

ABSTRACT

REVITALIZATION OF THE URBAN CHURCH: A MULTI-CASE STUDY OF TURNAROUND CHURCHES

by

Lisa M. Sullivan

Mainline churches are in decline and many are closing their doors. Decline is especially noted in urban and transitional settings. Thousands of churches have experienced decline to such an extent that they reach the death stage in the life cycle of the church. In the midst of this bleak forecast, some churches have reversed the cycle of decline into a new season of health, vibrancy, and growth. The purpose of this study was to distill common denominators essential to the process of changing declining urban United Methodist churches into vital, healthy transformed faith communities.

The study consisted of a cross-sectional survey of United Methodist churches, across different geographical areas of the United States, with the results compiled in a descriptive analysis. Additionally, in-depth case studies, conducted with four of these churches through telephone interviews, were summarized qualitatively. Analysis of commonly shared key factors in the turnaround process revealed the necessary foundational components of revitalization.

Major findings revealed a list of recurrent factors and common denominators necessary for successful turnaround. The change process was more flexible and organic in nature, and required a large investment of time, effort, and physical, emotional and spiritual perseverance to achieve new vitality and church health.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled
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A Dissertation

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by

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My hope is that other churches going through the process of transformation will be strengthened by the research findings and be equipped to engage the challenge of revitalization in the local church setting.

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM

Introduction

Mainline churches are in decline and many are closing their doors. Decline is especially noted in urban and transitional settings. Thousands of churches have experienced decline to such an extent that they reach the death stage in the life cycle of the church. I have witnessed churches in the Florida Annual Conference that have closed often after an agonizing period of slow decline. The experience of loss is a difficult process, resulting in sadness and a sense of failure, as members are uprooted from their church family. Relocation is an option for some, but others simply stop attending church altogether. In the bleak landscape of decline in the mainline church, surprising bursts of hope appear along the horizon, shining out like beacons of light into the darkness. Some churches, in spite of all odds, have somehow turned around the cycle of decline into a new birth of health, vibrancy, and growth. The challenge to discover keys that unlock the process of revitalization and renewal grew out of the practice of ministry, serving in pastoral appointments for eleven years, in the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

The Need for Revitalization

Effective catalysts for revitalization are urgently needed. Many established churches are faced with a rapidly changing demographic, along with a decline of members from the founding congregation. Globalization and urbanization of our world impacts even the smallest rural churches in ways that could never have been imagined a generation ago. When I was appointed to serve a church in an urban area, I discovered the

necessity for new paradigms of ministry, and sought insight through networking, and partnerships with others. I also discovered the complexity of interrelated concerns such as education, employment, health care, family issues, poverty, crime, and housing, inherent in the urban context.

In the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, decline is noted in the health and vitality of existing mainline churches. A recent congregational category survey, of 642 United Methodist congregations in the Florida Annual Conference, from year 2003 through the end of 2006, documented this decline (*Composite Congregational Category Survey Results*). This survey categorized congregations as one of the following:

Beginning—creating or reclaiming a healthy balance of inward and outward focus.

Transforming—a healthy balance of inward and outward focus.

Reproducing—a transforming congregation who is choosing to initiate the formation of new faith communities.

Maintaining—primarily inward focused.

Dying—a congregation whose process of decline is irreversible.

The results of the survey show that seventy-seven churches were categorized as transforming, with fourteen of those decreasing from transforming to maintaining by 2006; nineteen churches were categorized as dying, with ten of those improving to maintaining by 2006; all of the remaining churches were maintaining, or did not report. These numbers show that in the past three years, 1.4 percent were dying, 1.5 percent improved from dying to maintaining, 85 percent were maintaining, 2.2 percent declined from transforming to maintaining, and only 9.8 percent were transforming. The majority

of maintaining or dying churches were at one time active, vibrant, growing communities of faith. Although not all of these churches are in urban areas, almost all are in transitional contexts in the Florida Annual Conference.

A nationwide trend of declining health in mainline churches is noted across denominational lines. Jerry Mayo describes the dying church in need of new life as a “Lazarus church.” He notes that statistics show that from 1965 through 1999, there was a total combined loss of 4,638,000 members in the Episcopal, Presbyterian (USA), and United Methodist Churches. He predicts that if this rate of loss continued, these churches would cease to exist. A rediscovery of the core values, central convictions, and classic theology of the church, is necessary to revitalize old churches with new life (Introduction x).

The Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to distill common denominators that were essential to the process of changing declining urban United Methodist churches into vital, healthy, transformed faith communities

Research Questions

The research instruments used in this study provided information to answer these basic questions.

Research Question #1

When did the church begin to decline and what factors were involved?

Research Question #2

How did the process of revitalization occur?

Research Question #3

What impact did revitalization have on transformation of the surrounding community?

Research Question #4

What impact did the turnaround have on the spiritual and theological growth of the church community?

Definition of Terms

Certain terms used in this paper can be defined in various ways. The following are definitions that will be used in this context. These definitions reflect the general usage of the terms.

Urban—Urban is a descriptive term that refers to the characteristics of a person, place, etc., in a densely populated area, with a lifestyle and worldview that result from living in this particular environment. The United States Census Bureau defines urban as a location that includes both the population and housing units, in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, and consists of a large central area with densely settled adjacent areas with a total population of at least 2,500 for urban clusters and 50,000 for larger urbanized areas (“623 Definition”).

Declining Church—Howard Edington, with Lyle E. Schaller, observes that the majority of large downtown churches of the 1950s are now declining or nonexistent. In describing one such church, he lists nine characteristics of a declining historic downtown First Church. These nine characteristics highlight symptoms of other churches as well. These characteristics are

1. an aging and shrinking membership,

2. an annual operating deficit of nearly \$100,000,
3. a modest endowment fund,
4. a superb location with great visibility,
5. an aging and expensive-to-maintain building,
6. limited off-street parking
7. a powerful past orientation,
8. several extremely capable “young” leaders in their fifties, and
9. an absence of a distinctive identity in the larger community (9).

Declining churches often exhibit one or more of these characteristics, and often hemorrhage to a slow death.

Revitalization—A revitalized church is a healthy, growing church that connects with the community context, turning around from decline into vibrancy. In his research, Nile Harper discovered that the recovery of turnaround urban churches was rooted in the efforts of people to create genuine community. This turnaround is a sign of God’s ongoing creative activity (xiii). Overall, the strengths discovered in the urban turnaround churches were movement from dependence to empowerment, development of indigenous leadership and resources, partnership with community resources, deep concern in caring for one’s neighbors, and trust in God’s power to shape the community in a more just and life-affirming way (10).

Healthy Church/Vital Congregations—Healthy churches are alive and growing and they are connected to God, other people, and the community context in which they are located.

Context of the Study

The study included the major geographical areas of the United States: Northeast, Southeast, North Central, South Central, Northwest and Southwest. Churches of differing sizes, located in communities or cities of varying sizes, created a heterogeneous cross section of the churches included in the study. A broad spectrum of practices was established to extract core principles and experiences that were common to all. English was the primary spoken language, or as one of the primary spoken languages, in all of the churches; however, the churches represented various cultural and ethnic groups. All of the churches were located in urban areas of varying size and were existing churches that had experienced revitalization following a period of decline. The pool of qualifying churches came from the following states: Washington, California, Indiana, Texas, New York, Rhode Island, District of Columbia, Maryland, Florida, North Carolina, and Massachusetts.

Methodology

Four churches participated in case study interviews by telephone, with both the senior pastor and a lay member in congregational leadership interviewed at separate times.

Participants

Church # 1 is located in the South Eastern part of the United States in the Kentucky Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, and was established 119 years ago.

Church # 2 is located in the North Central part of the United States in the South Indiana Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, and was founded 136 years ago.

Church # 3 is located in the North Western part of the United States in the Northwest Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, and was established 110 years ago.

Church # 4 is located in the East Central part of the United States in the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, and was founded 177 years ago.

Instrumentation

A review of statistical records of the United Methodist Church in the Florida Annual Conference, contact letters, a researcher-designed questionnaire, and structured telephone interview protocol were used for the research.

Data Collection

The research limited the focus to United Methodist churches in the United States in urban areas of various sizes. I determined which churches to include in my study through Internet review and personal written correspondence. I noted the names of bishops presiding over urban areas and wrote a letter to each one briefly describing my project and inquiring if any churches in their jurisdiction fit the church descriptors needed. The bishop either responded directly to me or had the assistant to the bishop, a district superintendent, or a connectional ministries contact respond to me. A subsequent contact was made by letter to the pastors and churches referred to my study, to inquire if they would be willing to participate in this future research project. United Methodist

churches in varied geographical locations all across the United States responded affirmatively. The residing bishop or district superintendent who had firsthand knowledge of the churches and their situations decided whether they fit the criteria for the study. All participating churches received a written survey, followed by in-depth interviews with four of the churches.

Data Analysis

A qualitative case study method was used and utilized the following instruments for research: review of statistical records, a researcher-designed survey mailed to participants, follow-up phone calls for collection of surveys, in-depth phone interviews with four of the pastors and church leadership, such as lay leader, lay delegate to annual conference, evangelism or missions chairperson and trustees chairperson. All churches willing to participate received a survey by mail, and a follow-up phone call one month later for any surveys not returned. The four churches designated for an in-depth case study received a written confirmation by mail, and a phone call to set at time to conduct the interviews. The interviews lasted for about one hour and involved the pastor and one key lay leaders in the church. A series of questions, uniform for all groups involved, formed the basis of the telephone interview. A narrative analysis reports the tabulated and evaluated research findings.

The factors studied that contributed to the revitalization were

1. a crisis or a realization of the process of decline,
2. the decision to work for turnaround,
3. the community context ,including economic factors, cultural diversity, size, and personality of the urban context,

4. connection or disconnection with the surrounding community,
5. the role of prayer,
6. obstacles that needed to be removed, and restoration of dysfunctional relationships between members or the community,
7. availability of leadership training from conference and district levels
8. the development of leadership within the church community,
9. language or cultural obstacles, and
10. the impact on personal, church and community transformation.

Delimitations and Generalizability

The delimitations of this study are that the findings are based on United Methodist churches where English was the primary or secondary language spoken. United Methodist churches where the primary or secondary language spoken was not English, were excluded from this study, due to complexities of interpretation. However, because all the churches were operating under the same organizational structure of the United Methodist Church as a whole, and with diverse geographical, cultural, and size representation of the churches in the study, the results may be applicable to most United Methodist churches.

Theological Foundation

From Genesis to Revelation, God's love for the city is evident throughout the biblical accounts. God's grace and redemptive promise for the cities in Genesis point toward fulfillment in time. Harvie M. Conn glimpses views of this future restoration in the book of Genesis, with the redemption of cities still incomplete and waiting final consummation (32). In the New Testament accounts, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, brings

peace and wholeness. The restorative work begun in Christ, and manifest in the witness of the Christian community today, awaits complete fulfillment in the future dawning of the New Jerusalem. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, point to the fullness of God's future reign to come, and call Christians to live in community in ways that witness as if it is already here (Goldingay 858).

Christian mission ventures into the cities in the name of the Lord who heals and restores, bringing freedom, peace, and justice. The renewing presence of the Lord is able to overcome and transform barriers, reaching deeply into complex urban issues.

A special place in God's heart exists for the redemption of people and cities, as seen in the biblical accounts of the city of Jerusalem. Christians are called to carry forth God's continuing plan for the restoration of cities, and the redemption of the persons living in them, through living in the cities and through ministry to present and future needs. Incarnational ministry is a witness in word and deed to the in-breaking power of God's kingdom in the midst of despair, bringing hope and transformation, grace and blessings, to the people and communities living in the urban context. It requires both spiritual transformation of persons and the transformation of the places themselves, necessitating the integration of theology and sociology (Bakke, "Profiles" 133-34). Local churches are a dynamic part of the whole city itself, not separate units. Edgar J. Elliston and Timothy J. Kauffman note that effective urban ministry is both evangelistic and cultural, as mandated in the Great Commission, and the Great Commandment, calling disciples to love one's neighbor and show mercy and justice. Effective urban ministry transforms the spiritual, physical, and social aspects of lives and communities, involving relationships with God, our neighbors, and the environment itself (66-67).

The answer to the question of who is one's neighbor must be considered. Throughout the biblical story, God raises this question for humanity to answer. The story of the prophet Jonah and his journey to Nineveh, is an example of the challenge to define who is one's neighbor. God summoned Jonah to go and bring a salvation message to the city of Nineveh. Jonah initially refused to accept the responsibility to love these neighbors, but did finally go after encountering God's persuasion in the belly of a fish. All of created life in Nineveh cried out to God for mercy, trusting in God's compassion and patience, and received forgiveness and restoration. Jonah, however, resisted acknowledging them, and the city of Nineveh, as worthy of God's mercy. God's reply to Jonah is recorded in Jonah 4:11: "But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?" (NIV).

A prophet is like a sentinel, warning the city of danger, and urging turnaround so that the warnings need not come about (Goldingay 683). In the New Testament accounts, God's message of mercy, redemption and restoration continued. The Apostle Paul's missionary journeys are an example of this. Paul personally went to the large urban centers of that time with the message of the gospel. He lived and ministered in direct relationship with the people of those cities, often encountering tremendous resistance in both the human and spiritual realm, but catalyzing world-changing transformation. Modern-day prophets are called to go and do likewise, bringing the message of hope, redemption and restoration to the cities of the world. Scripture points to God's concern for the city itself and for the persons living in those cities. As followers of the Way, and witnesses of the New Jerusalem to come, God summons Christians to continue the story.

The account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the grave in John 11:38-44 is symbolic of the revitalization and restoration of dying churches in this study. Chapter 11:1-16 describes the death of Lazarus and the initial events surrounding his death, followed by verses 17-37, in which Jesus comforts Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha. These verses are also included in the overall story that speaks to the church. Mayo draws these parallels, noting that resurrection potential in the old, dying mainline churches but that the churches must first be awakened to the fact that they have become distanced from the presence, power, and ministry of Jesus (25). Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, grieved over the death of their brother and were painfully aware of the absence of Jesus to save him. Jesus waited for two days after the death of Lazarus before going to Bethany. Mary and Martha felt lost and alone, similar to what pastors and church members experience in a dying church. Just as Lazarus had no life, dying churches also lose vitality, become stagnant in growth, and appear almost lifeless. Dying churches continue to carry out religious rituals, but lack power, presence and spiritual fruit in their ministry and corporate life.

The power source for raising the church to new life is the love and grace of God, which gives hope for restoration. Throughout John 11, the text addresses Jesus' response to human need and to the issues of healing, faith, transformation, renewal, revival, and new life:

The Lazarus Church released from the cave and unbound is a world-transforming force. It is people freed to serve the world with a graceful and powerful presence that takes hold of weak lives to stand them up in the presence of Jesus. They meet with the One who alone has the power to peer into the caves of their lives—where darkness prevails—to call them out into the light of God's possibilities which are mysteriously unlimited. (Mayo 68)

The life-giving power of God takes what appears to be dead and brings forth a new beginning. New possibilities arise from circumstances that previously appeared hopeless.

The cave of entrapment can be personal or corporate, but Jesus brings the freedom needed to continue his mission and carry the light of the good news to others. Lazarus' return to life was not just about him, nor is the church's return to life just about the body of believers. Rather, restoration enables Christians to continue carrying out Jesus' purpose for our lives and the church. This process of change also causes great turbulence as life emerges out of death, and health from grave cloths. The reaction of the persons present following Lazarus' resurrection led to life-changing decisions. Although some turned and believed in Jesus after hearing about Lazarus' resurrection, the chief priest and the Pharisees reacted by intensifying their plot to arrest and kill Jesus. Throughout John 11, the power of God is evident in transformation through the theme of belief/unbelief, the eschatological hope that Jesus gives to his followers for resurrection and new life, and the possibility of new life coming through death. These insights can be applied to the revitalization of dying churches with individual, corporate and community transformation realized as a result. The climax of this account is the passage in John 11:38-44, where Jesus, the Word himself, speaks the Word into a context of death, and brings forth new life out of that which was dead. The events of this story reveal who Jesus is, and challenge the people to make a decision about who they think he is and to decide how their lives will reflect this revelation. The Church must ask itself who they believe Jesus in order to realize new life. Jesus came to give eternal life to all who believe and to give abundant life here in the present. The dying church can turn around to new life and rediscover hope and abundance, if Jesus is the center. Jesus showed deep anguish over

human suffering resulting from death: When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus began to weep” (John 11:33-35, New Interpreter’s Study Bible). I believe that Jesus weeps over death and destruction and all that comes against life—he weeps over the lost, the hurting, the cities and nations that have followed the way of death instead of life. I see a prophetic image of Jesus speaking forth life in people, cities and nations, calling them to come out of the tomb and into the light and life he offers.

The passage speaks of hope and new beginnings and transformation beyond what the world understands or believes can happen. Jesus said, “did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” (John 11:40). Jesus’ words and actions give us a model for ministry today, showing there can indeed be new life for dying churches and restored hope and reconciliation in communities.

Overview

Chapter 2 looks at a composite of different streams of literature. The literature reviewed include contributions to the fields of church transformation, leadership and change, urban ministry models, urban anthropology, spiritual renewal, community ministry and revitalization, turnaround church strategies, sociology, the emerging church, and evangelism.

Chapter 3 addresses the research questions and procedures as well as the methods of data analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the research and corresponding graphs, charts, and diagrams illustrating these findings.

Chapter 5 reports the data analysis and the practical applications and implications arrived at through the research. Suggestions for further study are given.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to identify factors common to churches that have successfully transitioned into revitalized faith communities in the urban setting. The literary review focuses on the theological foundations for ministry in an urban setting and transformational approaches or models for revitalization of existing churches. A comparison of different approaches to the turnaround process in transitional urban churches revealed the key determining factors influencing the potential for change and effective models of ministry.

Turnaround Churches

The book *Turnaround Churches* began to address the reality of dying churches. George Barna provided tools to assess whether a church had potential for revitalization; if so, the church would become a turnaround church. In order to effectively strategize for revitalization, he notes the importance of researching why the church experienced decline instead of simply focusing on church growth dynamics. Through studying the failures, a stronger foundation is built to engage positive future change. Barna's research revealed that the first critical steps taken in the turnaround process were actually unrelated to typical church growth strategies (15).

Additionally, in the life cycle of the church from birth, development, maturity, and decline, some churches are not viable candidates for the revitalization process and not all churches or pastors have the ability for leading the turnaround process. The qualitative research examined thirty churches in sixteen different states that were effective in the turnaround process. Several key factors emerged:

1. A comeback is difficult after a sharp decline in membership or attendance.

2. In the developmental stage of the church life cycle, a church becomes more set in its ways and establishes routine; in the maturity stage a church reaches a plateau and decreases innovation, loss of passionate vision, gaining more focus on facilities and staff; attendance begins to decline, and the pastor often leaves; in the last stage, death, the church exists in theory, but without any vitality, outreach, or spiritual impact on the community.

3. Churches that are able to make a comeback become authentic, evangelistic, and service-oriented toward the community, and they demonstrate the passionate commitment to Christ and one another that is modeled in the “Acts 2” church (Barna, *Turnaround Churches* 17-29). Barna summarizes the fuel for the process of revitalization:

Sensing a life-or-death struggle at hand, the turnaround churches were driven to renewed life in ministry founded upon an indisputable determination to see the resurrection power of Christ reflected in their battle to regain perspective and influence. (40)

The turnaround began only after acceptance of the reality of pending death, and a decision made to choose life over death.

The process and key leadership factors evident in successful turnaround churches were distilled as indicators whether or not a declining church should begin the process of revitalization. Some of these essential factors common to all the turnaround churches were as follows:

1. Pastoral leadership qualities of team building, vision casting, encouragement, spiritual growth, strategic thinking, willingness to take risks and work hard, younger chronological age, and strong influential presence.

2. Growth strategies of a sensitivity to the past, but focus on the future; model spiritual depth for the congregation; do a few things excellently; focus on the basics; emphasize people not programs; and build a sense of relational connectedness (Barna *Turnaround Churches* 62-86).

Transformation occurs within the turnaround churches and influences revitalization in the surrounding community.

Gene Wood encourages the process and possibility of turnaround, noting that a church can go through several cycles of plateau, stagnation, and then renewed vigor and growth (23). Once forward growth momentum stops, turnaround becomes necessary, and the size of the church does not deter the potential for regaining health and vitality. Instead of resigning to closure in a declining church, a commitment to stay and engage the transition brings hope for turnaround. The church is called to be a beacon of light and salt that infuses the city with hope and the power of the gospel, and brings new life in both word and deed. Lyle E. Schaller challenges denominations to reevaluate their role in revitalization of inner-city churches, calling them to faithfulness and obedience instead of deserting and closing urban churches (169-87).

The effects of urbanization are also experienced in suburban and rural areas, with similar characteristics and concerns exhibited as in urban areas. The United Nations report, *The Challenge of Slums*, notes a continued trend of growth in global urban populations, with a projected increase of more than two billion expected over the next thirty years (5). Global implications of urbanization are seen in the increasing growth of the world's population and cities. Walter P. Zenner gives an insightful view on defining urban life from an anthropological perspective-the historical understanding of the

distinction between what is considered rural or urban no longer fits the world today (53). The urban culture is more of a process, how people live out their lives in relation to one another, than a place. As society as a whole becomes more urbanized and global, the distinctions between what is considered urban versus rural, begin to blur. Perhaps it is not possible to clearly define what the term city looks like across all time and all cultures.

Surface definitions of being a city or urban area do not address the deeper issues of daily life. From a sociological perspective, Louis Wirth views urbanism as a form of social organization. Traditional ways of interpersonal interaction in daily life change in the urban context, resulting in weaker family bonds, and a substitution of secondary contacts for primary family contacts. This pattern creates an ethos of constant change and decreased stability (78). The complex, fast-paced urban environment creates challenges with interpersonal connections. Additionally, a myriad of other issues such as housing, education, transportation, medical care, crime, employment, and poverty, affect the urbanite on a daily basis. Urbanism can be viewed characteristically from the perspective of a physical population group base, a system of social organization or a set of ideas and attitudes (77). Although a large portion of the world's population is moving toward the city or urban areas, the complexity of urban life has impacted the church as part of the new reality of the urban landscape.

This trend of urbanization will impact every church in the future. Most pastors and congregations are unprepared to deal with the complexities of the increasingly urbanized life that are present in society today. As communities and churches transition, they experience a resultant decline in effectiveness and vitality, and the disconnect between the church and community context expands.

In his book *The Urban Christian*, Raymond J. Bakke connects the decline of urban Christian churches with their inability to relate to the culture of the *city* in relevant ways. From a biblical perspective, he defines the *city* as a place where the nations of the world are. Bakke says that the mission of the church is to reach the rapidly growing multicultural groups from all nations that are migrating to the big cities of the world (45). Overall, churches have not been very successful at doing so. If cities are the sacred places as reflected in the Scriptures, then they are “a proper focus for redeeming ministry because they are treated in the Bible as persons and families and as extensions of the people who live in them” (63).

Church turnaround is also a theological issue of stewardship: how the buildings and resources are used to fulfill the church’s mission in the context of today. To reclaim being a church that focuses on the mission of God, means to act faithfully and intentionally wherever God gives opportunity (Stetzer and Dodson 5). This change involves a spiritual focus that gives the church a vision of what can be and empowerment for the turnaround process. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson studied three hundred churches that effectively turned around from maintaining or dying churches to experience revitalization and health. They concluded from their surveys that churches desiring to turn around had to make changes in order to start growing again. Some of the necessary changes included “rekindling Jesus’ mission for the church, mobilizing the laity, focusing on leadership development, engaging in more strategic prayer efforts and increasing evangelistic emphases” (27). Comeback leaders engaged the change process in an intentional, strategic, and creative manner as catalyst to the turnaround.

Community Connection for Revitalization

In their book, Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson and Heidi Rolland Unruh speak to the impact churches can have on the health of the community. A church that connects to the community with a holistic balance of evangelism and social outreach will be a healthy, growing church (15-17). Unless the church connects with the community in vital networks, it will eventually become irrelevant, wither, and die. David Claerbaut describes the need for the Church acting as Christ's hands, feet, and eyes in the world through incarnational ministry that expresses love in word and deed, a love that actively connects with the lives of neighbors (15).

Urban communities today face a myriad of challenges such as increased levels of poverty, violence, and crime, declining quality of public schools, broken families, unemployment, and inadequate basic resources. These challenges reveal brokenness, social decay, and hopelessness. Although local churches can have tremendous impact on improving the quality and health of life in the surrounding community, many have become disconnected and closed off, as evidenced by the statistics of rapidly increasing numbers of churches that are categorized as maintaining of dying.

Churches that focus on only one side of the scale or the other will become ineffective at connecting with their communities in vital ways. In the twentieth century, many churches focused on primarily social action or on evangelistic efforts to lead people to faith in Christ, but few holistically addressed the two in balance. Effective transformation occurs when the good news of the reign of Christ is proclaimed in both word and deed, as modeled by Jesus' holistic ministry.

Awareness of both community context of the church location as well as the anthropological history of that church and city provides foundational understanding for ministry. Networking and relational connection to the community are essential to the process of evaluating the reasons for decline and disconnect.

Sider, Olson, and Unruh emphasize the importance of intentional efforts to balance both welcoming the community into the church as well as the church going outside its walls into the community (154-55). Some of the key bridge builders necessary to achieve this connection are as follows:

1. Welcome whoever walks through the door.
2. Network in the community.
3. Cultivate a sense of belonging to the community.
4. Incorporate a commitment to the community and outreach mission into church life.
5. Interweave the interests of church and community.
6. Take the church out into the community.
7. Support the relocation of church members into the community.
(155-60)

A bridge must be established that has movement in both directions, both out into the community, and back into the church.

During the early years of a church's life cycle, intentional bridge building is a foundational component of church vitality. Declining churches, on the other hand, have become complacent about bridge building. A common lament heard from dying churches is that the community around the church has changed but the church has not, increasing the gap between the church and the people they want to reach. In contrast, a healthy church will share a Christian fellowship that reflects holistic transformation, such as caring for one another (meeting needs), reconciling across racial, class, and gender barriers, welcoming the stranger, engaging joyous fellowship, building strong

discipleship, and supporting mutual accountability (Sider, Olson, and Unruh 179-85). A healthy church is a balance of nurture and outreach. According to Sider, Olson, and Unruh, “When Christians truly love one another and meet one another’s needs, when they experience growth and unity in Christ, and when their lives display the wonders of the Spirit, then congregations become powerfully attractive and transformational communities” (185). The witness of faith in action points to God’s power and love.

Congregational transformation is connected to the community, and effective strategies for turnaround are vitally linked to the ability to envision and build new bridges. Robert Lewis with Rob Wilkins describe this process as becoming a “church of irresistible influence” (14) or a church that irresistibly draws people to it by witness and incarnational presence. In other words, a “church of irresistible influence” is the Church as Jesus intended it to be. When a church ceases to have impact or influence on the community, it becomes isolated, irrelevant, and missionally anemic.

The process of revitalization and restoration of health requires building new bridges and changing church structure. During this process, the church must allow the Spirit to engineer the blue prints for kingdom building and network in unity with the body of Christ within the city as a whole. If the church is to be healthy and effective in influence it must be holistic; the church no longer has an either/or attitude. Instead, the church must have a both/and perspective, being both salt and light as Jesus intended. Lewis and Wilkins draw the conclusion that to become a church of irresistible influence, three things are required:

1. A “church of irresistible influence” will require pastors to redefine success.
2. A “church of irresistible influence” will require the Church to redesign its structures.
3. A “church of irresistible influence” will require laypeople to reconnect with

a lifestyle of specific spiritual standards and service. (214-15)

When these things are accomplished, the church begins to turn around and become a bridge that links the needs of the world with God's purposes for the church.

Tony Campolo agrees that an effective church must get *out* into the world. Campolo gives the example of Jesus sending out the disciples in teams of two into the city to connect and minister in his name, as described in Luke 10:1-17. Churches that have become disconnected from their communities do not know their neighbors, and instead of going *out*, they wait for people to *come* (63-64). To begin a process of turnaround, a church must be willing to go out of the walls of the church and begin to connect with the community. Then the church can begin to understand the needs and challenges that people in that community face.

Understanding the pulse of the world in which people live today, including cultural and demographic changes, is critical for becoming a church of influence in the community. Barna observes that although trends show an increasing interest in spirituality, there is a decline in church size and health since the 1990s, reflecting statistics of decreasing membership (*Boiling Point* 235). Predicting a major impact of the future cultural changes on the church, Barna calls the church back to a model that emulates the early Church as seen in the book of Acts. This model of church focuses on worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, service, and stewardship. Becoming a church that thrives in transition instead of dying requires the church to live and witness as the early Christian church lived and witnessed, focusing on the basics that matter to God (311).

Experiencing turnaround in churches located in communities transitioning with cultural and ethnic change is challenging. As the world becomes increasingly urbanized, multicultural, and multi ethnic, the Church's worldview needs to change, also. Ron Crandall addresses the issue of transition, noting that an understanding of missiology and cross-cultural ministry is found in the Scriptures. For the goals of the kingdom of God to be realized in the communities and culture of the early Church, a dependency on the Holy Spirit to guide and assist in the "cultural reorientation" was needed to do so (130). Churches today face transitional, rapidly changing community contexts, and they must practice the same dependency on the Holy Spirit. A church cannot begin the process of transition and transformation without a radical dependency on God's Holy Spirit.

Through his experience with transitional churches, Crandall discovered eight emphases that contributed to turnaround:

1. A biblical center for teaching (relating the Bible to life application),
2. A heart for the congregation (loving nurture,
3. Compassion for the community (missionary mind-set),
4. A listening ear (hearing firsthand what the community is saying; intentional gathering of information about community, not just relying on others' reports),
5. A commitment to prayer (dependence on God),
6. A passion for worship and preaching (sensitive to creating welcoming experience and community to those outside the church, such as introducing new traditions that are representative of the community),

7. A total community ministry team (development of lay ministry and leadership utilizing spiritual gifts and talents, as well as networking with those in the larger community outside of the congregation), and

8. Community-based evangelism (outreach programs to address felt needs of the community-physical, social and spiritual.,136-49).

Turnaround can be realized in churches of all sizes, including the small church. The churches effective at realizing turnaround demonstrated the common factors.

A movement from discussion to engagement is necessary for the process of turnaround to begin. The firsthand account of a church that experienced turnaround, Dellrose United Methodist Church in Wichita, Kansas, is recorded in the book *Can These Bones Live?* by author and pastor of the church Kevass J. Harding. His theological base for the new life is based on Ezekiel 37 where God breathes new life into dead bones, causing new life to rise up from death. Three main things were involved in this rebuilding or turnaround process: reach the lost (worship and evangelism), teach the found (discipleship and leadership development), and send the taught (outreach and connections with the community., 22). The church became healthy and grew from a worship attendance of twenty five to three hundred over a period of eight years, a testimony of how God can do much with little (67-68).

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger connect with this theme, noting that effective churches that reach communities today and turn around the trend of decline are churches that put theological emphasis on the kingdom of God as witnessed in the Gospels and the early Church. The observation that something was wrong with the church (as reflected in decline of the mainline church) pushed emerging church leaders to evaluate the cause.

The church leaders discovered that many unchurched persons had a favorable view of Jesus but not of the church, due to the deficient witness of the church to live out Jesus' teaching (48). The church must be willing to engage change through action. Engaging a new way of thinking and living is evidence of the transforming power of God. The renewed church is an effective change agent in society and is a sign of God's kingdom on earth (Dorrell 213-14).

To become effective churches, the *missio Dei* must become "go" instead of "come," in order to connect and relate to the community. The Church is called to influence individuals, the community, and the world for radical transformation. Emphasis is on holistic incarnational ministry, community, hospitality toward strangers, service to others, and holy transformation. Inwardly focused churches are declining and must learn to reconnect with the community if they are to turn around and become healthy churches. Cities today reflect the nations of the world in a culture that is global and diverse. Raymond J. Bakke and John Sharpe allude to the biblical theme of refuge, where God draws people into the cities for refuge (63) as reflective of the movement of people in today's world. Bakke and Sharpe's research evaluating the effectiveness of urban churches to change and adapt to this cultural shift led to an interesting conclusion. They discovered that the internal conditions of the church, not the city or urban environment itself, was the major barrier to effective urban ministry and community connection (71). Overcoming this barrier requires a new worldview and understanding the city as a gift of "common grace" for the people (114). Churches that accomplish turnaround are signs of hope for the city.

The church and the community are connected. Ed Delph proposes that transformation occurs when church culture changes from being church based to community based (4). Denominational statistics show that when a church becomes inwardly focused it ceases to grow and begins to decline, but an outwardly focused church reconnects with the community in vital ways and becomes healthy and growing. Delph agrees with the essential part of networking with others in the community and of thinking beyond the local church to the transformation and unity of the city as a whole (59-61). To isolate the church thwarts transformation and turnaround by failing to connect to the synergism of the broader community. To be Christ centered also means to be community centered, to live out the core value of a both/and understanding of being an incarnational Christian and church community. Delph challenges the churches to be fruit bearers like the Church in the book of Acts: to be both “deep and wide” for the sake of reaching and influencing the community (152). When the church connects with the community in transformative ways, Christ is revealed through heart, soul, mind, and strength: a burdened heart for the community, a commitment and passion to pray for the community, strategic thinking for a purpose and “calloused hands,” incarnationally living out a servant life for others (21-37).

The witness of an incarnational church sets up an organic model for mission. Alan Hirsh notes that this type of mission fits with the rhythms of the life of the community because it is then highly contextualized (135). Churches that allow the Holy Spirit to lead, taking the church out to the people, experience a natural flow of ministry, creating discipleship connections, worship as a lifestyle, and mission opportunities within the context of everyday life (185).

Reggie McNeal also emphasizes the movement from church activity to community transformation, getting outside of the church to engage individuals in everyday contexts (26). This then leads to a natural pattern of kingdom growth.

Terry Teykl also puts emphasis on the kingdom of God, on becoming a presence-based church that draws people by the Holy Spirit who is irresistible in influence because of God's transforming presence. Worship, fellowship, and discipleship within the church as well as outreach and mission beyond the church all flow from the presence of God. Tekyl states, "We do it because of Him and because it is His heart" (202). This focus is how the early Church in Acts grew as a healthy church and ignited transformation of hearts, lives, and communities.

Networking with the body of Christ in city-wide prayer ministry impacts the transformation of the city as a whole, as well as the transformation of individual churches and persons. Revitalization begins with spiritual renewal and then flows outward, in that the city itself can become presence based. Mac Pier and Katie Sweeting witness to this in their call to city-wide prayer in New York City. The fruit being evidenced by the work of the Holy Spirit in the city and churches as a result of prayer is the preservation and revitalization of the city and communities. In answer to the question, "What would it look like if God were to actually visit New York?" Pier and Sweeting developed four major themes of focus in prayer: revival, reconciliation, reformation, and reaching the lost (75). Prayer is a foundational component of serious turnaround and restoration, depending on God to lead and provide in the process.

Christian Community Development Approach

A biblical approach for urban community development and ministry is the foundation for the work of the Christian Community Development Association. It is grassroots, church-based effort at transformation. The long-term solutions are birthed out of an incarnational ministry presence in and among the community itself. John M. Perkins defines the key elements of this holistic church-based ministry focus on spiritual transformation and socioeconomic development for the poor:

1. Begins with felt needs of the people in the community.
 2. Responds to those needs in a holistic way.
 3. Is based on clear biblical principles.
 4. Is time-tested.
 5. Develops and utilizes leaders from within the community.
 6. Encourages relocation—living among the poor (people).
 7. Demands reconciliation—people to God and people to people.
 8. Empowers the poor through redistribution—all community members sharing their skills, talents, education, and resources to help each other.
- (26)

These eight elements work together for transformation of individuals, churches, and communities.

Wayne L. Gordon with Randall Frame share his testimony of his ministry work based on this approach. Like Bakke, Claerbaut, Crandall, and Sider, Olson, and Unruh, Gordon believes that the key to beginning to connect with the community and building effective bridges is to *listen* to what the community is saying (16-17, 64). Many churches that are in decline have forgotten how to really listen to the Holy Spirit's cues for turnaround in transitional churches. The church Gordon pastored has effectively brought about personal, spiritual, church, and community transformation. The turnaround is not limited to the church, but it is evident in the overall community transformation and

health, as well. Networking with other community groups and resources is fundamental for establishing effective community bridges and long-lasting transformation.

Dr. Robert D. Lupton, an advocate of the Christian Community Development Association, pushes the concept of community outreach further by challenging common thinking on Christian charity. In his book, Lupton promotes empowerment as a turnaround strategy, moving from *doing for* others to doing *with* them and then enabling them to *do for themselves* (87). This approach goes beyond the initial connection of the church with the felt needs of the community, to push for actual transformation of the community itself, as well as transformation of the individual and the church. Social change is then effected at the local level.

The Chalmers Center for Economic Development in Georgia also advocates empowerment of the communities, beginning with the commitment of the church to holistic ministry. Holistic ministry balances nurturing church members with outreach. It is a ministry dedicated to loving the community and being committed, and it advocates a vision and theology that is integrated into all aspects of the church along with leadership development that moves members to action (Claerbaut 271). Unless a church connects to the community in holistic ways, it becomes detached and increasingly irrelevant, declining instead of growing.

Greg Van Dunk agrees that growing a healthy church in the city requires engagement of certain core principles: neighborhood immersion, needs-based outreach, vital fellowship and indigenous leadership development, and networking with other community groups. In redeveloping a congregation, he stresses “keep[ing] the main thing the main thing,” beginning first with transformation of individuals, then transformation of

the church and out into the community (17-19). Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger also found that individuals and churches experience transformation through a simple, rather than complex, process and, by viewing the whole picture, understand how each part affects the whole in the process of producing life change (25-26). Churches that are healthy and growing have clarity, movement, alignment, and focus (67-68).

The Change Process

The concept that transformation is a gradual process supports Thomas G. Bandy's analysis that change in the local church community must be systemic, owned by the congregation, concentrated, and anchored in the experience of the congregation with Jesus (20-21). It requires intentional and passionate commitment to the transformation process. The first step in the change process is not to cast a vision for the future, but rather, as John P. Kotter from Harvard Business School states, a different factor. After studying organizations that had success with the change process, he concludes that the very first step is to establish a sense of urgency (36). Until the inertia of complacency or denial is overcome, the change process (or turnaround) will not be successful. A visible crisis or confrontation with facts may create a sense of urgency and the realization that a problem must be addressed. Honestly evaluating church statistics or numbers will also give a picture of church health or lack of health (2-7). William R. Hoyt addresses the issue of how churches keep numerical records and apply them to strategize needed changes. This approach is one way the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church evaluates the health of local churches. To accept reality means allowing God to begin to move in transforming ways, instead of trying to stop the inevitable fact of change (Galloway 68). Then genuine transformation can begin.

Peter Bush's insight into revitalization is described as a process of dying and rebirth (34, 39). The term birth indicates that something totally new emerges out of death. Dying is a precondition to resurrection.

Initial responses to the process of death include fear and paralysis, or frenetic action to attempt to halt the steps of decline, but ultimately the stages of death must be experienced in order to experience new life. The stages of denial, anger, and bargaining are ways of maintaining control, followed by despair, which confronts the reality that the future of the church is to be found in total surrender to God. The final stage, acceptance, occurs when the certainty of death is experienced, and the promise of new life on the other side of death appears (Bush, 68-76).

The church has to adapt to the changing environment or it will eventually die. It must become a change agent. Erwin Raphael McManus describes how awakening an apostolic ethos as evidenced in the early Church in the book of Acts creates movement, transformation, and adaptability to a changing environment, thereby enabling the Church to become healthy and effective (101-03). This momentum is both inward and outward, transforming both individuals and the world.

Ruth A. Tucker looks at the particular challenges of what she calls "left-behind" churches, those churches that do not fit the model of the contemporary popular megachurch. Instead of letting these churches die a slow death, Tucker advocates reconnecting spiritually with the life-giving potential of God and finding ways to reconnect with the changing community in hospitality and love (187-201). The size of the church does not appear to be a determining factor in the ability to accomplish successful turnaround.

Diana Butler Bass looks at the process of transformation as a journey with Jesus led by the Holy Spirit in imaginative and intuitive ways. Transformation occurs through connecting with the community with generous hospitality, not as a program but as something central to the Christian way of life, welcoming all into God's transforming love (82). Christine D. Pohl describes hospitality as a life-giving practice, one that joins the physical, spiritual, and social in nurturing ways (13). Hospitality welcomes the stranger and invites fellowship. Churches that have become disconnected from their communities and no longer have life-giving vitality have forgotten the biblical model and imperative of hospitality.

Mike Nappa challenges the church's understanding of hospitality and interaction with culture, encouraging Christians to engage changing contexts and be the Church Jesus calls us to be (122-25). Christians cannot disconnect from the changes around them or remain in a "bubble" of Christianity and still act as a vital transforming influence in communities and the world. Bakke emphasizes that God leads and places churches in community contexts that must be faithfully engaged. The fruit of that ministry is spiritual transformation of persons and social transformation of places (*The Urban Christian*, 204). Bakke illustrates the theology of ministry in urban transitional contexts and the power of transformation by quoting the following hymn by E. Margaret Clarkson:

Our Cities Cry to You, O God

Our cities cry to you, O God, from out their pain and strife;
 You made us for yourself alone, but we chose alien life.
 Our goals are pleasure, gold and power, injustice stalks our earth;
 In vain we seek for rest, for joy, for sense of human worth.

Yet still you walk our streets, O Christ! We know your presence here
 Where humble Christians love and serve in godly grace and fear.
 O Word made flesh be seen in us! May all we say and do
 Affirm You God, Incarnate still, and turn men's hearts to you.

Your people are your hands and feet to serve the world today,
 Our lives the book our cities read to help them find your way.
 O pour your sov'reign Spirit out on heart and will and brain;
 Inspire your Church with love and pow'r to ease our cities' pain!

O healing Savior, Prince of Peace, salvation's Source and Sum,
 For you our broken cities cry—O come, Lord Jesus, come!
 With truth your royal diadem, with righteousness your rod,
 O come, Lord Jesus, bring to earth the City of our God! (206-7)

The hope for transformation of churches and cities is grounded God's strength, power, and presence.

Summary

A broad base of literature addresses the processes of turnaround in transitional churches, particularly in the urban context. The authors reviewed in this chapter demonstrate that the turnaround process is one that is both complex, involving multiple components, as well as creative. Many factors need to be taken into account, and no one perfect course of action fits every context. These factors include the sociological and anthropological particulars as well as the personality and unique characteristics of the city and immediate community itself. Another important factor is the connection of the church with the community in which it is located, and with the larger context of the city as a whole. A culture of change and transformation in the local church determines the particulars of the church structure and ministries to facilitate transformation, along with a foundation of prayer and following the leading and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Components of different approaches can be combined together creatively to fit the particular context with a unique strategy developing for each church and community. In this way churches can learn from others who have gone through the experience of turnaround. The projection was that a core set of components foundational to all

turnaround churches, and principles essential for health and restoration, would be discovered through the research. Further research both in literature and in the field revealed a growing interest in this topic, with pastors authoring books on their experience in the turnaround process. If someone were to replicate this study, additional research that could be done should be an evaluation of the life cycle of churches that went through turnaround, to assess sustainability of the changes made and future implications. This would evaluate the impact of future leadership and community changes on the life cycle of the church, including repeated cycles of decline and renewal over an extended period of time.

Based on this literature as a foundation, this study researched urban churches situated across major geographical locations in the United States. The purpose was to distill common factors while at the same time discovering unique differences that contribute to a deeper understanding and application of turnaround strategies.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to distill common denominators that were essential to the process of changing declining urban United Methodist churches into vital, healthy, transformed faith communities.

The study attempted to identify factors common to churches that have successfully transitioned into revitalized faith communities in the urban setting. It was anticipated that the variables of different approaches used by individual churches and geographical particulars would be creative expressions of foundational principles that were common to all regardless of the variance. The findings should be helpful in guiding other churches going through transition in identifying key foundational factors necessary as well as revealing further areas that needed to be studied.

The qualitative research design was chosen for flexibility and openness to the process as it evolved, and to allow for a more holistic view of the data collected (Wiersma and Jurs, 201). Data collection was through an interactive process of interviews and document collection (written surveys). This process involved overlap of the process of data collection and analysis throughout the process, as the results of the different case studies were compared and contrasted (204-06).

This study focused on United Methodist churches in the United States. Other denominational churches across the United States and the world have successfully transitioned into revitalized faith communities in the urban context as well.

Research Questions

Four questions guided the research on this topic.

Research Question # 1

When did the church begin to decline and what factors were involved?

1. In what decade of the church's history did it begin, and what were several key factors that caused the decline?

Research Question #2

How did the process of revitalization occur?

1. What were your biggest stumbling blocks in the turnaround process?
2. Did the mission and vision of the church change? If so, in what key areas?
 - a. How did you engage the congregation in this process?
 - b. How did you engage conflict to move it toward a positive process?
 - c. Can you qualify the degree of emotional, spiritual, and physical stress that was experienced by the leadership and the laity?
3. What did you stop doing and what did you start doing that was different?
4. Did you have a change in staff—pastor(s) and lay staff—before and /or during the turnaround process? Describe the changes that occurred.

Research Question #3

What impact did revitalization have on transformation of the surrounding community?

1. How did the neighborhood/surrounding community impact the life cycle of the church—when the church was started, at the healthiest season, when decline or plateau began to occur, and after the revitalization.

Research Question #4

What impact did the turnaround have on the spiritual and theological growth of the church community?

1. Were there any changes in lay leadership and leadership development during this time from decline to turnaround?
2. What kind of changes occurred in the worship services in the turnaround process?
3. How do you make and mature disciples? How is this process different from before revitalization efforts were introduced?
4. Other insights /comments?

Population and Sample

Four United Methodist churches participated in the case studies for this research. These churches represent different geographical areas of the United States, are of varied size and cultural context, and represent a broad base of United Methodist churches in the United States. All of the churches are in the urban setting and have experienced proven revitalization after a period of decline, transitioning into healthy, growing churches.

The method for choosing churches to participate in the survey and case studies was as follows.

1. The initial contact letter was sent out in February to United Methodist bishops presiding over key urban areas, in twenty-eight different annual conferences, inquiring about the names of churches and pastors in their jurisdiction who fit the criteria of this study.

2. In March 2007, I received a response from nine bishops with a total of sixteen recommendations of district superintendents or local church pastors to contact for possible participation in the study.

3. A letter was mailed to the group of potential participants, explaining the project, and asking if they would be willing to participate in the future research, which would occur within the following year. A final first contact list of twenty one churches and lead pastors to contact represented positive replies from the group of potential participants.

4. Eleven responses from twelve churches and lead pastors expressed a willingness to participate if needed, and one declined, stating their church did not fit the criteria of the research. A letter was sent in response stating that they would be contacted again in the coming year. This part of the process took place from the months of March through May 2007.

5. A follow up-letter and initial survey was sent to each of the eleven potential case study participants in January 2008, to inquire of their continued willingness to participate in the research. Four persons returned completed surveys, and two expressed a willingness to participate in an interview, but did not return the survey. The responses of the returned surveys provided the criteria that determined which churches would be participating in the four in-depth case studies. The determining criteria are

- An interest to participate in the study and a willingness to participate in a future telephone interview.
- Each church represents a different geographical location within the USA and is located in an urban area.

- The church is part of the United Methodist Church in the USA
- The bishop or district superintendent recommended the church as one that demonstrated transformation, from declining churches to revitalized, growing community churches.
 - The pastor was able to describe the transformation process from first person experience and was involved in the course of revitalization.
 - The pastor agreed to recommend a lay member of the congregation, who could describe the transformation process from first person experience, to participate in a telephone interview.
 - The lead pastors of the four churches chosen to participate in the case study received a contact letter in early November 2008. A copy of the future interview questions was included in the letter. The churches were located in four different geographical areas and jurisdictions of the United Methodist Church: North Central, Northeastern, Western, and South Central. In one church, the pastor who had served during the revitalization process was reappointed to serve a different church. In this case, the current pastor at that church connected me with the prior pastor, who agreed to still do the case study interview.
 - Case study interviews took place from November 2008 to January 2009 by telephone with both the lead pastor and a representative of the lay leadership team, for a total of two interviews per church, for each of the four participating churches. The lead pastor and lay member answered the same questions. Names and identifying data were kept anonymous for confidentiality

Design of the Study

Instrumentation

A variety of different instruments guided the research of the turnaround churches.

The instruments used in this study were review of statistical records, a researcher-designed survey that was mailed to participants, follow-up phone call for collection of surveys, and in-depth phone interviews, with four of the pastors and four laypersons who served in leadership positions in the local church during the transformation process. Qualitative instrumentation was used for the purpose of this study due to the somewhat numerically restricted database.

Reliability and Validity

The review committee at the proposal hearing for this research study gave face validity to the project. This feedback was through a process of review, discussion and suggested recommendations by the committee for changes to be made. Successful completion of the revisions resulted in approval to proceed with the research project and confirmation of the reliability of the research instrument.

Data Collection

A mailing in January 2008 consisted of a survey to all churches willing to participate, and follow-up contact was made one month later for any surveys not returned. The surveys consisted of a series of qualitative questions to gain information directly from the people who experienced the turnaround. The written format of the surveys necessitated the participants to return them to me. The survey and case study

interview format was reviewed by four persons on my research review team to test for validity and inclusion of significant factors, and modifications were added as appropriate.

The four participating churches received a letter and a copy of the future interview questions by mail in November 2008. We established a set time for the interviews, which then took place at the appointed time by telephone. I conducted the interviews with both the lead pastor and lay leader of each of the local churches at separate times. The series of interview questions, identical for all four groups, were in a semi-structured format.

Data Analysis

A descriptive format categorizes the data attained through interviews. Cross-case analysis of the correlative factors and descriptive findings from participating churches revealed recurring factors common to all respondents, as well as trends and unexpected findings unique to particular contexts. Results of this study are summarized in Chapter 4.

Ethical Procedures

Anonymity was ensured in reporting the results of the survey and the interview through the following methods:

1. The names of individuals interviewed were not used.
2. The names and specific locations of the churches were not used.
3. Participating individuals were both laity and clergy, responses not identified.
4. Churches were identified by the following demographics: population of the urban area in which they are located without specifying the city and the jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church in which they are located.
5. The surveys and interview notes were destroyed upon completion of the study.

6. Participants were mailed a copy of the final research results and analysis, as requested.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Decline of the mainline church is an urgent problem that is especially noted in urban and transitional settings. Thousands of churches have experienced decline to such an extent that they reach the death stage in the life cycle of the church. Some churches have successfully reversed the cycle of decline, and brought forth a new season of health, vibrancy, and growth.

The purpose of this study was to distill common denominators that were essential to the process of changing declining urban United Methodist churches into vital, healthy transformed faith communities.

Profile of Participants

Four different churches participated in the research study.

Church 1

Church 1 is located in the Southeastern part of the United States in the Kentucky Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, in an urban area with a population of under 300,000 (US. Census Bureau). The founding church was established 119 years ago, and has a current Sunday worship attendance of 375.

Church 2

Church 2 is located in the North Central part of the United States in the South Indiana Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, in a urban area with a population of under 800,000 (US. Census Bureau). The founding church was established 136 years ago and has a current Sunday worship attendance of 226.

Church 3

Church 3 is located in the Northwestern part of the United States in the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, in an urban area with a population of under 600,000 (US. Census Bureau). The founding church was established 110 years ago, and has a current Sunday worship attendance of seventy five.

Church 4

Church 4 is located in the East Central part of the United States in the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, in an urban area with a population of under 600,000 (US. Census Bureau). The founding church was established 177 years ago, and has a current Sunday worship attendance of four hundred.

Findings report results from telephone interviews with both the senior pastor and a lay member in congregational leadership. All interviews were conducted in the time period of December 2008 through February 2009.

Decade of church history when decline in church vitality began

Each of the four churches experienced periods of decline.

Church 1

Decline occurred first in the 1980s and later in the 1990s, during the eighth and ninth decades of the church's history.

Church 2

The church went through several cycles of decline, first in the 1950s and later in the early 1970s, during the fifth and seventh decade of the church's history.

Church 3

Gradual decline occurred for many years but was most notable in the 1990s, during the ninth decade of the church's history.

Church 4

The church went through decline in the 1970s, during the seventh decade of the church's history.

The Process of Revitalization

Each church in the study experienced a process of gradual revitalization.

Case Study 1

Church one experienced seasons of decline and revitalization.

Key factors of decline. The church was founded in 1890. In the late 1970s, this church was the largest Methodist church in the Kentucky Annual Conference. Two main cycles of decline occurred in the history of the church. In the early 1980s the neighborhood changed, many members moved out of the area into the suburbs, and the congregation was aging. Membership was no longer exclusive to those within walking distance of the church.

The most recent cycle of decline occurred in the late 1990s due to conflict within the church over new attempts to connect with the changing neighborhood. Worship changes consisted of the addition of a Hispanic worship service and a contemporary style worship service replaced the existing traditional one. The two groups were not unified and existed as two separate congregations. Some efforts at revitalization were already underway. The district began dialogue with the church about future options.

In 2002, a decision was made to disband the existing church and to reorganize as a new church start. This decision was, in part, based on the fact that the financial reserves of the church had run out, and the church was forced to look at other options.

Seventy people from the previously existing congregation, and thirty people from the Hispanic congregation joined together to begin the new church start. The groups became unified as one congregation. Some members from the previously existing church left during this time. Other members who had left at an earlier time, in the 1990s, began to return and participate in the new church start. District denominational help enabled the new church start to occur.

Biggest stumbling blocks. The *old church* that now is *new* in many ways presents the challenge of getting people to notice the change and begin attending. They had an overwhelming sense of not knowing where or how to even start the turnaround process.

Changes in mission and vision of the church. The mission and vision of the church experienced a total transformation and continues with transformational revisions at present. The previously existing church was not connected with the surrounding community, and the only vision they had was survival.

The vision of the new church start focused on Jesus' words in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) with a focus on community missions, both locally and abroad. A lead team from outside the church came in to direct the turnaround process, replacing the leadership entrenched in the past history. Only two individuals from the previously existing church were part of the new leadership team. A lead team approach replaced the traditional United Methodist administrative structure in order to keep a

tighter focus in the transition. The lead team consisted of a small coalition whose function was to strategize, plan, and guide the change process. A smaller leadership core helped to decrease the amount of sabotage to the process from those who were resistant to change. The church reverted back to the traditional United Methodist structure once the church grew larger and the accountability process became more complex. The church is currently experiencing another wave of leadership transition as the *new* leaders then became the *old* leaders.

The church returned to the vision of helping and being a part of, the surrounding community. A renewed focus on children and youth included hiring a new youth leader.

Engaging Conflict. A very high qualitative level of stress remained throughout the process, and a general level of frustration still exists at present. The highest level of stress lasted for two years. Corporate and small group prayer was essential to surviving and thriving during the transition.

A popular *legendary* pastor led the church during the glory days in the late 1940s to 1950s, and many well known United Methodist pastors in the Kentucky Annual Conference came out of this church over the past years. The history of the church created difficulties for the congregation to move forward when a decision occurred to change the historic name of the church to a new one with the new church start.

At present, three retired pastors who served at the church in previous years are still members of the congregation. A recent change of pastors occurred during the turnaround process due to high levels of stress and pastor burnout.

Transformational impact on the surrounding community. A new ministry focus, established and expanded outreach to meet the needs of families in the community.

The demographics changed to include more Hispanic and African-American, instead of primarily Anglo, families. Building relationships, meeting specific expressed needs of families in the community, encouraging ownership of new persons in the worship services and ministries, and building trust as being a *safe place*, all impacted the community in a positive way.

The neighborhood, thriving and developing after World War II, began to decline in later years, impacting decline in the church as well. Now that the church is serious about reaching back out to the surrounding community and reflecting the demographic changes, the church is growing again.

Spiritual and theological impact on the church community. Worship: The worship service changed to include a morning service in English and an evening service in Spanish. A collaborative effort with the Hispanic service caused some conflict over the theological understandings of the meaning of membership and baptism theological understandings of the meaning of membership and baptism due to a different denominational background of the Hispanic pastor. The new contemporary services drew increased attendance from the surrounding community. An African service, conducted in French, Swahili, and Lingala expanded worship options.

Discipleship and Leadership development. An informal process of discipleship and leadership development emerged during the transition, based on connecting people with areas of need and mentoring them as leaders. Individuals moved through an informal process of maturing in their faith and leadership ability through experiential mentoring. Discipleship was a rather organic process that occurred naturally. In retrospect, a more systematic process would have been helpful. Presently new membership classes are in

place, as well as a process of intentional hospitality and discipling. Witnessing by example is a big part of reaching the community.

The key reason for growth in individuals and the church as a whole was the decision to “do the right thing” even when it was unpopular and people threatened to leave the church. A clear guiding focus on the Great Commission, and evangelistic outreach in word and deed to meet the needs of the surrounding community, changed the theological focus of the church. An outward rather than inward focus revitalized a missional focus. Decisions based on doing the right thing, and willingness to do whatever was necessary to make it happen was critical, even if some of the membership would leave because of the new, radical, missional focus. The decision to stop worrying about numbers, and to focus on fidelity to the God’s people in the neighborhood facilitated the revitalization process.

Changes in staff resulted. At the onset of the new church start, the only paid person who remained was the office administrator. A recent change in pastors created further change, as well as the addition of an assistant pastor, youth pastor, and children’s pastor.

Additional reflections. The process of turnaround was very difficult for the church members and leadership. In retrospect, the new vision brought excitement and potential for growth, but building on the existing foundations, instead of a total change in administrative structure, might have been more successful.

After experiencing a *big change*, members accommodated more changes in the present and future. They began to realize that as the neighborhood changes, the church has to change if it is to be vital, healthy, and growing.

Case Study 2

Decline began as early as the 1950s in Church 2.

Key factors of decline. The church was established in 1873. In the 1950s, the church was the largest United Methodist church in Indiana. Major cycles of decline occurred in the 1950s, late 1960s, and in the 1970s. This most recent period of decline occurred due to *white flight*, with many families leaving the urban area for the suburbs. The church was not prepared for the changing future. On looking back at the life cycle of the church, the church should have been preparing for revitalization as far back as the 1950s. Demographic changes occurred since the 1950s, when the community was primarily Anglo professionals, to the present, where the community reflects a lower income, African-American demographic. In the late 1960s, decisions made to stay in the community, to work at making the church more vital, to be open to everyone in the community, and to stop being exclusive and become inclusive facilitated a positive forward motion.

No single precipitating factor initiated the revitalization process. Rather, several different points of crisis over the history of the church precipitated decisions made at those points to remain vital.

Biggest stumbling blocks. The biggest stumbling blocks were the myth of the past, lack of faith that God is able to include the people in being part of what he is doing in the present, and the lack of ability to recognize the gifts and abundance that are already in existence. A decision made to stop trying to be guardians of God's grace and to begin treating people as if the church would be poorer without the gifts that each had to offer helped to overcome these barriers.

Other factors include people wanting to live in the past eras of the 1940s and 1950s with resistance to change, as well as financial changes experienced as a result of depletion of trust fund reserves. A lack of district denominational support and uncertainty on what steps to take next to achieve successful turnaround made the process difficult at times.

Several pastoral changes in the 1990s impacted the transition process. Membership declined with a pastorate that did not fit with the church's mission statement; the succeeding pastorate built the church back up and challenged the congregation to make the decision to take hold of their destiny and mentored the church to become more vital. The next pastor specialized in working with churches that needed healing, strengthening the church to be able to begin experiencing change in a more positive way; the current pastor then arrived and was the catalyst to the recent revitalization process. The process, described by church leadership as being organic in nature, moved forward through several cycles of change over time, as opposed to being simply one change movement.

Declining finances and aging buildings added challenges in the process. Since the 1970s, limited available funds to maintain and care for the original church buildings contributed to deteriorating structures. Declining church membership resulted in decreased giving and available operating funds. The congregation resisted using money available through a trust fund, for normal operating expenses limiting cash flow to assist with routine expenditures.

Changes in mission and vision of the church. The church expanded its sense of hospitality, both within and beyond the church walls. An intentional process of learning

to listen to the voices on the margins of the community and recognizing the gifts and abundance of those counted as poor by the world changed the church's vision.

The mission statement established twenty years ago is today an integral part of the church's identity, to seek, welcome and value every individual. Simplified structures ensure that this mission could be lived out in relevant and practical ways in the current context. A new direction of "listening to where the Holy Spirit is speaking and leading" has led to many innovative new ministries and insights into community needs. A new exploration of spiritual gifts, being attentive to where God was at work through demonstration of passion and fruitful ministry, and pastor-led training to discern where God was leading the congregation, all helped to listen to God's direction for the church.

The entire administrative structure has changed around the core concept of being "animators of the Spirit" and actively listening to what the congregation and community is saying. The value that each individual is gifted is celebrated through testimony and highlighting of what the Spirit is doing each Sunday in worship. Vitality of the congregation is measured by fruitfulness and faithfulness rather than by an emphasis on numbers.

During the turnaround, some major changes in staffing occurred. The church's current pastor, appointed to serve at this church in the late 1980s, was instrumental to the transformational process. Actions taken in the first six months after the pastor's arrival at the church resulted in four staff changes. The process took almost three years to build a staff team that fit the new direction of the church and to realign the administrative financial support structures. Only some of the staff are paid, and many of the other new staff positions developed were volunteer lay positions.

Engaging conflict. Conflict was unavoidable in the process. Learning to deal with conflict in healthy ways was the key to engaging in a positive way. The first two years of the transition phase revealed a lot of positive energy, and then stress points emerged as a result of the changes. Conflict resolution came through a process of prayer, discussion, and consensus building and with an emphasis placed on viewing the church as a family. The key was having healthy leadership who could model and lead others through healthy conflict resolution. Immediately addressing conflict helped to resolve it in ways that build trust.

Transformational impact on the surrounding community. Networking with resources in the community transforms the church leadership and way of being the church. An outside community coordinator keeps the church leadership updated on what the community observes and is saying about the church.

The development of *roving listeners*, who go out into the local community to hear the needs and dreams of the neighborhood, leads to insights for new, creative ministries.

The value of a changed attitude toward the neighborhood enables the church to view the surrounding community as a place of abundance, rather than poverty. Grants and support from the church district helped the church financially to build new ministries as a response to the felt needs of the community.

A culture of conversation and faith has reconnected the church to the surrounding community in vital ways. The church has received new persons from the community into formal membership, but many in the community actively participate in the church without becoming members as well.

Spiritual and theological impact on the church community. Worship. The worship service is primarily traditional in style, with some emergent liturgical influences integrated recently. Format did not change much, but a subtle theological change took place. Leadership added a monthly liturgical celebration of the gifts and mission of the congregation. Three worship services are held on Sunday morning, two in English and one in Korean. Members of the congregation participate in writing liturgy and leading worship, with intentionality to engage the congregation in interactive ways. The definition of liturgy as “the work of the people” is lived out in worship. The average Sunday worship attendance has grown to 250 persons.

Discipleship and leadership development. Before the revitalization process, most of the leadership was between the ages of the sixties to eighties, and currently leadership is between their thirties and fifties. During the turnaround, a series of strategic planning meetings facilitated the change process by clarifying the focus, direction, and steps needed to move forward.

Discipleship is a Spirit-led process that organically grows out of hospitality, love, and care of others, and is a continual process rather than a formal process.

Additional reflections. The key factor that differentiated the church from other surrounding churches, and moved them into revitalization, was a dogmatic openness to accept and engage people from the community who had previously been disenfranchised.

Case Study 3:

Decline in this neighborhood church began in the 1950s.

Key factors of decline. The church, established in 1898 by Methodist circuit riders, was considered a neighborhood church. Most families lived within walking

distance, up through the 1950s. The church was very vital throughout these years, and decline began in the late 1970s.

Significant changes have occurred in the surrounding community over time. The pastor describes the demographics of the church location as spiritual, but not churched, very involved in politics and environmental issues. A demographic study in 2000 revealed that 25-30 percent of persons living in the surrounding neighborhood describe themselves as having no religious preference, with the overall urban area considered to be religiously irreverent.

The housing situation also changed. The area became more upscale and housing prices skyrocketed. Newer residents who moved in the area were younger, highly educated, and wealthy. Two schools were closed and converted to condominiums. Many families moved out of the area, and few existing members remained within walking distance of the church. Once populated by church-going middle-class families, the surrounding area became a wealthy community of primarily unchurched young professional adults.

The decision for beginning the process of revitalization came when church membership declined to 30 persons, and 98 percent of the members in worship were over seventy years of age.

Biggest stumbling blocks. The history of the church was a stumbling block, as many of the healthy leadership dispersed from the church, and the remaining core leaders were discouraged and frightened. Many programs over the years attempted to bring about revitalization, and had failed. Only a few healthy people remained at the core of leadership.

Overall church membership was aging, did not want to let go of the past, resisted change, and were opposed to allowing the younger members to take leadership roles.

A strong leadership style exhibited by the new pastors met resistance by some, as forward motion toward change conflicted with their desire to take the church back to where it was in the past.

The facility was aging, and the buildings projected a look from the 1950s, in contrast to the neighborhood that became more upscale and immersed in an *un-churched* culture.

The remaining leadership expressed a desire to grow but did not want to change the buildings or worship style or spend any money on the process.

Changes in mission and vision of the church. A focus on intense discipleship formation for mission with Christ outside the walls, along with developing passionate worship, helped to move the church beyond its walls into mission with the community.

Engaging conflict. Conflict was intense. Leadership had permission from the pastor to make the changes happen, and honest communication and discussion were the keys to resolving conflict.

Through a group process, creative and resourceful ways were found to reach the new goals set. Acceptance and support of the change process took longer than originally expected, along with financial resistance.

District denominational support was positive and helpful during the turnaround, and provided some financial support for leadership training.

Transformational impact on the surrounding community. Mission outreach to felt needs of the community, as well as intentional hospitality, built bridges into the

community. Younger adults felt welcomed into the church, and were immediately connected in ways to get involved. The new sanctuary and style of worship was inviting to the culture of the neighborhood, and people became more comfortable with exploring Christianity in this new church style and approach. More young adults moved into leadership positions as they saw other young leadership in relevant and authentic action living out the Christian life.

Spiritual and theological impact on the church community. **Worship.** The established early worship service was ineffective and discontinued, with the previous two worship services were combined into one. The worship space was the original church sanctuary and the architectural style was not inviting to the younger generations, and the style of music was not connecting with the surrounding community. Worship attendance steadily declined. The existing worship leader was fired and a new music team was hired in order for the one service to become a blended one, with both a choir and praise team.

A new focus was given in worship to the Sacraments, and a weekly, instead of twice yearly, celebration of Holy Communion established this goal. Overall, an emergent style of worship evolved. Young adults were trained as ushers and greeters, and money was invested into music leadership development.

A new sanctuary space, designed for the twenty first century, replaced the older one. This project was financed half from an endowment fund and half from fund-raising. A *Spirit Sculpture* was commissioned for the middle of the sanctuary as a symbol of the church's new vision to follow the flow of the Spirit.

Discipleship and leadership development. All normal church meetings stopped for one year, and time was instead spent in church fellowship, discussion over meals, vision casting, listening, and dreaming.

The pastor and his spouse attended a Bill Easum seminar on the turnaround church in the first three months of his appointment. Seven months later, the existing leadership team met together to become a single functioning unit and decision-making change coalition. The key essentials to the change model they developed are creating a new vision that reflected current values as reflected in a permission-giving structure, developing a vision team to remodel worship, emphasizing a new focus on worship and mission, and modeling a servant leadership model to build trust and to free leadership to engage ministry.

The approach to discipleship training was to model it in action, along with an intense discipleship formation process during the Epiphany-Easter cycle of the church year, “The Way of Jesus.” Members met the challenge to be in mission and create new opportunities to serve hands-on in mission as well as to take time for spiritual reflection.

Changes to the administrative structure included removing two dysfunctional leaders from their position, disbanding the entire lay administrative team, with the exception of the chairpersons of Finance and Trustees, and creating a new team.

The church began to focus on living like a Christian community rather than saving an institution. A few simple outreach mission projects were started, creating early victories. Holistic, healthy spirituality modeled by leadership led to the emergence of new creative and innovative ministries. Instrumental in leading this part of the transition was the associate pastor.

Additional reflections. The process of turnaround is described by the current pastor as the “hardest work ever,” required application of “everything learned in ministry up until that point, and the maturity gained from thirty plus years in the ministry.” Many churches should be closed rather than engage the intensity of the turnaround process.

Case Study 4

Consecutive cycles of decline and renewal mark the long history of this church.

Key factors of decline. The church was founded in 1832, is an historic and significant landmark in the community, and changed names five times in the history of the church at this location. The highest membership point in the life cycle of the church was in 1950 with 1,200 members. By 1968, membership declined to three hundred, then to thirty in 1976. When the current pastor arrived to serve at this church in 1992, discussion occurred regarding changing it to a two-point charge, but the change did not occur.

The neighborhood surrounding the church experienced many different changes over the lifetime of the church. The church is situated two miles from the state line, and about 50 percent of the members come from the neighboring state. Diverse representation of twenty different nationalities created a new demographic.

In the 1990s, the neighborhood was a high crime area with prevalence for drugs and alcohol, broken families, a growing homeless population, and many drug houses. Many families moved out of the area into the suburbs to find single-family homes.

Biggest stumbling blocks. One stumbling block was trying to do ministry in an old building that was in disrepair and falling apart.

The congregation was aging and membership declined at a steady pace. A generational gap existed between the older existing church members and the younger, newer members who began coming to the church. Older members felt a loss of being valuable since the younger members could no longer connect with what worked for them in the past as a church. The existing traditions no longer fit the emerging vision and mission of the church.

Changes in mission and vision of the church. The congregational culture is now composed of primarily younger families in the age range of thirty-five to forty-five. New ideas, technology and out of the box creativity is encouraged. A focus is on reaching out to members of the community in relevant ways. Intentional hospitality welcomes new visitors, and encourages participation in the church community. New guests enter to experience worship, learn to connect with others, and are empowered to go out and serve. As church members began to go outside the walls of the church into the community and connect in relevant ways, outreach expanded. On a parallel track, intentional spiritual development of the existing church members began.

The pastor's function is to preach, teach, direct and equip others to be in ministry highlights a change from the previous pastoral model, where the pastor did most of the ministry alone.

The church's vision is about helping people to become whole and to help broken and hurting people. The development of a 501 3C organization next door to the church enabled the church to expand its ministry to the hurting and hopeless through various outreach programs. The staff that runs this organization is separate from the church staff and is not financed by the church.

Engaging conflict. The level of conflict was mild to moderate in the transition, focusing primarily on the realization that what had worked in the past was no longer effective. This conflict occurred primarily in the area of music due to preference over music and worship styles. A change in the position of music minister helped to diversify the music. The loss of the way things were in the past took time to assimilate.

Intentional communication by the pastor and staff helped members to understand and support the changes that steadily occurred. Achievement of this goal through pastoral conversations with the elderly members was through clarification of why the changes were necessary. An empowerment seminar helped in this process as well as providing leadership training.

Transformational impact on the surrounding community. Currently, the neighborhood has less crime and signs of renewal are emerging. The neighborhood is becoming safer for families and the police have a strong presence in the cooperative community. The local police department has a positive and interactive relationship with the church and is involved in the community in supportive ways, especially with the children and youth.

Local businesses are networking together as part of the overall community revitalization with joint efforts initiated to make the community livable and safe for families. A local business association formed that meets once a month for encouragement and brainstorming of ideas.

When the housing market recently changed, more young families sought shorter work commutes into the city and moved into the surrounding neighborhood. A gentrification process is taking place in which older row houses and local shops are

being renovated. New younger families as well as an established elderly population live in the direct vicinity of the church. Currently, a fight exists to find affordable housing.

A new church building project is slated to begin within the year, which will be a multipurpose building. This building will have affordable housing, transitional housing, apartments, and condominiums. The church space will have flexibility to adapt to varying needs and usage, and all of the offices will be together on one floor. Adjacent to the church is a local community outreach center that is a 501 3C corporation, which partners with the church in meeting the felt needs of the community.

Spiritual and theological impact on the church community. Worship. The style of music changed to reflect the changing diversity of the community, with a new music minister hired to lead this change. The basic format of the worship service otherwise remained the same.

The separate worship group that targeted the homeless population combined with the later worship service on Sundays. A dinner and movie follows the worship service. Sunday morning worship expanded to three different morning service times to accommodate the increased worship attendance.

Discipleship and leadership development. Lay leadership development has trained new members to enter leadership positions, and a permission-giving style enables them to take ownership of the ministries in which they are involved.

An empowerment seminar provided information and discussion on the direction the church was going, and a strategy designed to connect people with opportunities to serve. An ongoing study explores spiritual gifts for ministry in a small group setting and

small group ministry expanded. New members are connected with a mentor to help train in ministry areas of interest and giftedness.

Additional reflections. Transformation is ongoing. As the surrounding community continues to undergo revitalization, new connections open up for networking and addressing community needs. This, in turn, expands the church's hospitality and outreach into ever widening circles of influence and impact.

Summary of Major Findings

Recurrent factors

All four of the churches shared certain factors in the revitalization process.

- Older buildings were in progressive disrepair.
- Money was an issue in declining churches, limiting funds to be used for revitalization.
- Worship attendance and church membership did not grow until the church took intentional steps to change.
- Change was met with varying degrees of resistance, and the intensity of the resistance was unanticipated at times.
- Prayer provided support and facilitated discernment during the process.
- Financial assistance from denominational groups or fundraising was needed to fund ministry changes. Money reserved in established trust funds was protected from use in the present to guard funds for the future, and released very cautiously.
- Changing community demographics influenced decline and revitalization.
- The process of turnaround is difficult and has casualties.

Common denominators and foundational factors for turnaround

Certain factors were commonly found to be essential to the turnaround process.

- Changes made in the worship style or format to become invitational and connect in relevant ways with the changing demographics of the surrounding community.
- Outreach to the community addressing felt needs was an essential bridge to reconnect with the neighborhood outside the walls of the church.
- Structural changes of some sort occurred to the interior and in some instances, the exterior of the church. These changes had symbolic meaning for the church, and were visible signs to the surrounding community.
- Visibility in the community increased as the church made turnaround changes.
- Staff and pastoral changes were catalysts for revitalization.
- Leadership training was essential to facilitate transition and to achieve success in revitalization.
- A new missional focus facilitated lay leadership development.
- Strategies for how to proceed with revitalization were not always clear from the onset, and were intentional and organic at the same time.
- Acceptance of loss (of the past) and letting go were important turning points for achieving a new forward momentum toward revitalization.

These findings will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The results of the study reveal common factors essential to the process of turning declining churches into vital, healthy transformed faith communities.

Changes Made in the Worship Style or Format

Each church made some major changes in the style or format of the worship service. The intentional move to change the existing worship service, or services, was based on missional values. In all four churches interviewed, worship attendance was in gradual decline over many years due to overall lack of church vitality. Changes to the worship service initially led to further reduction in attendance by some members due to the loss of the familiar and comfortable style to which they were accustomed. In all cases, worship attendance began to increase once the overall health of the church improved.

The strongest deciding factor regarding the style and format of worship was to connect in relevant ways with the surrounding community. Changing community demographics strongly influenced the following factors of the new worship service: music style, time of service, languages spoken, worship space design, frequency of Holy Communion, liturgical style and traditional, contemporary, or emergent overall design of the service. The approach to worship was more about invitational hospitality and connection than personal preference for a particular style of service or type of music. A theological shift reflects a stronger value being placed on extending biblical hospitality, being in mission to the community, the meaning and practice of the Sacraments, and speaking the good news of the Gospel in ways that could be heard by the community, in word, action, and symbol. Worship became celebrative, life giving, and vital.

Some changes included adding additional services to address the community diversity and differences in spoken languages, blending multiple services into one service, or stopping a service that was no longer effective in reaching new attendees.

Changes in the worship service created varying levels of conflict within the existing congregation and, at times, met with intense resistance. Intentional effort to move forward with changes in this area came after an urgent realization that the church had to make changes or die. Decreased worship attendance, lack of evangelistic fruitfulness, and denominational accountability were catalysts for establishing new and creative means of contextual worship.

Witness to what God was doing in their midst through testimony and celebration was an important facilitator in the new birth process. At times, special ceremonies symbolically marked these turning points as visual reminders of where they had been and the faithfulness of the God who was moving them forward into the future. One church released balloons following the worship service when they changed the name of the church, symbolically releasing the past. Other examples included engaging laity in theological discussion and creation of some new liturgies to be used in worship, restoring an understanding of the importance of the Sacraments and increasing frequency of Holy Communion, placing a symbolic sculpture of the Holy Spirit in the worship space as a reminder of the work of the Holy Spirit in community, and inviting the homeless community to be a part of the worship feast. Outward signs and symbols were evidence of the inward spiritual changes that were taking place.

In the change process, leadership over the music ministry changed in order to move forward in new directions. Whether the worship style became contemporary or

emergent in format or remained traditional was not as important as discovering what worked to connect with the particular community context the church was currently experiencing. This process involved building a renewed interest and trust in the church by the surrounding community by demonstrating congruency in word and deed, not simply in the style of the worship service offered.

Connection with the Surrounding Community through Outreach

The churches studied experienced a weak or nonexistent connection with the surrounding community during the season of decline, which was one of the main reasons they were dying. Discovery of new ways to build a vital link between church and community became a catalyst for positive and necessary change. The type of outreach was unique to the context and began with hearing and responding to felt needs within the community. Building bridges with the surrounding community was both an organic process and an intentional strategy. All the churches made simple steps initially to connect in some way and then organically discovered unexpected connections. Lewis and Wilkins note the irresistible influence of the church in the midst of community as a result of effective bridge building .(14) All of the churches involved in this study went through the process of redefining being a relevant and connected church within their community context.

A theological shift from maintenance to missional thinking and a new outward focus on hospitality and servant ministry was both invigorating in the move toward health and vitality and difficult. Conflict arose over such issues as a change of life as it was previously known by the church and welcoming new persons into the family, use of

money and reserve funds and learning to let go of control and let God weave a new beginning into being the church.

The congruency of word and deed in this aspect of the life of the church was again essential toward building trust with those disconnected from the church. Participation in outreach ministries and community events allowed space for overhearing the stories of hope and life through witness of the gospel in action. Many individuals eventually joined the church and, for others, it provided a safe place to explore faith and grow in the journey toward Jesus. This type of incarnational presence that witnesses in word and deed is the model of ministry that Delph (152), Hirsh (185), and McNeal (26) emphasize for effective transformation.

Visual and symbolic aspects were again important in the process. For example, the community is able to see church members tending the cooperative outdoor vegetable garden that provides food to the community and working alongside other community leaders to address issues of homelessness. Networking with other outreach ministries and community groups to address common needs built trust and hope for a better future.

Listening to the leading of the Holy Spirit was essential for discerning the felt needs of the community and for open doors to begin new ministries. Intentional conversations with the community and building of relationships yielded fruit in this area. Establishing a non-profit organization to do outreach in community development allows persons and groups in the community to have ownership in the revitalization process. Discovering new ways to engage in conversation about faith was especially challenging in contexts that were indifferent or hostile to Christianity.

The process was not instant and necessitated perseverance and intentionality. Risk taking was an important value in the shift to an outward, instead of inward, focus, due to the uncertainty of what the response would be. The organic process of change was creative and exciting as new discoveries were made and acted on, resulting in a theological shift as the community took leaps of faith to do new things and learned to trust the guidance of the Holy Spirit in new and riskier ways. As the churches restored their incarnational presence and influence in the current context and season, barriers between the churches and communities began to dissipate. In real time, the churches experienced the cycle of moving from decline and death to vitality and growth through reconnecting with their community contexts in which God had placed them. This finding backs up research by Bakke (*Urban Christian*, 63) and Stetzer and Dodson (27) on the urgent need for intentional outreach to the surrounding community. Other authors, such as Sider, Olson, Unruh (15-17, 185) and community development leaders Perkins, Gordon, and Frame (64) all emphasize transformation of the community as part of the impact of a transformational church connection.

Structural Changes in Church Buildings Occurred

Each church in this study was over one hundred years old and had aging, deteriorating buildings. Sanctuaries and other spaces that had once been full were now only partially used due to declining membership. Incoming funds were declining along with a reluctance or resistance to use reserve or trust funds to upgrade or maintain the buildings. The older, empty buildings were visual reminders of the dying process.

Through the revitalization process, new life began to emerge in the physical structures of the church. Existing space was redesigned in appearance or function to work

with the new vision and direction of the church. The use of the buildings became more flexible, serving as a multipurpose space and becoming more accessible to the community.

As more of the churches aligned themselves with the direction of the new vision for the church, funds were released for use. The cooperative effort was a sign of an acceptance and release of the past and a new trust placed in God's provision for the future. In some cases, denominational help became available as an effort to partner with the local church for transformation. One church used the trust fund to remodel the old sanctuary completely into a new twenty first century worship space that was more inviting to the community. Another church in the study utilized the existing trust fund, along with denominational partnering, to renew the physical space of existing buildings to house new ministries. Funding for new building projects also came from outside community development grants and from increased financial giving by the congregation as a result of the revitalized mission focus. The physical changes, as outward symbols of new birth and transformation, caught the attention and interest of the neighboring community.

Church Visibility in Community

Structural changes in the buildings were the most obvious change, but interaction with the community, the development of needs-based ministries and overall hospitality impacted the communities, as evidenced by an increased participation in worship and in the life of the churches. Increased church visibility influenced the surrounding culture by the churches incarnational witness in the midst of everyday life.

Conversations with the community gave needed feedback on a regular basis, so the organic process of growth expanded in multidimensional ways. One church has a layperson whose ministry is to go out into the neighborhood to listen to the stories, dreams, and ideas the community has for a preferred future. This feedback then impacts how the church can be in mission to the community in ways that truly connect.

One church found that partnership with the local police led to lower crime rates and a higher quality of living for families in the community. Visibility through partnering with other community groups and resources has had a positive collaborative influence on the community. For example, the different groups work together to address the issues of homelessness and other social concerns. God's love in action touches the hurting and the broken and opens new opportunities for healing and wholeness. Community networking is also a way to connect with persons who are disconnected from the church but are interested in social concerns and being part of giving back to the community in positive ways. Networking with other groups in the community was essential to a positive compassionate witness and building of trust and relationships between the church and the community.

Changes in Pastoral Staff and Personnel as Catalysts for Turnaround

All of the churches in this study reported a partial or total change of leadership, which included clergy, church staff, and lay leadership. The first catalyst in the process was a change of pastors with the incoming pastor appointed by the denomination with the transformation process in mind. One of the participating churches in this study formally closed and began as a new church restart at the beginning of the revitalization process.

All of the other churches remained as the existing church, and two of the four changed the name of the church.

Seen as a change agent, the new pastoral leadership encountered some resistance by members who were determined to hold on to the past and attempted to undermine forward transformational progress. Leadership changes were also made in the staff and lay leadership positions to align the new mission with the vision of the church. Other influences added to the intensity of the tension associated with change: the memory of influential pastors who led the church in the *glory days*, a sense of betrayal to the saints of old who faithfully served in previous generations and felt a sense of loss, and a fear of the future.

The need for change in staff were necessary for the life and health of the church and was a difficult transition to assimilate. Changes occurred because of declining available funds and a decreased or increased need for staff due to changed mission focus. Additional catalysts to this process were a reduction in church membership, a growing need for new leadership style and gifts, and the need to move in a new direction with support staff that was positive and on board with the change process.

Leadership Training and Lay Leadership Development Facilitating Successful Revitalization

Early in the transformation process, none of the churches in this study utilized a formal strategy for leadership development. Emphasis on training evolved out of a need as the change process was underway. As the administrative structure adapted to the changes, a transformed leadership team to carry forward the new vision for the church emerged. The new missional direction and focus of the church was a catalyst for leadership development.

Leadership training took place in small group settings and informal but intentional discussion groups focusing on the issues of change. In one case, the pastor and his wife through denominational district support attended a seminar on transformation, and on their return, they then led leadership training in the church to equip the staff and lay members.

One church changed from a traditional United Methodist administrative structure to the lead team approach for leadership development in the new church restart. Later, as the church increased in membership, it returned to the original structure. The flexibility of organizational style and leadership training reflects the organic and, at times, unexpected changes that occurred throughout the transformation process. It also reflects a willingness to try something new, even when facing uncertainty about what would be the best way to proceed. All of the participating churches learned to listen to and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in raising up the new leadership team and strategy for change. One of the churches did not change the existing church mission statement but did initiate putting simplified structures into place so the mission could be implemented in practical and relevant ways in the current context.

Discipleship and leadership training worked together simultaneously through an informed mentoring approach. As a need arose, an experienced leader would mentor the incoming leader on a personal basis. Some of the members who were in leadership before the transition stayed and reorganized to work with the new transformation team, but others left the church.

Clear focus on vision and determination to do the right thing even in the face of difficulty kept the leadership teams moving forward. Prayer was a strong support through all phases of revitalization, either through small group gatherings or as a corporate body.

As membership began to grow, new members were assimilated into the church. Discipleship was less a formal process and more an immediate experience as participants grew in faith by parallel, interrelated tracks of discipleship training and hands-on mission experience through mentoring. The two processes worked synergistically to bring new leadership to the forefront.

Strategic planning meetings and seminars were also effective for developing new and existing leaders. All the churches noted a larger percentage of middle-aged to older adults in leadership prior to the turnaround, and during and after the transition, a growing number of younger and middle-aged adults, between the ages of thirty to fifty, moved into leadership positions.

Although the specific approach used depended on the context of the church, all of the participating churches simplified the leadership development process, developed a greater flexibility to allow the Holy Spirit to lead, and utilized a more organic, experiential approach. A simplified process of moving individuals toward deeper spiritual maturity through discipleship, as discussed by Rainer and Geiger (25-26) reflects the fundamental changes churches in this study group made as well.

Ministry moved from being clergy focused to empowering the laity to be partners in ministry. An emphasis on a balanced, holistic, healthy spirituality of leadership, and a permission-giving structure fostered a successful leadership culture.

Moving Through the Grief Process to Experience New Life

Church members had let go of the past and accept the need to move forward into the future before the churches could move in a new direction and focus. The different stages of the grief process were a learning experience for the community of faith as together they experienced the journey from death to new birth.

Some individuals were unwilling to engage the grieving process or change and left the church. Conflict arose even as new life was beginning to emerge. In all the churches, conflict resulted from the new intersecting with the old—moving to letting go of the past and embracing the new. This process applied to all aspects of church life. At times, conflict was very intense with attempts to undermine the pastor or leadership team as a way to block forward progress.

The level of conflict varied in each of the churches, from moderate to intense, and lasted for at least several years during the transition process. Fatigue, frustration, and a degree of burnout occurred with all pastors involved; two of the churches experienced another pastoral change after the turnaround.

The common approach to dealing with the conflict was to resolve issues through communication and Christian conferencing, prayer, accountability, the ability to speak the truth in love, consensus building, a gain in the understanding of being family and in community together, and the setting of an example of healthy conflict resolution.

Mistakes, as well as successes, occurred in the process. Church leadership, for the most part, had not anticipated the duration for which the conflict lasted and the intensity of the conflict encountered at times. Leadership learned how to turn conflict into

something positive in the creative chaos of change and organic process of reorganization, redirecting energy into trust building and cooperative effort.

Common Denominators and Foundational Factors for Turnaround

These factors were common to all four churches in the study in the turnaround process.

- Changes made in the worship style or format became invitational and connected in relevant ways with the changing demographics of the surrounding community.
- Outreach to the community addressing felt needs was an essential bridge to reconnect with the neighborhood outside the walls of the church.
- Structural changes of some sort occurred to the interior and in some instances, the exterior of the church. These changes had symbolic meaning for the church and were visible signs to the surrounding community.
- Visibility in the community increased as the church made turnaround changes.
- Staff and pastoral changes were catalysts for revitalization.
- Leadership training was essential to facilitating transition and achieving success in revitalization.
- A new missional focus facilitated lay leadership development.
- Strategies for how to proceed with revitalization were not always clear from the onset and were intentional and organic at the same time.
- Acceptance of loss (of the past) and letting go were important turning points for achieving a new forward momentum toward revitalization.

Implications

In our rapidly changing urbanized world, ministry form and context is always in the process of change. The four churches studied demonstrated the possibility of adapting to these changes and becoming vital and healthy after a season of decline, but the process is lengthy and difficult. All admitted turnaround is very challenging work and expressed limitations on how many times a pastor can go through the turnaround process before experiencing burnout. The transformation process requires a large investment of time and effort as well as physical, emotional, and spiritual perseverance. The eight emphases that Crandall discusses as necessary for turnaround (136-49) were all present in the success strategies of the churches studied in this research.

The majority of United Methodist churches have existed for fairly long periods of time with the exception of a smaller percentage of new church and mission starts. The implication, then, is that most pastors will be called to serve at least once, and most likely more than once, in a church that experiences the declining or dying part of the normal life cycle of the church. All the pastors in the study expressed that they felt unprepared to handle the intensity of the process and had to learn as they experienced it directly. Engaging the turnaround process contributes to a higher turnover rate of pastors either because of the stress of conflict or the discouragement of overwhelming challenges.

Preparation while in seminary to learn about the turnaround process would be helpful as well as training in the life cycles of a church and the death process. Denominational training through conferences and districts as well as intentional support for the pastors can deflect some of the burnout effects of going through turnaround.

Future research is needed to evaluate the impact of the process on pastors, churches, and communities and to assess if pastors are equipped to lead in times of transition from death to new birth. Implications from the research can provide insight to the annual conference to equip and nurture pastors more effectively for church transformation.

Research to evaluate the long-term response of local church potential to engage repeated life cycles of decline and renewal can help to assess sustainability over time. Exploration into why some churches are able to engage the process successfully yet others end up closing instead can suggest effective interventions that can assist in making this process more successful. Barna (*Turnaround Churches*, 40) and Wood (23) touch on the subject of repeated cycles of renewal throughout the life history of a church, and this cycle must be addressed if long-term sustainability is desired.

In denominations where more churches are older, new ways to keep the church relevant and vital in the current cultural context need to be explored. Findings could assist seminary students to be better prepared to engage ministry in a rapidly changing world.

Limitations

If I were to do the study again, I would look at the entire history of the church prior to the recent revitalization to assess how many previous cycles of renewal had taken place since the founding of the church. Interviewing a new church member or a member of the surrounding community might reveal the effectiveness of the church in connecting in relevant ways that impact the community.

Unexpected Observations

The study revealed some unexpected findings that give insight to the transformation process.

- Discipleship occurred in a more organic, versus prescribed, manner.
- Levels of stress experienced in the turnaround process varied.
- The organizational structure of the church became more flexible.
- Age was an influential, but not deciding factor in the intensity of resistance experienced.
- Moving toward becoming a healthy, holistic church community required intentional planning and energy.
- The name of the church often changed in the transition to revitalization.

The process of revitalization was more flexible and organic in nature rather than a prescribed strategy and affects all aspects of church life. Adaptation to new changes created more flexibility in the administrative structure as well.

A response to the change process required intentional planning of some sort, even though pastors admit they were not clear on the best way to navigate through the changes.

An unexpected finding was that some of the churches had a name change while going through the process of turnaround.

I expected all of the churches to experience the same intensity of stress as they went through the process. Three of the four churches experienced moderate to substantial levels of stress for the duration of many months and, in some instances, years. One church, however, reported only some levels of stress near moderate but that it was resolved fairly quickly. The stress of transformation affects all persons involved in the

church, as well as the pastor and staff. The healthier the staff and pastor are in working through conflict resolution, the quicker the process of conflict resolution is achieved, and with less damage to the individuals involved in the conflict. Intentional energy is necessary to move the church community into being more holistic and healthy.

Contrary to the assumption that older individuals who have been in the church for many years would be the most resistant to change and forward progress, the study found resistance from all age groups, including young adults and young midlife adults. Resistance was, in part, a reaction to the grieving process with difficulty noted in letting go of the past and embracing change, as well as an attempt to maintain control and halt the emergence of a new flexible model of ministry.

Recommendations

Groups that might benefit from the results of the study are the district lay leader and members of the District Church Transformation Team in the Florida Annual Conference. Other pastors would hopefully find the same encouragement I did from hearing the stories of other churches going through the process of revitalization and from seeing that positive forward motion comes out of the creative chaos of change.

I would encourage pastors and lay leadership to study the process of turnaround and natural life cycles of the church together. A deeper understanding of the process of grief and loss in the dying cycle would help others to understand the broader perspective.

I have personally experienced the dynamics of the turnaround process at the local church in Florida where I am serving at the same time I was doing the research for this paper. This first hand experience enabled me to apply knowledge gained from the

research and to keep daily events in the transformation process in a positive perspective and persevere through the challenges.

When I first came to serve at this appointment two years ago, the church was experiencing a transition from a low maintaining church to a dying church. Denial of the reality of the situation kept necessary changes from taking place earlier in the life cycle of the church and slowed down the process of planting new initiatives to engage turnaround. A district denominational leader assisted the congregation in identifying the current ministry context, that of a church in the dying process. This insight then assisted the church leadership in beginning discussion and planning for change initiatives. Insight on the change process by Kotter (36) and Bandy (20-21) reflects the steps of the process that occurred at the local church level where I am serving and were catalysts in the transformation process.

All of the areas noted under the major findings category of the research were experienced in the church where I am serving as well as in the unexpected findings, with the exception of a name change. Essentially, we had to die to the old in every aspect of the church life and allow the Holy Spirit to move us organically into the new birth stage with signs of life emerging from the death. This birth was both challenging and, at times, painful, as well as exciting and encouraging. To experience the parallel tracks of death and new birth at the same time was a period of creative chaos and of deep spiritual and corporate growth in understanding the meaning of being the church in community.

Two years into the process, we are still experiencing remnants of dying alongside streams of new birth. We learned how to deal with conflict in a more positive way and are simplifying every aspect of our church life as we reorganize into a missional

structure. Some members have left the church rather than endure the change process, and a core group now remains that is intentional about turnaround.

I surmise that some churches will not be able to sustain the lengthy and stressful process of revitalization. In these instances, some may close and others may merge with nearby churches or reorganize as a mission. Turnaround is a very intense process, and results do not come quickly. The grieving process cannot be underestimated as a key component in the outcome of how quickly a congregation can move from dying into engaging new birth. The members who do stay through the process truly experience the resurrection power of Christ and the new beginning that God provides.

I agree with participants in this study that pastor burnout or fatigue is an issue, and time management, along with rest and renewal, are essential to keep one spiritually and emotionally grounded. Not all pastors are able to navigate the intense transformation process and may be better suited to pastor churches that have decided not to work on transformation and revitalization, to assist these churches in gracefully letting go and dying with peace. Consideration of these choices will benefit the cabinet when making an appointment to a declining or dying church.

New seminary graduates entering into local church ministry for the first time are often unprepared to engage the intensity of the transformation process. The denominational demographics reveal that the majority of United Methodist churches are maintaining, declining, or dying, therefore an initial appointment to this type of church may escalate the rate of pastor burnout and discouragement, thereby increasing the dropout rate of pastors serving.

Training about the transformation process while in seminary would be beneficial to address this issue, as well as mentoring in the field by other pastors who have engaged the transition successfully. Additional training that would be helpful would be in the areas of conflict resolution, engaging the change process, and ministry in the different seasons of a church life cycle. Adaptability to respond to a changing environment is essential for effective ministry today (McManus 101-03), and pastors must be equipped to evaluate and interact transformationally with these changes.

Changes in pastoral appointments to churches going through the transformational process came from requests from the cabinet, district superintendent, or request by the current pastor. This decision was due to finances, change in congregational size and worship attendance, conflict and pastor burnout, and lack of evidence of fruitful change. Declining financial resources and downsizing of paid staff further impacts the team, limiting resources for funding new ministries. Denominational resources can be of assistance but may be limited due to funds being invested primarily into new church plants over revitalization of declining or dying congregations.

The effect of stress arising out of the conflict and the change process affects all persons involved, including the pastor, staff, and congregational members. A change in vision and direction of the church impacts staff and the functioning of the leadership team. Restructuring and a new focus on the community creates a need for a new model of being the church to emerge that fits the new direction.

Navigating through the grieving process also influences the ability of the pastor and staff to engage the lengthy turnaround process. The intensity of the conflict and loss can be overwhelming for the congregation, staff, and pastor, especially for persons who

have long term connections with the church. This piece of the process is essential, however, to be able to embrace fully the new things that God is bringing forth. A pastor may move if the grieving process becomes too intense and lengthy and if the congregation refuses to engage.

Not all churches can succeed at turnaround, becoming vital and healthy again after a season of decline. Those that do are very intentional in their leadership style and persist in holding strong when the challenges increase. One of the pastors noted, "It is the hardest work ever." I concur that most pastors are only able to go through one, or, at the most, several turnaround experiences due to the intensity of the challenge and the toll it can take on individuals. This feedback concurs with research by Barna (15, 62-68) in that not all churches or pastors have the ability to successfully engage the turnaround process.

Revitalization is imminently needed in churches today, and the process may be easier if it was initiated during the maintaining or healthy part of the church life cycle, instead of waiting until the church is in decline or dying.

Insights gained while doing the research and reading helped me to understand the revitalization process and apply it to the church where I am currently serving. I found many similarities with what I was experiencing in the local church concurrently. It was therefore very helpful to me, and inspiring, to see what God can and will do.

APPENDIX A

Survey Questions

1. How long had your church been in existence before it began to decline and what were several key factors that caused the decline?
2. What precipitated the decision to re-focus for revitalization?
3. What were your biggest stumbling blocks in the turnaround process?
4. Did the mission and vision of the church change? If so, in what key areas?
5. How did the neighborhood / surrounding community impact the life cycle of the church – when the church was started, at the healthiest season, when decline or plateau began to occur and after revitalization?
6. What did you stop doing and what did you start doing that was different?
7. Where there any changes in the lay leadership and leadership development during this time from decline to turnaround?
8. What kind of changes occurred in the worship services in the turnaround process?
9. How do you make and mature disciples? How is this process different from before revitalization efforts were introduced?
10. Did you have a change in staff – pastor(s) and lay staff – before and /or during the turnaround period? Describe the changes that occurred.
11. Other insights / comments?

Would you be willing to participate in a phone interview of 30-60 minutes duration for a more in-depth case study analysis of your turnaround process?

_____ Yes

_____ No

If yes, please note:

Best phone number to reach you: _____

Best time of day to contact you: _____

Email address: _____

APPENDIX B

Case-Study Interview Questions

Research Question # 1

In what decade of the church's history did decline in church vitality begin?

12. How long had your church been in existence before it began to decline and what were several key factors that caused the decline?

Research Question # 2

How did the process of revitalization occur?

1. What were your biggest stumbling blocks in the turnaround process?
2. Did the mission and vision of the church change? If so, in what key areas?
 - a.) How did you engage the congregation in this process?
 - b.) How did you engage conflict to move it toward a positive process?
 - c.) Can you qualify the degree of emotional, spiritual, and physical stress that was experienced by the leadership and the laity?
3. What did you stop doing and what did you start doing that was different?
4. Did you have a change in staff – pastor(s) and lay staff – before and /or during the turnaround period? Describe the changes that occurred.

Research Question # 3

What impact did revitalization have on transformation of the surrounding community?

1. How did the neighborhood / surrounding community impact the life cycle of the church – when the church was started, at the healthiest season, when decline or plateau began to occur and after revitalization?

Research Question # 4

What impact did the turnaround have on the spiritual and theological growth of the church community?

1. Where there any changes in the lay leadership and leadership development during this time from decline to turnaround?
2. What kind of changes occurred in the worship services in the turnaround process?
3. How do you make and mature disciples? How is this process different from before revitalization efforts were introduced?

4. Did you have a change in staff – pastor(s) and lay staff – before and /or during the turnaround period? Describe the changes that occurred.
5. Other insights / comments?

APPENDIX C

Sample Letter Bishop Participation Inquiry

February 23, 2007

Dear Bishop _____,

I am an elder in full connection serving in the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. My current appointment is at Oak Grove United Methodist Church in Tampa, Florida. I am a student in the Doctor of Ministry program at Asbury Theological Seminary (Kentucky campus) and beginning the process of writing my dissertation paper.

My research and paper will focus on urban United Methodist Churches in the U.S.A. that have experienced transformation from declining urban churches into vibrant growing community churches. I will be researching key factors that are common denominators in these urban turnaround churches across different geographical areas of the U.S.A. My hope is that the research will provide some helpful insights for local churches in the urban context in the process of transformation and revitalization.

I would be most appreciative if you would consider assisting me in this academic endeavor. I will be using four case studies in my research of different churches in different geographical areas of the United States and would appreciate suggestions. If there are any churches in your Annual Conference that are urban and have experienced significant transformation and revitalization, I would like to speak to the pastors of those congregations to see if I can include them in my research. The names and specific identifying factors, such as name of the church, persons interviewed, etc., would be kept anonymous in the actual paper, and general descriptors would be used instead. If you

have any contact names of District Superintendents or pastors and local churches that I could contact to request further information, it would be very helpful for me in this project. I can be contacted at the church or at the following parsonage address:

Thank you for your consideration of this request. If you are interested, I would be happy to share with you the results of my study when it is completed. May God richly bless you.

APPENDIX D

Sample Letter Pastor Participation Invitation

March 9, 2007

Dear Rev. _____,

I am a pastor serving in the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. My current appointment is at Oak Grove United Methodist Church in Tampa, Florida. I am also a student in the Doctor of Ministry program at Asbury Theological Seminary and beginning the process of writing my dissertation paper.

My research and paper will focus on urban United Methodist Churches in the U.S.A. that have experienced transformation from declining urban churches into vibrant growing community churches. I will be researching key factors that are common denominators in these urban turnaround churches across different geographical areas of the U. S. A. My hope is that the research will provide some helpful insights for local churches in the urban context in the process of transformation and revitalization.

I would be most appreciative if you would consider assisting me in this academic endeavor. I will be utilizing surveys, interviews and case studies in my research of churches in the different geographical areas. I have heard of the wonderful ministry that your church is doing in this area and would love to discover more about the work at _____ United Methodist Church. I am writing to see if you would be willing to be included in my research for my dissertation paper. I plan on doing the research in the early fall of 2007 and will contact you with further information about this project if you are willing to participate. The names and specific identifying factors, such as name of the

church, persons interviewed, etc., would be kept anonymous in the actual paper, and general descriptors would be used instead. I can be contacted at the following address:

Thank you for your consideration of this request. If you are interested, I would be happy to share with you the results of my study when it is completed. May God richly bless you in your ministry.

APPENDIX E

Follow-up Pastoral Participation Letter

January 2008

Dear Rev. _____,

In March of 2007 I initially wrote to you regarding a research project I was planning to do. I am a D.Min. student at Asbury Theological Seminary (Kentucky campus) and have now reached the point in the dissertation writing process to begin my research. When I contacted you in 2007, you expressed a willingness to participate in my future survey and I am very appreciative of your assistance.

My research and paper will focus on urban United Methodist Churches in the U.S.A. that have experienced transformation from declining urban churches into vibrant growing community churches. I will be researching key factors that are common denominators in these urban turnaround churches across different geographical areas. My hope is that the research will provide some helpful insights for local churches in the urban context in the process of transformation and revitalization. I will be happy to share the results of my study with you when it is completed, if you are interested in receiving that information.

I have enclosed a brief survey. If you are willing to participate, please complete the survey and mail it back to me in the enclosed envelope. If you note that you are willing to participate in a phone interview, I will be in contact with you to arrange the interview at a time convenient for you. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes and will be in a case study format. Thank you for your help with my research in the area of urban church revitalization.

As a United Methodist pastor serving in the Florida Annual Conference, I have moved to a new church appointment. Please note that my contact information has now been updated – church information as noted above; email contact:_____.My initial contact with you was from Tampa, FL and now I am living and serving in Lake Worth, FL.

May God richly bless you in your ministry.

APPENDIX F

Case Study Participant Follow-Up Letter

November 5, 2008

Dear Rev. _____,

It has been a while since I have last been in contact with you. When I wrote to you in January of 2008, I updated you on my proposed research project for my dissertation paper. I am still working on project through Asbury Theological Seminary, and am currently serving as pastor of St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Lake Worth, Florida.

My research and paper will focus on urban United Methodist Churches in the U.S.A. that have experienced transformation, from decline into vibrant, growing community churches. I will be researching key factors that are common denominators in these turnaround churches across different geographical areas. My project is now at the place where I can actually begin the research, which will consist of four case studies, conducted through an interview process.

The interview will last approximately 30 minutes, and will be conducted over the phone. The name and location of the church will remain anonymous in the dissertation document. I have enclosed a copy of the questions that I will be asking.

When you responded to the letter I sent out early in 2008, you expressed a willingness to participate in the case study interview. This will be a tremendous help to me, and I am hopeful that you will consider assisting me in this project through the interview process. If there is an individual in your congregation who would also be willing to participate in a brief interview (same questions), that would add an additional

perspective to the case study. At the completion of my project, I would be happy to mail you the results of the study, if you would like to receive it.

If you are still willing to participate, please email me at _____ or write to me at the above address, so that I can set up a time that is convenient for you, to conduct the interview. I will follow up this letter with a phone call next week.

Thank you and may God richly bless you, and your ministry.

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