(8.4%)
5 to 9:700(7.1%)
10 to 14:752(7.6%)
15 to 17:459(4.7%)
18 to 20:259(2.6%)
21 to 24:530(5.4%)
25 to 34:1,112(11.3%)
35 to 44:1,171(11.9%)
45 to 54:1,329(13.5%)
55 to 64:1,140(11.6%)
65 to 74:972(9.9%)
75 and up:612(6.2%)

Housing Types

Single Family Houses:3,568(82.3%)
Duplexes or Townhouses:59(1.4%)
2 to 4 Units at Address:306(7.1%)
5 to 9 Units at Address:34(0.8%)
10 or More Units at Address:50(1.2%)
Mobile Homes:319(7.4%)
Boats, RVs, Vans:0(0.0%)

Owner-Occupied and Housing Values

Less than \$50,000:674(28.7%)
\$50,000-\$89,999:824(35.1%)

\$90,000-\$149,999:410(17.5%)
 \$150,000-\$199,999:209(8.9%)
 \$200,000-\$299,999:99(4.2%)
 \$300,000-\$399,999:110(4.7%)
 \$400,000 or more:19(0.8%)
 Total Owner-Occupied:2,345

Educational Levels

Less than 9th grade:176(2.8%)
 High School, Non-grad:491(7.7%)
 High School Graduate:2,730(43.1%)
 Some College:1,425(22.5%)
 Associate Degree:464(7.3%)
 Bachelor's Degree:796(12.6%)
 Grad Program/Degree:254(4.0%)
 Total Adults 25 or Older:6,336

Household Income

Less than \$25,000:972(27.5%)
 \$25,000-\$44,999:781(22.1%)
 \$45,000-\$74,999:922(26.1%)
 \$75,000-\$124,999:469(13.3%)
 \$125,000 or more:395(11.2%)
 Total Households:3,539

Poverty level is computed for individuals based on household size and community costs of living. For this area, 2,023 (20.9%) were classified as living in poverty. Another 755 (7.8%) were considered to be close to the poverty level (less than 25% above that income level).

Culture Report

Asian (non-Hispanic):74(0.8%)
 Black (non-Hispanic):415(4.2%)
 Hispanic:1,009(10.2%)
 Native American (non-Hispanic):3,475(35.2%)
 Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic):0(0.0%)
 White (non-Hispanic):3,922(39.8%)
 Other:965(9.8%)

Languages spoken in the home:

Arabic:	0	(0.0%)
Chinese (incl. Mandarin, Cantonese):	0	(0.0%)
English only:	8,407	(93.0%)
French, Haitian, or Cajun:	42	(0.5%)
German or other West Germanic languages:	15	(0.2%)
Korean:	0	(0.0%)

Russian, Polish, or other Slavic languages:	0	(0.0%)
Spanish:	230	(2.5%)
Tagalog (incl. Filipino):	19	(0.2%)
Vietnamese:	0	(0.0%)
Other:	323	(3.6%)

Top 15 foreign born population nationwide:

Canada:	3	(0.0%)
China, excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan:	0	(0.0%)
Colombia:	0	(0.0%)
Cuba:	0	(0.0%)
Dominican Republic:	0	(0.0%)
El Salvador:	10	(0.1%)
Germany:	0	(0.0%)
Guatemala:	0	(0.0%)
Haiti:	0	(0.0%)
India:	0	(0.0%)
Jamaica:	0	(0.0%)
Korea:	0	(0.0%)
Mexico:	102	(1.0%)
Philippines:	51	(0.5%)
Vietnam:	0	(0.0%)
Total Foreign Born:	165	(1.7%)

Narrative

While Anadarko is not on a growth curve, reporting 0.0%, there are substantial numbers of people within a three-mile radius of the church with 21.7% of that population who do not identify with a local body of Christ. That translates to 2,140 people who your church can reach.

Chickasha COTN

Chickasha 1st COTN Demographics
 1300 S. 28th St., Chickasha, OK 73018
 Pastor: Steve Ruby
 Originating Year: 1923
 Reported Decadal Growth of Sun AM attendance

- 2023: 19 2012: 34 -15

ALL STATISTICS ARE FROM NAZARENE.ORG STATS AND RESEARCH AND SET FOR INCLUSION OF A 3 MILE RADIUS AROUND THE CHURCH BUILDING

Population

2014 Population:23,639

2019 Population:23,943

2024 Population:23,951(if current population trends continue)

Annual Growth Rate 2014-2019:0.3%

The estimated unclaimed population is 12,753 (53.3%).

The unclaimed figure is an estimate based on the [2010 U.S. Religion Census](#) of 236 denominational groups. This estimate is only a guide to the religious condition of the area, and should be supplemented by information from local sources, such as ministerial associations or newspaper religion editors.

Family Structure:

Married Couples With Children:1,544(16.9%)

Married Couples No Children:2,787(30.5%)

Male Single Parent:235(2.6%)

Female Single Parent:685(7.5%)

Other Family, Male Head:226(2.5%)

Other Family, Female Head:602(6.6%)

Total Families:6,079(66.6%)

Non-Family, Living Alone:2,602(28.5%)

Non-Family, Not Living Alone:452(4.9%)

Total Households:9,133

Never Married:5,232(26.9%)

Married (not separated):8,853(45.5%)

Separated/Spouse Absent:800(4.1%)

Divorced:3,112(16.0%)

Widowed:1,439(7.4%)

Total People 15 and Over:19,436

Age Groups

Ages 0 to 4:1,353(5.7%)

5 to 9:1,472(6.1%)

10 to 14:1,682(7.0%)

15 to 17:1,016(4.2%)

18 to 20:890(3.7%)

21 to 24:1,247(5.2%)

25 to 34:3,036(12.7%)
35 to 44:2,864(12.0%)
45 to 54:2,959(12.4%)
55 to 64:3,373(14.1%)
65 to 74:2,291(9.6%)
75 and up:1,760(7.4%)

Housing Types

Single Family Houses:8,290(75.9%)
Duplexes or Townhouses:83(0.8%)
2 to 4 Units at Address:474(4.3%)
5 to 9 Units at Address:414(3.8%)
10 or More Units at Address:627(5.7%)
Mobile Homes:1,023(9.4%)
Boats, RVs, Vans:17(0.2%)

Owner-Occupied and Housing Values

Less than \$50,000:1,163(19.7%)
\$50,000-\$89,999:1,744(29.6%)
\$90,000-\$149,999:1,556
(26.4%)\$150,000-\$199,999:577(9.8%)
\$200,000-\$299,999:479(8.1%)
\$300,000-\$399,999:167(2.8%)
\$400,000 or more:203(3.4%)
Total Owner-Occupied:5,889

Educational Levels

Less than 9th grade:789(4.8%)
High School, Non-grad:1,259(7.7%)
High School Graduate:6,894(42.3%)
Some College:3,272(20.1%)
Associate Degree:1,021(6.3%)
Bachelor's Degree:2,189(13.4%)
Grad Program/Degree:859(5.3%)
Total Adults 25 or Older:16,283

Household Income

Less than \$25,000:2,384(26.1%)
\$25,000-\$44,999:1,933(21.2%)
\$45,000-\$74,999:2,062(22.6%)
\$75,000-\$124,999:1,695(18.6%)
\$125,000 or more:1,059(11.6%)
Total Households:9,133

Poverty level is computed for individuals based on household size and community costs of living. For this area, 3,999 (17.2%) were classified as living in poverty. Another 1,347 (5.8%) were considered to be close to the poverty level (less than 25% above that income level).

Culture Report

Languages spoken in the home:

Arabic:	0	(0.0%)
Chinese (incl. Mandarin, Cantonese):	8	(0.0%)
English only:	21,311	(94.3%)
French, Haitian, or Cajun:	6	(0.0%)
German or other West Germanic languages:	21	(0.1%)
Korean:	18	(0.1%)
Russian, Polish, or other Slavic languages:	0	(0.0%)
Spanish:	1,100	(4.9%)
Tagalog (incl. Filipino):	0	(0.0%)
Vietnamese:	0	(0.0%)
Other:	126	(0.6%)

Top 15 foreign born population nationwide:

Canada:	0	(0.0%)
China, excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan:	21	(0.1%)
Colombia:	0	(0.0%)
Cuba:	0	(0.0%)
Dominican Republic:	38	(0.2%)
El Salvador:	0	(0.0%)
Germany:	17	(0.1%)
Guatemala:	10	(0.0%)
Haiti:	0	(0.0%)
India:	0	(0.0%)
Jamaica:	0	(0.0%)
Korea:	26	(0.1%)
Mexico:	427	(1.8%)
Philippines:	5	(0.0%)
Vietnam:	0	(0.0%)
Total Foreign Born:	693	(2.9%)

Clinton COTN

Clinton COTN Demographics and Narrative

800 8TH St. Clinton, OK 73601

Pastor Eddie Stark

Originating Year: 1937

Reported Decadal Growth of Sun AM Attendance:

- 2023:28 2012:34 -7

ALL STATISTICS ARE FROM NAZARENE.ORG STATS AND RESEARCH AND SET FOR INCLUSION OF A 3 MILE RADIUS AROUND THE CHURCH BUILDING

Population

2014 Population:11,064

2019 Population:11,596

2024 Population:11,703(if current population trends continue)

Annual Growth Rate 2014-2019:0.9%

The estimated unclaimed population is 2,929 (25.3%).

The unclaimed figure is an estimate based on the [2010 U.S. Religion Census](#) of 236 denominational groups. This estimate is only a guide to the religious condition of the area, and should be supplemented by information from local sources, such as ministerial associations or newspaper religion editors.

Family Structure:

Married Couples with Children:1,019(24.6%)

Married Couples No Children:896(21.6%)

Male Single Parent:205(4.9%)

Female Single Parent:394(9.5%)

Other Family, Male Head:124(3.0%)

Other Family, Female Head:151(3.6%)

Total Families:2,789(67.3%)

Non-Family, Living Alone:1,223(29.5%)

Non-Family, Not Living Alone:132(3.2%)

Total Households:4,144

Never Married:2,092(24.6%)

Married (not separated):3,915(46.1%)

Separated/Spouse Absent:372(4.4%)

Divorced:1,351(15.9%)

Widowed:761(9.0%)

Total People 15 and Over:8,491

Age Groups

Ages 0 to 4:1,085(9.4%)
5 to 9:1,220(10.5%)
10 to 14:800(6.9%)
15 to 17:508(4.4%)
18 to 20:112(1.0%)
21 to 24:432(3.7%)
25 to 34:1,386(12.0%)
35 to 44:1,462(12.6%)
45 to 54:1,532(13.2%)
55 to 64:1,136(9.8%)
65 to 74:1,057(9.1%)
75 and up:866(7.5%)

Housing Types

Single Family Houses:4,064(82.6%)
Duplexes or Townhouses:48(1.0%)
2 to 4 Units at Address:120(2.4%)
5 to 9 Units at Address:36(0.7%)
10 or More Units at Address:183(3.7%)
Mobile Homes:467(9.5%)
Boats, RVs, Vans:0(0.0%)

Owner-Occupied and Housing Values

Less than \$50,000:368(13.3%)
\$50,000-\$89,999:724(26.1%)
\$90,000-\$149,999:717(25.9%)
\$150,000-\$199,999:333(12.0%)
\$200,000-\$299,999:486(17.5%)
\$300,000-\$399,999:30 (1.1%)
\$400,000 or more:113(4.1%)
Total Owner-Occupied:2,771

Educational Levels

Less than 9th grade:513(6.9%)
High School, Non-grad:722(9.7%)
High School Graduate:2,671(35.9%)
Some College:1,740(23.4%)
Associate Degree:455(6.1%)
Bachelor's Degree:933(12.5%)
Grad Program/Degree:405(5.4%)
Total Adults 25 or Older:7,439

Household Income

Less than \$25,000:1,082(26.1%)
 \$25,000-\$44,999:826(19.9%)
 \$45,000-\$74,999:1,052(25.4%)
 \$75,000-\$124,999:712(17.2%)
 \$125,000 or more:472(11.4%)
 Total Households:4,144

Poverty level is computed for individuals based on household size and community costs of living. For this area, 1,370 (12.2%) were classified as living in poverty. Another 1,377 (12.3%) were considered to be close to the poverty level (less than 25% above that income level).

Culture Report

Asian (non-Hispanic):182(1.6%)
 Black (non-Hispanic):447(3.9%)
 Hispanic:3,003(25.9%)
 Native American (non-Hispanic):666(5.7%)
 Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic):5(0.0%)
 White (non-Hispanic):6,601(56.9%)
 Other:692(6.0%)

Languages spoken in the home:

Arabic:	0	(0.0%)
Chinese (incl. Mandarin, Cantonese):	10	(0.1%)
English only:	7,925	(75.4%)
French, Haitian, or Cajun:	0	(0.0%)
German or other West Germanic languages:	0	(0.0%)
Korean:	0	(0.0%)
Russian, Polish, or other Slavic languages:	0	(0.0%)
Spanish:	2,265	(21.5%)
Tagalog (incl. Filipino):	18	(0.2%)
Vietnamese:	30	(0.3%)
Other:	263	(2.5%)

Top 15 foreign born population nationwide:

Canada:	0	(0.0%)
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China, excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan:	0	(0.0%)
Colombia:	0	(0.0%)
Cuba:	0	(0.0%)
Dominican Republic:	0	(0.0%)
El Salvador:	26	(0.2%)
Germany:	6	(0.1%)
Guatemala:	136	(1.2%)
Haiti:	0	(0.0%)
India:	36	(0.3%)
Jamaica:	0	(0.0%)
Korea:	0	(0.0%)
Mexico:	935	(8.1%)
Philippines:	0	(0.0%)
Vietnam:	70	(0.6%)
Total Foreign Born:	1,223	(10.5%)

El Reno Cross Bridge COTN

El Reno Cross Bridge
 910 S. Reno
 El Reno, OK 73036
 Pastor Mark Fryar
 Originating Year: 1921
 Reported Decadal Growth of Sun AM attendance

- 2023: 38 2012: 69 -31

ALL STATISTICS ARE FROM NAZARENE.ORG STATS AND RESEARCH AND SET FOR INCLUSION OF A 3 MILE RADIUS AROUND THE CHURCH BUILDING

Population

2014 Population:20,436
 2019 Population:22,384
 2024 Population:22,796(if current population trends continue)
 Annual Growth Rate 2014-2019:1.8%

The estimated unclaimed population is 12,543 (56.0%).

The unclaimed figure is an estimate based on the [2010 U.S. Religion Census](https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2010/special/religion.html) of 236 denominational groups. This estimate is only a guide to the religious condition of the area, and should be supplemented by information from local sources, such as ministerial associations or newspaper religion editors.

Family Structure:

Married Couples with Children:1,295(18.8%)
Married Couples No Children:1,854(26.9%)
Male Single Parent:229(3.3%)
Female Single Parent:413(6.0%)
Other Family, Male Head:148(2.2%)
Other Family, Female Head:622(9.0%)
Total Families:4,561(66.3%)
Non-Family, Living Alone:1,989(28.9%)
Non-Family, Not Living Alone:333(4.8%)
Total Households:6,883

Never Married:5,829(32.5%)
Married (not separated):6,321(35.2%)
Separated/Spouse Absent:1,611(9.0%)
Divorced:3,160(17.6%)
Widowed:1,036(5.8%)
Total People 15 and Over:17,957

Age Groups

Ages 0 to 4:1,350(6.0%)
5 to 9:1,741(7.8%)
10 to 14:1,336(6.0%)
15 to 17:846(3.8%)
18 to 20:768(3.4%)
21 to 24:921(4.1%)
25 to 34:3,892(17.4%)
35 to 44:3,058(13.7%)
45 to 54:2,956(13.2%)
55 to 64:2,673(11.9%)
65 to 74:1,680(7.5%)
75 and up:1,163(5.2%)

Housing Types

Single Family Houses:6,188(77.3%)
Duplexes or Townhouses:100(1.2%)
2 to 4 Units at Address:432(5.4%)
5 to 9 Units at Address:316(3.9%)
10 or More Units at Address:291(3.6%)
Mobile Homes:633(7.9%)
Boats, RVs, Vans:42(0.5%)

Owner-Occupied and Housing Values

Less than \$50,000:503(11.6%)
\$50,000-\$89,999:1,038(24.0%)

\$90,000-\$149,999:1,337(30.9%)
 \$150,000-\$199,999:601(13.9%)
 \$200,000-\$299,999:489(11.3%)
 \$300,000-\$399,999:162(3.7%)
 \$400,000 or more:200(4.6%)
 Total Owner-Occupied:4,330

Educational Levels

Less than 9th grade:728(4.7%)
 High School, Non-grad:1,683(10.9%)
 High School Graduate:6,236(40.4%)
 Some College:3,519(22.8%)
 Associate Degree:1,190(7.7%)
 Bachelor's Degree:1,518(9.8%)
 Grad Program/Degree:548(3.6%)
 Total Adults 25 or Older:15,422

Household Income

Less than \$25,000:1,419(20.6%)
 \$25,000-\$44,999:1,635(23.8%)
 \$45,000-\$74,999:1,595(23.2%)
 \$75,000-\$124,999:1,523(22.1%)
 \$125,000 or more:711(10.3%)
 Total Households:6,883

Poverty level is computed for individuals based on household size and community costs of living. For this area, 3,404 (16.3%) were classified as living in poverty. Another 1,603 (7.7%) were considered to be close to the poverty level (less than 25% above that income level).

Culture Report

Languages spoken in the home:

Arabic:	18	(0.1%)
Chinese (incl. Mandarin, Cantonese):	4	(0.0%)
English only:	19,388	(92.2%)
French, Haitian, or Cajun:	31	(0.1%)
German or other West Germanic languages:	15	(0.1%)
Korean:	0	(0.0%)
Russian, Polish, or other Slavic languages:	15	(0.1%)
Spanish:	1,425	(6.8%)
Tagalog (incl. Filipino):	36	(0.2%)
Vietnamese:	9	(0.0%)
Other:	93	(0.4%)

Top 15 foreign born population nationwide:

Canada:	9	(0.0%)
China, excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan:	4	(0.0%)
Colombia:	0	(0.0%)
Cuba:	0	(0.0%)
Dominican Republic:	0	(0.0%)
El Salvador:	28	(0.1%)
Germany:	9	(0.0%)
Guatemala:	0	(0.0%)
Haiti:	0	(0.0%)
India:	12	(0.1%)
Jamaica:	0	(0.0%)
Korea:	0	(0.0%)
Mexico:	756	(3.4%)
Philippines:	0	(0.0%)
Vietnam:	0	(0.0%)
Total Foreign Born:	895	(4.0%)

Elk City COTN

Elk City COTN Demographics
 6th and Calloway, Elk City, OK 73648
 Pastor Andrew Dages
 Originating Year: 1924
 Reported Decadal Growth of Sun AM attendance

- 2023: 20 2012: 73 -35

ALL STATISTICS ARE FROM NAZARENE.ORG STATS AND RESEACH AND SET FOR INCLUSION OF A THREE MILE RADIUS AROUND THE CHURCH BUILDING

Population

2014 Population: 15,372
 2019 Population: 15,665
 2024 Population: 15,745 (if current population trends continue)
 Annual Growth Rate
 2014-2019 0.4%

The estimated unclaimed population is 5,005 (32.0%).

The unclaimed figure is an estimate based on the [2010 U.S. Religion Census](#) of 236 denominational groups. This estimate is only a guide to the religious condition of the area, and should be supplemented by information from local sources, such as ministerial associations or newspaper religion editors.

Family Structure:

Married Couples with Children:1,258(22.3%)

Married Couples No Children:1,667(29.6%)

Male Single Parent:237(4.2%)

Female Single Parent:423(7.5%)

Other Family, Male Head:139(2.5%)

Other Family, Female Head:223(4.0%)

Total Families:3,947(70.1%)

Non-Family, Living Alone:1,404(24.9%)

Non-Family, Not Living Alone:280(5.0%)

Total Households:5,631

Never Married:3,030(25.4%)

Married (not separated):5,871(49.3%)

Separated/Spouse Absent:494(4.1%)

Divorced:1,705(14.3%)

Widowed:810(6.8%)

Total People 15 and Over:11,910

Age Groups

Ages 0 to 4:1,321(8.4%)

5 to 9:1,069(6.8%)

10 to 14:1,365(8.7%)

15 to 17:725(4.6%)

18 to 20:431(2.8%)

21 to 24:925(5.9%)

25 to 34:2,125(13.6%)

35 to 44:1,976(12.6%)

45 to 54:1,879(12.0%)

55 to 64:1,762(11.2%)

65 to 74:1,284(8.2%)

75 and up:803(5.1%)

Housing Types

Single Family Houses:5,174(71.0%)

Duplexes or Townhouses:161(2.2%)

2 to 4 Units at Address:582(8.0%)

5 to 9 Units at Address:162(2.2%)

10 or More Units at Address:264(3.6%)
 Mobile Homes:914(12.5%)
 Boats, RVs, Vans:33(0.5%)

Owner-Occupied and Housing Values

Less than \$50,000:427(11.4%)
 \$50,000-\$89,999:481(12.8%)
 \$90,000-\$149,999:946(25.2%)
 \$150,000-\$199,999:826(22.0%)
 \$200,000-\$299,999:646(17.2%)
 \$300,000-\$399,999:123(3.3%)
 \$400,000 or more:300(8.0%)
 Total Owner-Occupied:3,749

Educational Levels

Less than 9th grade:220(2.2%)
 High School, Non-grad:948(9.6%)
 High School Graduate:3,742(38.1%)
 Some College:2,419(24.6%)
 Associate Degree:686(7.0%)
 Bachelor's Degree:1,140(11.6%)
 Grad Program/Degree:674(6.9%)
 Total Adults 25 or Older:9,829

Less than \$25,000:	1,194	(21.2%)
\$25,000-\$44,999:	1,312	(23.3%)
\$45,000-\$74,999:	1,026	(18.2%)
\$75,000-\$124,999:	1,567	(27.8%)
\$125,000 or more:	532	(9.4%)
Total Households:	5,631	

Poverty level is computed for individuals based on household size and community costs of living. For this area, 2,664 (17.3%) were classified as living in poverty. Another 909 (5.9%) were considered to be close to the poverty level (less than 25% above that income level).

Culture Report

Languages spoken in the home:

Arabic:	0	(0.0%)
Chinese (incl. Mandarin, Cantonese):	0	(0.0%)
English only:	12,602	(87.9%)
French, Haitian, or Cajun:	3	(0.0%)
German or other West Germanic languages:	0	(0.0%)

Korean:	8	(0.1%)
Russian, Polish, or other Slavic languages:	0	(0.0%)
Spanish:	1,616	(11.3%)
Tagalog (incl. Filipino):	31	(0.2%)
Vietnamese:	0	(0.0%)
Other:	84	(0.6%)

Top 15 foreign born population nationwide:

Canada:	0	(0.0%)
China, excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan:	2	(0.0%)
Colombia:	0	(0.0%)
Cuba:	0	(0.0%)
Dominican Republic:	3	(0.0%)
El Salvador:	0	(0.0%)
Germany:	0	(0.0%)
Guatemala:	0	(0.0%)
Haiti:	0	(0.0%)
India:	0	(0.0%)
Jamaica:	0	(0.0%)
Korea:	8	(0.1%)
Mexico:	651	(4.2%)
Philippines:	31	(0.2%)
Vietnam:	0	(0.0%)
Total Foreign Born:	834	(5.3%)

OKC May Ave. COTN

OKC May Ave COTN Demographics
2940 SW 11th Oklahoma City, OK 73018
Pastor: Jason Crouch
Originating Year: 1945
Reported Decadal Growth of Sun AM attendance

- 2023: 60 2012: 73 -13

ALL STATISTICS ARE FROM NAZARENE.ORG STATS AND RESEARCH AND SET FOR INCLUSION OF A 3 MILE RADIUS AROUND THE CHURCH BUILDING

Population

2014 Population	110,152
2019 Population	108,844
2024 Population	108,987 (if current population trends continue)
Annual Growth Rate	
2014-2019	0.2%

The estimated unclaimed population is 29,933 (27.5%).

The unclaimed figure is an estimate based on the [2010 U.S. Religion Census](#) of 236 denominational groups. This estimate is only a guide to the religious condition of the area, and should be supplemented by information from local sources, such as ministerial associations or newspaper religion editors.

Family Structure:

Married Couples with Children: 6,872 (18.5%)
Married Couples No Children: 6,240 (16.8%)
Male Single Parent: 1,171 (3.2%)
Female Single Parent: 3,793 (10.2%)
Other Family, Male Head: 1,261 (3.4%)
Other Family, Female Head: 2,044 (5.5%)
Total Families: 21,381 (57.7%)
Non-Family, Living Alone: 12,376 (33.4%)
Non-Family, Not Living Alone: 3,325 (9.0%)
Total Households: 37,082

Never Married: 32,822 (40.3%)
Married (not separated): 26,763 (32.9%)
Separated/Spouse Absent: 6,568 (8.1%)
Divorced: 11,211 (13.8%)
Widowed: 4,038 (5.0%)
Total People 15 and Over: 81,402

Age Groups

Ages 0 to 4:9,681(8.9%)
5 to 9:8,841(8.1%)
10 to 14:8,920(8.2%)
15 to 17:4,130(3.8%)
18 to 20:4,864(4.5%)
21 to 24:6,902(6.3%)
25 to 34:19,186(17.6%)
35 to 44:14,714(13.5%)
45 to 54:12,632(11.6%)
55 to 64:9,847(9.0%)
65 to 74:5,381(4.9%)
75 and up:3,746(3.4%)

Housing Types

Single Family Houses:30,961(70.6%)
Duplexes or Townhouses:785(1.8%)
2 to 4 Units at Address:3,375(7.7%)
5 to 9 Units at Address:2,372(5.4%)
10 or More Units at Address:5,240(11.9%)
Mobile Homes:1,102(2.5%)
Boats, RVs, Vans:49(0.1%)

Owner-Occupied and Housing Values

Less than \$50,000:3,643(21.2%)
\$50,000-\$89,999:6,739(39.2%)
\$90,000-\$149,999:3,776(22.0%)
\$150,000-\$199,999:1,249(7.3%)
\$200,000-\$299,999:1,211(7.0%)
\$300,000-\$399,999:224(1.3%)
\$400,000 or more:344(2.0%)
Total Owner-Occupied:17,186

Educational Levels

Less than 9th grade: 11,112 (17%)
High School, Non-grad:9,416(14.4%)
High School Graduate:19,572(29.9%)
Some College:11,980(18.3%)
Associate Degree:3,392(5.2%)
Bachelor's Degree:6,697(10.2%)
Grad Program/Degree:3,337(5.1%)
Total Adults 25 or Older:65,506

Household Income

Less than \$25,000:12,068(32.5%)
\$25,000-\$44,999:8,995(24.3%)
\$45,000-\$74,999:8,808(23.8%)
\$75,000-\$124,999:5,177(14.0%)
\$125,000 or more:2,034(5.5%)
Total Households:37,082

Poverty level is computed for individuals based on household size and community costs of living. For this area, 29,481 (28.5%) were classified as living in poverty. Another 9,038 (8.7%) were considered to be close to the poverty level (less than 25% above that income level).

Culture Report

Languages spoken in the home:

Arabic:	60	(0.1%)
Chinese (incl. Mandarin, Cantonese):	99	(0.1%)
English only:	54,942	(55.4%)
French, Haitian, or Cajun:	127	(0.1%)
German or other West Germanic languages:	78	(0.1%)
Korean:	18	(0.0%)
Russian, Polish, or other Slavic languages:	66	(0.1%)
Spanish:	41,820	(42.2%)
Tagalog (incl. Filipino):	68	(0.1%)
Vietnamese:	931	(0.9%)
Other:	954	(1.0%)

Top 15 foreign born population nationwide:

Canada:	74	(0.1%)
China, excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan:	71	(0.1%)
Colombia:	70	(0.1%)
Cuba:	35	(0.0%)
Dominican Republic:	7	(0.0%)
El Salvador:	366	(0.3%)
Germany:	72	(0.1%)
Guatamala:	1,906	(1.8%)
Haiti:	0	(0.0%)

India:	153	(0.1%)
Jamaica:	0	(0.0%)
Korea:	52	(0.0%)
Mexico:	18,355	(16.9%)
Philippines:	104	(0.1%)
Vietnam:	788	(0.7%)
Total Foreign Born:	23,371	(21.5%)

Snyder COTN

Snyder COTN Demographics

602 D. St. Snyder, OK 73566

Pastor: TED (Ramona Noble – Member contact)

Originating Year: 1952

Reported Decadal Growth of Sun AM attendance

- 2023: 5 2012: 12 -13

ALL STATISTICS ARE FROM NAZARENE.ORG STATS AND RESEARCH AND SET FOR INCLUSION OF A 3 MILE RADIUS AROUND THE CHURCH BUILDING

Population

2014 Population:2,955

2019 Population:2,733

2024 Population:2,690(if current population trends continue)

Annual Growth Rate 2014-2019:-1.5%

The estimated unclaimed population is 479 (17.5%).

The unclaimed figure is an estimate based on the [2010 U.S. Religion Census](#) of 236 denominational groups. This estimate is only a guide to the religious condition of the area, and should be supplemented by information from local sources, such as ministerial associations or newspaper religion editors.

Family Structure

Married Couples with Children:189(16.9%)

Married Couples No Children:296(26.4%)

Male Single Parent:56(5.0%)

Female Single Parent:56(5.0%)

Other Family, Male Head:44(3.9%)

Other Family, Female Head:65(5.8%)

Total Families:706(63.0%)

Non-Family, Living Alone:374(33.4%)

Non-Family, Not Living Alone:40(3.6%)

Total Households:1,120

Never Married:571(26.2%)
Married (not separated):959(44.1%)
Separated/Spouse Absent:155(7.1%)
Divorced:323(14.8%)Widowed:168(7.7%)
Total People 15 and Over:2,176

Age Groups

Ages 0 to 4:185(6.8%)
5 to 9:180(6.6%)
10 to 14:192(7.0%)
15 to 17:131(4.8%)
18 to 20:121(4.4%)
21 to 24:122(4.5%)
25 to 34:325(11.9%)
35 to 44:230(8.4%)
45 to 54:354(13.0%)
55 to 64:375(13.7%)
65 to 74:254(9.3%)
75 and up:264(9.7%)

Housing Types

Single Family Houses:1,173(81.3%)
Duplexes or Townhouses:22(1.5%)
2 to 4 Units at Address:127(8.8%)
5 to 9 Units at Address:0(0.0%)
10 or More Units at Address:7(0.5%)
Mobile Homes:113(7.8%)
Boats, RVs, Vans:0(0.0%)

Owner-Occupied and Housing Values

Less than \$50,000:302(38.7%)
\$50,000-\$89,999:201(25.8%)
\$90,000-\$149,999:126(16.2%)
\$150,000-\$199,999:79(10.1%)
\$200,000-\$299,999:43(5.5%)
\$300,000-\$399,999:29(3.7%)
\$400,000 or more:0(0.0%)
Total Owner-Occupied:780

Educational Levels

Less than 9th grade:71(3.9%)

High School, Non-grad:159(8.8%)
 High School Graduate:707(39.2%)
 Some College:389(21.6%)
 Associate Degree:123(6.8%)
 Bachelor's Degree:231(12.8%)
 Grad Program/Degree:122(6.8%)
 Total Adults 25 or Older:1,802

Household Income

Less than \$25,000:394(35.2%)
 \$25,000-\$44,999:230(20.5%)
 \$45,000-\$74,999:231(20.6%)
 \$75,000-\$124,999:164(14.6%)
 \$125,000 or more:101(9.0%)
 Total Households:1,120

Poverty level is computed for individuals based on household size and community costs of living. For this area, 634 (24.1%) were classified as living in poverty. Another 80 (3.0%) were considered to be close to the poverty level (less than 25% above that income level).

Culture Report

Asian (non-Hispanic):4(0.1%)
 Black (non-Hispanic):132(4.8%)
 Hispanic:313(11.5%)
 Native American (non-Hispanic):39(1.4%)
 Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic):9(0.3%)
 White (non-Hispanic):2,111(77.2%)
 Other:125(4.6%)

Languages spoken in the home:

Arabic:	0	(0.0%)
Chinese (incl. Mandarin, Cantonese):	0	(0.0%)
English only:	2,404	(94.3%)
French, Haitian, or Cajun:	0	(0.0%)
German or other West Germanic languages:	6	(0.2%)
Korean:	4	(0.2%)
Russian, Polish, or other Slavic languages:	0	(0.0%)
Spanish:	113	(4.4%)
Tagalog (incl. Filipino):	0	(0.0%)
Vietnamese:	0	(0.0%)
Other:	21	(0.8%)

Top 15 foreign born population nationwide:

Canada:	0	(0.0%)
China, excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan:	0	(0.0%)
Colombia:	0	(0.0%)
Cuba:	0	(0.0%)
Dominican Republic:	0	(0.0%)
El Salvador:	0	(0.0%)
Germany:	12	(0.4%)
Guatemala:	0	(0.0%)
Haiti:	0	(0.0%)
India:	0	(0.0%)
Jamaica:	0	(0.0%)
Korea:	0	(0.0%)
Mexico:	24	(0.9%)
Philippines:	0	(0.0%)
Vietnam:	0	(0.0%)
Total Foreign Born:	37	(1.4%)

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Questions For Further Study

The parameters of this study purposely limited it to the churches identified. However, the implications offered do not exhaust the possible areas for further study.

What are some possible paths forward for small churches?

How do small churches provide community?

What is the jeopardy to a district with this large a percentage of churches being closed?

How is desperation a valid motivator for change and what is role does it play in the life of a church with dwindling attendance?