

TURNAROUND CHURCHES IN THE WISCONSIN
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD

by

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A MAJOR PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

There is crisis in the traditional American church. A multitude of churches that were once stable or thriving are now struggling and hoping to survive. Local ministry and denominational leaders, as well as church consultants, wrestle with how best to help these plateaued and declining congregations.

This project focused on turnaround churches in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and attempted to discover the primary factors that appeared to be associated with their turnaround. Turnaround churches were defined as *congregations that declined at least 20 percent in worship attendance after which, by God's grace and blessing, they rebounded and rose above their original status (before their decline started) by at least 20 percent and then sustained or increased their new worship average.*

The findings were intended to help inform and better enable WELS church consultants to assist congregations with pursuing turnaround and be more helpful to stable congregations that yearned to have improved health.

Four foundational doctrinal issues were highlighted in this project primarily because they particularly lay a solid scriptural foundation for desiring and pursuing turnaround. It was the hope and prayer of the writer that considering these four issues would help to minimize the tensions that could easily exist in a congregation or denomination where there is both a high priority on remaining faithful to God's Word and conducting aggressive outreach, especially through innovative methodology. Other issues and perspectives were

explored from related contemporary literature, predominantly in reference to cultural shifts and changing demographics, striving for church health, and enabling needed change. The counsels in these resources underscored the complexities related to assisting churches with turnaround.

As intended, key factors were identified that appeared to be associated with worship decline, turnaround, and sustaining or increasing positive gains. One finding pointed to the significance of the pastors' influence, which was primarily *negative* during decline and *constructive* during turnaround. As worship attendance increased or gains were sustained, other positive factors associated with pastoral leadership became more influential. Also, both during turnaround and sustaining worship attendance, a persistent focus on serving and reaching *others* appeared to be a prominent factor.

To those who encouraged, instructed, mentored, supported,
and prayed for me as I served my Savior

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"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Rev 5:13, unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are to the NIV). Dear Lord, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10).

I am grateful to my associate researchers who ably assisted me with this turnaround churches project. What an honor it has been to serve with these kingdom-minded men on our cohesive consultant team *assisting God's people with pursuing his mission!*

Thanks to the pastors, elected leaders, and other informed members of the turnaround congregations for their willing participation in the research. The insights gained will, prayerfully, be a blessing to many.

Thanks to all the congregations and other ministries that invited me to become their ministry planning partner while I served as a consultant with and directed WELS Parish Assistance and, now, Crossroads Consulting Ministry. Praise God for all his blessings!

Thanks to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for providing an enlightening and beneficial educational experience, especially to those who taught quality courses and guided me in shaping and writing this major project.

Thanks to my family for continually encouraging and holding me accountable for completing this major project, especially while I was experiencing some setbacks.

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------|
| AC | Augsburg Confession |
| Apol | Apology of the Augsburg Confession |
| FC SD | Formula of Concord, Solid (Thorough) Declaration |
| FWLS | Forward with Lutheran Schools |
| NIV | New International Version |
| PA | Parish Assistance |
| RHM | Redemptive-Historical Method |
| SA | Smalcald Articles |
| SC | Small Catechism |
| STM | Systematic-Theological Method |
| WELS | Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod |
| WLQ | Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly |

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, comments made by Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) clergy, elected leaders, and other church members--often spoken with angst--are telling. To paraphrase: *Our congregation is dying, and we don't know what to do to save it. We used to have two hundred kids in Sunday school. Today it is about sixty. I think we have to merge with our sister congregation about five miles to the east. They're declining too. Our church has no clue how to connect with people moving into our community. We don't know them, and they don't know us. We don't have many younger families. To make matters worse, lots of us are growing older and are dying off. If we don't figure out how to do ministry in this new world of ours, it is just a matter of time before we close our doors.*

Statement of Need

From California to Connecticut, Canada to Alabama, and especially in the Midwest where WELS congregations are concentrated, such concerns are commonplace. And I know the WELS is not alone. Many other church bodies are experiencing similar anxieties. There is crisis in the traditional church. But why? A short answer here, in a single word, is *change*--both within congregations and their communities. A longer answer will follow in this project when considering Issues from Related Contemporary Literature and covering Cultural Shifts and Changing Demographics.

One visible sign of crisis in the traditional church is the number of books and other resources that are being written to help congregations that are struggling. Some of these include the word *turnaround* in their titles. Examples are *Turn-around Churches* (George Barna), *The Turnaround Church* (Mary Gifford), and *Leading Turnaround Churches* (Gene Wood). One Doctor of Ministry project is entitled *Turnaround Church Ministry: Causes of Decline and Changes Needed for Turnaround* (Daniel Eymann).

There are scores of other books that identify challenges and offer solutions to congregations under titles that include phrases like *comeback churches*, *breakout churches*, *church revitalization*, *congregations in transition*, *renew your congregation*, *leading congregational change*, *leading a dying church*, and *death of the church*. At least two books have *crisis* in their titles: *The Church in an Age of Crisis* (James White) and *The American Church in Crisis* (David Olson). Add to these resources the ever-growing list of printed and digital articles that address the above subjects from various perspectives.

Another visible sign of crisis in the traditional church is that primarily plateaued and declining congregations routinely call on church consultants to help them analyze what is happening and not happening in their parishes. Usually they want someone to spend a few days with them, fix their problems, point them in a positive direction, and guarantee they will experience fruitful ministry in the coming years. If only assisting congregations through consulting was that simple.

This is the ministry to which the Lord has called me. In a little corner of God's church militant on earth, there is a confessional church body called the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The WELS began in 1850, through the efforts of three

determined German pastors who met in Milwaukee, and is now the third largest Lutheran church body in America. The WELS has the reputation of being theologically conservative and confessional. At the end of 2011, based on the synod's statistical report, this rather small gathering of God's people that walks and works together was comprised of 383,506 souls in 1,286 congregations--most of which are justifiably described as *traditional*--within twelve geographic districts within the United States.

The WELS maintains two preparatory high schools, a ministry training college, and a seminary. These synod-operated schools focus on providing pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. Synod congregations, either individually or as federations, operate the fourth largest denominationally-affiliated private school system in the country comprised of 403 early childhood ministries, 324 elementary schools, and twenty-three area high schools.

Over the last twenty years WELS has provided one of the largest prison ministries in the nation, distributing hundreds of thousands of Bible correspondence courses along with Bibles to inmates across the United States. This church body is also active in twenty-two world mission fields serving 533 congregations with 86,502 baptized members.

The WELS has a blessed history--a remarkable record of God's amazing grace--during which a sizeable number of men, women, and children have been blessed through confessional Lutheranism. A multitude of sin-stained souls, in and through this church body, has been assured that Jesus is their all-sufficient Savior. No wonder so many within the WELS are concerned that their treasured church body has been declining.

The tipping point was in 1990. Prior to that year, the WELS had experienced many decades of sustained growth. Alarmingly, since 1990, soul membership (including

both children and adults) has decreased by 37,887 or 9 percent, from an all-time high of 421,396 down to 383,506. The dramatic loss of children during the span of these years, from 1990 through 2011, was 23,300. This represents a 22.5 percent decrease in the number of WELS children (infants through eighth grade). During the same twenty-one years, the number of adults decreased by 14,587 or 4.6 percent. The chart below illustrates why so many who are affiliated with the WELS are so concerned.

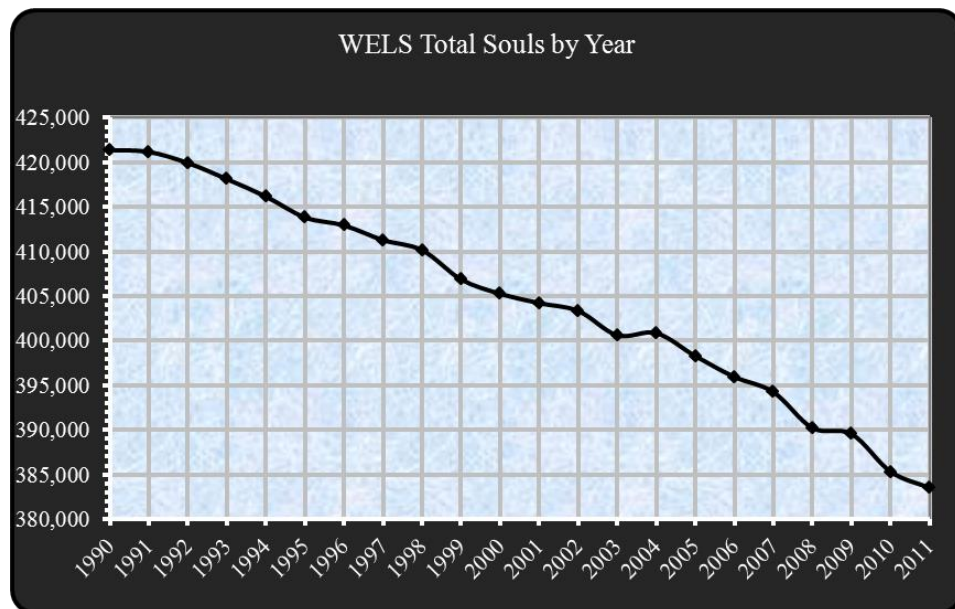


Figure 1. WELS total souls by year.

This contraction within the WELS has captured the attention of many synodical, district, and congregational leaders. Repeatedly, public and private conversations have raised questions. Why is this decline happening? What has changed? What should we do about it? What should we not do? WELS leadership has framed these concerns with this question: *"What does a congregation look like when it is putting into practice all of the good*

things that the Holy Spirit is prompting people to do when the gospel is clearly preached and the sacraments are properly administered?" (Synodical Council Update 2012, accessed May 1, 2012).

There is much to be thankful for in the WELS, including a number of healthy congregations that are excitedly expanding their ministries, positively impacting their communities, passionately reaching the lost for Christ, and enthusiastically nurturing believers to know, love, and serve their Savior. Some of these same churches were not so healthy in the past--and the symptoms of their poor health were obvious--until the Lord enabled them to experience turnaround. Spirit-given confidence demolished their despair, and by God's grace they experienced growth over time and with God's blessing.

My goal in this project was to study some of these turnaround congregations in depth and discover *the primary factors that appeared to be associated with the manner in which the Lord had blessed them*. These findings were intended to help inform and better enable our WELS consulting ministry to assist other congregations with pursuing turnaround. I was hopeful the findings would be helpful both to congregations that needed and desired turnaround and to more stable congregations that yearned to have improved health for the sake of having greater spiritual impact among their members and in their communities.

Topic Relationship to the Ministry of the Writer

I suspect the Lord began to stir in me a concern about church health and the need for turnaround as I was growing up in a rural community in North Dakota. The church in which my parents faithfully participated was a great blessing to me. There my faith was strengthened by the Holy Spirit through a methodical exposure to God's Word, first in

Sunday school, then in catechism classes, and continuously in weekly worship. Participation in worship, however, was sometimes a struggle. To be blunt, I perceived worship to be somewhat bland, and I was sometimes bored. Yes, I know *I* was often the problem because I was too sleepy or easily distracted or didn't put adequate effort into listening, concentrating, or absorbing. But was it *just me*?

The manner in which worship was led and the way people participated signaled to me that something was amiss. Most, if not all of the members, had the responsive parts of the liturgy memorized so that *The Lutheran Hymnal* was seldom opened to the traditional Order of Morning Service or Order of Holy Communion. These were the only two liturgies used. If the hymnal was opened, it was probably more out of habit than need. It didn't help that a couple of our pastors, by the way they led worship, seemed to send the signal that they were a bit bored themselves.

It was especially during the last couple years of grade school and the first couple years of high school that I began to analyze my thoughts and reactions to my hometown worship experiences. There were times when I really didn't want to go to church with my family. But after participating in those services, I was glad I was present because I always benefitted from them. How could I explain these perplexing experiences, not wanting to participate in worship but, afterwards, glad that I did?

Certainly, God was at work through his powerful Word. This explains how I could benefit even when, initially, my head and heart were not into it. However, when I analyzed my worship experiences, including those times when I was both engaged and disengaged, I drew some conclusions.

Pastors, in part, influence how people worship. Their tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions may or may not engage the worshippers. One pastor in particular really made it easy for me to listen to God's Word, and I believe the Lord used him to move me in the direction of serving in the public ministry.

I also concluded that I was most attentive to those parts of the liturgy that changed weekly (e.g., the hymns, Scripture lessons, sermons, and prayers). I would often return home humming the melody of a hymn and pondering its meaning or remembering some portion of the spoken Word. The responsive parts that were the same every week didn't seem to capture my attention or stick with me. Those I often mumbled mindlessly from memory, as it seemed others were also doing.

I know my conclusions could be challenged, again pointing the finger of blame at *me*. Yes, but these were real experiences for this farm kid who was, at the time, trying to make sense out of my on-and-off reluctance to participating in worship.

These early impressions so stuck with me that, when I entered the public ministry, I talked with my church leaders about offering worship that included more variety. Because I highly valued our liturgical heritage and ancient worship forms but was also concerned about meaningfully engaging easily-distracted attenders, we worshipped *straight from the hymnal* half of the time and used *alternative paths of worship* the other half. The alternative worship was still liturgical in form (including an invocation, confession, absolution, Scripture lessons, sermon, hymns, creed, communion, prayers, and benediction), but especially the repetitive responsive components were modified primarily by including additional Bible passages.

I made sure that proclaiming law and gospel and focusing on the means of grace were central to every worship experience, and I checked in with my leaders every so often to ensure that this practice was still preferred and appreciated. The leaders always responded affirmatively, and their positive responses were validated based on many personal conversations with worship participants.

It helps to step back from one's normal routines and practices occasionally to reflect on why we do what we do in the way that we do it. This brief *pausing for honest analysis* often helps us to assess and confirm what is appropriate and challenge and change what is not consistently accomplishing its intended purpose. This is especially helpful when ministry context changes and, with the passing of time, it always does. Looking back, pausing to analyze was a worthwhile practice throughout my parish ministry years.

I began to serve my Savior in the public ministry in 1978 upon graduation from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin. I was privileged as a parish pastor, over a period of twenty-four years, to shepherd two flocks of lambs and sheep gathered by the Lord. These congregations were quite different, each providing a valuable and instructive experience that would be of benefit to me as a church consultant.

My first call to public ministry was an assignment to start a new congregation in a large, ethnically diverse metropolitan area. I was warmly welcomed both by the small nucleus of people who were my church-launching partners and by the folks in my new neighborhood. One neighbor met me in the middle of the street just after my wife and I moved into our rented parsonage. Upon hearing I was a Lutheran pastor called there to start a new church, he raised his hands to the heavens and yelled loudly, *Praise the Lord!*

With only a few interested families assembled in this new start we prayed, set out to gather more people, and trusted the Lord to bless his gospel work. We mostly knocked on doors, asked probing questions, expressed loving concern, shared God's truth about sin and grace, and invited folks to join us for worship and Bible study in a variety of rented facilities. The Lord blessed these meager but consistent efforts to gather an audience for his Word. The Spirit did his work and soon there were enough of us to secure a loan, purchase land, and construct a multipurpose facility for worship, education, and fellowship.

Both the urban setting and the ethnic diversity were eye-opening for this farm kid now turned pastor. Picturing a little red cross on the foreheads of all the people I met and served, as encouraged by my district president, was a blessing both to them and me. But pastoral inexperience combined with passionate enthusiasm for expanding God's kingdom and growing a church in the process left me with a few regrets.

One regret was not focusing on enabling and empowering members to become active in all areas of ministry. This was driven home to me when, after moving on to another congregation, I received a phone call from one of the leaders back at that original church. Apparently, with the approach of spring, the grass needed to be mowed on the church lot. What was the problem? I was the only one who mowed the grass, so no one knew how to start or operate the mower-equipped farm tractor. After talking the person through the necessary steps, I hung up the phone and said to myself, *I think the Lord just sent me a message that will change how I function as a pastor.*

The Lord next positioned me to serve him for the following seventeen years as a senior pastor in a long-established congregation. When I arrived in 1985, a number of

attentive members described their congregation as lethargic. A few people privately brought to my attention the presence of a protracted conflict that had been, among other factors, paralyzing their church for decades. Over the years, anxiety within this congregation had increased, especially among the leaders. Everything else had been declining.

There was low member ownership of ministry, appalling worship participation, only a handful who gathered to study Scripture, and negligible concern for bringing the good news of salvation in Christ to the lost. There was, however, a growing sense of restlessness among some who knew this intolerable state of affairs in their congregation could and must change.

I recall feeling as though I was standing in a deep valley looking up at an inviting mountain top beyond some hazardous cliffs. How daunting! I wondered how this still sizeable but waning assembly--a group of what appeared to be mostly apathetic people--would ever become a healthier congregation. Would we ever overcome the obstacles and ascend to such scenic heights? I prayed for wisdom, strength, and patience.

It was clear to me that only the Lord could enable such a climb and, with his blessing, effect the changes that were needed. Based on that deeply-held conviction, the most important priority was to involve as many of God's people as possible, as often as possible, in a thorough study of his Word. We needed to know God's heart, have confidence in his promises, and pursue his purposes with passion. Only the Spirit could make that happen through his Word, so we promoted both personal and group Bible study.

Slowly but steadily attitudes and actions were amended as the Lord worked powerfully in the hearts and minds of his people, turning many from lethargy to activity.

Participation in worship and other existing ministries increased. New ministry programs developed, engaging more. Members talked optimistically about their *improving* church. Outreach efforts were initiated. More were instructed in God's Word and, as the Spirit worked within them, they yearned to unite with this expanding family of faith.

Excitement was in the air as the culture of the congregation gradually changed for the better. Certainly, there were still challenges to address and disappointments to endure. Especially during the early years some people had their boat rocked and left loudly when their comfortable, albeit unbearable, status quo was challenged. In spite of those painful negatives, the Lord was undeniably doing something special at this church.

After about a dozen years of experiencing progress on our way out of the valley and up the mountainside, I sensed the congregation was losing traction. Based on worship attendance, we were no longer moving upward. It was as if we had hit an invisible ceiling, and I wanted to know why. We had heard about Parish Assistance (PA)--the church consulting ministry of the WELS--so we made contact and sought their assistance.

After their comprehensive analysis, we better understood our predicament. Key among the impacting factors that were holding this congregation back were (1) our lack of physical space on our church campus and (2) continuing to function like a program-sized church even after becoming a corporate-sized congregation. PA walked us through the subsequent phases of the ministry planning process. This enabled the congregation to create a compelling and agreed-to vision for future ministry, which included purchasing property for a second campus in the same community.

Participating in the PA ministry planning process was enlightening and invigorating. The Lord used our consultants to help me see more God-given potential in myself and the people of this church. My passion for serving my Savior increased along with my determination to position more people to serve in roles that were appropriate for them. I was amazed at how the Lord blessed us through this consulting ministry. Consequently, when I was asked to assist as an associate PA consultant, I enthusiastically agreed. Again, I was blessed immensely by those experiences.

In 2002, the Board for Parish Services of the WELS called me to serve as a consultant in this ministry on a full-time basis. A few years later, in 2006, I became the director of WELS Parish Assistance. As director, my main objective was to advance the purpose of PA, which was to *assist God's people with pursuing his mission*. Primarily, I provided overall direction to this consulting ministry, set its operational policies, selected and helped to train its full- and part-time lead and associate consultants, strived to improve its materials and services, and developed new services when deemed appropriate.

Since its inception in 1992, PA had the privilege of serving almost five hundred client congregations, including those served by a school consulting ministry known as Forward with Lutheran Schools (FWLS), a division of PA's consulting group. PA served scores of congregations more than once, so it was obvious the services were appreciated. In fact, the Lord blessed this consulting ministry beyond expectations. A comprehensive survey distributed among served congregations demonstrated a high degree of satisfaction. Well over 90 percent indicated they would recommend PA's services to other congregations.

Initially, this *Turnaround Churches in the WELS* project related directly to my PA administrative role, and I was hopeful that the findings of this effort would significantly enhance my ability to function with greater proficiency as the director of this consulting ministry. Clearly, the more I benefited from this project personally, the more I would be a blessing to others as I continued to serve WELS congregations.

Unfortunately, as the field work for this project was underway, some leaders within the WELS began to talk about serious funding shortages and the probable need to cut both ministry programs and positions. Their prognostications were both alarming and accurate. There were many reductions in programs and personnel among all the divisions of the synod, including the termination (defunding) of WELS Parish Assistance. This meant that my call as director of this consulting ministry was also terminated.

I concluded (at the time this was happening) that the termination of PA and my call was *bad news* both for me and for my beloved synod. I was convinced, based on my consulting experiences, that the type of assistance PA offered was still desperately desired and urgently needed by many WELS congregations.

The *good news* (praise the Lord!) was the encouraging response of many coworkers and the congregations that continued to contact me with requests for assistance. After much prayer and planning, I decided to keep serving my Savior as a church consultant within the WELS. I launched Crossroads Consulting Ministry in July of 2010. Serving as executive director of this new fee-based consulting ministry positioned me to keep serving WELS congregations and continue with this turnaround churches project.

Scope and Limitations to the Project

The scope of this project was to (1) define and identify turnaround churches in the WELS within a specific span of years, (2) select a limited number of these congregations for in-depth study, (3) collect and evaluate the research data and subject input, and (4) report the findings. I did not identify or study specific turnaround churches beyond the WELS.

The intention was to limit the number of churches selected for in-depth study and attempt to select congregations by setting (urban, suburban, rural), by size (under 150 worshippers per week, between 150-250, more than 250), and by age (under twenty-five years old, between twenty-five and fifty, more than fifty).

A high percentage of WELS churches submit year-end statistics, and this data was used to identify and select the turnaround congregations included in this project. I defined turnaround churches in the WELS as *congregations between the years 1990 and 2008 that declined at least 20 percent in worship attendance after which, by God's grace and blessing, they rebounded and rose above their original status (before their decline started) by at least 20 percent and then sustained or increased their new worship average*. An example of a defined turnaround congregation is provided in the following graph.

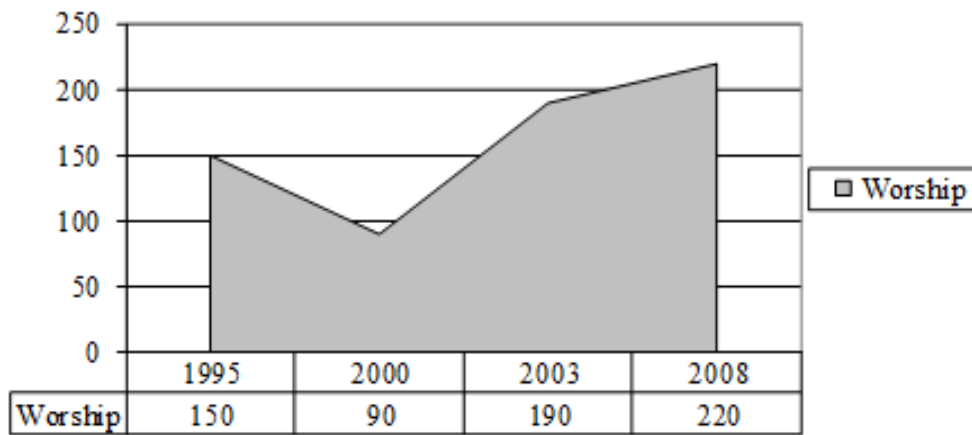


Figure 2. Example of a defined turnaround congregation.

From 1990 through 2008 sixty-eight, or approximately 5.3 percent, of 1,286 WELS congregations declined at least 20 percent in worship attendance and then rebounded and rose above their original status (before their decline started) by at least 20 percent. Of those sixty-eight churches twenty-seven, or 40 percent, sustained or increased their worship average after experiencing turnaround. I intended to study in depth twelve of these twenty-seven congregations and identify the most significant common factors that, under God, appeared to be related to turnaround in the WELS.

The research conducted within the congregations involved primarily the pastors (i.e., those formally called to preach and teach within our churches) and lay leaders (i.e., those typically elected to positions of authority). However, provision was made to seek input from other active adult members--those who were present during some span of their congregation's decline as well as during the turnaround years in their church. The number of subjects in each church varied. This depended mostly on the size and organizational

structure of the congregation and the number of members who had experienced the turnaround and were still connected to their congregation at the time of the study.

Goals and Objectives

There were two primary goals I intended to achieve in addressing this topic. The first goal was to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord blessed selected WELS congregations that experienced turnaround. The second goal was to explore, based on the discovered factors, how best to design the consulting services I would provide through Crossroads Consulting Ministry as I assisted struggling congregations with achieving turnaround.

To accomplish the first goal I designed the criteria that defined turnaround churches in the WELS, identified those congregations, selected a diverse sampling of twelve turnaround congregations primarily on the basis of their setting, size, and age, conducted field research, collected and studied the data on these congregations, and then reported the results. To accomplish the second goal I shared the project findings with some coworkers, engaged some of these consultants in an analysis of the previous four-phase core consulting service (WELS Parish Assistance) based on the findings, and sought their assistance with envisioning how to improve and expand the services for the benefit of churches desiring turnaround.

Consulting with churches--especially those that desperately need and desire turnaround--could easily be viewed as a daunting challenge. The same could be said about serving as pastors or lay leaders, particularly in churches that are struggling. One would not accept such an unnerving challenge were it not for confidence in the power of God and the

promises in his Word. In the next chapter we will explore some theological and biblical issues that ground us in God's Word and position us, with his blessing, to be helpful to his churches in pursuing his purposes.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL ISSUES

While all teachings of Scripture are significant to every believer as well as every church that is committed to being faithful to God's Word, this chapter focuses primarily on four doctrinal issues that lay a solid foundation for desiring and pursuing turnaround. First, *knowing God's gracious heart* after experiencing his love and forgiveness in Christ inspires his redeemed people to appreciate and share his love. Second, *owning Christ's make-disciples mission*, both as an individual Christian and as a gathering of believers (i.e., a congregation), is fundamental to pursuing the salvation of lost souls with passion. Third, *depending on God's powerful means of grace* causes congregations to rely exclusively on the gospel and Holy Spirit for converting the lost and transforming their lives. Finally, *gathering an audience through appropriate methods* (for the sake of exposing more people to the means of grace) ensures that congregations endeavor to be faithful to God's Word and responsible in identifying and utilizing God-given opportunities to build relationships and proclaim the gospel within their local ministry contexts and beyond.

There are, of course, other issues--both theological and practical--which come into play when striving to assist congregations with turnaround. Some of those issues are mentioned within this chapter and, along with others, are considered in greater depth in chapter 3 (Issues from Related Contemporary Literature), which focuses mainly on application. The four specific doctrinal issues (cited above) are highlighted in this chapter

primarily because it is the hope and prayer of this writer that considering these issues will help to minimize the tensions that could easily exist in a congregation or denomination where there is a high priority on both (1) remaining faithful to God's Word and (2) conducting purposeful outreach, especially through innovative methodology.

Such tensions have been apparent within the WELS for a couple of decades, both within some congregations and the church body as a whole. Briefly stated, some of our pastors (and lay persons) have emphasized the need to be less traditional and more innovative in reaching out, and this has caused others within WELS to wonder if we are relying less on the power of God's Word and more on our creativity and tactics to connect people to Christ.

For a time two separate and, one might also say, *opposing* groups developed within WELS. Each group gave prominence to a valid scriptural concern, solicited like-minded support, and gathered regularly to advance their cause. One group stressed faithfulness to God's Word; the other faithfulness to God's mission. Sadly, some advocates within each group seemed to talk more *about* each other than *with* each other.

The resulting tensions, from one perspective, served a good purpose. In due course special scriptural studies were conducted and then presented at a national gathering of hundreds of WELS pastors. These studies (cited later in this project) attempted to define *church health* and clarify the relationship between God's sovereign power and will and our human responsibility and effort. In other words, the key question was: *Based on Scripture, what is God's role and what is our role in carrying out his make-disciples mission?*

The presentations seemed to validate the concerns of each group and provided an immediate opportunity for earnest dialog. Later, additional forums for open and affable

discussions were established. While there has been ongoing and, for the most part, healthy dialog over what is central to church health, some tensions remain.

At the gathering of pastors mentioned above, the presentations and discussions that immediately followed appeared to unite the participants around several themes. I attempted to identify and expound on those themes in the first three doctrinal issues in this chapter. Noticeable unanimity seemed to exist around the significance of (1) *knowing God's gracious heart*, (2) *owning Christ's make-disciples mission*, and (3) *depending on God's powerful means of grace*.

At the same time, discussions about how to carry out the Lord's make-disciples mission revealed that there were differences of opinion. The resulting anxiety was perceptible. Based on this and similar experiences in diverse settings within the WELS, I determined that *gathering an audience through appropriate methods* needed to be the fourth foundational issue in this chapter.

While ongoing discussions within my church body have demonstrated an essential unity on the first three doctrinal points, the evident remaining tension on the fourth point underscores the need for additional study and dialog. The Lord has blessed previous efforts to unite those within the WELS to walk and work together in proclaiming Christ to the nations, and I pray that he will continue to bless and unify this body of believers (and others) perhaps also through this turnaround churches project.

Of course, the WELS is not alone in experiencing this type of tension. Regardless of the area of ministry, where there are different philosophies of or approaches to

ministry, there will be some level of confusion and anxiety. Both clarity on biblical truth and respectful dialog bring people together and help to diminish apprehensions.

Within denominations there have been controversies over styles of worship, approaches to stewardship, and methods of evangelism. Without clear statements of ministerial practice--explanations as to why a congregation does what it does the way it does, pastors and church leaders have sometimes made assumptions and judgments about the ministry of others that unnecessarily foster disunity. It is important to distinguish the timeless and unchanging truths of theology from the traditions and forms that change because ministry is carried out in differing places and in different eras by people with different gifts and emphases. It is important to separate biblical truths from personal preferences. ... It is important to ground a church's practice of ministry in biblical theology, cultural awareness and well-reasoned priorities. (Kelm 2003, 6)

Ed Stetzer and David Putman share similar thoughts in *Breaking the Missional Code*. People have different views and want to practice their preferences. This causes tension. "This tension is not new. We find the early church struggling with many of the same issues" (Stetzer and Putman 2006, 32).

Focusing primarily on the four doctrinal issues addressed in this chapter will help bring people together. Whether in a congregation or a denomination, agreement on these foundational issues will *both* unify and compel people to be faithful to God's Word *and* reach out to others determinedly with God's truth.

Knowing God's gracious heart draws attention to the purest motivation for ministry, God's love and forgiveness in Christ. *Owning Christ's make-disciples mission*, which is both a privilege and a responsibility, is the principal task of those who confess and follow Jesus and devotedly gather in his congregations. *Depending on God's powerful means of grace* ensures that those who conduct ministry and desire turnaround rely not on their own ingenuity and efforts to change hearts and lives but on the power of the gospel and the

Spirit's work. Finally, *gathering an audience through appropriate methods* calls on God's people, and especially God's leaders, to have integrity and use good judgment as they pursue Christ's mission.

Considered together, these four critical issues especially provide a concrete biblical foundation for pursuing turnaround because they guide God's people and his churches to do the *right thing* (make disciples) for the *right reason* (God's love and forgiveness) in the *right ways* (with confidence in the gospel's and the Spirit's power and with discernment). After laying a theological four-cornered foundation in this chapter, which provides the framework for the Turnaround Churches in the WELS study, we will address a number of practical concerns related to assisting churches with turnaround.

Knowing God's Gracious Heart

Vital, healthy churches--including those which desire and eventually experience turnaround in a way that honors their Lord--have a Christocentric worldview that is grounded in the account of creation and informed by the biblical record of Old and New Testament history. These vigorous churches, and especially their humble yet influential leaders, know God's gracious heart. Consequently, this revealed and abiding knowledge inspires them to appreciate and share their Lord's love for souls.

How does anyone come to know--to the degree that it is even possible--the heart of God? Surely all people are born with consciences that either accuse or defend their thoughts and actions (Rom 2:14-15, unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are to the NIV). Also, all that exists suggests that there is something or someone big and powerful out there (Ps 19:1-4; Heb 3:4). But, again, how does one know the heart of God?

There is only one sure way, and that is *through God's Word* (Josh 3:9; Matt 4:4; Acts 22:14). God invites all to hear and know him, "that your soul may live" (Isa 55:3). He declares that his thoughts and ways are drastically higher than ours (Isa 55:8-9). With words of praise Paul exclaims: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Rom 11:33). Yet the Lord reveals his loving heart for all to see in his words and actions (1 John 4:9-10).

Amazingly, this unfathomable God chooses to reveal himself to us because he wants to be our God, our *only* God (Exod 20:2-3). He wants us to know him, love him, trust him, serve him, share him, and ultimately be with him forever in his eternal kingdom.

Grounded in Creation

The three-in-one God had these clear intentions from the very beginning. On the sixth day of creation he counseled, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Gen 1:26).

Commonly referred to as the *climax* or *pinnacle of creation*, God fashioned humankind--his supreme visible beings--to be his constant companions and devoted caretakers of what he had brought into existence. Out of gratitude, both genders, male and female, would ecstatically bring their Creator endless praise and joy as they dwelt together in paradise. Through these divine words and actions God revealed his gracious heart.

Then slithering into paradise the serpent appeared. His tempting words to Adam and Eve challenged God's unambiguous decree to not eat from the forbidden tree. Embedded in his temptation were a call to doubt their Creator and luring promises of open

eyes, becoming like God and knowing good and evil (Gen 3:1-5). The two ate--first the woman, then her husband--and their eyes were indeed opened. They now knew evil because they had become evil, and both fearful and ashamed, they hid from their Maker (Gen 3:6-8). This is the origin of conflict between God and humankind, "when our human nature was corrupted by our first parents' sin (Rom 5:12)" (Chapell 2011, 8).

That's why Adam and Eve were the first people to hide from God, but not the last. Their loss of God's holy image would be inherited so that not only they, but also their children and all those conceived thereafter, would be rendered helpless to help themselves. David confessed, "I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:3-5).

"We stand condemned even before we have the ability to think or do anything. The Bible declares that the result of Adam's sin was 'condemnation for all men' (Rom 5:18). Because we have inherited Adam's sinfulness, we have inherited Adam's guilt" (Brenner 2000, 15). Paul's pronouncement applies to all. "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ... Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (Eph 2:1-3).

Those with inherited sin are spiritually lifeless. Like fallen Adam and Eve hiding in the garden, they are incapable of moving toward God. Even more dreadful, they are hostile to God and are opposed to his holy will (Rom 8:7-8). "God requires holiness for us to have a close relationship with [him], but both our nature and our actions distance us from him. How can we fix this? We can't. We are imperfect creatures and can't make ourselves holy any more than a muddy hand can wipe a white shirt clean" (Chapell 2011, 8). Only Christianity amply analyzes this human predicament (Andrews 2011, 9).

With the first man and woman--now sin infested, incapable of moving toward God, and hiding with trepidation--God himself took the initiative by calling out, "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9). A confrontation followed. The guilty ones offered empty excuses. The Creator, the righteous one, rightly condemned their actions and disclosed just consequences. "In response to Adam's rebellion, God cursed both humans and their world (Gen. 3:16-19). Physical and spiritual death set in" (Andrews 2011, 12). These were dreadful, long-term consequences, but for Adam and Eve there was some *good news* too.

The Almighty also spoke to the evil serpent (Satan) about his future and deliberate trouncing by the promised one, Jesus Christ. "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15). "God is the only one who can fix our relationship with him, and he does so by providing the holiness he requires. God takes the initiative (1 John 4:19). Through Jesus, our God rescues us from the consequences of our sin" (Chapell 2011, 8).

Adam and Eve desperately needed to overhear this *gospel* message, and there would be many gospel messages repeated again and again as the pages of history turned. These messages were proclaimed, written, memorized, and shared with multitudes over the centuries because *the Creator God has a heart that aches for the salvation of all*. Scripture guarantees that God wants all people to be rescued from the damnation they deserve through the one mediator, Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom for all (1 Tim 2:4-6).

Knowing this truth means every sinner who is brought to faith can say through the power of the Spirit: "The good news is that Christ's righteousness is greater than my sin.

Fully absolved in Christ, I am free to confess my sins, receive the assurance of pardon, and go on in my imperfect yet Spirit-led obedience" (Horton 2008, 121).

Since the Son of God had no sin, his willingness to suffer on a cross and accept the penalty we deserve is far beyond any recompense that humanity could provide. Christ's righteousness so overbalances our unrighteousness that his sacrifice is sufficient to compensate for the sin of the entire world and of all ages (Rom 5:15-19; Heb 9:26-28; 1 Pet 3:18; 1 John 2:2). God accepted Jesus' sacrifice as a substitute for our punishment (1 Pet 2:24). He paid the debt to justice we could not pay (Ps 47:7-9; Titus 2:11-14). His suffering atones for (covers) our wrongs (1 John 4:10). His death rescues us from the hell we deserve (Gal 3:13-14). (Chapell 2011, 10)

Rooted in the Genesis account of creation, preserved for the benefit of all nations through God's chosen nation Israel, expanded to include peoples from the ends of the earth through the New Testament church, and coming to full bloom in the consummation of God's eternal kingdom pictured in Revelation, there is a powerful message that unfolds within the pages of Scripture. It is a message that reveals the gracious heart of God. This message--a storyline that unifies every part of Scripture--is centered in the Christ.

Informed by Biblical History

D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller claim, "Within Genesis, creation grounds the responsibility of God's image bearers toward God and sets the stage for the anarchy and idolatry of Genesis 3 that in turn produces the drama of *the entire Bible*" (Carson and Keller 2011, 14). These authors point to Old Testament history and symbolism (e.g., the tabernacle and temple, the priestly sacrificial systems) and suggest, "It would be easy to follow these and many other lines as they intertwine to make an entrancing weave of God's purposes in bringing us to Jesus Christ and his gospel" (Carson and Keller 2011, 14).

"As we travel through the Old Testament story, we're building a picture of God's plan and of the person who will deliver what God promises: to give life to people who will reflect his glory, to destroy evil and rid the world of its curse, to bless people from all nations, and to reconcile sinners to himself through a sacrifice for sins" (Smith 2011, 13). Malachi captures this central theme and message well when he announces, "'Suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the Lord Almighty" (Mal 3:1). The Old Testament Scriptures are laden with symbolism and symmetry as they testify about the coming Christ (John 5:39).

Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola assert that the entire Bible has a single storyline united by a common narrative and "Once our eyes are opened to see that narrative, everything in both Testaments gels into a coherent, understandable, and amazing story. ... *It's the story of Jesus Christ*" (Sweet and Viola 2012, ix-x). These authors contend that this view of Scripture is backed by a long tradition of theologians who have described Scripture in similar terms, citing as examples: "As Protestant Reformer Martin Luther has put in epigrammatic fashion: 'Scripture is the cradle in which Christ lies.' Scot McKnight puts it in more current form: 'We have to become a People of the Story ... and this means we have to become People of the Story-that-is-complete-in-Jesus'" (Sweet and Viola 2012, xv).

To emphasize that the Scriptures are "not a library of disjointed, independent, inspired books" (Sweet and Viola 2012, xvi) and that the Old and New Testaments are "not two separate books bound together between a single cover," (Sweet and Viola 2012, xvi) Sweet and Viola refer to these Testaments as the *First* and *Second* Testaments (Sweet and Viola 2012, xvi). They assert, "Jesus Christ is the glue that binds both Testaments together

... [and as the church fathers, Reformers, and numerous theologians and scholars of the past and present have agreed,] Jesus is the interpretive key of the Bible" (Sweet and Viola 2012, xvii-xviii).

Because Christ is the *glue* between the Testaments and the *interpretive key* of Scripture, sermons and Bible studies and Christian witness need to be centered primarily on communicating the gospel. At the same time, conveying the Bible's plotline provides a beneficial context in which to communicate the gospel clearly. Keller explains: "We must not just preach the Bible in general; we must preach the gospel. Yet unless those listening to the message understand the Bible in general, they won't grasp the gospel" (Keller 2012, 31). In other words, the gospel is best understood in its historical context.

The greater the understanding of biblical history, the clearer the message of salvation in Christ becomes. For example, it helps to know what the Lord said as he proclaimed his name to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 34:6-7). Even though (as the Lord responds to sin's offense) he is a just and righteous God, demanding complete perfection of his creatures and damning those who reject him by rejecting his Son, he is at the same time a loving and forgiving God who yearns to bring his wayward children back into union with himself. He chose to do this by forgiving sinners through the merits of Christ--the one who was without sin, the one sacrificed once on a cross for the sins of all (Rom 6:10; Heb 7:27).

Biblical history provides the context for understanding God's redemptive plan and knowing his gracious heart (1 John 4:8-10), and it sets the stage for God's supreme act of love, sending a Savior to rescue a world of sinners (John 3:16-17; 2 Cor 5:19). Hear God's heart pounding. He sacrificed his only Son so unworthy sinners might be saved.

The biblical record provides the background for John the Baptist's pointed proclamation, "Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29) as well as Peter's pronouncement, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet 2:24). Those who know and believe the gospel in the context of biblical history know the meaning of Christ's death on a cross.

On the cross, in an act of self-sacrifice quantum leaps beyond anything ever seen in human history, Christ canceled the debt of our sin and credited his righteousness to our account (Col 2:13-14; 2 Cor 5:21).

Not only that, but he also broke the bonds of sin by being the first human ever to pass his entire life without grasping for his own glory, even to the point of submitting willingly to the ignominies of death on a cross (1 John 3:5). By vanquishing our sin in these two respects--paying sin's penalty and purging sin's power--Christ fits us for membership in his holy community. Costly to him and priceless to us is our induction into the body of Christ. (Savage 2011, 14)

The ancient text that historically traces the horrid path of sin, as it reveals the compassionate heart of God, prepares people to receive by faith Peter's and John's gospel proclamation. "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pet 1:18). "[Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

Believers in Christ know the heart of God because they have experienced his grace. As he did with Adam and Eve--who after losing their holy image were totally incapable of approaching their righteous Creator--the Lord has continued to seek out and pronounce the saving gospel to those conceived and born alienated from him. This is why every saved person who fixes his or her eyes on Christ (Heb 12:2) and every enthusiastic assembly of spiritually-rescued people, which meets to encourage each other in the Lord as

they wait for his return (Heb 10:25), appreciate and share the Lord's love for souls. Because they know the gracious heart of God they want what God wants, for all to be saved.

This is the purest motivation for participating in sharing the gospel. The beating heart of God, filled with passion and purpose revealed in Christ, engenders love for souls and drives make-disciples ministry. "The engine of being missional is not religious duty, guilt, condemnation, or ambition. Nor is it rooted in the human will and desire to do good and please God" (Viola 2009, 15).

Missional ministry can only be accomplished provided there is a sure foundation for all we do. We begin with the knowledge of God because the mission originates in His heart. Otherwise, we find ourselves doing many of the good things possible in this world, but never accomplishing the one great thing the kingdom of God had in store for us. The work God gives His people rises above mere goodness, because at the heart of who God is, there is love like none other. (Stetzer and Nation 2012, 28)

That love of God moves his redeemed to seek his will and accomplish his purposes. "Allow the Father to teach you of His heart for you, your family, your neighborhood, your culture. The missional working of His heart in our lives refuses to allow us to sit still. He drives us out into the rocky places of people's lives. Allying yourself with the Father's work is to travel with Him as He seeks those who are wayward" (Stetzer and Nation 2012, 40).

As God's redemptive plan continues to unfold, proclaiming the gospel to as many people as possible remains our God-ordained mission. Because we know his heart, we take that mission seriously. Especially leaders in the church--because of their added responsibility and amplified influence--will want to make sure they are "after [God's] own heart" like David (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13:22).

Godly Leaders Know God's Heart

Church leaders who provide *godly* leadership are deeply sensitive to spiritual concerns and responsive to divine directives. This is significant when striving for church health or pursuing turnaround. The Lord accomplishes his will in whatever way he desires, but he often works out his will through the leaders he raises up to serve him in his churches.

Through the power of the gospel, godly leaders attempt to rid themselves of all malice and deceit and become mature in their Christian faith (1 Pet 2:1-3). They are saddened by what saddens their Savior (Luke 19:41), and they delight in that which brings their Savior joy (Luke 10:20-21). They serve their Lord with humility (Jas 3:13), and sometimes with tears (Acts 20:19), and they consider others better than themselves (Phil 2:3).

Godly leaders value prayer, set aside time to pray regularly, encourage others to pray, and model for others dependence on the Lord (1 Thess 1:2). They pray for God's help to the glory of his name (Ps 79:9), pour out their hearts' desires for the salvation of others (Rom 10:1), and give thanks for the believers whose hearts and lives the Lord has changed (Eph 1:16). They pray when undergoing persecution because of their Christian confession (Acts 16:25), and they seek the prayers of others (1 Thess 5:25), especially that more doors to sharing the gospel might be opened so the saving truth might be proclaimed clearly to more people (Col 4:3-4). Such leaders are confident, in and through Christ, that their prayers are powerful and effective (Jas 5:16).

Godly leaders diligently study the Scriptures recognizing that they testify about Christ (John 5:39), are persuaded that God has the power to do whatever he has promised (Rom 4:21), and give themselves fully to the work of the Lord, knowing that their

labor in the Lord is never in vain (1 Cor 15:58). They serve the Lord wholeheartedly (Eph 6:7) and, faithfully using whatever gifts they have received, they are intent on serving others (1 Pet 4:10). As serious students of Scripture, they know that nurturing the saved (2 Pet 3:18) and rescuing the lost (Matt 28:19) must be priorities in their churches. They study their ministry contexts, cast and help to pursue appropriate visions for their congregations within their communities, and equip and empower God's people for works of service (Eph 4:12).

While being engaged in all these acts of service, godly leaders readily admit they are flawed (1 John 1:10). They see ample self-accusing evidence of egotism, greed, impatience, envy, and so many other sinful faults in their hearts and lives. But they know God's gracious heart. By grace, they know Christ Jesus as their Savior. Therefore, painfully aware of their wretched sin, they humbly cry out to the Lord for his mercy (Psalm 6). They are encouraged from being united with Christ and comforted by his love and gift of fellowship with the Spirit (Phil 2:1). Confident in Christ and fully assured of forgiveness, they rise from their kneeling penitent position and stand firm and strong in the Lord fully equipped with his armor (Eph 6:10-18) and eager to serve and share (1 Pet 5:2).

All of God's leaders and all of his congregations, not just those that need and desire turnaround, will want to build and base their ministry on their awareness of God's gracious heart revealed in and through Christ. This is what inspires God's people to own and pursue zealously their Savior's soul-rescuing mission.

Owning Christ's Make-Disciples Mission

It is imperative that God's redeemed people--either as individuals or as gatherings of believers in congregations--own Christ's make-disciples mission. This is both

challenging (because individuals and congregations have a natural propensity for becoming inwardly or selfishly focused) and, at the same time, *essential* to pursuing with passion the salvation of lost souls as the Lord desires. "When we lack passion, it is often because we have allowed something precious to become familiar. If Satan can desensitize us, he can effectively undermine what God wants to do in our lives. We keep the fires of passion lit by keeping clear about what is important: the salvation of the lost" (Browning 2009, 91).

This is what vital, healthy congregations do. They prioritize the salvation of the lost. This is also what turnaround churches do and have in common. During their decline they may drift off course and allow other concerns to consume their time and energy. But turnaround involves getting back on course and (re)focusing on what God cares about the most (i.e., saving souls). Turnaround requires not just affirming or espousing the theory of making disciples, but actually producing a concerted and consistent effort to do it. Pastors and lay leaders and other active members in turnaround churches do more than give lip service to the Lord's soul-saving mission; they dedicate their lives to it and, with their enthusiasm and example, impassion others to do the same.

It is likely that some churches intent on being faithful *to* God's Word are not even aware that they are being unfaithful *with* God's Word. They may not even know how deficient they are in outreach and evangelistic efforts because they *talk the talk* about reaching the lost and seeking the unchurched, but they fail to *walk the walk*. Instead they may mostly attempt to appeal to those who are already Christians, or they routinely repeat past efforts that have provided little or no evidence of bearing fruit for years.

Those who help their congregations to grow and those who lead their congregations from decline to turnaround and health are mindful of and impacted by their Savior's prayer to his Father. "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:15-18). This was and still is the Savior's perfect plan.

The Perfect Plan

The Savior's plan to distribute the message of salvation throughout the world was clear. His Father, who ordained this plan and would accomplish it through the work of his Holy Spirit (John 14:26), fully endorsed and empowered it. Together with providing the living, active, and enduring written Word (Heb 4:12; 1 Pet 1:23), penned through believers by the Spirit (2 Pet 1:21), the perfect plan for sharing salvation truth with all was set.

On the evening of his resurrection day, Jesus appeared to his disciples to assure them that this plan (which directly involved them) was now unfolding. "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven'" (John 20:21-23). With these words Jesus authorized his followers to forgive the sins of the penitent and refuse forgiveness to the impenitent for as long as they do not repent. It was important--both for them and future followers of Christ--to know and remember this because *this was the plan*.

With that one command ["I am sending you."], Jesus announced two thousand years of direction for the church, still in effect for the churches of today--even your church. He proclaimed that we are sent. The church is, and you are

individually, God's missionary to the world. Your church is God's instrument to reach the world, and it includes reaching your community. We are sent on mission by God. (Stetzer and Putman 2006, 31)

At his ascension Jesus knew that heaven and hell were the only two options for every person. He was fully aware of what he accomplished when he both dutifully and willingly provided the all-sufficient payment for sin to secure a way, the only way, back to his Father (John 14:6). Consequently, his heart throbbed like his Father's when he said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20).

Christ authorized his disciples on the Galilean mountain then and all his believers thereafter to baptize and to teach everyone everywhere. What an all-encompassing honor and responsibility! "For the great privilege of participation in Christ's transforming work, we have been saved, and for this great purpose, we honor our King and reflect his grace in every dimension of our lives" (Chapell 2011, 25). Of course, "We can never show the love of Christ until we understand the love of Christ. And we can never understand the love of Christ until we understand His death. And we can never understand the death of Christ until we understand why He died. And we can never understand why He died until we understand His holiness and our sin" (Stetzer and Nation 2012, 46). "All of Christian life and thought grow out of what Jesus accomplished" (Carson and Keller 2011, 14).

Understanding that the Lord both sends his believers out and then works with them in growing his churches and expanding his kingdom is critical. The Lord assigns to his

servants, his fellow workers, their tasks so that some plant the seed of the gospel and others do the watering, but only God produces the harvest (1 Cor 3:5-9). This is his perfect plan.

It is God who moves the church forward. But God did so and continues to do so by using people. It's like planting a garden. Only God can bring forth the miracle of life out of a lifeless seed. Yet, for whatever reason, God in his wisdom has decided to work through people. God could grow the garden on his own, but he doesn't. God uses people to plant, cultivate, weed, fertilize, and water. (Hunter 2000, 17)

Those gathered by the Lord in vibrant and turnaround congregations see themselves as purposefully positioned to pursue Christ's make-disciples mission. They know they are participating in *his* plan. They are convinced that proclaiming the gospel, both to the saved and to the lost, is their primary task.

The Principal Task

Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples following his resurrection. "He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned'" (Mark 16:15-16). Because heaven and hell are real (Matt 25:31-46), the proclamation of the gospel--both to those who already believe in Christ as their Savior and to those who do not--must be the principal task of every believer and of every Christian congregation.

The express purpose of Christ's coming was to remove the guilt and punishment of sin in order that sinful humans may be reconciled to God. Since this was the mission of Christ in coming to earth, it is fitting that the mission of the church be similar. The mission of the church is to announce the forgiveness that Jesus has accomplished for all. ... There seems to be work specially given to the church when the church and its ministers are sent into the world, apart from the general command to love others and live a God-pleasing life. What is uniquely commanded to the church when Christ spoke his commissioning words, this is what we do best to grab onto as the mission of the church. In the commission passages, Christ told his disciples to

preach the gospel. Preaching the gospel, then, is what we see the apostles doing. This is unique work, not done by unbelievers. This is unique work, not done by any other institution on earth.

Let's look upon preaching the gospel as the special mission of the church. Let's look upon helping the needy as an inevitable fruit of faith, as part of our life of sanctification. (Nass 2008, 6-7, 10)

Christian churches must make announcing the good news of salvation in Christ their highest priority, their *main thing*. This is the one ministry given to his believers by Christ himself. "The church has a very narrow commission. ... It is called to deliver Christ so clearly and fully that believers are prepared to be salt and light in the worldly stations to which God has called them" (Horton 2008, 228). The ministry of the gospel is the one office instituted by Christ in his church, proclaiming the gospel is the one assigned task, and everything else in the church must support that unique task (Brug 2009, 3-4).

When congregations view proclaiming the gospel--both to the not-yet converted and the already-converted--as their main task and then design everything else they do to support this effort, they are more likely to have dynamic and growing ministries. This is especially true when sharing the gospel, with those who do not yet know Christ, is their *highest* priority (Rom 15:20).

The frequent repetition of the commission to preach the gospel and the variety of ways in which it is presented in the four Gospels and Acts indicate that this task is so important that it must always be a priority in the program of the church. This is why I believe that it is still correct to say that world evangelization is the supreme task of the church. (Fernando 2002, 182).

Regrettably, where institution-mindedness supplants mission-mindedness, there will be imbalance within congregations between proclaiming the gospel to *our own* and sharing the gospel with *others*. Such an imbalance is often followed by decline.

Prioritizing Outreach

Failure to prioritize gospel outreach is not a new concern. Both individual followers of Christ and congregations comprised of believers are frequently inclined, because of fear or faulty rationalizations, to latch onto readily-available excuses for not intentionally and passionately going with the gospel to people everywhere, starting in their own communities, and even in their own families.

For some it may be fear of rejection, not knowing what to say, ruining a relationship, or even inviting some form of persecution. Fear is a powerful, controlling emotion. Others may be inclined to offer excuses. They might mention witnessing with their lives instead of with their words, waiting for the perfect opportunity, not having the gift of an evangelist, believing that faith is a personal matter, or suggesting that sharing the gospel is their pastor's job. Even pastors might dodge opportunities to share the gospel with the unchurched. Perhaps they have convinced themselves that they are better at public preaching than private witnessing, so they hope and pray that God uses others to reach the lost.

The Lord, who first proclaimed the good news in the garden (Gen 3:15), has always wanted his gospel to be communicated (Heb 1:1-2). Yet, offering excuses in an attempt to avoid participating in God's proclamation plan (i.e., delivering his truth primarily through human agents) has a long history. A few examples follow.

Moses suggested to his Maker, when God assigned him the task of being the point person in leading the Israelites out of Egypt, that he wasn't eloquent enough to occupy that position (Exod 4:13). Elijah the prophet orchestrated the victorious Mount Carmel sacrifice as a challenge to the prophets of Baal. But even after that memorable mountain-top

experience, when hearing of Jezebel's threat to kill him, he was afraid and ran for his life (1 Kgs 19:3). Reluctant to share God's words of judgment and compassion with an enemy of Israel, Jonah fled from God's call to preach against the city of Nineveh until the Lord changed his mind through an experience with a great storm and a great fish (Jonah 1-4). Jeremiah, appointed as a prophet to the nations, claimed before the Lord that he did not know how to speak (Jer 1:5-6). Only after the Lord quelled this prophet's apprehension by guaranteeing his rescue and touching his mouth was Jeremiah ready to go wherever God would send him and proclaim whatever he was told to speak.

Jesus personally extended this invitation: "'Follow me.' But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:59-60). Another said, "'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:61-62). The Lord expects wholehearted devotion from those who follow him, not needless delays or empty excuses.

The twelve apostles, personally selected and sent out by their Lord to declare that the kingdom of heaven is near (Matthew 10), had a lot to learn about proclaiming God's truth to the masses. They witnessed divine power and heard pure truth from Jesus' own lips. Still they struggled with their individual weaknesses, argued about attaining personal greatness, failed to grasp the most basic truths, and abandoned their Lord at a most unfortunate time.

Gradually they learned from their shameful mistakes. Eventually, enlightened and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they were sent out to proclaim the risen Christ to the nations. Most of them experienced a martyr's death, confessing faith in their Savior to the bitter end. These appointed men needed to be shaped for their soul-saving work. What ambassador of Christ doesn't?

The Lord helped them and others throughout their ministries to see opportunities to share the gospel beyond their race and territories. For example, he opened Peter's eyes to see that the gospel was for all people and not just the Jews (Acts 11:1-18), and he scattered his messengers by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed so that both Jews and Greeks heard the good news about the Lord Jesus (Acts 11:19-21).

Saul of Tarsus, the avenging persecutor, after his stopped-suddenly-in-his-murderous-tracks conversion, became the Apostle Paul--an astonishingly positive and powerful example of one called and sent to proclaim Christ. The Lord made it clear to Ananias that, despite this dreaded man's reputation, he had chosen Saul to proclaim his Word. "The Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel'" (Acts 9:15).

The biblical record of Paul's missionary ministry affirms that he was filled with the Spirit. Paul considered everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ (Phil 3:8); he was not ashamed of the gospel because he knew it was the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believed (Rom 1:16); his ambition was to go and preach the gospel where Christ was not known (Rom 15:20); he was willing to become

all things to all people so that by all possible means he might save some (1 Cor 9:22); and, he considered his life worth nothing if he could not complete the task given to him by his Lord--"the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24).

The biblical examples cited above call attention to specially chosen servants, albeit some unlikely prospects, who were commissioned to accomplish unique assignments at specific periods of time both in messianic Old Testament and New Testament salvation history. That takes nothing away, however, from the glorious task the Lord has given to all of his followers. That task is the privilege of participating in his work, his glorious make-disciples mission, which he wants them to own fully and pursue ardently to his glory. This is what Jesus emphasized at his ascension (Matt 28:16-20) and why so many have called Jesus' words the *Great Commission*, which "is nothing less than Jesus putting audacious vision into the act of mission" (White 2012, 201).

The Lord's ambassadors today, like so many who have served before them, need assurance from their Lord that he will be with them. Through the faithful use of God's Word, they will encourage one another and expose empty excuses as *hollow reasons wrapped in lies*. They will direct each other to Christ's blood-stained cross and empty tomb and exclaim, "We love because he first loved us" (John 4:19) and "Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died" (2 Cor 5:14).

Healthy congregations and churches which are in the process of experiencing turnaround are motivated by their Lord's unmerited love and forgiveness. This is what compels them to love their Lord, love others, and love his soul-saving, kingdom-building work. This is what gives them confidence that the Lord will work with them just as he

worked with his disciples when they went out and preached everywhere following his ascension (Mark 16:20). They are confident that, through themselves and others, "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24:14).

Predestination in Perspective

In spite of the clarity and urgency of Christ's directive to his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, some who are commissioned by that charge may be tempted to use the Bible's teaching of election or predestination to minimize the significance of the Lord's plan to use love-compelled people to reach the lost. They might wonder: If the Lord has promised to gather his elect and make sure every one of them is ultimately saved, why would we not trust him to reach his chosen with or without our personal evangelism or congregational outreach efforts? Why, then, must outreach be our highest priority?

It is true that the predestination doctrine gives assurance that all of God's elect will be saved by his choice and initiative, not ours, as he works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Eph 1:3-14). Motivated by unfathomable love, God chose in advance those he would later lead to faith in Christ to the praise of his grace (Rom 11:5). He arranges the situations in the lives of his elect so they are all exposed to the saving gospel, through which the Holy Spirit brings them to faith. For example, God made sure that the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch heard the gospel. Luke writes that after Paul proclaimed Christ to them, "All who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48).

From before creation, throughout the world's history, and into eternity, God has the benefit of his elect in mind and causes his divine purpose for them to be fulfilled.

After electing them, he calls them to faith through the gospel and declares them fully forgiven through the merits of Christ. Then, when his elect have lived out the days determined for them (Acts 17:26), he ushers them into heavenly glory (Rom 8:28-30).

While speaking about himself as the vine and his followers as the branches, Jesus summed up the truth of election so clearly and simply. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last" (John 15:16). The teaching of election puts God's grace on display and confirms that sinners are saved only because of what the triune God has done for them, because of his own purpose and grace, and not by what they have done for him (2 Tim 1:9; Eph 2:8-9). Those who confess Christ as Savior may then be assured: "You are eternally secure in God's choice of you as the subject of his eternal love. ... It was all God's choice and act" (Purves 2007, 117).

This is the saving work of the Spirit through the gospel, as Paul informed the Thessalonian believers. "From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess 2:13-14). "Arguably, the Holy Spirit's most important work is to glorify Christ, and he does not do this apart from shining the spotlight on Christ for the elect to see and savor" (DeYoung 2011, 18).

There is no Christian life without the converting work of the Spirit. He enables us to understand and spiritually discern the things of God (1 Cor 2:12-14). He grants us repentance that leads to life (Acts 11:18). He pours out God's love into our hearts (Rom 5:5). He enables us to believe in the promises of God (John 1:12-13). "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father," Jesus says in John 6:65.

And how do the elect come to God? "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). So we come to faith in the Son by the Father's appointing and the Spirit's imparting. Faith itself, then, is a gift, a gift that comes at conversion

when we are born again by the Spirit working through the Word of God (1 Pet 1:23-25). (DeYoung 2011, 13)

The truth that the salvation of undeserving sinners is all God's doing, from start to finish, provides indescribable confidence and comfort to those who have been brought to faith in Christ. This is a comfort that cannot be exhausted and need not be questioned because election is God's choice and work (Deutschlander 2011, 106-7).

Scripture declares that God called his elect by his own goodness and glory (2 Pet 1:3), false teachers will not be successful in deceiving them (Matt 24:24), the elect who are given eternal life will never be snatched from his hand (John 10:28), and believers are responsible for making their calling and election sure (2 Pet 1:10). Scripture also ensures that, for the sake of his elect, God will shorten the days leading up to the end of the age (Mark 13:20) and, at the sound of the loud trumpet call, angels will gather all of God's elect from one end of the heavens to the other (Matt 24:31).

Without entering into an extensive exposition of the controversies regarding the doctrine of election which is not the purpose of this work, it should be stated clearly that it is unhealthy to speculate why God chose some and not others. The Lord wants all to be saved and to have a knowledge of his truth (1 Tim 2:4); he is patient because he does not want anyone to perish (2 Pet 3:9); and he is filled with sorrow when people reject his saving truth and suffer self-inflicted consequences (Luke 13:34). All those who are ultimately eternally lost and end up in hell are there because of their personal unbelief. Also, those who live under God's grace and have confidence in Christ that they are among God's elect must take warning from biblical history and be careful that they do not fall (1 Cor 10:12).

The teaching of election in Scripture provides enormous comfort and encouragement to those who profess Christ as Savior, assuring them that they are saved alone by God's grace and power. At the same time, this teaching must never be used as an excuse for underemphasizing Christ's directive to go and make disciples of all nations.

Paul had confidence in Christ that he was one of God's elect. Simultaneously, he expressed the attitude the Lord wants to see in all of his believers and churches.

"Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory" (2 Tim 2:10). Paul viewed himself as an undeserving recipient of God's love and forgiveness in Christ and a clay-vessel instrument the Lord would use to communicate the treasure of the gospel to others and, in so doing, accomplish his purposes (2 Cor 4:7). Paul was confident that through God's Word and the Spirit's work the elect would be saved, "that Jesus would gather all whom he had chosen through the teaching of all that he had taught" (Deutschlander 2011, 197).

Paul knew that the message of the cross would seem like foolishness to the unsaved and would have to be spiritually discerned by the Spirit's power (1 Cor 2:14). He also knew that it was absolutely essential for the soul-saving message of salvation to be delivered and received (Rom 10:14). Not knowing who the elect were or where to find them, Paul was determined to travel to as many places as he could to share God's Word with as many people as possible. Compelled by the love of Christ and confident that God would guide his travels and bless his labors, how could Paul not want to become all things to all men so that by all possible means he might save some (1 Cor 9:22)?

The doctrine of election was not an excuse for Paul to be lethargic in proclaiming law and gospel, assuming that God would eventually gather his elect with or without him. That incongruous way of thinking would have been a misuse of Scripture's precious predestination teaching. Paul knew that God had already chosen him, and so he was confident God would reach more of his elect through him by the Spirit's power. This is why Paul was so devoted to seeking the lost and proclaiming God's Word to them.

The doctrine of election is not an excuse to be lazy in our seeking of the lost. The one who says to himself, "Why bother with sharing the gospel; the Lord will gather in his elect whether I share it or not?" is abusing the doctrine

But at the same time, the doctrine of election comforts us as we zealously seek to reach those lost in the dark night of unbelief. The success of the message we share is assured because the Holy Spirit is always present with his Word. But the success is his as he gathers in the elect. We do not know who the elect are. Only he knows that. And so, we do everything we can in conformity with the message to reach as many as we can. (Deutschlander 2011, 202)

Of course, there was only *one* Apostle Paul. Might our use of him as the model of faithfulness in search of the elect create in us some consternation? How can we measure up with the one many consider *the greatest of the apostles*? Should we even bother to try when Paul raises the bar so high? Pastors, and all believers in Christ, take heart!

God chose and predestined people in eternity. He foreordained that they would believe. In time he sees to it that they are called, justified, and ultimately glorified. To accomplish his eternal purpose God sees to it that each of the elect comes into contact with other people whom God uses to bring them the gospel. God gives a variety of gifts to individual Christians and to those who serve in the public ministry. God sanctifies these gifts and abilities and uses them in the ways he sees fit. ... We will do well to appreciate these gifts of God and play to their strengths in the work we ask God's people to do (see Rom 12:4-8). ... Each gift is necessary and God uses these gifts according to his eternal plan and purpose. (Brenner 2012, 11)

Turnaround congregations and other churches moving forward toward health and vitality are likely to have many members who have confidence that their Lord has chosen them from eternity and will use them in unique ways to reach the elect and grow his kingdom. Member ministry in such churches is alive and ever growing as more individuals discover how their Lord has shaped them to serve each other and others (Eph 4:16).

These churches understand that their make-disciples mission is truly their triune God's mission, which he conceived before creation, and that he stands with them and works through them as they participate in his mission plan. "For those of us engaged in Christian ministry, understanding the trinitarian basis of mission is crucial because it enables us to ask the right question 'What's hindering us from joining the mission in which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are already engaged?'" (Seamands 2005, 168-69).

The mission is clear, election is certain, and God has determined what means would be used to accomplish his mission so that all his elect would ultimately share eternity with him. "God has not only elected people, he has elected means to accomplish his saving purpose. That includes both the means of grace in which his saving power resides and the human tools who carry those means to the ends of the earth" (Gurgel 2010, 86). Imagine that! God decides to work out his eternal will and purpose by placing into trembling hands the means that have divine power to save sinners.

Followers of Christ--in spite of their personal frailties and with their God-given faith and variety of gifts--are empowered to serve and share their Lord when they know God's gracious heart and own Christ's make-disciples mission. They love their Lord and they love other people because they are compelled by the love of Christ.

We are compelled to share the gospel out of generosity and love, not guilt. We are freed from the fear of being ridiculed or hurt by others, since we have already received the favor of God by grace. Our dealings with others reflect humility because we know we are saved only by grace alone, not because of our superior insight or character. We are hopeful about everyone, even the "hard cases," because we were saved only because of grace, not because we were people likely to become Christians. We are courteous and careful with people. We don't have to push or coerce them, for it is only God's grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence or persistence or even their openness (Exod 4:10-12). Together, these traits create not only an excellent neighbor in a multicultural society but also a winsome evangelist. (Keller 2012, 49-50)

As believers gathered in congregations serve and share their Lord with joy and enthusiasm, they depend on his powerful means of grace to effect spiritual change in the hearts, minds, and lives of others. This is because they are convinced from God's Word that this is how he effected spiritual change in them.

Depending on God's Powerful Means of Grace

It may be helpful to the reader to be aware that the Turnaround Churches in the WELS project was conducted within a confessional Lutheran church body. Both the researchers and those within the studied congregations hold to the belief that God grows his Church through the means he has prescribed in his Word. From a confessional Lutheran perspective, to be spiritually healthy or to experience God-glorifying turnaround, it is essential that congregations depend on and faithfully make use of his powerful means of grace. Faithful use of these means involves purposefully delivering the gospel of Christ while discerning what is accomplished both by the message and the messenger.

Means of Grace Ministry

Confessional Lutherans use the phrase *means of grace* and add the descriptive words *the gospel of Christ in Word and sacraments* to identify those means that God has established through which he bestows spiritual blessings upon undeserving sinners (appendix 1). Lutherans define a *sacrament* as a sacred act established by Christ in which the Word (specifically the gospel), connected with an earthly element, offers and gives forgiveness of sins. Lutherans thereby recognize baptism and communion as the two sacraments God has given to his New Testament believers to administer according to his Word.

Through God's Word and sacraments he preserves and extends the holy Christian church throughout the world. Believers should therefore be diligent and faithful in the use of these divinely established means of grace for themselves and in their mission outreach to others. These are the only means through which immortal souls are brought to faith and to life in heaven. (WELS website, accessed November 2012)

Diligence and faithfulness in the use of these means is always a concern because, if these means of grace are neglected by those who have benefitted from them, saving faith will be weakened and may eventually be lost. Lamentably, there is evidence of this reality within most (if not all) congregations. Also, hearing or reading God's Word and receiving the sacraments are not to be viewed as meritorious acts that earn God's favor. Rather, through his means of grace, God provides to unworthy sinners his unmerited love and forgiveness through the gospel message of salvation in Christ. It is by God's grace that sinners are saved (Eph 2:8). The Lord uses these same means, which deliver the powerful gospel, to bring about revitalization or to maintain the spiritual health of his churches.

To avoid causing confusion, the use of the term *means* and the phrase *means of grace* in this report consistently refer to the gospel of Christ in Word and sacrament.

When the words *methods* and *methodologies* and *tactics* are used, the references are to human strategies and activities through which people are exposed to the means of grace.

Confessional Lutherans are passionate about means-of-grace ministry. Based on Scripture, they believe God has provided a number of ways through which the gospel is communicated and, through Christ, forgiveness of sins is received.

God is superabundantly rich [and liberal] in His grace [and goodness]. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached [He commands to be preached] in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren, Matt 18:20: *Where two or three are gathered together*, etc. (Concordia Triglotta 1921, 491)

Through each channel of grace, God delivers spiritual blessings through the gospel, which always involves the work of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit is always in the Word because the Word is always about Jesus. And whether the Word is preached or read, whether it comes in Baptism or the Lord's Supper, whether it comes in public or private absolution, it is always there, always powerful, and always full of the Spirit" (Preus 2004, 102).

Paul repeatedly connects the proclamation of the gospel with the work of the Holy Spirit. "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thess 1:5). "God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth" (2 Thess 2:13). Quoting Isa 64:4, Paul wrote, "As it is written: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him'-- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (1 Cor 2:9-10). "The Holy Spirit expresses God's compassionate work of salvation through our witness. For there to be any effect, we must have the accompaniment of the Spirit with

the gospel presentation ... no one comes to saving knowledge of Christ apart from the presence of God's Spirit" (Stetzer and Nation 2012, 60).

The Spirit alone works faith in the hearts of sinners, and because "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3), the proper use of God's means of grace and the work of the Holy Spirit are inseparable. Prior to or without the Spirit's powerful work in their hearts, the truths of God's Word seem absurd to the unconverted (1 Cor 2:14). "The gospel is nonsense to fallen reason and to those who give their reason the throne and the deciding voice in spiritual matters" (Deutschlander 2011, 7).

"We cannot rightly understand the Word of God apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. It is he who gives people the ability to know that Scripture is true and to understand its truth" (Bullmore 2011, 16). But the Spirit does not force people to have faith in Christ. "When the Holy Spirit works within us, he does not coerce, but he gives us a willingness to receive the gifts that God so freely offers" (Brenner 2000, 63).

As Scripture teaches, all persons come into this world with a depraved nature. They are dead in transgressions and sins; they are bent on gratifying the cravings of their sinful nature; and they are by nature objects of God's wrath (Eph 2:1-3). On the basis of Scripture's testimony: "Saving faith cannot be something we conjure by our efforts. If God did not make our hearts beat for him, then we would be spiritually dead" (Chapell 2011, 14).

The unconverted are powerless, ungodly, steeped in sin, and enemies of God (Rom 5:6-10). "We all are under the judgment of God because, as long as we are outside the faith, we are His enemies. You and I are not God's friends until He affects our relationship with Christ" (Stetzer and Nation 2012, 47). "If God waited for you or for me to seek after

him, he would still be waiting. 'No one seeks God' (Rom. 3:11). No one! By nature we run from God. If we seek him, it is because he has taken the initiative to seek us and to draw us to himself" (Smith 2011, 11).

"Apart from God's own gracious intervention, humans are unable to remedy their condition It's not like humans want to submit to God but can't. Their will is corrupt so that they don't want to do what's right ... until God changes their will so that they want to submit to God" (Andrews 2011, 14-15). Martin Luther penned in his Small Catechism:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith; in which Christian Church He forgives daily and richly all sins to me and all believers, and at the last day will raise up me and all the dead, and will give to me and to all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true. (Concordia Triglotta 1921, 545)

This is an understanding or position with which many struggle. "It is always surprising, counterintuitive, and even offensive for human beings to hear that salvation does not depend on human decision or effort but on God who shows mercy (Rom. 9:16)" (Horton 2008, 122-23). Christ on the cross displays God's mercy; there we see his amazing grace.

What Christ accomplished on the cross stands at the center of the Spirit's work because Christ is the one who died for the sins of all. Faith comes from hearing that message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ (Rom 10:12-17). That same gospel message, again through the Spirit's work, is also received in the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

That we may obtain this faith, *the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted*. For through the Word and

Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake. (Concordia Triglotta 1921, 45)

Proclaiming the saving gospel through the proclamation of God's Word and administration of the sacraments and, at the same time, making disciples through missionary and evangelistic activities go together. "The Great Commission speaks first of the *ministry* of the Word and sacrament, because this is not only the ministry *of* the church but the ministry that creates, sustains, and expands the church" (Horton 2011, 190).

Saving souls cannot be separated from the pure Word and Sacraments. Pure Word and Sacraments cannot be separated from the practices of the church.

The Bible says that the way in which sins are forgiven, hearts are comforted, and people are made Christians, in short the saving of souls, is through teaching the Word and administering the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper You do one by doing the other. You cannot have pure teaching that is not taught. And you cannot have missionaries who don't know what to say. (Preus 2004, 439-40)

It is both, means *and* mission. "A genuinely *evangelical* church will be an *evangelistic* church: a place where the gospel is delivered through Word and sacrament and a people who witness to it in the world. It will be a place where believers and unbelievers alike will be recipients of God's Good News" (Horton 2008, 205). Through Word and sacrament God is the one who is serving and sharing and saving.

Preaching is central, not because we value the intellect to the exclusion of the emotions and the will, but because it is God's action rather than our own. The God who accomplished our salvation now delivers it to us In preaching we are addressed--we are not in charge but are seated to be judged and justified. In baptism too, we are passive receivers--we do not baptize ourselves but are *baptized*. In the Lord's Supper, Christ gives himself to us as our food and drink for eternal life; it is a banquet set for us--the meal has already been prepared, and Christ even serves it to us through his ministers. We *are fed*; our filthy rags removed, we are bathed and clothed with Christ and fed for our pilgrimage to the City of God. (Horton 2008, 218)

The means of grace are the medium through which God comes to sinners with his unmerited grace, delivering his saving gospel. It is Christ in the gospel that saves sinners.

Christ delivers himself to us through the preaching of the gospel (Rom 10:6-8), baptism (Acts 2:38; 22:16; Rom 6:3-4; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 2:12; 1 Pet 3:21), and the Lord's Supper These are all means that convey God's saving grace rather than methods of our own striving. Before we serve, we are served. Before we do anything, something is done to and for us. (Horton 2008, 219)

Both the Word and the sacraments deliver the powerful gospel that changes hearts and transforms lives through the Spirit's work. This is why faithfully using the means of grace is essential to church health and turnaround. But what is, in essence, the *gospel*?

The Gospel

The Apostle Paul had a lot to say about the potent gospel of Christ. For example, Paul was quick to claim that there was only *one* gospel, that anyone preaching another gospel should be condemned (Gal 1:8), and the only true gospel was not something man made up (Gal 1:12). He proclaimed that the gospel was "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). He explained, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom 1:17). Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "By this gospel you are saved" (1 Cor 15:2), and he assured followers of Christ in Galatia that this was the same gospel that was announced in advance to Abraham (Gal 3:8).

Paul said he served his God "with [his] whole heart in preaching the gospel" (Rom 1:9) and was willing to make personal sacrifices and suffer hardship so others could hear this precious and powerful gospel (2 Tim 2:8-9). What is the gospel?

Summed up in one word, the gospel is Jesus *The gospel is the good news that God, who is more holy than we can imagine, looked upon with compassion, people who are more sinful than we would possibly admit, and sent Jesus into history to establish His Kingdom and reconcile people and the world to himself. Jesus, whose love is more extravagant than we can measure, came to sacrificially die for us so that, by His death and resurrection, we might gain ... by his grace what the Bible defines as new and eternal life.* (Stetzer and Nation 2012, 45)

Throughout Old and New Testament times, there has been but one salvation plan, one Savior, one gospel. All recorded biblical history is an expression of God's limitless grace which was given us in Christ Jesus even before creation (2 Tim 1:9). In due time, as God's redemptive plan was more fully revealed, Christ--the one mediator between God and humankind--was lifted up on a cross as the ransom for all sinners (1 Tim 2:5-6). The blessed outcome of this implemented plan will be as John described it in his spectacular and incomprehensible vision that includes a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1-6).

Jonathan Pennington points out that people differ on how they define *gospel*. Some understand the term in a narrow sense, that is, "doctrinal information about the justification possible through faith in Christ" (Pennington 2012, 6), but Pennington argues, "Although certainly not wrong, this meaning is notably incomplete and narrower than Paul's own usage, which much more comprehensively refers to Jesus' entire life, death, life after death, and future return; it is the whole proclaimed message, not just the particular (and partially polemical) issue of 'justification by faith'" (Pennington 2012, 6). What is the gospel?

The Gospel is properly a doctrine which teaches what man should *believe*, that he may obtain forgiveness of sins with God, namely, that the Son of God, our Lord Christ, has taken upon Himself and borne the curse of the Law, has expiated and paid for all our sins, through whom alone we again enter into

favor with God, obtain forgiveness of sins by faith, are delivered from death and all the punishments of sins, and eternally saved.

For everything that comforts, that offers the favor and grace of God to transgressors of the Law, is, and is properly called, the Gospel, a good and joyful message that God will not punish sins, but forgive them for Christ's sake. (Concordia Triglotta 1921, 959)

From that inclusive perspective, everything Scripture tells us about Jesus (including how in the Old Testament he was prefigured in types and predicted in prophecy) is *gospel*. "The message of the gospel is this: Jesus is Lord (world ruler), Savior, the fulfillment of the entire First [Old] Testament (including the Adamic commission, the prophets, the priests, the kings, the sages, the temple, the sacrifices, the land, the Law, the promises, and the entire story of Israel), and the Resurrection and the Life" (Sweet and Viola 2012, 307). The gospel is the *whole good news story of Jesus* in Scripture.

Beginning with Moses and the prophets, Christ explained to the Emmaus disciples "what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). He claimed, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 35:39).

The central figure in all of Scripture is Christ--pointed to in the Old Testament and proclaimed in the New Testament. "Everything in Scripture--every book, every story, every teaching, every theme, every letter, every verse, all of the arrows point to Him To be truly scriptural is to be Christological, for Jesus Christ is the subject of all Scripture" (Viola 2009, 300). The entire Bible is the unfolding of the narrative of Christ in the context of humankind's sinfulness and the Triune God's holiness and love, ultimately "bringing humanity back to God's original design" (Viola 2009, 309).

The gospel must always be understood within the context of the sacred story about creation, the fall, the promise of a Savior, the sinner's need for reconciliation with God, and the sinless paradise that is yet to come. All religions have moral codes, but Christianity has more; it has Christ, which makes it unique; it has the gospel, "the Good News that God has reconciled us to himself in Christ" (Horton 2008, 102-3).

The gospel is a message of rescue and grace; it is a powerful message that changes hearts, minds, and lives. It is also a message of comfort within a context.

Not everything the Bible teaches can be considered "the gospel" (although it can be argued that all biblical doctrine is necessary background for understanding the gospel). The gospel is a *message* about how we have been rescued from peril

1. The gospel is good news, not good advice It is not something we do, but something that has been done for us
2. The gospel is good news announcing that we have been rescued or saved We are rescued from the "coming wrath" at the end of history (1 Thess 1:10)

The gospel is news about what has been done by Jesus Christ to put right our relationship with God. Becoming a Christian is about a change of status The gospel is not about something we do but about what has been done for us, and yet the gospel results in a whole new way of life One of Martin Luther's dicta was that we are saved by faith alone but not by a faith that remains alone. His point is that true gospel belief will always and necessarily lead to good works, but salvation in no way comes through or because of good works

We must not, then, give the impression that the gospel is simply a divine rehabilitation program for the world, but rather that it is an accomplished substitutionary work. We must not depict the gospel as primarily *joining* something (Christ's kingdom program) but rather as *receiving something* (Christ's finished work). If we make this error, the gospel becomes another kind of a salvation by works instead of a salvation by faith. (Keller 2012, 29-30 [bold font omitted])

Keller proposes sharing gospel truths (i.e., propositions, what God has done in Christ) within a gospel narrative (i.e., the Bible's story, what God is accomplishing in history), and he adds: "Without the first message, the second message is not the gospel

Still, the Bible's grand narrative of cosmic redemption is critical background to help an individual get right with God" (Keller 2012, 32-33). Also, when the gospel is front and center in all that a congregation does, everyone's attention will be drawn to it. "Every form of ministry is empowered by the gospel, based on the gospel, and is a result of the gospel Because the gospel is endlessly rich, it can handle the burden of being the one 'main thing' of a church" (Keller 2012, 36-37).

Keller asserts that Scripture does not provide just one way to present the gospel, that there are a number of themes through which to proclaim the good news as evidenced by the inspired writers, that the Bible can be studied using the systematic-theological method (STM, topically) or the redemptive-historical method (RHM, historically), and "At the heart of all of the biblical writers' theology is redemption through salvation" (Keller 2012, 39-40). He adds, regarding STM and RHM:

The STM, carried out in isolation from the RHM, can produce a Christianity that is rationalistic, legalistic, and individualistic. Similarly, the RHM, carried out in isolation from the STM, tends to produce a Christianity that loves narrative and community but shies away from sharp distinctions between grace and law and between truth and heresy.

One approach that draws from both the story line and the themes of Scripture is to read the Bible through *intercanonical themes* [D. A. Carson] has posited that there may be twenty or so intercanonical themes that hold the Bible together [e.g., home/exile, Yahweh/covenant, kingdom and their related themes]. The gospel unifies and gives meaning to these many threads that run through the Old and New Testaments. A person can explain the gospel from beginning to end through any of these themes, but no single theme gives the full picture.

Although each of these themes emphasizes a unique aspect of the story of the Bible, there is no contradiction--only harmony--among these different ways of communicating the gospel. The Bible's story line tells us at least four things:

1. What God wants of us (Creation)
2. What happened to us and what went wrong with the world (Fall)
3. What God has done in Jesus Christ to put things right (Redemption)

4. How history will turn out in the end as a result (Restoration)
This story can be--and is--told in multiple ways, using multiple themes, since both sin and grace are multidimensional. (Keller 2012, 40-43)

Some similar and related thoughts are shared by Mike Bullmore as he proposes how to view the gospel in relationship to the whole of Scripture. "The gospel is a *cause* of scriptural revelation, and the gospel is an *effect* of scriptural revelation. In other words, God's great, eternal purpose of redemption (what is expressed in the gospel) gives rise to the Bible, and the Bible serves to accomplish God's purpose in the gospel" (Bullmore 2011, 7). He clarifies an important point. "While Scripture itself is not the gospel, all Scripture is related to the gospel, and the gospel is Scripture's reason for being. The gospel is the Bible's main and unifying message" (Bullmore 2011, 7).

Bullmore proposes two helpful approaches to reading God's Word: (1) as a continuous narrative or history, and (2) as a compendium of God-inspired perspectives or theology. "Whichever of these two ways the Bible is read, its message is the same. If read as a continuous narrative, its storyline is creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. If read as a collection of theological perspectives, the themes that emerge are God, sin, Christ, and faith" (Bullmore 2011, 16-17). Either way, Christ stands out as the central figure. At the same time, however a person chooses to define *gospel*, it will not be a biblical definition if the core proclamation of forgiveness of sins through Christ does not remain intact.

Every definition of gospel must include a clear *Christ-crucified-for-sinners* message because the Savior said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), and John declared, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

In the recent rediscovery of the kingdom-centrality of Jesus's message of the "gospel" there has often been a naïve and sophomoric pendulum swing away from the essentiality of Jesus's atoning death on behalf of his people. Not only is sacrificial atonement clearly testified to as essential in apostolic witness (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3; 1 Pet 3:18), it is also the obvious endgame of all four Gospels, one of the few ways in which all the witnesses are in total agreement and emphasis. But if this were not enough, one only has to read Isaiah 40-66 to see that this theme is at the heart of the "good news" Isaiah is sent to proclaim, as witnessed in 52:13-53:12. (Pennington 2012, 16)

Acknowledging that the gospel is *good news* requires another response to the question, What is the gospel? *The gospel is not law*. While declaring both the law and the gospel are essential in personal witness and in public preaching, these two predominant teachings of God's Word are opposites and have different purposes. The law pronounces judgment; the gospel pronounces forgiveness.

For the two chief works of God in men are these, to terrify, and to justify and quicken those who have been terrified. Into these two works all Scripture has been distributed. The one part is the *Law*, which shows, reproves, and condemns sins. The other part is the *Gospel*, i.e., the promise of grace bestowed in Christ, and this promise is constantly repeated in the whole of Scripture. (Concordia Triglotta 1921, 265)

Michael Horton talks about the difference between the law that condemns and the gospel that comforts. He expresses concern that too often "ministry today is law without gospel, exhortation without news, instructions without an announcement, deeds without creeds, with an accent on 'What Would Jesus Do?' rather than 'What Has Jesus Done?'" and he claims, "we are losing our focus upon, confidence in, and increasingly even our knowledge of the greatest story ever told" (Horton 2008, 106-7).

Horton simplifies the definitions of law and gospel. "Everything in the Bible that reveals God's moral expectations is *law* and everything in the Bible that reveals God's saving purposes and acts is *gospel*" (Horton 2008, 109). He adds: "The worst thing that can

happen to the church is to confuse law and gospel. When we soften the law, we never give up on our own attempts to offer our rags of 'righteousness' to God. When we turn the gospel into demands, it is no longer the saving Word of redemption in Jesus Christ alone" (Horton 2008, 122).

God's law demands absolute holiness (Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:16), and no one measures up (1 John 1:8; Rom 3:23) except Christ who was tempted but never sinned (Heb 4:15). God's law serves as a *guide* when a believer is looking for ways to thank and praise the Lord, as a *curb* in order to restrain those who would sin at will, and primarily God's law serves as a *mirror* to show sinners their pitiful and, without their rescue through Christ, hopeless condition (Concordia Triglotta 1921, 479).

The gospel announces God's love and forgiveness in Christ and gives assurance of eternal life (John 3:16). The gospel compels and empowers those who have been comforted by Christ's love and forgiveness to love and serve their Savior and others in his name (2 Cor 5:13-15). This "main thing" (Keller 2012, 37), as Keller described the gospel, is primarily what produces health in congregations and enables congregations in decline to experience turnaround. The gospel is the power within the means of grace.

The Message and the Messenger

Paul rightly calls attention to the source of the power that changes hearts and lives. "God ... made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:6-7). God does his powerful

work of saving sinners through the gospel in his Word and sacraments, and he has chosen to deliver these potent means of grace through flawed human instruments.

For credit to be given where credit is due, we must distinguish between the message and the messenger. It is not the messenger (the person) who produces positive spiritual results; it is the message (the gospel). "The only way Satan's strongholds may be torn down is by the supernatural power of the gospel, not the intellectual power of a perfectly reasoned argument" (Leyrer 2012, 201). One servant of the Lord may plant, another may water, but only God produces spiritual fruit (1 Cor 3:5-7).

Not the brilliance and charismatic personality of a preacher, nor the conviction and logic of a Christian witness can add a thing to the power of the Gospel. No psychology or sociology can augment the Gospel to improve the percentages of conversion. No evangelism methodology or discipleship strategy can enhance the ability of God's Word to create faith and strengthen faith. It is equally true that the humblest servant of Christ, unsophisticated in his world-view and out of touch with his culture, does nothing to subtract from the efficacy of the Gospel when he presents it in its truth and purity. In fact, the power of the Gospel is undiminished by the unfaithful life of its messenger. (Kelm 2003, 25)

Wherever the gospel is present the Holy Spirit will also be present, and through the gospel the Spirit will accomplish whatever he desires. God does what only he can do through his gospel means but, again, his plan for bringing salvation to a world of sinners includes the use of *clay pots* (his privileged messengers) to deliver his powerful, soul-saving means. God working through his powerful means of grace and his desire to have those means delivered through human instruments are both key factors, and there are other factors related to God's saving work.

The Lutheran theologians called these factors *causes* of salvation. They emanate from a core, like layers of an onion. The great seventeenth century Lutheran theologian, Johann Andreas Quenstedt, breaks them down:

At the heart of our salvation is the Trinity. He is *the principal cause*. Everything originates with him ... if there were no God, there would be no grace, no Savior, no Word, Sacraments, ministers, and so on and so forth.

The *impulsive causes* of salvation are those things which moved God to act for our benefit. There are inner impulsive causes: the tender heart and fatherly love of God. There are also outward impulsive causes: both the misery of mankind and the merits of Christ.

The *instrumental cause* of salvation is the Word and Sacrament. These are the tools by which God creates faith and gathers the Church.

The *ministerial cause* of salvation is the ministers God calls. They become God's agents, playing a vital role in his saving work, by utilizing the Word, i.e., the instrumental cause.

To delineate between these causes is not to separate them ... there is synergy between them. (Hein 2011, 2-3)

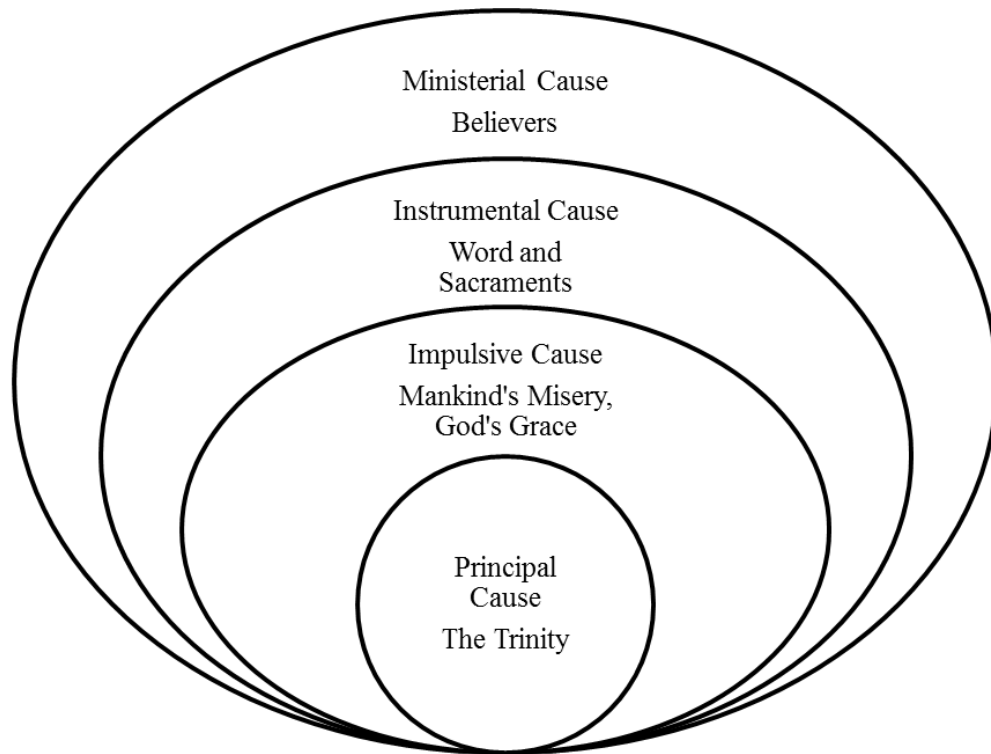


Figure 3. Causes of salvation.

In reference to the ministerial cause of salvation, Paul writes, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor 9:22). "Note the first person singular Obviously, Paul isn't teaching that he is the principal cause of salvation. He is recognizing that he is the ministerial cause of salvation, and that such a responsibility is not insignificant" (Hein 2011, 4).

Therefore, the person who proclaims the gospel must also make sure that he is sharing the gospel's message in a way that is understandable. Human communication is a *causa ministerialis* in the transferral [*sic*] of God's Word to human hearts. When a gospel proclaimer understands both how people communicate and to what needs to apply the gospel, he is faithfully using his voice as a *causa ministerialis* for the gospel. The work that a gospel communicator does to make the gospel clear and directly show its relevance to spiritual needs will unleash the gospel to work freely on the hearts of humans

.... Through Paul's work, God used the Word in both a psychological and supernatural manner. (Gebert 2012, 3)

Acknowledging the implications of the ministerial cause of salvation is weighty when considering the roles of people (both called workers and lay persons) within their congregations. How those who are the ministerial cause of salvation (believers, and especially pastors) deliver the instrumental cause of salvation (Word and sacrament) matters because of how the Word works (Hein 2011, 6-7). "The Word proclaims truth; therefore, it works psychologically. But that truth is impossible for human reason to grasp; therefore, the Word also works supernaturally The psychological working of the Word is where the instrumental and ministerial causes of salvation touch" (Hein 2011, 10).

Because God's Word works psychologically or intellectually, not just failure to deliver its truths faithfully but also poor delivery may keep people from hearing or understanding it. Regardless of how it is delivered, the Word itself never ceases to be powerful and efficacious. At the same time, the hearer's mind may not comprehend the Word if how it is delivered doesn't communicate well--perhaps because the speaker lacks clarity or some cultural aspects of the audience are not considered.

The God who created us as rational and emotional beings, communicates to us in rational and emotive language; and he has chosen to make his saving purpose for our world dependent on his people's proclamation of his message

While Christians cannot condition the efficacy of the Means of Grace in the heart of a hearer, they can and do condition how people hear the Means of Grace, by both the frequency and the way with which they present the Gospel. While churches cannot make the Gospel more or less believable, they can and do make it more or less hearable. While evangelism methods do not make the Word of God more or less powerful, they can make the Word of God more or less understandable. They can turn people off before they've really heard the truth, or they can build bridges which provide multiple opportunities to present the truth And churches that have no method of

connecting with the lost, let alone little intention to do so, have severely restricted their effectiveness in Christ's mission without at all diminishing the efficacy of the Means of Grace. (Kelm 2003, 29-30) [To read these comments in a broader context within a summary of a chapter section from Kelm's work, *A Theology of Ministerial Practice*, see appendix 2.]

Followers of Christ--and especially pastors of congregations, because of their positions and influence as shepherds and equippers of God's people--will want personally to depend on God's powerful means to produce spiritual fruit in people's hearts and lives. At the same time, God's servants will want to be good stewards of their God-given gifts and use them faithfully in service to God's potent means of grace (Gurgel 2010, 96-97).

Pastors and teachers who publically preach and teach as representatives of those who called them are especially well positioned to model faithfulness both in handling and delivering the means of grace. God's faithful servants will want to be apt students of Scripture and of their cultures. This will ensure that they keep learning and growing spiritually. They will also make the best possible use of their personal ministry skills, especially their ability to communicate the saving gospel to others in specific settings.

While proclaiming the gospel is much more than good communication, it is certainly not intended to be less. God has chosen to communicate his saving truth in the same outward form as any other human communication comes to us. So with Paul we work hard to set "forth the truth plainly ... to every man's conscience" (2 Cor 4:2) If we ignore how messages are wisely transmitted from person to person in any culture, we hinder communication of the gospel. (Gurgel 2010, 97)

Rejoicing in the privilege of serving and sharing their Lord, church workers--and all believers in Christ who have a clear view of his cross and empty tomb--will closely watch themselves and their teaching (1 Tim 4:16) and do their best with the gifts they have received to communicate the gospel as clearly as possible. With both their words and

deeds they will point people to Christ as the one who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), and they will have the attitude, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). Those who proclaim Christ will always be aware, however, that they are simply *delivering* the powerful means of God's grace, which alone can produce the results the Lord desires.

In carrying out the work God has given the church to do we will want to avoid two extremes: (1) doubt in the power of God that leads to substituting personality or human methods or efforts for the means of grace; (2) a careless attitude that fails to treasure the means of grace in our own lives or that leads to laziness, lack of effort, lack of preparation, lack of planning, or lack of interest in proclaiming the gospel to others

The power of the gospel does not lie in the person proclaiming it. It is always powerful because it has God's power. The person administering the sacraments does not add anything to them. The sacraments are efficacious because of Christ's institution and the promises he attached to them. The efficacy of the means of grace is not dependent on us or our planning. The means of grace are always efficacious because the Holy Spirit always works through the means of grace to accomplish his purpose. We cannot make them more effective by anything that we do. (Brenner 2009, 8)

"The means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, is the bridge between the love of Christ and our calling as saints and soldiers in this world. Cleansed and fed by the Lord himself, we can fight our sinful nature, we can gladly serve our neighbor, and we can spread the good news to all creation" (Zabell 2011, 22). Healthy congregations and those that hope to experience turnaround will depend on God's powerful means of grace to convert the lost and transform believers' lives. Making faithful use of those means will demonstrate dependence on them.

Concurrently, gathering an audience for the means of grace--through appropriate methods--will ensure that congregations endeavor both to be faithful to God's

Word and responsible in identifying and utilizing God-given opportunities to build relationships and proclaim the gospel to others within their local ministry contexts.

*Gathering an Audience Through
Appropriate Methods*

Do people and methods convert hearts or transform lives? No. People and methods simply deliver the gospel means through which the Holy Spirit works. Do people and methods either diminish or enhance the power of the gospel in God's Word and sacraments? No, however people and methods may either enlarge or limit the number of individuals who are exposed to the means of grace. This is why congregations are justifiably concerned about utilizing the best possible methods for growing audiences for the gospel and communicating effectively within their changing contexts. "The message doesn't change, but the vehicles for communicating the message are constantly changing" (Becker 2012, 60).

Vital congregations and those recovering from decline on their way to experiencing turnaround understand that their Lord requires faithfulness both *to* and *with* his Word. They recognize methodology can vary as they see examples in Scripture of how audiences were gathered so God's Word could be shared, and their methodology is guided by sound theology. As these congregations purposely discover and utilize appropriate methods for reaching and teaching more people, they aptly avoid the lure of inappropriate methods.

Examples of Methods in Scripture

Even a cursory review of the Old Testament reveals that, after God made the first recorded gospel promise of a Savior in the garden (Gen 3:15), he continued to clarify and communicate the gospel using a variety of methods until "the time had fully come" (Gal

4:4-5) he sent his Son to fulfill his age-old salvation promise. Century after century, God telegraphed what he intended to do. Then he did it so that the Christ would come.

God chose a people through whom the promise would be fulfilled (Deut 7:6). He then guarded and guided those people in spite of their unfaithfulness (2 Chronicles 36) and sketched throughout the centuries the bloodline of the Savior so it could be traced all the way back to Adam (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38).

During those Old Testament millennia--both to preserve and proclaim his salvation promise during changing circumstances--God sometimes miraculously appeared to specific people (e.g., Gen 18:1). He occasionally communicated through dreams (e.g., Gen 28:12) and visions (e.g., Ezek 37:1). He established tabernacle and temple worship (Exod 25:8-9; 1 Kgs 5:5), chose specific authors to record the drama of salvation history (2 Pet 1:20-21), positioned his prophets to proclaim his law and gospel truths (e.g., Isaiah), and even used periods of destruction and captivity to call his people to repentance (e.g., Ezra 8:35) and remind them of his messianic prophecies (e.g., Mic 5:2).

In the New Testament setting, the four canonical Gospels reveal that when the Messiah appeared and fulfilled those messianic prophecies he also employed various methods to communicate the good news of salvation. Notably, Jesus personally selects and then for three years walks with and teaches his disciples as he prepares them for what was to come (Matt 4:18-22). We have some examples of their instructive conversations in the Gospels, but there must have been many more opportunities for dialog (along with lots of observing) as the master mentor practiced what he preached (John 21:25). It is significant

that Jesus invests so much time and energy in just a dozen men. This was *masterful* leadership development, and it was observably intentional.

Jesus sends out his twelve disciples to preach in pairs and provides specific instructions (Mark 6:6-12), and later he appoints and does the same with seventy-two followers (Luke 10). Jesus coaches them in advance and then helps them learn from their experiences following their Word-sharing excursions. In time, they would help other disciples do the same. The trainees would become the trainers. Sound methodology!

More methodology. Jesus proclaims truth to a large audience on a mountainside, on public streets, and from a boat along a lake (e.g., Matt 13:2). He celebrates special events (John 2:1-11) and pursues opportunities to have private conversations, such as one with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, which turns into a community-wide witness (e.g., John 4). He eats and drinks with despised tax collectors and public sinners (e.g., Luke 5:29-31). He preaches in many synagogues (e.g., Mark 1:39), frequently quotes Scripture (e.g., Mark 7:6), and he calls attention to and backs up his words with miracles (Matt 4:23). Jesus methodically seeks out and recurrently creates opportunities to communicate the truth that whoever believes in him has eternal life, which was his Father's will (John 6:40).

Besides calling attention to Jesus' flexibility with methodology in the four Gospels, perhaps the next best source of information from the New Testament (on how methods of gathering audiences may vary) is to highlight some examples from Acts. The narrative of Acts picks up where the gospel of Luke concludes and reveals how (during a period of about thirty years) the promised Holy Spirit empowered Jesus' make-disciples mission, in a context of change, through the witness of his followers "in Jerusalem, and in all

Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Followers of Jesus today, including those gathered in congregations, continue to take part in that same global gospel-spreading mission within an ever-changing context.

During the church's first generation of New Testament history there was mega change. The emphasis shifted from *going up* to Jerusalem to *going out* to the nations. The Holy Spirit dramatically appeared as promised. The gospel message was linked with and expounded on the basis of Old Testament Scripture. A transition from traditional Judaism to contemporary Christianity was effected, which was largely Gentile and caused multiple tensions. Additionally, the expanding church experienced persecution. All this change required the development of new strategies for dispersing the gospel. The central message didn't change, but the methodologies for reaching and teaching more people had to change.

Initially we see Peter and his colleagues conduct their ministry in and around Jerusalem (Acts 1-12). They joined together constantly in prayer (Acts 1:14) and made an initial strategic and selective staffing change by adding Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:26). When the outpouring of the Holy Spirit caused many to wonder what was happening, Peter used the occasion to address the crowd and proclaim a clear law and gospel message (Acts 2:14-41). These followers of Christ lived in community, were devoted to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42), enjoyed the favor of all the people, and the Lord added to their number daily (Acts 2:47). The gospel these believers shared had power to convert others, and the loving and generous lives they lived attracted an ever-increasing audience for the gospel.

During a visit to the temple, Peter uses the power of the Lord to heal a crippled beggar (Acts 3:6), which provided another occasion for teaching a group of

onlookers (Acts 3:11-26), followed by a night in jail and a courageous testimony before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1-20). There were more prayers, miracles, stints in jail, bold testimonies about Christ, and more believed and were added to their number (Acts 5:14). Whether in the temple courts or from house to house, the apostles "never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42). They seemed to use every opportunity, even harsh treatments and setbacks, to share what they had been led to believe by the Spirit.

As the number of believers increased, more qualified leaders were needed and appropriately added, which the Lord used to spread his Word to even more people so that rapid growth ensued (Acts 6:1-7). The intensity of the pushback from some established synagogue leaders increased, resulting in the death of Stephen, but not before he offered a confession of Christ through the lens of Old Testament history and condemned their murderous thoughts and actions (Acts 7).

Saul was present and approved of Stephen's death, and that very day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem. All the believers (except the apostles) were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). This forced change quickly advanced the spread of the gospel because, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4). God again used adversity to expand the reach of his Word.

On one occasion Peter was compelled to say to Simon the Sorcerer, who wanted to buy the gift of giving the Spirit through the laying on of hands, "You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God" (Acts 8:21). This statement underscores the need for not only our methods to be right in God's sight, but also

our motivation. With right hearts Peter and John moved on and preached the gospel in many Samaritan villages (Acts 8:25). Phillip was suddenly led by the Spirit to witness to an Ethiopian eunuch, and just as suddenly was whisked away and traveled about preaching the gospel in other towns (Acts 8:26-40). Certainly the Spirit was and still is directing his witnesses.

In chapter nine Saul is confronted and converted by Jesus, who describes Saul (Paul) as his chosen instrument to carry his name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel (Acts 9:15). Paul is soon preaching that Jesus is the Son of God in the Damascus synagogues (Acts 9:20), and as he became more powerful and influential the Jews there conspired to kill him (Acts 9:23). When he came to Jerusalem he was befriended by Barnabas, joined the disciples, and there the Grecian Jews tried to kill him so his brothers sent him off to Tarsus (Acts 9:26-30). Through his confession of Christ, the former hunter of Christians had become a prized target among those most adamant against Christ.

A major shift in thought and function occurred after the individual yet related visions of the centurion Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10. Peter explained to the circumcised believers his vision and why he had gone into the home of uncircumcised men and ate with them, after which it became clear to them all that "God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). As a result, some of those who had been scattered by the persecution (following Stephen's stoning) began to share the good news about Jesus with Greeks also (Acts 11:20).

When the news reached the church at Jerusalem, Barnabas (a proven leader) was sent to Antioch to witness the evidence of God's grace, and then he and Paul taught great

numbers of people at Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:22-25). The addition of Gentiles, who became active participants in ministry (Acts 11:29-30), created a distinction between *Jews* and *Christians*.

In the next section of Acts we walk with Paul and his companions as they travel throughout Asia Minor and into Europe constantly witnessing, starting churches, and nurturing believers (Acts 13-21). Their general strategy seemed to be: (1) expose people to the teachings of the Word centered in Christ, (2) select and train leaders within the new congregations, and then (3) move on to do the same in other locations. In this way more people in more locations would hear about their Savior and continue to grow in their faith.

Paul was strategic. He seemed to favor population centers where large numbers of people would be found and opportunities to speak were readily available (e.g., synagogues, markets, city gates). He appeared to seek out devout persons who had some familiarity with Scripture, which is probably one reason places of worship were frequented. Through these receptive individuals, additional opportunities to share Christ often developed. "In carrying out his mission, Paul constantly had to grapple with questions of custom and culture. In a very important sense, he had to detach himself from his own culture in order to do so" (Wendland 2006, 196).

We hear that there were prophets and teachers at Antioch (Acts 13:1), one perhaps of African ancestry. Somehow the Holy Spirit provided the directive that Barnabas and Paul be commissioned to go on a mission tour. They were assisted by John (a cousin of Barabbas), also called Mark (Acts 13:2-5). As they traveled and witnessed, their words about Christ were received enthusiastically by many (Acts 13:48), but not by all. On one

occasion Paul and Barnabas shook the dust from their feet in protest against those who stirred up persecution against them (Acts 13:51). Rejection by Jews (sometimes violent and physical, e.g., Acts 14:19) and reception by Gentiles would become commonplace throughout Paul's ministry.

When they entered gentile mission fields, "Barnabas and Saul" changed to "Paul and his companions" (Acts 13:13) or "Paul and Barnabas" (e.g., Acts 13:42). It seems that Paul became the leader during this mission tour, after being mentored by Barnabas, and we note that they deliberately appointed elders in each church, committing them to the Lord (Acts 14:23). Every church needs qualified leaders to teach and preach and equip others for ministry.

When arriving back at Antioch, "where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed" (Acts 14:26), "they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). This must have been most encouraging to those who had sent these missionaries off to proclaim Christ to others as the Spirit directed.

God had graciously opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, but some misguided voices within the church in Judea attempted to close the door by insisting that Gentile believers be circumcised. Acts 15 tells us how leaders in the church dealt with this issue that threatened the gospel's teaching that salvation was by grace, through faith in Christ alone, and not by works. Appropriate leaders were appointed and gathered at Jerusalem to address the matter, and they did on the basis of Scripture. Paul later referred to this incident when he wrote, "We did not give in to [the Judaizers] for a moment" (Gal 2:5).

The conclusion of the council at Jerusalem was clear (Acts 15:23-29). No conditions would be attached to the salvation of the Gentiles. Circumcision would *not* be a requirement. However, Gentile believers should avoid some practices that would likely disrupt the bond of fellowship they shared with their Jewish brothers. A false teaching that threatened the pure gospel was renounced; a doctrinal crisis that endangered the church was averted. This is how spiritually mature leaders in the church handle such issues. Then they immediately resume the essential work of teaching and preaching (Acts 15:35).

As Paul and Barnabas were planning a second mission tour, they had a sharp disagreement over whether or not to take John Mark, and they ended up parting company and going in different directions to spread God's Word (Acts 15:36-40). Whether Paul was justified in refusing to take John Mark is unclear, but Barnabas was willing to give his cousin (who earlier deserted them) another chance. As it turns out, the Lord continued to guide and shape each of these men so that they served him faithfully. The message here is that staffing issues may result in the need to modify our ministry plans. However, the Lord may use even negative circumstances to produce positive results.

As the mission tour continued, there were matters that required a good measure of spiritual discernment. For example, Paul decided to circumcise Timothy for the sake of the gospel (Acts 16:3). Also, Paul reported that on one occasion they were "kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia" (Acts 16:6) and "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to [enter Bithynia]" (Acts 16:7). In some way the Spirit guided Paul to move in other directions for whatever good reasons he had. For Paul, that new direction became the continent of Europe via Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). Certainly, it is

good to plan our next steps in ministry, but we must always be open to changing those plans as the Spirit eliminates options and opens other doors of opportunity.

It comes as no surprise that as Paul and his companions traveled on the Lord provided numerous occasions for them to proclaim Christ, such as with the women gathered at a riverbank in Philippi (Acts 16:13). This illustrated again how Paul adapted his Word-sharing methodology to fit the situation. As they shared the gospel, the Spirit worked faith in many hearts (e.g., Acts 16:14; 17:12). At the same time there was disbelief, hatred, and violence from some who persisted in rejecting the truth Paul and his companions proclaimed (e.g., Acts 16:23).

In Athens, Paul demonstrated what every spokesperson for Christ will want to do. That is, be aware of your cultural setting and lovingly and patiently proclaim God's truth to your particular audience (Acts 17:16-34). "Paul's missionary message to the Athenian philosophers can be characterized as *adaptive* and *innovative*. Yet, it was not so adaptive as to compromise one iota of the truth of the gospel" (Becker 2012, 38). Some, and often many, hearers of the gospel will persist in unbelief. At the same time, the Spirit can and will work faith in sinful hearts through the gospel. This is why the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you" (Acts 17:9-10).

On his third missionary journey Paul fearlessly and obediently kept speaking as he revisited some of the churches he started in Asia Minor. He strengthened the disciples as he traveled (Acts 18:23) and again entered Europe. Luke mentions that Paul was accompanied by a number of others (Acts 20:4). "[Paul] was not a loner. Wherever he worked, he worked with others" (Wendland 2006, 207). Paul was likely their mentor, a

good strategy for raising up new leaders in the church and multiplying ministry through them.

As in the past, the Word Paul proclaimed continued to divide people, with some believing and some rejecting. But through it all Paul could clearly say, "I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews" (Acts 20:19). Paul was also clear about his primary purpose and methods: "You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:20-21). The methods of delivering the gospel may vary with the context, but the purpose remains the same.

Paul indicated that he was compelled by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem even though the Spirit had regularly warned him that he would face prison and hardships in the future (Acts 20:22-23). He was fully committed to finishing the race and completing the task the Lord Jesus had given him--"the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24).

In the final section of Acts (chapters 21-31), Paul is arrested and confined as a prisoner under various conditions. Even so, this didn't stop him from continuing his make-disciples mission from the time of his arrest in Jerusalem throughout the period of his confinement in Rome. Whether sharing God's Word during a trial before Felix or Festus (Acts 24-25), in an audience room before King Agrippa and high ranking officials (Acts 25:23), with a captive audience on a ship in peril (Acts 27:21-25), or writing letters and boldly preaching the kingdom of God and teaching his many visitors about Jesus while under

house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:31), Paul repeatedly used every opportunity to profess faith in Christ and plead with others to do the same. Because his audience often changed, so did his approach to communicating the gospel. Paul understood that appropriate methodology mattered.

Paul advised the Colossians during his imprisonment: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Col 4:5-6). This is still inspired advice for twenty-first century Christians as they seek to communicate the same gospel message of salvation in Christ to people today.

This brief review of Acts helps us to see the faithfulness and passion of the apostles and other Christian leaders in the early New Testament church as they sought to carry the gospel as far and wide as they could so others could hear, believe, and be saved. It also helps us to see, during a period of significant change, how they used various approaches to reach new audiences with the gospel and teach them the whole will of God (Acts 20:27).

In summary, we see examples of methods in Scripture through which God's powerful Word is delivered and transferred to others. In the Old Testament God used various methods to preserve and communicate his predetermined plan of salvation. In the New Testament primarily the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels followed by the methodologies of the apostles and other church leaders in Acts demonstrate how plans for gaining and growing audiences for the Word may vary depending on local cultures and customs.

The Great Commission requires that believers in every generation go and make disciples. This is an explicit directive of the Lord. Also, the means of grace (the

gospel of Christ in Word and sacrament) are prescribed. These are means through which the Holy Spirit calls people to faith in Christ and strengthens them to live as his willing servants.

However, as believers strive to make disciples, the methods and approaches and strategies they might use to deliver the means of grace are largely discretionary. As circumstances change, methodologies may and, at times, must be modified so more people hear the gospel. Churches and their leaders have significant freedom to make decisions on how best to gather audiences for the gospel in their local settings. At the same time, they will want to use discretion because it is possible for some methods to be *inappropriate*.

Appropriate Versus Inappropriate Methods

For methodology to be *appropriate* it must be grounded in biblical theology. In other words, it must not conflict with any teaching or principle of Scripture. At the same time, with whatever methodologies are employed, the ultimate goal is to expose more people to the truth of God's Word more often--especially for the purpose of communicating the message of salvation through Christ (1 Cor 2:2)--because faith comes from hearing that message (Rom 10:17). No methodology will be pleasing to the Lord without both complete faithfulness to his Word and a conspicuous focus on Christ.

Leaders who decide what methodologies they will use in their unique ministry contexts will be students of the Word. They will search the Scriptures to grasp the purposes and priorities of their Lord as they design ministry plans with a sense of urgency (John 9:4). They will be people of integrity and will not act improperly or manipulate God's Word as they take it to a world of sinners (1 Tim 4:16). Like Paul, they will be flexible but unwavering while winning the lost (1 Cor 9:19-22), and, at the same time, they will be

truthful (Rom 9:1). Paul did not peddle God's Word for profit but spoke it with sincerity (2 Cor 2:17). He claimed: "We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the Word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:2).

Paul worked hard at his ministry, applying himself wisely and fully to the best of his God-given abilities. He made sure he handled God's Word responsibly, and he urged Timothy to do the same (2 Tim 2:15). When the Word he and others planted and watered produced positive results, Paul said they were "only servants" (1 Cor 3:5). Paul knew that he and his coworkers were simply delivering the powerful gospel, so he properly gave credit to God "who makes things grow" (1 Cor 3:7).

Honorable ministry leaders, like Paul, will practice responsible stewardship of their Lord's resources (Matt 25:14-30) as they decide how best to reach the lost and nurture the saved in view of the threats they are facing and the opportunities the Lord is providing. "In Scripture there are scores of examples of God's people making plans and decisions. Although these examples are not prescriptive, they do offer guiding principles to Christian leaders who are responsible for making decisions" (Becker 2012, 43).

Becker cites examples of planning and decision-making from Scripture that were made "on the basis of thoughtful, and no doubt prayerful, consideration" (Becker 2012, 43). He then identifies some guiding principles that would influence planning and decision-making among mature leaders: prioritizing spiritual matters, fulfilling the mission, exercising Christian love for all involved, seeking practical solutions, weighing the immediate circumstances and their potential impact on others, always wanting to please and

praise God, depending on the Lord for his blessings, and viewing whatever plans are made as being subject to God's sovereign will (Becker 2012, 43-47). "Ministry leaders need to pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance, do their best to plan for the future, and entrust their decisions to God for his blessing" (Becker 2012, 47).

Especially in congregations that have experienced disheartening decline, the need for leaders to pray and plan and trust the Lord to bless their decisions is obvious.

As you might imagine, [reversing unhealthy trends in a congregation] is a most arduous task. It will require many things but most especially a grounding in Word and Sacrament and prayer, courage, and faith on the part of pastor(s) and lay leaders

The only outside force capable of rejuvenating congregations ... is the Holy Spirit. The authentic spiritual growth necessary for renewal of troubled congregations comes only through God's Spirit working in mysterious ways God working through the Spirit uses our intellect, passion, and service to bring about God's kingdom. The force of the Holy Spirit moves through God's servants to accomplish a congregational turn around. (Goodwin 1999, 28-29)

Again, whatever methodologies are eventually envisioned and executed, it is essential that they be *appropriate*. This means that they are not only believed to be applicable within a local ministry setting, but that they are also implemented with pure motivations and consistently ensure that Christ's soul-saving mission remains their primary objective. Wholesome, God-honoring motivations coupled with a mission mindset help position leaders to move toward congregational health and stability.

When the Lord looks at his churches (Revelation 2-3) he wants to see pure and repentant hearts, faithfulness to his Word, a bold confession of faith, elimination of soul-destroying falsehoods, hard work and perseverance, renewed strength in and through him, deeds that express faith and love, and passion for people. But often he doesn't.

Many churches experience plateau and decline because of sinful attitudes or behaviors. Some churches are guilty of pride and self-reliance. Others have neglected prayer or have sought self-glory rather than the glory of God. Many churches would experience revival and turnaround if they simply met these four prerequisites: (1) humility, (2) prayer, (3) seeking God, and (4) repentance. (Eymann 2011, 39-40)

Having pure hearts helps leaders to have pure motives, which prompts them to select appropriate methods. This is important because, when it comes to methodology, ministry leaders could easily be tempted to gravitate toward *doing things that work* (from a human perspective), possibly without even realizing the impropriety of their methods.

This may be true especially in an ecclesiastical environment within which either (1) the extolment that comes with being a large church entices some to focus primarily on institutional growth, or (2) leaders of churches in decline, out of desperation, are constantly concerned about growth so their church is able to survive. In either situation, to appeal to audiences with the ambition of seeing positive numerical outcomes, some leaders may be induced to become extreme with their methods or to moderate God's message.

Such injudicious choices--designed to lure and secure an ever-growing audience for the sake of growth, often through the use of imaginative gimmicks (Stetzer and Nation 2012, 88)--may actually obscure Christ's message and mission. Attempting to impress and draw in outsiders on worldly terms, giving people what they want, adjusting the content of the message to cater to their tastes, is a fundamentally flawed approach because it is at cross-purposes with the gospel of Christ (Savage 2011, 20-21).

The recent trend in pastoral ministry has been to come up with increasingly clever and innovative models or metaphors for ministry that still retain some semblance of faithfulness to God's Word. Much of this recent activity has had its genesis in the thinking of the church growth movement. Bigger must be best, so the primary goal has shifted from how to cultivate

health to how to get big. Many books in this camp are designed to make the church appeal to the world on the world's terms rather than on God's terms. But this only amounts to so much worldly wisdom (1 Cor 2:1-5). As our ministry methods become more complex, more reliant on human ingenuity, and more concerned with the approval of the world, they begin to cast a shadow on the image of God, and "the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6) appears correspondingly dimmer. The mirror of God's Word becomes increasingly opaque, tarnished by the over-application of human technique. (Dever and Alexander 2005, 196)

One flawed approach to appealing to those whose ears perhaps *itch* (2 Tim 4:3) is with the message that becoming a Christian means being blessed quickly and abundantly (in the here and now) without needing to carry personal Christian crosses. Carrying a personal cross includes humble submission to God's Word, bearing the burdens of being a Christian, and bearing hardships in general with confidence and joy in Christ (Mark 8:34; Luke 21:12-17; Jas 1:2-3). Especially ministers should not be surprised if they, while speaking boldly for Christ, are mistreated. In fact, "True ministers of Christ are happy to be despised, if, by their being despised, somehow the gospel is displayed" (Dever 2008, 43).

For today's Christians, pastors included, the challenge to carry willingly their personal crosses (in the shadow of Christ's cross) may be intensified because of current expectations. "In an age dedicated to self-fulfillment and enamored with success, who wants to hear about sacrifice and self-giving?" (Seamands 2005, 83). But consider the gospel of Christ. "You cannot have the true and loving God without the bloody death of Christ. God will not love you without the gruesome spectacle of His Son's corpse. God cannot accept you except through the naked, bloody, dead Savior on Golgotha. That is the theology of the cross" (Preus 2004, 41). That cross-focused theology is compelling.

Contrast the theology of the cross with the theology of glory, commonly described as the *prosperity gospel*--which promises health, wealth, and influence to those who believe in and obey God. The message is different, which means the theology of glory "is really no gospel at all" (Gal 1:7). "The contrast is the *theology of the cross*: the story of God's merciful descent to us at great personal cost--a message that the apostle Paul acknowledged was offensive and foolish to Greeks" (Horton 2008, 68).

Again contrasting the theology of the cross (centered in Christ) with the theology of glory (centered in oneself), another author writes:

We see on every hand a desire to make Christianity fun and happy-go-lucky. Some churches and their leaders go so far as to claim that God really wants Christians always to be healthy, wealthy, and wise. Others turn worship services into hours of self-discovery; the goal is to give the Christian personal fulfillment and better character. If the individual can learn to get along better with himself, then he will get along better with everyone else too, and God should be happy about that. Still others are obsessed with the notion that the true church should be successful, big, and influential in world and national politics. Within the church, no matter what denominational label the particular church may wear, many members want to be their own bible; they want the freedom to pick and choose what doctrines to believe and what behavior to praise or blame. Their choices change with their circumstances of the moment, and woe betide any preacher who tells them on the basis of the Scriptures that they are wrong and their choices damnable in the eyes of God. All of that is a theology of glory, a theology which lets man be his own god and turns the God of the Bible into a creature subject to personal whims of the moment. (Deutschlander 2008, vi)

Perhaps it is safe to say that many people and the pastors that serve them are tempted along these lines. "[Many churches] have broken Christian principles in their pursuit of growth and success. A passion for Christ and the lost (which should have caused people to be obedient to Christ in all things) seems to have been replaced by a passion for growth that tempts them to use questionable means to achieve it" (Fernando 2002, 85).

When confidence in what we do or how we do it lessens our dependence on the power of God's Word, when we alter God's truth in an attempt to make it more palatable to people, or when our vision of success competes with God's requirement of faithfulness, we have assuredly gone astray. We've entered into forbidden territory.

Certainly there is nothing wrong with the wise use of [commonsense] principles. They should be part of the intelligent orchestration of ministry. However, when the refrain they play is numerical growth--when the persistent motif is numbers--then the siren song becomes deeply sinister: growth in numbers, growth in giving, growth in staff, growth in programs--numbers, numbers, numbers! *Pragmatism* becomes the conductor. The audience inexorably becomes man rather than God. Subtle self-promotion becomes the driving force.

When success in the ministry becomes the same as success in the world, the servant of God evaluates his success like a businessman or an athlete or a politician And if this happens, it can erode the noblest ideals. It can even corrupt one's theology. (Hughes and Hughes 2008, 29-30)

Utilizing appropriate methods often helps congregations make connections, increase community interest, communicate effectively, develop trust, serve people in Christ's name, and establish meaningful relationships. Churches, though, must be faithful to God's Word and must never depend on methods to accomplish what only the Lord can achieve through the gospel. We must be careful what we label *success* in the church. "We do not measure our success by that which is obvious and visible [hundreds of members, thousands in attendance, programs and budgets, anything we do] It is found in the sacrifice Christ made on the cross and the work He continues to do through the Gospel" (Preus 2004, 42).

Faithful ministry that does not compromise God's message surely saves souls through that message, but at the same time there will be rejection (1 Cor 1:22-24). Even when virtuous methods are employed, both positive and negative results are realistic expectations. "The point is not that methods don't matter. The point is that methods as

such do not convert or preserve our faith. Only the gospel can do that That many, even most, will reject the message is not the fault of the gospel but of those who reject it" (Deutschlander 2011, 198-99).

Success gained through compromising God's Word is not God-glorifying achievement. "If we cover up some of God's truth because we are afraid of failure, then our methods do not advance the cause of the gospel; they become another hindrance to it. ... Our methods must conform to the message, not the other way around" (Deutschlander 2011, 200-201). As every thought is taken captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor 10:5), every teaching of Scripture must be handled faithfully and presented clearly.

Unquestionably, faithful pastors and other leaders will want to avoid inappropriate methodology that obscures or distorts the truths of Scripture. Such faulty methods cannot be considered *appropriate* no matter how many people they gather.

While it is true there needs to be interaction with the unconverted so relationships can be built, and "Each ministry must grapple to see how best to combine meeting needs and preaching the gospel in the particular context in which they are operating" (Fernando 2002, 204), we will do this responsibly. This means we will not misrepresent Christian truth or misguide the people we hope to reach with the gospel (Kelm 2003, 36).

Stated positively, we will share our confession of Christ with both words and actions in ways that honor our Lord and do our best to stay out of the Spirit's way so we do not hinder his work or give those we are trying to reach any reason to close their ears to our message (Brenner 2012, 9). We simply want to show Christian love, to provide a Christian

witness, to touch the lives of those within our reach with the message that saves. How appropriate it would be if, in our neighborhoods, we become known as persons who are loving and kind and often talk about the Savior. "When we walk the walk of the faith that burns in our hearts through acts of service, it may be then that those who seem hardest to reach are willing to give a hearing to the Servant's story" (Leyrer 2012, 200).

Perhaps an appropriate way to close this section, which addresses the desire of God's people to gather audiences for the gospel through appropriate methods, is with the wisdom of a seminary professor who has sensed the tensions that have surfaced within this writer's church body for some time now. After commenting on the Lord's instructions to "be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt 10:16), the professor concludes:

A lay leader, a pastor, a congregation, and a church body all understand that Jesus instructed us to be both shrewd and innocent in the cause of making disciples, to use our heads and to follow Christ's heart as we touch our communities with the gospel. Are we blessed to have some evangelists who are particularly gifted in the shrewdness of snakes? Yes, we are. What a shame if their "thinking outside the box" as to how to penetrate an unchurched community would only be viewed as playing fast and loose with the doctrine of the means of grace. Are we blessed to have some evangelists who are particularly gifted at recognizing and avoiding evangelism methodologies that are less than innocent because they are premised upon less than scriptural truth? Yes, we are. What a shame if their discernment in this matter was only viewed as having less of a heart for the lost. "Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves," Jesus said. Both and. God grant us a rich measure of Christ's Spirit so that disciple-makers trust one another, learn from one another, and spur one another on to work our mission fields shrewdly and innocently. (Leyrer 2012, 205)

We have reviewed in this Theological and Biblical Issues chapter four doctrinal issues primarily because (1) they particularly lay a solid scriptural foundation for desiring and pursuing turnaround, and (2) considering these four issues helps to minimize the tensions that could easily exist in a congregation or denomination where there is both a high

priority on remaining faithful to God's Word and conducting aggressive outreach, especially through innovative methodology.

Knowing God's gracious heart draws attention to the purest motivation for ministry, God's love and forgiveness in Christ. *Owning Christ's make-disciples mission*, which is both a privilege and a responsibility, is the principal task of those who confess and follow Jesus and devotedly gather in his congregations. *Depending on God's powerful means of grace* ensures that those who conduct ministry and desire turnaround rely not on their own ingenuity and efforts to change hearts and lives but on the power of the gospel and work of the Spirit. Finally, *gathering an audience through appropriate methods* calls on God's people, and especially God's leaders, to have integrity and use good judgment as they pursue Christ's mission.

These four critical issues especially provide a concrete biblical foundation for pursuing turnaround because they guide God's people and his churches to do the *right thing* (make disciples) for the *right reason* (God's love and forgiveness) in the *right ways* (with confidence in the gospel's and the Spirit's power and with discernment).

We have briefly mentioned in this chapter other theological and practical concerns related to assisting churches with turnaround (e.g., godly leadership, prayer, context). We will now more fully explore these and other concerns in the next chapter, *Issues from Related Contemporary Literature*, considering both theory and process. There we will cover in three sections, with turnaround churches in mind, *Cultural Shifts and Changing Demographics*, *Striving for Church Health*, and *Enabling Needed Change*.

CHAPTER 3

ISSUES FROM RELATED CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Why is there, on the whole, crisis in the traditional church (and certainly not just in the WELS)? A short answer was provided earlier under the *Statement of Need*. The single word answer provided there was *change*--both within congregations and their communities. A longer answer follows in this chapter under *Cultural Shifts and Changing Demographics*.

Within a context of rapid and comprehensive change, many congregations have been knocked off balance and are struggling to regain their stability by figuring out how best to function in this twenty-first century without compromising God's truth or his soul-saving mission. Because of all this change, *Striving for Church Health* has become essential. How congregations become healthier--both for the benefit of the saved and the lost--is explored in this chapter as well.

The final section in this chapter is titled *Enabling Needed Change*. The emphasis there is on those process components that help facilitate needed and desired adjustments in ministry methodology and, if required, congregational transformation (i.e., turnaround).

Cultural Shifts and Changing Demographics

The available resources on the study of American culture are both massive and complex. For our purposes, we will focus primarily on some of the aspects of culture that may be associated with congregational plateau and decline in membership and worship participation. As previously stated, only the Lord through his means of grace can change hearts and transform lives, and he does so where and when it pleases him as he accomplishes his purposes. At the same time, the Lord has chosen throughout the ages to work through human agents in gathering more people and exposing them to his powerful gospel. This is true wherever God's people are located and within whatever culture currently exists.

We, and our churches, must engage the culture here and now. Pining away for a culture of times past and the practices that are meaningful to us but are ineffective in reaching those around us is a selfish way to view the ministry of the church. Instead, we must engage the culture with the life-changing, unchanging message of Jesus Christ--even if we must set aside our preference to stay home and simply enjoy church as it has always been. (Stetzer and Nation 2012, 117)

Cultural shifts and changing demographics must not be ignored by congregations and especially by those who are positioned to lead congregations. Ministry leaders who aptly understand their cultural environments, including the characteristics of the people living within their local communities, are better prepared to make strategic ministry decisions than those who do not. Such decisions, blessed by the Lord, are likely to result in greater church health through an intentional process that brings about *needed change*.

Both having and exercising wisdom regarding one's times are the goals. Perhaps the men of Issachar among the people of Israel at the time of David serve as an example. It is written that these men "understood the times and knew what Israel should do"

(1 Chr 12:32). These sagacious men were keenly aware of the dynamics of culture that are consequential and they practiced real wisdom, which meant they knew how to live *according* to that knowledge in the most appropriate way (White 2012, 11).

There are a number of factors that need to be considered when contemplating culture and attempting to define current reality for the purpose of identifying what ministry adjustments may be needed or desired at any given time and place. There are big-picture global factors, national factors, local community factors, and factors unique to a particular congregational (including the congregation's denomination). Considered together, these factors provide a helpful comprehension of the changes that have impacted and continue to influence the settings within which congregations conduct their ministries.

Global Factors

Starting with the big picture, one global perspective is offered by Gary McIntosh as he comments on historic church movements and argues that such movements now happen within much shorter periods of time. "Throughout history, there has always been change. The difference today is how fast change is taking place. What once took years or decades to change now happens in a few months. ... Major historical events in the history of the Church illustrate how the pace of change is increasing" (McIntosh 2010, 121). After providing a historic summary of worldwide change in the church, McIntosh concludes:

The point in looking at this brief overview of Church history is to show that the pace of major change is occurring in an ever-shortening space of time. It took one thousand years from the fall of Rome for the Protestant Reformation to jolt the Church. Yet, it was only two hundred years until the First Great Awakening, then one hundred years to the Second Great Awakening, then around fifty years to the evangelical movement in the latter half of the 1900s.

Today, the shelf life of any Church movement seems to last around fifteen years and appears to be getting shorter. (McIntosh 2010, 122-23)

Another even broader worldwide perspective is posed by Kevin Kelly as he reviews briefly the spread of Christianity since Christ walked the earth and then envisions its movement going forward for the next thousand years. Accurate or not, his extrapolations and predictions are intriguing.

From the time of Christ to the year 300 the center of Christianity moved from its epicenter in Jerusalem to Armenia, which is the oldest Christian country. By AD 500 the center of the faith had moved west to Greece and Rome. In the next five hundred years the center of gravity of the church continued to move further west into Europe, where it became synonymous with culture and art. In the next one thousand years the center of the Christian church moved even further west into North and South America. While the Pope remained in Europe, all the cultural action, innovation, change, and life in the church was focused in the Americas. By AD 2000, the U.S.A. in particular came to see itself as the headquarters of Christian belief, now removed half way around the world from its origins.

But the center of the church continues to move west Asia and Africa are experiencing phenomenal rates of Christian church growth. Most of the new Christians in the world born in the next centuries will live in Asia and parts of Africa. The fastest growing churches seem to be in Asia (China and the Asian Tigers 3), and so the cultural center (newest ideas, most money, largest congregations) of the global body will tend to move west again. Given the speed of church growth in Korea and China, and extending that another five hundred years, by the year 2500 the world might identify Christianity as primarily an Asian thing.

If the move west continues as it has for the last two thousand years, Christianity's center of gravity may keep migrating westward. The new missionaries based in Asia will reach out to unbelievers in the birthplace of Christianity. Eventually the center of gravity leaves Asia and slowly returns to the Mid-East. In the next one thousand years, the epicenter of Christianity might complete its circumnavigation of the globe and arrive back where it began. As one Chinese missionary said, "We have the view that Chinese missionaries will be part of the mainstream on the highway back to Jerusalem." (Kelly 2008, 4)

Philip Jenkins appears to concur with the observation that Christianity is experiencing major geographical movement. He explains in his acclaimed book, *The Next Christendom*.

We are currently living through one of the transforming moments in the history of religion worldwide. Over the last five centuries, the story of Christianity has been inextricably bound up with that of Europe and European-derived civilizations overseas, above all in North America

Over the last century, however, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably away from Europe, southward, to Africa and Latin America, and eastward, toward Asia. Today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in those regions

This trend will continue apace in coming years

Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the coming decades, but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of the Southern churches is dawning. The fact of change itself is undeniable: it has happened, and will continue to happen. (Jenkins 2011, 1-3)

John Brenner echoes a similar conclusion as he comments on a Religious News Service release dated February 16, 2005. The reference to post-Christian cultural norms is telling.

For some time religious observers have been noting that the center of Christianity has been moving away from Western Europe and North America to the third world countries in the south and east. ...

Citing a book entitled *The Changing Face of Christianity* ... the article observes, "It is in Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Oceania that Christianity is flourishing. In the global north--North America and Europe especially--the religion is barely holding its own"

The book claims that a liberal, worldly spirit of accommodation to contemporary secular culture characteristic of so much of Western Christianity is to blame for the decline in Europe and America and the lack of vigor of western churches [From the book's conclusion] "The new Christianity of the global south and east, which bears the scars of hardship and persecution ... may be closer to classic Christian doctrines and imperatives than in the north where it has assumed modern, post-Christian cultural norms."

Decades of doctrinal decline in liberal churches and accommodation to pop culture, business culture, and various other manifestations of secular culture by more conservative churches in America have taken their toll on the vitality of Christianity in this country. (Brenner 2005, 302-3)

Perhaps assuming modern, post-Christian cultural norms explains, at least in part, why so many Christian churches in America seem to be losing influence within their communities and are, additionally, seeing a loss of members and fewer people seeking out a church to call home. Perhaps it is even safe to postulate that the morphing and, in many ways, deteriorating culture in America is having more negative influence on Christian churches today than those churches are positively influencing American culture.

Another factor with both global and national implications is pluralism. Harold Netland writes extensively on this subject as he calls attention to the changing landscape of Europe and North America, the result of profound changes within the last fifty-plus years, which have weakened the traditional links between Christianity and Western culture and have brought about "striking differences in basic values, lifestyles, worldviews and religious commitments" (Netland 2001, 9).

Netland explains, "religious pluralism is a distinctive way of thinking about religious diversity that affirms such diversity as something inherently good, to be embraced enthusiastically" (Netland 2001, 12). He proposes, "Christianity, once the dominant religious force in America, now struggles with its diminishing role in a society that increasingly rejects it in favor of fresh alternatives" (Netland 2001, 20). Religious pluralism helps to explain, in part, why Christian churches are seeing fewer new people in their sanctuaries as more of the regulars drift away.

National Factors

There are likely a number of other national factors that may be associated with the decline of so many churches in America. After reviewing census results from the last two decades, writers from USA Today concluded that the year 2010 marked a turning point in the nation's social, cultural, geographic, racial, and ethnic fabric that was so profound it even stunned demographers and social observers (USA Today website, accessed July 2012).

The most recent census-based prediction by the U.S. Census Bureau is that America will "become more racially and ethnically diverse, with the aggregate minority population projected to become the majority in 2042. [The minority population is considered to be everyone other than the non-Hispanic White alone population.] The population is also expected to become much older, with nearly one in five U.S. residents aged sixty-five and older in 2030" (Vincent and Velkoff 2010, accessed August 2012). No wonder struggling congregations frequently point to growing ethnic diversity within their communities and use the word *aging* to describe their membership.

For decades most people who are established in traditional churches have noticed that those moving into their communities are increasingly less like them. Immigration has been on the rise for decades, and much of it could be classified as *illegal*. "[Ethnic transformation] is undeniable and irreversible As planters of churches in America and as members of established congregations, we must ponder the implications of the ethnicization of the neighborhoods we are serving in Jesus' name" (Sorum 1999, 100).

The shifts over these decades explain, in part, why institutional churches (which could be identified as *traditional sacred places*) are finding it more difficult to remain

viable. Barna concluded years ago what is even more visible now: "America has clearly entered a post-Christian era. While religion remains important to people, they are not clamoring for the Christian faith, nor is there much hard evidence of people willingly defining their lifestyle and values according to Christian principles" (Barna 1993, 87-88).

A more recent report concludes that (1) half of all adults now contend that Christianity is just one of many options, (2) people no longer look to denominations or churches to offer a slate of theological views that the individual adopts in its entirety, and (3) feelings and emotions now play a significant role in the development of people's faith views (Barna Group 2009, accessed August 2012). Complicating matters, Christian churches now compete against a growing number of entities that offer varied spiritual experiences. Spirituality in America is changing, and the traditional church is feeling the impact.

Looking back on spirituality in the United States over a number of decades (since the 1950s), Robert Wuthnow in *After Heaven* concludes that "Growing numbers of Americans piece together their faith like a patchwork quilt" and, "Spirituality has become a vastly complex quest in which each person seeks his or her own way" (Wuthnow 1998, 2). Culture has become more secular, but Americans have not become less interested in spirituality as they vacillate between old religious traditions and new spiritual opportunities (Wuthnow 1998, 10-11). Wuthnow believes the United States is in the throes of a major transition, and people are reshaping deep religious traditions in ways that help them make sense of the new realities of their lives in an increasingly complex social and cultural environment (Wuthnow 1998, 11).

Jim Petersen in *Church without Walls* shared his overlapping perspective on America's shifting culture a couple of decades back. Petersen at that time cited six major influences that were shaping America: (1) Our view of truth is becoming increasingly relativistic, (2) long-range prospects of scarcity and downward mobility, (3) time becomes the most precious commodity, (4) the pursuit of self-fulfillment, (5) the redefining of the family, and (6) increase in personally and socially destructive behavior. He opined, "One way of life appears to be ending, and another is emerging" (Petersen 1992, 22-27).

A related perspective (from about the same time) was shared by Mike Regele in *Death of the Church*. Regele predicted that the institutional church would look different going forward because of chaotic change. He anticipated, "There is a new world coming, and it is erupting with massive force, rising up out of the world that is passing" (Regele 1995, 49). Regele claimed that one consequence would be the marginalization of mainline protestant denominations (Regele 1995, 182). His prediction now seems prophetic.

One perspective submitted by Carson and Keller explains not only *what* has changed but *why* these changes have occurred. In brief, (1) adults no longer have similar moral institutions to guide them and especially younger people are far less traditional, (2) secularism is much more aggressive and anti-Christian, and (3) more people now live fragmented lives with identities that are reshaped as they move through a series of life episodes that are not tightly connected, which means commitments and loyalties may be quickly abandoned (Carson and Keller 2011, 7-8).

One outcome of these deep-rooted changes, which negatively impact the stability of American churches, is the increase of *Nones* (the religiously unaffiliated). The

Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports that the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace, with one-fifth of the U.S. public and one-third of adults under the age of thirty currently religiously unaffiliated, and Nones are often critical of religious organizations (Pew Research Center website, accessed October 2012).

Tellingly, two of the Top Trends cited by The Barna Group were "Americans are struggling to determine how faith, Christianity and church fit into contemporary life," and "the Christian community is struggling to remain connected with the next generation of teens and young adults" (Barna Group 2011, accessed August 2012). This may explain partially why worship participation in America is declining.

David Olson, in his book *The American Church in Crisis* and based on a national database of over 200,000 churches, confidently maintains that "the American church is losing ground as the population continues to surge" (Olson 2008, 15). He contends that popular polls (Barna Research Group and Gallup), which have attempted over the years to measure how frequently people participate in public worship, are flawed. "When you start to do the math, the vision of a booming American church unravels [T]he actual attendance is less than half of what polls suggest" (Olson 2008, 16).

Going back to 1939, as adults were asked various questions related to their past week's church attendance, 40 to 47 percent of those polled responded affirmatively (Olson 2008, 26). Olson suggests these percentages are inaccurate because of the *halo effect*, i.e., the over-reporting that occurs when people want to show themselves engaged in socially acceptable behavior (Olson 2008, 28). Thom and Sam Rainer agree. "The spread between

those who claim a church and those who actually attend on any given weekend is substantial" (Rainer and Rainer 2008, 58).

Olson claims (based on his research) that the American church is not only failing to keep up with the inflow of new immigrants but also, "The percentage of Americans who attended a Christian church on any given weekend declined from 20.4 percent in 1990 to 17.5 percent in 2005" (Olson 2008, 36). If this trend continues, it is likely that less than 15 percent of America's people will be attending church during an average week by 2020.

This brief review of some national factors that are influencing the wellbeing of American churches raises some obvious questions. How will congregations and their church bodies grow and remain viable today? Also, far more important, how do we who *know* Christ reach more people *for* Christ and then nurture and equip them to reach others in our morphing ministry contexts? In our restructured country and reformatted culture, change has definitely impacted churches. "The United States has always had a voluntary religious system, but today it seems more voluntary than ever" (Dudley and Ammerman 2002, 3).

These questions also merit responses: What are the implications of these mostly unsettling national factors for the American church, and what is the way forward for churches which want to remain healthy or recover from short- or long-term ominous decline?

In *Essential Church*, Thom and Sam Rainer comment on the decline of the church and decry the loss of a generation of church dropouts who no longer see the church as essential to their lives. Their message is grim as they predict the continuing demise of churches. "Simply stated, our churches are reaching fewer people and losing more people" (Rainer and Rainer 2008, 178). Paul Nixon predicts that more than half of mainline

denominational churches will likely disappear sometime in the next half-century (Nixon 2006, 9).

In one of the groundbreaking books on the subject of turnaround churches, George Barna concluded that when you live in the midst of change it is often difficult to recognize the impact change is having, with the result that silently, but certainly, many congregations across America have been overwhelmed (Barna 1993, 33-34, 40). The authors of *Leading Congregational Change* are of the same mind. Most churches and denominations failed to see the shifts in society and understand the deep implications of those shifts over the past few decades. The result is that approximately two-thirds of Protestant congregations now have long-term attendance trends that are either flat or declining. They maintain that bold transformation is currently needed in many of the congregations that cover the American landscape (Herrington, Bonem, and Furr 2000, ix-xi).

Many churches in America are struggling but, according to Frank Page, it is not just because of secularism, cultural shifts, and changing demographics. Page points to faults *within* many churches (e.g., being lifeless, boring, emotionally hollow, going through the motions of worship out of habit) and concludes, "It's no wonder that church attendance is shrinking and congregations across the country are panicked over what to do about it" (Page 2008, 3).

Michael Horton appears to agree that there is fault within many churches: "We are the problem. If most churchgoers cannot tell us anything specific about the God they consider meaningful or explain basic doctrines of creation in God's image, original sin,

the atonement, justification, sanctification, the means of grace, or the hope of glory, then the blame can hardly be placed at the feet of secular humanists" (Horton 2008, 244).

Thom Rainer's perspective is that the American church is "mired in mediocrity." He cites as evidence: doctrinal ignorance, evangelistic apathy, ministry irrelevance, and fellowship fractures (Rainer and Rainer 2008, 73-74).

William McConnell in *Renew Your Congregation* maintains that it now takes much more work just to keep a church moving forward. Reflecting on days past when it used to be relatively easy to pastor a congregation, he observes: "Now, it seems, keeping a church alive and growing has become a major task. Our yearly reports indicate that the natural state of most mainline denominational churches is a slow spiral toward death If nothing is done to stop that spiral, it will not automatically reverse itself" (McConnell 2007, vii). He adds, "For a church to be revitalized and transformed, much hard work must be done" (McConnell 2007, 4).

Acknowledging that Christian ministry faces more challenges today than it did just twenty years ago and that young people today do not share the philosophical assumptions of fifty- or even twenty-year old congregations, Olson opines, "Largely unaware of these changes, many churches continue to operate in modes and mentalities that no longer resonate with our culture" (Olson 2008, 161). He argues that the American church must work its way through these three critical transitions: "Our world used to be Christian, but it is now becoming post-Christian. Our world used to be modern, but it is now becoming postmodern. Our world used to be monoethnic, but is now becoming multiethnic" (Olson 2008, 162).

To help us grasp how to navigate our way through these critical transitions, Olson mentions that in a largely Christian world the focus was on insiders and institutional maintenance, whereas now, in a post-Christian world, the focus must be on outsiders with a renewed emphasis on the message and mission of Jesus (Olson 2008, 163). In a postmodern world, where subjective experience replaces objective certainty and spiritual curiosity is present yet not necessarily Christian in orientation, there will be ample opportunities for fruitful ministry if we are able to recognize them (Olson 2008, 164-65). Also, moving from primarily a monoethnic to a multiethnic culture will involve more complexity (similar to the early church's mission to the Gentiles), and new challenges will require new strategies (Olson 2008, 169-71). So, is there hope?

Looking at cultural change from the perspective of mainline Protestantism, Mary Gifford raises grave questions in *The Turnaround Church*. "Can the mainline Protestant church learn to adapt to the culture that surrounds it now and learn new ways to thrive again? And will the church be able to establish its relevance within this changed culture?" (Gifford 2009, 2). Gifford contends that churches which have experienced prolonged decline can indeed be turned around. Paul Nixon concurs. "Any church can blossom and grow anywhere if it will become healthy enough spiritually and pay attention to the needs, experiences, and sensibilities of those it seeks to serve" (Nixon 2006, 13).

Gifford, however, cautions that turning a church around involves years of dismantling old systems and initiating and implementing newer, more effective systems (Gifford 2009, 22) that might be more work than many pastors and congregations want to or are able to undertake (Gifford 2009, 62). Similarly, Frank Page is guardedly optimistic about

church renewal as long as work *within churches* is coupled with work *within culture*, and he is confident (in Christ) that churches can rise to the challenge.

As challenging as it is for churches today to hang on, much less to grow and thrive, the same spiritual essence that produced vital and dynamic Christian congregations twenty years ago--or two hundred years ago--will produce them today Christ is the source of all success. But you can't just sit around and wait for Him to stop your church from shrinking There's a lot to learn and a lot to do in order to turn your church around, or to keep it headed in the right direction. (Page 2008, 4)

In spite of the plight of the American church, Kent Hunter also sees the glass half full. He acknowledges the following: "Moving a church to action ... is nothing less than spiritual renewal in the hearts and lives of people gathered around God's message of forgiveness" (Hunter 2000, 18), and God's people will be *moved to action* through influential servant leaders, a refocus on taking the gospel to the world, self-analysis and a sense of accountability as human efforts in sharing the gospel are measured, and "dreamers and visionaries who are enlightened by Word and Spirit and characterized by boldness" (Hunter 2000, 27).

Once again, the message of forgiveness through Christ doesn't change, but the methodologies may and sometimes must change. "Each church is called to minister uniquely because the culture surrounding it is unique" (Stetzer and Nation 2012, 86). "The mission is the same, but the different audiences require a different approach in pursuing the mission" (Becker 2012, 36). This requires that churches need to be mindful not only of the global and national factors that are at play but also of their local community factors.

Local Community Factors

There are a variety of ways for congregations to become familiar with their local communities and to identify the factors that will inform their ministry-related discussions and decisions. Some approaches primarily gather *hard* data (which is quantitative and factual, using verifiable statistics and graphs); other approaches rely mostly on *soft* data (which is qualitative and subjective, making use of surveys and interviews); but a balanced collection of both is best. This allows the most helpful understanding of a congregation's ministry context.

The authors of the second chapter of *Studying Congregations* (Ecology: Seeing the Congregation in Context) maintain that there are over 300,000 congregations in the United States, that each one "exists in relation to an environment ... which is external to the congregation," and that a helpful way to define environment is "*wide in scope, having several layers, and made up of elements that are relatively invisible as well as visible*" (Ammerman et al. 1998, 41). They define *scope* as "the open-ended character of the congregation's environment" and describe *layers* using three terms--*demography* ("the characteristics of the people in the community"), *culture* ("the systems of meaning, values, and practices shared by ... members of the community and groups within the community"), and *organization* ("the systems of roles and relationships that structure the interactions of people in the community"), all of which help a congregation understand the complex dynamics of its local ministry context (Ammerman et al. 1998, 41-42). The authors conclude with the claim, "The only sure way for a congregation to die is for it to close itself off from its context" (Ammerman et al. 1998, 76).

In *Congregations in Transition*, the authors emphasize the importance of "getting the lay of the land" around the congregation and "mapping" the community for the purpose of locating itself within its particular context (Dudley and Ammerman 2002, 3). They encourage the creation of three contextual maps: (1) a "place map" to define the congregation's boundaries, (2) a "people map" for identifying and knowing the congregation's neighbors, supplemented by conversations with local people, and (3) an "institutional map" (Dudley and Ammerman 2002, 3) that sets the congregation within the context of notable community events and institutions. The expectation is for each map to provide helpful information, and when the discoveries are consolidated a congregation is better able to envision opportunities for ministry within that unique community (Dudley and Ammerman 2002, 21-58).

In *Change: Mission and Ministry Across Cultures*, with an emphasis on multicultural mission fields in urban North America, E. Allen Sorum proposes using research, surveys, and interviews to engage local residents and discover how best to serve them in Christ's name. He posits, "The process itself is ministry and leads to a ministry plan" (Sorum 1999, 2). Sorum surfaces some questions that require searchable answers.

What about that community, that neighborhood around your church? What do you know about them? What do they know about you? Do your neighbors even know where you are, let alone what glorious resources and benefits and ministry you have hidden behind those church walls? Can you build on the perception your neighbors have of you or must you first change the perception that your neighbors have of you? These are crucial questions for your congregation's future. The answers are not difficult to obtain. (Sorum 1999, 129)

To obtain the answers, Sorum recommends the completion of both a demographic study of the community and an ethnographic study of the church's neighbors.

Members of the congregation would carry out local research and use surveys and interviews to become familiar with people who live in the church's ministry area. Sorum claims with confidence, "God will reveal what programs your congregation can and should hold out in the name of Christ to your neighbors," (Sorum 1999, 143) and he cites three specific objectives for doing this work: (1) uncover specific cultural issues, questions and hurts to which you can apply specific law and gospel, (2) uncover specific cultural issues, questions and hurts to which you can apply specific mission and ministry strategies, and (3) begin to develop a systematic theology that speaks to the specific needs, hurts, questions and issues of this culture (Sorum 1999, 143).

Sorum explains the rationale for these objectives and their connection to proclaiming God's truth in a specific context. "Doctrinal statements do not come out of a vacuum. Every statement of doctrine and every application of doctrine comes in direct response to a hurt or a sin or a question or a need" (Sorum 1999, 144). Mark Mittelberg in *Becoming a Contagious Church* echoes similar thoughts. Decide first whom your outreach efforts will serve, get to know them, shape your approach accordingly, and then present God's truth to them in ways that will communicate (Mittelberg 2007, 139-40).

Correspondingly, Gary McIntosh advises the following five steps in discerning a congregation's community context: (1) Study the general demographic trends to discover what is happening around your church, (2) survey the needs and concerns in your community, (3) interview community leaders, (4) identify potential ministry opportunities, (5) identify possible growth barriers (McIntosh 2010, 84). Satisfactorily researching each step answers a list of relevant questions.

Conducting an external analysis should include three audits--a community audit, a threats audit, and an opportunities audit--claims Aubrey Malphurs. The *community audit* "consists mostly of demographics and psychographics" and answers many questions about the people who live in the area, why they do what they do, and the congregation's willingness to reach those people; the *threats audit* takes a close look at "immediate and long-term threats" to the congregation's ministry, including competitors within the community; and, the *opportunities audit* "assesses all the opportunities for ministry in the community and beyond," including unreached people and special people groups within them such as singles and seniors (Malphurs 1999, 73-77).

Malphurs puts forward, "If our churches want to relate to and reach our culture, they must spend time exegeting the culture as well as the Bible" (Malphurs 1999, 116). Part of that cultural exegesis includes not only discovering what is currently taking place but also searching for future trends or significant forces that will shape the community relative to its social, technological, economic, political, and philosophical environments (Malphurs 1999, 119-22). He concludes: "Understanding our times is only half the battle. The rest is determining what the church should do in response to what is happening in our times" (Malphurs 1999, 123).

Kent Hunter approaches the goal of discovering local community factors from the perspective of honoring each congregation's context. He calls attention to two general principles that impact local ministry: (1) Most pastors and church leaders *underestimate* the influence that the national and local contexts have on the church, and they can do nothing

about it, and (2) most pastors and church leaders *overestimate* the degree to which the community is aware of the church (Hunter 2000, 149).

Hunter calls attention to windows of opportunity "when people will be more open to Christians who desire to share the love of God and the good news of Jesus Christ with them" (Hunter 2000, 155-57), maintains that evangelism strategies are best developed when congregations identify specific people groups within their communities, and shares some elements that would help leaders recognize those people groups (Hunter 2000, 158-59). He claims that too often churches try to fit everyone into one style of ministry and then conclude that those who are resistant are not open to the gospel, without realizing they never hear the gospel because it is not presented in a language, style, or form that they can understand (Hunter 2000, 167).

In other words, those who have the privilege of proclaiming the gospel must do so conscientiously with a particular context in mind. Timothy Keller comments on the responsibility of gospel proclaimers in *Center Church* as he reflects on what seems to be associated with receiving God's blessings on the ministries of the urban church he serves in Manhattan. He concludes there is some space for *vision* (as he defines it) between doctrinal beliefs and ministry practices that must be thought-provokingly discovered and pursued.

Between one's doctrinal beliefs and ministry practices should be a well-conceived vision for how to bring the gospel to bear on the particular cultural setting and historical moment. This is something more practical than just doctrinal beliefs but much more theological than "how-to steps" for carrying out a particular ministry. Once this vision is in place, with its emphasis and values, it leads church leaders to make good decisions on how to worship, disciple, evangelize, serve, and engage culture in their field of ministry--whether in a city, suburb, or small town. (Keller 2012, 17)

Typically, however, leaders of congregations often steer too far to the left or right as they seek to discover an appropriate vision for ministry within their communities, and their choices have consequences. "There is a tendency to either overcontextualize to the city (which usually leads to weakening or relativizing a church's commitment to orthodoxy) or to undercontextualize (which leads to inward-facing churches that reach only certain kinds of people and fail to advance a movement of the gospel in the community)" (Keller 2012, 20). Also, in the process of forming the congregation's vision, "It is critical ... in every new generation and setting to find ways to *communicate the gospel clearly and strikingly*, distinguishing it from its opposites and counterfeits Communicating the gospel rightly in your time and place is not just a matter of 'how-to' programming" (Keller 2012, 21-22).

At the same time, ministering to a community not only involves adjusting to the audience for the sake of reaching them with God's truth; ministering also involves creating some tension to help facilitate positive change in people's lives. Keller explains: "To reach people we must appreciate and adapt to their culture, but we must also challenge and confront it If we overadapt to a culture, we have accepted the culture's idols. If, however, we underadapt to a culture, we may have turned our own culture into an idol, an absolute" (Keller 2012, 24).

This involves living in tension, and the tensions are often lived out in our churches and in our church bodies. "We need to hold to our heritage while pioneering new forms of ministry, to preserve our traditions while being free from their control. We must adapt to unbelievers without taking on their beliefs or values and maintain unity while encouraging diversity. In short, we must change while not changing" (Petersen 1992, 220).

Certainly, ministry leaders will want to learn as much as possible about their ministry contexts and about the people the Lord has placed within their reach. They will want to do their best to understand current culture, which is always undergoing change, and discover new ways to communicate God's ancient truths. Even so, beware! "Culture cannot be what drives ministry. Theology and mission determine the essence of a congregation's ministry. An understanding of culture will shape strategies and refine methods. An understanding of culture may even help a congregation establish priorities" (Kelm 2003, 77).

The Lord wants every person in every community within every culture to hear about their grievous sin and their all-sufficient Savior. "Christianity is universal in that it welcomes *everybody*, but is also particular in its confession that Jesus is Lord, and culture and ethnicity (or whatever other identity) are not. Gospel-relying Christians will exhibit both moral conviction and compassion with flexibility" (Keller 2012, 49). Duane Elmer agrees. "Our challenge is to be inclusive in extending grace to all people yet exclusive in affirming that the Bible is the authoritative truth of God" (Elmer 2006, 56).

McIntosh advises putting people first when crafting plans for the future because ministry is a social process. "Putting people first tends to reinforce the desire and commitment of people to serve each other [Churches are] in the service business. We serve others by giving them the free gospel of Jesus Christ" (McIntosh 2010, 90). He adds that we must understand people to serve them well, churches need to focus both on people inside and outside the church, and sometimes you must focus first on serving and equipping those inside before prioritizing outreach (McIntosh 2010, 90-93). Also, "No church will put people first unless the pastoral staff and main leaders visibly and constantly commit

themselves to the idea. Putting people first only happens if the people at the top lead the charge" (McIntosh 2010, 95).

Focusing both on people inside the church (nurture) and, at the same time, focusing on those outside the church (outreach) defines the dual nature of congregational ministry. Both are essential priorities. But why does nurture so often receive the majority of a congregation's resources with not much more than lip service given to outreach? Dave Browning's supposition may be spot on. "There are two tensions in a church--outreach and nurture. Without intentionality, nurture always wins. Through the years, I've come to realize that I need correctional lenses for my heart. I always want to have my needs met before I concern myself with meeting the needs of others" (Browning 2009, 180).

Intentionalizing ministry--especially to people not yet in a congregation's family of believers--is why studying cultural shifts and changing demographics is so important. Ministry is about people, and the more we understand where and how people live, the better we'll be able to reach them with the truth that saves so the family of God grows.

Considering global, national, and local community factors together is imperative if the goal is to accurately comprehend the cultural shifts and changing demographics that could positively or negatively impact a congregation's capacity to gather an audience for the gospel. But the picture would still be out of focus if congregational factors were not also considered, including the congregation's denomination or larger church body. Only when all the findings from the searchable factors are combined and fittingly contemplated will a congregation be in the best possible position to make well-informed decisions about their current and future outreach and nurture ministries.

Congregational Factors

To discover which factors within a congregation may be either slightly influencing or perhaps significantly impacting local ministry, many pointed questions must be asked regarding a variety of issues. Answering appropriate questions with accurate facts and figures not only provides useful information, it also helps avoid blind spots that could be detrimental to exercising good judgment.

A logical place to start when gathering information within a congregation is reviewing and analyzing that church's history. Typically, writings about the congregation's past are informative and creating a time line as a group activity can be instructive. "Look all the way back to the founding of the church and note the major events--good and bad. Seek to understand the church's unique DNA" (McIntosh 2010, 82). Each church's ethos is unique because their traditions, heroes, expectations, norms, stories, rituals, symbols, rewards, values, and so on are dissimilar when compared to others (Malphurs 1999, 68).

A key question is, What people and events have in some way shaped this congregation? Talking with some tenured members (especially former leaders) about their memories of the past will provide insights. Other important questions: Did their charter members and those that followed have one distinct ethnic background? How has the makeup of the congregation's membership changed? Does the current membership reflect the diversity observed in the community? Are they more or less connected with those in their ministry area compared to previous years in their church's history? What are the happy and sad stories they keep recalling and retelling? What is the reputation of the congregation and has it changed? Often a helpful follow-up question is, Why?

Along with the historical discoveries, collecting annual membership data and worship and Bible study participation numbers for the previous decade(s) and displaying them in graphs reveals what may be eye-opening trends. Frequently a major increase or decrease in numbers is associated with a significant event in the congregation's history. Perhaps there has been a more recent uplifting event that is still providing positive momentum or a traumatic one from which the congregation is still recovering.

Studying past and current data on the congregation's finances--including the costs of property purchases and capital projects and their related debts, annual budget balances, financial reserves, and the like--is also helpful. If there has been significant turnover in the community, has the giving potential of newer residents who are now becoming members changed? Based on how the congregation invests its financial resources, what are the priorities? Is there a healthy balance between outreach and nurture? What about the congregation's programming? Does it serve well and attract people who live within the congregation's reach?

Reviewing what the congregation is attempting to accomplish, is staffing adequate? Are they staffed to grow or only staffed to maintain? Are relationships healthy among the staff, between the staff and elected leaders, among members? Do they have clearly defined leadership roles and capable leaders, organization structure that is aligned with their ministry goals, and effective communication that promotes member involvement?

Properties and facilities are tools for ministry advancement, but they sometimes become obstacles. Do they provide enough space for current ministry efforts and future ministry expansion? Do they project a positive image to those who pass by, or are

they dated and unappealing? When guests visit, will they be pleased by what they see, smell, and hear? It is likely most visitors will not return if there is clutter, a musty odor, or insider talk that doesn't communicate. The same is true if the visitor's ethnicity is not represented among those who are gathered, especially if those assembled gawk and whisper when they spot someone *not like them*.

The attitudes and core values of existing members, including the congregation's leaders, need to be explored and identified because people make decisions on the basis of what they think and feel. Why does this congregation exist--for them, for others, or for themselves and others? If they exist both for our own benefit *and* that of others, which of the two (themselves or others) is their highest priority? "Sadly, churches that serve their preferences and the church culture do not reach the unchurched and will not experience comebacks The reality is too many of us love our preferences more than we love Christ's mission" (Stetzer and Nation 2012, 114).

How do members feel about the people in their community? Do they feel differently about those who are least like themselves? What is their plan to build relationships with local residents? How can they leverage their congregation's strengths to serve more people? Are they willing to make some or many changes to better reach those who do not yet know Christ or are not yet connected with a Christian congregation? Are they able to assimilate new members, especially those who have no church background?

Is there evidence in the programs they offer, the groups they organize, the events they schedule, and in their church calendar and budget to validate their responses to these and other soul-searching questions? "A disciplined congregational study must keep

open the possibility that it will reveal what a congregation does not want to see Although such revelations may be painful, seeing the patterns enables the congregation to deal with them in a constructive fashion" (Ammerman et al. 1998, 11).

Malphurs recommends conducting an audit consisting of both demographics and psychographics to help answer the question, *Who are we?* (Malphurs 1999, 67). He claims both are helpful because they gather different information. "A congregation's demographics concerns its people. It asks, To whom are we ministering? ... Psychographics asks, What are our congregation's needs, values, wants, and desires? ... It should be obvious that congregational demographics and psychographics are ministry shaping, yet far too many churches ignore them to their peril" (Malphurs 1999, 67). Each congregation may have different obstacles to overcome, its own levels of spirituality, energy and emotion, attitudes and practices regarding finances, and age characteristics involving both their people and facilities (Malphurs 1999, 69-73).

Thom Rainer writes in *Breakout Churches*, "Most church leaders are unable or unwilling to confront reality" (Rainer 2005, 69). He was surprised to discover when conducting his research how significant a factor this would be. He proposes, "One of the reasons many churches today are in a slow but deadly path of erosion is the failure of the people to accept that the church is in trouble and that immediate changes are needed" (Rainer 2005, 71).

Rainer asserts emphatically, "We cannot overstate the critical importance of awareness. Many, if not most, church leaders do not move their churches out of slow erosion because they are unwilling or unable to see the facts and discern what is taking place"

(Rainer 2005, 78). He adds that church leaders are frequently unwilling to acknowledge that their congregations are not doing well or they rationalize their unhealthy situations, often to avoid conflict (Rainer 2005, 210).

Many acceptable analysis tools and processes may be used during a self-study. But if some vital information is missed, intentionally ignored, or hidden the findings may be incomplete and future planning could easily go awry. With self-analysis especially there are often institutional mindsets, desires to keep everyone happy, and that proverbial *elephant* in the room that everyone knows is there but no one dares to talk about. Other self-analysis hazards might include getting lost in the details, failing to properly interpret the data, missing the big picture, allowing the planning process to stall, or failing to recognize the root causes (often spiritual in nature) buried beneath presenting symptoms.

Because of these and similar concerns, many congregations reach out to others for assistance with analysis and ministry planning and are convinced the benefits far outweigh the costs. "Some of the best decisions great churches make happen because of either an intensive consultation or an ongoing coaching relationship with someone who sees the big picture and who works with scores of churches" (Nixon 2006, 104).

Trained and experienced personnel from outside the congregation are often better qualified to offer fresh, impartial, and informed points of view. They identify ministry opportunities both within the congregation and community, promote crosspollination of ideas, utilize associates who have a wide range of competencies, and usually provide a proven ministry planning process that has a positive track record. Additionally, they use

tested tools, manage the phases and steps of the process so it keeps moving, and promote ministry balance through a vision that seeks both outreach and nurture.

The important factor is that God's purposes are clearly identified. It is also important that vision encompasses the great commission; it must include a balance of both evangelism and discipleship. If a church focuses on only one aspect of the great commission it will have difficulty experiencing healthy church growth. When evangelism is the sole focus of a vision the church remains shallow. It may win many people to Christ but if they are not growing as disciples they will eventually fall away or go elsewhere to grow. On the other hand, if a church focuses solely on spiritual growth it will eventually implode due to self-centeredness. A healthy vision is a balanced vision with both inward and outward perspectives--it includes both evangelism and spiritual growth. (Eymann 2011, 89-90)

Regarding spiritual growth and the role of the pastor in leading church transformation, William McConnell claims: "Spiritual transformation is foundational to church transformation Possibly the most important and significant thing a pastor can do to bring transformation to a church is lead in the area of spiritual growth" (McConnell 2007, 79-80). The Holy Spirit does the transforming, both within the person and the congregation, but the pastor is uniquely positioned to deliver God's truth to those he serves.

Understanding a congregation within the context of its relationship with its denomination may be significant. "A congregation's relation to any larger body may be the subject of practical theological work and the source of different implicit theologies" (Ammerman et al. 1998, 33). A congregation's church body often provides a strong sense of identity and a deeply-valued theological heritage, which are factors that must be considered.

Especially congregations from a staunchly conservative denomination may tend to be overly cautious and exaggeratedly resistant to needed change. This could inhibit ministry leaders from pursuing or even recognizing innovative ministry opportunities within

their community. Or they could easily confuse the benefits of theological unity with the detriment of coerced conformity.

Faithfulness to Scripture is essential, but that does not mean all the pastors from the same church body should conduct parallel ministry in a uniform manner. Pastors within the same denomination have dissimilar personalities, life experiences, gift sets, and unique local ministry challenges and opportunities.

One denominational leader--while offering helpful clarification regarding doctrine, practice, and application in the context of brotherly admonition and accountability--pointed out that pastors could celebrate the fact that there were differences in their applications of doctrine. At the same time, they could foster brotherly openness and sharing in order to encourage each other both to remain true to the good news of Jesus and to proclaim that good news to all (Huebner 2012, 24).

Conscientious kingdom-minded leaders of congregations will want to comprehend cultural shifts and changing demographics so they are better able to make informed decisions on how best to gather audiences for the gospel in their specific settings. They will research and consider global and national factors along with local community and congregational factors and determine what methodologies would be appropriate within their ministry contexts. While doing so, they will also strive for church health so their families of faith become a greater blessing both to their own members and to area residents.

Striving for Church Health

When we know God's gracious heart, own Christ's make-disciples mission, depend on God's powerful means of grace, and have as our goal to gather the largest possible

audience for the gospel through appropriate methods, then *striving for church health* becomes a key objective and a God-honoring aspiration. Especially churches that are in need of and desire turnaround will want to focus on becoming healthier.

Let's be candid. Because of failure to respond adequately to America's cultural shifts and changing demographics over the past few decades, because of missional apathy and other reasons, many churches could be failing to invite God's blessings. They might even be blocking them. Congregations cannot enhance the power of the gospel in the means of grace, but they can get in the gospel's way by poor planning, careless leadership, insensitivity to the lost, or disregard for those who are perishing (Brenner 2009, 11).

Faithfulness to God includes being willing to look in a mirror, to acknowledge faults, to repent when required, and to work diligently (compelled by Christ's love) to improve whatever is amiss. That is what congregations do as they strive to become healthier. Healthy churches want to become the best possible vehicle of God's grace and accomplish the work he has given them as they faithfully proclaim Christ both locally and to the ends of the earth.

Defining Church Health

What is *church health*, what does it look like, and how does a congregation know when it is advancing toward that desired destination? Some have attempted to answer these and other related challenging questions, which we'll now explore.

Church health was a topic of major concern and focus in the WELS within the recent past, and a significant number of clergy gathered to hear and discuss sanctioned essays on the subject. Because this turnaround churches project was conducted within the WELS,

where some tensions around this topic have surfaced, selected thoughts from these papers are included in the following pages.

From "God's Bible Men Assess Congregational Health": "I would not be surprised at all if ... we do not come to a universal agreement on the definition of congregational health. That can almost be expected to be the case because God does not speak of a universal definition with which we must agree" (Kolander 2009, 1). The author cites 2 Thess 1:3 and states, "Growing in Christian faith and love--that is the kind of congregational health which pleases our Lord," and this growth comes from the gospel (Kolander 2009, 1).

David Kolander shows how men of God (both from the past in biblical history and also today) are used by the Lord to help God's people grow in faith and love. He urges ministry leaders not to worry unduly about the definition of congregational health or the apparent lack of its outward manifestation and encourages them, instead, to concern themselves with figuring out godly, evangelical ways of carrying out the ministry of the Word and connecting people in natural and intentional ways to the means of grace (Kolander 2009, 14).

Thomas Kock attempts to simplify, but he knows the topic of church health is multifaceted. He offers under the title "Twenty-first Century Pastors Address Congregational Health": (1) The enemy of congregational health is always sin, so the solution will always be Jesus; (2) God gives us the blessings of Jesus' work through the means of grace, so use the Word and sacraments regularly and share the Word zealously; and (3) every bit of theology has application for having a healthy congregation (Koch 2009, 1).

This author raises the question, How do you measure congregational health? He submits: "This whole topic is difficult and subjective ... [Yet] it's valuable for us to ask, 'Are we doing all we can with the Word so that our members and congregations are as healthy as possible, so that the Word is reaching those who do not yet believe in Jesus?' We can ask those questions, and should, for our work is eternal" (Koch 2009, 1-2).

He also maintains that "numerical growth isn't necessarily a sign of spiritual health" (Koch 2009, 1-2), and points to the bread of life discourse in John 6 when many stopped following Jesus. Still, he argues: "Indeed, our goal IS to grow, for God has told us that He wants 'all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth' We WANT to grow. It's vital that we make every effort to grow! But sometimes we won't. Sometimes we'll even shrink. We're the church militant" (Koch 2009, 2-3).

This essayist offers a number of suggestions as actions that might bring greater health to congregations and, at the same time, reminds his readers, "We know that while we plant and water, that it's God who causes the increase" (Koch 2009, 16). Among his suggestions are: (1) make sure the mission of the church remains the main thing, (2) make Bible study an ongoing priority, (3) provide quality preaching, (4) employ the priesthood of all believers, (5) provide variety in worship, (6) use technology wisely, and (7) ensure the pastors are spiritually healthy (Koch 2009, 17-24).

He concludes with conviction. "We KNOW from whence spiritual health comes--it comes from God, working through the Word and Sacraments! And that gives us confidence! It is Word and Sacrament which builds congregational health" (Koch 2009, 26).

Kenneth Fisher proposes, while addressing the theme "Brothers in Ministry Arrange for Congregational Health": "The Church in every age struggles with some of the same spiritual diseases. ... The cure essentially remains the same--using the Means of Grace--to get the church back to health and to keep it living and growing in a spiritually healthy lifestyle" (Fisher 2009, 1-2). Fisher adds: "We trust in the gospel's power to accomplish the purposes that God intends. The gospel works and we seek to reflect this truth in humble service, and confident preaching, teaching, and witnessing" (Fisher 2009, 4).

At the same time, *congregational health* begs to be defined because healthy congregations have identifiable characteristics. Contrasting healthy congregations with those that are dysfunctional, Fisher offers the following:

Healthy congregations and pastors are joyfully fulfilling Christ's mission--both making and nurturing disciples (Matt 28:19-20) by properly using the Means of Grace. Healthy congregations exist both to nurture the flock and reach the lost without neglecting either task--nurture or outreach. Dysfunctional congregations neglect outreach or nurture--or devalue one or the other. Dysfunctional congregations exist more for those who are already in the congregation than those on the outside (pitting nurture against outreach). Dysfunctional congregations do not nurture disciples to be better equipped as "salt and light" in the world (outreach). Dysfunctional congregations make outreach optional rather than the mission of the church which nurture equips God's people to accomplish. Healthy congregations neither neglect Christ's call to nurture those who are currently disciples, nor his call to reach out with the gospel that others may come to faith through the Means of Grace. Healthy congregations nurture Christ's disciples with the goal of outreach. Healthy congregations are outward-focused--both to their fellow believers whom they are called to "build up" [Ephesians 4] and to those in the community to whom they are to be "salt and light" [Matt 25:13-16]. (Fisher 2009, 7)

Fisher proposes that healthy congregations have healthy leadership (competent leaders with firm commitment to outreach), healthy attitudes (a joyful passion born of resurrection truth and Great Commission calling), healthy plans (shaped by God's

Word and focused on seeking the lost), healthy actions (prompted by the gospel), and can therefore expect healthy results (produced by the Spirit)--all to God's glory and "centered in our salvation guaranteed at the blood-stained cross and the empty tomb" (Fisher 2009, 9-23).

Continuing our attempt to define *church health*, we move beyond the WELS. As we review several authors' efforts to define church health, we discover that each offers a different definition or perspective. In fact, it is difficult to see a common thread that ties them all together. However, more than one author mentions that the role of leaders is an element to consider and that moving toward church health is a process. It would seem the diversity of the definitions underscores the complexity of not only *defining* church health but also *perceiving* when it is happening and to what degree it is happening.

Mark Dever, for example, asks the question in the title of his book, *What is a Healthy Church?* He answers:

A healthy church is not a church that's perfect and without sin. It has not figured everything out. Rather, it's a church that continually strives to take God's side in the battle against the ungodly desires and deceits of the world, our flesh, and the devil. It's a church that continually seeks to conform itself to God's Word

A healthy church is a congregation that increasingly reflects God's character as his character has been revealed in his Word. (Dever 2007, 40)

Dever does not claim that this is the only or best definition of church health, stating, "Different occasions and purposes might call for different descriptions" (Dever 2007, 41). He does, however, name nine marks of a healthy church, all with a biblical emphasis, that "may distinguish a sound, healthy, biblical church from many of its more sickly sisters" (Dever 2007, 62).

Thabiti Anyabwile links church health to healthy church members and submits that healthy members will be active in their local congregation (Anyabwile 2008, 14). "The health of the local church depends on the willingness of its members to inspect their hearts, correct their thinking, and apply their hands to the work of the ministry" (Anyabwile 2008, 15).

The faith-generated activities of healthy members are guided by Scripture and compelled by God's love in Christ. Consequently, Anyabwile emphasizes: "The greatest need in the church today is the gospel. The gospel is not only news for a perishing world, it is the message that forms, sustains, and animates the church" (Anyabwile 2008, 39). Pointing out that healthy church members are gospel saturated, he maintains, "The gospel is absolutely vital to a vibrant, joyous, persevering, hopeful, and healthy Christian and Christian church" (Anyabwile 2008, 39), and that "A healthy church is built, in part, on healthy gospel-motivated members" (Anyabwile 2008, 44). Mark Dever adds that members are not simply intended to be consumers but providers, "colaborers with God Himself in the work of the Gospel (1 Cor 3:9)" (Dever 2005, 198).

After attempting to categorize over seven hundred United Methodist congregations across North America, Dan Dick in *Vital Signs* concluded, "Many congregations defy a simple labeling of healthy or unhealthy" (Dick 2007, 9). Besides studying these congregations on the basis of their growth or decline, Dick developed another set of criteria which he labeled "Sustainability" (Dick 2007, 10). Then integrating both sets of criteria (i.e., growth and sustainability), four church types emerged that Dick termed *decaying*, *dystrophic*, *retrogressive*, and *vital*, proposing: "Where a congregation is highly

stable and growing, vitality exists. This is the optimal situation for any congregation" (Dick 2007, 10).

Dick asserts, "The critical focus areas for congregations seeking vitality are: thinking holistically ..., balancing inward and outward focus, pursuing lifelong learning, developing ways to measure and evaluate impact, reestablishing standards with accountability, becoming developmentally complex, and creating transparency" (Dick 2007, 115-16). He observed, "The journey toward vitality takes time, and having a positive, productive partnered relationship between congregation and pastoral leader is a great asset" (Dick 2007, 124-25).

The thought of moving toward church health--that this is *process*--is implied or clearly stated by Dever when he uses the phrases "constantly seeks" and "increasingly reflects" (Dever 2007, 40), by Dick when he uses the words "seeking," "pursuing," and "journey" (Dick 2007, 115-25), and by Steinke who uses the word "process" (Steinke 1996, 4). Both Steinke and Dick also mention the influence of leadership while moving toward congregational health.

Peter Steinke in *Healthy Congregations* suggests using a systems approach when defining church health. He explains:

In a systems approach, we look at the health of a congregation as a process. Health is not a state or a thing. Health is a manifestation of processes, many hidden yet real.

Whenever humans interact, emotional and physical processes happen. Human interactions are full of information and are mutually influencing. With a systems approach, we "see" the *interactions* that take place, the *information* that is exchanged, and the *influence* that is reciprocally reinforced. (Steinke 1996, 4-5)

His definition: "*A healthy congregation is one that actively and responsibly addresses or heals its disturbances, not one with an absence of troubles*" (Steinke 1996, 10). He adds, "Health is 10 percent what happens and 90 percent how we respond" (Steinke 1996, 17); "At the heart of congregational life is the Gospel of Christ's steadfast love, given in Word and Sacraments" (Steinke 1996, 19); and "The Spirit of God and the spirit of the people nourish congregational life" (Steinke 1996, 21).

Steinke sees ministry leaders as "key stewards of the congregation ... [who] by virtue of their positions in the system, can most promote congregational health" (Steinke 1996, 26). He goes on to identify a number of health promoters (driven by leaders) including: creating a sense of purpose and direction by visioning and revisioning, appraising and managing conflict, setting a positive mood or tone, engaging in mature interaction and focusing on the growth of people, allowing the congregation's strengths and resources to carry them through challenging times, and leveraging available resources by focusing on them (Steinke 1996, 26-35).

As we consider the definition of church health, we must ask, What do healthy congregations do and how does human activity fit into the picture alongside of God's activity? Steven Goodwin suggests that healthy congregations seek to grow deep and wide with congregational life structured around Jesus' Great Commission, and they see God at work in two dimensions simultaneously--both with them as individuals and as a gathered community--with power coming from the Holy Spirit (Goodwin 1999, 7-9).

Along with exploring how church health might be defined, we are already learning from some authors about what healthier churches avoid, what they value, and how they function. We'll learn more as we hear from others about facilitating church health.

Facilitating Church Health

However one would choose to define *church health*, everyone connected with a Christian congregation will want their church to be healthier. So what might they do to facilitate church health, especially if they are ministry leaders? While addressing this question, we'll identify probable primary causes of poor health (to be avoided) and call attention to some actions that can be taken to help congregations become healthier.

A review of what several authors have written on this subject reveals that there could be a long list of possible factors associated with the decline of congregational health. As with *defining* church health, this suggests that *facilitating* church health is also a complex and challenging issue. At the same time, some identifiable themes surfaced within the authors' writings on this subject. We begin by providing three authors' lists of decline factors and then, from those lists, identify and briefly explore some common themes.

George Barna (one of the first to study churches that decreased in size and then rebounded) submits that the list of possible decline factors is limitless, but based on his team's research, the primary eight symptoms are: (1) demographic changes, (2) inadequate leadership, (3) poor management, (4) old blood, (5) building campaigns, (6) the ingrown family, (7) resistance to change, and (8) spiritual health or lack of passion for ministry (Barna 1993, 32-38). "Beyond this handful of common obstacles is a veritable laundry list of

idiosyncratic difficulties, problems tailor-made to, or by, the congregation in question" (Barna 1993, 39).

After studying over three hundred congregations, which had experienced renewed growth following an extended period of plateau or decline, Stetzer and Dodson cite an array of reasons why so many North American churches (70 to 80 percent) get stuck, including: (1) functioning as a mere institution, (2) striving to keep everyone happy and thereby retaining the status quo, (3) repelling newcomers by not letting them into preexisting family-like relationships, (4) feeling that they can't compete and giving up, (5) prioritizing processes while lacking passion, (6) failing to position people to serve purposefully, (7) expecting outsiders to adapt to dated programs and positions, (8) viewing new growth as a threat to valued tidiness, (9) allowing a few members with strong voices to control everything, (10) expecting the church staff to do all the ministry, (11) focusing primarily on using handed-down denominational materials, and (12) playing it safe while not trusting God to provide (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 19-23). Acknowledging that there are many more reasons churches get stuck, the authors claim that all the reasons have one thing in common. "They have lost the passion for making disciples and the focus of God's glory in His church" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 23).

Gene Wood (who led several churches through turnaround) submits that there are five common scenarios that contribute to plateau and decline among congregations. He cites: (1) external factors beyond the church's control, (2) a coalition of unfortunate circumstances, (3) a power struggle which results in losers leaving, (4) a power struggle in which the pastor leaves, and (5) a power struggle which is cloaked with denial (Wood 2001,

48-60). Wood uses broader scenario headings as he primarily focuses on pastoral leadership in turnaround churches from the perspective of power struggles and other tensions resulting from the challenges of leading change. For example, under "external factors" he includes demographic changes and natural disasters, and under "unfortunate circumstances" he mentions unexpected events, i.e., staff resignations and relocation of strong supporters (Wood 2001, 48-49).

The "one thing in common" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 23) identified by Stetzer and Dodson pinpoints our first common theme, which we'll call *lack of passion for outreach*. This includes having an inward focus--which is an obvious symptom of a spiritual malady (lack of love and concern for souls)--and an observable failure to prioritize Christ's make-disciples mission. Barna's references to "old blood," "ingrown family," and "spiritual health or lack of passion for ministry" (Barna 1993, 39) would likely be related to this theme. Stetzer and Dodson validate this theme with their references to "functioning as a mere institution," "retaining the status quo," "repelling newcomers," and "lacking passion" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 19-23). So does Wood's references to power struggles, especially when there are some in the congregation working hard to overcome this inertia (Wood 2001, 48-49).

Barna theorizes: "Declining churches generally focus inward rather than outward. The ministry that takes place rarely reaches beyond those people who are faithful participants within the church" (Barna 1993, 36). Stetzer and Dodson maintain, "The real issue is whether your church is biblically faithful, acting as the presence of Christ in the community at large, able to relate Christ to people in the culture, and is on mission" (Stetzer

and Dodson 2007, 4). Wood adds, "Without a burden for lost people the church will continue on its merry way to demise. Always!" (Wood 2001, 128).

Frank Page proffers another perspective by raising the question, Whose church is it? He insists: "Self-righteousness and pride are two of the greatest threats to spiritual health and church growth Churches get caught up in doing work for their own selfish reasons, not for the purpose of building God's kingdom" (Page 2008, 22). Page challenges congregations to do some soul searching, to take an honest look at their motives, and to acknowledge that they belong to God and are doing his work (Page 2008, 23).

Lack of passion for outreach can only be reversed by the power of the gospel through which the Spirit changes hearts and modifies behavior, but primarily leaders (starting with the pastor) need to own this issue and work tirelessly to resolve it. Their efforts will likely include proportioning law and gospel in sermons and Bible studies, modeling what a passion for outreach looks like both in their congregation and community, casting a vision for outreach that is compelling, providing ample training, and managing outreach efforts. "A paradox of superb leadership is the responsibility to create holy dissatisfaction. Turnaround leaders do this. They are never satisfied until the lost are being won to Christ, disciplined, and assimilated into their congregation in healthy numbers" (Wood 2001, 128). A spirit of *holy dissatisfaction* is needed in every church because "[a] congregation can no longer exist in a vacuum separated from the world outside its doors" (Gifford 2009, 85).

Lack of leadership is another theme that deserves consideration. Barna calls attention to "inadequate leadership" and "poor management" (Barna 1993, 39). Stetzer and Dodson mention "striving to keep everyone happy," "giving up," "failing to position people

to serve purposefully," "expecting outsiders to adapt to dated programs and positions," "allowing a few members with strong voices to control everything," and "playing it safe while not trusting God to provide"--all of which are examples of leadership failures (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 23). Wood mentions "power struggle" three times in his list of five scenarios (Wood 2001, 48-49). Power struggles almost always involve the pastor and other ministry leaders and, when handled poorly, end poorly.

Barna writes about "the extreme importance of visionary leadership" and states: "Leadership without strong management results in theoretical, idea-heavy, pastor-driven churches. Management without visionary leadership leads to ministry that is mechanical, passionless, predictable and limited" (Barna 1993, 34-35). He adds, "The churches that recovered from their tailspin were those that demonstrated depth of leadership, spiritual commitment and maturity and the will to perform meaningful ministry" (Barna 1993, 40).

Stetzer and Dodson insightfully submit, "Leaders help churches see that their real problems are spiritual" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 36). Referring to both pastors and lay leaders, they claim: "Both are essential, and we found that leadership was the number-one factor associated with turnarounds" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 36).

Wood claims: "The underlying issue in power struggles is who will determine the direction of the church The 'issues' are never the issue. The underlying question is, who will lead" (Wood 2001, 57-58). Related to power struggles is the health of the relationship that pastors have with those they serve. Wood supports the premise that "the pastor-people relationship is a leading (if not *the* preeminent) factor in determining whether a

body will be effective" (Wood 2001, 71) and concludes that too much contentment with status quo is one reason pastors don't take steps to bring needed change within their congregations (Wood 2001, 151). Other probable reasons are fear of conflict, lack of professional discipline, inability to do personal evangelism, and unwillingness to accept coaching (Wood 2001, 152-62).

William McConnell warns, "Dealing with problem people is one of the most vexing problems church leaders face," and learning about conflict management can be helpful as well as pursuing continuing education in other areas (McConnell 2007, 95-97). He appropriately adds: "If love is left out of the equation, church transformation will never happen The church members and the pastor must be bound together by the bonds of love, or they will never survive the difficulties transformation brings to the church" (McConnell 2007, 102).

Leaders must learn to lead--leveraging for the good of their church and the kingdom whatever leadership style they possess--and must keep growing in their leadership skills. Fortunately, there are ample opportunities to pursue leadership development today, and every congregation needs to have in place its own ongoing leadership development program. Networking, mentoring, and coaching relationships are all admirable options.

Another theme worthy of special mention is *lack of member ministry*. Barna would likely include this in "spiritual health or lack of passion for ministry" (Barna 1993, 39). Stetzer and Dodson cite in their list of reasons churches get stuck both "position people to serve purposefully" and "expecting the church staff to do all the ministry" (Stetzer and

Dodson 2007, 19-23). Both help to verify the *lack of member ministry* theme, with the first pointing to the failure of leaders and the second to the confusion or idleness of members.

Barna observed that turnaround pastors gave top priority to equipping the laity for effective, targeted ministry (Barna 1993, 49), adding, "A motivated laity working hand in hand with the pastor is an absolute necessity" (Barna 1993, 59). Stetzer and Dodson state strongly, "Laypeople becoming actively involved in meaningful ministry is a significant factor in church renewal" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 211).

To help reverse the debilitating *lack of member ministry* situation, Stetzer and Dodson provide solid advice. "Increased expectations, equipped people, and empowered people are key components of developing an atmosphere of lay ministry involvement" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 211). McConnell agrees. "Open the door to ministry to the laity of the church. Become a permission-giving church instead of a church that limits what lay people are allowed to do in ministry Help people discover their giftedness and passion and allow them to minister according to these" (McConnell 2007, 87). This is primarily a leadership issue, as are most congregational concerns, which is why leadership is so vital to church health and turnaround.

At the same time, members may also bear some responsibility for their congregation's decline, and out of necessity must also contribute to congregational renewal. The authors of *Pathway to Renewal* (addressing the laity) assert: "Here's the hard truth Your pastor can teach, guide, lead, support, inspire, and even cajole. But in the end, congregational health is a function of how people in the congregation relate to one another, to God, and to their community" (Smith and Sellon 2008, 5). They add, "In the most

fundamental sense, congregational renewal happens through 'people renewal'" (Smith and Sellon 2008, 8).

Lack of planning is another leadership issue and theme to address. On Barna's list of decline factors "inadequate leadership," "poor management," and "resistance to change" all point to the need for leaders to direct ministry planning and to do this well (Barna 1993, 39). Stetzer and Dodson inventory "striving to keep everyone happy," "lacking passion," "dated programs and positions," "allowing a few members with strong voices to control everything," "focusing primarily on using handed-down denominational materials," and "playing it safe" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 19-23). All of these in some way are connected to a *lack of planning*. Wood's primary premise is that plateaued ministries eventually become dying institutions if they are not guided effectively by turnaround leaders, which inherently requires planning and change within a context of opposition. This explains why he emphasizes the need to handle power struggles (Wood 2001, 48-49).

Barna suitably sums up the need for planning in these illuminating statements. "Without vision, there is no reason to change. Without leadership, there is no path upon which change can be managed intelligently. Without a determination to remain relevant (without compromising one's essential values, beliefs and principles), there is no need to reorient behavior to address the needs and desires of the target audience" (Barna 1993, 37).

When it comes to planning and bringing about needed change, Stetzer and Dodson highlight the significance of spiritual leadership and advise all ministry leaders to remember what it is they are doing and why. "Our task is to find new ways to reach people with the unchanging message. Ultimately, it is just the gospel--and the gospel transforms,

but God has led us to use different strategies over the years to help us share the gospel broadly and wisely" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 214).

Wood believes that turnaround pastors (and the lay leaders who assist them) begin with the circumstances God has handed to them, become students of their unique situation, and implement a course of action that is tailor-made to their church (Wood 2001, 136). In other words, local needs and opportunities will determine the best course of action.

Others agree. "We eschew the cookie-cutter approach to church health Such an assumption ignores the uniqueness of every congregation and the uniqueness of the community in which the church is located" (Rainer and Rainer 2008, 242). "The unique personality traits of congregations impact the pursuit of congregational renewal, enabling church leaders to be more effective in their pursuit of this goal" (Kendall 2009, 76). "No one, universal key opens church revitalization for each and every church. Doing church revitalization is more like putting together a good recipe. One must bring together the correct ingredients, mix them carefully and well, and allow the warmth of God's Spirit, love, and grace to bake it" (McConnell 2007, 9-10). Daniel Eymann asserts: "The changes implemented in a turnaround church must be intentional and must directly address the factors that led to decline. Otherwise, the changes only serve as *band-aids* and not real solutions. As a result, the church will likely fall prey to the same issues and the same demise as before--eventual plateau and decline" (Eymann 2011, 123-24).

Perhaps it is not too strong to say that *all* congregations need to engage in ministry planning, and ensuring that this happens is the leaders' responsibility. The planning may be informal, basic, and happen from within; or it might be highly structured,

comprehensive, and guided by an outside entity. Either way, godly leaders will want to give their best efforts to making it happen because facilitating church health largely depends on quality leadership, which includes sound planning and successful implementation.

Additionally, Bud Wrenn argues that to be healthy planning must be cyclical as circumstances change both inside and outside of the congregation. "*Planning, then in a healthy organization, is a very dynamic process*" (Wrenn 2008, 3).

Based on the writings of some respected authors, we have identified four primary themes that appear to be commonly associated with the decline of congregational health. The four themes are: (1) lack of passion for outreach, (2) lack of leadership, (3) lack of member ministry, and (4) lack of planning. As previously acknowledged, there are many other specific factors that are likely associated with poor congregational health.

Many of these other factors, however, would probably be related to one or more of the common themes which we have identified. For example, *changing demographics* might be a decline factor *if* there is a lack of passion for outreach, inadequate leadership, little member involvement in ministry, or ineffective planning. Conflict, facilities, location, programming, staff, worship style, an aging membership, disgruntled members, etcetera could all become decline factors under similar circumstances.

If this is accurate, it would also be true that--under God and with his blessing--facilitating church health would be significantly enhanced wherever *a passion for outreach, adequate leadership, active member ministry, and effective planning* were in place. Unfortunately, often these desirable assets are not in place, which means facilitating church health will be that much more challenging.

Renewing congregations is a mountain of work, especially for pastors. The work of a turnaround pastor is demanding physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually; to lead this kind of transformational work, you must stay fit in all of these areas (Gifford 2009, 70). Lay leaders, too, must be ready for the challenge. "If your church leadership is not committed to change, work, and stay, the whole endeavor is doomed to failure. It requires a shared vision and a willingness among the leaders" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 191).

Turnaround is fairly rare, and that's probably because it is often costly. "It's going to cost you money, it's going to cost you time, it's going to cost you comfort because you're going to have to change some things" (Barna 1993, 62). But, consider the alternative. When you're declining, who wants more of the same? "It is easier to just go with the flow, but transformation calls for change. Change is challenging, difficult, and almost always involves conflict" (McConnell 2007, 92).

Because this is reality, churches will want to use all the helpful tools they are able to gather. One useful tool, and it comes in various shapes and sizes, is a skillfully-designed and tested process that helps break down into understandable and manageable phases the mountainous challenge of facilitating needed change. We now explore *enabling needed change* primarily through a deliberate planning process because change is always required when striving for church health and, even more so, when attempting a turnaround.

Enabling Needed Change

Earnestly desiring and attempting to bring about church health does not necessarily make it happen. From one perspective, only God through his Word and sacraments (through the power of the gospel and work of the Holy Spirit) can change hearts and transform lives so that a congregation becomes healthier. From that means-of-grace perspective church health is a blessing from God and a result of his work, not ours.

At the same time, we also recognize that it is God who blesses our faithful efforts to make use of the principles and practices that better enable needed change to occur. That, too, is his doing because he chooses to work *in* us and *through* us to accomplish what is pleasing to him (Heb 13:21), giving us both the *will* and the *ability* to function according to his good purpose (Phil 2:13).

In other words, it is God who receives credit for whatever good comes both from our faithful use of his Word and the best processes and practices for enabling needed change that we have discovered through research and experience. There is nothing humans can do to coerce God into blessing them or their churches, yet God chooses to channel his blessings through us as we participate in his work (Herrington, Bonem, and Furr 2000, 17). Enabling needed change in churches, then, is our responsibility but still God's doing as he guides and blesses our efforts.

Just as there is no one single or even specific set of factors that causes all churches either to decline or to experience health and turnaround (primarily because of their unique circumstances), there is no one particular planning process that all churches must utilize to help them enable needed change. In fact, there are multiple planning approaches or

processes for congregations to consider both from secular and ecclesiastical sources. After we consider several suggested processes and insights on planning from various authors, we'll consider some additional distinct insights related to strategic planning that could help churches move forward toward a healthier future.

John Kotter, a recognized expert on business leadership, has much to offer on the subject of enabling needed change within an organizational context. Fortunately, many of the insights he shares are transferable to nonprofit entities, including churches. In *Leading Change*, Kotter points to eight common errors that often undercut efforts to make positive adjustments to changing circumstances: (1) allowing too much complacency, (2) failing to create a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition, (3) understanding the power of vision, (4) under-communicating the vision, (5) permitting obstacles to block the new vision, (6) failing to create short-term wins, (7) declaring victory too soon, and (8) neglecting to anchor changes firmly in the culture (Kotter 1996, 4-15).

Kotter explains that making any of the eight errors common to transformation efforts can have serious consequences, but with awareness and skill they can be avoided or at least greatly mitigated (Kotter 1996, 15-16). At the same time, the change process--purposefully designed to avoid or moderate the impact of the eight errors)--must generate enough influence and enthusiasm to overcome all the sources of inertia (Kotter 1996, 20). Each stage of his process addresses one of the fundamental errors that undermine transformation efforts.

1. Establish a sense of urgency
2. Create the guiding coalition
3. Develop a vision and strategy
4. Communicate the change vision

5. Empower broad-based action
6. Generate short-term wins
7. Consolidate gains and produce more change
8. Anchor new approaches in the culture (Kotter 1996, 20-21)

The first four steps help defrost a hardened status quo; steps five through seven purposefully introduce new practices; and the last stage grounds the changes in the corporate culture and makes them stick (Kotter 1996, 22). Leaders generally operate in multiple stages simultaneously (Kotter 1996, 23), and it is important that they increase and become life-long learners, because "Without enough leaders, the vision, communication, and empowerment that are at the heart of transformation will simply not happen well enough or fast enough" (Kotter 1996, 165).

It is easy to see how Kotter's points are applicable to churches. For example: "*Communicating the vision* is a comprehensive, intentional, and ongoing set of activities that are undertaken throughout the transformation process to make the vision clear ... Failure to effectively communicate the vision can temporarily stop or even permanently damage the entire transformation process" (Herrington, Bonem, and Furr 2000, 62).

As a follow-up to *Leading Change*, in their book *The Heart of Change*, John Kotter and Dan Cohen dig deeper to identify and analyze the core problem leaders face in successfully implementing change through the eight stages. The authors emphasize that leading change is always about changing the behavior of people, which happens mostly by speaking to people's feelings and finding ways to help them see the problems or solutions in ways that influence how they feel, not just how they think (Kotter and Cohen 2002, x).

The point is this: "People change what they do less because they are given *analysis* that shifts their *thinking* than because they are *shown* a truth that influences their

feelings" (Kotter and Cohen 2002, 1). Insert God's Word and the compelling influence of the gospel. What potential there is, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to impact people's thoughts and behaviors by touching their hearts with God's forgiving love!

After coauthoring *Our Iceberg is Melting*--which illustrated the eight stages of change and emotional lessons from *The Heart of Change*--Kotter penned *A Sense of Urgency* which offered a broader and deeper view of urgency, including a clear distinction between constructive true urgency and destructive false urgency (Kotter 2008, xi-xii).

Kotter defines *destructive false urgency* as frantic energetic activity that flows from a fear of losing and is characterized by anxiety and anger, whereas *constructive true urgency* focuses on critical issues and is driven by a deep determination to succeed (Kotter 2008, 6). "A real sense of urgency is a highly positive and highly focused force A false sense of urgency is pervasive and insidious because people mistake activity for productivity" (Kotter 2008, 8-9). Kotter proposes a winning strategy that combines analytically sound and ambitious goals with methods that help people experience the new goals as exciting and meaningful, which creates a deeply felt determination to move forward and make it happen (Kotter 2008, 47).

Richard Bevan echoes many of Kotter's opinions as he outlines the typical steps of a change process in his book *Changemaking*. He claims the elements of effective change are simple: (1) be clear about purpose and process, (2) listen to and involve stakeholders, (3) provide needed resources, (4) align systems and processes to support the change, (5) lead with clarity and involvement, (6) communicate relentlessly, (7) track

progress, (8) follow up, and (9) course correct. He says: "That's it. But while it is easy to say, it usually proves very hard to do" (Bevan 2011, 11).

Bevan submits that the goal is to have the change process go smoothly, with minimal disruption and maximum support, but usually it doesn't because change is often not well planned or managed (Bevan 2011, 12). Still, he believes change can be successfully shaped and implemented as leaders discover what they need to know about their environment, take action to reinforce the positives and address the negatives, and listen well to those involved and impacted during the entire change process (Bevan 2011, 14-16).

Bud Wrenn claims that the planning paradigm used in his book, *Innovative Planning*, "is more of a *flexible and 'customizable' approach that any organization can use*," and he refers to his approach as "4-D," referring to the four dimensions of planning that he believes are foundational (Wrenn 2008, 5). The following chart illustrates his planning paradigm and includes key questions and typical planning horizons (Wrenn 2008, 108).

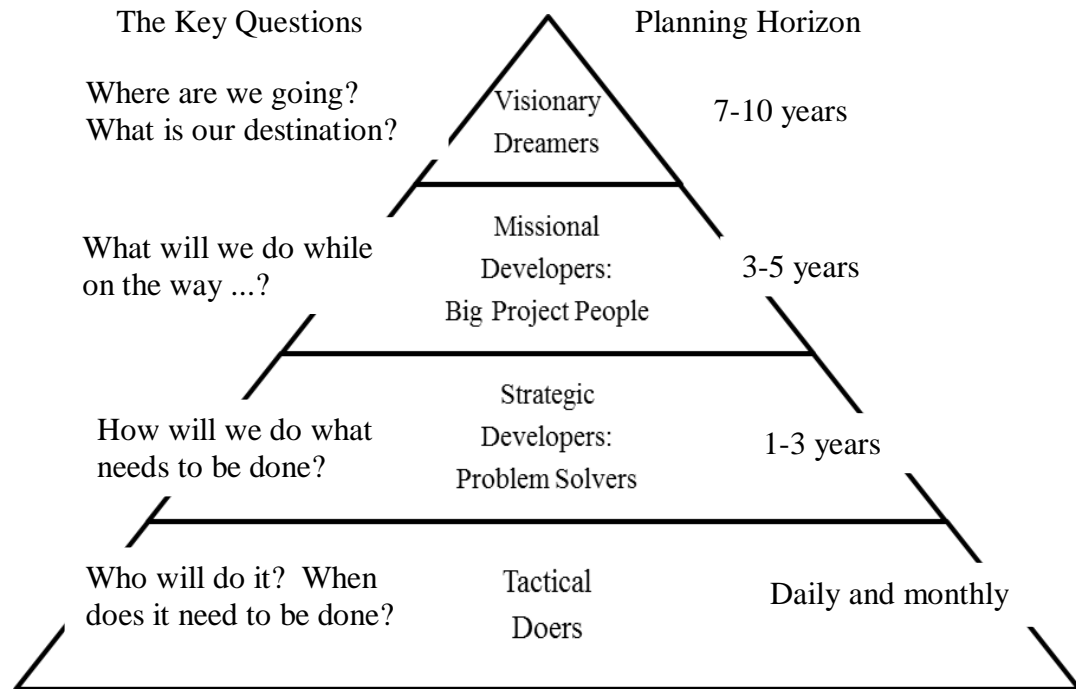


Figure 4. The four dimensions of planning (Wrenn 2008, 108).

The first dimension is *visionary* planning, the *dreamers'* activity, which answers the question, Where are we going? "The vision must be developed and properly communicated before anything else can be effectively done" (Wrenn 2008, 36). The second dimension is *missional* planning, the *developers'* function, answering the question, What will we do on the way? Here Wrenn cautions, "Vision can overwhelm people--the very people it is intended to inspire--when it is not accompanied by a 'roadmap' for the vision to be realized" (Wrenn 2008, 50). The big project people develop the roadmap.

The third dimension is *strategic* planning. This is again the role of *developers*, but now the focus is on solving problems. The question is, How will it get done? Wrenn claims it is not enough for people to know *where* they are going and *what* they will do

on the way; they must have a collective concept of *how* those things will get done, so strategies are about how the mission will be carried out (Wrenn 2008, 67).

The fourth dimension is *tactical* planning, which is tackled by *doers*, after answering the questions, Who will do it, and when? "It is ultimately in the day-to-day operations that the organization gains real traction" (Wrenn 2008, 87). It is in this *tactical* dimension where the majority of the people in a congregation get involved. One always hopes to have many more doers than dreamers or developers so goals can actually be accomplished.

Notice that the previous chart illustrates that the dreamers look out about seven to ten years, the missional developers about three to five years, the strategic developers about one to three years, and the tactical doers are focused primarily on daily and monthly activities. Wrenn explains: "The purpose of the pyramid is not to demonstrate any type of hierarchical relationship. Visionaries are really no more important than the strategists or the doers. All the participants are important" (Wrenn 2008, 108). There is in the design of the pyramid, however, a demonstration of the natural sequencing of the dimensions. It all starts with vision and flows downward to tactical advances by the doers.

Aubrey Malphurs offers another version of a planning process for congregations in *Advanced Strategic Planning*. The nine steps of his model are shown in figure 5.

Strategic Thinking and Acting Model



Figure 5. Strategic thinking and acting model (Malphurs 1999, 55).

Malphurs links a basic question to each of the above steps to help leaders focus on the significance of the knowledge that is gained throughout the planning process.

The steps and their related questions are listed below.

- Ministry analysis ... What kind of church are we?
- Values discovery ... Why do we do what we do?
- Mission development ... What are we supposed to be doing?
- Environmental scan ... What is going on out there?
- Vision development ... What kind of church would we like to be?
- Strategy development ... How will we get to where we want to be?
- Strategy implementation ... Where do we begin, when, and with whom?
- Ministry contingencies ... How will we handle pleasant and not so pleasant surprises that could affect the strategy?
- Ministry evaluation ... How are we doing? (Malphurs 1999, 51-54)

In the process of making changes, Malphurs cautions leaders on confusing *functions* with *forms*. *Functions* of the church are those timeless truths that must never change, and *forms* are timely vehicles that are tied in some way to the church's culture which help to implement the functions (Malphurs 1999, 55-56). He clarifies:

My view is that only the core values, mission, vision, and purpose of the church are timeless. Thus, everything else--the church's strategy, structures, systems, policies, and procedures--are subject to change and should regularly change. The vision expresses the church's direction in a cultural context. While the direction (to make disciples) will not change, the cultural context (who, where, when, and how) will change over time. (Malphurs 1999, 56)

Malphurs stresses the importance of bathing the entire ministry planning process in prayer and trusting God to bless it as each step is taken (Malphurs 1999, 62), reminds his readers that no congregation can do everything well, so each church needs to decide both what to do and what not to do (Malphurs 1999, 65), and encourages every church to have a ministry assessment and development program "that places the best people in each position" (Malphurs 1999, 181). Sound advice!

Steven Goodwin states the obvious. "The reality of turning around a declining congregation is daunting indeed" (Goodwin 1999, 23). This is because enabling needed change is problematic at best. But, with the Lord's help, it is achievable.

Goodwin, along with a number of other Christian authors who have written on the topic of needed change in the church, points to the biblical narrative of Nehemiah--which typifies a planning process--as an exemplary case study on the power of vision (really God's vision) that led to initiating and implementing positive change. Goodwin clarifies, "The real vision, however, was not to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem; that was its method. The real vision in the book of Nehemiah was God's vision to rebuild the people of God from a

scattered and oppressed people into a unified nation that feared and loved God" (Goodwin 1999, 70).

This is a reminder that all our talk about revitalizing congregations and working to bring about needed change is God- and-people-centered. It is not primarily about helping congregations survive or thrive; it is about helping God's people focus on what he desires; it is about joyfully participating in his kingdom-building work.

What did Nehemiah do that enabled needed change, which is instructive to those who desire to be change agents within their congregation? "At least eight steps can be observed in Nehemiah's rebuilding project" (Eymann 2011, 45-52).

1. Nehemiah was greatly burdened for his people and his home city.
 2. Nehemiah's burden led him to prayer.
 3. God turned Nehemiah's burden for Jerusalem into a vision.
 4. As Nehemiah prayed, he also planned.
 5. Nehemiah took several risks in pursuing his vision.
 6. Nehemiah gathered the leaders to cast his vision and challenged them to join him in fulfilling the mission.
 7. Nehemiah knew he couldn't rebuild the walls himself.
 8. Nehemiah remained focused on his vision [in spite of opposition].
- (Eymann 2011, 45-52)

The result? Nehemiah reports: "So the wall was completed ... in fifty-two days. When all of our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God" (Neh 6:15-16). An obvious problem. A positioned person. A strategic plan. A powerful God. A God-honoring purpose. A blessing to people.

That's what enabling needed change in churches is all about. Leaders are burdened for the right reasons. They pray for guidance and wisdom. They pursue a preferred future that honors God. They think things through and develop strategies. They

take measured risks. They get on the same page and cast a compelling vision. They secure the willing participation of others and work together to accomplish shared goals. They stay focused on their goals, even when faced with opposition. Leaders eagerly do all of this for their Lord and for people who are so very precious to him.

We have reviewed several ministry planning processes along with some insights from the authors who proposed them. We now consider a few additional distinct insights related to strategic planning that will help congregations enable needed change and move forward toward a healthier future.

Jim Collins made a mark on the world of business with his book *Good to Great*. In this volume Collins explored how being satisfied with good is an enemy of great and how *good* companies can become *great* companies through disciplined people, disciplined thought, and disciplined action (Collins 2001, 1-12). Several years later this author published a monograph to accompany *Good to Great* with the title *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*. In his monograph Collins claims that business thinking is not the answer within the social sectors.

He states unequivocally, "We must reject the idea--well-intentioned, but dead wrong--that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become 'more like a business'" (Collins 2005, 1). Even so, Collins argues that the good-to-great principles still apply to the social sectors, but some concerns must be addressed (Collins 2005, 3).

For example, defining *great* without business metrics involves assessing performance relative to mission (not financial returns) even if the outputs defy accurate measurement (Collins 2005, 5). Collins clarifies: "It doesn't really matter whether you can

quantify your results. What matters is that you rigorously assemble evidence--quantitative or qualitative--to track your progress," and failing to do so shows a lack of discipline (Collins 2005, 7).

Regarding leadership within the social sectors, the "compelling combination of personal humility and professional will is a key factor in creating legitimacy and influence" (Collins 2005, 11). Also, having the right people in the right seats is paramount (Collins 2005, 14), just as it is within the business sector.

To move from good to great within the social sector--with the goal of seeing the best possible results--Collins emphasizes the importance of having passion (inspired by core values and mission), becoming the best at what you do, and understanding what best drives your resource engine (i.e., committed people, cash flow, and emotional goodwill), all working together to move the organization forward as you say *no thank you* to unsupportive distractions (Collins 2005, 17-23). As momentum is gained, additional resources and commitment are attracted and the organization grows in health and strength because, "supporters believe not only in your mission, but in your capacity to deliver on that mission" (Collins 2005, 23-25).

Of course, whether within the business or social sector, there are always difficulties and brutal facts to face with confidence that the outcome will be positive (Collins 2005, 30). Summing up, Collins concludes that "Every institution has its unique set of irrational and difficult constraints, yet some make a leap while others *facing the same environmental challenges* do not" (Collins 2005, 31). He adds: "This is perhaps the single most important point in all of *Good to Great*. Greatness is not a function of circumstance.

Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice, and discipline" (Collins 2005, 31).

We'll be quick to point out here that all of Collin's insights and assertions must be tempered with an acknowledgement that a God-factor exists within Christian congregations. The Lord can withhold blessings or bless and give an increase--regardless of human effort--wherever or whenever he desires and in whatever measure pleases him.

Because God's servants know this, they are eager to thank and praise him for whatever goodness or greatness is attributed to them personally or to the congregations they serve. When compliments or commendations are offered by observers or admirers, the mental (if not verbal) response will be, "Let's lay those kind words at the feet of Jesus as an offering to him." The attitude of those who know, love, and serve the Lord will be that of John the Baptist. "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30).

At the same time, the Lord does not want us simply to dismiss human effort. Because he desires faithfulness from those he has redeemed and restored and forgiven; because he promises to bless and reward such faithfulness as an added act of his grace; and because he works through such faithfulness to accomplish his purposes, *human efforts do matter*. Understanding this, both his individual followers and his gatherings of people (congregations) will do everything within their power through his power that is at work within them (Eph 3:20) to accomplish needed change.

When attempting to enable needed change, whether in a corporation or in a church, expect resistance. Rick Maurer gracefully tackles this challenge head on in *Beyond the Wall of Resistance* by helping his reading audience see resistance as a natural reaction to

change and assuring them that there are appropriate responses that help transform resisters into partners. Especially useful are Maurer's three categories of resistance: Level 1, *I Don't Get It*; Level 2, *I Don't Like It*; and Level 3, *I Don't Like You* (Maurer 2010, 38-42).

Maurer explains that level one resistance (*I Don't Get It*) is the easiest to overcome because all people need at this level is additional accurate information. Level two resistance (*I Don't Like It*) is more complicated. People have adequate information, but they still don't like the proposed change. Maurer explains: "Level 2 resistance is an emotional reaction to the change It is based on fear Level 2 runs deep," making communication more difficult, and, "meeting people at Level 2 takes courage" (Maurer 2010, 39-40). Overcoming this type of resistance requires discovering what is causing the fear and respectfully addressing it.

Even more challenging is overcoming level three resistance (*I Don't Like You*), which often includes a lack of trust or confidence either in the person proposing the change or in the one that person represents--even though the change itself is not opposed and may actually be liked. Maurer cautions, "Turning Level 3 resistance into support can be extremely difficult" (Maurer 2010, 42). Whatever trust is lacking, it must be earned. That may take time, so persistence and patience are required. It seems counterintuitive, but inviting criticism, which can be painful, often proves to be a judicious step in the right direction.

In *Leading Change in the Congregation*, Gilbert Rendle maintains, "We do not live in a time of clear answers; we live in a time when leaders will need to use discernment and experimentation to guide their congregations through changes" (Rendle

1998, 9). He submits that providing competent guidance is complicated by fear, which often paralyzes individuals as well as organizations, and congregations have two essential fears: the fear of *too much change*, which results in a loss of control, and the fear of *too little change*, which ends up not making a difference (Rendle 1998, 9-11).

So, what are leaders to do? "The first thing leaders can do is to relieve themselves of the pressure to come up with the perfect 'answer' to an uncertain future that will keep all parties in the congregation 'happy.' I cannot stress this point too strongly" (Rendle 1998, 13). Rendle adds, when times are changing rapidly, it is inappropriate and ultimately damaging for leaders to value satisfaction and happiness over leading needed change and to do so would be "a formula for decline and even death" (Rendle 1998, 13-14).

Calling attention to the distinction between *leading* (doing the right things) and *managing* (doing things right), Rendle suggests, "It is helpful and healthy for clergy and laity who have accepted responsibility in congregations to be clear about when they need to *lead* and when they need to *manage*" (Rendle 1998, 14). Balance is needed, but when change is required and becomes the goal, leaders must focus less on managing what is (status quo) and more on leading toward what could or should be (vision). "When congregations need to learn new things and confront new realities, they need a greater measure of leadership ... which is not measured by satisfaction and happiness" (Rendle 1998, 16).

One way for a church to reflect on its past, ponder its present, and envision its future is to see itself within the Life Cycle of a Congregation--a concept made popular by Robert Dale in his book *To Dream Again*, which was published in 1981. Since that date, many authors have included commentary on Dale's life-cycle concept within the pages of

their own writings. The life cycle, which associates the typical stages of organizational life with the fixed stages of human life, has been illustrated in various ways.

Rendle uses the following life-cycle diagrams to distinguish between *restructuring* and *revisioning* in congregations, indicating that there are distinct developmental stages in the life of a congregation, much as there are in our individual lives, and each stage has its own discrete tasks and characteristics. A life cycle of a congregation identifying each developmental stage is illustrated below (Rendle 1998, 135-42).

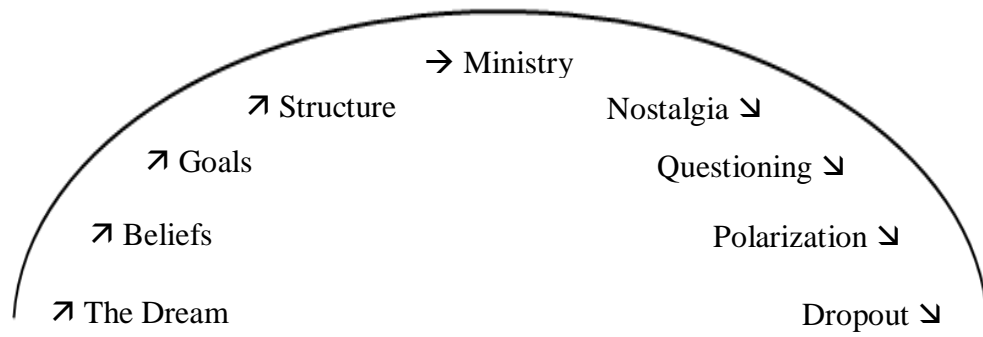


Figure 6. Life cycle of a congregation (Rendle 1998, 135).

Rendle walks through the various life-cycle stages and offers insights (Rendle 1998, 135-38), paraphrased as follows. The *dream* is the congregation's outreach-focused vision which establishes identity and communicates purpose. Shared *beliefs* unify those who are launching the congregation and draw other like-minded people, so the dream begins to be realized and the church begins to grow. During the organizational stages of *goals* and *structure*, objectives are clarified and the dream is divided into manageable steps. Work groups are established, resources are allocated, programs are developed, and facilities may be

constructed. If all goes as planned (with the Lord's blessing), the *ministry* stage follows and the dream is fulfilled. People then, typically, want to rest and enjoy the fruits of their labors.

During that period of contentment and repose, there is little motivation to (1) analyze what has changed (both in the congregation and community), (2) look forward and dream again, or (3) make needed adjustments so more people can be reached and served. The focus has shifted from gathering more people to taking care of those who are already gathered, which has perhaps become a sizeable task. As a result, over time, the element of change continues to run its course. The productive ministry of the congregation slowly begins to wane as some people step back and relax, some move away or join different churches, and others are called home to glory.

People gradually begin to notice that things are not the same in the *nostalgia* stage. They recall the good-old-days and ask one another, *Remember when?* Pretty soon people are asking another question in the *questioning* stage. *Why?* Contrasts are drawn between *what was* and *what is*, and people begin to offer opinions. *I'll tell you why.* When views differ, the stage of *polarization* has begun. In this stage, those with similar opinions sometimes align themselves into groups, pick targets, and blast away. The next and final stage is *dropout*, and as people begin to leave, the congregation declines more quickly.

Unlike humans who go through life cycles that always end in death (unless you are Enoch or Elijah), a church doesn't have to expire after living out its dream. A family of faith can dream again and start a new life cycle. It is possible, if the congregation already has a long history, that some stages of the life cycle have been repeated multiple times. Ideally, for a new life cycle to begin with the least amount of disruption, leaders will interpret

the descending life-cycle direction (as the ministry stage is winding down) and respond. Rendle suggests that there are two ways to accomplish this: *revisioning* or *restructuring*.

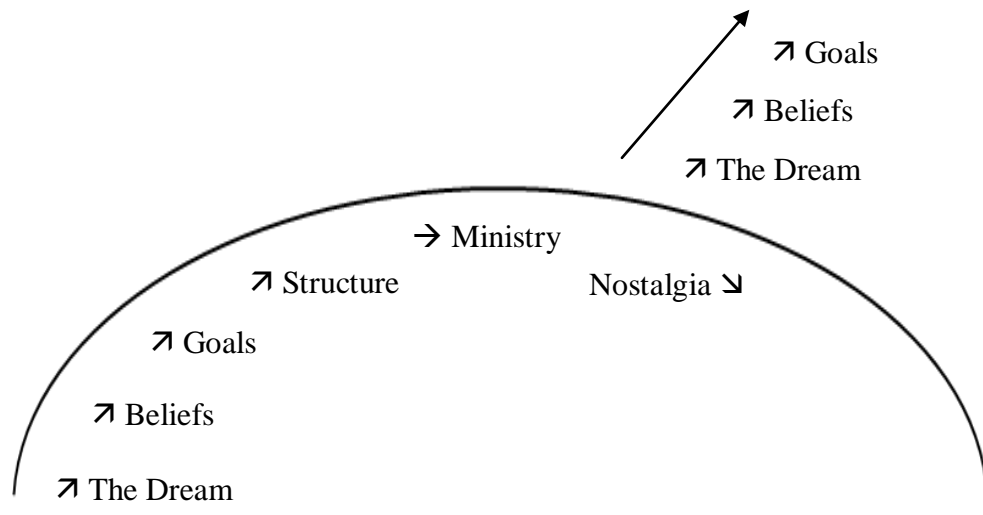


Figure 7. Life cycle revisioning (Rendle 1998, 139).

Revisioning is illustrated above; *restructuring* is illustrated below. During the *revisioning* process the congregation pictures itself in the future, and a new or expanded dream creates energy and enthusiasm that starts a new life cycle (Rendle 1998, 138). *Restructuring* is different because the focus is on reenergizing the original dream by returning to a previous stage of the life cycle (usually *goals* or *structure*) and then moving forward again (Rendle 1998, 139).

Rendle asserts, "The difference is between trying to recapture old history already gone [*restructuring*] and being open to new history not yet lived [*revisioning*]," and either response could be appropriate depending on the circumstances (Rendle 1998, 140). However, because so many changes in congregations and communities have occurred over

the years, *restructuring* (which mostly relies on old ideas and outdated solutions) is usually an inadequate life-cycle choice (Rendle 1998, 141-42).

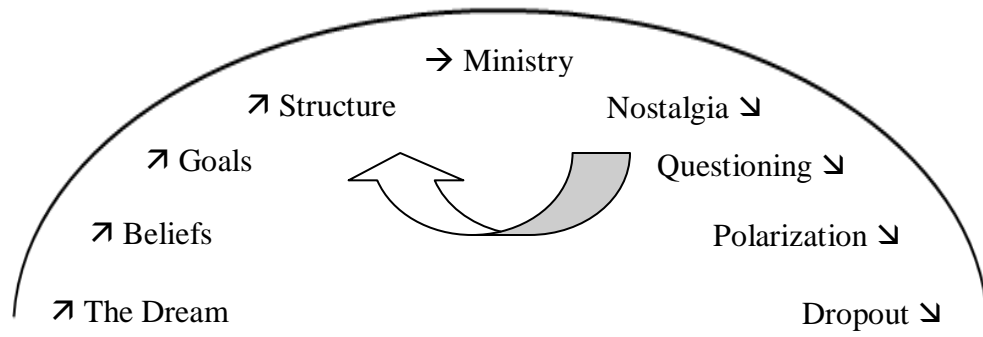


Figure 8. Life cycle restructuring (Rendle 1998, 139).

Another life cycle illustration developed by George Bullard, featured in *Pursuing the Full Kingdom Potential of Your Congregation*, is pictured in appendix 3. Bullard adds a number of reference points for the benefit of congregations (e.g., ten human life stages correlated with five primary congregational life-cycle phases). He states that the life cycle has been one of the best learning tools for congregational leaders to spiral forward to the next cycle in their spiritual strategic journey (Bullard 2009, 76).

Bullard maintains that the influence of the four organizational principles--Vision (V), Relationships (R), Programs (P), and Management (M)--is significant. He believes congregations that focus more passion on Vision and Relationships are proactive in their actions and regularly seize opportunities for ministry, as opposed to congregations that focus more passion on Programs and Management. The latter are more

passive and less vital as they seek to maintain past gains. This usually leads to less satisfying results (Bullard 2009, 77).

We know that enabling needed change is necessary in most, if not all, congregations for the simple reason that every flock's ministry context is itself constantly changing. We also know that accomplishing needed change through a planning process will likely be demanding and protracted work. Nevertheless, convinced that deliberate planning is essential for guiding congregations biblically and thoughtfully "through these and future times of unprecedented, convoluted change" (Malphurs 1999, 10), Malphurs offers the following credible reasons for churches to pursue ministry planning.

1. The church decides on and envisions its God-determined future and how best, through specific strategies, to accomplish that future
2. The process prompts the church to be proactive not reactive--to be aggressive not passive--"salt and light" in this present world
3. It forces churches to think about and focus on such deep biblical-theological issues as core purpose, mission, values, vision, and strategy.
4. A good strategic model helps the ministry discover its strengths as well as its weaknesses, its opportunities as well as its threats.
5. Strategic thinking helps churches face the reality of chaotic change and make the tough decisions.
6. A good strategic planning model will help the church be positive, not negative, in its approach to ministry--to envision what it can do.
7. It invites the church to discover the trends driving both the secular world and the evangelical church and their positive or negative effect on the ministry.
8. The planning model gets everyone on the same page so that the entire church team has a common context for decision making and problem solving. (Malphurs 1999, 10-11)

There are sound reasons to invest heavily in ministry planning processes to enable needed change in congregations, and there are ample resources to help us do so

wisely. As we remember that we are serving our Savior and participating in *his* mission, by grace and through the power of the Spirit, why would we hesitate?

In this chapter we have primarily considered the wisdom of others who have written on the subjects of *Cultural Shifts and Changing Demographics*, *Striving for Church Health*, and *Enabling Needed Change*. Given the expansive volume of resources on these topics and the scope of this turnaround churches project, it was necessary to be selective and limit the number of referenced resources.

Nevertheless, it is clear from the sources cited that the traditional church is facing a time of crisis both because of shifts within culture and demographic changes. It is equally clear that congregations must strive to become healthier both for their own benefit and the benefit of those within their communities who are not yet connected to Christ. Finally, enabling needed change in churches is possible especially when spiritual leaders exercise wisdom and follow a well-designed ministry planning process that helps facilitate necessary and desired adjustments in ministry methodology in a way that honors God and engages more people in pursuing his make-disciples mission.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Chapter 2 offered a four-cornered theological foundation for pursuing turnaround. *Knowing God's gracious heart* draws attention to the purest motivation for ministry, God's love and forgiveness in Christ. *Owning Christ's make-disciples mission*, which is both a privilege and a responsibility, is the principal task of those who confess and follow Jesus and devotedly gather in his congregations. *Depending on God's powerful means of grace* ensures that those who conduct ministry and desire turnaround rely not on their own ingenuity and efforts to change hearts and lives but on the power of the gospel and work of the Spirit. Finally, *gathering an audience through appropriate methods* calls on God's people, and especially God's leaders, to have integrity and use good judgment as they pursue Christ's mission. Considered together, these four underlying critical issues provide a concrete biblical foundation for pursuing turnaround because they guide God's people and his churches to do the *right thing* (make disciples) for the *right reason* (God's love and forgiveness) in the *right ways* (with confidence in the gospel's and the Spirit's power and with discernment).

Other theological and practical concerns related to assisting churches with turnaround were explored in chapter 3. There is crisis in the traditional church primarily because of the changes they face--both within congregations and their communities. The first section, *Cultural Shifts and Changing Demographics*, explained why. Within a context

of rapid and comprehensive change, many congregations have been knocked off balance and are struggling to regain their stability by figuring out how best to function in this twenty-first century without compromising God's truth or his soul-saving mission. Because of all this change, striving for church health has become essential, and how to become healthier--both for the benefit of the saved and the lost--was explored in the second section. The final section in chapter three was titled *Enabling Needed Change*. The emphasis there was on those process components that help facilitate needed and desired adjustments in ministry methodology and, if required, congregational transformation (i.e., turnaround).

This chapter focuses on the methodology used to accomplish the two primary goals of this project. The *first* goal was to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord blessed selected WELS congregations that have experienced turnaround. To accomplish this goal I (1) designed the criteria that defined turnaround churches in the WELS and identified those congregations, (2) attempted to select a diverse sampling of twelve turnaround congregations primarily on the basis of their setting, size, and age, and (3) conducted field research and collected and studied the data on these congregations, with the assistance of several associates, and then reported the results.

The *second* project goal was to explore, based on the discovered factors, how best to design the consulting services that I would provide through Crossroads Consulting Ministry to assist struggling congregations with achieving turnaround. To accomplish this goal I (1) shared the project findings with my coworkers, (2) engaged these consultants in an analysis of the previous four-phase core consulting service (WELS Parish Assistance) based

on the findings, and (3) sought their assistance with envisioning how to improve and expand the services for the benefit of churches desiring turnaround.

Methodology Used to Achieve Goals and Objectives

I determined, based on John Creswell's comparison of the three approaches to inquiry (Creswell 2003, 18-23), that a combination of quantitative and qualitative research (i.e., a mixed methods design) would be the best approach to achieving the goals of this project. Quantitative data were collected and analyzed primarily for the purpose of identifying the subject churches and the points at which average weekly worship declined, turned around, and was sustained. Qualitative data were collected with the use of mostly open-ended survey questions prior to the on-site visits and open-ended questions asked within structured interviews (Bailey 2007, 98-100) while on site. This subjective input allowed the researchers to gather and analyze the detailed views of three groups of participants (pastors, elected leaders, and other informed members), most of whom had firsthand knowledge of their congregation's entire turnaround experience.

There were four stages in my project methodology: (1) engaging in academic research, during which I consulted books and other resources on the subject of church revitalization and turnaround, (2) collecting pertinent data and selecting for study specific turnaround congregations, (3) securing permission from the selected congregations to study them in-depth, and (4) conducting the on-site field research and reviewing the results.

Selecting, securing permission from, and then studying the WELS churches that had experienced turnaround involved using pertinent data to identify the specific congregations and then contacting the senior or sole pastor in each of these congregations

initially by email (appendix 4) and having him request, through his elected leaders, authorization for me to conduct the study (appendix 5). If authorization was granted, I then coordinated with the pastor the timing of the visit, the distribution of the initial research instruments, and the on-site schedule. The pastors of the subject congregations, where authorization to participate in the study was granted, cooperated in making these arrangements and appeared to support their congregation's involvement in the turnaround churches project.

Within each church I used three preliminary research instruments: (1) a Pastor Input Questionnaire (appendix 7), (2) a Leader Input Questionnaire (appendix 10), and (3) a Member Survey (appendix 14). I expected each of these instruments to provide a valuable perspective on the factors that appeared to be associated with the manner in which the Lord blessed these turnaround congregations.

In addition to the use of these initial instruments, either I or one of my associates conducted on site in each congregation (1) a personal interview with the pastor (appendix 8), (2) a group consultation with four or more elected leaders (appendix 11, 12), and (3) a group session with a gathering of eight to twelve other informed members (appendix 15, 16). Seeking similar input from each of these three groups of people provided an opportunity to compare their responses regarding their church's turnaround experience.

I asked the pastor of each congregation to select those leaders and informed members who participated in the research on the basis of their firsthand experience with their congregation's turnaround process. Those selected by their pastors were persons who were

present and active in their church during at least a period of the decline and throughout the turnaround years.

I was reasonably confident--based on my experience as a church consultant--that my familiarity with conducting transcribed interviews and group sessions with leaders and other members would serve me well in this project. Also, I requested assistance with conducting the field research and reviewing the results. To ensure consistency in using the research instruments and gathering the data, I utilized three other experienced consultants who were active in our synod's Parish Assistance consulting ministry at that time. The three persons selected to assist were veteran consultants with a minimum of seven years of consulting experience.

I conducted an orientation session for these associates to ensure that each of them utilized the same research instruments and methodology. An informed consent acknowledgment for these associates (appendix 17) and an outline of the orientation session (appendix 18) are provided. The responsibilities of the associates were:

- Schedule with the local pastor, in any order, the on-site field research steps (i.e., pastor interview, group consultation with leaders, and group session with informed members).
- Make your own travel plans selecting the least costly options.
- While on site at each congregation, use the Informed Consent Acknowledgement forms and conduct the pastor interview(s) and the group sessions with the selected leaders and other informed members.

- Record each congregation's story, including key quotes identified with quotation marks, from the perspectives of the pastors, leaders, and informed members.
- Report the findings in writing. Type your notes within the electronic versions of the on-site instruments and email them to me as they are completed, with the congregation clearly identified.
- Participate as an Assessment Team member. This team will (1) provide a comparative review and analysis of the research process and findings, (2) assist me with reviewing our current four-phase consulting process, and (3) envision with me which new or expanded services would benefit other churches desiring turnaround.

Following the use of the preliminary instruments and the follow-up instruments utilized during the on-site visits to the congregations, I gathered my associates for a two-day assessment (appendix 20, 21) during which the researchers (1) reviewed the research process and findings from the turnaround churches project, (2) analyzed the current four-phase consulting process (WELS Parish Assistance) based on the findings, (3) envisioned which new services would benefit churches desiring turnaround, and (4) determined what next steps might be taken for other WELS congregations to benefit from the findings of this project.

Narrative Description of Project Execution

Engaging in academic research began early and continued throughout the duration of the project as new materials became available and fresh insights were revealed. My mentor, especially, helped me to gain a broader perspective on key issues by pointing me in the direction of some useful resources.

In April of 2009, an initial review of data (available at the WELS headquarters and based on the determined criteria) suggested that sixty-eight or 5.3 percent of our 1,286 WELS congregations experienced turnaround between the years 1990 and 2008. These congregations declined at least 20 percent in worship attendance after which, by God's grace and blessing, they rebounded and rose above their original status (before their decline started) by at least 20 percent. Of these sixty-eight churches, twenty-seven or 40 percent sustained their turnaround based on average annual worship participation. In other words, the identified turnaround churches experienced a significant decline and rebound in worship attendance, after which their worship average did not decrease through 2008.

As previously stated, it was my intention to study in depth twelve turnaround congregations and identify the most significant common factors that appeared to be associated with turnaround in the WELS. However, the number of turnaround congregations actually studied ended up being ten, two short of my goal, for several reasons.

First, I expected that there would be more than twenty-seven congregations in the WELS (out of 1,286) that met my criteria for turnaround. Second, ten of these congregations were deemed unsuitable for this study because they were mission starts with short histories, were extremely small congregations where only a few additional worshippers

significantly increased percentages, or they had experienced a prolonged pastoral vacancy.

Third, of the remaining seventeen congregations that were invited to participate in the study in June of 2009, seven declined and ten consented.

Only one of the seven congregations offered no explanation for opting out of the research. Pastors from the other congregations cited a variety of reasons, and a few mentioned more than one reason, usually including lack of available time or energy. The names of the pastors quoted or referred to below are withheld to maintain confidentiality.

One pastor wrote, "We certainly think the study is of value, but we have very few people who would even qualify as long standing members to participate" (July 31, 2009, email message). Another pastor responded, "[The] Church Council declined to participate in the study ... some concerns were raised regarding the danger of raising methodology over the Word and God blessing the labors of faithful servants" (July 16, 2009, email message). A different pastor indicated that he and his leaders questioned the use of statistics to identify turnaround or "successful" churches--using the example that fighting false teaching might lead to the loss of members and decline in numbers, but that church would still be faithful--and that they had concerns that the conclusion of the study might be "preaching the Gospel as Jesus commanded isn't enough" (August 29, 2009, email message). This pastor added:

I thank God for the spiritually mature men on the council who see the danger in trying to measure the work of the Holy Spirit in building God's church in any way, especially by simply using numbers. I am also grateful that they sense the seeming implication of such a study that it is something we have done to make the Gospel more effective in some way. (August 29, 2009, email message)

Another response pointed to God's grace alone as the reason for turnaround and proposed that qualifying as a turnaround church is beyond human analysis. He shared the following thought-provoking statements:

It was our decision not to participate in this study. The reason is quite simple: the answer to the question why [our congregation] experienced the "turnaround" as you qualify it in your study is plainly and simply the grace of God. To spend time and money studying this congregation would uncover nothing new or novel. We are not "innovative" in our approach. We simply strive to bring God's Means of Grace to bear on people. Our evangelism is simple: we follow up on visitors and invite them to come back for more of the Means of Grace, and we encourage our people to tell others about Jesus--and some do. (Yes, there is the occasional canvass, but--truth be told--I don't know if we could trace one visitor in this church to knocking on doors). We also operate a preschool and kindergarten, which is a large part of our Gospel outreach.

What we do is no different than 90 percent of other WELS churches. Why this one qualifies as a "turnaround" rests solely on God's inexplicable, unsearchable, and incomprehensible grace. In the end, it is beyond human analysis, for He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy. (July 8, 2009, email message)

I pray that my reply to this pastor's points was appropriate. I offer my reply here as instructive context both for this phase of the project methodology and for the entire *Turnaround Churches in the WELS* study.

Thank you for letting me know about your leaders' decision not to participate in our Turnaround Churches study. I respect their response to our invitation, but I regret that we will not have the opportunity to come on site and learn more about how the Lord has blessed your congregation's Gospel ministry.

I wholeheartedly agree with you that "the grace of God" is behind your congregation's turnaround experience and that qualifying as a turnaround congregation (based on the project criteria) "rests solely on God's inexplicable, unsearchable, and incomprehensible grace." These are truths that we will want to explicitly acknowledge and ecstatically celebrate.

At the same time, the methodology you refer to (i.e., following up on visitors, inviting them back, encouraging your people to tell others about Jesus, an occasional canvass, positioning your preschool and kindergarten to be a large part of your Gospel ministry--and undoubtedly there is more),

through which you "bring God's Means of Grace to bear on people," is inviting the Lord's blessings and may well be associated with the manner in which the Lord is blessing [your congregation]. By the way, based on my personal experience in working with many of our congregations, I question whether 90 percent of our WELS churches are doing the same. For example, pastors and other church leaders routinely report that they do not consistently follow up on visitors. Also, many do not have a signature ministry (like your preschool and kindergarten) that interests and serves the people of their congregation and community. And even if they do, they might discover that there is more they could do to strengthen their current programs and pursue other local ministry opportunities.

Obviously, methodology matters. If [your congregation] did not determine how best to gather an audience for the Gospel in your particular ministry context and put specific strategies into practice, it's reasonable to assume that some of God's blessings might not be received or might be blocked. Might not fewer souls be saved and might not fewer lives be transformed by the Spirit's power through [your congregation's] ministry if you did not employ your current practices and programs? I believe such a concern had been weighing on Paul's heart when he penned the well-known words, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor 9:22). Referring back to all the personal sacrifices and discomforts he was willing to endure so that some might be saved, Paul added, "I do all this for the sake of the gospel."

Methodology mattered to Paul because the Gospel mattered to him, and apparently he believed God could bless his methodologies with eternal results. Clearly, based on many lessons from the Gospels, it mattered to Jesus as well. In the end, of course, only God can accomplish what he promises: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isa 55:10-11).

The goal of the Turnaround Churches in the WELS study is to discover what our Lord wants to teach us about how he is blessing some of our congregations that were at one time in decline but, by his grace, both recovered from decline and are now sustaining their worship attendance. I hope this will not be a waste of (Thrivent's) money or our time. I pray that the Lord will help us to discover how best to focus our make-disciples efforts at this point in history. So much has changed in recent decades. The culture is shifting; our church body is shrinking. We know what must never change (God's message and mission), what may change (methodology), and what must change (anything that hinders God's message or mission). Pray with me that God blesses the Turnaround Churches study so that the outcome will be a blessing to more of our struggling as well as our healthier congregations.

If you and your leaders have a change of heart about participating in the Turnaround Churches study, I would be delighted to hear from you. But even if not, I would welcome an opportunity to delve a little deeper into this subject with you. I'm eager to learn from you and others, and the last thing I want to have is a blind spot that in some way obscures the Grace of God in Christ and his powerful work in our degenerate world. Oh that all of us in WELS--by our earnest study of his Word, sincere prayers, purposeful planning, and faithful efforts--would invite our Lord to accomplish more in and through us! (July 8, 2009, email message)

In addition to the above stated reasons for opting out of the research, a couple pastors appeared to be dispirited. They were not inclined to participate because they assumed that any findings from the study would be largely ignored by WELS leaders and would, therefore, not help to bring about needed change. Also, even though assurance was given to all the pastors that neither they nor their congregations would be identified, at least one pastor was reluctant to have the congregation he served participate in the study because he wanted his church to stay out of the cross hairs and avoid unwarranted criticism. This pastor was convinced that if a WELS congregation was growing significantly in a region where sister congregations were declining, some would predictably conclude that something unbiblical was happening and scrutinize him and his congregation for wrongdoing.

The comments of these pastors now seem prophetic. While a number of parachurch organizations and other WELS groups expressed interest in the project findings and scheduled presentations, official synodical leadership showed little to no interest in what was learned. And the pastor of the growing congregation who was concerned about staying out of the cross hairs, along with the congregation he served, endured several years of disparagement from WELS neighbors and eventually left the synod.

While securing permission from the selected congregations to study them in-depth, I provided the initial Informed Consent Acknowledgement forms (appendix 6, 9, 13) and preliminary research instruments, which were the Pastor Input Questionnaire (appendix 7), Leader Input Questionnaire (appendix 10), and Member Survey (appendix 14). The pastors then distributed these forms and instruments to the appropriate parties and requested that they be returned by specific dates so that all these materials could be forwarded to the researcher who later came on site to continue to gather data.

The research conducted within the congregations primarily involved pastors and lay leaders. However, provision was made to seek input from other active adult members--those who were present during some span of their congregation's decline as well as during the turnaround years in their church. The number of subjects in each church varied, depending mostly on the size and organizational structure of the congregation.

During July and August of 2009, the researchers scheduled their on-site visits with the pastors of their assigned congregations. We asked the pastors of the subject congregations to select the leaders and informed members who then participated in the research on the basis of their firsthand experience with the turnaround process. Those selected by their pastors were persons who were present and active in their church during at least a period of their congregation's decline and throughout the turnaround years.

I and my associates conducted the on-site field research from August through October of 2009, and my associates reported all their findings to me by October 15, as requested, using the report findings form that I provided (appendix 19). The schedule for each on-site visit was to include (1) a personal interview with the pastor, (2) a group

consultation with four or more elected leaders, and (3) a group session with a gathering of eight to twelve other informed members. The interviews with the pastors went as planned with each participating as requested and as scheduled.

Depending on the level of turnover in membership during each congregation's turnaround experience, identifying the eligible elected leaders and informed members who would participate in the group sessions was more or less challenging for the pastors of the subject congregations. In two of the ten congregations there were fewer leaders present at their session than the requested minimum of four, and in three of the ten congregations there were fewer informed members than the requested eight to twelve. Still, the researchers received useful information from those who participated.

In most of the congregations we conducted a separate group session with the selected elected leaders and informed members, which was the intent. This allowed us to hear the unique perspective of each group regarding their congregation's turnaround experience and to compare the input of leaders with other members in their congregation.

However, because of availability concerns that made it difficult or impossible for some elected leaders or other members to participate in their scheduled group sessions, exceptions were made in a couple of the congregations for one or more leaders to join the other members' group and vice versa. Because the input from the leaders and other members in each congregation was so similar, these exceptions did not raise concerns regarding the validity of the feedback received or the conclusions reached. In fact, the comments of the leaders and the other members in one congregation were so comparable that one researcher combined them and commented that both groups spoke with one voice.

The field research was followed by an evaluation process which included two steps: (1) my personal review of the research process and results followed by (2) a comparative review by an Assessment Team, comprised of those who assisted with the field research. This team of associates met with me on two consecutive days (to allow for reflection between sessions) in January 2010 to conduct their analysis and offer their insights.

The associates helped me test the validity of my preliminary observations and served to expose any blind spots in my initial conclusions. They also helped me analyze our current four-phase consulting process and envisioned with me which new or expanded services would benefit other churches desiring turnaround. I am indebted to these gifted men for their quality work and for assisting me with achieving the goals and objectives of this turnaround churches project.

Project Results

As previously stated, initially I was planning to select subject congregations by *setting* (urban, suburban, rural), by *size* (under 150 worshipping per week, between 150-250, more than 250), and by *age* (under twenty-five years old, between twenty-five and fifty, more than fifty). Because only seventeen congregations were deemed suitable subjects and only ten agreed to be included in the research (two less than desired), it was not possible to select congregations based on these categories. However, when the ten congregations were categorized (appendix 22), there were churches in each grouping.

Regarding setting, five of the congregations were urban, four were suburban, and one was rural. In reference to size, four of the congregations were under 150 in worship, five were between 150 and 250 in worship, and one was over 250 in worship. Finally,

relative to age, three were under twenty-five years old, six were between twenty-five and fifty years old, and one was over fifty years old.

With each of the subject congregations, the goal was to identify the primary factors that appeared to be associated with decline in worship participation, turnaround in worship participation, and following turnaround, sustaining worship participation. After reviewing the input from the initial research instruments (pastor input questionnaires, leader input questionnaires, and members surveys) and conducting interviews with pastors and sessions with leaders and other informed members, the researchers analyzed the compiled data for each of their subject congregations and identified the primary factors that appeared to be associated with the decline and turnaround of worship attendance and then sustaining the improved attendance.

Because the volume of pages from the initial research instruments and the researchers' reports are too lengthy to include, and because the names of participants and the names and locations of the congregations must remain confidential, only anonymous summaries of the research findings are provided in this project (appendix 23). Each congregation was assigned a letter (A through J), and all references to specific persons and locations were omitted.

Review of Research Process

Overall, the research process unfolded as planned. Turnaround churches in the WELS were defined and identified, associate researchers were carefully chosen and agreed to assist with the project, a number of the turnaround congregations were selected for in-depth study and decided to participate in the project, and the desired data were collected

and evaluated by the researchers. After these steps were completed, the researchers gathered to review the research process and findings.

During the evaluation, the research process received a mixed review. On the *positive* side, there were turnaround congregations that were eager to participate in the study and anxious to discover what was learned from it. The associate researches, too, were enthusiastic participants. They readily assisted with the project and fully completed their assignments with the hope of discovering how better to help other congregations experience turnaround.

Requesting initial written input from three separate groups of people (pastors, elected leaders, and other informed lay persons) before the researchers came on site was helpful. First, it gave the researchers a heads-up on what people were thinking and enabled them to formulate appropriate follow-up questions. Second, this step ensured that there would be some input from each of the groups even if a few of the scheduled listening sessions with leaders and informed members did not occur or were poorly attended. Third, the initial written input, when considered alongside of the oral input collected during the on-site interviews and listening sessions, provided a more complete picture of the congregations' turnaround experiences.

Another positive was the interaction that took place among leaders and other informed members during the on-site listening sessions. When the leaders and other members were engaged in conversation with the facilitator and each other regarding their congregation's decline, turnaround, and capacity to sustain their worship attendance, they drew additional details from each other and tested each other's perceptions of reality. In the

end, a fuller and more vivid picture of each congregation's turnaround was gained by the researchers. Reading and hearing the input from the three groups of people, when available, allowed the researchers to compare the responses of the groups and determine if there was agreement. Asking each group identical initial questions was also helpful in this regard.

It was noted by the researchers that, overall, the similarities among the three groups in each congregation were *remarkable*. Many seemed to talk the same language, and some appeared to echo the same words and phrases of the pastor, suggesting that his influence in shaping the views of members was undeniable. In reference to a particular congregation, one researcher mentioned that the comments of both leaders and other members sounded like a recording of the pastor.

Generally, pastors and lay leaders thought more alike and used similar phrases and concepts to express themselves, probably because they spent considerable time together working through the issues. Occasionally, there were leaders or other members at the listening sessions who had not been at the congregation during the entire turnaround experience. These members were mostly *beneficiaries* of the turnaround and often framed the issues from their perspectives. This shed additional light on how the turnaround was perceived by members of the congregation.

Another positive of the process was the benefit of utilizing trained and experienced church consultants as associates. Their breadth of experience with interviewing individuals and facilitating listening sessions and their competence in providing assistance with evaluating the research process and findings was invaluable. Of course, as much as we attempted to be unbiased and simply record what we saw and heard, each of us to some

degree probably received and processed the available data through our personal filters. It should also be noted that the four researchers served together in the same church consulting group (i.e., WELS Parish Assistance), and this may have influenced how we processed our findings.

At the same time, given our breadth of exposure to many congregations prior to this study, abnormalities in the data were more easily recognized and recorded. Also, to help mitigate the influences of groupthink, each of us collected and analyzed the data from each of our congregations independently prior to evaluating the findings together. Furthermore, our past consulting experiences helped us to analyze the combined data from a broad perspective and allowed us to test each other's conclusions and challenge each other's perceptions. The consistency of our findings, without initially collaborating or comparing notes during the information gathering process, and our agreement with one another on our conclusions both seem to validate the project's fundamental learnings.

There were also *negatives* noted regarding the research process. The criteria used to identify turnaround churches in the WELS gave us a limited number of churches to study and, at the same time, excluded from the study some congregations that were amazingly blessed. Also, as previously stated in this work, a number of congregations opted out of the research project. This resulted in a study of ten congregations rather than the desired twelve. This topic was explored earlier, but it should be mentioned here that additional insights might have been discovered if the other congregations would have accepted their invitations to participate.

Moreover, of those churches that were studied, most were relatively small. Only one averaged above 250 in worship. Why this was the case is not known and deserves additional study. Is it more likely that smaller churches will experience turnaround as opposed to larger congregations? Are the factors associated with turnaround in larger congregations similar or dissimilar to those of smaller churches? Did we learn enough from this study to assist purposefully larger congregations with turnaround?

In a couple of cases, some of the preliminary surveys were not given to us until we came on site. Also, the desired groups of lay leaders and other informed members were not always fully gathered, were mixed, or were not even assembled. In especially the smaller congregations, it was sometimes difficult for the pastor to locate people who had experienced the complete turnaround process. Some pastors may have procrastinated and tried to pull the groups together shortly before we arrived, and it probably didn't help that most of our on-site visits took place in the fall of the year when congregations were launching programs and had full calendars.

Looking back, I might have done a better job of initially communicating the value of this study and each congregation's findings in helping other churches work toward turnaround. Perhaps not adequately setting that tone at the beginning contributed to some pastors assigning a low priority to this effort compared with all the local activities that were happening leading up to and during our on-site visits.

One point of confusion during the study was distinguishing between the factors that seemed to be associated with turnaround from those that appeared to be associated with sustaining worship averages. For example, was relocating and constructing a

new facility primarily a turnaround or a sustain factor, or was it both? It was often necessary to review in detail the graphs that indicated at what point the congregation experienced decline and turnaround in worship and then the point at which sustaining worship began. Establishing these points of demarcation both eliminated confusion and enhanced discussion.

Not always having the opportunity to participate in worship while on site, because of travel plans, was perceived to be a detriment by the researchers. In some cases we read and heard incredibly positive comments about worship, and it would have been helpful to experience the worship firsthand.

We also regretted not having the turnaround pastors complete personality profiles, which we usually incorporate when consulting with congregations. It struck us that these ten pastors had varied sets of gifts, and some seemed to have similar personalities. Simply based on our first impressions and recollections, it seemed that most of the pastors were strongly goal oriented and relational in their approach to ministry. Those two characteristics may have been common among the pastors in this study, but Daniel Eymann may be correct when he supposes:

Turnaround Pastors come in all sizes and shapes. There does not seem to be one particular personality profile or leadership style that best describes the Turnaround Pastor. Each Pastor has a unique blend of God-given personality traits, spiritual gifts, passions, talents and abilities, and life-experiences that help mold him and shape him into the man God chooses to use for this high calling.

One thing is certain: turnaround ministry is demanding. It is spiritually, emotionally, and physically exhausting. Many turnaround pastors have stated that they border on being *workaholics*, regularly working sixty to eighty hour weeks. Whether that is due to their nature (personality traits) or the job (high demands), it behooves every pastor considering such ministry to count the cost. (Eymann 2011, 110-11)

The questions we asked were helpful in soliciting useful information, but we wished we would have specifically asked all the pastors for the two or three things they each did when they first arrived that really seemed to make a difference. In other words, what epitomized what was in the hearts and minds of these turnaround pastors and what initial efforts in each congregation began to bring about positive change? Some of the turnaround pastors offered this specific information, but we failed to gather comparable input at each of the churches we studied.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

The project evaluation process consisted of two steps: (1) my personal review of the research process and results followed by (2) a comparative review by an Assessment Team, comprised of those who assisted with the field research. The Assessment Team analysis helped me test the validity of my preliminary observations and expose any blind spots in my conclusions. Based on the findings of the study, this team also helped me analyze our current four-phase consulting process and envision with me which new or expanded services would benefit other churches desiring turnaround. The comparative review and analysis by the Assessment Team was conducted during a two-day event.

The primary purposes of these evaluative efforts were: (1) to reflect on what was learned *about* the research process (i.e., how well the information gathering process worked) as well as *from* the research process and (2) to achieve the goals and objectives of the project. It was my prayer that I would discover what the Lord intended to teach me from the turnaround churches and that more congregations would benefit from what was learned.

Analysis of Gathered Data

The lists of primary decline factors, turnaround factors, and sustain factors related to worship in the ten studied turnaround congregations serve as an outline for the analysis of the gathered data. These lists include a compilation of the *primary* factors

identified by the researchers in each congregation (appendix 24) that appeared to be associated with (1) decline in worship attendance, (2) turnaround in worship attendance, and (3) sustaining worship attendance.

It was interesting to note that unique sets of decline, turnaround, and sustain factors were identified in each congregation. In other words, none of these congregations had the exact set of factors that appeared to be associated with their turnaround experience. While a unique set of primary factors in each of the three categories was associated with each congregation, there were strong similarities among the congregations in reference to a number of common factors. To help identify these similarities, the primary factors in each category were divided into two groups: *Major Factors* (evident in six or more of the ten congregations) and *Minor Factors* (evident in five or fewer of the ten congregations). There were only two *Major Factors*: Previous pastor (seven of the ten) and Inward focus/little outreach (seven), and eight *Minor Factors*: Lack of member ministry (five), Changing community demographics (four), Pastor turnover/vacancies (four), Conflict (four), Poor location (three), Inadequate facility (three), Aging membership (two), and Launched new mission congregations (one).

The top two primary factors that seemed to be associated with decline in worship attendance among the ten congregations were (1) the previous pastor and (2) having an inward focus, resulting in little outreach. Because of the influence of the pastor, perhaps it is not surprising that the congregation's inward focus often reflected the previous pastor's failure to prioritize outreach in his personal ministry. But failing to prioritize ministry to the lost was only one shortcoming of these pastors.

In some cases, the previous pastor was such a weak leader (e.g., excessively controlling, poor work ethic, uncommitted) that just having someone *normal* arrive was a major step forward for the congregation. At the same time, in today's church culture, members seem to have higher expectations of professionalism and are more critical of their pastors. They are also quicker to express criticisms, and not always directly to their pastor. The point is, members do bear responsibility for encouraging and supporting their pastors.

Some of the pastors (evaluated in the research) might have been *better* pastors had they received stronger backing by members or, perhaps, coaching or mentoring by district or synod leaders. At the same time, some of the previous pastors who seemed to fail the congregation they served were clearly loved and honored by their members even as members recognized they did not have the gifts needed to lead their church forward.

The third on the list of decline factors, lack of member ministry, also seemed to be connected to the previous pastors' failure to provide appropriate leadership. Whether the result of being overly controlling, failing to equip members for works of service or simply not knowing how to engage people in ministry, most members sat idle while precious opportunities to reach and teach others were not pursued. This is significant because lay persons are key to penetrating society (Petersen 1992, 119).

David Nixon points to another possibility regarding pastors and unengaged members. "Unfortunately, there's often a 'them and us' mentality that pastors have toward laypeople. Such an attitude builds walls instead of bridges. It isolates. In healthy, authentic relationships there's no 'them-us' mentality. Instead, there's a spirit of *we're all in this*

together" (Nixon 2004, 43). There appeared to be some evidence of this unfitting attitude lurking in the minds and hearts of some of the previous pastors, based on what we heard.

When it comes to member ministry, "The pastor's role is to create and sustain an environment wherein the people of the church can carry out their ministry with minimal obstacles and maximum fulfillment" (Browning 2009, 120). At the same time, it is essential that members are willing to step up and serve. Of course, when pastors lead well members are often more willing to follow their lead.

For a church to be transformed from maintenance to missional, the laypeople must come to embrace the concept of lay ministry. But how do you move people from being centered on themselves and on their needs being met by the church and get them involved in the mission of the church? The best way is to empower them for ministry. One of the keys in this process is for the church's pastoral and lay leadership to lead the way, model ministry for them, and then engage them in doing lay ministry. (McConnell 2007, 83)

The next three most common decline factors were changing community demographics, pastor turnover/vacancies, and conflict. When the community changes, the audience changes. Adjustments must be made to connect with the new (often different) people. When pastors come and go within a short span of years and sometimes lengthy vacancies occur, congregations often settle into a holding pattern or begin to deteriorate. Conflict, especially in churches that are in decline, is common as people begin to affix blame to the pastor or the leaders or various groups within the congregation (e.g., those that desire change, those that resist change).

Other decline factors included having a poor location, inadequate facilities (or both), an aging membership, and in one congregation, daughtering other congregations which caused temporary setbacks in the mother church. Lacking helpful *tools* such as a strategic

site from which to conduct ministry or an adequate building within which people can be gathered, nurtured, and equipped can be detrimental to congregational stability or growth. An aging membership could easily be either a cause or result of prolonged decline.

The one studied congregation that temporarily experienced decline because it gave birth to several other area churches, and lost a significant number of members in the process, was unique. But if there was ever a *good* cause of decline in worship attendance, one you would like to see happen far more often, expanding the reach of the gospel by starting other congregations is it.

Primary Turnaround Factors were also divided into *Major Factors*: New pastor (nine of the ten), (Re)Focus on others/outreach (eight), and New or expanded facilities (six) and *Minor Factors*: Relocation (four), Deliberate ministry planning process (three), More member ministry/empowered (three), Added staff (three), Quality worship/variety (three), Launched new ministries (three). Five other factors were ranked by researchers: new attitude, expanded Bible study, use of outside resources, strong emphasis on prayer, and discipline/removal of antagonists.

If the two most common factors associated with *decline* in the studied congregations were the previous pastor and little outreach, it makes sense that the two most common factors that the Lord used to bring about positive change in these declining congregations, resulting in turnaround, were a new pastor and a new or renewed focus on others (outreach). As the influence of the previous *inward-focused* pastors seemed to stifle outreach within the congregations as they were experiencing decline, the influence of the

new *outreach-focused* pastors appeared to promote an *others* mindset and corresponding outreach activities as the congregations began their turnaround.

It needs to be noted that none of the pastors present during their congregation's decline later led their congregation's turnaround. This is significant and seems to support what Stetzer and Dodson claimed in *Comeback Churches*. "All comeback churches need a new pastor--either one brought in from the outside or one changed from the inside It is possible to lead a turnaround church as an established pastor, but it is more challenging. It means changing yourself while you transform the congregation" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 176-78). After conducting their research in 324 formerly declining congregations across ten different denominations, they concluded, "Leadership is the most important factor in making a comeback" (Stetzer and Dodson 2007, 210). Similar thoughts are echoed by Daniel Eymann and Mary Gifford:

While a church turnaround may not *always* require a new pastor, it certainly is most often the case. A pastor with a long tenure in a church usually becomes entrenched in the old way of doing things. Even if he is willing to change, a pastor who has served through a period of decline has often lost the respect of the people as well as the personal energy to reverse the present course of the church. New leadership is needed. A new pastor brings a fresh perspective and a fresh vision. (Eymann 2011, 88)

One of the reasons church turnaround experts believe that it takes a new pastor to lead a congregation through a turnaround is because the old pastor becomes enmeshed into the system of denial along with the congregation. The exception is when a particular experience or set of circumstances causes a transformation in the settled pastor's heart. (Gifford 2009, 21)

Paul Borden, who offers strategies for equipping pastors to lead, emphasized the same point in *Hit the Bullseye*. "The key ingredient needed for change is leadership We have observed that the biggest human factor in the process of transforming a

dysfunctional congregation to a healthy one is the leadership ability of the pastor" (Borden 2003, 17).

Frank Page, while writing about shrink-proof leadership, opines: "The role of the pastor cannot be overstated. His heart, passion, skill set, and personal agenda will have more impact on a church's attitude and growth potential than any other single factor" (Page 2008, 41). Many other authors, some previously noted in this work, point to leadership as essential to bringing about congregational health and turnaround.

At the same time, as discovered in this turnaround churches study, it appeared that a couple of the previous pastors were in the process of laying the groundwork for their congregation's turnaround. Whether these churches would have experienced turnaround had these pastors stayed and continued to serve is not known.

All the turnaround pastors seemed to have a couple characteristics in common. First, they were outreach minded and helped their people see ministry opportunities that were previously overlooked. Second, they had a work ethic that kept them busy throughout the week, with an emphasis on being with people (both members and non-members) and building relationships through which ministry was multiplied. In other words, they were passionate both about outreach and people, and they were driven to equip and empower more people for ministry (another turnaround factor in the above list). Moreover, they all served in their congregation for years as the congregations experienced turnaround. When the field research was conducted, these pastors had served in their congregations an average of nine years, suggesting that leading a congregation through a turnaround process takes considerable time.

Some of the pastors' wives were also mentioned in a few of the congregations as being a significant, positive influence both in supporting their husbands and participating in the congregation's ministries. On occasion, comments were made about the pastor's family serving as a *model* Christian family, implying that this brought about respect for the pastor and influenced the members' willingness to follow their pastor's lead.

It also makes sense that, if having poor locations or inadequate facilities created problems for some congregations and precipitated their decline, relocation and new or expanded facilities provided growth-producing solutions. Other factors that seemed to be associated with growth (in some of the congregations) included participating in a deliberate ministry planning process, adding staff, offering quality worship (which often included more variety), launching new ministries, having a new attitude, expanding Bible study opportunities, using outside resources, putting a strong emphasis on prayer, and disciplining or removing antagonists.

It must be noted that the researchers assumed (and, because of the sensitivity of some church leaders, frequently mentioned to those within the studied churches), that no congregation can be revitalized and *turn around* without God changing people's hearts and transforming their lives through his Means of Grace. Since this was assumed and stated up front, *spiritual growth* was seldom cited as a key factor associated with turnaround. Obviously, from a spiritual and biblical perspective, spiritual growth was a key turnaround factor in each of these congregations.

The Primary Sustain Factors included *Major Factors*: Reaching/serving others priority (nine out of ten), Quality worship/variety (six), Culture of permission/member

ministry (six) and *Minor Factors*: New or expanded facilities (four), Current (turnaround) pastor (four), Added staff (three), Launched new/expanded existing ministries (three), Spiritual growth/engaging Bible study (two), Consensus style decision making (one). There was no number ten.

Most of the primary sustain factors mirrored or were closely related to the primary turnaround factors. For that reason, additional comments about most of these factors would be redundant in this section. However, after comparing the two lists, several observations stand out.

First, the most common primary factor associated with the capacity of the turnaround congregations to sustain their improved worship attendance was a priority on reaching and serving others beyond their immediate membership. Only one of the ten congregations indicated that it had recently lost ground in this area, and this may have been a result of their turnaround pastor accepting a call to serve another church. Although this happened in only one of the studied congregations, it may underscore the significance of the turnaround pastor's influence not only during the turnaround but also during the period of time the congregation sustained or increased its worship participation.

Second, what was most conspicuous in the compilation of the sustain factors was that the pastor was no longer at the top of the list as in the other two categories. The turnaround pastors were still a positive factor in these healthier churches, but now the Lord was using other positives that were firmly in place to bring about additional congregational health and stability. In addition to *reaching and serving others* beyond their immediate membership, two other major sustain factors were ranked higher than the current

(turnaround) pastor. These were *quality worship* (including more variety) and a *culture of permission* (which allowed more members to serve their Savior in various capacities).

The data appeared to imply that, through the consistent efforts of the turnaround pastors, the congregations' members and ministries became strengths on which to build. This means that, during turnaround, the impetus for positive change was gradually moving from *reliance on the pastors* to *dependence on the members*. This would seem to explain why the three major sustain factors mentioned above were ranked highest as the role of the turnaround pastors shifted from *primary motivator* to *dependable developer*.

Initially, during turnaround, pastors were identified as a *major* factor that God used to change the culture of the declining congregations. As members matured and ministry improved and multiplied, during the time worship averages were sustained or increased, pastors were identified as a *minor* (i.e., less significant) factor that God used to help preserve and continue to improve the more positive church culture.

Finally, the one new item on the list of sustain factors, *consensus style decision making*, was given the status of a primary factor in one of the congregations. This congregation had learned to operate as a Christian family in which decisions were made with all voices heard and after open and honest discussion by the entire membership. Leaders still made the *final* decisions, but the membership was fully engaged in the decision-making process and therefore provided strong support of whatever was decided.

Additional Team Analysis

In addition to the preceding analysis of gathered data, one of the associate researchers took the initiative to review the report findings from all ten congregations in

search of common themes that seemed to be associated with turnaround. As he read through each of the researcher's reports, he noted the obvious themes and the frequency with which they appeared. His summary provided another useful set of findings that took into consideration additional turnaround factors and the number of congregations in which they surfaced. Here are his discoveries. These unanimous themes were seen in all ten of the congregations:

- A new pastor (whose leadership, gifts, personality, energy, philosophy, and style set the pace)
- An *other* and *outreach* focus
- Community awareness and involvement, with intentional strategies
- Member involvement in ministry, empowered and encouraged

Nearly unanimous themes were seen in eight or nine of the congregations:

- A climate of permission
- Outside assistance (Mission Counselors and/or Parish Assistance, WELS Kingdom Workers teams, plus reading/exploring ideas)
- Adding staff (pastor, vicar, staff minister, secretary, teacher)

Significant majority themes were those seen in six or seven of the congregations:

- A vision-driven planning process
- Additional worship opportunities, with variety in style
- A culture of warmth, welcome, and caring
- Attractive facilities (new/expanded), often as a result of relocation

- Children's ministries, especially preschool, also Lutheran Elementary Schools refocused on the community

Finally frequently mentioned themes were those seen in three or four of the congregations:

- A patient shift in attitude (to joy, optimism, confidence, a *can-do* spirit)
- More significant involvement of women
- More emphasis on spiritual growth, including prayer ministry
- Pastor making visits on both members (especially upon arriving) and prospective members)
- Losing (or removing) dissident or divisive members

The first analysis approach focused on identifying the *primary* factors in each congregation that appeared to be associated with decline and turnaround in worship attendance and then sustaining that attendance after the turnaround. After these primary factors for each congregation were identified, all the findings were compiled so that there would be a list of the primary decline, turnaround, and sustain factors. These primary factors were then placed into two groups, *Major Factors* and *Minor Factors*, as previously indicated.

The second analysis approach (by an associate researcher) considered all the cited turnaround factors for each congregation, without prioritizing any of them, and identified the *frequency* with which they occurred. The first approach focused on the primary factors in each category (decline, turnaround, and sustain). The second approach focused only on the turnaround factors and the frequency with which they appeared. As a

result, the second approach included some factors that may have been less influential overall but still present.

Together, these two approaches and resulting lists were useful in identifying the factors that appeared to be associated with turnaround churches in the WELS. The two lists help congregations--both those needing and desiring turnaround as well as those that are healthier--consider what the Lord appeared to use and bless as he brought about turnaround in these ten churches.

The researchers agreed that what really stood out, after reviewing all the input from the turnaround congregations, was that the new pastors helped bring to these declining churches a passion for pursuing the lost--and not just an ideology, but actually a practice and pursuit. During the decline in most of these congregations, members had been deprived of opportunities (through their church) to live out their Christian faith and share the gospel. When the new pastors focused members' eyes on God's saving mission and opened some doors to common and sometimes innovative outreach opportunities, members motivated by God's love and forgiveness in Christ were eager to get involved. The connection between the pastors' positive influence and the members' eager response was obvious.

Recalling and clarifying again that God alone changes hearts and lives through his powerful gospel message in Word and sacrament, we must also acknowledge that there were many helpful *human* attitudes and activities (prompted and blessed by the Lord) that seemed to be associated with turnaround in these congregations. Indeed, as he desired, it appeared the Lord chose to channel his blessings of health and growth to these turnaround churches in part through various human factors, many of which exposed more people to his

Word and sacraments more often. Here, from the perspective of the Assessment Team, is a partial list of observable factors that appeared to be associated with turnaround.

- Members seemed to have a close personal connection to their pastor and were convinced that he loved and wanted to serve them.
- The pastors were patient but functioned with drumbeat persistence. They didn't give up when faced with daunting challenges.
- In a few of the congregations, veto authority was not granted to the grumblers (as had been the case in previous years). The pastors were loving, but over time they did not allow those who resisted positive change to stand in the way and block it.
- The pastors and other leaders often sought assistance from the outside (sister churches, district or synodical personnel and programs, parachurch organizations, etc.) and received needed help and resources.
- There was a hunger to learn about anything that would help their congregations become healthier. Pastors wanted to know what to do and how to do it; they wanted to hear about God's blessings in other churches.
- Developing an outreach mindset within the congregation appeared to be closely associated with the new pastor. The turnaround pastors were determined to reach others with the gospel, and they developed intentional strategies to do so. These pastors walked the talk; they personally and consistently modeled outreach ministry.

- With the help of lay leaders, the pastors shaped ministry around people's needs in the community, sometimes zeroing in on underserved demographics, and they were quick to follow ministry leads.
- Well-run children's ministries were especially fruitful, indicating that if you love and serve children, their parents will love you.
- After developing new ministries and providing needed training and experience, the pastors handed off the new programs to others. In that way they multiplied ministry without becoming personally overwhelmed.
- There was often a shift in worship during the turnaround. There was more variety and quality, a blended style, relevant preaching, and usually worship was less formal and more relational (personal warmth), with the tone set by the pastor. Additional services were added as well.
- Ministry often went from being property and facility- or program-focused to people-focused. Methodology was adjusted to reach *more* people.
- Ministry was future-focused, with most of the congregations receiving outside assistance with strategic planning.
- A culture of permission developed (the opposite of excessive control) within which there was eagerness to engage and empower people.
- There was a shift in attitude from desperation and having no confidence to optimism and having hope, which then compelled them to explore and pursue opportunities.

- As God's blessings were celebrated, enthusiasm grew. More members wanted to and were given opportunities to get involved (including women). Financial support increased. Ministries were started or expanded (as were some facilities). Invitations to friends and neighbors were extended, and more people were compelled to come and see.
- Prayer was cited as a primary factor in one congregation, but there were frequent references to seeking God's blessings through prayer in others.
- Increasing Bible study opportunities and involving a greater number of people in the study of Scripture, with the goal of living out one's faith, was common but not frequently emphasized (because it was assumed God was working through his Word to accomplish his will through his people).
- As the turnaround was underway, opportunities for mutual fellowship and service multiplied and members became more loving and supportive toward each other and others. This created a culture of welcome and care.

Many of the above positive factors, as well as the compiled lists of primary turnaround and sustain factors identified by the researchers, gave the impression of being interconnected. In other words, they appeared to intersect with each other as the Lord used them to bring about positive change. Again, the Lord utilized a unique mix of factors in each of the studied churches to produce improved health and growth. At the same time, there were commonalities. Some factors were more prevalent than others among these churches.

As I conclude this section, it gives me great pleasure to report the following.

Throughout the entire *Turnaround Churches in the WELS* project, including the field

research in each of the studied churches, there was no evidence that these congregations had lessened their dependence on the power of God's Word to accomplish what his Word promises (Isa 55:10-11). Nor did these congregations in any way suggest that they were relying on *their* strategies and methodologies to convert sinners.

In fact, both the pastors and their people (including leaders and other lay persons) frequently expressed total confidence in the Spirit's power and in the gospel to bring sinners to faith in Christ and make them willing subjects of his kingdom. It was clear from our many conversations that pastors and members alike were determined to do everything they could to gather larger audiences for the gospel because they were confident that the Lord could and would bring about conversions among the lost and strengthen the faith of the saved wherever and whenever he desired.

Results Achieved

After laying a theological and biblical foundation for this project and exploring issues from related contemporary literature, there were two primary goals that I desired to achieve in addressing this *Turnaround Churches in the WELS* topic. Both of these goals were achieved as intended.

The first goal was to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord blessed selected WELS congregations that had experienced turnaround. To accomplish this goal I first designed the criteria that defined turnaround churches in the WELS and identified those congregations.

I had hoped to select a sampling of twelve turnaround congregations (from those that were identified) primarily on the basis of their setting, size, and age. For a variety

of reasons, including the decision by some to opt out of the research, ten congregations were studied in depth instead of twelve. However, I do not believe having two less congregations to study compromised the integrity of the project. Field research was conducted in the ten subject congregations with the assistance of several associates. The desired data was collected and evaluated, and the results were reported as planned.

The reported results identified the primary factors that appeared to be associated with worship decline, turnaround in worship attendance, and then sustaining or increasing the positive gains in worship attendance. The first primary goal was accomplished when the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord blessed selected WELS congregations that had experienced turnaround were identified.

The second primary goal of this project was to explore, based on the discovered factors, how best to design the consulting services I would provide through Crossroads Consulting Ministry to assist struggling congregations with achieving turnaround. To accomplish this second goal I first shared the project findings with some coworkers (those who assisted with gathering the data) and engaged these associates in an analysis of the previous four-phase core consulting service (WELS Parish Assistance). This analysis was based on the project findings. The second primary goal of the turnaround churches project was accomplished when, together, we envisioned how to improve and expand the consulting services of Crossroads Consulting Ministry for the benefit of churches desiring turnaround. A summary of this analysis is provided in the next section, *Synthesis within Ministry Context*.

I was hopeful and prayed that the findings of this project would be helpful both to congregations that needed and desired turnaround and to more stable congregations

that yearned to have improved health for the sake of having greater spiritual impact among their members and in their communities. I believe my hope was realized as my prayer was answered.

Synthesis within Ministry Context

After I initially compiled and evaluated the data from each of the subject congregations and composed the lists of primary decline, turnaround, and sustain factors, I met with the Assessment Team during a two-day event to (1) review the research process and findings from the turnaround churches project, (2) analyze the current four-phase consulting process (WELS Parish Assistance) based on the findings, and (3) envision which new services would benefit churches desiring turnaround. We didn't know it at the time, but the new services would be provided through a new entity, Crossroads Consulting Ministry, which I would launch and direct.

Here, from the perspective of the Assessment Team, is a partial list of purposeful adjustments and enhancements a church consulting ministry could offer based on the *Turnaround Churches in the WELS* findings. Many of these concepts helped to shape and are now included in the services offered by Crossroads Consulting Ministry.

- Retain the four-phase ministry planning approach (exploration, analysis, mission/vision setting, and implementation) that has a proven track record, but shorten the timeframe of the process from three to under two years, including the twelve months of follow-through and delivery of desired assistance during implementation. Exceptions could be made as needed with the length of the process. However, if the process is too long,

momentum is lost and time is not wisely invested. If the process is too short, there is insufficient needed change and minimal gain.

- Become far more flexible in modifying the core ministry planning process and offering special services based on the needs and desires of individual congregations. One size doesn't fit all.
- Work more closely with and provide more assistance to pastors. Use personality assessments (e.g., StrengthsFinder, DISC [Dominance/Inducement/Submission/Compliance] Assessment). Position pastors to lead well by helping them discover and leverage their leadership style. Provide coaching, mentoring, or whatever type of individualized assistance is needed. This is a good investment of time and effort because the pastor is vital to turnaround and to moving congregations in the direction of health.
- Help pastors evaluate their personal spiritual practices. Some pastors are not spending personal time in the Word, not tending to their own spiritual lives as they strive to serve others. Nor are they praying for people (both members and the lost). They are walking through ministry, doing what they have to do to prepare for the next church-related activity on the calendar, not letting God take hold of and shape who they are, not letting God strengthen them and open their minds and hearts to his kingdom perspective. They are riding on their academic ministerial education

rather than on a deeply personal relationship with God derived from immersing themselves in and wrestling with his Word.

- Be selective in accepting congregations as clients. For services to be beneficial, the pastor must both be on board and lead the charge. Also, some congregations may need to be told, *You are not ready to proceed with this effort. We suggest that you first ...*
- Prioritize lay leadership development throughout the planning process and emphasize the need for ongoing spiritual growth. Provide useful resources to leaders and customize assistance to meet their specific needs. Help them, along with their pastors, to function as a cohesive mission-focused team.
- Communicate effectively on how essential it is that members of the congregation become aware of and involved in their community. This is not a *going through the motions so we can grow* strategy. This must be genuine Christianity in practice, saturated with selfless love. Provide examples. Network with those who are doing it. Show them Jesus.
- If there is major conflict, this must be managed or resolved before ministry planning occurs. Discipline may be required. To minimize frustration and anxiety, design a balanced focus on pastor, leaders, and other members in an effort to get them moving forward together with leaders leading the way.

- Create a climate of hope for the future. Review the findings of the turnaround churches project. Give assurance that God's Word works.
- Encourage congregations to explore and pursue outside resources and partner with sister churches for the sake of advancing gospel ministry.
- Provide more for pastors and other leaders to do on their own during the planning process to ensure the best possible investment of the consultant's on-site time, without weakening the process. On-site time is still vital for building relationships and earning trust, but maximum effectiveness with minimum expenditure of time and money is the goal. This preserves more resources for congregational ministry (less cost) and enables the consulting ministry to serve more churches.
- Intentionally design the process steps for churches in need of turnaround understanding that the biggest issue may be the need for a change of heart and mind (acquiring a missional, kingdom perspective), and the most significant shift in ministry focus may be prioritizing outreach.
- Continue to emphasize the importance of engaging more members in ministry--on and off campus--and creating a culture of permission within which all are free to express their thoughts and serve their Savior in harmony with the mission of the church and within biblical guidelines.
- Assist leaders of congregations with identifying new ministry opportunities in their communities that would be context sensitive.

Children's ministries are often appropriate choices, but dissimilar contexts may provide a diversity of other options.

- Challenge congregations that appear to value comfort over mission. For example, *We don't think you are bold enough in your vision. Have you considered ...? What if ...?*
- Continue to check in with district leadership when a congregation requests assistance. Gather insights, welcome suggestions, listen to concerns. If serious issues surface or develop in the congregation, consider delaying or discontinuing services until the issues have been agreeably resolved.
- Add additional consulting services as they flow from current work or as requested. Build whatever consultant teams are needed to address specific requests. Offering a collection of consulting options to meet diverse needs would be desirable.
- When appropriate, outsource requested services that cannot be adequately provided. Just as no church can do everything well, no consulting ministry can meet every need or desire.
- Explore how to make greater use of technology and how to help congregations do the same.
- Continue to use trained and experienced consultants with pastoral and educational backgrounds, but consider utilizing more lay people who have expertise in specific ministry areas.

In shaping and launching Crossroads Consulting Ministry, much thought and prayer were given to the points listed above. The wisdom and insights provided by the Assessment Team proved to be invaluable, and ongoing discussions with these capable servants of the Lord continue to be helpful. Crossroads will always be a work in progress. For as long as the Lord has use of this consulting ministry, we will always strive to discover new and better ways of serving our Savior as we serve his churches.

CHAPTER 6

PROJECT REFLECTIONS

Completing my doctrinal program was a long and challenging journey causing me to conclude at times, *this is crazy*. At the same time, it was a joyful journey that frequently inspired and filled me with the sensation, *this is fun*.

Completing the program was long and challenging because unexpected detours and setbacks occurred that, no doubt, the Lord allowed to emerge for his own good reasons. Only he knows what blessings he bestowed through those uninvited impediments. Nevertheless, these interruptions delayed the completion of the *Turnaround Churches in the WELS* project, especially the writing of this report.

It was a joyful journey because, in spite of the challenges, I learned so much from exceptionally wise and spiritual and experienced individuals. As a result of this project I have more to offer congregations as I serve them in Jesus' name. This made completing the project well worth the time and effort it required. Still, it is true, the more you learn, the more you realize how little you know. Surely, I must strive to keep learning so I can serve well.

Lessons Learned

As I reflect on what was learned from this turnaround churches project, I marvel at what the Lord is capable of accomplishing in his churches even after they suffer

serious decline. Stated in other words, the Lord is fully capable of turning his churches around--always through the power of his Word but, in addition, also through whatever human factors he decides to deploy--irrespective of the circumstances that were associated with their debility. Church consultants need to know and congregations need to hear, "There's good news! God is still eager and able to re-create both people and congregations" (Herrington, Bonem, and Furr 2000, 1). "No situation is hopeless where God is involved" (Page 2008, 86).

Based on this study, it is likely that a common factor linked with worship decline in many churches is the reality that pastors frequently fail to prioritize the Lord's kingdom-building mission and rally their people to pursue it with passion. Pastors are uniquely positioned to have profound influence, for good or for bad, within their congregations. This is why pastors, in particular, must be spiritually healthy and prioritize Christ's make-disciples mission both in their personal lives and in the ministries of the churches they serve. For pastors to have the energy and stamina to lead well, they must also be emotionally and physically healthy.

Most of the congregations studied in this project (during their decline) were not serious about Bible study, were inwardly focused, and therefore made little effort to reach out meaningfully with the gospel to those within their communities. Neither pastors nor members should expect their congregations to recover from decline, to be healthy, or to grow when Christ's make-disciples mission is not given high priority. Again, a lack of spiritual health and failure to pursue Christ's make-disciples mission are related.

The spiritual health of a church is always a major factor in its growth or decline. Healthy spiritual attitudes like love, joy, peace, humility, patience,

forgiveness, and acceptance will foster growth. Unhealthy spiritual attitudes such as pride, legalism, unforgiveness, prejudice, or apathy will impede growth.

When people are spiritually unhealthy they lose their sense of urgency in fulfilling the mission of the church. Having lost a sense of urgency the church then settles into ministry through habit and routine. They go through the motions but with no spiritual vibrancy and no process for spiritual development. (Eymann 2011, 82)

Besides lacking spiritual health, there may be a number of other reasons why pastors struggle to lead in a constructive manner or set a positive tone for ministry. When those within the studied congregations described their previous pastors, they were generally supportive and empathetic as they shared their perspectives. They were sad and sorry that the ministries of their previous pastors were to some extent uninspiring and at times problematic, and they often called attention to their own weaknesses and failures.

Some mentioned that their previous pastor lacked people skills, had difficulty communicating both in personal conversation and when preaching, and didn't seem to enjoy being with people. Others mentioned that their previous pastor was unorganized and overwhelmed, defensive and controlling, a weak leader, or he had an attitude issue (e.g., the church *owes* me). A few people indicated that their prior pastor had a track record of negative experiences in other churches, and some even wondered if their prior pastor wanted to be in the public, representative ministry because he gave the appearance that his heart was not in it.

Whatever issues there were with the previous pastors, it is worth noting that ministry will not go well when pastor and people do not connect and joyfully share the challenges and joys of ministry. Contrast that *failure-to-connect* scenario with the arrival of the turnaround pastors and the favorable ministry relationships and partnerships that formed.

The pastor connecting with the people he serves and equips for ministry appears to be a significant factor when striving for turnaround and church health.

Whatever factors were associated with decline--lack of member ministry, changing demographics, pastor turnover or vacancies, conflict, poor location or facilities, aging membership, or (a positive and commendable circumstance) daughtering multiple congregations--the Lord can orchestrate a comeback in worship attendance. He can undo the damage and decay and bring health and growth to his hurting congregations even after they, for a time, have *blocked* his blessings by neglecting his Word and will.

The Lord certainly doesn't *need* to use pastors and other people (along with their Spirit-prompted attitudes, approaches, assessments, and actions) to channel his blessings to his churches. He can simply *will* whatever he desires and make it happen because he is the omnipotent, miracle-working God as he clearly demonstrates on the pages of Scripture. He can strategically position his angelic messengers to work wonders within congregations, and maybe he does this far more than we imagine.

Then again, is there any doubt that our God wants to use people and their church-cultivating activities to bring about positive change and accomplish in his houses of worship whatever he desires? Has he not given his followers a vital role in his work? Is he not most certainly behind and working through those specific factors, which he brings together in congregations, through which turnaround is the God-effected and God-honoring outcome? Acknowledging this reality, of course, is in no way a denial of what God alone accomplishes through the power of the gospel and the working of his Spirit. Even then the Lord delivers the gospel, either vocalized or in print, through human agents.

It was interesting to discover that there were a variety of factors associated with decline in the studied congregations, with some factors more prevalent than others. The same was true regarding the turnaround and sustains factors. But even though some elements were more common than others, some even appearing in all the churches, each congregation had a unique set of decline, turnaround, and sustain factors.

This finding suggests that each church must be viewed as distinct and served with the expectation that a divergent set of factors (e.g., strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, obstacles) are likely to be present. In other words, a consultant's diagnostic assessment and set of recommendations will differ from one congregation to another (sometimes slightly and at other times significantly). The goal, in each unique context, should be to identify the most appropriate steps forward for that particular congregation at that time and place.

One pastor's or church's experience cannot necessarily be transferred directly to another. Every church is different. Every church has a unique culture, context, and personality. Every pastor is different. And every pastor has a unique blend of spiritual gifts, leadership skills, and personality traits. Thus, every turnaround ministry is unique. One must be careful to apply principles rather than specific practices to a specific turnaround ministry. (Eymann 2011, 55-56)

Do we fully comprehend how the Lord brings about turnaround in his churches? No. But we are confident that he does, just as we are confident that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). What is important is that each of us comes before the Lord with this humble request: *Lord, here I am. Use me as you please to accomplish your will, and through me, bless others.* This heartfelt attitude--compelled by Christ's love and combined with tireless effort--is our daily offering to the One who claims us as his own by grace.

As God's people seek his will and endeavor strategically to accomplish his mission, the Lord always provides opportunities for kingdom building. Even when situations look bleak or hopeless within congregations, the Lord is able to come to their rescue. He is able to help them see in their communities fields ready to plant and, eventually, to harvest as he produces a crop of souls and grows his Church. He grants freedom to exercise discernment and to experiment with whatever methodologies might help to grow an audience for his Word, as long as biblical truths or principles are not compromised.

Ministry planning that revisits critical questions--where are we now (analysis), why are we here (mission), where are we going (vision), and how are we going to get there (implementation)--can help congregations get back on track and move forward with confidence. "Planning is good and useful and necessary. The writer of Proverbs 16 reminds us of that and even applauds it. But with every plan we make, we realize it is subject to the ultimate plan of God" (Becker 2012, 164). That's what congregations desiring turnaround (and all congregations) will want to seek, *God's will*. "To put it succinctly, a turnaround church must renew its vision by clearly identifying *what* God has called it to accomplish and *how* it is going to do so in its unique setting" (Eymann 2011, 88).

It is important that we and our congregations stay on mission no matter what is happening, whether within the congregation or community. Again, the message of God's Word and his soul-saving mission must *never* change; the methodologies that we use to gather audiences and deliver God's truths to as many people as possible *may* change; and anything that hinders the message or the mission *must* change. Especially pastors and other church leaders must grasp and be guided by these basic biblical principles.

As congregations adjust to changes in their communities and within the culture, the services provided by church consultants must also change as they are guided by the same sacred principles. All participants in the consulting process must remain staunchly grounded in God's Word and, simultaneously, be as flexible as possible when exploring how best to reach out and proclaim the saving message of salvation in Christ. We must have Paul's follower-of-Christ heart, share Paul's soul-rescuing priority, and follow his selfless example. "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor 9:22). That's every believer's and every Christian congregation's daily focus because saving *some*--saving as many as possible--is the ultimate goal.

To help ease the tensions that are likely to exist among God's people (within congregations and church bodies) when some focus primarily on *being faithful to and not watering down the message* and others focus primarily on *being faithful with the message and employing innovative methodologies to pursue Christ's make-disciples mission*, there must be common understandings and agreements. All must come together around God's Word, listen to their Lord and to each other, and learn to appreciate the value of both perspectives.

This is why (in chapter 2) I selected and focused on primarily four foundational doctrinal issues. First, knowing God's gracious heart, after experiencing his love and forgiveness in Christ, inspires his redeemed people to appreciate and share his love for souls. Second, owning Christ's make-disciples mission, both as an individual Christian and as a gathering of believers (i.e., a congregation), is fundamental to pursuing the salvation of lost souls with passion. Third, depending on God's powerful means of grace causes

congregations to rely exclusively on the gospel and Holy Spirit for converting the lost and transforming their lives. Finally, gathering an audience through appropriate methods (for the sake of exposing more people to the gospel) ensures that congregations endeavor to be faithful to God's Word and responsible in identifying and utilizing God-given opportunities to build relationships and proclaim the gospel within their local ministry contexts and beyond. Agreement on these doctrinal issues will help to ensure that God's people joyfully unite both in being faithful to God's message and to his mission.

Considered together, these four critical issues especially provide a concrete biblical foundation for pursuing turnaround because they guide God's people and his churches to do the right thing (make disciples) for the right reason (God's love and forgiveness) in the right ways (with confidence in the gospel's and the Spirit's power and with discernment). Yet, there is more to consider when addressing the topic of turnaround.

Beyond establishing agreement on those basic understandings, which lay a solid biblical foundation for working together as brothers and sisters in Christ, there is still much to learn both from Scripture and from other sources about pursuing turnaround in our churches. Some of these concepts and practices were identified in chapter 3, *Issues from Related Contemporary Literature*. What was offered in this chapter was only a sample of the many thoughts and recommendations of others concerning cultural shifts and changing demographics, striving for church health, and enabling needed change.

In one sense, because of the many voices and opinions that are weighing in on subjects related to church revitalization, assisting churches with turnaround could be

described as being enormously complex. Never stop reading about, listening to, and learning from others regarding every topic related to church health and renewal.

From another perspective, assisting churches with turnaround could be described as being relatively simple. Just stick to the basics and trust God to bless your efforts. Proclaim Christ to as many people as possible and keep those already gathered by the Lord connected to him as you equip them for kingdom service.

Either way, whether we see church revitalization and turnaround as complex or relatively simple, we are not without responsibility. Primarily, we must be faithful *to* and *with* God's Word.

No doubt, people will make use of various approaches and engage in endless efforts to help congregations gain or regain their balance in this twenty-first century. May the Lord use and bless all of them as he desires. Certainly, there is not just one way to help congregations recover after suffering decline. "There is no one magic fix that can help each congregation move from dysfunction to health" (Borden 2003, 80). At the same time, only the Lord can give a congregation true spiritual health and enable a congregation to experience a God-honoring turnaround through his powerful Word and through whatever human factors he chooses to bless.

Personally, as I offer services to congregations through Crossroads Consulting Ministry, I'll strive to take full advantage of what I learned from this *Turnaround Churches in the WELS* project. Compelled by Christ's love I'll make a concerted effort, whenever and wherever I have the opportunity, to assist God's people with pursuing his mission.

If this project is in some way useful to others in assisting more churches with experiencing turnaround, which is my prayer, *solī Deo gloria!*

Considerations for the Future

This study was comprised of a group of only ten WELS congregations that met specific turnaround criteria for the purpose of identifying the primary factors that appeared to be associated with their worship attendance decline, turnaround, and following their turnaround, sustaining their much-improved worship averages. This limited study produced some interesting and helpful inferences, but there is much more to learn about assisting churches that need and desire turnaround.

Perhaps studying a similar-sized group of congregations in another church body, with comparable criteria, would be advantageous. Or, perhaps a project with a larger sampling of WELS (or another denomination's) congregations would be beneficial. Either type of study would help to validate or possibly call into question the findings of this project.

Studying a group or groups of larger turnaround congregations would be useful as well. This study had only one congregation with a sustained weekly worship average over 250. If additional studies focused on churches with worship averages between 250 and 500, 500 to 750, and 750 to 1,000, would there be marginally or considerably different sets of primary decline, turnaround, and sustain factors? What do turnarounds in smaller and larger congregations have in common? What is dissimilar? The smaller the boat the easier it is to turn and head in a new direction. Is this also true of churches?

Answers to these questions would be good to know especially if altering consulting approaches, based in part on church size, proved to be far more helpful to

congregations and, under God, yielded healthier outcomes. Or maybe the findings from additional studies would suggest that the factors and other insights identified in this limited turnaround churches study are transferable irrespective of a congregation's worship average.

Exploring how some pastors seem to weaken churches could be a standalone study. It was shocking, but clearly apparent in this turnaround churches venture, that poor pastoring was a major and nearly ubiquitous factor related to decline in worship participation. Perhaps, on that issue, this turnaround churches study was an anomaly. Is poor pastoring really as common as suggested by this project's findings? Would similar studies in other denominations reach the same conclusion? If so, what does this mean? What must be done by church bodies and their seminaries to reverse this trend? This is a topic that begs both honest discussion and a timely response.

The WELS has, within the past couple of years, begun to invest additional measurable resources in providing opportunities for continuing education and other supports for pastors. Time, money, and effort have been wisely expended to help equip and encourage pastors just beginning, continuing in mid-stream, and preparing to conclude their called worker careers. This has the potential, with God's blessing, to make a demonstrable difference in how congregations are served and how they function.

As mentioned earlier, it would have been good in this turnaround churches study--and it should be encouraged if there is a future study--to have the pastors of the researched congregations complete personality profiles. The pastors of the congregations in this study appeared to have *different* sets of gifts, but most appeared to have *similar* personalities. Because God is sovereign, he can use any pastor at any time as his instrument

to help revitalize a congregation. But does he most frequently use pastors with certain personality characteristics to lead churches in decline through turnaround?

Based on our first impressions and recollections, it seemed that most of the turnaround pastors in this study were strongly goal oriented and relational in their approach to ministry. Had the DISC assessment been utilized, for example, this would mean that several and perhaps most of the turnaround pastors had some combination of a high *D* (dominate, goal-oriented) and *I* (influential, people-oriented) personality profile. The other two letters that measure personality characteristics in the DISC assessment are *S* (steadiness) and *C* (compliance or conscientious).

This type of personality assessment, and possibly other instruments, could help determine and document if such a pattern exists among turnaround pastors. If this was revealed to be a factor associated with turnaround, would this be a consideration when preparing call lists for congregations that need or desire renewal or recovery?

Also mentioned earlier, the survey and interview questions the researchers asked were helpful in soliciting useful information, but we wished we would have specifically asked all the pastors for the two or three things they each did when they first arrived that really seemed to make a difference. This question could be included in future studies. Perhaps strong similarities will be discovered in the pastors' responses, and these could be encouraged in other congregations.

Finally, although it would be challenging to measure and evaluate, finding a way to assess the mood or mindset of turnaround congregations would be an interesting study. The researchers noted a major shift in attitude among members when the Lord moved

their congregations from decline to turnaround and then enabled them to sustain their positive worship trend.

To what degree was this shift in attitude a factor in their turnaround? Was their new positive disposition primarily a *result* of turnaround or a factor that was so strongly associated with forward movement that it *precipitated* turnaround? Clearly, from this study, the new pastors were influential in bringing about a change in mood, and a renewed sense of optimism seemed to produce a renewed vision. What other factors within turnaround congregations (besides the life-generating gospel, of course) are likely to change the overall mindset of a congregation from *pessimism* (we're doomed) to *optimism* (let's roll)?

Without question, these and other supplementary studies could help bring to light what the Lord is doing among his churches when they, by his grace and guidance, experience turnaround. As more is learned, both pastors and consultants who serve congregations in crisis, as well as healthier ones, will know better what to do and how to pray as they invite God's blessings on his kingdom-building work.

Finally, whenever and wherever a turnaround attempt is made, and especially when it is achieved: "The focus of the comeback effort is always Jesus Christ. The only success we can know is in relationship to Him. Always divert the glory to Christ in any comeback accomplishment" (Nixon 2004, 149).

In his name we pray: Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all (1 Chr 29:11).

APPENDIX 1

STATEMENTS OF BELIEF--THE MEANS OF GRACE

Section VI from This We Believe, a public confession of the WELS

1. We believe that God bestows all spiritual blessings upon sinners by special means established by him. These are the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments. We define a sacrament as a sacred act established by Christ in which the Word connected with an earthly element gives the forgiveness of sins.
2. We believe that through the gospel, the good news of Christ's atoning sacrifice for sinners, the Holy Spirit works faith in people, whose hearts are by nature hostile to God (1 Pet 1:23). Scripture teaches that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). This Spirit-worked faith brings about a renewal in sinners and makes them heirs of eternal life in heaven.
3. We believe that also through the Sacrament of Baptism the Holy Spirit applies the gospel to sinners, giving them new life (Titus 3:5) and cleansing them from all sin (Acts 2:38). The Lord points to the blessing of Baptism when he promises, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). We believe that the blessing of Baptism is meant for all people (Matt 28:19), including infants. Infants are born sinful (John 3:6) and therefore need to be born again, that is, to be brought to faith, through Baptism (John 3:5).
4. We believe that all who join in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper receive the true body and blood of Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine (1 Cor 10:16). This is true because, when the Lord instituted this sacrament, he said, "This is my body. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:26, 28). We believe that Christ's words of institution cause the real presence--not any human action. As believers receive his body and blood, they also receive the forgiveness of sins (Matt 26:28) and the comfort and assurance that they are truly his own. Unbelievers also receive Christ's body and blood, but to their judgment (1 Cor 11:29).
5. We believe that the Lord gave his Word and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper for a purpose. He commanded his followers, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19, 20). Through God's Word and sacraments he preserves and extends the holy Christian church throughout the world. Believers should therefore be diligent and faithful in the use of these divinely established means of grace for themselves and in their mission outreach to others. These are the only means through which immortal souls are brought to faith and to life in heaven. (WELS website, accessed November 2012)

APPENDIX 2

THE ABSOLUTE EFFICACY OF THE MEANS OF GRACE AND THE RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS OF METHODS OF COMMUNICATING GRACE

A summary of a chapter section from *A Theology
of Ministerial Practice* (Kelm 2003, 23-33)
provided by the author

In Isa 55: 10-11 the Lord says: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." God's Word is *efficacious*, that is, it produces an effect in the mind and heart--and then the life--of those who hear it. It accomplishes God's purpose, whether his saving purpose of convincing and converting or his judicial purpose of rendering without excuse those who deny his grace.

People are brought to faith and nurtured in the faith alone by the gospel in Word and sacrament (cf. John 6:44; Rom 10:17; 1 Thess 2:13; Titus 3:5; John 3:5). This biblical truth is affirmed in the Augsburg Confession, Article V: "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. ... Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word of the Gospel." Similarly, the Formula of Concord, The Epitome, Article II, argues: "the will of man has been changed and renewed solely by God's power and activity Prior to man's conversion there are only two efficient causes, namely, the Holy Spirit and the Word of God as the Holy Spirit's instrument whereby he effects conversion. Man should hear this Word, though he cannot give it credence and accept it by his own powers but solely by the grace and operation of God the Holy Spirit."

An important corollary of this truth is that there is nothing any human being can do to make the Word of God more or less efficacious. The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II, paragraph 48 uses that term "efficacious" to make the point. St. Paul

makes this clear in 1 Cor 1:10-17 by rejecting "personality cults" within the church and in chapter two, verses 1-5, by emphasizing that not human wisdom but the Spirit's power characterized his message. In Phil 1:15-18 he argues that neither the character nor the motives of the preacher condition the power of the message. (See also the Augsburg Confession, Article VIII, point two.) Not the brilliance and charismatic personality of a preacher, nor the conviction and logic of a Christian witness can add a thing to the power of the Gospel. No psychology or sociology can augment the Gospel to improve the percentages of conversion. No evangelism methodology or discipleship strategy can enhance the ability of God's Word to create faith and strengthen faith. It is equally true that the humblest servant of Christ, unsophisticated in his world-view and out of touch with his culture, does nothing to subtract from the efficacy of the Gospel when he presents it in its truth and purity. In fact, the power of the Gospel is undiminished by the unfaithful life of its messenger.

Just as Lutheran theology leaves unresolved the tension between the absolute efficacy of the Word of God and the free will of human beings to reject that Word of God, so also must our theology honestly present another paradox. In 2 Cor 5:11, St. Paul says: "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men." Much of this epistle is a defense of Paul's ministry, sometimes in comparison with the less faithful or less productive ministry of others. In 1 Cor 3:10-15 the apostle uses the analogy of construction to make the point that while the foundation of every true ministry is Jesus Christ, the quality of a man's ministry may vary. He may be more or less effective. In the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30), Jesus recognizes that differing abilities and efforts bring different results. The way in which we communicate the Gospel DOES have an impact on conversion and discipleship.

Theologian Edward A. Koehler makes the distinction this way: "The Gospel is always efficacious The Gospel is not always effective." By "efficacious" is meant the inherent, complete and sole power to accomplish its purpose. The Gospel is, as St. Paul describes it in Rom 1:16, "the POWER of God for salvation." In Rom 3:3-4 the apostle adds that a person's unbelief does not negate the promise of God to save in the Gospel. Nothing beyond the Gospel is necessary to bring a person to faith, nothing in the person brought to faith and nothing in the person who proclaims the Gospel. "Efficacious" is an absolute term. "Effective," on the other hand, is a relative term. "Effective" may describe how well a Christian witness gains an audience for his evangelism, how well a preacher organizes and delivers his message, how well a church follows up on an initial presentation of the Gospel to reinforce the message. The term "efficacious" is reserved for the Gospel, while the term "effective" is applied to the individuals or institutions that proclaim the Gospel.

If a preacher's lack of preparation results in a garbled sermon, the effectiveness of his message has been damaged even though the efficacy of the Means of Grace has not. If a church member's life so contradicts the love and truth of God that others reject his efforts at witnessing, the effectiveness of his evangelism is severely curtailed even though the efficacy of the Gospel is not. If a congregation's insensitivity to the culture of its neighborhood keeps the unchurched from participating in its programs of ministry, that

congregation's mission may be rendered ineffective even if its theology is orthodox. When language changes, when the way people listen or come together is altered, when the assumptions and concerns of a generation are different from those of previous generations, the effectiveness of a church's ministry methods is affected even though its message of Law and Gospel remains unchanged.

The efficacy of the Means of Grace dare not become an excuse for ineffectual ministry. Faithfulness to the Word of God cannot make faithfulness with the Word of God unimportant. Lutheran theology does not turn the Gospel into a talisman or those who proclaim the Gospel into shamans. The God who created us as rational and emotional beings, communicates to us in rational and emotive language; and he has chosen to make his saving purpose for our world dependent on his people's proclamation of his message. While Christians cannot condition the efficacy of the Means of Grace in the heart of a hearer, they can and do condition how people hear the Means of Grace, by both the frequency and the way with which they present the Gospel. While churches cannot make the Gospel more or less believable, they can and do make it more or less hearable. While evangelism methods do not make the Word of God more or less powerful, they can make the Word of God more or less understandable. They can turn people off before they've really heard the truth, or they can build bridges which provide multiple opportunities to present the truth. While church programs that address human needs such as food, medical care, education, child care or emotional support do not of themselves accomplish the Savior's mission for his church, they create relationships and forums in which the Gospel is shared with people who would not otherwise give that church the opportunity for witness. And churches that have no method of connecting with the lost, let alone little intention to do so, have severely restricted their effectiveness in Christ's mission without at all diminishing the efficacy of the Means of Grace.

When German Lutheran churches in the first quarter of the twentieth century were confronted with the twin challenges of greatly diminished German immigration and opprobrium attached to German culture by World War I, they adapted their methods of ministry without changing their message. They continued German-language worship and devotional visits because English was a barrier to many members' understanding. The Gospel was not less efficacious in English; but ministry was less effective in English. They began English-language worship and instruction because, however efficacious the Gospel was in German, that language and its culture were a barrier both to neighbors' interest and their ability to understand. And the children of German immigrants had become acculturated, less able and willing to learn the truth in the language and culture of their parents. Two generations later Lutheran churches confronted a similar issue within English language and culture. The King James Version was replaced by contemporary translations because God's truth didn't communicate clearly any longer in "the king's English." A new hymnal and a revised catechism inevitably followed.

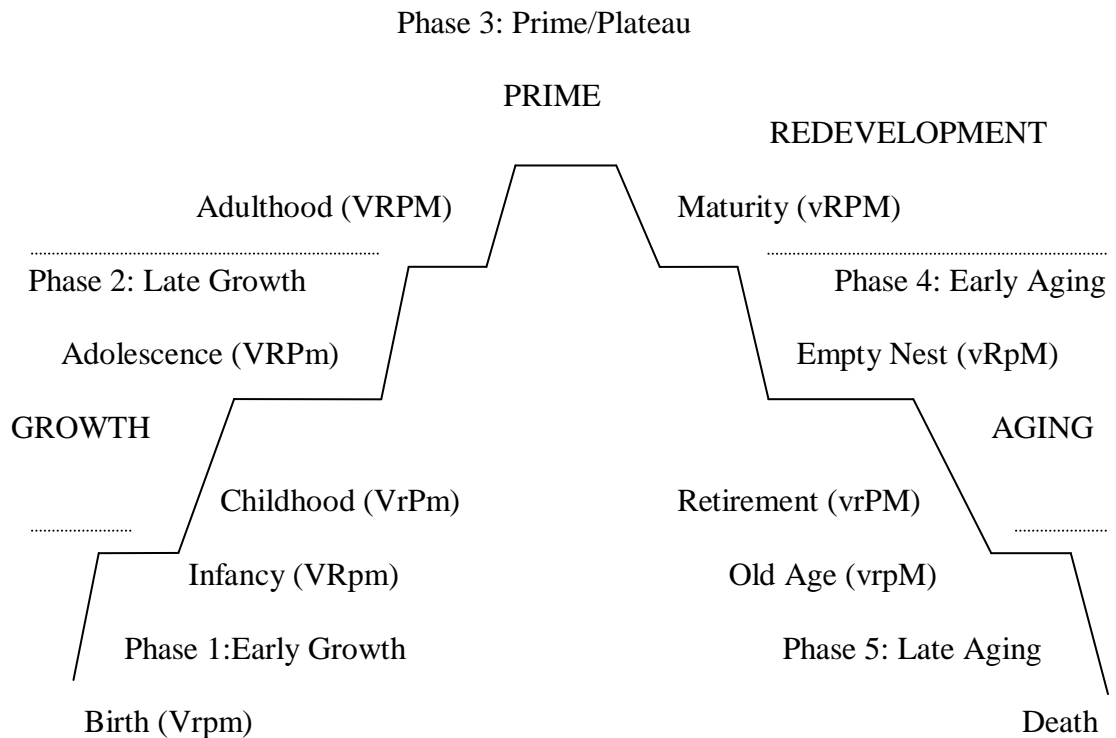
It may be more difficult to recognize significant cultural shifts when they are less ethnic or linguistic in nature. But there are marked differences in the way the so-called

"Builder" generation (often coupled with the "Silent" generation to include people born before 1946) sees ministry from the way "Boomers" (born between 1946 and 1964) or "Busters" (born between 1964 and 1982) or "Millennials/Mosaics" (born after 1982) respond. In a post-literate world, people are more likely to perceive things through images and experiences than through logical propositions. Their attention spans are different, as is their way of processing information. Their values are different. In a postmodern culture, people's assumptions about truth and life are different. They think synthetically rather than in black-and-white contrasts. Their goals are different. In a post-Christian society, many are unfamiliar with basic Bible stories and theological truths. They no longer see "going to church" as important to their life. They may be turned off by "institutional" expressions of the church. God's Word is no less efficacious in this rapidly changing culture. But the church's methods of communicating that Word and the church's ways of reaching people may become less effective.

There are twin dangers that ministerial practice must confront. One danger is to condition God's message with the sociology of a new culture, while the other danger is to imprison God's message in the traditions of an old culture. While cultural insensitivity can diminish the effectiveness of ministry by losing the audience, cultural impositions on the message can diminish the effectiveness of ministry by obscuring the Gospel. The Gospel in either case remains efficacious. In extremes, a culturally conditioned message may eliminate any efficacious Gospel with heresy; and a culturally insensitive message may become totally irrelevant to the people for whom Christ sent us. It is important to maintain the tension between two truths: the absolute efficacy of the Means of Grace and the relative effectiveness of methods of communicating God's grace.

APPENDIX 3

LIFE CYCLE AND STAGES OF CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT



V → Vision, Leadership, Mission, Purpose, Core Values
 R → Relationships, Experiences, Discipleship
 P → Programs, Events, Ministries, Services, Activities
 M → Management, Accountability, Systems, Resources

Figure 9. Life cycle and stages of congregational development (Bullard 2009, 96).

APPENDIX 4

INITIAL INVITATION EMAILED TO PASTORS

Pastor _____,

Please find attached a letter inviting you and _____ Lutheran to participate in the *Turnaround Churches in the WELS* study. As mentioned in the letter, I will contact you by phone within a few days to answer any questions you might have. By the way, what phone number would you prefer that I use, and is there a best time to call (perhaps during Monday, June 22 or Tuesday, June 23)?

If you and your leaders are willing to participate, here are the anticipated next steps:

1. I or one of my associates would contact you to set up the on-site visit.

We need to have all of our visits completed by the end of September and earlier if possible. One of us would come on site for one or two days, depending on the agreed-to schedule.

2. You would distribute the three attached instruments and then send those that are completed to our Parish Assistance office at the synod building.

These would need to be received at our office at least three weeks before the scheduled on-site visit, so you would want to insert appropriate instructions at the bottom of the attached Leader Input Questionnaire and Member Survey before you distribute them.

The member survey, including the Informed Consent page, might be inserted in your bulletin, e-mailed and/or handed out to those who were members prior to the year indicated on the survey. The year indicated, based on the annual statistical reports, is the point at which the turnaround began. The higher the number of member responses, the better.

Please make clear that only those who were members prior to the indicated year are to complete and return the Member Survey.

3. Send all the completed instruments back to us in one package.

Mail them to WELS Parish Assistance, 2929 N. Mayfair Road, Milwaukee, WI 53222. Please clearly identify your congregation on the package and indicate that it contains Turnaround Churches Materials.

4. When one of us comes on site, that person would (a) interview you, (b) conduct a group consultation with four or more informed leaders, and (c) conduct a group session with eight to twelve informed members.

Each of these sessions should take no longer than two hours. Both the leaders and members would be selected by you, and you (or someone you designate) would need to set up the times and locations.

Completing a Leader Input Questionnaire or Member Survey prior to the on-site visit may be helpful but is not required of those participating in the leader consultation or member session. Also, those participating in these group sessions would not be asked to bring anything.

When selecting the *informed* leaders and members, keep in mind that the participants should be chosen primarily on the basis of their firsthand experience with the turnaround that occurred at your church. Ideally, these men and women would have insights to share on (a) what led to the decline and (b) the turnaround that occurred, as a result of God's blessing. It would be helpful if those selected were analytical and willing to share their thoughts.

Finally, if the congregation would like to be reimbursed for any expenses related to participation in this study (e.g. photocopying, paper, postage), you would let me know.

Anxious to speak with you about your participation in this vital project,

Pastor Elton C. Stroh, Director
WELS Parish Assistance

APPENDIX 5

INVITATION TO CONGREGATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE TURNAROUND CHURCHES STUDY

Date: _____

Pastor _____

Address: _____

Dear Pastor _____,

Greetings in name of Jesus, the Savior of all!

Some preliminary sets of data from past annual WELS statistical reports have identified your congregation as one which has, by God's grace, rebounded from decline. On the basis of that initial statistical data, I am inviting you and _____ Lutheran to participate in a Turnaround Churches study. I plan to conduct research, with the help of other experienced Parish Assistance consultants, as a part of my Major Project for the faculty of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, IL), where I am pursuing a Doctor of Ministry degree. The research is designed to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord has blessed selected WELS congregations that have experienced turnaround.

This Turnaround Churches study is funded, in part, by a grant from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. Beyond benefitting from being named as a sponsoring organization, Thrivent will receive no other direct advantage from this project nor will Thrivent exercise any control over the research process or outcomes.

It is my hope and prayer that the findings of this study will help inform and better enable our WELS Parish Assistance consulting ministry to assist additional congregations with pursuing turnaround. At the same time, I hope the findings will be helpful also to more stable congregations that desire improved health for the sake of having greater spiritual impact among their members and in their communities. Potentially, the discovered factors could be presented at our ministerial training college and seminary and at regional seminars and district conferences.

If you and the leaders of _____ Lutheran agree to participate, I will be asking you, some lay leaders, and some informed members to provide input on the turnaround experienced by your church. I would plan to use the attached instruments (i.e., Pastor Input Questionnaire, Leader Input Questionnaire, and Member Survey). After that, I or one of my associates would visit your church. During this visit one of us would conduct an interview with you, a consultation with some leaders, and a session with selected members--all of which would be selected by you. The goal would be to seek helpful information from some who were present during the turnaround years.

Please be assured that any information that you, your leaders, and your members provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Your name and the names of other participants will be used only on some of our research instruments to help those conducting the research properly account for and accurately collate the gathered data. Also, please understand that participation in this research is totally voluntary and that you, your leaders, and your members will be free to withdraw at any time during the study.

I will contact you by phone within a few days to answer any questions you might have. Then, if you are willing, I'll request that you confer with your leaders to determine if you would like to have _____ Lutheran be a part of the Turnaround Churches study. If you and they agree to participate, we'll formulate a plan together to conduct the desired research at your church.

Your brother in Christ,

Pastor Elton C. Stroh

APPENDIX 6

INFORMED CONSENT ACKNOWLEDGMENT--PASTORS

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord has blessed selected WELS congregations that have experienced turnaround. This study is sponsored by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and will be conducted by Pastor Elton Stroh and his associates. Pastor Stroh is the director of WELS Parish Assistance and a Doctor of Ministry student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL.

In this research you will be asked initially to offer some written responses within a Pastor Input Questionnaire. After that, you will be asked to participate in an interview. Please be assured that any information you provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Your name will be used only on some of our research instruments to help those conducting the research properly account for and accurately collate the gathered data. Also, please understand that your participation in this research is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time during this study.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate.

Pastor's Name: _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX 7

PASTOR INPUT QUESTIONNAIRE

Church: _____ Location: _____

Name: _____ Position: _____ Date: _____

How long have you been at this church? Since _____ or for _____ years.

Has your position/role changed since you arrived? ☐ Yes ☐ No Explain: _____

Past Ministry Experience (In the final column, enter a few words that best describe your experience there.)

| Name/Location | Yrs. | Position | Words that Describe Experience |
|---------------|-------|----------|--------------------------------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Identify the personal gifts/strengths you feel you bring to your ministry. _____

List some personal *actual core values* that significantly guide your ministry. _____

List any specific goals you have for your congregation at this time. _____

The three most important leadership functions you carry out in this church are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Rate your level of enjoyment and fulfillment in this ministry.

(Very low) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (Very high)

Comment: _____

Prior to your congregation experiencing turnaround, there was a period of decline. From your perspective, what were the primary causes of decline? Please list and rank up to three of the most significant decline factors (1 is main factor). Also, it will be helpful if you add a brief comment about each.

1 (Main) Factor: _____

Comment: _____

2 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

3 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

Please list and rank up to three of the most significant factors which you believe the Lord used to bring about turnaround in your congregation. Again, it will be helpful if you add brief comments.

1 (Main) Factor: _____

Comment: _____

2 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

3 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

After the turnaround experience, the Lord enabled your congregation to sustain or increase your worship attendance. From your perspective, what are the primary factors associated with this blessing? Again, please list and rank up to three of the most significant factors (1 is main factor) and add a brief comment about each.

1 (Main) Factor: _____

Comment: _____

2 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

3 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

Other Comments:

Please return these completed sheets to _____ by _____.

APPENDIX 8

PASTOR INTERVIEW OUTLINE

Church: _____ Location: _____

Name: _____ Position: _____ Date: _____

For use by the on-site interviewer: (1) Review Pastor Input Questionnaire, (2) Ask these follow-up interview questions, and (3) take copious notes.

1. Please tell me your *church turnaround story*.
 - a. What was the situation before the turnaround? (Explore the decline factors.)
 - b. What happened during the turnaround? (Explore the turnaround factors.)
 - c. What's happening now? (Explore the factors associated with sustaining worship.)
2. Were any other factors (in addition to those already mentioned) blessed by the Lord as he brought about turnaround in your congregation?
3. What was the most significant shift in *thinking* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
4. What was the most significant shift in *function* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
5. Did any big event or experience (in addition to those already mentioned) seem to have major impact?
6. Did called worker or member roles/priorities change (in addition to those already mentioned)?
7. Did your congregation's perception of your community change?
8. Did the community's perception of your church change?
9. What other information would help me better understand your congregation's turnaround

APPENDIX 9

INITIAL INFORMED CONSENT ACKNOWLEDGMENT--LEADERS

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord has blessed selected WELS congregations that have experienced turnaround. This study is sponsored by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and will be conducted by Pastor Elton Stroh and his associates. Pastor Stroh is the director of WELS Parish Assistance and a Doctor of Ministry student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL.

In this research you will be asked initially to offer some written responses within a Leader Input Questionnaire. This Informed Consent Acknowledgement requests your consent to provide those responses. After that, you will be asked to participate in a leader consultation group session, during which other leaders from your congregation will be present. Your consent to participate in that group session will be requested separately at a later date.

Please be assured that any information you provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Your name will be used only on some of our research instruments to help those conducting the research properly account for and accurately collate the gathered data. Also, please understand that your participation in this research is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time during this study.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate.

Leader's Name: _____ Position: _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX 10

LEADER INPUT QUESTIONNAIRE

Church: _____ Location: _____

Name: _____ Position: _____ Date: _____

How long have you been at this church? Since _____ or for _____ years.

Prior to your congregation experiencing turnaround, there was a period of decline. From your perspective, what were the primary causes of decline? Please list and rank up to three of the most significant decline factors (1 is main factor). Also, it will be helpful if you add a brief comment about each.

1 (Main) Factor: _____

Comment: _____

2 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

3 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

Please list and rank up to three of the most significant factors which you believe the Lord used to bring about turnaround in your congregation. Again, it will be helpful if you add brief comments.

1 (Main) Factor: _____

Comment: _____

2 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

3 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

After the turnaround experience, the Lord enabled your congregation to sustain or increase your worship attendance. From your perspective, what are the primary factors associated with this blessing? Again, please list and rank up to three of the most significant factors (1 is main factor) and add a brief comment about each.

1 (Main) Factor: _____

Comment: _____

2 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

3 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

Other Comments:

Please return these completed sheets to _____ by _____.

APPENDIX 11

GROUP INFORMED CONSENT ACKNOWLEDGMENT--LEADERS

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord has blessed selected WELS congregations that have experienced turnaround. This study is sponsored by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and will be conducted by Pastor Elton Stroh and his associates. Pastor Stroh is the director of WELS Parish Assistance and a Doctor of Ministry student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL.

In this research you will be asked to participate in a leader consultation group session, during which some other leaders from your congregation will be present. Please be assured that any information you provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Your name will be used only on some of our research instruments to help those conducting the research properly account for and accurately collate the gathered data. Also, please understand that your participation in this research is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time during this study.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate.

Leader's Name: _____ Position: _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX 12

LEADER CONSULTATION OUTLINE--GROUP SESSION

Church: _____ Location: _____

Leaders Present: _____

For use by the on-site interviewer: (1) Review the Leader Input Questionnaires, (2) Ask these follow-up group consultation questions, and (3) take copious notes.

1. Please tell me your *church turnaround story*.
 - a. What was the situation before the turnaround? (Explore the decline factors.)
 - b. What happened during the turnaround? (Explore the turnaround factors.)
 - c. What's happening now? (Explore the factors associated with sustaining worship.)
2. Were any other factors (in addition to those already mentioned) blessed by the Lord as he brought about turnaround in your congregation?
3. What was the most significant shift in *thinking* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
4. What was the most significant shift in *function* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
5. Did any big event or experience (in addition to those already mentioned) seem to have major impact?
6. Did called worker or member roles/priorities change (in addition to those already mentioned)?
7. Did your congregation's perception of your community change?
8. Did the community's perception of your church change?
9. What other information would help me better understand your congregation's turnaround?

APPENDIX 13

INFORMED CONSENT ACKNOWLEDGMENT FOR MEMBER SURVEY

If you were a member of this congregation prior to _____ (enter year) and are now an adult (eighteen or more years old) please continue. If not, please disregard this Informed Consent Agreement and Member Survey.

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord has blessed selected WELS congregations that have experienced turnaround. This study is sponsored by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and will be conducted by Pastor Elton Stroh and his associates. Pastor Stroh is the director of WELS Parish Assistance and a Doctor of Ministry student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL.

In this research you will be asked to provide some written responses by completing the Member Survey below. Please be assured that any information you provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Your name will be used only on some of our research instruments to help those conducting the research properly account for and accurately collate the gathered data. Also, please understand that your participation in this research is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time during this study. By your completion of this Member Survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research project.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate.

Your Name: _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX 14

MEMBER SURVEY

Prior to your congregation experiencing turnaround, there was a period of decline. From your perspective, what were the primary causes of decline? Please list and rank up to three of the most significant decline factors (1 is main factor). Also, it will be helpful if you add a brief comment about each.

1 (Main) Factor: _____

Comment: _____

2 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

3 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

Please list and rank up to three of the most significant factors which you believe the Lord used to bring about turnaround in your congregation. Again, it will be helpful if you add brief comments.

1 (Main) Factor: _____

Comment: _____

2 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

3 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

After the turnaround experience, the Lord enabled your congregation to sustain or increase your worship attendance. From your perspective, what are the primary factors associated with this blessing? Again, please list and rank up to three of the most significant factors (1 is main factor) and add a brief comment about each.

1 (Main) Factor: _____

Comment: _____

2 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

3 Factor: _____

Comment: _____

Other Comments:

Thanks for sharing your thoughts!

APPENDIX 15

INFORMED CONSENT ACKNOWLEDGMENT

GROUP SESSION--MEMBERS

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord has blessed selected WELS congregations that have experienced turnaround. This study is sponsored by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and will be conducted by Pastor Elton Stroh and his associates. Pastor Stroh is the director of WELS Parish Assistance and a Doctor of Ministry student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL.

In this research you will be asked to participate in a group session. Other members from your congregation will be present. By signing this Informed Consent Acknowledgment, you are agreeing to keep confidential any information you gain by participating in this group session. Please be assured that any information you provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Your name will be used only on some of our research instruments to help those conducting the research properly account for and accurately collate the gathered data. Also, please understand that your participation in this research is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time during this study.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate.

Your Name: _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX 16

GROUP SESSION OUTLINE--MEMBERS

Church: _____ Location: _____

Members Present: _____

For use by the on-site interviewer: (1) Review the Member Surveys, (2) Ask these follow-up group session questions, and (3) take copious notes.

1. Please tell me your *church turnaround story*.
 - a. What was the situation before the turnaround? (Explore the decline factors.)
 - b. What happened during the turnaround? (Explore the turnaround factors.)
 - c. What's happening now? (Explore the factors associated with sustaining worship.)
2. Were any other factors (in addition to those already mentioned) blessed by the Lord as he brought about turnaround in your congregation?
3. What was the most significant shift in *thinking* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
4. What was the most significant shift in *function* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
5. Did any big event or experience (in addition to those already mentioned) seem to have major impact?
6. Did called worker or member roles/priorities change (in addition to those already mentioned)?
7. Did your congregation's perception of your community change?
8. Did the community's perception of your church change?
9. What other information would help me better understand your congregation's turnaround?

APPENDIX 17

INFORMED CONSENT ACKNOWLEDGMENT FOR ASSOCIATES ASSISTING WITH THE RESEARCH

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord has blessed selected WELS congregations that have experienced turnaround. This study is sponsored by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and is being conducted by Pastor Elton Stroh and his associates. Pastor Stroh is the director of WELS Parish Assistance and a Doctor of Ministry student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL.

In this stage of the research process you are being asked to participate in an orientation session to prepare you for assisting with the on-site field research. By signing this Informed Consent Acknowledgment, you are agreeing to serve as an associate, to visit your assigned congregations, to make use of the research instruments and report your findings, as instructed, and to maintain the confidentiality of the research process.

Please be assured that any information you provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Also, please understand that your participation in this research is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time during this study.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate.

Your Name: _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX 18

ORIENTATION FOR ASSOCIATES ASSISTING
WITH THE RESEARCH

(approximately a two-hour session)

1. Project description and goals
2. Timetable
3. Responsibilities of associates
4. Research instruments
5. On-site research steps
6. Gathering and reporting the data
7. Expenses and honorariums
8. Church assignments
9. Questions

APPENDIX 19

REPORT FINDINGS--ASSOCIATE RESEARCHERS

Pastor Interview Outline

Church: _____ Location: _____

Name: _____ Position: _____ Date: _____

For use by the on-site interviewer: (1) Review Pastor Input Questionnaire, (2) Ask these follow-up interview questions, and (3) take copious notes.

1. Please tell me your *church turnaround story*.
 - a. What was the situation before the turnaround? (Explore the decline factors.)
 - b. What happened during the turnaround? (Explore the turnaround factors.)
 - c. What's happening now? (Explore the factors associated with sustaining worship.)
2. Were any other factors (in addition to those already mentioned) blessed by the Lord as he brought about turnaround in your congregation?
3. What was the most significant shift in *thinking* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
4. What was the most significant shift in *function* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
5. Did any big event or experience (in addition to those already mentioned) seem to have major impact?
6. Did called worker or member roles/priorities change (in addition to those already mentioned)?
7. Did your congregation's perception of your community change?

8. Did the community's perception of your church change?
9. What other information would help me better understand your congregation's turnaround?

Church: _____ Location: _____

Leaders Present: _____

For use by the on-site interviewer: (1) Review the Leader Input Questionnaires, (2) Ask these follow-up group consultation questions, and (3) take copious notes.

1. Please tell me your *church turnaround story*.
 - a. What was the situation before the turnaround? (Explore the decline factors.)
 - b. What happened during the turnaround? (Explore the turnaround factors.)
 - c. What's happening now? (Explore the factors associated with sustaining worship.)
2. Were any other factors (in addition to those already mentioned) blessed by the Lord as he brought about turnaround in your congregation?
3. What was the most significant shift in *thinking* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
4. What was the most significant shift in *function* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
5. Did any big event or experience (in addition to those already mentioned) seem to have major impact?
6. Did called worker or member roles/priorities change (in addition to those already mentioned)?
7. Did your congregation's perception of your community change?
8. Did the community's perception of your church change?

9. What other information would help me better understand your congregation's turnaround?

Group Session Outline--Members

Church: _____ Location: _____

Members Present: _____

For use by the on-site interviewer: (1) Review the Member Surveys, (2) Ask these follow-up group session questions, and (3) take copious notes.

1. Please tell me your *church turnaround story*.
 - a. What was the situation before the turnaround? (Explore the decline factors.)
 - b. What happened during the turnaround? (Explore the turnaround factors.)
 - c. What's happening now? (Explore the factors associated with sustaining worship.)
2. Were any other factors (in addition to those already mentioned) blessed by the Lord as he brought about turnaround in your congregation?
3. What was the most significant shift in *thinking* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
4. What was the most significant shift in *function* while transitioning from decline into turnaround, and by whom?
5. Did any big event or experience (in addition to those already mentioned) seem to have major impact?
6. Did called worker or member roles/priorities change (in addition to those already mentioned)?
7. Did your congregation's perception of your community change?
8. Did the community's perception of your church change?
9. What other information would help me better understand your congregation's turnaround?

Summary of Key Findings

It appears that the primary causes of this congregation's decline were (1 is main factor):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Comments:

It appears that the primary factors used by the Lord to bring about turnaround in this congregation were (1 is main factor):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Comments:

It appears that, after the turnaround, the primary factors associated with sustaining or increasing worship attendance in this congregation were (1 is main factor):

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Comments:

While studying this congregation were there any surprises, unusual circumstances that should be noted, awe moments, or anything else you would consider significant?

What primarily was learned from this congregation that might be a blessing to other WELS churches?

APPENDIX 20

INFORMED CONSENT ACKNOWLEDGMENT

ASSESSMENT TEAM

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the most significant factors associated with the manner in which the Lord has blessed selected WELS congregations that have experienced turnaround. This study is sponsored by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and is being conducted by Pastor Elton Stroh and his associates. Pastor Stroh is the director of WELS Parish Assistance and a Doctor of Ministry student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL.

In this stage of the research you will be asked to participate in (1) a review of the research process and study findings, (2) an analysis of our current four-phase consulting process, and (3) a brainstorming session designed to envision what new services would benefit other WELS churches desiring turnaround. By signing this Informed Consent Acknowledgment, you are agreeing to maintain the confidentiality of this assessment process.

Please be assured that any information you provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Also, please understand that your participation in this research is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time during this study.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate.

Your Name: _____

Signed: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX 21

ASSESSMENT TEAM AGENDA

First Day--Four to Five Hours (followed by time to reflect)

1. Review Research Process and Findings from the Turnaround Churches Project
 - a) Explanation of Project and Current Stage
 - b) Review of Research Process and Results
 - c) Questions: Do the findings appear to be valid? What about blind spots?

Second Day--Two to Three Hours (followed by time to reflect)

2. Analysis of Our Current Four-Phase Consulting Process Based on the Findings
 - a) Phase I--Exploration
 - What should we keep?
 - What should we change?
 - b) Phase II--Analysis
 - What should we keep?
 - What should we change?
 - c) Phase III--Mission/Vision Setting
 - What should we keep?
 - What should we change?

d) Phase IV--Implementation

- What should we keep?
- What should we change?

Second Day--Two to Three Hours (followed by time to reflect)

3. Envisioning Which New Services Would Benefit Churches Desiring Turnaround

- a) Which new service(s) could PA offer, and what would this look like if it was designed well?
- b) Which new services are needed, but would have to be provided through other synodical groups, agencies, or institutions?

Second Day--One Hour

4. Suggested Next Steps

5. Wrap Up

APPENDIX 22

CATEGORIES--STUDIED CONGREGATIONS

This chart categorizes the ten studied congregations based on their size, age, and setting. Congregations were assigned a letter (A through J) to ensure anonymity.

| Size (based on average worship attendance) | | |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------|
| Under 150 | Between 150-250 | 250 or more |
| BDFG | AEHIJ | C |
| | | |
| Age (based on the date of organization) | | |
| Under 25 years | Between 25-50 years | 50 or more |
| ABE | CDFGIJ | H |
| | | |
| Setting (type of community) | | |
| Urban | Suburban | Rural |
| BEHIJ | ACFG | D |

Originally not considered but nevertheless noted, half of the twelve WELS districts had one or more of the studied congregations within their boundaries.

| | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 0 Arizona-California | 2 Northern Wisconsin |
| 0 Dakota-Montana | 0 Pacific Northwest |
| 0 Michigan | 3 South Atlantic |
| 0 Minnesota | 0 South Central |
| 2 Nebraska | 1 Southeast Wisconsin |
| 1 North Atlantic | 1 Western Wisconsin |

Also, even though this was not deemed a factor in selecting or studying these congregations, seven of the ten turnaround churches had been served by WELS Parish Assistance either just prior to or during their turnaround and, before the field research began, another was in the process of requesting assistance.

APPENDIX 23

SUMMARIES OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Church A

Prior to the turnaround, during the years of decline in worship participation, there was so little activity at the church and in the community that local residents would ask if the church was for sale. The pastor lived at a distance, spent most of his time in his home office, and worship was routine. The pastor was incredibly unorganized, set in his ways, and was quite controlling. He allowed members to do only certain things, and many people left the congregation in frustration. Those who thought the pastor should be defended had concluded that he was just tired and burned out from serving previous congregations under challenging circumstances. The pastor ended up taking only a portion of his salary for several years and then finally left the congregation and the ministry.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- Worship was the same every week with only two orders of worship, one with and one without Holy Communion. (P)
- Members were itching to get involved in ministry. (P)
- Council meetings were pretty depressing; we didn't have enough money to cover even the basic needs. (L)
- This place looked dead. No cars, no activity. The lawn tractor was parked in front of the main church door under a canopy during the week. (M)
- The previous pastor needed help but, when people tried, it had to be done his way. (M)
- The vast majority of our outreach effort was to put out mass mailings. (M)

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship participation:

1. The previous pastor was controlling and not fully engaged.
2. Member involvement in ministry was limited.

3. There was hardly any outreach by pastor or members.

During the turnaround, as worship participation was increasing, the new pastor's influence was clearly visible. People in the community started noticing things were happening. Another weekly service was added, the church property was cleaned up, a new church sign replaced the old one, and an office secretary was secured. The disorganized became organized, the new pastor put his office in the church, and fresh ideas for ministry were discussed. The congregation initiated some commonsense outreach and people were given freedom to serve in this and other areas of ministry, which increased member ownership and participation. Community growth was on the rise, so there were lots of new people to contact. Some members who previously left the congregation in frustration began to return.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- A couple of nights each week I'm in people's homes. (P)
- Thinking in new ways and being smarter in how we invested our time really made a difference. (P)
- Our [new] pastor deserves a lot of credit for our turnaround. (L)
- We tried a number of different strategies for reaching people. (L)
- There was a new compelling vision, outreach to young families, and an early childhood ministry was started. (L)
- There was a whole new level of energy in our pastor's sermons. (L)
- The new pastor had a different mindset. We focused on ministry and people. (M)
- Our new pastor was key; he got us motivated. He marshaled the resources, including the people, to get things done. He helped us raise our sights and be optimistic about our potential. (M)
- He would get the ball rolling [with some activity or ministry] and then step back and give us freedom to function. (M)
- We are reaching totally unchurched people. (M)

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship participation:

1. A new pastor helped to usher in a new enthusiasm for ministry.
2. A new and positive attitude permeated the congregation. There was joy.

3. A signature ministry (to young children and their parents) developed.

Following the turnaround, as the congregation sustained or increased worship participation, members took charge of ministry programs so that the pastor's presence was not always required. This allowed him to focus on outreach and building relationships with new people. The new preschool ministry became member-driven and plans were developed to expand this ministry and the church facility. Staffing was increased and the congregation reached out and made useful connections with outside synodical entities, which provided both additional financial resources and volunteer assistance.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- We went to a team concept. Every person who joins the church is placed on one of four service teams and we rotate captains. (P)
- We have not been afraid to ask for help and have others evaluate us. (P)
- All the little things we did added up and made a big difference. (P)
- The pastor's leadership was huge. He was the driving force behind the creativity of our efforts. (L)
- We have much more freedom, and we're not afraid to try new things. (L)
- We have a new *can-do* attitude. It will happen if the Lord blesses it. (L)
- We went from being centralized to decentralized in doing ministry. (L)
- We have seen more and more opportunities to reach people. (L)
- We are now really big on making the facility and property available to our community. (M)
- Members now feel like part of a bigger cause--the mission of God. (M)

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship participation:

1. Outreach remained an emphasis.
2. A culture of permission giving and empowerment was established.
3. The pastor and leaders provided quality worship experiences that engaged both members and guests.

Comments by the researcher:

- The mindset and style of leadership of the previous pastor seemed to demotivate members and essentially block God's blessings.
- It appears God primarily used the new pastor, and then the many positive outcomes of his ministry, to revitalize this congregation. Through the new pastor, the Lord breathed new life into this church, helped them to see a

field ripe for harvest, and positioned them to proclaim sin and grace to many more people.

Church B

Prior to the turnaround, during the years of decline in worship participation, the congregation experienced pastor turnover and uncertainty, had visiting pastors who served other churches in different communities, and offered only midweek worship for an extended period of time. This church used a variety of rented facilities for a number of years, so there was no permanent presence in the community. There was a lack of mature members. The congregation was first attempting to function and then simply trying to survive without pastoral leadership, consistent biblical instruction, or a mission focus.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- No pastor was on site for a couple of years. Nothing was structured; everything was unknown. (P)
- The congregation didn't know its identity and members were weak. (P)
- The core group was used to being served, not serving others. (L)
- There were occasional visitors, but they would usually not return because we were so unorganized. (L)
- We had little direction and the future seemed very uncertain to us. (M)
- We lacked leadership, a building, an outreach focus, and funds. (M)

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship participation:

1. Pastor turnover and a lengthy vacancy caused instability.
2. Temporary facilities and relocating caused confusion and uncertainty.
3. The previous pastor provided little leadership and direction.

During the turnaround, as worship participation was increasing, a new full-time, energetic pastor was in place. He helped the congregation become organized and focused on outreach. He and his family were out in the community and became socially connected with their neighbors. Soon land was purchased and a new facility was

constructed. The congregation requested consulting assistance, and the primary outcome was starting a preschool which helped the congregation become known and valued in the rapidly growing community. Members began to own ministry and speak positively about their congregation, especially their pastor and preschool, which attracted more people.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- I read books about ministry that shaped my thinking and talked with other pastors in the community. (P)
- We became more focused, especially with outreach, and began to find our identity. Everything we did was outreach-minded and focused. We tried just about anything we could think of to reach new people. (P)
- There is no escaping that the physical building attracted many unchurched people. (P)
- We became more legitimate with our new resident pastor and building. (L)
- Our pastor was emphatic early on that reaching the lost was everyone's role. (L)
- The preschool was the biggest member producer. (L)
- Switching to Sunday worship was big and, when there was a sense that the church was here to stay, people started coming and sticking. (M)
- The Lord really provided the means, including people, to enable us to build and grow. We received blessings that we didn't even pray for. (M)

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship participation:

1. A new pastor arrived who lived and served in the community.
2. An outreach focus was developed.
3. A new facility was built and a preschool ministry was launched in it.

Following the turnaround, as the congregation sustained or increased worship participation, the established preschool remained the dominant ministry of the congregation and continued to draw new families. Members of the congregation, through worship and Bible study, matured in their faith and became more active. The well-connected and personable pastor continued to grow relationships both in the congregation and community.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- Many of the unchurched who were attracted by the preschool became active members. (P)

- We became a known quantity in our community, a *neighborhood church*. (P)
- With the continued growth, we are in the process of increasing staff. (L)
- Outside consulting assistance and regular ministry planning have been very helpful. (L)
- Visitors have commented that loving and caring members were influential in their decision to return and join our church. (M)
- Our pastor's priorities never changed. Find property, build a church, and keep it going and growing through outreach. (M)
- Our pastor will do anything; he has a servant's heart. His wife is a blessing too. (M)

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship participation:

1. The preschool continued to attract and help connect new people.
2. The pastor continued to model and the members increasingly acquired an outreach mindset.
3. Members became more involved and owned ministry.

Comments by the researcher:

- Initial and then more outreach efforts and member involvement followed a shift in thinking about the congregation's mission.
- The new building and preschool ministry sent the message to the community that this church was there to stay and these continued to be leveraged as outreach tools.
- The pastor and his wife and many members developed strong connections within the community, and the church earned a positive reputation for being loving and serving others. Regular planning sessions have kept the congregation focused on its make-disciples mission and active in pursuing this mission.

Church C

Prior to the turnaround, during the years of decline in worship participation, this congregation was primarily focused on providing a church home for transplanted Midwestern confessional Lutherans. That narrow mission limited outreach and created an inward focus, but it also compelled this church to start several new regional congregations to reach more WELS transplants. Each new church plant spun off members, which caused at

least temporary decline. Additionally, the neighborhood changed as more Asian immigrants and then Hispanics, with lower household income, moved in. The previous long-tenured pastor established a firm biblical foundation for this congregation, but synodical responsibilities took him away from the congregation often.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- Ours was the first WELS church in the area so we became an outpost for WELS people in this region. (P)
- Starting more WELS congregations in new areas was the priority. (P)
- We were focused on ministering to our own congregants and were not open to change, even though it was not doctrinal but mainly tradition. (L)
- Tradition and fear held us back. We were inward focused and had no passion for local outreach. (L)
- We were more a club that others were welcome to join, provided they changed to our ways and fit in with us. (L)
- We spun off five daughter/sister congregations and had declines for a year or so after each. (L)
- We lost key leaders when we started new churches, and they became pillars in the new congregations. (M)
- Leaders with a true mission mindset were needed who were less concerned about control and tradition and more concerned about reaching people for Christ. (M)
- There was a lack of variety and a sense that our church was a Midwestern outpost and not necessarily a church for our community. (M)

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship participation:

1. This church launched several new WELS mission congregations.
2. The congregation possessed an inwardly focused mentality coupled with an unspoken mission to serve WELS transfers and preserve a conservative Lutheran culture in the wider geographic area.
3. The community changed significantly, with great ethnic diversity, and this was not initially viewed as a mission opportunity.

During the turnaround, as worship participation was increasing, a new mindset had taken hold. A mission/vision statement and strategic plan with an outreach focus was developed. A new pastor arrived who modeled and patiently led the emphasis on outreach to the community. His capacity to lead grew as he studied issues and enrolled in a Doctor of

Ministry program to expand his understanding of outreach and ministry. An unofficial group of former leaders served as a sounding board for the pastor and the voice of wisdom. A facility renovation and expansion was driven largely by an outreach mindset. After more than two years of study, two huge decisions helped to shape the culture of this church. One decision was to launch aggressive Hispanic outreach and call a pastor to lead this effort. The other was to begin blended/contemporary worship. The call to a staff minister enabled expanded worship and ministry to youth and young adults.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- We spun off members several times and started new churches. Then we asked, now what? (P)
- We put trust in our elected leaders and sought their direction. (P)
- We discovered that the contemporary or blended service attracts most newcomers, so we adjusted. (P)
- Community events sponsored by the church put us on the map. (P)
- It was time for new pastoral leadership without the loss of the experience and knowledge of our first pastor. (L)
- There was a strong effort to educate, motivate, and change through a slow step-by-step process. (L)
- Inspired by pastoral leadership, lay leaders stepped forward and were willing to break the mold for the sake of reaching more people. (L)
- Leadership demonstrated concern for people and focused on the positives rather than the negatives. (M)
- It took time and patience to implement new ideas without offending members who preferred the status quo. (M)
- Having a very dedicated staff of called workers made a big difference. (M)
- There was an increased willingness to reach out to the community, especially the young and those with cultural and religious backgrounds different from our own. (M)

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship participation:

1. The leaders developed a mission/vision and strategic planning document after both self-study and community analysis.
2. The senior pastor provided strong leadership by listening patiently, pursuing continuing education, empowering lay people, and emphasizing community outreach repeatedly.

3. The congregation made a watershed decision to call a pastor for Hispanic outreach and to begin contemporary/blended worship after two-plus years of study.

Following the turnaround, as the congregation sustained or increased worship participation, opportunities for worship were added and other ministries were started or expanded that involved more members and reached new people. Involvement in the Hispanic community kept expanding the network of prospects. A growing summer camp for children and small group Bible study for young adults attracted and held people. Regular mailings to the community each year promoted events, and one of the pastors was involved at a local high school.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- Thinking about the community leads to getting involved in the community. We bring people along. (P)
- We worked on developing a friendly, open environment. (P)
- The strength of our congregation is the willingness to never back off of the law and gospel, maintain our doctrinal strength, and accept change to man-made practices. (L)
- Our pastor gently and persistently pushes toward the goal. That's why we have Hispanic outreach. He respects lay leaders--men and women--and counts on them to take the reins and run with the program. (L)
- Leaders were not afraid to ask for help and show appreciation. (M)
- Offering a variety of worship options reaches many more people. (M)
- There are more opportunities for worship, fellowship, and service now and a larger pool of talent both to serve and to lead. (M)
- Very ambitious budgets were adopted and funded to upgrade and expand the physical plant and the staff of called workers. (M)
- The blessing of continued growth results from a combination of advantages unique to our congregation's location as well as a lot of hard work, planning, and risk taking. (M)

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship participation:

1. Staff was added to lead key areas of ministry.
2. The congregation sustained a community focus (Hispanic outreach, community service and involvement, ministry programs designed with sensitivity to non-members--from the school to worship).

3. *Both/and* options--from four services on Sunday, each a bit different and targeted at diverse audiences, to two Sunday School sessions each week--symbolic of a realization that the church serves a very diverse audience and that *serving* is what the church does.

Comments by the researcher:

- The honest self-assessment of long-time members and leaders was refreshing. The pastors and other leaders made a point of the patient and persistent leadership required to make major change. Bible study, community study, and insights from outside the church were elements contributing to the change. Sensitive and caring pastoral care earned the right to lead major change.
- It was significant to hear the same themes from pastors, leaders, and members. And the dominant theme was community outreach, from a shift in the way people think about ministry to creative efforts to engage the community. Selflessness was an underlying attitude that explains the enthusiastic and committed character of this church. Members learned to think from the perspective of others and sacrifice preferences in order to reach others.
- This church exemplified (1) the importance of a clear sense of mission and a clear vision for the future, (2) community awareness and the kind of planning that connects ministry to the community, and (3) strong but sensitive pastoral leadership.

Church D

Prior to the turnaround, during the years of decline in worship participation, there was a rapid turnover of pastors. One of the previous pastors did everything himself and another pastor had serious family problems and ultimately resigned from the ministry. These and other trying situations (e.g., a long pastoral vacancy) caused conflict and divided people. The congregation became lethargic and was demoralized.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- When a previous pastor would not allow members to serve, they became lax and had no role in ministry. (P)
- Members developed the attitude, *We're too small; we can't do anything.* (P)
- The congregation was apathetic, divided, and without Bible study. (L)

- There was serious conflict with people taking sides. People started to drop out and quit giving, causing serious financial problems. (L)
- There was no looking to the future, no plan for growth. (L)
- Our previous pastor had issues. Families were leaving and he just did not have time to care about it. Attendance and offerings fell sharply. (M)
- We were a bunch of individuals going our own separate and often different ways. (M)
- There were no common goals. Cliques developed. (M)

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship participation:

1. Previous pastors caused conflict and division within the congregation.
2. A long pastoral vacancy deflated the members' spirit and resulted in widespread inactivity.
3. Apathy set in and a survival mentality developed. There was an inward focus and very little outreach occurred.

During the turnaround, as worship participation was increasing, there was a new pastor at the helm. Positive visits to members' homes enabled him to make an immediate positive impression and begin to lay a foundation for constructive change. Some lay leaders stepped up and demonstrated commitment to ministry. The pastor and his leaders sought outside assistance with creating an outreach mindset, funding special projects, and other activities. Members became optimistic about their congregation's future and were willing to help make a difference both in their congregation and community. A change in expectations and reorganization led to the involvement of many more members.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- Starting a preschool gave the congregation a *can-do* optimism. (P)
- We increased Bible study opportunities and got involved in our community, offering the use of our church facility to others. (P)
- The three *d's*--doctrine, demeanor, determination--became our motto. Malcontents left the congregation. (P)
- The coming of a new, hardworking pastor was what we needed and the blessing we received. Our pastor shows a personal interest in anyone who shows up. He has a heart for lost souls. (L)
- We began to see the members of our community as people we ought to be concerned about. (L)

- Pastor always emphasizes that it is God at work through us. (L)
- When we let go of our apathy and got back to God's Word things started to turn around. We got into the Word and grew in our faith. (M)
- The emphasis on Bible study, both personal and in offering many Bible classes, is what really made all the difference. (M)
- Pastor taught our congregation to be outgoing. We set goals and developed a mission statement. (M)
- We went from *How do we keep the doors open?* to *Where are the opportunities?* We started to see prospects all over our community. (M)
- Members got involved and then involved others. Seeing the results made everything worthwhile. (M)

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship participation:

1. A young, upbeat, mission-focused pastor arrived. He was a good preacher and teacher, relational, spiritually mature, and an organizational leader.
2. An outreach focus developed, aided by seeking outside input and assistance. Eyes were opened; hearts were changed; action followed.
3. The addition of staff allowed for worship variety, more Bible study, and other ministry efforts to begin or expand.
4. Their church facility was rebuilt, which received lots of community attention and attracted new people.

Following the turnaround, as the congregation sustained or increased worship participation, member involvement in Bible study and ministry roles also grew. Besides providing more group Bible study, instructions leading to membership were provided regularly and individually as needed. Outreach training for members and relationship building in the community continued. Called or lay workers made monthly contacts with all members.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- We follow up on visitors and new people to the community quickly and persistently. (P)
- Members are taking active ownership of the ministry. (P)
- We continue to expand under our pastor's strong, spiritual leadership. He is a hard worker. (L)
- Every month someone gets in touch with every member. (L)
- We have become really friendly to new people. We stop talking to friends to talk to our visitors, which is modeled by our pastor. (L)

- We learned that not everything we try will work and to be okay with failures. (L)
- Our new facility continues to draw people and all visitors are greeted warmly. Our ushers and greeters are thoroughly trained each year and our members are constantly reminded to be mindful of those around them. (M)
- People never used to stand around and talk after worship. Now they stand around and talk for a long time. (M)
- We are encouraged and encourage each other to bring people we know to worship and Bible study. (M)

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship participation:

1. Following up on and serving the unchurched remained a priority.
2. The congregation was committed to continuing involvement in the community on multiple levels.
3. The pastor and lay leaders provide quality worship and Bible study (in their new facility) that attract and hold both members and visitors, and they contact all members monthly.

Comments by the researcher:

- This congregation was blessed with the involvement and support of many outside people and groups, which had a strong positive effect on the congregation and the community. Other congregations desiring turnaround and striving to advance God's kingdom could benefit from similar outside assistance.
- Pastoral leadership--leadership that was spiritually driven (growing people spiritually through the Word), mission-focused, people-centered, energetic, determined, and that engaged members in all levels of ministry--was clearly a factor related to this congregation's turnaround.

Church E

Prior to the turnaround, during the years of decline in worship participation, the previous pastor had worn out his welcome with half-hearted work. He lived at a distance and was unavailable to members. Members left, including leaders, and questions about even continuing this ministry were raised. In desperation, they reached out and church consultants helped the congregation see the need to remove the pastor and began a change in thinking about ministry. A synod official confirmed for the congregation that their pastor had to go.

The founding pastor was a charismatic preacher who brought in the unchurched. He was, however, an autonomous and tireless worker who created a culture of *pastor-dependency*.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- When I accepted the call to this church, I was told the congregation had maybe four months to live financially. (P)
- The congregation had declined dramatically and [besides worship] had only two programs: ladies aid and Sunday school [for children]. (P)
- Our previous pastor preached out of a spiral notebook of old sermons and wasn't seen until the next Sunday. He admitted to *working* only about twenty hours a week. (L)
- He had no ambition to grow the church, no heart for outreach, and he did not know how to keep the church together. (L)
- Members were not trained to lead or do anything. (L)
- Some people leaving caused others to leave. People left rather than believe they could change things. (L)
- It was a difficult but necessary decision to remove our previous pastor. (L)
- It was just a job to our previous pastor. There was no fire. (M)
- Many felt we had an incompetent pastor who was lazy and unmotivated and cared only about himself. (M)
- With so many members unhappy, contributions went down and many believed we could not make it as a congregation. (M)
- Because of our internal conflict, mostly centered on the previous pastor, we became isolated from our community. (M)

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship participation:

1. The previous [second] pastor's insensitivity to people and their needs, lacking work ethic, and poor preaching produced negative results.
2. The founding [first] pastor's style of doing everything himself--even though he was a charismatic preacher and outstanding evangelist--left members as spectators and failed to develop lay ownership and leadership.
3. The synod's failure to alert the congregation to the second pastor's previous issues and problems, coupled with a failure to intervene when the congregation all but collapsed, produced and prolonged pain and conflict.

During the turnaround, as worship participation was increasing, the new pastor was carrying out ministry influenced by his reading of Henry Blackaby's *What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches*, especially Blackaby's experience with a dying church. This

pastor prayed fervently both for his members and open doors, which immediately started to appear. Over time new ministries were launched and grew, at which point the pastor strategically handed them off to equipped members who had a passion to serve in those areas.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- We got rid of as many meetings as possible to free the calendar for [hands-on] people ministry. (P)
- I prayed, we prayed, fervently and often. God responded. (P)
- Receiving consulting assistance was a big help. (L)
- Calling [our current pastor] was the key to our turnaround. He learns and grows. He has great leadership ability and administrative skills. (L)
- Pastor finds where people can get involved, starts small, and makes all of us recruiters. And he is so low key about it. (L)
- We adopted an attitude of servanthood toward our community. The invisible people in the community became real to us. (L)
- We went from top-down to bottom-up, from the pastor does everything to the pastor leads and delegates, from a narrow to a broad view of ministry methods, from an institution-orientation to a people-orientation, from fear and concern to looking for opportunities, from being to doing, and from *What do we want?* to *What does God want us to do?* What hasn't shifted is our commitment to biblical teaching. (L)
- Pastor had a general plan in mind, but he was adaptable, and the journey unfolded. His vision became a snowball going downhill. (M)
- Pastor's emphasis on evangelism shaped our church. He helped people feel comfortable talking to others; we want to invite friends to church. (M)
- Pastor prays for the whole congregation every week and lets people know with phone calls that they are prayed for. He has the passion of a pastor; he taught us to pray. (M)
- He knows his strengths and weaknesses, and he looked for strengths in members. He isn't afraid to ask people to get involved. (M)
- Our pastor taught us to put others before ourselves. (M)

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship participation:

1. The new pastor's leadership, personality, gifts, and style of ministry created enthusiastic lay ownership and involvement in ministry.
2. Prayer and the expectation of open doors capitalized on opportunities to serve and share Jesus.
3. Community involvement, from the Chamber of Commerce to serving identified groups of hurting and neglected people, expanded outreach and service within the community.

Following the turnaround, as the congregation sustained or increased worship participation, the most significant factor in sustaining growth appeared to be adding part-time paid staff with a single ministry area focus. These ministry leaders then took on greater roles and compensation as they demonstrated ability. The pastor led the congregation to prioritize adding staff ahead of adding space, even though the congregation's facility was somewhat limiting. He was concerned about pushing beyond what they could afford and letting debt distract from or stifle ministry. At the same time, the pastor purposefully positioned people (who worshipped regularly) into service roles as he used a *come-and-see* invitation to get some hands-on experience in the area of ministry for which he was recruiting them. He also did away with voting and employed a consensus-building approach to making decisions. This fostered better judgments and broader ownership.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- People now see [our congregation] as a community asset. (P)
- My initial question for recruiting members for ministry was: Do you see yourself on the paper-work or people-work side of life? (P)
- Retaining the style of worship that connects with multiple senses and the ongoing ministries carried forward the Gospel-outreach momentum that had been developed. (L)
- We have an outreach emphasis on meeting people's needs. (L)
- Our pastor built trust among us, taught us how to study Scripture, helped us see ourselves as a *family*, and increased our ownership of ministry. (L)
- We believe in the power of prayer. (M)
- A spirit of *try things* has developed. (M)
- We've gone from *pastor's church* to *our church*. (M)
- We now ask, *What can we do for the community?* instead of *What do we want for ourselves?* (M)

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship participation:

1. Adding part-time staff helped them to focus on specific areas of ministry and increase lay leadership and member involvement.
2. A consensus style of decision-making involved and empowered people.

3. A worship style that *fit* the congregation and was welcoming to guests attracted and held worshippers.

Comments by the researcher:

- It is interesting that a gifted, loved, and successful pastor can create the soil in which a really poor pastor can sow the seeds of ministry collapse.
- The influence of Henry Blackaby's experience and book on the new pastor, particularly the focus on prayer, was significant.
- Focusing outreach on neglected people in the community created relationships and opportunities for still more ministry.
- The current pastor's philosophy of ministry is now deeply embedded in the members.
- This turnaround pastor led members with several principles: (1) God's people pray for open doors fervently and regularly, then expect and look for them, (2) a *people-read-the-Bible* model of discipleship, with a drum-beat of resources and encouragement to personal Bible reading, (3) blended worship, somewhat informal, with services written for each week, (4) delegation, asking members personally to serve in areas for which they have gifts and interests, providing resources, and allowing people to own and assume greater stakes in an area of ministry, and (5) an outreach philosophy that gets involved in the community, focuses on neglected people, and anticipates people who are helped will bring others. The mission statement tagline of this family of believers was *Where God Helps People*.

Church F

Prior to the turnaround, during the years of decline in worship participation, the previous gifted and hardworking pastor had accepted a call to another congregation and there was a long vacancy worsened by a loss of key families. The congregation was in an inadequate facility within a poor location and decided to relocate. During the transition they rented a facility in which to conduct services. This seemed to make their future more uncertain. They were overly dependent on their church body for financial support, which didn't encourage ownership of ministry among members. As their numbers decreased, rumors started that the congregation would likely fold.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- *The synod will support us* was the attitude, so most members didn't own the ministry. (P)
- The congregation was concerned about surviving, especially while they didn't have a pastor for such a long time. (P)
- We had no focus on outreach, a poor location and facility, and an uncertain future. (L)
- Our primary focus seemed to be preserving our fortress instead of going with the gospel. (L)
- When we were in a rented facility people seemed to feel we were not permanent, and it made it hard to offer programs for us or others. (L)
- Someone once asked, *Is this the roaming church?* Some of us became impatient for a new building. (M)
- When we don't have a good location and quality facilities, we put obstacles in people's way. (M)
- The original building, an unattractive and small facility, was in an old established area that was heavily churchd. (M)
- People shunned us because we lacked direction and had so little confidence regarding our future. (M)

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship participation:

1. The congregation had an undesirable facility in a poor location.
2. There was little focus on outreach.
3. They were barely surviving and appeared to have an uncertain future with an aging membership and absence of member ministry.

During the turnaround, as worship participation was increasing, the vacancy had ended, and the congregation went from wondering if they could keep the doors open to believing they could make things happen with God's help. The congregation relocated and constructed a permanent facility. This attracted attention in the community. Visitors started showing up, travel canvas-witness teams were brought in annually, and members became much more enthusiastic about and active in reaching out. A *serve-the-community* mindset developed, and leaders scheduled events that interested and benefitted their neighbors.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- Members became more confident that this could work. (P)

- Time and effort were invested strategically and concentrated in certain areas, and we became more and more excited as we began to see God blessing our efforts. (P)
- Flexibility is big for us. We ask what works best, what can we try? (P)
- People now say that they admire our church for what we do for our community. (P)
- After relocating to a new property and constructing a new facility, by God's grace and our pastor's leadership, we acquired an inspiring vision and zeal. We began to see ourselves as a community church. (L)
- Our new pastor had a passion for outreach and channeled his energies into *equipping the saints* to reach more people. (L)
- The pastor's wife has been a positive influence in the congregation as well. She also is a blessing from the Lord. (L)
- New leadership emerged, new programs were started, and we became known in our community. (L)
- Some of the ministry ideas members had were terrific. (L)
- It was the combination of location, facility, and staffing--the synergy was really blessed. (M)
- We needed to remember that it is not our church; it is Jesus' church. (M)
- With new and positive leadership came new members who were eager to serve. (M)

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship participation:

1. The congregation's commitment to outreach grew dramatically.
2. They purchased land and relocated to an area with more unchurched people.
3. They built a new church facility that appealed to visitors and enabled ministries to start and expand.

Following the turnaround, as the congregation sustained or increased worship participation, a second pastor was called. Members claimed this made a world of difference. The congregation reorganized in an effort to divide areas of ministry, multiply leaders, and involve more members. Every area of ministry had its own mission statement tied to the congregation's mission statement. Additional ministry programs were started both for members and others. This provided many more opportunities for members to serve. With an

emphasis on involving all lay leaders in corporate Bible study, leaders grew spiritually and numerically.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- We continue to emphasize that each member is a part of the body and is important. (P)
- Our lay leaders do ministry, but they also multiply ministry by getting others involved. (P)
- Our unity in the gospel, our spirit for outreach, and our fellowship are strong and growing. Being a *family in Christ* is very much the heart and soul of this congregation. Knowing each other on a personal, intimate basis is intentional. We are involved in each other's' lives. (P)
- Outreach is everyone's job and is central to everything we do. (L)
- We engaged in strategic planning and developed more programs. (L)
- We continue to have excellent, dynamic pastoral leadership and his longer tenure here is becoming an even greater blessing. (L)
- We are now blessed with men and women who are equipped and willing to serve. (L)
- New members are inspiring people with new ideas. Their optimistic outlook is great. (L)
- Our members continue to be excited about their church and mission. (M)
- Our second pastor was really needed and is making a big difference. (M)
- As our church adds members and programs, we are becoming even more attractive to people, and we are reaching more for Christ. (M)

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship participation:

1. As people grew in faith and numbers, leadership and member ministry expanded.
2. The outreach emphasis continued, fueled in part by new members.
3. A second pastor was added to staff.

Comments by the researcher:

- Attitude matters. Fearing or anticipating closure stifled optimism, drained energy, and kept people from doing the very things that the Lord seems inclined to bless.
- When God brings an agent of change into the mix, often a new pastor, a positive and radical transformation can occur that resets the course of the church.
- An optimistic and mission-focused pastor promotes widespread hopefulness and attention to what matters most. If he brings more people into contact with God's Word more often, the Spirit powerfully impacts more hearts, minds, and lives.

- The physical setting for ministry (property and facilities) can easily become an asset or a liability for a congregation.
- The absence or presence of well-designed ministry programs will influence people's response to invitations.

Church G

Prior to the turnaround, during the years of decline in worship participation, this congregation was deteriorating as a consequence of a number of negative factors. Initially the core group was formed around disgruntled people from another Lutheran church body, and some with strong personalities tended to be divisive. Some even threatened lawsuits if things did not go their way. One member actually did sue, all the way to the state supreme court. He lost. There had been a lot of pastoral turnover and a few unskilled pastors were among them. The community had suffered a major downturn in employment, and many people left in search of jobs. Strategically speaking, this church had a bad facility and was poorly located--invisible to the community in a fully developed neighborhood and surrounded by five mega-churches within a five-mile radius. Probably frustrated and feeling defeated by all of these issues, there was little effort to reach out with the gospel.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- Any suggestion of change was threatened and viewed negatively. This church had conflict and at times looked like a battleship. (P)
- This was a club house for WELS people with a fortress mentality. (P)
- The congregation was maintenance-minded and quickly reaching the point of no survival. (P)
- No one knew where we were located. The church design was dark, and there was no space to visit after worship. Still, most members were content with their little church. (L)
- We had no programs, no outreach, no fellowship activities, nothing for children except our tiny Sunday school. (L)
- One previous pastor shot down what people wanted to do. (L)

- A strong, high-powered individual was very resistant to any change and basically shouted down everyone else. (L)
- We saw we were going to fold and close if we kept on the way we were, and to make matters worse, the community was in decline. (L)
- I think there were doctrinal issues with several members that were probably not adequately addressed by a previous pastor or pastors. (M)
- The competition among churches was intense in our area. You can't grow if you don't have people or programs that draw others. (M)

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship participation:

1. Fearful, negative, and influential members (some from another church body) were combined with a number of unskilled pastors.
2. They were situated with a bad location and facility--out of the way and invisible even if you drove by.
3. Folks had a *fortress* [a word almost everyone used] mentality, and outreach efforts were pretty much nonexistent.

During the turnaround, as worship participation was increasing, a new enthusiastic and outreach-minded pastor helped the congregation see the need to sell their ministry-inhibiting property and facility. They set up in a rented facility across the heavily-traveled street from the new property they purchased. The turnaround pastor convinced his members that they should not build a new facility for a few years but, instead, focus on people first. They sought outside assistance to help them organize for action, establish an outreach priority, and complete long-range ministry planning. Within a few years they went from being a regional church (under the influence of some controlling, diehard Lutherans) to a church where most members were from unchurched households in the same zip code.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- What we did, we did excellently. We got the right people into the right places. (P)
- It was not going to be business as usual; we were going to do outreach. (P)
- I went from being a pastor who preached on Sundays to conducting membership (Bible information) classes every night of the week. (P)

- Noticeable membership growth came while we were worshipping in the rented facility across the street from our new property. (P)
- The individual who negatively dominated our church was dealt with, and the environment began to change immediately. We started to grow. (L)
- Members began to focus on the Word and our job to spread it. We looked at the Lord's mission, and we knew we had to do something. (L)
- Our new pastor became well connected in the community. He had energy and drive. He was evangelism based. (L)
- We began to think about others and became future focused. We moved to a high growth area and actively canvassed our new neighborhood. (L)
- Before [our move] we considered ourselves outsiders in a foreign place. Now we saw ourselves as a part of our community, and we saw our community as an opportunity for ministry. (L)
- We got a new pastor with fire in his belly. He had a better vision for the future and a plan to get us there. (M)
- Selling the old building and moving into temporary quarters opened the door to doing new things that we just could not do before. (M)
- Putting up the future-site-of sign gave us something to point to as we reached out to people in our new area. (M)
- The biggest change was in attitude from a fortress mindset (if people want to find us we are here) to telling people what our message is. (M)

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship participation:

1. The coming of a new pastor with a passion for the lost helped this congregation bust free from its imprisoned past.
2. The removal of a key, dominating, intimidating, anti-change individual made going forward possible.
3. Relocating to a new area where development was just beginning provided an opportunity for a new start.
4. The use of outside resources to activate and involve members in outreach and securing additional ministry assistance by adding to staff were positive steps forward.

Following the turnaround, as the congregation sustained or increased worship participation, the congregation built a new facility on their vacant property and launched a preschool ministry. Bible study participation increased dramatically along with other ministry efforts. For a number of years the congregation rode joyfully on the wave of their recent growth in ministry programming and membership. The preschool program,

especially, was thriving. Just as we were conducting our study of this congregation, the turnaround pastor accepted a call to another congregation, membership numbers began to plateau, and worship participation began to drop.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- Our preschool is filled to capacity. We have to turn people away. (P)
- We opened and continue to open our facility to the community. (P)
- We're beginning to lose our mission focus, and we never established a solid inreach [grow and nurture our members] effort. (L)
- We are starting to have an inward focus just like before when we were declining. (L)
- Our preschool program is still a vibrant outreach tool. (M)
- Our preschool continues to draw many children and their parents, but it is sad that our congregation really doesn't own this ministry. (L)
- Our newer church facility continues to draw visitors, and we continue to put our name out into the area and promote our preschool. (M)

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship participation:

1. Under the leadership of the turnaround pastor, worship participation and their outreach focus were sustained, but now these seem to have peaked. They admit they have lost their outreach focus and are falling back primarily into a maintenance mode.
2. The new facility and newer members from the community provide some stability.
3. The preschool continues to attract new families.

Comments by the researcher:

- As the study of this congregation was being conducted, the turnaround pastor had just left to serve another church and a new pastor, with a very different personality, was just settling in. In the short time that he was there, the congregation was already experiencing a drop in membership and worship participation. Outreach zeal and effort were also waning, and angst was on the rise. The present pastor (who followed the turnaround pastor) does not appear to have the passion for outreach that the previous turnaround pastor had, but he is still concerned about sharing the gospel with people in the community. The new pastor commented, *There are only a few key people who want to do things, and we have set up an Elder committee to tend to internal needs.*
- It is interesting to note that significant growth in the congregation came while they were worshiping in rented quarters and really focusing on reaching the disconnected in their new community. The new building was

a blessing for a number of reasons, but members may have depended on it too much to do outreach for them.

- Some of the older members who did continue on to the new location have again been asserting themselves and, unfortunately, the former outreach-suppressing attitudes are beginning to creep back into prominence.

Church H

Prior to the turnaround, during the years of decline in worship participation, this congregation found itself in a landlocked location with almost no parking, had poor visibility, was surrounded by other congregations (including other WELS churches), and felt inadequate because it had no Lutheran elementary school. The membership was aging as fewer people were attracted to this flagging church, and younger folks left to connect with more vibrant congregations in the area. Membership and worship participation declined even more quickly when a valued musician and talented organist left. Consulting assistance was sought, but the pastor put the analysis and recommendations on a shelf and there was little change.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- The people here didn't feel complete without an elementary school. (P)
- For over a decade the congregation was stuck trying to decide what to do--whether to move to a better location or not. (P)
- Pride and selfishness and inability to make decisions to advance gospel ministry, probably because they were weak in the study of God's Word, held this church back. (P)
- People looking for the church couldn't even find it. (L)
- Young families looking for a church naturally gravitated toward congregations with schools. (L)
- With few young families and losing members, including by death, we were declining. (L)
- We were located in a residential area on a side street with low visibility and no off-street parking. (M)

- The previous pastor was here for a very long time and did almost everything himself. He was faithful but lacked an outgoing personality needed to make people feel at ease, especially the unchurched. (M)
- We were an older congregation with a pastor that wasn't very *warm* and didn't want to rock the boat and members that didn't want to change. (M)
- We were a divided congregation with some wanting to move and others wanting to stay. (M)

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship participation:

1. The location of the church was a major ministry obstacle.
2. The previous pastor was not a strong leader and didn't involve members in ministry.
3. There was little to attract and keep young families so the declining membership was aging.

During the turnaround, as worship participation was increasing, the congregation finally made the protracted decision to relocate. Some people left at that point, but the decision brought peace and hope to those that remained. They felt far more positive about their future, and their optimism became an attraction to others. The idea that this congregation could embrace change was a turning point, and with the arrival of a new pastor, this concept was reinforced and caught by the membership. Members were engaged in discussing their congregation's future. Bible study and equipping members for ministry received emphasis. A midweek service was added. A decision to build a new facility was made. Funds were gathered, and the facility was constructed. The preschool and other ministries were enhanced. You could sense it. You could see it. The congregation was turning around.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- The consultant's report [shelved by the previous pastor] was dusted off and put to use. The attitude developed, *let's just do it*. Parish Assistance is a hero around here. (P)
- The gospel must predominate! Gospel ministry reaches people where they are, so gospel ministry is messy. (P)

- Members now definitely better understand the need for the gospel in the community. (P)
- Word of mouth gave the congregation a good reputation. (P)
- Practical instructions for how to be friendly were provided, and we became known for our friendliness. (L)
- Our previous and current pastors have very different personalities, and the change was positive. Our new pastor is energetic and demonstrates tireless dedication to spreading God's Word. (L)
- Our improved preschool and friendliness are attracting both unchurched people in the community and people from other churches. (L)
- Outreach is now number one; nurture is number two. Many more members are involved and are serving, including women. (L)
- We went from being a small, declining church with no room to grow to a growing church with a new facility, from being satisfied with the status quo to becoming a growing, proactive congregation, and from an old congregation to a very young congregation. (L)
- Some people don't believe in miracles. You're looking at one. (L)
- Our consultants taught us that members were a vital part of the church's ministry. (M)
- Our new pastor communicated to us, *this isn't my church; it is everyone's church*. He was warm and friendly and led with gentle persuasion. (M)
- We strengthened what we had and started new programs, especially for kids. There were more activities and involvement of members. (M)
- We became a *welcoming* church. We believed: this is for others; let's take it to other people. Outreach ministry became a priority. (M)

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship participation:

1. The relocation and new facility opened doors for ministry.
2. The new pastor united those he served in pursuing a common vision.
3. The advice of outside consultants (from the previous ministry planning process) was taken to heart and utilized.

Following the turnaround, as the congregation sustained or increased worship participation, more people from area churches drifted in their direction. Becoming a church that radiated gospel joy was attracting people who felt such elation was lacking in their congregations. More and stronger connections with the community were established. The church facility was expanded. Worship was enhanced by adding variety. The preschool and other ministries thrived. More members became involved both because of growth in

numbers and enthusiasm. The congregation's positive reputation in the community had been established.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- We put a lot of emphasis on *joy in the gospel* here. (P)
- We are an oasis for people who have gone through the wars in their own congregations; we are the *Cheers church in town* where everybody knows your name. (P)
- The de-churched [who are searching for a spiritual home] often land here because it is easy to feel welcomed. (P)
- Our hardworking pastor and the planning done with help from our consultants are helping us to bring God's Word to as many souls as possible. (L)
- Our preschool is one of our greatest blessings and opportunities to serve other people. This and other children's programs in our expanded facility continue to draw young families. (L)
- Our newer, expanded building serves us well and doesn't cost a lot of money to maintain. (L)
- We continue to have a friendly and relaxed atmosphere and a well-liked pastor who is both faithful to Scripture and willing to try new things. (L)
- Our consultants helped us develop a plan for how we are going to do our ministry. Now we have a vision for helping other people. (M)
- We are more connected to the community and continue to look for ways to serve others. (M)
- Now that we have permission and are encouraged to serve, more and more members are getting involved. (M)
- Our new facility, especially our fellowship area, allows us to congregate and show our friendliness. (M)

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship participation:

1. The new church facility, and then the expansion that followed, provided more quality space for programming and people.
2. The respected replacement pastor continued to lead well.
3. The membership matured in their understanding of the mission of the church and every member's involvement in it.

Comments by the researcher:

- This congregation began to experience a gradual turnaround soon after the decision was made to relocate. Then, when the new pastor arrived, the congregation experienced accelerated growth in enthusiasm, membership, and worship participation.

- The Lord used the pleasing personality and member-engaging philosophy of ministry of the new pastor to change the dynamics of this church. The new pastor was more personal, winsome, passionate, and outreach-minded. Especially those who were eager to see change responded.
- There was a major shift among members from having an inward focus (*What's in it for us?*) to prioritizing outreach (*How can we be a blessing to others?*) and a shift from a pastor-does-all-ministry to all-members-do-ministry.

Church I

Prior to the turnaround, during the years of decline in worship participation, the community was undergoing a major demographic and cultural change while the church was steeped in traditionalism. Not only did the congregation fail to adapt to the influx of people *not like them*--thereby failing to reach out and proclaim to them the truth that saves--this inwardly focused congregation had an adversarial relationship with the changing community. Especially younger families in the congregation moved away, and the average age within the congregation soon climbed into the *seniors* grouping. As a result, what was once a thriving church had become a dying church.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- The congregation just kept doing what it was always doing, even though it wasn't working. (P)
- Preservation of truth was more important than proclamation of truth. They didn't understand their mission, and the pastor at that time considered this church his prison. (P)
- Members didn't understand the new people in the neighborhood and even feared them. (P)
- Putting it bluntly, some leaders and other members exhibited racism. (P)
- We were a white, German-American, older congregation that didn't reflect the community. (L)
- We were once a flourishing congregation; then community change started. We became economically challenged and couldn't pay our utility bills. (L)

- The neighborhood was shifting from single family homes to rentals. Additional apartment complexes were built. The density of people increased rapidly, and most had lower incomes. (M)
- We didn't know our new neighbors, and they didn't know us. (M)
- We needed to change and adapt to meet the neighborhood. (M)

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship participation:

1. Changing demographics in the community surrounded the church with people who were unfamiliar and even feared.
2. Because members of this congregation were internally focused, they did not initially recognize that change in the community also provided new opportunities for pursuing Christ's mission and revitalizing their church.
3. Younger families moved away and the average age of members rose, weakening the congregation in a number of ways.

During the turnaround, as worship participation was increasing, this church benefited from the leadership of a new pastor who was visionary, had a passion for outreach, and was mentored by gifted and informed colleagues. A long-range planning committee played a vital role, as did the pastor's reading of a book that helped him understand how to study and reach out to people in a changing environment. The leaders' view of their congregation's ministry context and target audience changed from being *people like us* in a ten-mile plus radius to people *not like us* living in the immediate community around the church. Pessimism was replaced by optimism, and bold actions followed. Grants were secured for pilot projects, other outside resources were brought in, leadership training was provided, a new facility was constructed, a school designed for outreach was launched, and variety was added to worship that especially new members would appreciate. It didn't hurt when a couple agitated alligators eventually left.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- We did ethnographic interviews and brought in outside experts to help us *see* the people in our immediate surroundings. (P)

- Members making the transition in how they felt and functioned required a lot of handholding and patience. (P)
- We prioritized reaching other kids (outreach) over teaching our own children (nurture) in our new school. (P)
- We did a demographic study and discovered there were three thousand kids within a one-mile radius of our church, and many were bussed to other areas. (L)
- Our new pastor challenged the leadership to think about the future. Cottage meetings for members got buy-in and commitment. A unified mindset developed. (L)
- There was a commitment to make changes, to reach out to and embrace the community. People started to join [our church] to experience the excitement, commitment, and activity. (L)
- We canvassed on the streets, not door-to-door, asking, What can [our church] do for you? The neighborhood began to respect our church. (L)
- Walking the neighborhood and building relationships with people was huge. We went from fearing our neighbors to wanting to save them. (M)
- We started asking, How do we get out into the community? We began to think about social programs that addressed the needs of the people. (M)
- Our pastor made some people feel uncomfortable with his emphasis on outreach. We lost families because of the change in priority. (M)
- Pastor was excellent at showing older members that serving the children of the community was worth it. (M)
- God provided us with the right people at the right time. (M)
- I used to say, No way will things change here! I was so wrong. (M)

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship participation:

1. A new pastor challenged the congregation to set a vision for outreach.
2. Demographic studies revealed a significant number of children within a one-mile area around the church, and a vision to reach and teach them and their families surfaced.
3. There was a change of heart and mind among existing active members who became determined to serve the people in their neighborhood.

Following the turnaround, as the congregation sustained or increased worship participation, a culture of granting permission (by not establishing rules and policies) had developed. The focus was on serving and reaching others by removing obstacles that were in the path and pursuing opportunities. The priority was proclaiming God's truth to as many people as possible as often as possible. Adjusting to change was less traumatic at this point.

When the community underwent another demographic transformation, with an inflow of Hispanics, the congregation shifted direction and called a Hispanic pastor.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- We don't require people to sit through a Bible class before offering them a bag of groceries or demand that they be instructed before enrolling their children in our school. (P)
- A common spirit of partnership, enthusiasm, and devotion to Christ's mission keeps us moving together in the same direction. (P)
- There are intentional efforts to keep people with negative attitudes on the sidelines. (P)
- Parents in the community saw the church open to the neighborhood and the growing school brought in students and their families. (L)
- The Hispanic worship service, started because of the influx of Hispanics into the neighborhood, really drew the parents. (L)
- We design our programs (after-school care for youth, English as a Second Language class, pregnancy counseling, health clinic, etc.) for the community. We put our arms around the community without compromising the Word. (L)
- We were determined to fulfill the mission, but it wasn't easy. Now even young couples with no kids come here because it is an active church. (L)
- The exposure to the community is phenomenal; the health clinic is an example. We just try to keep meeting the needs of the people. (M)
- At [this church] White, Black, and Hispanic all belong together. We're known as *the church for all people*. (M)
- Gospel preaching is down to earth and applies to different cultures. (M)
- Our volunteer base is strong. Outreach is about us as well as those we are trying to reach. (M)
- Things don't always work, but we keep working. (M)

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship participation:

1. The congregation continued to focus on the needs of the community and seek out opportunities to reach and teach more people.
2. Proclaiming God's truth to others, primarily through quality worship and Bible study, was a high priority.
3. A culture of permission provided multiple opportunities to show love for and patience with people who were not yet a part of this family of believers.

Comments by the researcher:

- The new pastor faced huge challenges, but he was a visionary leader who led with love, patience, and confidence. Some did not appreciate his

enthusiasm for outreach and his perseverance, but the Lord used him to win over the majority of people's hearts and organize them for action.

- The turnaround vision was enormous and beyond the imagination of some, but God made it happen.
- This church dared to ask, For whom does this congregation primarily exist? They concluded, it is for the people in the community who don't yet know Jesus as their Savior, and we will do whatever it takes to reach them with the gospel.
- Doing the right thing for the right reason matters.

Church J

Prior to the turnaround, during the years of decline in worship participation, this congregation was primarily focused on serving WELS servicemen stationed at a nearby naval base. It was reported that military persons represented 80 percent of the membership prior to the decline. Then the naval base was closed, and the membership dropped. Because this church lacked a mission mindset toward the community in general, other outreach efforts did not exist. There were also issues with the pastor, who resigned after being charged with false doctrine. Calls for a new pastor were extended twenty-two times, and all the calls were returned prolonging the vacancy for over four years. The congregation was confused, conflicted, and demoralized. The church facility, although located on a main thoroughfare, was poorly designed and almost invisible to those who passed by.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- The previous pastor exercised poor judgment, both theological and personal. (P)
- Members became divided over the pastor with some supporting him and others wanting him to go. (P)
- The long vacancy caused the people to become disheartened. (P)
- We started and existed for many years as a mission which primarily served the military stationed in the area. Then the base closed. (L)
- Outreach and evangelism were seldom mentioned at that time. (M)

- The previous pastor lost the trust of members and was accused of false doctrine. (L)
- Some members and prospects lost hope and went elsewhere during our long vacancy. (L)
- People were not coming and hearing the message of truth because our facility was not very attractive. (M)
- Not having a permanent pastor for so long meant fill-in pastors would come and go. There was no shepherd for the flock. (M)

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship participation:

1. The congregation's target audience (military personnel) was reduced in size dramatically when the local naval base closed, and outreach to other people in the community did not exist.
2. A doctrinal controversy involving the previous pastor caused conflict, split what was left of the congregation, and forced the pastor's resignation.
3. A prolonged pastoral vacancy demoralized the few members that were left.

During the turnaround, as worship participation was increasing, retired pastors served the congregation until the new, permanent pastor arrived. The new pastor brought consistency, a loving spirit, and sound biblical preaching and teaching with relevant application to people's lives. He had a passion for outreach and modeled reaching out to others constantly. The eventual leaving of some dissidents cleared the way for this new and singular outreach focus. This pastor taught his members to care about visitors and created a mindset that all people matter and should be treated the same. He learned from a mentor to prioritize *pulpit* (good preaching) and *pavement* (building relationships) in his schedule. He built little structure, made decisions by forming consensus, and centered all efforts on three things: (1) quality preaching, (2) quality teaching, and (3) constant outreach by all. Ownership and strong leadership were developed and members became willing participants in ministry activities. A new facility was constructed to provide space for the growing number of people and primary ministry efforts. This new facility attracted even more people.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- The biggest shift was to consider the church a *family* and start acting that way. (P)
- The shift to a dual focus on pulpit and pavement under the guidance of a mentor was key. (P)
- You reach people by reaching out to them face-to-face, which is why I was on the streets canvassing and following up three or four nights a week. (P)
- I dealt with all potential conflict head on. I went to people's homes to talk. There needn't be total agreement, but there can be no conflict. (P)
- When something needed to be done, members were presented with the facts and allowed to volunteer and make decisions about the task at hand. (L)
- Sermons were (and still are) wonderful. Pastor is fearless when it comes to pointing out sin. Then he provides comfort by teaching us about God's love and mercy. (L)
- The new facility was attractive, it drew people, and all the kids were a draw to younger families. (L)
- It was wonderful to finally receive a permanent pastor, and our new pastor was wonderful. He was a big factor in the turnaround here. (M)
- Pastor has had many opportunities to serve other churches, but he has demonstrated commitment to staying here. (M)
- The Lord sent us just the right man to be our pastor. God used his spiritual gifts and talents to help us overcome our challenges. (M)

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship participation:

1. A new pastor with leadership abilities and a mission mindset arrived.
2. A new church facility was constructed and quality worship was offered.
3. Members were equipped and empowered to carry out ministry.

Following the turnaround, as the congregation sustained or increased worship participation, outreach remained a priority under the same pastor's leadership. Members excitedly welcomed and embraced new people and participated in a growing small-group ministry. At the same time they lovingly, yet firmly, worked with the straying. The new church facility, quality worship and Bible study, and friendliness of both pastor and people attracted more people. As the church grew, most of the day-to-day ministry was turned over to members, and the pastor focused on preaching and teaching. There was excitement about

the possibility of establishing at least three other church locations in the area to complement theirs. One congregation with multiple sites, with a school centrally located, was the goal.

Comments by pastors (P), elected leaders (L), and informed members (M):

- We structure to avoid conflict. Voting on everything only guarantees you'll have people who feel *I lost* on a regular basis. We vote once a year to approve a budget and elect elders. (P)
- Spiritual development takes time. Especially newer Christians need patience and ongoing guidance. (P)
- We strive to have worship that is uplifting, yet reverent; traditional, but still laid back. There is variety, but participation is enhanced by liturgical structure. The sermon is central, and I put a ton of work into it. (P)
- Our pastor is dedicated and hardworking. Members see him at work late at night, on weekends, and he is always ready to go on Sunday morning with a quality product. (L)
- We have a warm and loving congregation and a lot of fellowship opportunities. Outreach is always strongly encouraged. (L)
- God's Word, truthfully and compellingly proclaimed, draws more and more people and keeps them coming back. (L)
- People need to come and hear our pastor. They will go home fed and touched. (M)
- Many people bring family and friends, and they end up enjoying their experiences here. This leads to repeated visits and membership. (M)
- Our pastor and other leaders provide strong spiritual leadership in all areas of ministry. (M)
- Our new facility has been a great asset for worship, outreach, youth involvement, and fellowship. It has allowed space for growth. (M)

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship participation:

1. This congregation has developed into a people-focused ministry that speaks the truth in love and offers quality teaching and preaching through its gifted pastor. Members want to tell the world to come and see, and they do.
2. The new facility continues to provide visibility in the community and draws people in.
3. There is relentless follow-up and follow-through with visitors and other prospects, and promoting member witness to friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors is credited as the primary strategy that continues to bring in new people.

Comments by the researcher:

- This is a fully recovered church that truly functions as a healthy Christian family and wants to share what they have with others. They evidence the living presence of the Spirit and their Savior like I have never witnessed.
- These folks are doing so many things right they don't even realize how unique they are.
- The pastor is a leader with a vision, a heart for people, and the skills to serve well. He led the turnaround by simplifying ministry to quality worship and Bible study and modeling personal outreach.
- This church practices ministry intentionally on all levels. Members know *why* they do *what* they do the *way* they do it and are always thinking of new and better ways to do it. In fact, they have forums just to gather new ideas for how best to accomplish God's work.

APPENDIX 24

PRIMARY COMMON FACTORS

As requested, the researchers submitted--for each of the congregations they studied--a list of the primary factors that appeared to be associated with *decline* in worship attendance, *turnaround* in worship attendance, and *sustaining* worship attendance. The following charts provide a ranking of these primary factors based on the frequency with which they were identified. The studied congregations were assigned a letter (A through J) to ensure anonymity.

Primary factors associated with *decline* in worship attendance:

| | <i>Major Factors</i> | | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|---|--|----|
| Previous pastor | ABDEGHJ | 7 | | 1a |
| Inward focus/little outreach | ACDFGIJ | 7 | | 1b |
| | <i>Minor Factors</i> | | | |
| Lack of member ministry | ADEFH | 5 | | 3 |
| Changing community demographics | CGIJ | 4 | | 4a |
| Pastoral turnover/vacancies | BDGJ | 4 | | 4b |
| Conflict | DEGJ | 4 | | 4c |
| Poor location | FGH | 3 | | 7a |
| Inadequate facility | BFG | 3 | | 7b |
| Aging membership | FH | 2 | | 9 |
| Launched new mission congregations | C | 1 | | 10 |

Primary factors associated with *turnaround* in worship attendance:

| <i>Major Factors</i> | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------|---|-----|--|
| New pastor | ABCDEFGHIJ | 9 | 1 | |
| (Re)Focus on others/outreach | BCDEFGIJ | 8 | 2 | |
| New or expanded facilities | BDFHIJ | 6 | 3 | |
| <i>Minor Factors</i> | | | | |
| Relocation | DFGH | 4 | 4 | |
| Deliberate ministry planning process | CHI | 3 | 5a | |
| More member ministry/empowered | CEJ | 3 | 5b | |
| Added staff | CDG | 3 | 5c | |
| Quality worship/variety | CDJ | 3 | 5d | |
| Launched new ministries | ABG | 3 | 5e | |
| New attitude | A | 1 | 10a | |
| Expanded Bible study | D | 1 | 10b | |
| Use of outside resources | D | 1 | 10c | |
| Strong emphasis on prayer | E | 1 | 10d | |
| Discipline/removal of antagonists | G | 1 | 10e | |

Primary factors associated with *sustaining* worship attendance:

| <i>Major Factors</i> | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------|---|----|--|
| Reaching/serving others priority | ABCDFGHIJ | 9 | 1 | |
| Quality worship/variety | ACDEIJ | 6 | 2a | |
| Culture of permission/member ministry | ABEFHI | 6 | 2b | |
| <i>Minor Factors</i> | | | | |
| Current (turnaround) pastor | BGHJ | 4 | 4a | |
| New or expanded facilities | DGHJ | 4 | 4b | |
| Added staff | CEF | 3 | 6a | |
| Launched new/expanded existing ministries | BCG | 3 | 6b | |
| Spiritual growth/engaging Bible study | DJ | 2 | 8 | |
| Consensus style decision making | E | 1 | 9 | |

As previously stated, the researchers assumed (and frequently mentioned to those within the studied churches) that no congregation can be revitalized and turn around without God changing people's hearts and transforming their lives through his Means of Grace. Since this was assumed and stated up front, spiritual growth was seldom cited as a key factor associated with turnaround.

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