

## ABSTRACT

### CHRISTIAN UNITY IN CHURCH MERGERS: THE MISSING PEACE

by

Scott K. Stephans

Merging two or more congregations is usually undertaken with a serious eye to achieving more effective ministry. Yet only a casual nod is given to achieving unity. Larger numbers of people mean higher attendance, stronger finances and more volunteers. So, in general, the goal of a merger is to enhance the bottom-line metrics in order to avoid closing struggling churches. But rarely does the merger process help the larger numbers of people (often strangers to the other congregation) build healthy Christ-centered relationships.

The purpose of this research project was to discover whether Christian unity was preserved during the merger of Indiana United Methodist congregations by surveying pastors and congregants who have experienced merger or merger attempts in order to identify best practices for promoting unity between members of the merging congregations. Out of the twenty-eight churches formed by merger, six became participants. From those six churches, six pastors and forty-nine lay persons were involved in sharing their experiences. The pastors were interviewed and each shared their endorsement for the nature of the project. The lay persons filled out a questionnaire and attended a focus group discussion.

This project resulted in two key findings and three best practices. The first finding was that church mergers tend to focus on growth and mission, giving little attention to building relationships. The second finding was that church mergers do little to identify and promote Christian unity. The research pinpointed three best practices that help merging congregations cultivate unity: working together in various ministries, participating in small fellowship groups, and utilizing positive leadership that advances a Biblical vision of unity.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled  
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THE MISSING PEACE**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

UMC = United Methodist Church

UM = United Methodist

DHUMC = Dearborn Hills United Methodist Church

NIV = New International Version

NLT = New Living Translation

MSG = The Message Translation

NRSV = New Revised Standard Version

*Book of Discipline = The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **NATURE OF THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

The “united” in the United Methodist Church comes from the 1968 merger of two denominations: the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB). The Methodist Church was formed in 1939 by the three-way merger of The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Protestant Church and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Even the EUB Church was a 1946 merger of The Evangelical Church and The United Brethren Church. Merging churches together is in the DNA of the UMC.

So, when two or more UM congregations consider merging, they are certainly living into their heritage. Yet there are many other powerful forces at play in a merger, some healthy and some not. When churches merge there is hope that the future together will be better and brighter and more effective than if those churches continued on their own. Sometimes that happens and sometimes not. This project was about examining one of those forces at play when churches merge – unity.

After a brief autobiographical introduction, the purpose, research questions, rationale and research methodology for this project are outlined below.

#### **Personal Introduction**

I am an elder in the UMC, ordained in 1983. I began my pastoral ministry as a student pastor of a three-point charge in 1978. I have served five fulltime appointments as the lead pastor in Indiana congregations. Since 2005 I have served the Dearborn Hills United Methodist Church in Bright, Indiana (twenty miles northwest of Cincinnati).

When the news of my appointment to DHUMC became public, I received some calls from concerned friends. A previous pastor of DHUMC called to say he had a liturgy of healing and unity that he thought I might be able to use when I arrived at my new appointment. A former District Superintendent called to ask what I knew about DHUMC. He informed me that this congregation had a reputation among the Conference leaders of being a rough appointment. He suggested I be more cautious in the future of the appointments I accept. The current pastor at that time (the person I followed) met me for lunch to warn me about some of the difficulties he experienced at DHUMC.

The Dearborn Hills church is a 1982 merger of two UM congregations – Bright and Logan. The feeling I was getting from these “well-wishers” was that the merger did not go well. Twenty-three years later unresolved issues still haunted the congregation. For three months before I moved to Bright I kept hearing about a can of worms that lingered at DHUMC causing problems that had not been successfully addressed. My plan was to go in love the people, preach the Word and see for myself what was going on.

The “honeymoon” went well and lasted longer than most. Growth was taking place. I led the leaders through several months of reflecting on the church’s present condition and dreaming about the future. That laid the foundation for a steering committee to do some serious visioning (Stanley, 16) and strategic planning. In 2008 DHUMC launched out on a new voyage designed to bring spiritual growth to her members and improve the effectiveness of the church’s ministries. But near the end of 2009 the spooks began to rise. A small cadre of we’ve-never-done-it-this-way-before grumblers spread their negative influence among the mates. Soon the wind of the Spirit quit filling the sails of the church. Small fires broke out on deck. The captain was

pierced. By mid-2010 the ship was in a fog – dead in the water, not knowing which way to go.

“The ship set ground on the shore of this uncharted desert isle” (from the theme of the television show *Gilligan’s Island*). But instead of getting along with the Skipper and other leaders, some of the castaways were uncooperative, ignoring any attempts to repair the ship and move it forward. As I observed who was doing what, I noticed that those impeding progress were from just one of the merged congregations and not from the other. I began to pay more attention to what those early well-wishers had tried to warn me about. It was certainly true: DHUMC had issues (what church doesn’t?) and suffered dysfunction as a church family.

Where did that dysfunction come from? Did something happen in the merger that may have caused pain and brokenness? Was there ever a time of healing? How can churches which have merged or are considering merger deal effectively with the person-to-person issues – not simply with the programming, financial, missional or spatial issues? These questions motivated the research in this project.

### **Statement of the Problem**

“United” – the word is applied to names of countries and denominations and sports teams and corporations. It’s applied to marriage, politics and business. It conveys a desirable unity of purpose and a cohesive union of people. Yet it is nearly impossible to achieve in a lasting way. United failures are widely scattered throughout history. Civil wars divide countries. There are more Americans who have experienced divorce than those who haven’t (U.S. Census, May 2011). Between seventy and ninety percent of all business mergers and acquisitions fail after five years (Wharton School of Business,

2013). On the church front, the United Methodist Church appears to be far from united (Renfroe, 23).

The problem applies to merged congregations as well. Only 20% of UM church mergers are successful (Miller, “UM Mergers”). That’s an embarrassing problem for the church. The strength of the church’s witness is in the unity of her people. The most miraculous feature of the church is how different folks from all walks of life can come together and sing together and share together and weep together and serve together and stand together because – for no other reason – they are one in the Lord Jesus Christ. So, when church mergers fail something has gone wrong.

There are plenty of merger models that help local congregations take healthy steps toward a successful merger. At an organizational level most models help process the logistical details of combining leadership, sharing space, casting a common vision, and coordinating the timing, the legal matters and the necessary communication. That was not what this research was about. This research was focused on the deeper dimension of the unity or the lack of unity among the church members that contributed to the success or failure of the merger.

### **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this research was to discover whether Christian unity was preserved during the merger of Indiana United Methodist congregations by surveying pastors and congregants who have experienced merger or merger attempts to identify best practices for promoting unity between members of the merging congregations.



## **Research Questions**

To provide a more comprehensive model that included relational practices, this study needed to go beyond identifying best organizational practices of church mergers. The research was focused on the personal and spiritual dynamics involved in Christian unity and fellowship. Therefore, the research questions center around the personal impact of the merger upon individuals and the relationships between members.

### **Research Question #1**

What expectations about unity were present going into the merger?

### **Research Question #2**

What steps were taken during and following the merger to promote unity and fellowship?

### **Research Question #3**

What joys and/or struggles occurred in relationships between the people of the merged congregations?

### **Research Question #4**

What best practices promote unity among church members of merging congregations?

## **Rationale for the Project**

Successful church mergers are important for many reasons. Congregations, especially of the same denomination, near each other which have dwindling attendance, meager resources and ineffective ministry are prime candidates for merger. A successful merger of these congregations can reverse the trend toward irrelevance and form a church with adequate space, finances and personnel which then can be a significant force for

good in the community. Combining forces of smaller congregations into one large church avoids the pitiful but eventual death of the small churches and brings to life a large phoenix more powerful, beautiful, relevant and effective than the small churches could ever have been on their own.

Many studies have been conducted, and many books have been written about church mergers. Recently, Dirk Elliott has written a book on his ten-year study of mergers that hit close to home, namely UMC congregations in Ohio and Michigan (Elliott). His model for *Vital Mergers* reflects many of the best practices found by other researchers in this field. What seems to be missing in this research, and across the board, is a serious reflection on the spiritual and relational dynamics that affect the people involved. Many studies refer to communication and consensus and community. But few probe further into harmony and peace, or prejudice and reconciliation, or fear and anger, or faith and love.

This study was not an attempt to reinvent the merger wheel. This study was to look harder at the personal dimension of merging groups of people. Church is more than attendance, buildings and cash. Church is the people. Her members are persons who have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, who seek to follow him in holy obedience and who share him – his grace and truth and love – with others through faithful ministry. Without people there is no church. Without people who are invested in loving relationships there is no loving church. A church merger that does not pay attention to the people's spiritual and relational health during the uniting process will struggle to succeed.

Jesus Christ commissioned the church to make disciples (Matthew 28:19). He revealed the litmus test of that commission: “By this everyone will know that you

are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 15:35)<sup>1</sup>. Any evaluation of success in the church must take seriously the relationships between church members.

The Apostle Paul needed to address the issue of strained relations between church members in the early stages of Christianity. The young church at Corinth struggled in its witness because church members were not sensitive to building healthy relationships. They were playing their new-found faith cards in ways that caused division. So, Paul played the trump card of love. “If I have faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Dysfunction in the church family is cause for great concern. The Lord of the Church addressed the matter with seven churches in chapters two and three of the book of Revelation. The dysfunction in those ancient churches took many forms such as the lack of love, disobedience, false teaching, tolerating evil, and arrogant complacency. Such dysfunction diminished the light of the church’s witness. In each case, churches were exhorted to shape up and correct the problem. Failure to do so would result in some disciplinary action from above.

The nature of the church is to be the Body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:27, Romans 12:5, Ephesians 4:12, Colossians 1:18). Like in a human body, for the church to function properly the parts (members) must cooperate and coordinate with each other. When congregations merge there’s a grafting together of different body parts. All sorts of things can go wrong. Rejection and infection and disease can result from this social-surgical union. Therefore, the merger procedure needs to prescribe the antibiotics of grace, patience, and acceptance.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references are quoted from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® unless otherwise noted.

This research investigated the personal and relational aspects of church mergers to see what extent love and unity were enhanced, promoted, preserved or ignored, and what difference that made to the success of the union.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

- **Church/Congregation**

A church or congregation is a diverse group of people with various backgrounds, of a variety of ages and races, in different careers and stages of life who believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that comes together to worship the Lord Jesus Christ, to grow in the Christian faith, to nurture the presence of the Spirit, to fellowship with one another, to proclaim the Gospel of Salvation through Jesus Christ, to oppose evil, oppression and injustice, and to work to relieve poverty and suffering around the world.

- **Merger**

Merger is a union of two or more congregations to form one church.

- **Unity**

Unity is a congenial togetherness of a blend of people who get along peaceably despite their differences and who cooperate harmoniously to achieve common goals.

- **Fellowship**

Fellowship is an aspect of congregational life where persons show genuine care for one another through love, support and prayer. Fellowship is an intentional ministry of the church, often organized through small group gatherings.

- **Relationship**

Relationship is two or more persons sharing a connection, ideally in a positive fashion where mutual edification and encouragement and love are demonstrated and expressed.

### **Delimitations**

The focus of this research was on congregations of The United Methodist Church in the state of Indiana which merged or attempted to merge together. Interviews were conducted with pastors, church members and Indiana Conference leaders.

This focus narrowed the scope of the project to provide a realistic framework from which to draw practical applications. Therefore, not included in this research were mergers of congregations from other denominations.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

The literature consulted in this research covered three broad areas: the theology of church unity, the practice of Christian fellowship, and the sociology of merging different groups of people. Within these areas a variety of topics emerged: church unity, church health, spiritual formation, community creation, conflict resolution, faith application, group dynamics and interpersonal relationships.

Reading included books, journal articles, doctoral dissertations and theological reference volumes. Most authors consulted were Christians writing to bring clarity to the identity, mission and practice of the Church. Other authors were from the business world writing about mergers, management and negotiations. And still other writers shed light on the human dynamics of personal relationships.

These authors provided deep insight into church mergers and Christian unity: Dirk Elliott, Lyle Schaller, Jim Tomberlin (with Warren Bird), and Doug Anderson were helpful. From the world of business and industry Anthony Buono, Peter Drucker and Roger Fisher explored the human dimension of mergers and acquisitions. Theological insight was gleaned from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Walter Brueggemann, James Gustafson,

Gerhard Lohfink and Ben Witherington III. Many authors wrote about the nature of unity and the practice of fellowship. Some of those included: Robert Banks, Jerry Bridges, Randy Frazee, Gordon MacDonald, Scot McKnight, Alan Thompson, Robert Worley and Phil Yancey.

### **Research Methodology**

In addition to the reading, information was gathered by research in the field. The Review of Relevant Literature provided the framework for understanding unity and mergers. The biblical and theological foundations were constructed through pouring over the many books and articles on the topics of church unity, church health, Christian fellowship, spiritual formation and the psychological and sociological dimensions of group dynamics. The reading helped formulate the questions which needed answers from those who had experienced a church merger. Participants were asked questions through several formats: interviews, questionnaires, surveys, and focus groups. Other data about the merger process was collected through reading the minutes of the meetings leading up to the merger.

### **Type of Research**

The type of research for this project necessitated qualitative research. Church unity is predominantly relational in nature. Relationships are un-quantifiable. No statistical analysis can capture love and grace and harmony. Therefore, the research needed to be narrative-based.

The qualitative research approach in this project chased the rabbit down three holes: written responses to questionnaires, personal interviews, and focus groups. Evaluating the tangibility of unity required persons to reflect on relationships with other

church members, on building relationships with strangers, and on the effectiveness of church fellowship programs to help groom relationships. The various methods used to collect those reflections provided several solid avenues for the data to be clear and accurate.

### **Participants**

Persons involved in the research for this project were those present when the church they attended decided to merge with another church (or churches). Collecting data from persons who experienced the merger process was a priority for this research. Therefore, church members and current pastors of twenty-eight merged UM congregations in Indiana were selected to be interviewed. They were: Unity Chapel, Dearborn Hills, Kingsland, Ossian, Keystone, Lancaster Chapel, Goodland County, Anderson New Horizon, Community, Marion Christland, Rossville, Royal Center, Elkhart Faith, Hope, Northside, Logansport Crosswind, Hillside, Living Water, Gary Christ, Hammond Hyde Park, Modoc, Redkey, Granger Good Shepherd, Marion God's Grace Ministries, New Beginnings, Anderson Cross Roads, South Bend First, and Park Memorial. For a more detailed account see Appendix A

### **Instrumentation**

To answer the research questions four instruments were created. The first instrument was a set of interview questions for pastors. It was important to start with the pastor to receive permission to proceed with the research pertaining to that congregation. Also, the pastor's perspective on the merger and how things have gone since the merger was valuable.

The second instrument was a document analysis of the historical minutes of meetings leading up to the merger. Administrative Board and all-church meetings of each church involved in the merger, and joint meetings of both (all) merging congregations provided data around discussions and votes about the merger. It was important to evaluate the atmosphere in which the merger took place.

The third instrument was a questionnaire sent to participant church members who experienced the merger. This written tool asked some before-and-after questions about fellowship programs administered by the church, and some open-ended questions about harmony and relationships in the church. It was important to determine the intention of the churches to provide a way for its members to relate, and to assess whether or not participants believed unity existed in the church members' relationships.

The fourth instrument was a focus group comprised of some of those who filled out the questionnaire. Discovering the presence or absence of the relational dynamic of Christian unity required a face-to-face discussion. This conversation provided in-depth insight into relationships and fellowship in the church.

### **Data Collection**

The instruments outlined above provided data related to the mechanics of merger and the presence of unity. The pastoral interviews occurred first in February and March and were done by phone. The document analysis was next. PDF documents of meeting minutes were sent via email. Questionnaires were mailed in April to the appropriate list of members secured from the pastor. Responses were returned in self-addressed, stamped envelopes. Focus group discussions with church members were held on location in May, June, July and August. Arrangements were made to discuss the merger with small groups



of five to ten church members who were present during the uniting process. To accurately document the input, these conversations were videotaped with the permission of the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The persons questioned in this research gave both objective information and subjective reflections about the unity aspect of the merger. Honest conversation brought out the colors of the merger through the personal recollections of those involved. Here is where the success or failure of the unity aspect of the merger showed up.

Because the data was acquired through qualitative methods the analysis revealed patterns by which unity within a merger was stimulated or suppressed. The patterns were aligned into processes and categorized around theological themes and relational themes. Then the data was evaluated as to its value in promoting unity and coded as healthy or unhealthy.

A module of healthy practices for promoting unity was developed from the analysis. That module can be used as an add-on within various effective organizational models of church merger.

### **Generalizability**

The steps taken to collect the data for this research project were simple and straightforward. The analysis resulted in findings that are helpful to building relationships and can be applied to all sorts of church merger settings. Since the general purpose of the project was to determine the health of relationships during an event where two different people groups came together to form one new group, the results may apply outside of the church realm. However, few other groupings of people are as completely identified by

their unity as the church. For example, business mergers may find this research helpful in building harmony between newly united employees. But harmony is not the bottom line of business. Business is far more focused on production and profit than on relationships. Yet wherever churches merge – within the same denomination or between denominations – unity is critical. Love and harmony, peace and forgiveness are the defining hallmarks of the church. Without unity the church loses its identity.

### **Project Overview**

Looking ahead: Chapter Two, “Literature Review for the Project,” provides the frame within which to discover the Biblical, theological, and theoretical foundations for understanding Christian unity and its role in church mergers. Chapter Three, “Research Methodology for the Project,” provides the canvas upon which the data will be displayed – the what, the who, the how, the when and where of the research methodology. Chapter Four, “Evidence for the Project,” provides the many colors of the research findings that resulted from the canvassing of the participants. The closing Chapter Five, “Learning Report for the Project,” puts it all together and provides the concluding interpretation of the big picture, final synthesis, and recommendations.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

#### Overview of the Chapter

The unity of the Christian church has been well discussed over the past century, with most of the conversation following the course of ecumenism (Küng, *The Church and Theology for the Third Millennium*; Marty; Matson; Pannenberg; Tjørhom; Hunt; Tveit; Best). The effective witness of the church would certainly be enhanced if the Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Pentecostals, Lutherans and Catholics would overcome their theological and polity differences to worship and serve together with a oneness that would wow the world. That is not the focus of this research.

The unity *within* a Christian congregation affects the witness of that local parish. “The proper ecumenical task is not to create church unity by denominational coalescence, but to recognize the unity that already exists and to give it worthy expression on the local level” (Packer, 247). Though much has been written on the subject theologically and theoretically, very little practical direction exists on how to identify, achieve and preserve unity within a church. That issue comes closer to the focus of this research. More specifically, when two congregations merge for the sake of being more effective together, what happens to unity?

What follows is an attempt to do three things. First define Christian unity (or oneness), second consider how fellowship (or community) is established in a congregation, and third discover what dynamics are involved in unifying two groups of people (merger). The perspectives offering the best peek inside these matters will come

from Scripture, theology, ecclesiastical practices, relationship science, sociology, and the world of business.

This chapter will conclude with the direction in which the literature has pointed the research. The focus and parameters of this project will follow from the foundation set by the in-depth analysis of the literature.

### **Biblical Foundations**

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:21-23).

This prayer of Jesus for the Church reveals the extraordinary priority the Lord places on the unity of believers. His desire for oneness among believers is so deep that he compares it to the incalculable bond within the Trinity. His anticipation of the power of oneness is so high that he proposes the salvation of the world depends on it!

We can dream the impossible dream of all Christians everywhere for all time living and loving and worshiping and serving in perfect harmony. We can only imagine the incredible transformative effects that would have in our world. But it is not happening. The fits and starts of the ecumenical movement through the centuries have failed to produce a viable Christian unity. Still, Jesus's prayer remains.

His prayer is not for some distant eschatological era. He prays for unity so that "the world will know that you sent me" (John 17:21b). This is a prayer for the church today. Whatever ground can be gained in the pursuit of Christian unity, ecumenically or otherwise, is the work of the Father in conjunction with the Son's prayer. One

congregation living and loving and worshiping and serving in harmony with one another will help the world know the reality God.<sup>2</sup> “The unity of believers will be explicable to the world only on the basis of the divine love” (Morris, 736).

To that end it’s important to interpret the Biblical concepts of unity, fellowship and togetherness as they apply to the local congregation. Those terms are used often to describe values held dear in churches. It’s critical, then, to explore the Scriptures to build a strong understanding of Christian unity.

### **Unity**

At the outset of the Old Testament, Creation conformed to a unity designed by its Creator. Out of an empty, meaningless chaos (Genesis 1:2) God brought order and beauty and purpose. Sun and earth and sea and sky and plants and animals and human beings thrived together in divine harmony. In God’s opinion all this was “very good” (Genesis 1:31).

Aloneness was not an option. Human beings were blessed to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 1:28). Unity was built into the family relationship between Adam and Eve. “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Genesis 2:18). Beyond the symbiotic harmony with nature, human beings were designed to live in unity with other human beings. The marriage pronouncement of Genesis 2:24 continued to reflect God’s oneness scheme: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”

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<sup>2</sup> God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Father Almighty, and Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, and the Holy Spirit, as affirmed in the Apostles’ Creed.

But this pristine unity was disrupted when the self-centeredness of sin corrupted the relationship between God and humans. Adam and Eve decided that their own opinion was more important than God's command, and so they disobeyed the Lord. Unity was shattered. "So the Lord God banished them from the Garden of Eden" (Genesis 3:23, NLT). The seismic effect of this brokenness violently shook every following generation. Cain killed his brother Abel – no unity there. Just before the flood in Noah's day, "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5) – no harmony with God there. In Babel people decide to unite, but for all the wrong reasons. Their builders' union determined to organize the construction of a tower that would make them famous for being the gateway to heaven (Genesis 11:4). God would have none of it.

The blessed "be fruitful and increase in number" plan backfired. Unity between God and humans, and between men and women had horribly deteriorated. But then God established a new route for this plan to succeed. The Lord chose Abraham. The Lord made a solemn covenant with Abraham to build a relationship with him and with his descendants that would bring into existence a unity based on faith, founded up the initiative and the sovereignty and the grace of God.

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God" (Genesis 17:3-8).

This new “many nations” of Abraham’s descendants first came to be known as Israel. After a brief stint in the land of Canaan, and a search for drought relief, the Israelites ended up in Egypt. Initially, working for the Pharaoh was peaceful and providential due to God’s hand in the life of Joseph. The fruitful covenant with the Lord prospered, “the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them” (Exodus 1:7). But after Joseph died, the Egyptians became nervous at the proliferation of the Hebrew people. For the next four hundred years the Israelites were forced to hard slave labor. Unity was in danger. The ruthless Pharaoh decreed death to all newborn male Israelites (Exodus 1: 22).

Then God raised up a deliverer in Moses who led God’s covenant people out of Egypt, rescued them from slavery, and set them on a course to inhabit the Promised Land. Together they experienced the Passover, eluded Pharaoh and the Egyptian army, and safely traversed the parted Red Sea. Together they were led by pillars of God’s presence, survived the harsh wilderness conditions, defeated enemy threats, and received the covenant commandments. As long as Israel trusted the Lord and kept focused on following his instructions, they enjoyed a blessed togetherness with God and with each other. That unity was bound up in their identity as a people who belonged to God. “You are to be my holy people” (Exodus 22:31).

As the Jews prepared to enter the land promised to them by God, Moses reminded them “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). This call established the basis for unity among God’s covenant people (Bartles, 720). The nature of God revealed to the descendants of Abraham was the model for the character and behavior of the people who belonged to God. “I am the Lord your God; consecrate

yourselves and be holy, because I am holy...I am the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44-45). The Jews were to reflect the reality, the nature, and the behavior of the Lord by who they were and how they lived. This reflection of God became visible in their oneness as a nation.

As long as the Israelites stayed focused on God their unity as a nation was evident and secure. When they obeyed the commands of God good things happened. When they worshiped only the Lord God good things happened. Their solidarity as the unique people of the one true God was important to their success as a nation. Not every generation got it right. Often poor leaders who rejected God’s commands led the nation into dark, unblessed days. Yet all along God worked by his grace to keep unity intact. Even after the nation split into northern and southern kingdoms unity was still a high priority for the Lord. “Also in Judah the hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the Lord” (2 Chronicles 30:12).

Leadership in ancient Israel was important in the pursuit of unity. Under kings David and Solomon “all Israel” fought together and worshiped together and celebrated together. “All Israel came together to David at Hebron and said, ‘We are your own flesh and blood’” (1 Chronicles 11:1). Good, obedient and faithful kings led God’s people in ways that brought the nation together. Unity flourishes in the defeat of enemies, in the takeover of Jerusalem, in the homecoming of the ark, in the building of the Temple. Even in unstable and divided times the rule of a powerful king – a Messiah – gave God’s people hope (Thompson, 30-33).



The prophets in Israel envisioned glorious unity in the days ahead as part of God's plan for his people. Isaiah prophesied, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox" (Isaiah 11:6-7). Jeremiah encouraged those in exile – those displaced from their homes and homeland, those separated from friends and family – "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'When I bring them back from captivity, the people in the land of Judah and in its towns will once again use these words: The Lord bless you, you prosperous city, you sacred mountain. People will live together in Judah and all its towns – farmers and those who move about with their flocks'" (Jeremiah 31:23-24). Even the final word of prophesy at the end of the Old Testament in Malachi speaks about unity. "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:5-6a). And, as if that weren't enough to impress the importance of unity in the lives of God's people, Malachi finishes that final verse with this stern warning: "or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." In the vernacular of a frustrated parent, it seems as though God is saying to the covenant people who live by faith, "Listen to me: you get along together and love one another; or so help me I will smack you upside the head!"

In fulfilling the prophesy of Malachi about Elijah, John the Baptist called people to prepare for the coming of the Lord. From towns and countryside people came together at the Jordan River to be baptized. A spiritual revival took place through the preaching of John and his call to serious repentance. Baptism symbolized a unity of spiritual focus.

That focus caught the attention of the hearts of the people in Jerusalem, Judea and the region around the Jordan. Crowds asked what they should do, and John responded with instructions about helping others and living in harmony (Luke 3:10-14). This paved the way for the arrival of Jesus and his preaching about the Kingdom of Heaven.

As recorded in the gospels great numbers of people gathered to listen to Jesus and to witness his miracles of healing. He challenged the crowds not to simply “go along” with him, but to follow him closely and be willing to sacrifice everything in order to make following him the top priority of their lives. He talked about how people could find in him living bread and living water that would bring them life. In a radical statement about connecting with him, Jesus said, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:54). Becoming one with Christ was essential for having eternal life and experiencing future resurrection. Faith in Jesus as the Messiah was serious. It united believers through a deep commitment that brought hope and an excitement that God was in their midst.

Jesus said that those who followed him were like family (Matthew 12:49-50). He invited twelve men to be with him and learn from him. He gave them power and authority to go out and preach about the Kingdom and to do ministry in his name (Mark 3:14-15). Then he called those twelve his friends and said that he would give up his life for them (John 15:13-15). Less than twenty-four hours after saying that, Jesus galvanized his love for his friends by dying for them – crucified. The three-year experience of the disciples following Jesus, listening to his teaching, watching him debate the Pharisees, witnessing his miracles, seeing him crucified and buried deeply bonded those men.

Yet nothing could prepare them for the experience they had on the third day. As Jesus tried to explain to them, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Luke 9:22). And so it happened, Jesus was alive. When he appeared to them, resurrected from death, they were filled with “joy and amazement” (Luke 24:40). This profound joy united believers. Their excitement and wonder at the resurrection of Jesus could not be contained. Together the disciples and many other believers openly – publically in the Temple in the middle of Jerusalem – expressed their genuine praise and euphoria for the risen Lord.

That unity of praise and worship carried over into the early church. Those who had just witnessed the ascension of Jesus stayed together in Jerusalem. “They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1:14). The promised baptism with the Holy Spirit brought even more harmony among believers. “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:1-4). The early church’s unity in the Holy Spirit became obvious in the communal life of the first believers. Commitment to teaching and fellowship and worship and sharing possessions and meeting together formed the common ground of the church. As people accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord the church grew. The unity of the church remained evident and secure in the Spirit. “All the believers were one in heart and mind” (Acts 4:32).

There were serious challenges to that early unity. Though secured by the Holy Spirit, Christian unity was not automatic or guaranteed. Threats came from within the fellowship. Ananias and Sapphira brought in an offering to the church. But they lied about it to the apostles and to God. As a result, they both died on the spot. This caused a disruption in the ranks. “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events” (Acts 5:11). Threats came from outside the church. The high priest of the Jews gave orders to arrest the leaders of the church. So the apostles were put in jail. Upon their release they were beaten severely and ordered not to preach about Jesus (Acts 5:40). Threats came from administrative distraction. The ministries of the church were growing as the number of believers grew. Not everyone could be served effectively which led to grumbling and complaining within the church family. That disturbance took away the focus of the apostles from their main work of preaching the Word (Acts 6:1-2). Threats came from persecution. Stephen was brought in to a meeting of the Sanhedrin to be questioned about his faith. When he accused his listeners of rejecting the Messiah they stoned him to death. “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1).

Christian unity is difficult to preserve. But through all the threats to the unity of the early church, God continued to work by grace through the Holy Spirit to keep the harmony of his new covenant people in place. “Things calmed down after that and the church had smooth sailing for a while. All over the country – Judea, Samaria, Galilee – the church grew. They were permeated with a deep sense of reverence for God. The Holy

Spirit was with them, strengthening them. They prospered wonderfully” (Acts 9:31, MSG).

In the Pauline epistles few passages offer as strong a statement on unity as Ephesians 4:3-6, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” After outlining a clear explanation of the grace of God in the first three chapters of Ephesians, chapter four begins with “Therefore...lead a life worthy of your calling” (Ephesians 4:1, NLT). Paul urged the early Christians to live in unity with one another as a way to outwardly show the effects of the inward transformation brought about by their salvation in Christ. Paul understood the great doctrine of unity, the great miracle of the oneness of the Church with her Lord. He also understood how difficult that unity was to realize. In every letter Paul wrote to the churches he sounds the same note “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.”

To the Roman churches, where Christians struggled with theological differences, Paul urged unity. Once he explained the “grafting in” of the Gentiles to God’s tree of eternal life, he used the metaphor of the human body to encourage unity. “In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5).

To the Corinthian churches, where division and discord among Christians reached toxic levels, Paul urged unity. Two long and strong letters were sent to the conflicted church (Witherington, 73-74). After chastising them about their infantile quarrelling, Paul used the metaphor of the temple to remind them of their sacred oneness. “Don’t you

know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

To the Galatian churches, where Christians resisted the freedom of grace and instead sought to rely on the law, Paul urged unity. He used the metaphor of the family to encourage unity. "In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, since you are Christ's family, then you are Abraham's famous 'descendant,' heirs according to the covenant promises" (Galatians 3:28-29).

To the Ephesian churches, where Christians wrestled with ethnic and economic diversity, Paul urged unity. He used the metaphor of the one building with one foundation to encourage unity. "You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19-22).

To the Philippian churches, where Christians suffered persecution, Paul urged unity. He used the metaphor of the courageous fighter to encourage unity. "Stand united, singular in vision, contending for people's trust in the Message, the good news, not flinching or dodging in the slightest before the opposition. Your courage and unity will show them what they're up against" (Philippians 1:27-28).

To the Colossian churches, where Christians were disturbed by false teachers, Paul urged unity. He used the metaphor of wearing the clothing of love and holiness to encourage unity. “Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:12-14, NLT).

To the Thessalonian churches, where Christians experienced growing pains in their young spiritual life, Paul urged unity. He used the idea of togetherness to encourage unity. “Encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Finally, the Biblical revelation pulls back the curtain that separates time and eternity and reveals that unity is the atmosphere of heaven.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).

One day only unity will exist. Everything in heaven and on earth will be united in the worship of God. “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!’” (Revelation 5:13).

The Biblical architecture for unity among Christians is strong and glorious. From out of God’s own oneness, the Lord laid the foundation for unity at Creation, structured

the framework for unity through the Old Covenant with his people, Israel, and built the unity of the church through the New Covenant established in Jesus Christ. That unity is not a uniformity of doctrine or a conformity of practice. Instead, Christian unity is a oneness that permeates the vast diversity of believers (Evans, 191; Campbell, 126.) Rooted in the grace of God with Jesus Christ as its lifeblood, the church demonstrates unity by an indefatigable devotion to the Lord and an unwavering love of one another.

### **Fellowship**

Unity on paper is not real. Unity only talked about as an ideal is not unity. For unity to exist it must be visible. Unity is only seen when people interact. It's through relationships that unity shows up – or not. Unity became visible when the community of God's people began to live together in relationships choreographed by the Lord. In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel designated the community of God's people. In the New Testament, it was the church.

In the Old Testament God's covenant people lived out their unity in ways defined by God's commandments about how to treat each other. Relationships were ideally shaped by "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:13-17). These last five of the Ten Commandments supplied straight-forward practical directions for life within the covenant community.

More rules were added to regulate the complexity of life together. Throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy the Israelites received vast



instruction on how to be the people of God. They had never been a nation before, and now they were preparing to move into the Promised Land to be a distinct, holy, and “peculiar” people. How were they to live? God gave them the *Torah*, the Hebrew word for the rules the Israelites were to follow, not only about religion but also about relationships. Here is one passage typical of the relationship rules about fellowship:

Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another. Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord. Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight. Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the Lord. Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the Lord. Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. Keep my decrees (Leviticus 19:11-19).

Community was not meant to be a legislated activity in the Old Testament. The rules were given to add understanding to what it meant to be “holy as I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 11:44). The people of Israel were not forced to obey the Torah, nor forced to love their neighbors. But broken rules had consequences. Because the fabric of the universe was woven with the laws of God, disobedience caused a tear which resulted in a spiritual raggedness that wasn’t the holy look God was going for in his people.

If any of the relationship rules were broken, there was an offering prescribed that would heal the brokenness and reset the relationship. The sacrificial offering varied according to the sin. Guilt offerings, sin offerings, fellowship offerings, peace offerings, and more, were practiced to redeem the relationship with God or with others. The Lord placed a high value on sound, healthy relationships.

Unity, made visible in relationships, was also to be experienced. Community was something felt in the heart. “It is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God” (Psalm 55:13-14). Togetherness was meant to bring joy. Unity with God and with others in the covenant bestowed the blessings of happiness and life. “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down on the collar of his robe. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore” (Psalm 133:1-3).

Being together as one people with one God was a precious gift. God initiated it through the covenant with Abraham and ratified it with the whole nation through Moses. “Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.’ Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words’” (Exodus 24:7-8).

God not only instructed his covenant people about covenant life together, but he also modeled it through his presence with his people. Again, to the Lord, relationships are supremely important. God was not, nor did he intend to convey, a distant, detached deity. He was not aloof or aloft. Indeed, he was eternal, transcendent of time and space. But he was also very present, intervening and interacting with his people. The tabernacle was built as a place where God would meet with his people (Exodus 30:6). God promised to be with Moses and the Israelites as they traveled (Exodus 33:14). The Israelites were encouraged with the thought of God’s presence as they prepared to battle other nations

and enter the Promised Land. “The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deuteronomy 31:8).

Even the prophets regularly reminded the Jews of the present reality of the Lord. Following Babylonian captivity, at a time when God’s people returned to their homeland and settled back in – and became too settled – the prophet Haggai reminded them of the priority of relating to God. “Then Haggai, the Lord’s messenger, gave this message of the Lord to the people: ‘I am with you, declares the Lord’” (Haggai 1:13). God’s with-ness energized the fellowship of the Jews and inspired them to work together to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

It was the “God with us” message of Isaiah that spurred the hope of a Messiah who would defend and rescue the Jews. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). The fulfillment of that Old Covenant prophecy is how Matthew introduces the New Covenant Christ. “And they will call him Immanuel – which means God with us” (Matthew 1:23). Jesus was God-in-the-flesh dwelling with his people. Unity was now visible and able to be experienced so tangibly. God was huggable (at least touchable). Community life was now centered on the Son of Man who “became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, MSG).

The gospels record Jesus being with people. He was with the twelve disciples, with the crowds, with tax collectors and with sinners. He spoke openly to people in synagogues, in the Temple, on the road, in the city, in the country. He visited privately in the homes of Simon the Pharisee, Zacchaeus the tax collector, Mary and Martha the

sisters, Peter the disciple and Jairus the synagogue leader. He reached out to touch the leper, the blind, the lame, the demon-possessed, and even the dead. His personal connections with people set the table for his followers to feast on his many teachings about relationships.

At the heart of Christ's teaching is the call to love. In harmony with the Scriptures, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40). Not only did he flesh out this teaching by loving those around him, but he also explained what love looks like. He taught about kindness and forgiveness, about helping strangers and the poor. He taught that loving others includes enemies and persecutors as much as friends and family. He taught that loving God means trusting and obeying him.

Jesus took love out of the storybook pages of fantasy and made it real, personal and practical. He said, "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31). He emphasized to the disciples that their relationships would be the signature of their Christian faith. "By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). "The ancient Christians were known for their love for one another" (Hellerman, 105). Gordon MacDonald calls it "the brand of the Christian movement" (MacDonald, "True Community" 2).

Jesus redeemed and sanctified love from market place sex and idolatry and mythology. He told the Pharisee Nicodemus, who could sense the oneness Jesus had with God and came seeking the truth about life and love, "For God so loved the world that he

gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The deepest, the most genuine, meaning of the Church is that it is a community caught up in a response of love to Love, of human love to the divine Love; that its fellowship is characterized precisely by such shared love; and that as it lives in love it looks back in faith to the person who is the focus of the event from which it takes its origin and looks forward in hope to the fulfillment of the purpose of God, whose aim for it is that it shall be the spearhead of a kingdom where Love, God's love, reigns supreme and is expressed in human love of one's fellowship (Pittenger, 65-66).

Jesus's message of love paved the way for the first Christians to have the promise of eternal life in the next life and the truth necessary to embrace eternal life in this life. Life together as believers in Jesus Christ took on a new and radical social dimension of unity. Christian church looked different from other forms of ancient community.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:44-47).

People sharing a common life together because they cared for each other was called *koinonia* in the Greek language, and is often translated “fellowship” in the English versions of the Bible (Witherington, 224; McKnight, 115; Martin, 36; Banks, 57; Brown, Vol. 1, 640-642; Kloha). In Acts *koinonia* is limited to two episodes, the famous 2:42-47 passage (above) and in 4:32-35:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold

them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Koinonia in Acts is empowered by the Holy Spirit (the with-ness of God) who filled the believers (Acts 2:38; 4:31). The presence of the Lord was again with his people. This time in an intimately personal way. Yet that personal divine with-ness required love expressed in community for unity to be visible. Love was the hallmark of Christian unity (Getz, 38). The life of the Spirit-filled believer spilled over into the new familial relationships with other believers. In Christ, a committed brotherly and sisterly love issued in a willingness to sacrificially share property and possessions and money with other members of the church in to meet everyone's physical needs. That special divine with-ness of the new Christian community proved to be a powerful witness which attracted many to the fellowship. "Because it is a human community the Church can make Christ present to men" (Gustafson, 111).

But how did they know to share their things? How did they come up with the idea to sell their possessions and contribute to a community fund that went to help everyone? How did they decide to meet together every day in the temple courts? Why did they agree to meet in each other's homes and break bread together? Did someone tell them to do those things? These are reasonable investigative questions whose answers would shed valuable theological insight into the fellowship of the early church. For purposes here, it is enough to know the practices of that ancient model in order to replicate it today.

Paul revealed more about the details of koinonia in his letters to the churches. He was clear that relationships between Christians only exist and have meaning because of Christ (Thompson, 103). "God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of

his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9, NRSV). The apostle outlined several practical ways in which believers are to relate to one another:

- Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. (Romans 12:10)
- Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. (Romans 12:16)
- Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. (Romans 14:13)
- Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you. (Romans 15:7)
- I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1 Corinthians 1:10)
- Greet one another with a holy kiss. (2 Corinthians 13:12)
- Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (Ephesians 4:2)
- Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)
- Therefore encourage one another and build each other up. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Of course, there were prohibitions associated with Christian fellowship as well.

Because Paul addressed mostly Gentile Christians who came out of and were surrounded by the pagan culture of their society, warnings to refrain from common worldly activities were necessary. “The church at Corinth had become synonymous with wickedness and debauchery” (Brunson, 23). These unholy behaviors are found scattered throughout the Pauline epistles, and include lying, stealing, adultery, idolatry, revenge and grumbling. Paul called these “acts of the flesh,” meaning they are not behaviors of a spiritual person who is living in Christ, and certainly are not appropriate in Christian fellowship.

Galatians 5:19-21 sums them up, “The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the

like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

The Apostle John picked up on the same theme. “If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:6-7). Walking in the light or walking in the truth meant walking with Jesus, and that meant walking with other believers in genuine fellowship. Fellowship with Christ and fellowship with Christians went hand in hand.

Joseph Hellerman picks up on the how critical fellowship is to the church: “There is much work to be done in our American churches if we are someday to recapture Jesus’s vision for authentic Christian community. But embracing a genuinely biblical ecclesiology is a challenge that is well worth the effort. The relational and spiritual health of the people in our churches depends on it” (Hellerman, 52). He concludes, “It has been my observation that church leaders who spend the bulk of their week in the business world, and who have not been extensively exposed to New Testament ecclesiology, remain quite satisfied to view growth in Sunday morning attendance and the expansion of the church budget as the primary benchmarks of a healthy Christian community. As long as our key leaders remain so satisfied with so little, we will not recapture Jesus’ vision for authentic Christian community” (Hellerman, 180).

## **Merger**

Fellowship is rather simple in a strictly homogeneous group. People who are so similar that the only difference may be some take cream and sugar in their coffee and



others take it black, find it easy to relate. Those relationships tend to develop easily, grow smoothly and stay intact. But Sunday mornings in church are far different than Tuesday mornings at Starbucks. “On paper, the church works. On paper, the church is perfect...On paper, it is a loving fellowship...It all seems good, until you arrive on Sunday morning...” (McKnight, 68).

The Biblical vision of Christian unity on display in the fellowship of the church is blindsided by the reality of human life together. “Church would be easy without people” (Brunson, 1). No one person is perfect. No two people are the same. No groups of multiple, imperfect, different people can get along in meaningful, long-lasting relationships without help. “In other words, one can expect that a trusting relationship can be developed under an individual orientation only if external circumstances provide the support for it” (Deutsch, 183).

In the Old Testament that help comes in the form of instruction. God commands his covenant people to be hospitable to one another and even to foreigners. “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34). In the face of a culture of fierce nationalism, the Israelites were instructed to treat those from other lands kindly. “Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow” (Jeremiah 22:3).

God issued this command to get along with others, even those who were different, because his people reflect his nature. God loves the world, which includes the non-Jewish. “The community is to have the same rules for you and for the foreigner residing among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the

foreigner shall be the same before the Lord” (Numbers 15:15). The same rules and the same blessings are for everyone in the covenant community because no matter the ancestry, heritage, background or nationality people are the same before the Lord. “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:18-19).

Though it was hard to see similarities when standing eyeball-to-eyeball with those who appeared to be so different, God’s people were to see others the way God saw them. Long after the kingdom of Israel split in two and animosity grew over the generations between the north and the south, God wanted his people to see that the ultimate plan was to return to a united kingdom. “In those days the house of Judah will join the house of Israel, and together they will come from a northern land to the land I gave your forefathers as an inheritance” (Jeremiah 3:18).

In the gospels Jesus offers constructive instruction on getting along with those who are different:

You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best – the sun to warm and the rain to nourish – to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that. In a word, what I’m saying is, *Grow up*. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you (Matthew 5:43-48, MSG).

Someone different is not always an enemy. But an enemy is always someone different. This teaching from the Sermon on the Mount underscored for followers of Jesus Christ the need to treat everyone with grace no matter to which camp they belonged.

Jesus demonstrated that practice when he dined with the Pharisees who persecuted him; when he touched the lepers who were unclean; when he conversed with the Samaritan woman. He risked scandal by associating with groups of people who were different. The resulting reputation hung on Christ was that he was “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19). But according to Kingdom values the exclusivity of the world’s segregation is far more scandalous. “Jesus sought to draw together an Israel fractured by struggling parties and groups” (Lohfink, 11). His ministry was to bring people together around the grace and truth of God.

The small group of twelve disciples was a perfect illustration of Christ’s work of uniting different people. This traveling band followed the Lord around for three years. “Jesus continually strove to build community with his disciples and to encourage them to pursue this among themselves” (Macchia, 80). They ate together and slept together and faced danger together and argued together and preached the gospel together. Yet they were widely diverse in their personalities and backgrounds. They were salty fishermen and a refined businessman. They were teenaged young and seasoned old. They were a religious zealot and a social reformer. They were out-in-front impulsive and behind-the-scenes cautious. They were human. They cried and laughed. They got it right and got it wrong. They stayed to fight and ran away scared. They confessed the truth and denied the Truth. They stayed awake while Jesus slept. They went to sleep when Jesus said stay

awake. They had families and were loners. They were believers and doubters. They obeyed and rebelled. Through it all Jesus called them all his friends (John 15:15).

When Jesus left his friends on earth and ascended into heaven, back to the Father, the union of God's new covenant people hung in the balance. The apostles were armed with Christ's teaching and his example, but could they lead the church into a Kingdom community? On day one, Pentecost, the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit made it possible for people from many foreign lands to hear the gospel in their own language.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2:5-11).

Thousands of people – different people – assembled from all over the Mediterranean region (Asia, Europe, Africa), became the church. Weeks later, still newborn yet growing, enrolling thousands and thousands of people in the church, "all the believers were one in heart and mind" (Acts 4:32). But that oneness would be challenged because people (even redeemed and filled with the Holy Spirit) are human.

Serious problems threatened to unravel the church's unity on three fronts: physical persecution, moral subversion, and professional distraction (Stott, 105). At the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:60) the church's physical togetherness was shattered. "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1). In spite of Christians being dragged from their houses, arrested and put in jail, the wise leadership of the

apostles and the divine intervention of the Lord helped Christian unity remain intact in the believers' hearts. "Their unity with one another and with Christ made them bold" (Trueblood, 31). Eventually, "things calmed down after that and the church had smooth sailing for a while. All over the country – Judea, Samaria, Galilee – the church grew. They were permeated with a deep sense of reverence for God. The Holy Spirit was with them, strengthening them. They prospered wonderfully" (Acts 9:31, MSG).

Two monumental events solidified the church's place squarely in the will of God pertaining to the uniting together of different people. First, the believers displaced from Jerusalem by the persecution told the story of Jesus the Messiah to Jews everywhere. "Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:20-21). The Jews-only dam holding back the gospel from the rest of the world was about to break wide open. News of Gentiles entering the ranks of the church reached the apostolic leaders in Jerusalem. Barnabas was sent to Antioch to confirm the report. It was true! God brought the dreaded (to the Jew), unclean, non-kosher Gentile into the church. Barnabas went to Tarsus to recruit Saul (aka Paul) to help him lead the church in Antioch. "So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch" (Acts 11:26).

For the next several years the Lord gave Paul great success in preaching the gospel and establishing the church in every location he traveled. Whatever town he visited he began his ministry by speaking to the Jews at the local synagogue. Most rejected his claim that the Jesus was the Messiah. But some believed. Then he turned his

attention to proclaiming the good news to the non-Jews in that town. Many believed and the church grew. Paul stayed for months to teach about Jesus, establish the fellowship, and train and organize the leadership. “He continually sets before his communities a vision of what their common life should, and one day will be” (Banks, 189).

But opposition grew against Paul because some Jewish Christians thought that non-Jewish people should become Jews and go through Jewish ceremonial customs before becoming Christians. “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1). So, Paul and Barnabas went to the church headquarters in Jerusalem to help the leaders decide what to do about this issue.

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (Acts 15:6-11).

This second monumental event, a decision by the early church leaders inspired by the Holy Spirit, was shared with the Gentile believers who rejoiced and celebrated the good news. The church was encouraged and continued to include both Jews and non-Jews in the name of Jesus Christ. “As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for all the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers” (Acts 16:4-5).

But the divisive work of the Judaizers continued to be a cancer in many of the churches. False teachers injected works-righteousness ideas into the preaching of the

gospel. Paul addressed this issue in several of his letters to the churches because people were arguing and fighting over wrong ideas. Paul wrote the church in Corinth, “There is jealousy and quarrelling among you” (1 Corinthians 3:3). That discord stemmed from much more than false teaching (Witherington, 28-29, 74). Yet, no matter the source of the disruptions – social, economic, political, religious, or moral – in the church where people confessed “Jesus is Lord” and wherever two or three gathered in his name, the wheels of unity were in danger of coming off.

Paul confronted false teaching and set the record straight about salvation: “God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it” (Ephesians 2:8-9, NLT). He urged Christians in the churches to “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:16-18).

Easier said than done, but it’s still the plan God has for his people. One of the group portraits of those in heaven who worship the Lord is found in Revelation 7:9-10. Pull the veil back from this life on earth and peek into the next life and here is a picture of those who live together for ever:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, *from every nation, tribe, people and language*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” (Italics added for emphasis.)

## **Theological Foundations**

A theology of Christian unity is constructed in three dimensions: first by seeing the foundation of Christian unity cemented in the nature of the Triune God; second by understanding how the unity of the Godhead bridged the gap between the Holy One and the human ones and created a God-Man union; and third by observing how the God-Man union built a united community for the glory of the Lord. When completed this theological model will serve to identify, achieve and preserve Christian unity in the church.

### **Unity of God**

The unity of God in the Trinity is the dynamic heart of what Christians believe about the nature of God. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three in one. Three complete and distinct Persons in one almighty and holy Godhead. They co-operate seamlessly to create creation, to secure salvation, and to rule eternity. They relate perfectly in surrender to and support of each other. John Wesley commenting on “the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father” from John 1:18 wrote, “The expression denotes the highest unity, and the most intimate knowledge” (Wesley, Vol 1, 223).

The oneness of God is the foundation of all harmony. As Jesus the Son announced, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). That oneness is not sameness. Like musical harmony is not built upon the sounding of one note but achieved through several notes that complement each other in the same key played together at the same time, the three Persons of the Trinity are not identical replicas of each other. They harmonize. Though one in divine nature, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit differ in function. The



power and the presence and the purpose and the character of God are the same across the Trinity. But the way they work varies in people's lives, in the world, and in the eternal spiritual realm.

This one-but-not-the-same unity is revealed in the symphony that is Nature. The physical creation reflects the unity of God. "But the basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is! By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being" (Romans 1:19-20, MSG). Nature is one, but with many, many different parts. Plants and animals, ocean and atmosphere harmonize together to make life work on planet earth. God made it that way because that's the way God is. And he wants people to know it.

The masterpiece of Nature, the human being, is a manifestation of the Trinity. Humans are created in the image of God. The unity of God has been designed into every person.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Gen 1:26-27, NRSV).

Brain and kidneys, fingers and toes coordinate to make a person function. Heart and soul and mind and strength harmonize together to make a person alive. God made it that way because that's the way God is. And he wants everyone to know it – personally.

### **Union with God**

The Trinitarian nature of God seeks relationship. God's Self-unity is certainly Self-sufficient. Yet in God's Self-revelation the Lord of the universe seeks Self-

expression through intimate connections with what he has created. The union of God with the creation is hardwired into the universe. A tulip blooms because God has designed the bud to form and the flower to open at just the right time in just the right climate. The God-Nature connection is an auto-response bionetwork programmed by God to function according to his blueprint. However, God's connection to human beings is not a pre-programmed system. The union of God with people requires a covenant. A special and unique agreement is needed for union with God because, contrary to tulips, humans are hardwired with free will. To enter into a relationship with God, human beings must choose to trust or not, to obey or not, to love or not. When the choice of faith is made the covenant is established and there is union with God.

The covenant initiated and established by God with Israel was based upon the Law. The old covenant clearly defined that a people's union with God was based upon choice. The Israelites were given many commands to obey. As they remained faithful in obedience to the Law their relationship with God was healthy. When they chose to disobey the Law the connection with God was broken. By God's mercy the connection could be reestablished through a process of repentance, sacrifice and atonement. The value of the covenant based on the Law was in its emphasis upon what behaviors synced up with God and what behaviors were out of sync with God. "Through the law we become conscious of our sin" (Romans 3:20). Once aware of sin and being separated from God, a person could begin the process of repentance, sacrifice and atonement. Eventually the covenant based on the Law became moralistic and legalistic. The Israelites corrupted the ancient covenant and their connection with God ruptured. Therefore, a new covenant was needed.

The new covenant, again initiated and established by God (and currently in effect), is based on grace. Choice is still important. God's people enter into union with God by choosing to trust him. The connection is based on a relationship with God through faith. God invites people "Come to me. I will be your God; you will belong to me." A person agrees, the relationship begins, and God sets up residency in the heart through the Holy Spirit. "The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is analogous to the unity, fellowship and communion between Christ and the Father" (Snyder, 94).

The connection can still go bad because of sin. Bad choices injure the union with God. But the atonement is no longer a legalistic process of animal sacrifices and burnt offerings. Instead, the healing of the relationship comes through the second Person of the Trinity, the Son, the God-Man.

The decisive advance in NT, cause by God himself, is the basing of the unity and uniqueness of God on the unique revelation through and in the one Man Jesus Christ, the Revealer and Lord (Matt. 23:8ff; 1 Cor. 8:4ff; Eph. 4:1-16; 1 Tim. 2:5f.)...The foundation and continuity of the church's unity are grounded in him as the one shepherd of the one flock (Jn. 10:14ff.) (Bartles, 722-723).

The crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's way of bringing together the sinful children of faith and their holy heavenly Father. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Union with God is relational because God is relational. The God-Man, Jesus, provides the relational bridge which makes union with God is possible.

Ralph Martin sums it up:

We may see in John's understanding of unity as expressed in a common purpose and a shared goal. The focal point of unity is the mission that brought Jesus from the Father's presence and led him back there, carrying as the fruits of his passion those whom God had given him (17:22-26). The ontological union between God and the Word (in the prologue of 1:1-18) is the deep foundation; the missiological

consequence flows from it, for it is the Father's active will to reclaim the world by sending his Son (Martin, 91).

### **United in God**

Union with God connects all those in the covenant. Every person who trusts and loves God is united together in God. Believers in Jesus Christ become the one holy catholic<sup>3</sup> Church. "God intends for salvation to be a community-creating event" (Hellerman, 137). Robert Banks agrees, "Union in the Spirit involved union with one another, for the Spirit was primarily a shared, not individual, experience. The gospel is not a purely personal matter. It has a social dimension. It is a communal affair" (Banks, 26).

A variety of biblical images helps describe the connectedness of the people of the new covenant: one body, a family, joint heirs, a temple, a plant, a field. United in God is not confined to national, ethnic, economic, gender, or age boundaries. United in God has nothing to do with denominational, doctrinal, or polity matters. United in God means people who believe in Jesus Christ have a spiritual and eternal bond that joins them together. The blessed tie that binds is not physical like attending the same church on Sunday. Nor is it contractual like signing the membership certificate. Christians are united in God because God is Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18) and God's Spirit lives in Christians (1 Corinthians 3:16). It is the actual presence of God dwelling within believers that unites them – heart soul, mind and strength. "The corporate dimension is central here – it is group acceptance rather than individual peace and reconciliation that is emphasized... The primary dimension is union with Christ and then union with others as

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<sup>3</sup> catholic: meaning universal, as used in the *Apostles' Creed*.

demonstrated by Ephesians 2:5-6 – it is together with Christ that believers are made alive, raised up and made to sit in the heavenly places” (Campbell, 76).

One of the most helpful metaphors that conveys the togetherness of Christians is the singular but multifaceted human body. Thomas Oden asks, “By what evidences is the church recognizable? By her unity the *ekklesia* proximately expresses in time the oneness of Christ’s body so as to unite anticipatively all humanity to God’s reconciling activity” (Oden, 297). Being the Body of Christ, Christians share the glories and eternal inheritance of Christ and share in the responsibilities of earthly ministry in Christ’s name. “For Jesus the possibilities of the promise take place in community: ‘When they accept you,’ Jesus told his disciples, ‘they accept me.’ What is more, ‘If you embrace the least of these,’ Jesus said, ‘you embrace me.’ Individual Christians are spiritual fractals of the body of Christ” (Sweet, 192).

In his epistles to the ancient churches, the Apostle Paul used this image far more than any other concept to help believers understand the nature and dynamics of being united in God. He told the fractured church in Corinth, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). He told the Christians in Rome, “So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). In the church *everyone* belongs, *everyone* has value, and *everyone* contributes to the whole.

Paul addressed the confusion about spiritual gifts by comparing the church to the body, which is one entity but has several parts. *Nobody* is just a hand or just an eye. Every body part is needed, and no one part is more important than another. All parts working together are required to complete the physique. So too in the church. “The way

God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church” (1 Corinthians 12:24, MSG). *Everybody* is needed to make the church complete. The Spirit has equipped each believer to function as a contributing member of the whole. “Paul implies that since the Godhead works together, surely he and his converts can do likewise” (Witherington, 476). United in the Spirit and coordinated together, Christians put one foot in front of the other to walk the path of witness and service as the church. “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this” (Bonhoeffer, 21).

Paul also used the idea of the church as the body of Christ to confront divisiveness. “But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Corinthians 12:24-25). The church is united in God. There is no reason for discord. Disagreements will surely exist because people are different and think differently. But disagreements should not lead to disharmony. In Christ, the head of the body, all differences can be worked out through peacemaking, love, humility and forgiveness. Those who disrupt the unity have already disconnected from Christ. “They are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow” (Colossians 2:18-19).

The church whose members are not united, who fail at unity, suffer from spiritual epilepsy. Physiologically, the body experiences a seizure of abnormal behaviors due to a disorder (usually genetic) in which the commands given by the brain are twisted or ignored. Ecclesiologically, the church experiences a convulsion of pride and arrogance

when persons, due to their sinful nature, disregard the teachings of Christ and the leading of his Spirit. Disunity, Christians not living in harmony with one another, is a spiritual disease in the church. When in Eden paradise was lost, the broken relationship with God led to broken relationships with others. “In the primeval history of Genesis the rupture of fellowship with God was followed by the loss of unity among men” (Schattenmann, Vol. 1, 640).

Since discord within the church fellowship results from a broken relationship with God, the cure for the lack of unity in the church is for God’s people to *first reunite with God*. For example, when a bone breaks it has to be reset to fix it. Each side of the break is reintroduced to its matching counterpart so it can fuse back together. Healing in broken church relationships begins with fusing back together in Christ. “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesian 4:16). Being united in God is the source of the church’s strength. When the faith connection with God is in place the church can be built up in unity as each person works to love and cooperate with others in the church. “Christianity is not a purely intellectual, internal faith. It can only be lived in community” (Yancey, 23).

God designed the church to be one. Christians are united together in God by the union that comes through Jesus Christ. That divine-human union produces a human-to-human unity that reflects the reality of the triune God. Jesus summed it up as he spoke to the Father, “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity” (John 17:22-23).

### **Christian Unity: What Does It Look Like?**

The seeds of denominationalism may have been sown as early as the separation between Jacob and Esau. Later, in the New Testament some see denominationalism creep onto the scene in the fight against the Judaizers (Fernando, 423f.). The early church fought off the divisiveness of heresies like Gnosticism (Schmithals, 25f.). Martin Luther had to decide whether to stay with one catholic church that strayed from the Word of God, or risk splitting the church in order to stay faithful to the Word of God. Pursuing Christian unity through the centuries and across the variety of faith traditions is a mighty effort. Ecumenism is certainly a worthy cause. Good things can happen to promote God's Kingdom when Christians from multiple traditions and cultures sit down at the table to discuss the doctrines and the heritage they all have in common.

However, what is far more evident in Scripture is the pervasive instruction for Christians personally to live in harmony with other Christians. All good institutional ecumenical efforts aside, pursuing Christian unity within a local congregation is supremely important in God's design of the church. "Essentially, the church is not a human organization as such, but a divinely created fellowship of sinners who trust a common Saviour, and are one with each other because they are all one with Him in a union realized by the Holy Spirit" (Packer, 242). In Acts and in the epistles strong emphasis is place on healthy relationships within the church. The first century formation of churches required immense attention be given to how Christians were to live together in their new life of faith. "It is striking how often the New Testament deals with issues in relation to Christian community" (Malherbe, 70).



Today, some things that pass for unity in the church are farcical. Churches wrongly claim unity because its congregants are all White, all Black, all Asian, or all Latino. No church displays Christian unity because it's all upper middle class or all lower middle class, all white collar or all blue collar, all rich or all poor. Church unity does not happen because all the members are doctrinally conservative or progressively liberal. Nor does church unity exist because all members are politically republican or democrat. Agreement on moral issues like abortion and homosexuality does not signify unity. Generational unity that settles on traditional or contemporary worship style does not indicate unity in the church. Finally, the pièce de résistance of what passes for Christian unity today: “we are a friendly church where everyone is so nice” – which is just as awful as where everyone is so militant. Gag me with a spoon! (valleyspeak from the eighties).

No long-lasting, spiritual, eternal unity can exist in the church if it's based upon human opinions or preferences or skin color or financial status or favorite ball team or even denominational loyalty (Colson and Vaughn, 75; L. Schaller *Competition to Cooperation*, 226; Gustafson, 12; Peterson, 13). Christian unity is grounded in God alone. Only in God can unity in the church be real and endure. Thoughts and ideas and actions rooted in God, in Truth, make for unity in the church. Personal preferences lined up with God's grace foster unity in the church. Personal relationships built around God's love promote unity in the church.

Though no analogy is perfect, the portrait of a family comes close to what the church should look like. As Paul referred to the church, “And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more” (1 Thessalonians 4:10). Joseph Hellerman puts a unique spin on it when he

writes, “Conversion to Christ involves both our *justification* and our *familification*, that we gain a new Father *and* a new set of brothers and sisters when we respond to the gospel” (Hellerman, 143). His idea of “familification” harmonizes with a long list of those who see the same biblical vision (Witherington, 475; Banks, 50, 56; Callahan, 35; Macchia, 19; Meeks, 75, 86; McKnight, 20; Malherbe, 68-69; Martin, 124; Barna, 93).

Though no family is perfect, family ideals present parameters for unity that apply to the church. The basic definition of family is “a group of people who are related to each other.”<sup>4</sup> The church constitutes a family because Christians are related to each other – not biologically, but Christologically. “Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (Hebrews 2:11). Unity in the church looks like a family living in honest and genuine harmony. When believers in Christ live among each other full of grace and truth, unity in the church materializes.

Family-like togetherness in the church revolves around several key memes – ideas and behaviors adopted by the members and instilled in the next generation of new members. Dolores Curran’s research has discovered fifteen traits of the healthy family (Curran). Five major characteristics cover the whole gamut. First is ownership. “My family”, “your family”, “our family” are ways family ownership is expressed. The possessive adjective does not convey a proprietary wielding of power and control. Instead, it affectionately identifies family boundaries and celebrates a family’s uniqueness and promotes a deep sense of belonging. “It’s no secret that people are hungry for community, for a genuine sense of belonging, for the sure knowledge that they are

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<sup>4</sup>Merriam-Webster, Inc. *The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc. 2003.

deeply cared for beyond the circle of their immediate family. And it is this desire for community that draws many Christians as well as non-Christians to the church” (Group Publishing, 7).

In the church family possessive ownership results in destructive power and control. “This is my church and we’ll do things my way.” The only one who has the right to say that is the true Owner of the church, Jesus Christ. As John the Baptist said when he spoke of the church, “The bride belongs to the bridegroom” (John 3:29). However, there is a healthy sense of ownership in the church when Christians can say with affectionate pride, “Hey, that’s our church!” (Schaller, *Hey, That’s Our Church!*). When members delight in “our” church, feel they belong, and take seriously the responsibility of talking positively about the church and acting unconditionally constructive and congruent (Fisher, 38-40, 190-191) in the name of the Owner, unity is noticeable. “The development of meaningful relationships where every member carries a significant sense of belonging is central to what it means to be the church” (Frazee, 35).

A second key family meme is safety. “There’s no place like home,” repeated Dorothy as she and Toto were transported back to Kansas after their scary adventure in Oz. The comfort and security of trusted family members make hearts long to be home. When it’s necessary to venture away from home, knowing there is a safe haven to return to is reassuring. Home is acceptance where persons are free to be themselves. Home is protection where persons find care and support. Home is provision where persons have what they need in food, clothing and shelter. In the church family safety is required for unity to exist. “The church is to be a community, a safe place” (Kallam, 36; Evans, 190). Christians need to feel at home with one another where they can be themselves, and find

care and support, and have what they need to grow spiritually. Toxic environments of strife and judgmentalism and unforgiveness poison the spirit of unity. Instead, Christians should follow Paul's advice, "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (2 Corinthians 13:12).

Another key family meme is interaction. Families talk together and work together and play together and pray together and laugh together and cry together. Families take vacations together and visit Grandma together and eat around the table together and celebrate birthdays together. Yes, families do argue with each other and hurt each other. But they work through it together. From cradle to grave nearly every day is spent in contact with family in some fashion. In the church family interaction between members is essential for unity. Relationships can only grow deeper and more significant as people talk to one another and pray with one another and sing with one another and serve alongside one another. "The development of meaningful relationships where every member carries a significant sense of belonging is central to what it means to be the church" (Frazee, 35). There are sixty-five "one anothers" in the New Testament. The directive from God is clear: connect with each other. That connection needs to be sincere and Spirit-filled. Coffee and a doughnut, or a handshake and "Hi, how are you?" once a week on Sunday morning is not interaction that brings unity. Christian unity was on display in the early church when "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (Acts 2:46). Unity is family-style interaction with other believers every day – gladly.

A fourth key family meme is discipline. Learning right and wrong takes place in a family, as does learning respect and responsibility. The moral development of children

rests squarely on the shoulders of their parents. Moms and dads naturally take the lead to teach and train their sons and daughters. They establish rules, observe behavior, suggest corrections, distribute rewards for keeping the rules and punishments for breaking the rules. Parents instill a positive habit of self-discipline when they take the reins of authority in the home. When the family lacks discipline all chaos breaks loose. Harmony in the family suffers severely when parents are not in charge and their children are out of control. In the church family discipline is critical for unity. There are leaders and groups of leaders in a congregation to whom the members look for wisdom and direction. This community must have in place respected spiritual authority – individuals who are biblically literate and who can serve as exemplary spiritual mentors” (Frazee, 68). When their authority is ignored and their decisions are not followed, all chaos breaks loose. There are administration rules and ministry guidelines set in place for good and healthy church organization. When the rules are broken it hurts the unity of the church. At that point the leaders in charge must step in to correct the wayward behavior and exercise church discipline. The church is put to terrible shame when sinful, arrogant and rebellious behavior of church members is not confronted and controlled. The church in Corinth was chastised by Paul for not acting to eliminate troublemakers and preserve the fellowship. “It isn’t my responsibility to judge outsiders, but it certainly is your responsibility to judge those inside the church who are sinning” (1 Corinthians 5:12, NLT). Unity thrives in a framework of well-defined expectations. Church unity works best when Christians live disciplined, holy lives, controlled by the Spirit.

The final key family meme is love. Families love one another. Husbands love their wives; parents love their children; children love their parents; brothers and sisters

love each other. It shows. Family members respect each other, listen to each other, are honest with each other, forgive each other, trust each other, protect each other, sacrifice for each other, celebrate each other, hug each other. It's more than a feeling, more than a warm fuzzy gently abiding in the heart. Family love is about complete commitment and total surrender to the people and the ethos of the family a person calls his/her own. Few bonds in life are as strong and cohesive as a family that loves. In the church family love is the very nucleus of unity. All else revolves around this center of life. "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them" (1 John 4:16). There's no option for the Christian. Love is built into the spiritual DNA of the church. "The vital congregation is a church that will help create a climate of Christian love and acceptance within the church" (Miller, *Vital Congregation*, 16). Others agree (Lohfink, 109; Witherington, 265).

Complete commitment to and unconditional acceptance of the people and the ethos of the church is how believers fulfill the mandate to love one another. Jesus modeled that love while he lived on earth. Ultimately, he gave his life as the supreme act of God's love for the world. He instructed his followers to love each other just like he loved them. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35). That uniquely God-strong family-type love unites Christians together as they respect and listen to and forgive and trust and celebrate each other. Love like is the nuclear power of unity.

That's what Christian unity looks like in the church. Members positively delighted to belong together. Members feel at home and find acceptance and

encouragement. Members actively interact spending time building deep Christian friendships. Members commit to growing in the Spirit, to practicing the spiritual discipline necessary to mature in Christ, and to following and supporting the church leaders. Members love one another in truth and grace.

### **Fellowship in the Congregation: How is it Achieved?**

Knowing what unity looks like is one thing. Achieving unity is another thing. It's like a car and a teenage boy. He knows a car is for driving. Teaching him to drive it – safely – is a whole other thing. Christians know the church is united in God. Teaching them to manifest their made-in-heaven unity is a whole other thing. A congregation lives in one accord by submerging the church culture in the family-like traditions of ownership and safety and interaction and discipline and love.

Fellowship is the Christian life lived in harmony together with other Christians. It is the practice of Christian unity. Jerry Bridges added a note of correction to a common misunderstanding.

It is not an activity; it is a relationship...It is not the fact that we are united in common goals or purposes that makes us a community. Rather it is the fact that we share a common life in Christ...Biblical community is first of all the sharing of a common life in Christ. It is when we grasp this truth that we are in a position to begin to understand true community (Bridges, 11).

The first generation of Christians seemed to come by true community out of the pure excitement of their new faith in Christ. The nursery of new Christians was overflowing with the joy of being born from above into the same family. They discovered “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1).

Howard Snyder suggested that the church today is suffering a fellowship crisis. “True Christian fellowship – what the Greek New Testament calls *koinonia* – is the

Spirit's gift to the church. Yet this fellowship is critically lacking in much of the institutional church today” (Snyder, 89). He continued to point out “The church today has become accustomed to a pleasant, superficial sociality which is at best a cut-rate substitute for koinonia (Snyder, 92).

Today church leaders attend workshops on how to develop effective fellowship in the church. Congregations hire consultants to bring in ideas about cultivating New Testament koinonia among their members. Some churches desperately seek ways to connect their members in genuine Spirit-filled relationships. Other churches are satisfied with much, much less than the real thing. Coffee and doughnuts on Sunday morning served in the fellowship hall, or anything that takes place in the fellowship hall, is considered fellowship. No thought is given to building deep relationships. Still other churches care nothing about providing genuine (or fake) fellowship. The doors are open on Sunday for worship and maybe Sunday school – that’s it.

Unfortunately, some Christians do not pursue serious relationships with others in the church. “In fact, selfishness is so natural to us that many Christians don’t even care about the unity Jesus prayed for and Paul taught” (McKnight, 91). They fail to heed the mandate of Hebrews 10:25 “And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near” (NLT). That day is certainly closer than when this verse was written and that is all the more reason fellowship is critical. Whatever their reason to abstain, people who do not participate in church fellowship diminish the church’s unity. Christians cannot love one another if they are not together with one another. Christians who avoid connecting with other Christians miss the boat of fellowship. “Whenever we have the opportunity, we



should do good to everyone – especially to those in the family of faith” (Galatians 6:5, NLT). “Clearly all who belong to the community share responsibility for its practical operation” (Banks, 136). Again, love is not a warm, fuzzy feeling, but action that requires personal connection. The ancient church needed help with that. The church today needs help with that.

John Wesley saw that the church in his day needed help with achieving fellowship. He strongly emphasized mid-week class meetings for the early Methodists. “Wesley was not merely promoting a small group program as many churches do today. Rather, he was acting out of theological conviction, convinced that there was no such thing as a solitary faith” (MacDonald, “Building One Another”). At first, attendance was required at those small groups which met during the week between Sunday’s congregational gatherings. Wesley knew that the accountability needed for spiritual growth and the togetherness necessary for fellowship could only happen in more intimate weekday meetings. Once unity began to flourish among Methodists class meetings were no longer compulsory. People *wanted* to join a small group. They rediscovered the joy that the Spirit brings to fellowship. “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:46-47). So too, Methodism grew.

Small groups are indispensable for effective fellowship. When a handful of Christians come together on a weekly basis and meet in an informal setting to openly and honestly share their lives, that’s a formula for fellowship. “If the Church is to be genuine, fellowship must be real, and the small group movement is one way in which the growth

of true fellowship may be facilitated. The Church as a ‘body’ is healthy only if it include healthy cells” (Trueblood, 71). In a small group people can feel at home (ownership); people can be themselves (safety); people can genuinely relate (interaction); people can grow in knowledge and grace (discipline); and people can care for others (love). The uniting power of Jesus Christ bonds their souls as they encourage and challenge and pray with one another. “And when two or three of you are together because of me, you can be sure that I’ll be there” (Matthew 18:20, MSG). Unity runs on the spiritual fuel of the presence of Christ. Christians burn that fuel in the combustion chamber of small groups.

In fact, unless congregations are intentional about organizing small groups fellowship will be hard to come by. Building intimate family-type relationships is only possible in groups of around ten (Jesus did it with twelve). Without enrolling members in small groups, churches may provide hospitality, but will miss the mark of fellowship.

Not everyone in the same congregation can belong to the same small group. Other avenues of fellowship must be provided. That’s where koinonia comes in. The root meaning of koinonia in Greek is “sharing things to provide for the common good.” Early in Acts the church lived a nearly commune life. The Christians shared food and property and possessions so material needs in the community would be met. Walter Brueggemann believes this is really the heart of the church’s ministry: “to practice covenantal fidelity in terms of neighborly generosity” (Brueggemann, 63). They also worshiped together and ate meals together and learned together and witnessed together and worked together. As the church expanded across the region, participating in shared community provided strength and courage for new believers. The Apostle Paul was never a loner. He brought believers together to encourage their spiritual ties. And he always traveled with a several-

member missionary entourage. Wherever he established a Christian community he took donations from them to help support the poor Christians living in Jerusalem. Koinonia evolved to include the sharing of time and energy and resources.

Koinonia helps build unity. Christians grow in fellowship (the practice of unity) when they serve in ministry and mission together. Sharing time and energy and resources builds relationships between those working side by side in Christian service. People who serve together on worship teams grow in fellowship, as do believers who serve together in nursery, youth, teaching, administrative or maintenance ministries. Specialized “task forces” focused on service where Christians coordinate the use of their spiritual gifts and abilities to build up the church is a significant path to fellowship. Robert Worley suggests, “Positive involvement increases as members are personally effective in attaining goals and performing tasks that are important to them” (Worley, 31).

Finally, although worship ministry is not fellowship ministry, worship can build fellowship. The purpose of Christian worship is to connect believers to God through adoration and praise and thanksgiving. Even though worshipers may “pass the peace” to one another, that is not fellowship. However, worship does build the worshipers’ fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And when that heavenly bond is stronger, earthly relationships in the church are better. There is an eternal connection between Christians’ relationship with God and each other. “We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3, NRSV).

Worship helps focus the church’s attention on things above so that things here below are aligned properly with the Lord. Achieving unity through fellowship requires

that fellowship with God is the top priority of all church members. “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). Put the connection with the Lord in first place in the church, and everything else will find its proper place. Worship ministry, then, needs to help Christians come together to an experience of surrender before the Lord Jesus Christ. When God’s people worship the Lord, he shows up, lives are changed, sin is forgiven, and the community is infused with the power of the Spirit. King Solomon discovered that the night the Temple was finished. God said to him, “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). The prophet Isaiah discovered the same power in worship. “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple” (Isaiah 6:1). At that point Isaiah experienced the awesomeness of God, had his sins forgiven, and heard the Lord speak – to which he responded, and it changed the course of his life.

Christian fellowship is the practice of Christian unity. It is the outward and visible sign that those who have been brought into union with God through faith in Jesus Christ are surely united together. Church unity looks and feels a lot like family. Relationships between believers are Spirit-filled and offer love and grace and truth. To establish those relationships and give them a chance to exist, flourish and grow stronger, the church must intentionally provide avenues for members to access healthy fellowship. “Removing fish from water isn’t a good idea. It kills the fish. Failing to create the environment Christians need to flourish has an almost equally lethal effect” (Kallam, 26). Creating the right

environment for fellowship occurs through small groups, through people serving together in ministry, and through corporate worship. After sixty years of preaching the gospel and leading the church and suffering for the sake of Christ, the Apostle John wrote, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another” (1 John 1:7).

### **Relational Dynamics Within a Merger: How is Unity Preserved?**

The Apostle John also said, “If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth” (1 John 1:6). As blessed as it is for God’s people to live together in unity, Christian unity is difficult to maintain. One church group gone bad, or one church leader gone wild, and harmony in the church can go way off key. Persons who profess the Christian faith, are members of a congregation, and are one together in Jesus Christ, but live and act and relate to others in unholy and worldly ways can destroy the unity of a church. Craig Groeschel calls it “Christian Atheism” (Groeschel). The Apostle John would agree.

Dramatically more difficult than doing damage control around wayward church members is establishing and keeping unity when two or more congregations merge into one. The great Scottish Anglican Bishop Stephen Neill wrote, “I am convinced that no one takes the cause of Christian unity seriously until he is faced with the prospect of an actual union or merger, by which his own church (both in the sense of denomination and of congregation) will be immediately affected” (qtd. in Hunt, 17). By the same token, the distinguished American United Methodist theologian Albert C. Outler wrote, “But the most powerful resistance to unity comes from *fear* – fear of losing cherished gains and values in our own traditions, the fear of reckless change” (qtd. in Hunt, 17).

For a variety of reasons two churches may find the idea of two becoming one attractive. UM leader Ezra Earl Jones offers fifteen suggestions for a new church (Jones, 100). Martin Saarinen reflects on the life-cycle of a congregation and writes, “A congregation in the Decline phase can become sensitized to the forces of life which are inherent in its history, heritage and place. Displacing the sense of despair by the recovery of memory and hope, the congregation can experience a birth to a new sense of mission and purpose” (Saarinen, 23). A merger could do that. But some offer warnings about merging for the wrong reasons. Ralph Felton put it this way:

When a church has declined in membership, is unable to support a pastor, has lost all its best lay leadership, has almost no young people, and is unable to continue alone, everyone seems to feel the time has come for it to unite with some other church. It is put on a circuit or federated or merged. This is done “to save it.” This should not be the main reason for church cooperation... We sometimes lean two dead churches up together, almost like two corpses, to unite them or federate. Then we wonder why they don't yield better results (Felton, 25-26).

Still others question whether there is any wisdom in merging churches. “Church mergers, in particular are often a clear sign of approaching decline, if not death” (Wagner, 83). Church consultant guru Lyle Schaller agrees, “The old rule books called for congregations in rural America to cooperate with one another in order to survive. The new rule book calls for congregations in rural America to expand their service area in order to compete for future constituents” (Schaller, *From Cooperation to Competition*, 38).

When a merger is in the works a proposal is made and the congregations engage in exploring what it would be like to join forces for the rest of their lives. They receive pre-union counseling, which in the United Methodist Church is extensive and clearly defined in the *Book of Discipline* (§ 2546) and by the Annual Conference. They date for a

while to work out all the logistics of administrative, financial, leadership and missional union. They put it to a vote. If the idea passes, then the big wedding day is placed on the calendar. After the two congregations are officially united in ecclesiastical matrimony cohabitation begins. There may be a harmony-moon period where everyone gets along to save face after all that work. But, sooner or later, he's not going to like the way she squeezes the toothpaste. She's not going to like his snoring. Now what?

“The church is essentially a fellowship and not an institution” (Bloesch, 209). Philip Yancey would agree (Yancey, 62). But James Gustafson believes the church is both fellowship and institution (Gustafson, 101-103). Therefore, simply employing institutional remedies for fixing church problems tends to fall short. There is no paragraph in the *Book of Discipline* about what to do if church members don't get along. Businesses fire people, the military discharges soldiers, Congress impeaches, couples divorce when trust is broken and relationships destruct. But in the church, members aren't fired or discharged or impeached or served with divorce papers (except during Medieval times). Fellowship is based upon a spiritual covenant not a legal contract. Therefore, preserving unity in the church requires special stabilizers.

Disruption, discord, disunity happen in the church. It's a reality. UM Bishop Sharon Brown-Christopher writes, “There is division within our church body. Our United Methodist soul is fractured by it” (qtd. in S. Jones, xvii). “They [feuding and bickering] must not be tolerated. They destroy the spirit of an organization” (Drucker, 114). From day one the church wrestled with how to bring together different people from various backgrounds to live in harmony with one another. Acts 6 records one such disturbance in the church in Jerusalem. “But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of

discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food” (Acts 6:1, NLT). “We must be aware that there is a mysterious (almost predictable) threat to any effort that is made to create and maintain community. Call it a spirit of divisiveness or confusion, but something inevitably bubbles up and attempts to divide the best of people” (MacDonald, “Community With a Purpose”).

The next few verses in Acts 6 reveal the first step in restoring balance. The anointed apostolic leadership listened to the complaints and devised a plan to resolve the problem.

### **Stabilizer #1: Openly Address Conflict**

Do not sweep a broken egg under the rug – the smell will worsen as the days go by, rats will be attracted to the smell, and the rug will be ruined. Churches must anticipate “rumblings of discontent,” especially in a merger situation where each group has different traditions and histories and cultures and personalities. Crafting a prenupt that includes a processes whereby grievances are expressed, considered and resolved is one way to preserve unity (Rediger, 90-92). “The best time for handling people problems is before they become people problems” (Fisher, *Getting to Yes*, 38).

Doug Lewis highlighted the choice people face when conflict inevitably arises.

To be human means you will have conflict...The option for human beings, however, is not whether to experience conflict or not. The only choice is whether this conflict will be managed constructively or destructively...I want to challenge the assumption that to love others means having no conflict with them. In fact, loving, caring for others, investing deeply in them and risking part of ourselves makes our conflict more intense. The deeper the relationship, the more significant the conflict (Lewis, 23, 31).



Several studies offer similar thoughts about addressing problems and resolving them (Deutsch, 360ff.; Lohfink, 147; Brunson, 20; Deutsch and West; Johnson). To preserve unity in a merger of two congregations conflict must be anticipated, openly addressed and resolved in redemptive ways.

The Apostle Paul dealt with an intense fracture in the fellowship of the church in Corinth. Right from the start he addressed the problem. “God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:9-10). Paul knew that the only way for the Corinthian rift to be healed was to help the church refocus on Jesus Christ. Their attention had drifted to which preacher was the best, which spiritual gift was the most important, which worship style was right, which eschatology was most accurate, which foods were okay to eat, which mission project was worthiest (Witherington, 74). Twenty centuries later the church deals with the same problems; nothing has changed. Neither has the prescription.

### **Stabilizer #2: Keep the Focus on Jesus**

Wandering eyes lead to a wandering heart – watch the ball, catch the ball in the glove; watch the bird, catch the ball in the face. Church leaders must help the congregation keep main thing the main thing. In a merger many distractions exist. People can become more interested in securing their seat in the sanctuary than growing their faith.

“Whatever else, Christians have a common object of loyalty that binds them together” (Gustafson, 5). “Relational unity in this community is maintained by the Spirit and in common submission to the lordship of Jesus...Personal disagreements may or may not be resolved in this community at this stage in salvation history, but true unity is assured with common allegiance to the lordship of the one risen Lord Jesus” (Thompson, 103, 170). To preserve unity in a church merger a strong emphasis on spiritual formation must be maintained.

Ownership is an important piece to church unity. All members need to be all in. But all members need to let all other members be in. Sometimes some Christians think and act as if the church belongs only to them. The book of Romans contains a warning about that issue:

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others...Do not be conceited (Romans 12:4-6, 16).

William Campbell discovered a similar attitude.

A characteristic of some of the Roman Christians was that they held an inflated self-estimate, and this may have included elements of religious, ethnic, and cultural superiority. They tended to boast in their *distinctions* rather than in their *common faith*. It was arrogant attitudes that were the root of the problem. This arrogance destroyed community harmony (Campbell, 64). (See also Malherbe, 30)

Some in the church may feel their personal investment over the years gives them the right to wield power and control. That cannot be allowed.

### **Stabilizer #3: Confront the Disruptors**

The church must be willing to rebuke those who insist on doing things their own way. “Refusing to deal with someone will rarely solve an immediate problem: it will almost certainly impair our ability to solve future problems” (Fisher, *Getting Together : Building a Relationship That Gets to Yes*, 5). Arrogant Christians (an oxymoron?) who act without regard to established church procedures or without respect for other members should be admonished. In a merger of two congregations the temptation exists for some to establish their territory and flex their “big fish” muscles. Leaders must be ready to handle those who step out of line. “Where defection from God's Word in doctrine or life imperils the family fellowship and with it the whole congregation, the word of admonition and rebuke must be ventured” (Bonhoeffer, 107).

Jesus gave some instruction on how to do that in Matthew 18:15-17.

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (NRSV).

The courage to challenge those who brazenly ignore the “we are family” dimension of church is needed to preserve unity. “Being nice is no answer” (Fisher, *Getting to Yes*, 8). (See also Deutsch, 181)

Finally, “honesty is the best policy” (attributed to Benjamin Franklin). It’s a good policy for sustaining harmony in the fellowship of the church. “Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as

each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:15-17, NRSV). It's important for Christians to speak the truth. Those who do not are not in the same family as Jesus. He made that clear when he spoke to Jews who did not believe in him. "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Yet truth needs to be spoken in love, full of grace. Therefore, forgiveness needs to be spoken in Christian fellowship as much as the truth.

#### **Stabilizer #4: Encourage Truth and Grace**

"Fellowship is more than unconditional love that wraps its arms around someone who is hurting. It is also tough love that holds one fast to the truth and the pursuit of righteousness" (Colson and Vaughn, 108).

The Apostle Peter asked the Lord how many times a person should forgive another person. Jesus's reply was, essentially, "every time" (Matthew 18:21-22). To preserve unity, the idea of speaking the truth in love cannot be overly stressed. Members acting with grace toward one another is absolutely crucial to keeping a healthy balance in the church. Christians are not supposed to look the other way when fellow believers stumble in their walk of faith. But the accountability process is to be undertaken with great humility and love (see Matthew 7:1-5; James 5:16-20; 1 John 5:16-17). "The problem has been that Christians often never get beyond the social dimension of fellowship. Thus, we need a balanced emphasis on the church as a caring community, as a partnership in the gospel, and as a body of believers who mutually build up one another spiritually" (Bridges, 150).

Therefore, after making every effort to avoid division and dissention, when conflict arises church members must be honest with one another, covenant to work things out, and must love one another. “It (Philemon) shows the freshness, the sincerity, the goodness which flourished wherever people experienced the new reality of sisterly and brotherly community which comes from the new beginning made possible by the Spirit. The early church's most beautiful word for the new reality which spread in the community given by God is agape (love)” (Lohfink, 109). Hellerman sums it up:

I find it rather striking that neither in the midst of the Galatian heresy nor in the context of divisiveness and immorality at Corinth did Paul instruct his readers to leave the community in order to find a healthier group of brothers and sisters. Instead, he challenged them to stick it out and partner with God to make things better (Hellerman, 153).

Churches are not always good at agape. Samuel Holdbrook-Smith discovered that of the eight characteristics listed by the Natural Church Development guide to a healthy church the two that ranked next to the bottom after a merger were “holistic small groups” and “loving relationships.” (Holdbrook-Smith). Relationships, even between Christians, require hard work. Lincoln Bingham, at age seventy-seven, served as pastor of the Shively Heights Baptist Church and helped lead the merger of that predominantly black congregation with the predominantly white congregation of St. Paul Baptist Church. His advice to pastors considering merger is “Work hard at building relationships” (Bingham).

Kelly Dee McClendon in his in-depth research of a church merger established criteria for effectiveness/success “a sense of unity among the majority of church members.” The survey question asked to harvest that response was “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The two former congregations have now genuinely become one?” (McClendon). Really? How do the respondents even

know what “become one” means? Brian Wright in his research comes closer to the real issues of Christian unity. He asks practical questions about fellowship ministry and relationships. “Unity, trust and spiritual health are essential building blocks of religious community and their absence is an indicator of the failure of the merger” (Wright).

When congregations merge many administrative, missional, financial, denominational and logistical matters need lots of attention. But if no attention is paid to create, preserve or enhance unity, then the union is a bust in the Kingdom. Relationships in the church matter. Anthony Buono and James Bowditch capture the exact same thought from the business viewpoint:

Merger-related organizational restructurings can traumatize and alienate people at all organizational levels...To simply assume, however, that the transformation will succeed or the myriad issues and concerns associated with it will work themselves out in the long run is naïve. A merger is ultimately a human process. Focused efforts on and sensitivity to what people are experiencing are necessary...A myopic focus on the financial efficiencies that can be derived from organizational consolidation serves only to disrupt the human fabric of an organization...The human side of mergers and acquisitions has been neglected for too long (Buono and Bowditch, 6, 133, 265).

Many strategies for successful churches and church mergers include virtually no reference to healthy fellowship or preserving unity. Ezra Jones lists seventeen characteristics of effective churches without a single mention of unity or fellowship (E. Jones, 14-17). Others do the same (Elliott; Tomberlin and Bird; S. Jones; Opalinski). Yet that is exactly what most people are looking for in a congregation. “Surveys show that the number-one thing people look for in a church today is fellowship” (Colson and Vaughn, 107; see also Barna, 2; Easum, 83).

Building unity in a church merger is difficult, but it cannot be ignored. There is natural instability in bringing together two completely different groups which have

different histories, heritages, traditions, memories and personalities. The risk is high for jealousy and pride and fear to disrupt fellowship and virtually destroy unity, and thereby damage the effective witness of the church. Yet there is hope. It comes in the form of the stabilizing influence of the Holy Spirit. The only way the church can be God's kind of church is through the power of the Spirit. "Only the Spirit empowers us to transcend differences and to transform our preferences into love for others" (McKnight, 196). Under the influence of the Spirit merged congregations can expect success in addressing conflict, focusing on Jesus, confronting the disruptors and encouraging truth and grace.

### **Research Design Literature**

How does the church measure unity? That's like asking "How do you measure how blue is the sky?" At different times of the day it's different shades of blue. There's navy blue, Carolina blue, Kentucky blue. Some days it's cloudy and not blue at all. At night it's definitely black. But, it's never neon green. There's a standard scientific wavelength of light specific for the color blue and its million hues. Whenever the visual receptors look at the sky and pick up that wavelength, the brain interprets blue. So, what's the wavelength of Christian unity?

The preceding biblical and theological foundations pointed to a standard spiritual wavelength for unity in the church. That standard was not based upon subjective interpretation. Nor was it based upon the church yard sign saying, "We are a friendly church. Everyone is welcome." It was not even based upon the word "United" being part of the name of the church. Instead, based upon the survey of the preceding literature, Christian unity in the church resides in the relationships between the members of a congregation. The standard for unity involves truthfulness and trustworthiness between

Christians. It is about apologies and forgiveness and love and encouragement. Church unity revolves around persons of faith taking seriously their life together in Christ.

The research design of this project used that standard to objectively measure unity in churches that have formed from a past merger – specifically, merged United Methodist churches in Indiana. The goal was to identify unity in a congregation as measured against the wavelength of the researched standard for unity. If unity was detected, then discovering what produced it and how it was preserved was important. If unity was lacking, then discovering what inhibited it and how it was obstructed was valuable. In the end, the hope was to produce a “Unity Module” that congregations deciding to merge can use to pay attention to the relational dimensions of the merger.

The best way to discover if unity exists in a church was to ask to the members. Research Design Literature suggests a qualitative approach was the best way to ask. The qualitative (versus quantitative) method explores social or human problems in their natural settings attempting to bring understanding through analysis that builds a holistic picture of the issue (Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*; Creswell, *Research Design*; Denzin and Lincoln; Patton). Certain life experiences, like church unity, cannot be meaningfully assessed by numbers (Berg, 3). Qualitative research, then, became the system of receptors that seeks to see the wavelength of unity in the church.

The four receptors in this system were interviews, document analyses, written questionnaires and focus groups. These tools (Sensing, chapter 4) covered the spectrum of research needed to ask the questions in multiple ways. Asking in multiple ways was critical for triangulation in order to clarify and verify the observations in the field (Denzin, Lincoln, 97). The research focused on relationships and the interaction between



members of the church, especially post-merger. Questions covered topics related to “familification” such as fellowship and harmony. Discerning the before-merger and the after-merger sense of unity was valuable. Talking about harmony and conflict helped identify the joys and challenges of unity in the merger.

There was pain involved in the process. Experience teaches that not all mergers are healthy; and certainly, there is a level of disunity in nearly every congregation. The key here was to develop simple objective questions and help participants stay focused on answering those questions. However, experience also teaches that cathartic healing can come from simply talking about the past. The Lord is certainly able to heal even memories (Seamands, *Healing for Damaged Emotions*; Seamands, *Healing of Memories*). Though that was not the purpose or intention of this project, anticipating emotions around the topic of church unity was part of the preparation for the interviews. If there is a can of worms in a church it usually involves relationships.

This research project sought to find if people united when their churches united. If so, and Christian unity was evident, how did it happen? And if not, why not? Many other factors are involved when churches merge, like financial, administrative, missional, survival. This project was not concerned with those other factors. Often those other factors are institutional in nature, and usually tagged for determining whether or not a merger is successful. This project was purely interested in discovering how the people involved in a merger got along. If that did not go well, no matter the marks of other metrics, the merger was unsuccessful in Kingdom terms. For unity is spiritual in nature.

### Summary of Literature

In discovering how unity is preserved in a church merger, several main themes flow out of the literature analysis. These themes form the core of the questions used to probe for unity: Christian Unity, The Body of Christ, Church Family, Fellowship, Speak the Truth in Love, and Forgiveness.

*Christian Unity* is the atmosphere created in the church through the relationships that persons have by being together in Christ. The oneness that is inherent in the Trinity is on display in the church “through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Christians can choose to live in and strengthen that bond by following Jesus’s teachings on relationships and his example of how he related to others. Failure to follow Christ’s teaching and example destroys unity.

*The Body of Christ* is the biblical model of the church and the reality of Jesus in the world as he dwells in believers through his Spirit. Diverse as the human body, but one like the human body, the church is a coordinated and productive living physical entity. Members of the church are like parts of the body, so different and yet get along in order to be fruitful. The life-force that equips and activates the Body of Christ is the Holy Spirit. Living by the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit are essential qualities for spiritual health and harmony in the church. Suppressing the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19) restricts the Body’s ability to work together in harmony.

*Church Family* is the concept for how Christians relate to one another. Related by blood (of the Savior) and given birth by the Spirit, Christians are God’s children (Romans 8:16). As spiritual brothers and sisters, church members find “there’s no place like home” when there is unity in the church. A church, like a family, provides care and support,

comfort and healing, instruction and correction, encouragement and love. Life begins in a family. Eternal life begins in a church family. When dysfunction disrupts the familial relationships between Christians unity is broken.

*Fellowship* is the practice of unity in the church. Building the community of the church family is the purpose of fellowship. Various ministries, like small groups, service projects and worship, help the community-building process. Small groups provide an avenue for Christian friendships to develop. Service projects help Christians exercise their spiritual gifts and rub elbows together. Worship keeps Christ in the center of everyone's lives. A strong center, namely the gravitational pull of the nucleus Jesus Christ, keeps order in the church. Christians who avoid fellowship fly out of orbit and risk splitting the church.

*Speak the Truth in Love* is the accountability process for preserving unity. Only when truth is valued and practiced can unity exist. Rumor and innuendo and suspicion breed dissonance. For harmony to resonate in the church, Christians must be honest with one another. But brutal honesty defeats the kindred spirit. Therefore, honesty must be tempered with love. Speaking the truth in love builds healthy relationships in a redemptive way. It's an accountability process wherein believers can encourage others and be encouraged; can confront others and be confronted. Without the freedom of truth and the fullness of love, church is nothing more than a superficial social club.

*Forgiveness* is at the heart of unity. Bringing different people together creates tension. When two groups of people, who have different backgrounds, histories and traditions, rub together there is friction. Forgiveness is the spiritual lubricant that eliminates the friction. The church has a God-appointed ministry of reconciliation (2

Corinthians 5:18-19). Believers are first reconciled to God and then live out that reconciliation by being reconciled with each other. “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you” need to flow freely between Christians. Congregations that bring people together promote humility in their ranks. Unforgiveness and unrepentance rot the core of a person’s soul and eat away at the unity in the church.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter covers the research methodology for this ministry transformation project of evaluating if and how Christian unity was promoted and preserved in churches that merged. The context, participants and instruments used to obtain the data are provided in detail. Topics include: the nature and purpose of the project, how the answers to the research questions were discovered using the indicated instruments, the ministry context of the project, the selection, description and ethical considerations of the participants, the expert reviews and the pilot study, the reliability and validity of the research design, and the procedures for collecting and analyzing the evidence.

#### **Nature and Purpose of the Project**

Church mergers continue to be a path forward for congregations longing to be fruitful. Shrinking vital statistics of attendance and giving and member involvement cause churches to look for ways to join together with other churches and combine resources to be more effective. This is especially true in the mainline denomination of the United Methodist Church where the vital statistics have been shrinking for decades.

The nature of this ministry transformation project was to discover if and how Christian unity was promoted and preserved between members of two (or more) congregations that merged into one church. Church mergers require attention be given to many dimensions of congregational life: administrative, financial, location, mission, and more. The relational dimension is extremely important and vital to success. This project was designed to find out if and how fellowship was practiced in ways that created and

sustained Christian unity in mergers of United Methodist congregations in Indiana. Interviews, document analysis, questionnaires, and focus groups were used to collect the evidence. The analysis of the evidence led to a synthesis of best practices for promoting unity which may be used to assist the merger process.

### **Research Questions**

The following four research questions were answered by using the indicated instruments. Four instruments were created: a document analysis, a questionnaire, a focus group, and an interview.

#### **Research Question #1**

The first research question was: what expectations about unity were present going into the merger? This question was studied to determine if Christian unity was even on the radar of what was important during the merger. Three tools were used to research this question. The first tool was a document analysis called “Meeting Minutes Analysis” (MMA). The records of the meetings of the congregations involved that pertained to the merger were read to discover the initial awareness of unity in the minds of the church members. These four questions were asked:

- “What was the vote at each church to merge?” (MMA1)
- “What rationale was given for the merger?” (MMA2)
- “What concerns and/or stipulations about merging were noted?” (MMA3)
- “What were the officially recorded statements about unity?” (MMA4)

The second tool was a questionnaire called “Church Merger Questionnaire” (CMQ). Persons who were members of each merging congregation were mailed this eight-question tool which sought to acquire a broad perspective of the participants’ experience of the merger. Within that broad perspective were specific questions about unity.

- “Did you agree with the decision to merge? Why or why not?” (CMQ2)
- “What vision of unity was promoted during the merger?” (CMQ5)

The third tool was a focus group called “Unity Focus Group” (UFG). Six to ten randomly-chosen persons who completed the CMQ were invited to attend a group discussion about the merger. The UFG was held at the merged church, and a person whom the researcher had trained moderated the focus group meeting. The researcher recorded the discussion on video and wrote down field observations. This conversation provided in-depth responses about the merger and relationships in the church that were not possible to acquire through the questionnaire. To capture the initial expectation of the people about unity, the following questions were asked:

- “What was the main motivation for the merger?” (UFG2)
- “What expectations about unity did you have when the churches merged?” (UFG3)

### **Research Question #2**

The second research question was: what steps were taken during and following the merger to promote unity and fellowship? This question was explored to determine what, if any, practical steps were taken intentionally during and since the church merger to provide fellowship. In addition to the three tools listed above, an interview with the current pastor was added. This fourth tool was called “Pastoral Phone Interview” (PPI). Beyond informing the pastor of this project and securing the pastor’s approval to conduct research among the members, the pastor’s bird’s-eye view of the church was valuable. The following question was asked to the pastor about fellowship:

- “What does the church do today to facilitate fellowship?” (PPI2)

In the document analysis of MMA, questions were asked to discover whether specific plans were discussed about providing fellowship opportunities during the merger. Those questions were:

- “What concerns and/or stipulations about merging were noted??” (MMA3)
- “What steps in the merger were planned to promote fellowship?” (MMA5)

In the questionnaire CMQ, questions were asked to determine the presence and the extent of fellowship activity in the church during the merger. To this end two questions were asked:

- “What joint fellowship activities were planned during the time of the merger?” (CMQ3)
- “What steps has the church taken to build fellowship since the merger?” (CMQ6)

In the focus groups UFG, a question was asked to determine the perceived development of unity through fellowship. Discussion around this question addressed the very heart of this project.

- “In your opinion, has the merger been successful in building Christian unity through fellowship? If so, how? If not, why?” (UFG1)

### **Research Question #3**

The third research question was: what joys and/or struggles occurred in relationships between the people of the merged congregations? This question was investigated to learn about the new relationships of the members of the merged congregations. Unity is all about relationships. How this question was answered established the strength or weakness of the merger in terms of unity. if any, practical steps were taken during and after the church merger to build relationships. All the tools contributed to discerning the status of relational union. The following question was asked to the pastor about relationships:



- “In your opinion did the merger create a healthy environment for relationships? Why or why not?” (PPI1)

In the document analysis of MMA, a question was asked to see if there were any voiced objections to the merger which may have prejudiced relationships even before the merger process began. That question was:

- “Were there any objections to the merger? If so, what were they?” (MMA6)

For those who were church members during the merger, the CMQ asked questions designed to evaluate the general relationships in the church. These two questions were asked:

- “On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Not Good: deceit, arrogance, gossip; 5 = Fabulous: forgiveness, encouragement, speaking the truth in love), how would you rate the overall relational dynamics of the congregation today? (CMQ4)
- “What blessings occurred in relationships between the people of the merged congregations?” (CMQ6)
- “What problems occurred in relationships between the people of the merged congregations? Why did these problems occur? How were they resolved?” (CMQ7)

In the focus groups UFG, part of the discussion centered around how well or how poorly the relationships were going in the church. People were instructed to speak in generalities, and not to name any names.

- “In your opinion did the merger produce healthy relationships? Why or why not?” (UFG4)
- “What joys/struggles have there been in building new relationships between the people of the merged congregations?” (UFG5)

#### **Research Question #4**

The fourth research question was: what best practices promote unity among church members of merging congregations? This question was researched to gain insight into the practical steps that work best to build unity during a church merger. Three out of

the four tools were used to research this question. In the interview (PPI) the pastor was asked:

- “In your opinion, what works best to strengthen Christian unity in the church?” (PPI3)

In the questionnaire CMQ, a similar question was asked:

- “In your opinion, how can the church best promote and develop Christian unity?” (CMQ8)

In the focus groups UFG, the following question was presented for discussion:

- “Suppose you were in charge and could make one change to the process of merger, what would you do differently to make unity and fellowship better?” (UFG6)

### **Ministry Context**

The ministry context of this project included United Methodist churches located in the state of Indiana which had formed through the merger of two or more congregations. Building Christian unity within a congregation is critical to the health and effectiveness of the church. A church merger provides a significant opportunity to highlight and evaluate the process by which unity is promoted and preserved.

Churches in this project were of the same denomination – United Methodist. They shared a common connection which provided doctrinal and procedural harmony. The United Methodist Church has guidelines for merger that are outlined in the *Book of Discipline*. The Indiana United Methodist Annual Conference (a regional division of the denomination) was required to provide episcopal oversight, superintendent supervision, clergy appointment, and other leadership resources to assist in the merger. A wealth of practical help through merger models and ecclesiastical wisdom was available from the denomination.

Churches in this project were from the same state – Indiana. They shared a very homogenous cultural background which eliminated language and social customs from being barriers to unity. The Midwestern town-and-country setting for most of the churches meant the people shared common values. This cultural congruency established a firm foundation upon which to build strong harmonious relationships.

Churches in this project that merged together were from the same general community. They shared a close geographical proximity which afforded the congregations' members many shared avenues of regular interaction. Beyond the church activities, church members had the opportunity to interact at school events, grocery stores, Fourth of July celebrations, public parks, the post office, polling places, and other community locations. There was a good chance some might have lived in the same neighborhood. There was a good chance, because of their proximity, the churches had united together in the past for joint ministry (like Vacation Bible School or Sunrise Service).

Churches in this project were struggling to survive and be fruitful. Attendance was minimal; income was low; and expenses were rising. The hope they shared came from the idea that merging together would boost attendance and finances to more sustainable levels where ministry would be more effective. Whether that is good motivation to merge, or a healthy denominational practice, or even results in effectiveness is not the point. The point is that in the context of these churches merger meant a shared hope for a better and brighter future.

Though the churches in this project were quite similar in many regards, they were all significantly different in one aspect. Every church was unique. No one congregation was identical to any other congregation it merged with. Each church had its own traditions and

history and personalities. Merging churches celebrated Christmas and Easter differently, worshipped differently, fellowshiped differently, had different patriarchs and matriarchs and heroes and villains. Building Christian unity in church mergers, though formed through personal relationships, had to occur in the context of congregations with different and unique personae.

### **Participants**

Participants in this project were clergy and laypersons from Indiana United Methodist churches that had formed from a past church merger. The present pastor was contacted by phone and made aware of the project's goal, processes, and commitment to confidentiality. The pastor supplied twenty-five names and addresses of church members who experienced the merger.

### **Criteria for Selection**

For this qualitative research project purposive sampling served to provide the best criteria for participant selection. "Purposive samples select people who have awareness of the situation and meet the criteria and attributes that are essential to your research" (Sensing, 2271).

Due to the nature of the project's main focus, namely Christian unity, the persons chosen needed to be Christians who had the experience of uniting with other Christians. Since that broad category could include millions of people, a finer focus narrowed the participants by three factors. First, the persons invited to participate were part of congregations that in the past had decided to leave behind their church, combine with one or more congregations, and form a new church. This uniting event was selected because of its widespread practice and obvious challenges to Christian unity.

Second, United Methodist churches were selected because of the historical legacy of the “united” aspect of that denomination. The marriage of two churches becoming one is legendary in the long history of United Methodism in America. And, the researcher was a lifelong Methodist whose career as a United Methodist pastor deeply motivated the research.

Third, participants lived in Indiana (the researcher’s home state). The state boundaries helped define the geographical scope of the project and limit the number of cultural factors that might influence relationship-building. The project aimed at understanding if and how a church merger process promoted and preserved unity. The more diverse the people groups, the more difficult the research would be to focus purely on the process and not on the blending of ethnic, racial, or economic differences. Indeed, that would be an important work, but it was not the work of this project.

### **Description of Participants**

Churches which participated in this research were selected from the list of the twenty-eight Indiana United Methodist church mergers where the pastor gave approval for the congregants to be surveyed. Nine pastors gave approval, but only six sent a list of names and addresses of members who were present during the merger. From those six churches forty-nine persons completed and returned a questionnaire.

The following is the demographic description of the total sampling of persons involved in this research project:

- Female            57%
- Male              43%
- Ages 18-34      0%
- Ages 35-54      6%
- Ages 55-74     41%
- Ages 75+        53%

- Ethnicity 100% Caucasian

Also, see charts on pages 104-105.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All persons who participated in the project gave their informed consent by signing the Consent Form, and by agreeing to its terms (see template in Appendix F). Those completed consent forms were mailed to the researcher before any questionnaires were distributed or any focus groups met. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, the document was date-stamped and secured in a locked file cabinet in my (the researcher's) locked office. Throughout the duration of the project, I was always in possession of the only key to the file cabinet.

All field notes and completed questionnaires were coded for confidentiality. I secured all instruments, including interview logs, returned questionnaires, protocol analysis, field notes, and focus group videos and transcripts in a locked file cabinet in his locked office, and only he had the key to the file cabinet. Confidentiality was kept throughout the project. Participants were made aware of the strict confidentiality measures in the consent form, in the cover letter sent with the questionnaire, on the phone at the outset of interviews, and at the beginning of the discussion in the focus groups. Again, all recorded participant responses were coded so that the data remained confidential. I, the researcher, was the only one who possessed the key to the code.

### **Instrumentation**

Christian unity is a relationship-based issue. Since that is the object of this project's research, all instruments used to obtain data were qualitative in method and researcher-designed. Only one of the total of twenty-four questions across all instruments

was quantitative. Four instruments served to collect the data: an interview, a document analysis, a questionnaire, and a focus group.

### **Interview**

The interview was named “Pastoral Phone Interview” (PPI – see Appendix A). The pastor’s buy-in was important to be able to address the congregation in this research. Also, the pastor’s perspective, as the spiritual and administrative leader of the church, on the unity and fellowship of the church was valuable. Three questions in the interview covered the pastor’s opinions about the effects of the merger on the church members’ relationships, on the current state of fellowship ministry in the congregation, and on what practices work best to promote unity.

### **Document Analysis**

The document analysis was named “Meeting Minutes Analysis” (MMA – see Appendix B). The official records of the meetings leading up to and including the decision to merger provided insight into the atmosphere within the congregations and the attitudes of the leaders. This information was helpful in discerning pre-existent angst or excitement surrounding the merger. The six questions of the document analysis guided the perusal of the historical minutes of the meetings.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was named “Church Merger Questionnaire” (CMQ – see Appendix C). The evaluation of the relational dynamics resulting from the merger were best obtained by asking those involved to reflect on them. The eight questions of the questionnaire covered the topics of unity and fellowship during and after the merger, and it gave participants a place to record their opinions about the blessing, problems and

effects of the merger as they pertained to relationships in the church. One question used a scale to rate the perception of the overall fitness of the relational dynamics in the church.

### **Focus Group**

The focus group was named “Unity Focus Group” (UFG – see Appendix D). A discussion about the merger provided a richer and deeper understanding of the relational dynamics of unity and fellowship in the church. Six to ten participants were randomly selected from those who responded to the questionnaire. Care was taken to insure a balanced representation from the different churches involved in the merger. A moderator asked seven questions designed to produce a full picture of relational unity and fellowship in the congregation. The focus group conversation was videotaped, and the researcher wrote down observations about the meeting.

### **Expert Review**

Since the project’s assessment instruments were researcher-designed, three expert reviewers were used to evaluate and fine-tune the questions. A cover letter explaining the project, its rationale and the research questions were sent along with the instruments and an evaluation protocol for each instrument to each reviewer. The helpful comments of the reviewers tightened up the wording of some questions, combined or eliminated some questions, suggested other questions that might be asked, and affirmed the alignment of the instrument questions with the research questions.

### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was used with the Dearborn Hills United Methodist Church. Since the DHUMC congregation met all the project’s criteria (a merger of two United Methodist congregations located in Indiana), it became an added way to perfect the



instrumentation. The questionnaire and the focus group instruments were used in the pilot study. The Meeting Minutes Analysis and the Pastoral Phone Interview were not used.

Twenty-five people filled out the Church Merger Questionnaire, and then were given an evaluation protocol. The feedback helped to determine the amount of time required to answer the eight questions, and the clarity and suitability of the questions. From those twenty-five, eight people (four from each of the two congregations that merged) participated in the Unity Focus Group. After the discussion they were given an evaluation protocol to supply constructive feedback about the UFG. Those comments helped identify unclear and irrelevant questions, and pinpoint some uncomfortable topics surrounding merger.

### **Reliability and Validity of Project Design**

The object of this project's research was Christian unity. Christian unity finds expression in relationships between persons of Christian faith. To determine the existence and extent of unity questions needed to be asked of people about relationships. There is no statistical analysis that can identify unity because there is no relationometer. Relationships cannot be quantified. Therefore, qualitative research was necessary in this project.

The instruments developed asked questions that aimed at understanding relationships. The questionnaire and the focus group allowed persons to reflect upon, report on, and discuss relationships in the church in a confidential manner. Participants used both of those tools to convey their assessments of how the merger stimulated (or not) harmonious Christian relationships in the church and fostered (or not) the practice of fellowship in the church which builds relationships.

Three expert reviewers and a pilot study were used to validate the research process. Their input helped adjust questions to make the instruments clearer and more on point with the intended goal of the project. Once the instruments were adjusted the research could proceed with the utmost confidence. All the participants from all the church mergers received exactly the same instruments in exactly the same way. No deviation occurred. No deviation was necessary because the result of each merger produced the same product: a local church which is still in existence.

### **Data Collection**

“Qualitative research systematically seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience” (Sensing, 1628). Thus, the design of this project was qualitative in nature because of the need to make sense of the social experience within churches and examine the relationships of “individuals who inhabit these settings,” namely Christians. Instruments were crafted to ask questions about church fellowship and Christian unity, and the instruments were addressed to persons who had gone through a merger of their church with another church (or churches).

The project design was built around four dimensions. The first dimension was to get the church’s spiritual and administrative leader’s perspective. An interview with the pastor was created.

The interview is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose determined by the one party – the interviewer. It is a professional interaction, which goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views as in everyday conversation and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge. The qualitative research interview is a construction site for knowledge (Kvale, 7).

The second dimension was to get a sense of any pre-existent bias for/against merger and to get a sense of the strength of the will of the people to merge. A document analysis was created to look at the records of the official meetings where discussion and votes about the merger took place.

The third dimension was to get the church members' perspectives. A questionnaire was created to obtain information about the perceptions of unity, the health of relationships, and the quality of fellowship in the church. This questionnaire was given to current church members who were present during the time of the merger. "In qualitative data collection, purposeful sampling is used so that individuals are selected because they have experienced that central phenomenon" (Creswell, *Research Design*, 217).

The fourth dimension was to obtain deeper insight into the effects of the merger especially as it pertained to the relationships between the members of the different churches. A focus group was created to facilitate an observed discussion which was directed by a pre-established set of questions. "Focus group interviews also provide a means of collecting qualitative data" (Berg, 145). Six to ten persons who had completed the questionnaire participated in the focus group. Several resources were consulted to design the focus group instrument (Morgan and Scannell; Bell; Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*; Berg).

In an effort to insure clarity, precision, and reliability of the instruments, three experts reviewed the research design, and volunteers from a church that fit the project's participant criteria filled out a pilot questionnaire and participated in a pilot focus group. As Judith Bell advises, "All data-gathering instruments should be piloted" (Bell, 84).

Protocols were developed and appropriately administered, which served to fine-tune the design.

I took the following steps to collect the data.

1. I secured a list of names, addresses, and phone numbers of churches formed by merger. The list of merged churches was obtained from the records kept on file in the conference office.
2. I called each church and talked with the senior pastor.
  - a. I introduced myself and described the purpose and the nature of the project.
  - b. I asked for the pastor's blessing to proceed to contact church members to invite them to participate. If permission was granted, I requested the names and addresses of twenty-five current members (several from each of the previous churches) who were present when the merger occurred to be mailed, or emailed, to me.
  - c. I told the pastor about the pastoral phone interview and I asked when a good time for that would be.
  - d. I asked to view the documents that recorded the minutes of meetings leading up to the merger. I asked the pastor about the best way to access those documents: i) copies mailed to the researcher? ii) scanned pdf files emailed to the researcher? or iii) documents viewed when the researcher comes for the focus group? The timing of the document analysis depended on the pastor's answer. For the procedure to process that data collection, see number 5 below.
  - e. I asked about how to schedule the focus group at the church. I asked the pastor his opinion about scheduling that one-hour meeting on a Saturday morning or

Sunday afternoon/evening (my most available times). The date and time was arranged after the I received the completed questionnaires and selected the focus group participants.

3. I mailed the research packet to the members whose names and addresses were sent to me by the pastor.
  - a. First in the packet was a cover letter of introduction with all my contact information, and statement of the purpose and the nature of the project. The cover letter also included an invitation to participate, a statement of confidentiality, and a thank you for considering participating.
  - b. Next in the packet were the instructions about completing the consent form, the demographic information, and the questionnaire.
  - c. Then the pages of the consent form and demographic information and questionnaire were included.
  - d. Finally, the packet included an envelope that had prepaid postage and was addressed to me. This envelope was used by the participant to mail the three research pieces – the consent form, the demographic information, the questionnaire – back to me.
4. I received the mailings from the participants, and processed the pieces.
  - a. I sent a thank-you note to each participant.
  - b. The three research pieces were coded for confidentiality. The code was kept on an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was saved on the secure project data stick which was patently protected: locked in a file cabinet in the locked office

of the researcher who was always in possession of the only key to the file cabinet.

- c. The consent form was date-stamped and secured and patently protected.
  - d. The demographic information was processed by transferring the data to an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was saved on the secure project data stick which was patently protected.
  - e. The questionnaire was processed by transferring the data to an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was saved on the secure project data stick which was patently protected.
  - f. A backup of the secure project data stick onto another stick was made every time there were additions made to the spreadsheets. The backup data stick was patently protected.
5. I viewed the documents that recorded the minutes of meetings leading up to the merger, and processed the data.
- a. I used the Meeting Minutes Analysis instrument to process the data. Information was transferred to an Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was saved on the secure project data stick which was patently protected.
  - b. After I received copies of the documents, those documents were patently protected.
  - c. A backup of the secure project data stick onto another stick was made every time there were additions made to the spreadsheets. The backup data stick was patently protected.
6. I invited persons to participate in the Unity Focus Group.

- a. I randomly selected three to five persons from each of the former churches (for a total of six to ten) to populate the focus group.
  - b. I mailed invitations to the selected persons to participate in the hour-long focus group discussion. An explanation of the topic and the procedure and the confidentiality of the focus group was included in the invitation.
  - c. Respondents were encouraged to email the researcher to expedite making the proper arrangements.
  - d. After I secured the date and time of the focus group with the church office, a confirmation was sent to the participants.
7. I hosted the focus group.
- a. I trained the moderator to facilitate the discussion using the Unity Focus Group instrument.
  - b. I traveled with the moderator to the church site. Arrived thirty minutes early to set up the room.
  - c. I welcomed participants with drinks and snacks.
  - d. I started on time, beginning with a thank-you, introductions, and instructions about the conversation. Pushed the record button on the audio recorder.
  - e. The moderator guided the participants by asking the UFG questions.
  - f. Researcher observed and took notes about the conversation and the group dynamics.
  - g. The final question was asked, “Anything else?” and the discussion was completed. I offered a sincere and heartfelt thanks to the participants and sent them off with a small gift.

8. I processed the focus group data.
  - a. I transferred the recorded focus group conversation to its own data stick. The audio data stick was patently protected.
  - b. Information from the focus group recording was transcribed to an Excel spreadsheet. My field notes and the moderator's notes were added to the data. Then the spreadsheet was saved on the secure project data stick which was patently protected.
9. I destroyed the raw data six months after the completion and submission of the project.
  - a. I removed all documents from the locked file cabinet and shredded them.
  - b. I removed all data sticks from the locked file cabinet and the backup data stick from the locked desk drawer and destroyed them.

### **Data Analysis**

“The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data (some qualitative researchers like to think of this as peeling back the layers of an onion), representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, *Research Design*, 183). The data analysis of this project followed a blended approach drawing upon ideas and models from Sensing, Creswell, and Berg (Sensing; Creswell, *Research Design*; Berg). The plan was to draw out themes and patterns from the data by coding, categorizing, and interpreting the information in order to arrive at a narrative summary explaining the discoveries of this project.



### **Prepared and Organized the Data**

The raw data collected from participants were transformed into written text format. The Pastoral Phone Interview notes were typed into an Excel spreadsheet which was set up to record each answer question-by-question. The Meeting Minutes Analysis notes were typed into an Excel spreadsheet which was set up to record each answer question-by-question. The Church Merger Questionnaire answers were typed into an Excel spreadsheet which was set up to record each answer question-by-question. The Unity Focus Group video was transcribed and then that data, along with the researcher's observation notes, were typed into an Excel spreadsheet which was set up to record each answer question-by-question.

### **Reviewed the Data**

The prepared and organized data had been entered into Excel spreadsheets were read through and reviewed. The researcher noted three things: the general ideas of the participants' answers, the tone and depth of the data collected, and the emerging themes. This was helpful in getting an overall feel for the information heading into the coding process.

### **Coded the Data**

Open coding (Berg) of the open-ended data (Creswell) was used to organize the information in the Excel spreadsheets into meaningful categories and labeling those categories to discover major themes and patterns. Every answer from each question across all the instruments was read and tagged in two ways. First, a color tag was placed on all the entries. Each question in the instrumentation was designed to pertain to one of four major topics – unity, relationships, fellowship, or merger. Since those

predetermined topics existed, color coding them meant each question was tagged with a color that connected it to an area (if a question applied to more than one topic, more than one appropriate color tag was applied). Second, according to the nature of the answer, the number of the Excel cell of that answer was placed in a corresponding column on another “Results” spreadsheet of the same Excel workbook. New results columns were added as different answers emerged. The outcome of this coding produced themes within the major topics that were categorized for analysis and produced descriptive statistics that were weighted for interpretation.

### **Categorized the Data**

The themes and patterns that were discovered in the data led to several significant categories. The categories were named, and a description of each category was crafted using evidence from the data.

### **Lessons Learned from the Data**

Once the data was categorized and described concluding interpretations were made. The lessons learned from the data came from a) identifying healthy and problematic aspects of relationships, fellowship, and unity; b) specific suggestions about what worked and didn’t work in building Christian unity; and c) the general perception of the success of the church merger in the areas of relationships, fellowship, and unity. Following that analysis, a link was made to the research in the literature review. The intersection of the data with the biblical and theological foundations was valuable to explore in the final synthesis.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter presents data gathered from interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, and document analysis. The topic of Christian unity is not a good candidate for a quantitative evaluation. Counting how many United Methodists are united may be possible, but discerning unity in a United Methodist congregation is different. It is not a function of statistics or data found on an end-of-year report form. Therefore, the data here is reflective of unity's qualitative nature.

The practical logistics of merger include finance, facility, leadership, administrative structure, mission and programming. Understandably these elements are given priority in the merger process. Yet what was worth a closer look is how new relationships develop between the people of the merged congregations. The purpose of this ministry transformation project was to discover if and how Christian unity was promoted and preserved between members of two (or more) congregations that merged into one church.

#### **Participants**

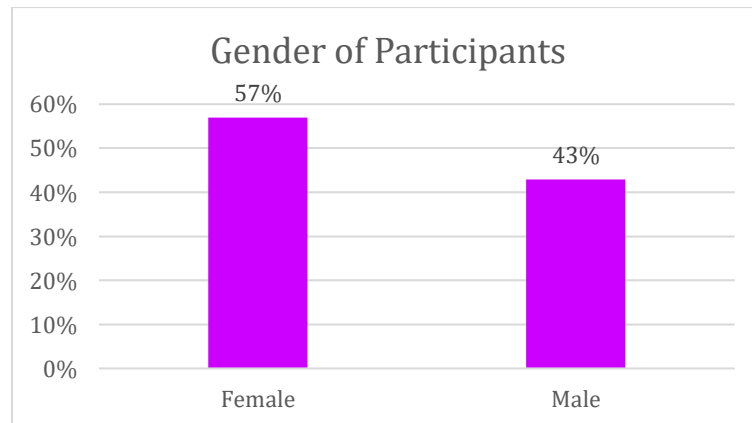
The total number of Indiana UM churches formed through merger was twenty-eight. Of those twenty-eight, six have closed, seven were unreachable/unresponsive, and one was a pilot for this research, which left fourteen possible participant churches. All fourteen were contacted about participating in this project. Of the fourteen, nine pastors were excited about the idea of the project, giving permission for the church they serve to participate by returning their signed consent form. But when asked for a list of members

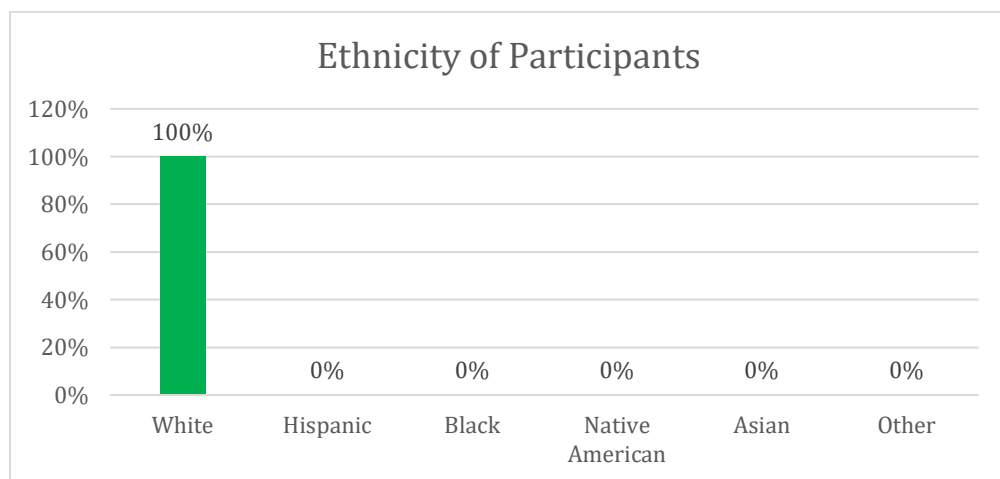
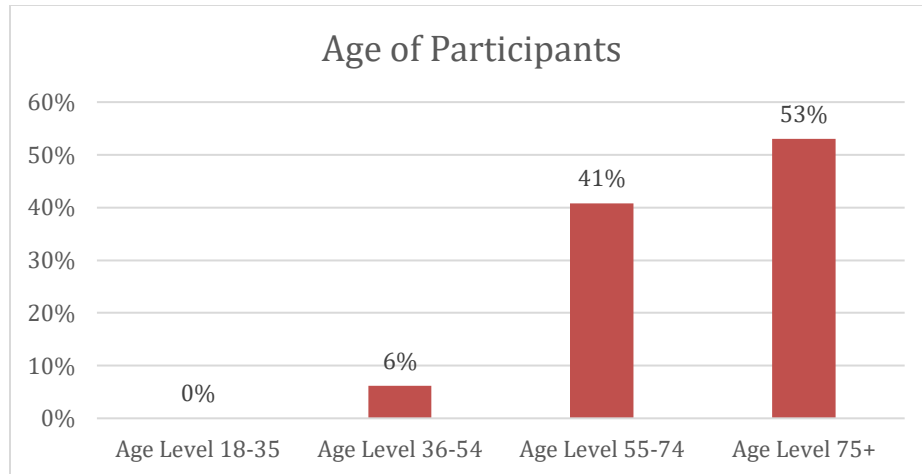
to contact and involve in the research, only six complied. A total of one hundred and forty-eight people from those six lists received an invitation to participate. Forty-nine said yes, returned their signed consent form and filled out the questionnaire. Then those forty-nine were invited to continue the conversation about unity in church mergers by attending a focus group meeting. Twenty-one persons from three churches accepted the invitation and participated in the focus group meeting held at their respective churches. In every focus group there was at least one person from each of the merged congregations.

In summary, the participants in this project were members of six United Methodist churches located in Indiana. These six churches were established as a result of a merger where previously established congregations decided to unite together and form a new congregation. The six pastors were interviewed and a total of forty-nine church members contributed their thoughts through questionnaires and focus groups.

The demographics (see charts below) were collected in the areas of gender, age and ethnicity. There were more women than men – 43% men, 57% women. The ages broke down into three levels – 6% age 36-54, 41% age 55-74, 53% age 75+. The ethnicity of the participants was from one category – 100% white.

The following charts demonstrate the demographics of the sample group.





### Description of Evidence

#### **Research Question #1**

The first question was: what expectations about unity were present going into the merger? The potential responses to the inquiry about the expectation of unity heading into a merger were spread across eight questions in three different instruments. There were over one hundred and forty-four possible replies to this question. Twenty-one replies addressed the issue. Though many more responses were recorded for these questions, the clear majority were not about unity.

For example, in the Unity Focus Group (UFG3) the question was asked: “What expectations about unity did you have when the churches merged?” Most of the answers (87%) came in the form of people’s hopes for growth.

- “We planned to be a regional center for outreach.”
- “Our hope was that more youth and children would attend.”
- “We were looking forward to a new building in a new location.”
- “More people would mean more support to do the work.”
- “The ultimate goal is higher attendance.”

In the Church Merger Questionnaire (CMQ4) people were asked, “What vision of unity was promoted during the merger?” The majority of answers (74%) had nothing to do with Christian unity.

- “We were going to build a new church.”
- “There was a lot of excitement around purchasing land and building.”
- “Having new programs and expanded programs.”
- “We talked about the benefits of merging resources for making disciples.”
- “The idea was to be a vital part of the community in service to others.”

Reviewing the documents that led up to a merger revealed similar ideas. In the Minutes of Meeting Analysis (MMA1..2..3..4) four questions helped probe whether any pre-merger statements were made about unity. Most responses (66%) were not about unity.

- “There will be opportunities for growth.”
- “We will have more effective ministries.”
- “The merger will revitalize energy and activity for serving.”

Those that did address unity referred mostly to an enhanced feeling of family togetherness. These ideas were reflected in 15% of all responses in this category.

- “We are going to come together as one and accept one another.”
- “The merger helped us be one big family.”
- “I feel like the new church is home.”
- “We’ll have a stronger, more united witness to Christ.”

- “The real product of this merger is Christian fellowship and the by-product is a nice new building.”

From the limited applicable responses, the expectations of unity going into a merger were 1) building relationships between members of the merged congregations, 2) a sense of belonging to a new family of Christian brothers and sisters, and 3) being one together in the same church.

### **Research Question #2**

The second question was: what steps were taken during and following the merger to promote unity and fellowship? The potential responses to the inquiry about the practical steps taken to promote unity and fellowship during and following a merger were spread across six questions in four different instruments. There were over one hundred and twenty-seven possible replies to this question. Nearly all of the responses (95%) provided feedback that tracked with the question.

For example, in the Pastoral Phone Interview (PPI2) the question was asked: “What does the church do today to facilitate fellowship?” All of the pastors responded with several examples of activities that provide avenues for fellowship.

- “We rebooted the UMW; that’s been a great help with fellowship.”
- “There are several small groups that meet regularly.”
- “All-church meals bring everyone together.”
- “Members get involved and work side-by-side in service projects.”

In the focus group discussions, lots of positive energy issued in the answers to the question: “Were there activities as a result of the merger that helped bring people together?” Six items were mentioned in every group.

- Small Groups
- Leadership Training
- Large Group Activities
- Good Communication

- Doing Ministry Together
- Looking Forward

In the questionnaire people were asked to list any joint fellowship activities planned during and since the merger. Many of their replies corresponded to the same activities discussed in the focus groups. There were, however, some that were different.

- Pre-Merger Joint Planning Meetings
- Pre-Merger Joint Worship Services
- Sports Ministries
- Building a New Building Together

Reviewing the minutes of meetings leading up to a merger a clearer picture of vision/purpose emerged. Also, the required (by the *UM Book of Discipline*) joint committees for planning and construction were stipulated, which prompted people working together. One church merger established an official rah-rah visionary motto.

- “All for love and love for all!”

Most of those responses (96%) focused on establishing fellowship activities. Only a very few comments were about practical steps taken to establish unity. The significant aspects involved in facilitating fellowship were 1) small groups, 2) large group activities, 3) working together in ministry or on a project, and 4) good leadership and healthy leadership development.

### **Research Question #3**

The third question was: what joys and/or struggles occurred in relationships between the people of the merged congregations? The potential responses to the inquiry about the relational joys and struggles experienced in a merger were spread across seven questions in four different instruments. There were two hundred and sixty-five replies to



this question. The number of joy comments (192) were more than double the number of those about struggles (73).

In the joy category pastors were in unique positions to offer their insights. In the pastoral interviews (PPI1) four activities surfaced in response to this question: “Did the merger help create a healthy environment for relationships – why or why not?”

- “Lay leadership was key due to their positive influence.”
- “The church was going to close. Merger provided an option that gave new life to the congregation.”
- “Initially things got off to a good start because of good, thorough planning.”
- “Prayer brought people together.”

In the focus group (UFG5) the question was asked: “What joys have there been in building new relationships between the people of the merged congregations?” The increase in the numbers of people brought new opportunities.

- “We had more youth and more children than we ever had before.”
- “We all liked working together.”
- “People bought into the same vision.”
- “It was a blessing to be Methodist together and not have power struggles.”

That same question about joys was asked on the questionnaire (CMQ6). This question received the most answers. Beyond what was stated in the focus groups, there were several other positive relational dynamics.

- “It was a joy to get to know new people and make new friends.”
- “New leaders were good role models.”
- “There was new enthusiasm and new ideas that brought energy to existing committees and programs.”
- “It felt like we were all one big happy family.”
- “There were more people who cared.”

Surveying the pre-merger documents (MMA6) revealed an analysis that explained part of the benefits of one merger in a small community. One of the lay leaders

commented, “We already have a long history of working and serving and worshipping together due to smallness of our community and proximity of our congregations.”

Even though there were many joys cited, people were willing to share the struggles as well. Most (72%) of the replies about relationships were positive. Yet the remaining comments (28%) were honest comments about the difficulties encountered.

For example, from PPI1 the pastors identified two sources of difficulties: people not being equipped for the conflict that arises due to differences and poor relational habits that do not improve. Four comments reflected observations.

- “The construction of the new building caused conflict.”
- “The two different personalities of the congregations did not mesh well.”
- “People were weak in building relationships.”
- “Cliquish small groups and classes alienated many members.”

In the focus groups people were asked about shortcomings in the relationships between the merged congregations (UFG4, UFG5). They talked openly about the problems.

- “Some people had a hard time leaving the past and changing old traditions.”
- “I think sometimes we entered into new ministries too quickly.”
- “At first we were relationally challenged and needed to learn to meet new people.”
- “At first we got along great, then things deteriorated.”
- “The Conference leadership did a poor job preparing us.”

In the questionnaire two questions explored the struggles in a merger. CMQ3 asked people to explain their rating of the church’s relational dynamics. If people responded with a low score they stated their reasons.

- “The minister did not have the ability to relate to members.”
- “We have almost become two separate congregations in one church.”
- “We are an older congregation and have failed to bond.”

The other question, CMQ7, specifically asked, “What struggles/problems occurred in relationships between the people of the merged congregations? Why did those struggles exist? How have they been resolved?” The struggles identified were in these four areas:

- Relationships (resentment, generational differences),
- Personalities (disagreements, control),
- Worship (music, preferences), and
- Leadership (administration, finance).

The struggles occurred as a result of these factors:

- Poor Communication,
- Poor Leadership,
- Resistance to Change, and
- Pride and Prejudice.

The struggles were resolved in the following ways:

- Honest Conversation,
- Good Leadership,
- Compromise to Work Things Out,
- Focus on the Big Picture (Vision), and
- Departure of Some from the Church.

The major joys in building new relationships in a church merger setting stem from 1) sharing excitement about the future; 2) worshipping and working together; 3) grace shown toward one another; and 4) relational and visionary leadership.

The major struggles in building new relationships in a church merger setting stem from 1) poor conflict management; 2) unholy/unloving personalities; 3) inadequate leadership (local and conference level); and 4) lack of communication.

For the most part joy in the merger seemed prevalent. An indicator of the satisfaction of the participants in this research project with the merger they experienced was the overall rating of the current relational dynamics of the congregation. On a scale

of one to five (1 = Awful, 5 = Fabulous) the scores averaged 4.5. The two main reasons given for the high rating were grace shown toward each other (hospitality, respect, love) and serving together in ministry (outreach, missions, discipleship).

#### **Research Question #4**

The fourth question was: what best practices promote unity among church members of merging congregations? The potential responses to the inquiry about the best practices to promote unity heading into a merger were spread across six questions in four different instruments. There were over one hundred and forty-seven possible replies to this question.

For example, the pastors were asked (PPI3), “In your opinion, what works best to strengthen Christian unity in the church?” Their answers broke out into four categories reflected in these comments.

- “Empowered laity take the initiative to take ownership.”
- “The people worked together for Christ.”
- “Be intentional, even instructional, about relating – don’t assume it happens automatically.”
- “Dream big. Build vision and expectations around unity.”

In the focus groups two questions (UFG6, UFG7) were raised with the intent of discovering what people thought were good lessons learned about unity in a church merger. There was no lack of input from the participants.

- “Good leadership from the pastor and the conference is invaluable.”
- “Provide intermingling events where people can get to know each other.”
- “Getting people involved is important for success. It feels good to be proud of our church.”
- “A key was organization and communication.”
- “Have a clear plan and focus.”

The questionnaire asked (CMQ8), “In your opinion, how can the church best create a healthy environment for Christian unity?” The majority of the responses (79%)

were around the four topics of building relationships, encouraging spiritual growth, providing good programming, and having strong leaders as role models.

- “Be open and honest with each other.”
- “Start with prayer and be led by the Holy Spirit.”
- “Find areas of ministry you can work on together.”
- “Make sure the congregation sees its responsibility, even with strong pastoral leadership.”

One unity building practice that came out of the document analysis (MMA) was the idea requiring a two-thirds majority vote at each of the merging churches to approve the merger. That way the minimum ratio of those in harmony with the decision to those not is 2:1.

One comment stood out from the others in a way that helped put perspective on the possible lack of unity. One participant said, “A sure sign of dysfunction is desperate outreach.” That observation was a critique on the survival-mode mentality that can permeate congregations thinking about merger. That thinking did not surface in the responses of these participants. Instead, the four best practices for promoting unity in church mergers that did surface were 1) good lay and clergy leadership; 2) widespread involvement of members in ministries, projects and fellowship activities; 3) intentional relationship building; and 4) clear, open, honest communication around the vision for unity.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

Christian unity (or lack of it) in a church is evident in the relationships between members within a congregation. Relationships are multi-dimensional, and there are many factors that contribute to healthy and unhealthy relationships. Therefore, there are many dynamics in operation around the formation and preservation of unity. These findings

reflect the experience of church members who went through a merger process in which they faced the task of building new relationships in the spirit of Christian unity.

**Major Finding #1**

Church mergers tend to focus mainly on growth and survival giving little attention to building relationship. There is so much to do in the process of merging two or more congregations into one new church. Understandably, the administrative mechanics and the physical logistics and the denominational regulations require great attention, time and energy. In the long run, however, what is of most value and is most determinative of success is the relationships of the people within the congregation. Time and energy would be very well spent in helping to build those relationships right from the get-go.

**Major Finding #2**

Christian unity is not well understood or promoted. Identifying Christian unity in a local congregation is difficult because the members do not have a theological framework by which to address their experience. Of course, the framework exists, but the people are not trained in understanding the nature of their unity in Christ, nor in how to cultivate its reality.

**Major Finding #3**

Best practices to promote unity include: working together in various ministries, small fellowship groups, and leadership that supports a positive vision of unity. The data provided by the participants indicates that a powerful catalyst for building relationships came from activities in which the members of the merging congregations were given various opportunities to serve together and fellowship together. These opportunities were

planned and implemented in large part due to the senior lay and clergy leadership of the church.

## CHAPTER 5

### LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

#### Overview of the Chapter

One of the more miraculous features of the church is how different people from all walks of life can join together and sing together and share together and weep together and serve together and stand together because – for no other reason – they are one in the Lord Jesus Christ. Part of the strength of the church’s effective witness is in the unity of her members.

When congregations merge unity is vulnerable. Church members are pressed into new relationships with strangers in the deeply emotional context of religion. The relational dynamics of a merger are so significant that they cannot be ignored. Though theologically there is unity in the Spirit of Christ, practically Christian unity does not occur automatically. This research discovered that to enhance church mergers the process must include assisting people in building healthy relationships, providing people with avenues of genuine fellowship, and educating people about Christian unity. Though vital, these three steps are often ignored.

There are plenty of merger models that help local congregations take steps toward a successful merger at an administrative level. Most models help process the logistical details of combining leadership, sharing space, casting a common vision, and coordinating the timing, the legal matters and the necessary communication. That was not what this research was about. This research was focused on the deeper dimension of the unity among church members that may or may not have been present before, during or after a merger.



The purpose of this research was to discover whether Christian unity was preserved during the mergers of Indiana United Methodist congregations by surveying pastors and congregants who have experienced merger or merger attempts in order to identify best practices for promoting unity between members of merging congregations.

Christian unity in a church finds expression in the relationships between members within a congregation. Relationships are multi-dimensional with many factors that contribute to healthy and unhealthy relationships. Therefore, there are many dynamics in operation around the formation and preservation of unity. These findings reflect the experience of church members who went through a merger process in which they faced the task of building new relationships in the spirit of Christian unity.

### **Major Findings**

#### **On Building Relationships**

Church mergers tend to focus mainly on growth and mission, giving little attention to building relationships.

There is much to do in the process of merging two or more congregations into one new church. Understandably, the administrative mechanics and the physical logistics and the denominational regulations require great attention, time and energy. In the long run, however, what is of most value and is most determinative of achieving a successful union is the relationships of the people within the congregation. Time and energy would be very well spent intentionally helping merging congregations build new relationships right from the get-go.

Though growth is a strong motivator for merger, assimilating that growth is required for unity. Survival is the wrong impetus for a healthy and long-lasting merger.

Giving priority to growth in numbers, growth in finances, and growth in programming to the neglect of growing healthy fellowship weakens the relational bonds within the church. The information gathered in this study revealed two things about building relationships between the members of merging congregations: (1) the social dimension of a church merger process is often ignored, and (2) intentionally orchestrated togetherness is required to achieve a sense of oneness.

Normal relationships in natural associations, like family, friends, and neighbors, are hard enough to maintain. Yet far more difficult are relationships between strangers forced into association. When two congregations merge, two people groups who are strangers to each other are forced to get along. Those relationships, begun through superficial means and developed through artificial acculturation, have little chance on their own of maturing into one harmonious symphony of a unified community.

Churches are famous for squabbling. Honest debate over significant matters is one thing. Those constructive conversations are necessary for progress. But arguing over the color of beanbag chairs in the youth lounge or the wattage of lightbulb used in the custodial closet is asinine. So, when two congregations each with their own histories and personalities and traditions and heritage come together to form one church there should be no expectation that everyone will automatically get along just fine together.

Yet, the standard format in the church merger process makes no arrangements to help congregations build relationships with each other's members. The dotted i's and the crossed t's are required in triplicate for combining financial accounts and leadership roles and committee members and property sharing and parsonage use. Rightfully so, details are important. A boatload of decisions have to be made about planning and strategy and

administration and mission and logistics and a new legal name. But in going by the book little attention is paid to the body. The church “Body” (1 Corinthians 12) is comprised of living, breathing, often anxious souls for whom this merger is way more than the combining two congregations. This merger uproots the tree of faith-life for their families, often rooted for generations in the church. The replanting of that sacred life in the soil of brand new relationships with strangers deserves – no, demands – the utmost assistance and guidance.

In spite of the lack of attention given to relationships in the merger process, the research data showed generally positive relational dynamics were at play in most of the mergers. Much of the joy that brought people together was due to the shared excitement of something new, the hope of a better future and the closeness of the small community in which everyone lived.

Even though joys outweighed struggles three to one, there were still significant struggles in building relationships. Underlying dysfunctional behavior did not automatically go away. People with difficult personalities remained difficult. Change was the new reality, so conflict was inevitable. Congregations which openly faced these struggles scored higher in relational satisfaction than those who failed to address these problems. It is precisely at this point where mergers need help with managing conflict, with identifying fellowship dysfunction, and with loving people for whom extra grace is required. Vitality in the life of a congregation is a function of the relationships of the members. Providing help on this point for merging churches should be a no-brainer.

Dirk Elliott in *Vital Merger* fails to recognize this critical point. He lists five characteristics for a vital merger: sell all church buildings and relocate to a new location,

worship in a neutral location from the day of the official merger, reset the congregation's focus on the mission field and begin new ministries to reach the new mission field, receive a pastor that has been assessed and trained as a church planter, and choose a name that is not a part of the name of any of the merging churches (Elliott, 19). There is no mention whatsoever – not even a hint – that a “vital merger” includes any relational-fellowship-unity dimension.

In Appendix 1, Elliott offers a Checklist for a Successful Vital Merger Process (Elliott, 153-156). He suggests twenty steps to take leading up to the vote to merge. Only one of the steps mentions fellowship: “Create numerous opportunities for both congregations to get to know each other.” At least that recognizes the issue, but it fails to provide any help on the matter or to elevate its importance. He also offers seven steps to take once the final vote has been tallied and the merger has been approved. None of the seven make any reference to building relationships or fellowship or casting a vision of unity.

Elliott is a leader in the Detroit Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. If his pattern for merger is followed by UM congregations there will be a glaring hole in the process, one that neglects the relationships of the people who are merging. This thought process by a UM leader affirms the comments made by several research participants that conference and district leaders were not helpful before, during or after the merger.

Morton Deutsch noted that “one can expect that a trusting relationship can be developed under an individual orientation only if external circumstances provide the support for it” (Deutsch, 183). Church mergers need to supply the external circumstances

through which trusting relationships can be developed. That means in the whirligig carnival ride of merger, stabilizing forces need to be applied in order to give loving, healthy, holy relationships a chance.

Those stabilizing forces discovered in the research included keeping the focus on Jesus, openly addressing change, confronting the disruptors, and encouraging grace and truth. These four habits put into practice before, during and after the merger helped resolve problems and pave the way for good relationships. Other research from Gustafson, Fisher, Bonhoeffer and Colson underscore the necessity of these stabilizing dynamics. Merging churches without these guardrails rode dangerously down the hill of disunity.

To ignore the social aspect of church mergers and fail to engage in the hard work of building relationships merging congregations risked getting started off on the wrong foot. “There is much work to be done in our American churches if we are someday to recapture Jesus’s vision for authentic Christian community. But embracing a genuinely biblical ecclesiology is a challenge that is well worth the effort. The relational and spiritual health of the people in our churches depends on it” (Hellerman, 52).

The early church in apostolic times flourished in Christian love. Building healthy relationships with other believers was the trademark of the church. Jesus established that brand early on when he said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). The apostles followed that teaching as they helped give birth to the church through the merger of three thousand people from “all over the world...Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya

belonging to Cyrene; immigrants from Rome, both Jews and proselytes; even Cretans and Arabs!” (Acts 2:5, 9-11, MSG). People heard the gospel message and responded in faith to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, were baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit and received instruction from the apostles as to how to live together in unity. “They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers...And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony” (Acts 2:42,44).

Encouraging the church to continue to build relationships in love with one another was a major focus of most of Paul’s epistles to the church everywhere. To the Christians in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus and Thessalonica he writes “love one another” (Romans 12:10, 2 Corinthians 13:11, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 4:2, 1 Thessalonians 4:9). Peter and John follow suit in their early epistles. The social dimension of the fellowship of the early church required constant attention and oversight by the leaders. The New Testament is filled with instructions to Christians about how to treat one another with patience, kindness, forgiveness, encouragement, honesty, correction, compassion and peace.

The same attention and oversight and instruction is needed today, especially in the context of merger. If healthy relationships in the church were automatic there would be no need in the ancient days of the early church for such strong admonish to love one another. If Christian unity was easy to come by then reminders like this would not have been necessary:

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:12-14, NLT).

The Lord placed high value on sound, healthy relationships. At the heart of Christ's teaching is the call to love. In harmony with the Old Testament Scriptures, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'" This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-38). Who qualifies for a neighbor better than the person sitting next to you in the pew every Sunday morning? A church merger is a prime opportunity to push the refresh button on building relationships of love in the church.

### **On Christian Unity**

Church mergers do little to identify and promote Christian unity.

Identifying Christian unity in a local congregation is difficult partly because the members do not have a theological framework by which to address their experience. Of course, the framework exists, but the people are not mindful of the nature of their unity together in Christ, nor in how to cultivate its reality.

Unity is hard to come by in this world. It should be different in the church. The walls in the world that separate people should come tumbling down in the Kingdom of God. But that is not the prevailing reality in the church. The pride and prejudice and preference which exist in believers' minds and hearts make unity a rarity. Instead, superficial niceness masquerades as unity so it appears as if everyone gets along swimmingly together.

"The two shall become one" (Ephesians 5:31) is an amazing theological definition of unity. It is the spiritual foundation of marriage. Though a church merger is not a marriage, it adheres to the same oneness foundation that allows unity to exist. Like

husbands and wives who need to overcome their self-centeredness to enjoy a fulfilling marriage, members of churches which merge need to do the same. And like marriages, mergers must be based upon Christ for the blessedness of unity.

In many church mergers where two different congregations united together to form one church unity was rarely mentioned in the process. In this research, when asked about their expectations for unity in the merger, four out of five church members responded with comments about growth and mission. Unity in Christ was not a basis of their hopes for merger. In their minds what would make the new union successful was more people working together to bring in more people to the church. Oneness in Jesus Christ was never mentioned.

The joys people experienced in merger came from good experiences of grace shown in new relationships and from serving in ministries together. No one attributed that to unity in the Spirit. There was no suggestion that the positive results were due to anything other than good fortune. Certainly, no one had planned or pursued basing the new relationships or the new service opportunities on their common bondedness in Jesus Christ.

In the same vein, the struggles people experienced in merger came from difficult relationships and poor behavior. No one attributed those struggles to a lack of unity in the Spirit. There was no suggestion that the negative results were due to anything other than “being human.” No one mentioned that difficulties could have been avoided or better resolved if the members were more focused on being one in the Body of Jesus Christ.

Yet that oneness could be a great asset in a merger between two Christian congregations. “Essentially, the church is not a human organization as such, but a



divinely created fellowship of sinners who trust a common Saviour, and are one with each other because they are all one with Him in a union realized by the Holy Spirit” (Packer, *The Nature of the Church*, 242). Relationships between believers flow with the grace necessary to build love and trust. The Holy Spirit primes the pump of acceptance that paves the way for strangers to become family. If the church ignores its Spirit-centered identity, if church members do not build relationships based in Christ, Christian unity is, as they say in the military “AWOL” (absent without leave).

Every person who trusts and loves God is united together in God. Believers in Jesus Christ “automatically” become one by the nature of their eternal redemption and shared adoption into the family of God. Christian unity is a theological given in Biblical ecclesiology. Joseph Hellerman said, “God intends for salvation to be a community-creating event” (Hellerman, 137). Robert Banks agreed, “Union in the Spirit involved union with one another, for the Spirit was primarily a shared, not individual, experience. The gospel is not a purely personal matter. It has a social dimension. It is a communal affair” (Banks, 26). Thomas Oden noted, “By what evidences is the church recognizable? By her unity the *ekklesia* proximately expresses in time the oneness of Christ’s body so as to unite anticipatively all humanity to God’s reconciling activity” (Oden, 297). Exactly! Unity in the church is by design for the sake of effective witness, identifying the church with God. One congregation living and loving and worshiping and serving in harmony with one another will help the world know the reality God. “The unity of believers will be explicable to the world only on the basis of the divine love” (Morris, 736). If the love between believers is missing, there is no unity. If there is no unity, what good is merger?

No long-lasting, Christian unity can exist in the church if it is based upon human opinions or preferences or skin color or financial status or favorite ball team or even denominational loyalty (Colson and Vaughn, 75; L. Schaller, 226; Gustafson, 12; Peterson, 13). Neither is that unity a uniformity of doctrine or a conformity of practice (Evans, 191; Campbell, 126.) Christian unity is grounded in God alone. Only in God can unity in the church be real and endure. The key to living in unity is living in Christ. Church members individually rooted in Christ and their relationships with each other rooted in Christ will bear the fruit of Christian unity.

Jesus prayed for that unity: “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-21). The Lord understood how difficult it would be to achieve unity. He also understood the nature of unity to be a powerful witness in the world. The theological framework that seems missing in church mergers is twofold. One is the ontological nature of the church as the Body of Christ with Jesus as the head and the Holy Spirit as the bonding agent. The other is the mission efficacy of a harmonious fellowship.

About unity in the Body, Eugene Peterson puts it this way in *The Message*:

You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts – limbs, organs, cells – but no matter how many parts you can name, you’re still one body. It’s exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which *he* has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain – his Spirit – where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves – labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free – are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive (1 Corinthians 12:12-13, MSG).

Sometimes a church merger builds a “Franken-church” by forcing parts of the Body (members of the churches) to connect in ways that are artificial. The truth is that the newly formed congregation is not some weird amalgamation of two different species, but a contiguous, albeit reshaped, entity. The former congregations were the Body of Christ. The new merged congregation is the same Body of Christ. Unity is in identity. “You are Christ’s body – that’s who you are! You must never forget this” (1 Corinthians 12:27, MSG).

Part of the problem with cultivating unity comes from churches seeing their identity from a worldly perspective. “We are Main Street UMC.” “Our church is a friendly church.” “Traditional service at 9:30am; Contemporary service at 11:00am.” No earthly, nor even religious, definitions promote unity. What may define a congregation’s uniqueness on earth inhibits its identification with the Body of Christ. The underlying spiritual connectedness of the members of the church make it one.

Unity is clearly God’s will for his people. Adam and Eve in the Garden were designed to live in harmony with Creation and in oneness with each other. Abraham was meant to live in unity with the Lord, as evidenced in the Covenant where the initiative and sovereignty of God’s grace made unity a matter of faith. The unity of the twelve tribes of Israel was bound up in their identity as a people who belonged to God. “You are to be my holy people” (Exodus 22:31). When the Israelites stayed tuned into God their unity as a nation was evident and secure. “Also, in Judah the hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the Lord” (2 Chronicles 30:12).

The early church's unity was obvious in the communal life of the first believers. Commitment to teaching and fellowship and worship and sharing possessions and meeting together formed the common ground for all the Christians. That unity attracted people. The mission of the church to proclaim the Gospel was enhanced by the oneness of those doing the proclaiming. The unity of the early church was contagious and opened the door for growth (Acts 2:44-47). The unity of the church remained evident and secure in the Spirit. "All the believers were one in heart and mind" (Acts 4:32). The togetherness of the new Christian community proved to be a powerful witness which attracted many to the fellowship.

"Because it is a human community the Church can make Christ present to men" (Gustafson, 111). True enough. But that cuts the other way as well. Because it is a human community the church can lose touch with what makes presenting Christ effective. That is why in many letters the Apostle Paul sent to newly formed churches he included the exhortation to: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3, see also Romans 12:18, 2 Corinthians 13:11, Philippians 4:2, Colossians 3:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:13, Titus 3:2). Even though by nature the church is one in Christ and one in Spirit, unity requires intentional attention.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). Or, in another translation, "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family" (MSG). Or, as applied to church mergers: You are right on track with God when you come together as brothers and sisters in Christ and work hard to get along with each other through the fullness of grace and truth. The hard work required

for unity comes simply from paying attention to the formation of the spiritual life of the congregation. Therefore, the best practices that produce unity are the ones that cultivate the spiritual formation of the members.

### **On Best Merger Practices**

Best practices to promote unity in a church merger include: working together in various ministries, participating in small fellowship groups, and utilizing positive leadership that advances a Biblical vision of unity.

Building relationships in Christ builds Christian unity. Unity emerges when Christians are 1) employed side-by-side in working for Christ's mission on earth; 2) engaged heart-to-heart in genuine Christian fellowship; and 3) empowered by coming face-to-face with the truth of who they are in Christ.

The effects of a merger for good or ill have a long shelf life. Starting off on the right foot has ripple effects that add blessings through the successive influx of new members in the church. Beginning down the wrong path leads to a tidal wave of problems that swamp the church with years of frustration. Getting the social dimension of a church merger right from the outset is a crucial piece for the long range effectiveness of the newly formed congregation.

The data provided by the participants indicated that a powerful catalyst for building relationships came from activities in which the members of the merging congregations were given the opportunity to serve side-by-side together. Most often these took the forms of community service and mission programs and worship ministry and building projects. The direct interaction of merging members working together to accomplish a task helped form bonds of comradery. Serving alongside a "new friend"

established a relational connection which opened the way to experience a sense of oneness.

The data also suggested that small groups which were comprised of a mixture of members from both the merging congregations helped people get to know each other better. Those groups included Bible studies, in-home fellowship groups, Sunday school classes, men's and women's and youth groups. They might have been short-term or long-term. They might have had five in attendance or twenty-five. A structured, regularly scheduled gathering of people who shared their lives with each other provided a good avenue for growing relationships.

Two challenges to that practice surfaced. First, not everyone was involved in a small group. Generally, less than half of the members participated in any class or fellowship group. As valuable as building relationships is to the wellbeing and effectiveness of a congregation, some members refuse to relate. Believers cannot be forced to "love one another." Christian unity depends upon church members' willingness to engage relationally. Some chose not to, and unity struggled to find expression. Second, not every small group provided opportunities for heart-to-heart genuine fellowship. Talking about the weather over coffee and doughnuts is not genuine Christian fellowship. Neither is simply teaching a Sunday school lesson from the quarterly curriculum. Believers may take seriously the text from Hebrews 10:25a, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing." But many neglect the context: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds...let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24 and 25b). Christian unity depends upon church members' willingness to engage heart-to-heart

where genuine care and spiritual concern are practiced. On the whole, small groups did not “go deep” and provide channels of reconciliation and forgiveness and accountability and spiritual formation.

The data revealed the important role of the church leaders in a merger. Good leadership, both clergy and lay, helped set the table for a positive merger experience. Leaders who demonstrated what healthy relationships look like, who promoted the establishment of small groups, and who clearly communicated the goals and expectations of the merger were appreciated by their congregations. On the other hand, some persons in official roles (clergy, lay, district and conference leaders) who were less than encouraging in the process added no value to the merger.

Leaders struggled in two main areas: managing conflict and providing a Biblical vision of unity. The Change Monster certainly prowls around a church merger. There is always conflict in a change of this magnitude. Pastors and church leaders would be well served to take a refresher workshop in conflict management in preparation for a merger. Personalities and dreams and traditions and expectations can all be at odds between two different congregations. Peacemaking leadership is essential for the development of unity.

What normally passed for vision casting in a church merger focused on the benefits to growth and mission. What was missing was a prevalent vision of Christian unity based on Biblical foundations. Merging congregations did not come face-to-face with their theological identity as a church. How rude of church leaders not to use this great opportunity to proclaim the church’s oneness in Jesus Christ. A clearly defined, well communicated, widely held and Spirit-inspired vision for what unity looks like in a

congregation would establish the basis for the new relationships. Regular preaching and teaching on the church's unity in Christ before, during and after a merger would enhance the relational ties between the members.

The important role of church leadership in cultivating unity and building healthy relationships is underscored in the data. However, the research was not as keen on leadership as it was on small groups. The same can be said for service opportunities. Both of those practices – working together and utilizing leadership – were valuable in the field. But the research strongly supported the ministry of small groups as far and away the most crucial practice in growing relationships and enhancing unity in a local congregation.

Good, strong, positive, spiritual leadership is, of course, essential to good, strong, positive church life.<sup>5</sup> In the research, Joseph Hellerman makes the case for key leaders needing to be consumed with a Biblical vision for community for the church to be genuine. Church unity is stymied when leaders focus on a business model for church which primarily gives attention to attendance, building and cash (Hellerman, 180). The data showed the church members' frustration when leaders emphasized corporate growth metrics over spiritual dynamics.

There is much work to be done before, during and after a church merger. That work provides many opportunities for members of the two congregations to serve side-by-side together. Though not a fellowship setting where directions and instructions are given with the goal of building relationships, service activities help break the relational ice in an informal way (Worley, Bridges, Frazee, Yancey). Still involvement in projects

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the value of leadership beyond the research included here see *Good to Great* by Collins, *Courageous Leadership* by Hybels, *Leadership Jazz* by DePree, *Uprising* by McManus, *Servant Leadership* by Greenleaf, *Spiritual Leadership* by Blackaby, *Winning with People* by Maxwell, *Coaching Change* by Bandy.



did not guarantee unity. Church members would often volunteer to help but would not invest the time and energy in building relationships.

Small groups, by far, provided the best practice for people in merging congregations to get to know each other. The research confirmed this. For the church to be genuinely Christian as the Body of Christ, fellowship must be authentic, and “the small group movement is one way in which the growth of true fellowship may be facilitated” (Trueblood, MacDonald, Bridges, McKnight, Colson, Bonhoeffer). Small groups are required for effective fellowship. No other setting allows for intentional sharing and caring. When a dozen or so church members meet together on a weekly basis to talk openly and honestly with each other, unity is brewing.

Larger group activities do not percolate with the aroma of unity like small groups do. Things like Sunday morning worship and Sunday school and other big-group gatherings lack the intimacy that builds relationships. Small groups give the Heavenly Barista (Holy Spirit) the proper environment to create the perfect cup of koinonia. In a small group people can feel at home (ownership); people can be themselves (safety); people can genuinely relate (interaction); people can grow in knowledge and grace (discipline); and people can care for others (love). The research identified those five characteristics of small groups as core components of feeling of family. That feeling is the heartbeat of Christian unity.

The theological seeds of unity come from being in Christ. As believers are planted in the new soil of a church merger their potential for oneness is looming just beneath the surface. Because the members abide in Christ and mature in Christ unity sprouts. Then

Christian service and small group fellowship and spiritual leadership provide the sunshine, rain and nourishment for the church to grow and harvest the fruit of unity.

“If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another” (1 John 1:7). Christian fellowship is predicated upon believers living together in the “light” as seen in Jesus. That light is life for the church, and it is full of grace and truth (John 1:4, 14). Life together as a church means serving side-by-side in Kingdom work, sharing heart-to-heart in caring for each other, and willing to be challenged face-to-face with the truth that shapes the Body. The data revealed that those are effective ways for two churches to be one in Christ.

In Acts the unity of the newly-formed Christian church was tested often. In chapter six somehow serving side-by-side hit a snafu. “Hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers – “Hellenists” – toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily food lines” (Acts 6:1, MSG). The leaders took the lead and presented a way forward that all agreed to. Serving together in Kingdom work was preserved – and so was the unity of the church.

In chapter four the apostles Peter and John were put in jail overnight. The next day they were grilled by the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jewish faith. Under the threat of serious punishment, they were told to never ever again talk about Jesus. Sharing heart-to-heart the love and truth of the Gospel was in jeopardy. But, in spite of the warnings from the Jewish religious authorities, the disciples of Christ shrugged it off.

As soon as Peter and John were let go, they went to their friends and told them what the high priests and religious leaders had said. Hearing the report, they lifted their voices in a wonderful harmony in prayer...The whole congregation of believers was united as one – one heart, one mind! They didn’t even claim ownership of their own possessions. No one said, “That’s mine; you can’t have it.” They shared everything. The apostles gave powerful witness to the

resurrection of the Master Jesus, and grace was on all of them (Acts 4:23-24, 32-33, MSG).

Sharing and caring together in the fellowship of the church was preserved – and so was the unity of the church.

In chapter fifteen a foundational doctrinal dispute nearly unraveled the church. “While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently” (Acts 15:1-2, NLT). The administrative council of church leaders convened in Jerusalem to consider the matter. After listening to the arguments and to the wisdom of various spiritual leaders and to the words of the holy scriptures and to the leading of the Holy Spirit, the council decided to keep Christianity from becoming a law-based, works-oriented religion. The leadership of the church was willing to come face-to-face with the truth about God’s design for His Church. The good news of the gospel was preserved – and so was the unity of the church.

Relationships within a congregation do not have to be contentious for unity to be missing. They simply have to be fake. Insincere fellowship that does not speak the truth in love stands in the way of unity. Rude behavior that does not extend grace to others is an obstacle to unity. Yet phony relationships with others are symptomatic of a counterfeit relationship with the Lord. In the big picture Genesis paints, falling-out with God produced disunity among humans. It started with Cain and Abel and continued with Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers. Sin crouching at the door (Genesis 4:7) ruptured relationships and ruined unity.

Therefore, part of the cure for the lack of unity in the church is for God's people to *first reunite with God*. A season of repentance, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, would make a wonderful first step in bringing unity to merging congregations.

### **Ministry Implications of the Findings**

If the United Methodist Church continues in decline, the opportunity for congregations to merge will rise. Unfortunately, survival will become the watchword of especially smaller congregations (of which there are plenty in the UM denomination). Merging with another congregation will be one path to avoid closing the doors.

Whatever the motivation for merger, church members need help with building new and healthy relationships. The standard governance provided by the conference should include steps to promote unity. Pastors and other leaders in the church should be intentional about cultivating Christian unity by clearly casting the theological framework for unity, by providing genuine fellowship opportunities, and by equipping and empowering the church members to work together in ministry.

The UMC has drifted farther and farther away from its Scriptural and Wesleyan moorings. Ira Gallaway warned about this in his 1983 book *Drifted Astray*. He raised concerns about the church which have only worsened in the past thirty-five years. His hope for renewal and transformation of the church's witness and ministry was grounded in the local church.

It is my conviction that the wind of the Spirit is blowing across the church in these days, and there has never been a time of greater opportunity to reach others for Jesus Christ and build up the church for witness and ministry. This can be done ultimately and only on the local level (Gallaway, 126).

“Ultimately and only on the local level” is where Christian unity finds its most glorious expression. Church mergers put unity on display for the whole community to

see. It is a part of life together that cannot be taken for granted. Mergers must place as high a priority on building relationships as on any other aspect of uniting two congregations together.

Building relationships will require a strong commitment from church leaders to hold everyone accountable to high standards of personal responsibility throughout the merger process. Being vigilant about four relational dynamics will provide stability to the merged congregation. First: openly address change. Change can evoke fear, anxiety and frustration. Congregations are different. Merging two congregations together brings huge changes. Leaders need to identify differences and communicate changes and anticipate conflict and help navigate the church members through the changes. As Roger Fisher noted, “The best time for handling people problems is before they become people problems” (Fisher, *Getting to Yes*, 38).

Second: keep the focus on Jesus. Churches should naturally do this, but there are many distractions during a merger. Keeping the main thing the main thing helps channel the congregation’s energy on Kingdom matters. When people’s attention turns inward then preferences and prejudices rock the boat of fellowship. Believers have a strong rallying point around Christ. Jesus, as the Lord of the church who gave his life for the church and calls the church to action, should be the topic of many sermons, lessons and devotions throughout a merger. Marginalizing Christ minimizes unity.

Third: confront the disruptors. Leaders must be ready to handle those who step out of line. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it best, “Where defection from God's Word in doctrine or life imperils the family fellowship and with it the whole congregation, the word of admonition and rebuke must be ventured” (Bonhoeffer, 107). There are those,

even in the church, who cause trouble and disturb the peace. Their behavior should be arrested. Those with negative attitudes who cause offense, stir up trouble, antagonize others and aggravate the unity of the church must be opposed.

Jesus said to do the same thing with these instructions:

If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him – work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you’ve made a friend. If he won’t listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won’t listen, tell the church. If he won’t listen to the church, you’ll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God’s forgiving love (Matthew 18:15-17, MSG).

Fourth, encourage grace and truth. Church leaders need to model the hard work of speaking the truth in love. Holding one another accountable in the balance of grace and truth is critical to Christian unity. “Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Speaking truth with no love results in harsh judgmentalism. Loving without being honest results in sappy sentimentalism. Unity can ill afford either one. Believers must be willing to speak – and to hear – the truth in love. That balance will build healthy relationships in the church. “Fellowship is more than unconditional love that wraps its arms around someone who is hurting. It is also tough love that holds one fast to the truth and the pursuit of righteousness” (Colson and Vaughn, 108). Without that accountability modeled and encouraged by the leaders, relationships in the church fail and unity suffers.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several considerations limited the generalization of this research project.

- Many years have elapsed (10 to 25 years) since the mergers took place. The mergers in this study occurred between 1992 and 2007. Sometimes it was difficult to find a significant sampling of members who were around at the time of the merger. Sometimes the “if memory serves me correctly” comment brought the validity of a participant’s response into question.
- Only a handful of churches (six) participated. Even though twenty-eight church mergers were listed in the Annual Conference records, only a half dozen were involved in the project. A larger sampling would have been desirable for more definitive findings.
- Demographics were skewed dramatically toward older white participants. The United Methodist constituency in Indiana is generally white and older. Thus, the deviation is not far off the mean. But the ethnic and generational dynamics are too homogeneous to allow for a healthy, diverse sampling.
- Most current pastors were not the ones present during the merger. Except for one, the pastoral leaders at the time of the mergers had been reappointed to serve other congregations. The pastoral interviews were helpful. The pastors’ understanding of the merger and the current condition of relationships in the church were quite insightful. However, the insights of the pastors who were leading the churches at the time of the merger might have added some new perspectives.
- Little official documentation was available. Two churches provided significant minutes of the meetings leading up to the decision to merge. The other churches were unable to produce any documentation. Official minutes allow for the cross-referencing of comments made by participants on the questionnaire and in the focus group discussions. More is better.

Given these limitations, a few adjustments could have improved the project. Make a more concerted effort to involve more churches – the time frame of the research limited the attempts to try and try again to connect with pastors to seek their approval to involve their congregation in the project. Interview the pastors who served the churches at the time of the merger – the time frame of the research limited the scope of the project. Ask more direct questions on the questionnaire and in the focus groups about the participants’ theological understanding of unity – good news: the open-endedness of the questions

allowed participants to freely share their thoughts about unity and church relationships; bad news: no one saw any spiritual dimension to the merger.

### **Unexpected Observations**

Surprises in this research project came by way of three unanticipated findings. The first surprise was discovering pastors who did not want to volunteer their churches to participate. Due to the scope of the project, no follow-up questions were asked about the reason for refusing permission. One pastor did ask if this research was sanctioned by the Annual Conference. Because officially it was not, that may have been his reason to refuse.

The second surprise was discovering a large number of church members who have no clue about Christian unity. The data showed that when asked what expectations about unity participants had going into the merger, eighty-seven percent of the responses centered around church growth. When the motive for merger is survival, unity is generally not on the agenda. One participant in a focus group made a most memorable comment, “A sure sign of dysfunction is desperate outreach.”

The third surprise was discovering the wide range of results from church mergers. Six out of the twenty-eight churches formed by merger have closed (20%). Four out of the twenty-eight (14%) have done very well according to their numbers for attendance and growth and mission. A few churches have experienced more than one merger, merging with one congregation and then, several years later, with another congregation. Maybe the most disappointing result was the comment made in four out of the six participant churches that the District and Conference leadership bungled the merger



process leaving bad feelings in the congregation toward the supervising administration of the Indiana Conference.

### **Recommendations**

One recommendation following this research is to develop and add a Unity Module to the required steps for merging congregations. Even if the main motivation for merging churches is survival, building up relationships between the members of each congregation can only increase the effectiveness of the church's outreach. Growth happens more naturally when believers enjoy the blessings of being one in Christ. The harmony that comes from genuine fellowship spills over into the community through the witness of church members who love being part of a relationally healthy congregation. Unity is the first principal of church growth revealed in Scripture. "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47).

A follow up project to this project could be to develop and test a Unity Module for congregations in general – all churches, not just ones heading into a merger. There is a shortage of Christian unity in the church. There is a mandate to fulfill the wishes of Christ who prayed for the unity of believers (John 17:21). Therefore, it is incumbent upon the church to help its members understand and embrace their oneness in Christ and help them build relationships with one another in Christian love.

I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the

world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. *May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me* and that you love them as much as you love me (John 17:20-23, NLT, italics added for emphasis).

### **Postscript**

This research project has been a special privilege and honor for me. I have thoroughly enjoyed the journey through the literature and theological review, through developing the research instruments, through collecting the data, and through the conversations with focus groups. At first, I had difficulty settling on a topic. I went through four iterations of what I thought I wanted to concentrate on. None of those resonated in my soul. Eventually I did not find this topic, it found me.

I am encouraged by congregations who are proud of who they are and what they have accomplished. The churches in this project have made their merger work. They are engaged in efforts to advance the Kingdom of God. Bolstered by the upshot of more people to accomplish the tasks they have carved out a better future together than they could have managed without merging. They know that and are glad for what they have achieved.

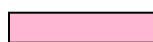
I am disappointed in the lack of theological grounding and in the weak spirituality that inhibits genuine Christian fellowship. Life in the Body of Christ could be much more abundant if believers would step up their game in the area of faith. Great and glorious congregations would emerge from following the Biblical directive to love one another where people actually practiced forgiveness and peace-making and speaking the truth in love and sharing their burdens and living in harmony and giving encouragement and being patient with one another. What a picture the Bible paints of the church living in unity!

Someday I expect to be surprised by unity. I did not find it much on this journey. I caught glimpses of it in a small group here or a joint worship service there. But, one day the church will experience the fullness of its unity. “That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11). Until then I plan to help raise the awareness of our oneness in Jesus Christ.

## APPENDIX A

## MERGED UNITED METHODIST CHURCHES IN INDIANA

	NAME	CITY	YEAR EST.	MERGED CONGREGATIONS	PASTORAL PERMISSION	MEMBER LIST
1	Unity Chapel	Ramsey	1979		no	no
2	Dearborn Hills	Bright	1982	Bright, Logan	yes	yes
3	Kingsland		1985	Kingsland, Pleasant Valley	closed	closed
4	Ossian	Ossian	1986	Ossian First and Faith	yes	no
5	Keystone		1987		closed	closed
6	Lancaster Chapel	Craigville	1987	Lancaster, Craigville	no	no
7	Goodland County		1988	Goodland UMC, Goodland Presbyterian	closed	closed
8	New Horizons	Anderson	1990	Noble, Otterbein	no	no
9	Community	Vincennes	1992	North, Wabash	yes	yes
10	Christland	Marion	1992	Christy Street, Highland	no	no
11	Rossville	Rossville	1992	Rossville, Moran	no	no
12	Royal Center	Royal Center	1993	Grace, Trinity	yes	no
13	Elkhart Faith	Goshen	1993	Simpson, Grace, Castle, Good Shepherd	no	no
14	Hope	Hope	1995	Hoagland, Poe	no	no
15	Northside	Terre Haute	1996		yes	yes
16	Cross Wind	Logansport	1996	Market Street, Third	yes	yes
17	Hillside	Princeton	2002			
18	Living Water		2002	Linn Grove Calvary, Old Salem, Reiffsburg	closed	closed
19	Christ	Gary	2003	Delaney, Grace	no	no
20	Hyde Park	Hammond	2003	Hyde Park, Centenary	no	no
21	Modoc	Eaton	2003	Modoc, Huntsville	no	no
22	Redkey	Redkey	2004	Main Street, North Meridian	no	no
23	Good Shepherd	Granger	2004	Good Shepherd, Maple Lane	yes	yes
24	God's Grace	Marion	2004	Grace, New Hope, Swayzee St Trinity	closed	closed
25	New Beginnings	Markleville	2006	Markleville, Mt. Gilead	closed	closed
26	Cross Roads	Anderson	2006	South, Park Place	yes	yes
27	First	South Bend	2007	South Bend First, South Bend Central	yes	yes
28	Park Memorial	Jeffersonville	2010		no	no

Color Code Key**Pilot Church****Questionnaire Participants****Questionnaire and Focus Group Participants**

APPENDIX B

**PASTORAL PHONE INTERVIEW**

PPI1. In your opinion did the merger create a healthy environment for relationships?

Why or why not?

PPI2. What does the church do today to provide fellowship opportunities that help build healthy relationships between its members?

PPI3. In your opinion, what works best to strengthen Christian unity in the church?

APPENDIX C

**MEETING MINUTES ANALYSIS**

MMA1. What percentage of the people voted for the merger?

MMA2. What rationale was given for the merger?

MMA3. What hopes and/or concerns about merging were voiced?

MMA4. What theological, scriptural, or spiritual references to unity were mentioned?

MMA5. What steps in the merger were planned to promote fellowship?

MMA6. Were there any objections to the merger? If so, what were they?

APPENDIX D

**CHURCH MERGER QUESTIONNAIRE**

CMQ1. Did you agree with the decision to merge? Why or why not?

CMQ2. What joint fellowship activities were planned during the time of the merger?

CMQ3. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Awful: widespread deceit, arrogance, gossip; 2 = Poor; 3 = Okay; 4 = Good; 5 = Fabulous: predominant forgiveness, encouragement, speaking the truth in love), how would you rate the overall relational dynamics of the congregation today? Please explain your rating.

CMQ4. What vision of unity was promoted during the merger?

CMQ5. What steps has the church taken to build fellowship since the merger?

CMQ6. What joys occurred in relationships between the people of the merged congregations?

CMQ7. What struggles occurred in relationships between the people of the merged congregations? Why did those struggles occur? How have they been resolved?

CMQ8. In your opinion, how can the church best promote and develop Christian unity?

CMQ9. What else would you like to say about the merger?

APPENDIX E

**UNITY FOCUS GROUP**

UFG1. In your opinion, has the merger been successful in building Christian unity through fellowship? If so, how? If not, why?

UFG2. What was the main motivation for the merger?

UFG3. What expectations about unity did you have when the churches merged?

UFG4. In your opinion did the merger create a healthy environment for relationships? Why or why not?

UFG5. What joys/struggles have there been in building new relationships between the people of the merged congregations?

UFG6. Suppose you were in charge and could make one change to the process of merger, what would you have done differently to make the unity and fellowship better?

UFG7. Anything else you would like to say about the merger?



APENDIX F

**CONSENT FORM TEMPLATE**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ ,

I am a Doctor of Ministry participant at Asbury Theological Seminary and I am conducting research on the topic of unity in church mergers. I would like to survey twenty-five people from each congregation and you have been selected randomly from your church as one invited to assist in the study.

Since relationships can be a sensitive issue for many church attenders, I want to assure you that your responses will be kept confidential. I do not want to jeopardize your relationships in your church, so I will not ask for your name on the questionnaire. The data will be collected using a code and all of the questionnaires will be collated to give a blended view rather than identify any one person.

I believe unity is a central element of any church and I believe the findings from this questionnaire will allow me to assist congregations as they merge with other congregations. My hope is that churches from around the Indiana Conference and other United Methodist conferences will be helped because you and others like you have taken the time to participate.

Once the research is completed in approximately six months, I will destroy the individual surveys and keep the anonymous data electronically for an indefinite period of time, at least until my dissertation is written and approved.

Please know that you can refuse to respond to any or all of the questions. I realize that your participation is entirely voluntary and I appreciate your willingness to consider being part of the study. Feel free to call or write me at any time if you need any more information. My number is 812-637-3821 and my e-mail is [scott.stephans@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:scott.stephans@asburyseminary.edu).

If you are willing to assist me in this project, please sign and date this letter below to indicate your voluntary participation. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

*Scott Stephans*

I volunteer to participate in the study described above and so indicate by my signature below:

Your signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please print your name: \_\_\_\_\_

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