

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Improving Adoptive Mergers at River Community Church

A Thesis Project Proposal Submitted to
the Faculty of Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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This thesis project cross compared the adoptive mergers of River Community Church (RCC) to identify the methodologies and strategies that created one successful campus via adoptive merger and a subsequent unsuccessful campus. Empirical analysis quantified the gap in success between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway. Qualitative research provided the thematic points of differentiation in RCC's adoptive merger implementations. The thematic findings detailed a potential revitalization plan for RCC Fairway, a common structure for future RCC adoptive merger considerations, and insight for churches contemplating adoptive merger pursuits.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

With an average net loss of 3,500 churches each year over the last twenty-plus years, Harry Reeder would suggest the church in North America is in an ongoing statistical free fall.¹ Of the churches still operating, Reeder estimates 88 to 91 percent of them are dying.² Reeder is not alone. Others have suggested similar statistics. While these estimates of church death rates vary slightly, the data paints a similar, bleak picture of the North American church.

This ongoing, annual net loss of churches is harmful to the Kingdom, directly working against the commission to “go and make disciples” given to believers and the church by Jesus before his ascension.³ As a body of believers, reaching the lost and making disciples of the found is the church’s charge. Declining and dying churches work directly against this corporate, collective, and eternal mission. In the face of this decline, churches need revitalization to resurrect congregations to reach their communities once again as the primary means for accomplishing the commission given to the church body by Jesus.

The death and decline of individual churches create consequences beyond the loss of individual congregations. A non-revitalized church leaves a wake of lost opportunity in its death. In these dying churches, buildings and other sacred resources, previously underutilized, are eventually lost to the secular world. While dying congregations ultimately lose their ability to reach their local community, lost sacred resources, once gone, are rarely recovered postmortem. The death of individual churches affects the surrounding community in their lifetime. The loss of

¹ Brian Croft, *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches* (Scotland, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), Kindle Location, 79.

² Ibid.

³ Matthew 28:16-20, Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998).

Kingdom resources has eternal ramifications, affecting communities for generations.

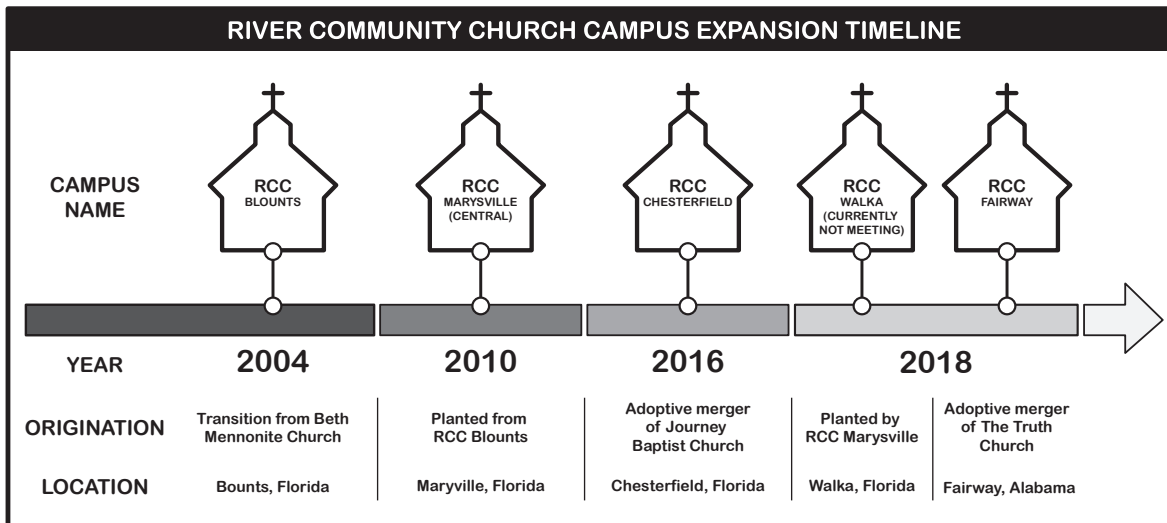
This paper presents a research study of River Community Church’s (RCC) strategy to adopt declining and dying churches as campus locations as a means of revitalization.

Note: Pseudonyms represent all church names, campus names, and individual participant names throughout this project.

Ministry Context

River Community Church (RCC) is a non-denominational, multi-site church based in the Marysville community, a primarily rural section of the central Florida panhandle. This once single-site church is currently a multi-site church of five campus locations. From its humble beginnings as a small, conservative, Mennonite church, today, the collective RCC congregation approaches 2,000 attendees each week.

Figure 1.1: RCC Campus Expansion Timeline



History

RCC began in the late 1940s in a small community located in the Florida panhandle. This small, rural town of 2,400 created the context for the launch of Beth Mennonite Church, a conservative, Mennonite church of a few dozen attendees from the community. The town and church stayed relatively unchanged until a leadership transition in October 1993, giving way for Paul Johnson to assume this church's leadership role of approximately 100 attendees. This leadership transition initiated what would eventually become a complete church transition.

From the beginning of Paul's tenure, he was not satisfied with their ability to reach the broader Blounts, Florida community surrounding their original church location. Shortly after taking the RCC helm, Paul began transitioning the church from an inward-focused Mennonite congregation to an outward-facing, community-focused church. Without any transition examples, Paul and his small team led this initial transition primarily through trial and error.

Catalytic moments often are the stimulant for change in a leader's heart, which was true for Paul. After attending a conference on church models and pastoral leadership in October 2000, Paul and his leadership team embarked on a more robust transition journey to focused on reaching the unreached of their community. This three-year journey culminated in the church leaving the Mennonite denomination and changing its name to River Community Church.

With this new, fresh, reaching church model implemented, attendance multiplied to 800 across three Sunday morning services. In Blounts, Florida, the original RCC church quickly became a regional church, not a community church, with people traveling from five counties and up to an hour to attend. While RCC welcomed this growth, it hindered their desire to create great, local churches.

RCC Expansion

With people traveling up to an hour to attend, keeping the church fixated on their local community was challenging for RCC. Recognizing this challenge, Paul and his team crafted a vision to create RCC campus locations in neighboring communities to meet the church demand while remaining community focused.

In 2010, RCC launched its second location in a neighboring Florida city. Initially, RCC Marysville met as a portable church in a local high school. Four years later, this church moved into a permanent location. Shortly after, the regional nature that infiltrated the original location began to occur in Marysville. As the church in Marysville grew, the team recognized the need to expand into new communities to allow each church to be community-focused. Their next expansion opportunity was presented in a non-traditional format by Journey Baptist Church (JBC) in the adjacent Chesterfield, Florida community.

JBC began in 2010, but six years later, the once-thriving JBC was dying. Without the hope of a viable self-revitalization options, JBC approached RCC with a merger opportunity for their church and 35 in average weekly attendance. For RCC, this created the potential for a church in a neighboring community, allowing the attendees commuting to the Marysville location from this adjacent community to attend a church location in their home town. Most church mergers designed to salvage two congregations are rarely successful.⁴ In this situation, RCC's stability provided a viable alternative to JBC closing permanently.

To help ensure success, RCC closed JBC for six months, renovated their building to create a fresh start and new identity, and identified and trained an RCC staff member to become the campus pastor. On August 14, 2016, RCC Chesterfield opened its doors. Today, this RCC

⁴ Tom Bandy, "Successful Church Mergers." *The Clergy Journal*, 83, no. 8 (2007): 18.

location ministers to an average weekly attendance of 182 people.

The success of three campus locations positioned RCC for continued expansion. In late 2017, RCC's leadership heard of an organic gathering of people in another nearby community, meeting on Sunday mornings to watch the RCC service online as a group. This community is approximately 60 minutes from the nearest RCC campus. Even though the distance was more significant than RCC's previous campus launches, the gathering's organic nature appeared as an opportunity for continued expansion.

In March 2018, RCC fourth campus met for the first time as a church in a renovated community center. RCC Walka grew to a peak of 50 average attendees for Sunday service, but leadership deficiencies at the location forced RCC to close this location in October 2019 temporarily. Upon closer of this campus, 10 – 15 families transitioned to attend the closest RCC location. RCC hopes to reopen this campus location in the future.

RCC's fifth and final campus location came by way of a second adoptive merger. Similar to the scenario experienced with JBC, The Truth Church (TTC) in Fairway, Alabama, was struggling to keep its doors open after thirteen years of ministry. After considering options, TTC decided their best course of action was to approach RCC in hopes of being adopted into their campus family. Following a relatively quick conversational process, RCC decided to adopt this failing church as a new campus location in 2018.

This location presented uncommon challenges from the beginning. Most unique by comparison to the other RCC campus locations, this community is approximately three hours west of the closest RCC location. Where previous RCC campus locations were planted strategically to create a local RCC campus experience in the home towns of current RCC attendees, the adoption of TTC fell clearly outside of this strategy. The distance between RCC's

Alabama campus and their Florida campus locations created significant staff and church culture degradation, as the incoming staff of this fifth campus location could not easily meet with their multi-site peers for culture transfer, and transitioning staff from RCC to this fifth campus struggled to maintain their relational connection to RCC.

Similarly, without the benefit of proximity-based brand recognition in the community, the people in the Alabama community were not as expectant of the RCC culture to become part of their community. Unlike other locations, the RCC brand was an unknown entity that did not bring default value. This lack of community awareness of RCC and RCC's lack of presence in the Alabama community before the adoption left the transitioning, dying church to reopen without expectation.

Finally, the distance from all other RCC campus locations to the Alabama location created a more significant leadership requirement, which was not initially recognized. As part of this adoptive merger, RCC allowed the acting lead pastor at TTC to remain in place, assuming the role of campus pastor under RCC's leadership. This decision proved fatal, and in August 2019, RCC removed him from leadership.

For these reasons, RCC fifth campus has struggled to move forward successfully. Today, with interim leadership in place, RCC Fairway continues to meet, but the lessons learned from their first church adoption must be documented and implemented in this more recent effort for this location to become successful.

Multi-Site Expansion Strategy

“Strategically opportunistic” best describes RCC's current multi-site strategy. Beyond RCC's second campus, groups outside of RCC have initiated all other campus locations. RCC

launched two campus locations via adoptive merger (RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway) and one through an organic gathering watching digitally (RCC Walka). Of these, only one has experienced the similar success of the two initial RCC campus locations since its launch.

Strategically, RCC hopes to create local campuses that can remain focused on local communities. As their founding location became more regional than local, RCC expanded to help resolve this tension. That same strategy was employed in launching the third location, but not the fourth or fifth campuses. Interestingly, the two campus locations launched outside of their strategy have created RCC's most significant struggles.

Before launch, RCC meets with other churches in the community to share their plans and ask for their blessing, basing this on the teaching of Jesus in Luke 10:1-10. RCC also ensures a leader is identified, trained, and placed before launching any new campus location.

Financially, RCC sets aside margin monthly for campus expansion, recognizing the average cost for an initial campus launch is \$500,000, including building renovations. RCC desires for new locations to launch without the burden of debt.

Programming Strategy

With RCC's launch of its third location in 2016, the Marysville location officially became the central support hub for all RCC church locations. As the central campus location, RCC Marysville serves as a broadcast location for sermon delivery to all other campuses. Messages are streamed globally across RCC most weeks, but there are occasional weekends where local campus pastors take the platform to preach to their local churches.

Programmatically, every RCC service is virtually identical, as RCC is a highly centralized multi-site entity. On Sunday, every campus service performs the same worship set,

service hosts in each location communicate similar messages from talking points provided from the central staff, and children and student programming follow suit. This strategic commitment has become increasingly difficult with growth, as churches in unique communities often have unique needs. This complexity only grows with distance and the individual histories brought by failing churches adopted as campus locations.

Staffing Strategy

The RCC organization is matrix-led. Staff members at the Marysville campus provide campus leadership in Marysville and multi-site support for all other locations. Most Marysville staff directors have an assistant to help them manage the workload between both roles. Additionally, the Marysville campus staff centrally supports the other locations Finance, HR, IT, and Facility needs.

At the non-Marysville campus locations, a campus pastor typically trains for about a year before leading the location. In addition to the campus pastor, most locations have a Weekend Experience Director, Student Director, Children's Director, and Ministry Services Director.

Finance Strategy

RCC functions as one 501c3 entity. While there is one global budget, each location is classed separately with an internal P&L. The target is to fund the overall vision rather than any individual location.

From an expansion strategy, the goal is to open a new campus from the margin created each year, allowing a new campus to open without debt.

RCC Campus Summary

Campus One, RCC Blounts:

- Location, Blounts, Florida
- Strategy: This was the original location of Beth Mennonite Church
- Building: Permanent
- Opened: Transitioned in 2004
- Average Sunday Attendance: 626
- Average Weekly Giving: \$17,000

Campus Two, RCC Marysville (Present Central Location)

- Location: Marysville, Florida
- Strategy: Opened to relieve the regional pressure experienced at the founding location.
- Building: Permanent
- Opened: 2010
- Average Sunday Attendance: 783
- Average Weekly Giving: \$23,000

Campus Three, RCC Chesterfield

- Location: Chesterfield, Florida
- Strategy: Adoptive merger of a dying church
- Building: Long Term Lease (Golf Course Clubhouse)
- Opened: 2016
- Average Sunday Attendance: 182
- Average Weekly Giving: \$6,000

Campus Four, RCC Walka (Currently not meeting)

- Location, Walka, Florida
- Strategy: Opportunity to create a church where an organic gathering was occurring
- Building: Long Term Lease (Community Center)
- Opened: 2018
- Average Sunday Attendance: 50
- Average Weekly Giving: N/A

Campus Five, RCC Fairway

- Location, Fairway, Alabama
- Strategy: Adoptive merger of a dying church
- Building: Permanent
- Opened: 2018
- Average Sunday Attendance: 125
- Average Weekly Giving: \$7,000

Problem Presented

This project will address the less successful adoptive merger of The Truth Church in Fairway, Alabama, by RCC following their previously successful adoptive merger of Journey Baptist Church in Chesterfield, Florida. The merger through adoption of TTC did not successfully expand RCC's influence or fully revitalize this church in need. However, RCC has successfully adopted a congregation as a campus location previously, making this juxtaposition of success and then failure a worthy evaluation, both for the potential success of TTC as an RCC campus location, the future success of RCC adoption mergers, and the potential revitalization of other dying churches. While thriving multi-site churches adopting through merger dying

churches is not a normative revitalization approach, the strategy has proven effective.

Non-normative approaches to ongoing problems are often required to experience positive change. Openness to new forms of revitalization that supports and propagates the church's biblical function is necessary, as current revitalization forms are failing at a record pace. Mark Clifton indicates that 70 to 80 percent of North America's evangelical churches are either plateaued or declining.⁵ Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird agree, suggesting roughly 80 percent of the three hundred thousand Protestant churches in the United States have plateaued or are declining.⁶ Brian Croft claims an average net loss of 3,500 churches per year over the last twenty years.⁷ Mark Hallock estimates upwards of 4,000 churches across North America close their doors every year.⁸ Other studies show similar findings. John Dart approximates 3,700 churches close each year.⁹ Thom Rainer suggests approximately 100,000 churches in America are on the brink of death.¹⁰ Considering denominations and individual churches do not always accurately track and report data, these data points are potentially not exact, but a look at the shifting religious views of individual Americans certainly substantiates church decline.

According to the Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christian when asked about their religion, down

⁵ Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2016), 1.

⁶ Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird, *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), Kindle Location 436.

⁷ Croft, Kindle Location 88.

⁸ Mark Hallock, *Replant Roadmap: How Your Congregation Can Help Revitalize Dying Churches* (Littleton, CO: Acoma Press, 2017), Forward.

⁹ Dart, John, "Church-closing Rate Only One Percent: More 'Churning' Among Evangelicals," *The Christian Century* [online], (May 6, 2008). Accessed April 12, 2020. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2008-05/church-closing-rate-only-one-percent>

¹⁰ Matt Rogers, *Mergers: Combining Churches to Multiply Disciples* (Alpharetta, GA: The Send Network, 2014), Kindle Location 53.

12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular,” now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009.¹¹

This research, among others, paints a distressing picture of the church and Christianity throughout the country. The data indicates that the U.S. is steadily becoming less Christian and less religiously observant as the share of adults who are not religious grows. Assuming people simply do not attend church as frequently as in the past, some might suggest the metrics are not as bleak as the data trends show, shaping the analysis to indicate a false sense of decline. However, the Pew Research Center investigated attendance patterns and found them unchanged over the last decade. That finding suggests the nation’s overall rate of religious attendance is declining not because Christians are attending church less often, but instead because there are fewer Christians as a share of the population.¹²

As Jesus once said, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.”¹³ If the research and metrics are accurate, the harvest is growing more plentiful by the day, and the work done by the church might require a new approach to church revitalization to cultivate the growing harvest.

¹¹ Pew Research Center. *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape*. October 17, 2019, 3. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

¹² Pew Research Center. *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape*, 9.

¹³ Matthew 9:37, Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this thesis is to identify the methods and strategies utilized in RCC's successful adoptive merger of Journey Baptist Church (now RCC Chesterfield) for implementation in a potential re-launch of the less successful adoptive merger of The Truth Church (now RCC Fairway) and other future adoption merger endeavors by RCC. This research is necessary, not just for the future success of RCC's campus expansion potential, but also for other churches in need of revitalization, as other revitalization methods often fail to successfully turnaround dying churches or reverse the trend of death in the American church. These alternate methods include senior pastor replacements, church planting, and survival-based mergers.

Revitalization Through Turnaround Pastors

The replacement of leadership in dying churches by pastors willing to attempt a turnaround can create a pathway to revitalization. This option is problematic on multiple fronts. First, there is a timeline problem. Brian Croft proposes it takes a minimum of five years before a pastor can begin to see real, lasting fruit of his ministry that points to church health.¹⁴ Gary McIntosh suggests it takes longer, writing, "Research in the field of church growth shows that it takes an average of seven years to implement significant changes in an urban or suburban church. Bringing about the same changes in a rural setting often takes ten to twelve years, if not longer."¹⁵

Time is not on the side of church revitalization through turnaround pastors, as the average

¹⁴ Croft, Kindle Location 404.

¹⁵ Gary L. McIntosh, *There's Hope For Your Church: First Steps to Restoring Health and Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 69.

tenure of a pastor is less than four years.¹⁶ This timeline is problematic in revitalization efforts, as 90 percent of churches do not maintain a revitalization leader long enough for a church revitalization to be successful.

Second, the availability of potential revitalization pastors contributes to the growing problem. Gary McIntosh indicates only five percent of pastors can be considered turnaround leaders.¹⁷ Thom Rainer, who has done years of research for the Southern Baptist Convention, believes there are not enough turnaround pastors to lead even one-third of America's churches in need of revitalization.¹⁸

The math for individual church revitalization through pastoral leadership change simply does not work to reverse the prevailing trend toward decline. The typical pastoral tenure and revitalization leadership pipeline paint a realistic picture of despair for the American church.

Revitalization Through Church Planting

Some have suggested church planting as a potential solution to close the death-rate gap. Networks of churches, like Stadia, ARC, Acts 29, and NAMB have come together for the primary purpose of planting new churches. For many churches and church leaders, starting a new church is more appealing than spending decades trying to revitalize often-unwilling, dying churches.¹⁹ If the church is primarily an evangelistic tool in the hands of God, Peter Wagner argues that planting new churches is the best use of Kingdom resources and efforts.²⁰

¹⁶ McIntosh, 34.

¹⁷ Tomberlin and Bird, Kindle Location 1106.

¹⁸ Ibid., Kindle Location 1107.

¹⁹ Rogers, Kindle Location 119.

²⁰ Dirk Elliott, *Vital Merger: A New Church Start Approach that Joins Church Families Together* (U.S.A: Fun and Done Press, 2013), Kindle Location 309.

Wagner’s opinion is welcomed but is questionable as a revitalization solution in the face of vast church decline. For church planting to reverse the trend of death, both launch rates plus long-term viability rates must exceed the death rate. Deciphering accurate church plant launch statistics is problematic. Not all church planting networks publish data, nor do individual denominations publish accurate data. Additionally, data on individual churches who plant churches is rarely available.

More accurate data for church plant success is available. The ARC network reports that 90 percent of their church plants continue in operation after five years. By comparison, the Southern Baptist Convention’s North American Mission Board states in a 2018 report that about 76 percent of its plants survived five years.²¹ These success metrics seem promising, yet church planting does not appear to solve the decline seen across the church landscape. Telephone surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018 and 2019 found that only 65 percent of American adults describe themselves as Christian when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade. In tandem, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as “atheist, agnostic, or ‘nothing in particular,’” now stands at 26 percent, up from 17 percent in 2009.²²

While the church planting metrics and overall church decline statistics are not directly correlated, they provide some insight into revitalization. The data demonstrates the launch rate and ongoing success rate of church plants do not equal the death rate of declining churches. Meaning, church planting alone cannot reverse the church death rate trend across North America.

²¹ Kate Shellnutt, “Church Planting Goes Big: Strong Launches Help New Churches Stay Viable, According to the Association of Related Churches.” *Christianity Today*, 63, no. 6 (2019): 13–15.

²² Pew Research Center. *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape*, 3.

Revitalization Through Traditional Church Mergers

More recently, pastors and researchers have suggested church mergers to secure sacred resources and revitalize dying churches. In the past, when churches decline to the point of desperation, invariably, the talk turns to possibilities of merging with another church.²³ Tom Brandy notes that churches merging to salvage congregations are rarely successful. Financial crisis or the lack of support staff often force churches to consolidate efforts,²⁴ but the merging of two churches struggling to survive does not often provide relief for either.

In the marketplace, mergers and acquisitions are nothing new. Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird have studied mergers in the marketplace and in ministry. Their research shows that the failure rate of mergers is close to 75 percent.²⁵ From their findings, this failure rate for mergers motivated by survival is too high to be seen as a viable revitalization method.²⁶

Revitalization by Thriving Churches Adopting through Mergers

While mergers as a revitalization method may appear risky, as a solution, this concept does provide potential. In RCC's history of campus expansion, adoption through merger has successfully expanded its influence and revitalize a congregation. However, their second attempt at an adoption merger was initially unsuccessful. Mark Hallock has suggested dying churches often struggle to experience transformation on their own. They need help from thriving

²³ McIntosh, Kindle Location 169.

²⁴ Bandy, 18.

²⁵ Tomberlin and Bird, Kindle Location 2166.

²⁶ Ibid., Kindle Location 2169.

congregations.²⁷ The structure of the “help” determines the success of the revitalization.

As a potential solution for dying churches, larger, multi-site churches looking to expand could adopt struggling churches without facing the startup costs of acquiring land or building a new site.²⁸ This approach provides a win for the larger church hoping to expand and a new opportunity for the smaller, struggling church to experience revitalization. For the struggling church, partnering with another church with life, energy, and momentum may be a viable means of expediting change and invigorating the church.²⁹ In support, Matt Rogers advocates for church mergers as a tool for the revitalization of established churches. He suggests the rate of merger-based revitalization far exceeds the rate of transformation from one pastor attempting to lead a revitalization project alone.³⁰ From this perspective, church mergers built upon mission and vision, not survival, are vehicles for revitalization.

Basic Assumptions

First, the researcher assumes the successful revitalization of dying churches through adoptive mergers as campus locations of thriving multi-site churches is a worthwhile effort for thriving churches to engage. Second, the researcher assumes the Great Commission given by Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20) includes both individual believers and the church as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27) working to reach the lost and disciple the found. Next, the researcher assumes RCC desires to successfully reinvigorate its efforts to revitalize the former TTC as a campus location of RCC. The researcher also assumes the methods utilized in RCC’s

²⁷ Hallock, 15.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁹ Rogers, Kindle Location 91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

adoption merger of JBC as their third campus location will provide a successful juxtaposed comparative to the initial failure of their subsequent TTC adoption merger. A fifth assumption is that RCC desires to be strategic with future adoption merger opportunities, recognizing that this thesis project will illuminate successful and unsuccessful methods from both of RCC's adoptive merger narratives. A sixth assumption is that the methods utilized in the successful adoptive merger of JBC will provide insight for other churches attempting a successful adoptive merger as a growth and revitalization strategy. Finally, the researcher assumes that Action Research will provide a process through which all the stakeholders will work together to "clarify their problems and formulate new ways of envisioning their situations. In doing so, each participant's taken-for-granted cultural viewpoint is challenged and modified so that new systems of meaning emerge that can be incorporated in the texts—rules, regulations, practices, procedures, and policies—that govern our professional and community experience."³¹

Definitions

This thesis project will use the following definition throughout unless otherwise noted:

Adopting Church: The thriving church choosing to merge another church as a campus location into their church family through adoption.

Adopted Campus: The dying church needing revitalization, being adopted through merger into another church as a campus location.

Central Campus: The primary location of centralized support for the other campus locations of the multi-site church.

³¹ Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 54.

Campus Location: A church in a community functioning as a location of a broader multi-site church family.

Core Team: A core team is the group of initial supporters of a new campus location, helping fund, serve, and launch a new campus location.

Lay Staff: For this project, lay staff will represent any non-paid individuals leading or exerting influence over RCC or a campus of RCC.

Leadership: For this research effort, leadership describes an individual exerting influence unless otherwise noted specifically by position.

Merger Failure: In the context of RCC's adoptive merger of TTC in Alabama, failure as a term will indicate a less successful adoptive merger than planned or desired by comparison to RCC's more successful adoptive merger of JBC as RCC Chesterfield.

Multi-site: One church meeting in more than one location.

Limitations

There are several externally imposed constraints within this research project.

First, while familiar with RCC, the researcher is not a staff member or directly connected to the church. This disconnect limits the researcher's personal experience with the successful adoptive merger of JBC as RCC's third campus and subsequent less successful adoptive merger of TTC as RCC's fifth campus.

Second, while RCC's adoptive mergers of both JBC and TTC are somewhat recent, neither project is currently documented by RCC, requiring the researcher to build a timeline of events from those involved to understand the narrative accurately.

Third, RCC's successful adoption of JBC as their third campus does provide insight for

their future adoptive merger attempts, but a case study of one success is statistically insignificant to assume the learning will create a definitive pathway without the potential of failure for any and all future RCC adoptive mergers.

Fourth, factors outside of the study's reach may have potentially influenced the success of RCC Chesterfield and the initial failure of RCC Fairway. As an example, many of RCC's campus locations were directly affected by Hurricane Michael in 2018. While this outside event did not affect the campus expansion strategy, this event did affect RCC's leadership availability, financial stability, and organizational focus for a sustained season.

Delimitations

This researcher is imposing the following constraints on the project to ensure that the research is conducted completely and without bias. The quality of this research is contingent upon the following delimitations:

To help ensure the most accurate portrayal of RCC's previous adoptive merger success and less successful subsequent attempt, the researcher will interview all involved parties and stakeholders, building a timeline of events and methodological structures from their collective memories. While any individual perspective may provide supportive data, the collective perspective of multiple staff should paint an accurate picture of both adoptive mergers.

Second, as an outside researcher, an understanding of what led to the third campus's success and the following failure at the fifth campus will be constructed from more than just the senior pastor's perspective. Paul Johnson was the primary decision-maker and point leader for both adoptive mergers, but many others were involved in the decision and implementation.

Third, as these interviews will reveal successful and unsuccessful methodologies, the

researcher will conduct all interviews with involved stakeholders rather than allowing Paul Johnson as the senior pastor to gather the information, as his involvement in the research process could unintentionally usurp the validity of the feedback.

Thesis Statement

If a revised strategy based upon RCC's successful adoption merger of Journey Baptist Church is understood and implemented at The Truth Church, RCC should successfully expand their influence and fully revitalize this once dying church while creating a methodology for future adoptive mergers.

Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework

Like virtually every research effort, this project is not the first of its kind. While church revitalization as a topic is not necessarily original, new frameworks, methodologies, and strategies are consistently evaluated and implemented to renew churches. This chapter will evaluate precedent literature, theological foundations, and theoretical foundations.

Literature Review

Evaluating precedent literature specifically related to this thesis topic requires a somewhat tangential approach to understanding the need for adoptive church mergers, the associated metrics and statistics, and the alternatives to church revitalization outside of adoptive mergers. While some of this is summarized in the previous chapter (Purpose Statement), a more robust review is needed. Specifically, for RCC's future and hopeful success of their previously failed adoptive merger of TTC to find traction, both the evaluation of their successful adoptive merger with JBC as their third campus location and investigative research beyond RCC should be incorporated. This section will directly address findings beyond RCC.

The primary contributors to the growing conversation of church revitalization are pastors with successful revitalization stories and church leaders observing these efforts. While each individual approaches this conversation from their perspective, some common beliefs are shared: 1) Current trends of church decline necessitate the implementation of revitalization solutions, 2) There are several solution alternatives to evaluate, and 3) New solutions are most likely required.

Current Trends in the Church Creating the Need for Revitalization

Seemingly every survey, research study, and metric tells a similar story: The church of North America is in a statistical free fall.³² Brian Croft notes that the American church lost 3,500 churches annually over the last twenty-plus years, with 88 to 91 percent of the remaining churches dying.³³ Metrics presented by authors vary, but the variation does not provide hope. As included previously, Mark Clifton poses 70 to 80 percent of evangelical churches in North America are either plateaued or declining.³⁴ Mark Hallock increases Crofts estimate by 500, suggesting 4,000 churches close their doors each year.³⁵ Thom Rainer, a leader within the Southern Baptist Convention’s revitalization efforts, suggests approximately 100,000 churches in America are on the brink of death.³⁶ Additionally, The Barna Group has shown that, while the US adult population has grown 15 percent over the last fifteen years, the number of unchurched adults has grown by 92 percent.³⁷

Matt Rogers compares many North American churches to David, writing,

“Limited by the armor of previous generations — namely, impressive church buildings that are much loved symbols of the church’s history and role in the community but are now a liability. Often the mission of such churches becomes mainly that of maintaining the building, updating it to meet safety and accessibility requirements and paying the rising cost of heating — all with the resources of a declining membership.”³⁸

The corporate demands in these dying churches have exceeded the missional pursuits that

³² Croft, Kindle Location 85.

³³ Ibid., Kindle Location 88.

³⁴ Clifton, 1.

³⁵ Hallock, Forward.

³⁶ Rogers, Kindle Location 53.

³⁷ Andrew M. Davis, *Revitalize: Biblical Keys To Helping Your Church Come Alive Again* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 22.

³⁸ Rogers, 48.

most likely founded the church. As a result, the established church as a whole is suffering.³⁹

The loss of Kingdom resources often compounds the death of churches. With many of these dying churches, their buildings, remaining finances, and equipment are liquidated and handed over to outsiders. The return on the investment once financed by believers and used to further the Kingdom is now reduced to nothing.

As is the case in almost every facet of organizational life, growing concerns set the foundation for growing needs. This is the case for church revitalization, as the need for pathways to revitalize churches in mass is creating a concern to discover proven pathways to reverse the church death trend.

Current Church Revitalization Solutions

The ongoing death rate of churches in North America requires revitalization solutions to reverse the death trend. Traditional methods are typically encouraged, including replacing church leaders with “turnaround pastors,” planting new churches, and creating the context for church mergers. These typical strategies have a place in the conversation, yet all are insufficient to reverse the trend. Initially presented in Chapter One, these three strategies will be enhanced by the current literature in this section.

Turnaround Pastor Replacements as a Revitalization Solution

The Church Revitalization team of the North American Mission Board (NAMB) created a characteristics list outlining the unique and essential qualities of turnaround pastors: “Visionary shepherd, High tolerance for pain, Respect and passion for the church’s legacy, Passion for

³⁹ Rogers, 48.

multi-generational ministry, A resourceful generalist, Tactical patience, Emotional awareness, and Spousal perseverance.”⁴⁰ While this list is relatively robust and potentially complete, it is simplistic to believe enough people fit this description to revitalize the volume of dying churches.

Davis attempts to make it even more simplistic, writing,

“When God intends to revitalize a church, he inevitably raises up men who will step forward as visionary leaders. Though visionary leadership would be essential even if that church were flourishing, never has there been so great a need for leaders to step forward and cast a biblical vision for what God is calling them to become and how he is commanding them to obey.”⁴¹

Revitalization might not be that simplistic. The first challenge facing revitalization via pastor replacement is the time required for success. Brian Croft suggests it takes a minimum of five years before a pastor can lead a ministry to church health.⁴² As presented in Chapter One, Gary McIntosh proposes it takes from seven to twelve years, depending on the community context and severity of the situation.⁴³ Understanding the typical tenure of a pastor is less than four years,⁴⁴ most pastors hoping to revitalize a dying church do not last long enough for the fruit of their revitalization efforts to pass.

Additionally, potential turnaround pastoral candidates are scarce. McIntosh suggests only five percent of pastors can be considered turnaround leaders.⁴⁵ Extrapolating this belief reveals that there are not enough turnaround pastors to lead even one-third of America’s churches in

⁴⁰ Croft, Kindle Location 371.

⁴¹ Davis, 105.

⁴² Croft, Kindle Location 404.

⁴³ McIntosh, 69.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁵ Tomberlin and Bird, Kindle Location 1106.

need of revitalization.⁴⁶

Church Planting as a Revitalization Solution

Church planters and church planting proponents often suggest it is easier to give birth than to raise the dead.⁴⁷ Mark Clifton, a church planting proponent, agrees, writing, “It is easier to start a new church than to resurrect a dying one.”⁴⁸ Such a statement implies that it is wiser to plant new churches than to revitalize dying churches back to life.

Church planting is on the rise. Recently, the North American Mission Board reported that the number of SBC church plants grew by 27 percent.⁴⁹ While that is a significant increase, if extrapolated to all denominations and church planting organizations, it represents fewer than one thousand new churches in actuality – far less than even the most conservative projections of church deaths. This metric also does not indicate the number of church plants surviving over time.

In their church revitalization text, Aubrey Malphuers and Gordon Penfold see church planting alone as insufficient to reverse the trend of church death. All denominations pursue visionary church planters to plant spiritually healthy churches, but in focusing too much energy in this direction, many have overlooked the need for and importance of the re-envisioning or the revitalization of our established churches.⁵⁰

Of course, there are times when a church needs to die and give way to something new,

⁴⁶ Tomberlin and Bird, Kindle Location 1107.

⁴⁷ McIntosh, 169.

⁴⁸ Clifton, 9.

⁴⁹ Rogers, 110.

⁵⁰ Aubrey Malphuers and Gordon Penfold, *Re:Vision: The Key To Transforming Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 127.

but church planting is inadequate to accommodate for current church death rates.

Survival Mergers as a Revitalization Solution

When facing desperation, invariably, the talk in dying churches turns to possibilities of merging with another church.⁵¹ Such mergers might be initially seen as answers to avoid death, but mergers for survival are often replete with more frustrations than favor.

Studies have often backed up these findings. In his argument against survival mergers, Dirk Elliot points to a study conducted by the Detroit regional area of the United Methodist Church. Their research during the decade of 2000 – 2010 followed twenty-one traditional mergers. From this control group, according to the study, eighteen mergers could not maintain the attendance of the combined merged churches pre-merger, and fifteen churches lost the equivalent of the attendance of the smaller church within one year.⁵² Elliot continues from his study, noting that three merged churches lost the attendance from the smaller congregation within two to six years. The remaining three congregations did grow in attendance post-merger. Of these mergers, one became a charismatic congregation shortly after merger and has grown in attendance by approximately 50 percent. Another maintained its pre-merger attendance until year six when it underwent a traditional merger with yet another church, and its attendance plummeted. The third church initially lost 22 percent of its attendance and took six years to achieve its pre-merger numbers.⁵³

The United Methodist Church of Detroit's findings are not an unfortunate anomaly. As a revitalization technique, conventional wisdom and research conclusions propose that merging

⁵¹ McIntosh, 169.

⁵² Elliott, 198.

⁵³ Ibid.

two churches for the sake of survival is rarely successful. Church growth consultant Lyle Schaller has said, “looking back at the dismal fruit of the 1950s and ’60s, when mergers were all the rage with denominational leaders, that in too many mergers, the result was 4 plus 4 equals 6 — meaning a net decline in attendance and growth.”⁵⁴

Even with the lack of success in various merger scenarios, churches are still merging. A study by The Leadership Network found that 2% of America’s 300,000 Protestant churches have engaged in a merger.⁵⁵ Furthermore, this study noted an increased interest in mergers by Protestant churches, indicating a need for a systematic process that can increase the likelihood of success.⁵⁶ The question is how to increase the likelihood of merger-based success as a revitalization technique.

Rethinking Mergers as a Church Revitalization Solution

Dying churches struggle to experience transformation on their own. Hallock writes, “They need help from Jesus-loving, Kingdom-minded, mission-focused congregations, congregations that share this burden to see forgotten, tired, declining churches reclaimed for the glory of God.”⁵⁷ This sentiment would advocate for church mergers, and while survival-based mergers are rarely successful, adoptive mergers by thriving churches, while still complicated and relatively newer as a solution, are finding fruit.

⁵⁴ Greg Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *A Multi-Site Road Trip: Exploring the New Normal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), Kindle Location 2342.

⁵⁵ Elliot, 167.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 169.

⁵⁷ Hallock, 15.

Adoptive Mergers

Dirk Elliot appears to be the first to use the phrase “adoptive mergers” to describe a model where a strong, stable church adopts a struggling church as a new campus or mission site.⁵⁸ As Elliot suggested, in these cases, the infusion of healthy DNA and positive brand awareness in a community by the healthy church revitalizes the struggling church.⁵⁹

Conceptually, others have seen mergers of this type as solutions. Rogers recognizes that a dying church choosing to partner with another church with life, energy, and momentum may be a viable means of expediting change and invigorating the church.⁶⁰

The research backs up the statements. Research conducted by Warren Bird and Jim Tomberlin has found that declining churches that became campus sites of a larger, healthier church often do exceptionally well.⁶¹ There are plenty of candidates for adoptive mergers. The nearly quarter of a million Protestant churches across the United States that are struggling, in decline, or dying could connect to a thriving church ready and willing to be an adoptive parent.⁶²

Adoptive Mergers via Multi-site Churches

One key finding from The Leadership Network’s Multi-site Church Scorecard established that multi-site campuses consistently grow more than church plants, and likewise, “multi-site churches have a greater evangelistic impact than church plants.”⁶³ While adoptive mergers of any

⁵⁸ Elliot, 179.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 179.

⁶⁰ Rogers, 91.

⁶¹ McIntosh, 169.

⁶² Tomberlin and Bird, 953.

⁶³ Warren Bird, “Multi-site Church Scorecard: Faster Growth, More New Believers, and Greater Lay Participation,” May 8, 2019, at <https://leadnet.org/download/multi-site-church-scorecard-faster-growth-believers-greater-lay-participation/>. Accessed 12/4/19.

kind may provide a solution to revitalizing dying churches, it appears that struggling churches adopted by multi-site entities may provide a higher rate of success. According to Rogers, multi-site churches expanding through mergers provide a bright future for the church in America.⁶⁴

The statistics of multi-site churches and struggling churches create a case for multi-site adoptive mergers. According to Tomberlin and Bird, roughly 80 percent of the three hundred thousand Protestant churches in the United States have plateaued or are declining. Among the 20 percent of growing congregations across the United States, many desperately need space.⁶⁵ These conditions present a unique revitalization opportunity.

A 2017 research study by The Leadership Network confirms this pathway as a potential revitalization solution. Summarizing from Warren Bird's study:

- Multi-site churches report exceptional growth levels, much of it through new believers.
- Multi-site churches touch 5 million people weekly through congregations of all sizes.
- Eighty-nine percent of multi-site churches are over 500 in attendance, 72 percent are over 1,000, 20 percent are over 5,000, and 8 percent are over 10,000.
- In the United States alone, 5 million people worshipped at one of 8,000 multi-site churches last weekend, according to the National Congregations Study sponsored by Duke University.
- Eighty-five percent of surveyed multi-site churches are growing at an average rate of 14 percent per year. Campus viability starts are 75 - 350 people, depending on the model.
- Thirty-seven percent of multi-site churches started a multi-site campus as the result of a merger. The vast majority (88 percent) of churches report that going multi-site increased

⁶⁴ Rogers, 174.

⁶⁵ Tomberlin and Bird, 436.

the role of lay participation.

- Multi-site campuses grow far more than church plants, and likewise, multi-site churches have a greater evangelistic impact than church plants.
- On average, new campuses grow by 28 percent in the first year and 25 percent in the second year.
- Eighty-five percent of multi-site churches surveyed are growing.
- Multi-site churches grow at an impressive 14 percent per year.
- Fifty-seven percent of multi-site churches are planning to launch a new campus in the next year.
- Forty-seven percent of multi-site churches have a campus in a small town or rural area.”⁶⁶

In summary, Bird’s research suggests that campuses grow faster and have more conversions than church plants.⁶⁷

Other research studies show similar findings, pointing to adoptive mergers as revitalization solutions. According to the National Congregation Study, most churches in America are small, with a median weekend attendance of 76 people, yet most churchgoers attend a big church, with a median attendance of 400.⁶⁸ Interpretation of this metric suggests that “small churches have most of the church buildings, and big churches have most of the people and the money. Small churches have what many big churches want: property, often on highly valuable land. And big churches have what most small churches want: Money and people.”⁶⁹ While the term seems more callous, Smietana sees these multi-site churches as “church flippers” who take

⁶⁶ Bird, “Multi-site Church Scorecard.”

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Bob Smietana, “Flip this church.” *Christianity Today*, June 2015, 44.

⁶⁹ Smietana, 44.

over older, struggling churches and reboot them as thriving worship spaces.⁷⁰

This often is a perfect solution for struggling and declining churches, but adoptive mergers make sense for larger churches as well. This strategy can allow a thriving church to expand ministry without facing the startup costs of acquiring land or building a new site.⁷¹ Smietana continues, proposing that in an adoptive merger, dying churches get the pastoral presence of a small church while having the resources of a large megachurch.⁷² Such adoptive mergers reflect a growing trend where two local churches at different life stages leverage their common DNA and complementary differences to generate a more successful Kingdom story.⁷³

Recent research reveals one out of every three campus locations of multi-site churches begins via merger,⁷⁴ and among megachurches, almost one out of five have experienced a merger.⁷⁵

Not everyone sees multi-site adoptive mergers kindly. Smietana notes larger churches can easily discard small churches' unique history in mergers.⁷⁶ Jeff Brumley labels the pressuring of smaller churches to concede to larger churches “steeple-jacking,” defining the term as “a multi-site movement resulting from larger congregations preying on smaller ones, pressuring them into relinquishing buildings and land in exchange for survival.”⁷⁷

Assuming good motivations by larger, multi-site churches, it appears adoptive mergers as

⁷⁰ Smietana, 44.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Tomberlin and Bird, Kindle Location 427.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 538.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 533.

⁷⁶ Smietana, 45.

⁷⁷ Jeff Brumley, “When Small Churches Merge with Large Ones” *Baptist News Global*. [online] Baptist News Global (August 9, 2013). Accessed November 1, 2019. <https://baptistnews.com/article/when-small-churches-merge-with-large-ones/#.XcWPtZNKjUI>.

an approach to church revitalization provides a positive pathway to aid the struggling church of North America. With the demise of established churches abounding, there are fewer capable churches than ever before.⁷⁸ The scope of metrics is daunting, yet show hope. With 80 percent of the three hundred thousand churches across America struggling, nearly a quarter-million churches have room in their facilities to fill with a vibrant ministry.⁷⁹

To that point, Rogers points out that church mergers may be a tool for revitalizing established churches at a rate that far exceeds the pace of transformation from one pastor attempting to lead a revitalization project alone.⁸⁰

Theological Foundation

For many persons, the church is the first moment, and perhaps the only moment, to encounter Christianity.⁸¹ This sentiment is why the universal church is sometimes referred to as the invisible church, but the local church, often called the visible church⁸², as it produces a visible representation of Jesus. Therefore, the church's one essential of ministry is the ministry of her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.⁸³ This indispensable ministry places quite an importance on the life and mission of the local church.

This fact equally magnifies the problems found when churches decline and eventually die. Karl Barth noted that one of the several ways in which the church "witnesses to Jesus Christ

⁷⁸ Malphuers and Penfold, 129.

⁷⁹ Tomberlin and Bird, Kindle Location 1307.

⁸⁰ Rogers, 92.

⁸¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 1036.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1043-48; cf. Douglas Kelly et al., eds., *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1981), 44.

⁸³ Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 249.

is simply by its existence.”⁸⁴ A dying church is without witness, and being without witness works directly against the church’s purpose.

Considering Jesus charged believers both individually and collectively to be a light, the continuous dimming of churches is a definitive theological issue. In the midst of what is labeled Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount,” he directly addresses the crowd of followers, challenging them to allow their light to shine before others.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”
– Matthew 5:14-16 (NIV)

“In the same way,” the church as the body of believers should function as a light shining for all to see, allowing others to glorify God by what they see. The significance of believers and the churches they form witnessing as salt and light in their respective communities should not be downplayed. From the *Baker Commentary on the Bible*, “In salt and light, nature and function are one. As salt, disciples are a preservative to impede the spread of evil in society. As light, they bear a positive witness to that society.”⁸⁵ This witness matters. Brian Croft writes, “It is good and right to be burdened by the reality of the extinguishing of once thriving local churches that previously were gospel lights in their communities.”⁸⁶ This address from Jesus provides a functional charge to all believers from that point forward, including the church of today. Therefore, any church in decline is a city on a hill without the light of Christ shining. It is slowing and painfully becoming hidden, like a lamp put under a bowl.

⁸⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), vol.1, part 1. Page 1.

⁸⁵ *Baker Commentary on the Bible, Based on the NIV*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1989), 729

⁸⁶ Croft, Kindle Location 167.

The ongoing need for church revitalization is a practical problem founded upon a theological command that goes beyond Jesus' teaching on salt and light. Specifically, this command was initially given to Jesus' Disciples before his ascension, with an understanding of perpetual obedience to the charge. The "Great Commission" is a charge to make learners and followers of all people.

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
– Matthew 28:16-20 (NIV)

Similarly, just prior the Jesus' ascension, he reminded his Disciples of their new mission, reiterating the importance of being a "witness."

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.
– Acts 1:7-9 (NIV)

Erickson writes, "As the body of Christ, the church is the extension of his ministry."⁸⁷ He continues, suggesting, "The work of Christ, then if it is done at all, will be done by his body, the church."⁸⁸ This "Body of Christ"⁸⁹ harkens back to Paul's suggestion that the collection of believers represents the body, but this is also true for local collections of believers that make up local church bodies. While the church plays a crucial role in spreading this commission, dying churches work against this command, as they lose influence in their communities while

⁸⁷ Erickson, 1049.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

perpetuating an inaccurate picture of the church and life of a believer. It is impossible to witness in death.

It is possible the “Great Commission” was given as an individual command. While that is partially true, as the church is the body of Christ, with each individual existing as a part of the body, it is also true that the church is under the same collective commission as the individual believer. Dying churches require a shift in focus from the “Great Commission” to survival, shifting their energy, resources, and hope from going to make disciples to keeping their existing disciples. In the landscape of the church, dying churches again work against what God is working to accomplish.

While not directly connected to that church as of today, the record of God’s desire and ability to bring life from death through his Spirit⁹⁰ for the purpose of his people is seen best in the context of Ezekiel. Arguably there is no more explicit demonstration of God’s life-giving power than in Ezekiel 37.⁹¹ It will take God’s power for dying churches to thrive once again, not human craftiness or invention. Croft summarizes this concept, writing,

“God’s people were so far gone that they were without hope. They have as much hope to save themselves and give themselves life as that grieving spouse trying to shake her husband awake at the funeral. According to the book of Ezekiel God’s people are in such a place of hopeless despair that only God and His power and might can do what we cannot.”⁹²

John MacArthur recognizes this revelation no doubt represents the world area wherever Israelites were scattered.⁹³ The vision ends with Ezekiel understanding three distinct promises of God for the future of his people: 1) restoration, verse 21; 2) unification, verse 22, and 3)

⁹⁰ The Hebrew word “ruah” is mentioned ten times within these fourteen verses. *Baker Commentary on the Bible*, 583.

⁹¹ Croft, Kindle Location 243.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 294.

⁹³ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 931.

purification, verse 23.⁹⁴ As Israel was considered God’s chosen people in the Old Testament, today’s Body of Christ presents an equal comparative. The beautiful connection to this Old Testament narrative is found in relying on God for revitalization. While man may strategize and implore methodologies and research, God is ultimately the only giver of life able to renew and sustain any church.

While multi-site church and adoptive church mergers set the foundation for this thesis, understanding the ecclesiology of multi-site and church mergers is essential, as God only blesses that what is biblically worthy of blessing. The church’s primary motive must be the glory of God demonstrated through the multiplication of disciples as read in John 15:8. Therefore, this is equally true of church mergers of everyday need. As Paul articulated to the Ephesian Christians, “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.”⁹⁵ There are many churches, denominations, and practices, but there is but one Lord who is served by all.

Peter reiterates this emotion, writing:

“⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”
– 1 Peter 2:9-10 (NIV)

As a chosen people and God’s special possession, the body of Christ is one in Spirit and in mercy. This oneness transcends mergers and multi-site churches, as the body’s function is more important than the organization’s form.

In the early church of Acts, the members work interdependently. Roland Allen comments

⁹⁴ MacArthur, 931.

⁹⁵ Ephesians 4:4-5

on this, saying, “For him [Paul] the Church was prior to the churches. The churches did not make up the Church, but the Church established the churches.”⁹⁶ In this way, church mergers provide a public witness that the church is one.

Paul, writing to the churches and believers in Corinth, states:

“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

From the *Baker Commentary on the Bible*, “Paul’s appeal is more than a mere formality, as is shown by the fact that it is made ‘in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.’”⁹⁷ As is the case throughout Scripture, more is said about the church and the body of believers from a place of contextual description than modern-day prescription of how to gather. The charge to “agree with one another” and to remove “divisions among you” is an exhortation to move the faith forward as one.

In the first century church in Acts, the church is described as “coming together as a church.” Paul, writing to the believers in Corinth, says, “In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.”⁹⁸ Juxtaposed to Acts 2:46-47, this “coming together” seems to describe how the followers of Jesus met in smaller groups, homes, and at times as a larger gathering.

From the words of Jesus, believers and the church should focus more on the mission than any specific method. From Luke’s writings, he quotes Jesus.

⁸ “The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ⁹ I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it

⁹⁶ Rogers, 205.

⁹⁷ *Baker Commentary on the Bible*, 964.

⁹⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:18

is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

¹⁰ “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹ So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? ¹² And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own?”

– Luke 16:8-12 (NIV)

The Kingdom potential of a dying church is analogous to what Jesus calls “very little” wealth. Jesus inspires his followers, and therefore his church, to be shrewd in the building of the Kingdom through his local church, meaning the form is again less important than the function reaching and making disciples and growing the Kingdom.

In tandem, C.S. Lewis provides a clear perspective on the purpose of the church.

“May I come back to what I said before? This is the whole of Christianity. There is nothing else. It is so easy to get muddled about that. It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects—education, building, missions, holding services. [But] the Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose.”⁹⁹

If Lewis is correct, and the church exists for nothing else but to draw people to Jesus, then multi-site models and adoptive mergers should be considered equally as all church models that do the same.

Finally, in biblical terms, church mergers are often seen by proponents as another example of God doing a “new thing” as prophesied by Isaiah,¹⁰⁰ by “helping existing congregations to reach new levels of unity, maturity, and the fullness of Christ.”¹⁰¹ “New things” are often difficult to accept. Without direct experience, things that are new often struggle to be accepted by the masses. While church mergers are newer and the word “merger” is not found in

⁹⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1952) 199.

¹⁰⁰ Isaiah 43:19

¹⁰¹ Tomberlin and Bird, Kindle Location 564.

Scripture, the concept is seen throughout the biblical narrative. To this point, the entire drama of the New Testament can be considered the story of God bringing a diverse people unto himself, reflecting on earth what will be in eternity.

Many people encounter Christianity directly through a local church.¹⁰² As salt is meant to preserve and light is meant to illuminate, local churches are placed in local communities to grow disciples and point those outside of faith to the saving light of Jesus. Struggling churches need to be restored and revitalized to ensure communities continue to be served by local church bodies. The revitalization of dying churches is not only in keeping with biblical mandates, it displays a beautiful picture in the community of the restorative nature of Jesus.

Theoretical Foundation

The ongoing decline of churches across North America is well documented. RCC has successfully turned around one of these dying churches in their adoptive merger efforts with JBC. Their desire to continue growing the RCC influence is admirable. More admirable is their heart for helping declining and dying churches find new life. Every dead church represents lost opportunity, lost Kingdom resources, and a lamp placed over a potential community light.¹⁰³

Building a theoretical framework for adoptive mergers as revitalization solutions requires analyzing previous case studies, Scriptural principles, and current realities. While RCC has already adopted TTC in Alabama as a fifth campus, there remain options at their disposal.

¹⁰² Erickson, 1036.

¹⁰³ Analogous to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:14-16 (NIV) and extrapolated in the Theological Foundations section of this project.

Theoretical Options for an RCC Fairway Revitalization

Specifically, several options exist with RCC Fairway depending on their ultimate hope for their church and the Alabama community. 1) RCC could allow their fifth campus to continue meeting in their current form, hoping time will resolve the tensions. 2) RCC could train a turnaround pastor and support the Alabama church location as a church plant, disconnected from RCC. 3) RCC could discontinue Alabama operations, understanding the complications (distance from the Florida locations, unique community needs, etc.) make a turnaround effort unrealizable. Finally, 4) RCC could implement new strategies and methods more in line with the key learnings from their successful RCC Chesterfield adoptive merger.

Option One: RCC Fairway Continues Without Intervention

It is conceivable that time is the only necessity for a full revitalization of TTC. Being that RCC Fairway has only operated under the RCC umbrella for two years, it could be that time is on the side of RCC. As Croft and others have suggested, turnaround pastors typically require five years before church health becomes a partial reality,¹⁰⁴ and RCC has only been operating this campus location for two years.

Revitalizations require patience. In the case of RCC Fairway, time may be a theoretical solution, but a five-year turnaround is potentially five years of lost opportunity. In evaluating time as an option, a better question is: What is the opportunity cost in waiting?

Jesus commanded that we “let our light shine before others.”¹⁰⁵ Not in five years, but where possible, now. The extinguishing of a church light is counter to the church’s commission.

¹⁰⁴ Croft, Kindle Location 404.

¹⁰⁵ Matthew 5:16 (NIV)

The dimming of the same light is equally problematic, as both represent lost opportunity to “witnesses”¹⁰⁶ in our communities. However, there are times where God uses time for Kingdom benefit. The 400 years of silence prior to the birth of Jesus as one example. Yet these moments often are used in preparation.

In the case of RCC Fairway, time may be a viable option, but time may not be the best option.

Option Two: Replant RCC Fairway as a Separate Church Plant

Converting RCC Fairway into a separate church through planting is an option available to RCC. When discussing church revitalization, church planting proponents often suggest it is easier to give birth than to raise the dead.¹⁰⁷ As a first step, if RCC were to spin off this fifth campus to become an independent location, the first step would be to identify and train a revitalization, planting pastor.

As stated previously, identifying these individuals is not a simple task. This individual would need to be a visionary shepherd, have a high pain tolerance, have respect and passion for the church’s legacy, both as TTC and as a two-year campus location of RCC, be a resourceful generalist, have tactical patience, emotional awareness, and spousal perseverance.¹⁰⁸ This daunting list makes finding a pastor with the ability to replant difficult.

The lost opportunity cost of time remains an obstacle in this approach. Brian Croft has suggested it takes five years for a turnaround pastor to see fruit in ministry,¹⁰⁹ and Gary

¹⁰⁶ See Matthew 28:16 – 20 (NIV), Acts 1:7-9 (NIV).

¹⁰⁷ McIntosh, 169.

¹⁰⁸ From the North American Mission Board (NAMB), reviewed by Croft, Kindle Location 371.

¹⁰⁹ Croft, Kindle Location 404.

McIntosh pushed the timeline longer, proposing a seven- to twelve-year timeframe.¹¹⁰

With the financial constraints of a declining church, a five to twelve-year replanting cycle is often not viable. Moreover, the opportunity cost over this timeframe is high. The “Body of Christ”¹¹¹ has a role to play in every corner of the world, from now through twelve years and beyond. A timeline of this nature leaves too many people without the hope of the Gospel in their community.

Option Three: RCC Discontinues Operations at RCC Fairway

While this option seems to work against everything God is working for, if RCC Fairway is draining financial and emotional resources to the possible detriment of the other campus locations, this option could be considered biblical and sensical. RCC Fairway represents 125 in average Sunday attendance. The primary issue in question is simple: Is operating a fifth campus of 125 in average attendance detrimental to the collective mission, vision, and strategy of RCC’s other 2,000 in weekly attendance? This question is both financial and emotional.

Ironically, RCC Fairway financially outperforms some of their other locations. This achievement is most likely due to the higher household incomes in Fairway, Alabama. However, revenue is only one aspect of the evaluation. On the expense side of the ledger, the staffing and operational cost of RCC’s fifth campus need to be less than the revenue generated for it to avoid draining the church’s total funding. As RCC Fairway has limited staff, and most programming support is centralized, it does not create a financial burden worthy of dissolving the campus.

The emotional toll of a stagnant to declining church is another question, however. Had

¹¹⁰ McIntosh, 69.

¹¹¹ From Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

this been RCC's first foray into adoptive mergers, it would be easy to question the strategy two years into the process. With a previous, successful adoptive merger in place, for RCC, hope is not a strategy, but an experienced reality. They know adoptive mergers are viable alternatives to creating campus locations, as they have a proof of concept over time in RCC Chesterfield.

With this proof of concept and the lack of financial strain, option three is not a necessity.

Option Four: An RCC Fairway Intervention Strategy

Considering RCC has a proof-of-concept at its third campus, a likely scenario is a learning expedition that leads to rethinking the strategy that created RCC Fairway. This option would provide more immediate support for this fifth campus while providing the surrounding community a more immediate Gospel opportunity. Theoretically, this option would allow the economies of scale found in a multi-site church context to support a more rapid learning and improvement project. Concurrently, this option would open the leadership pipeline for hiring a campus pastor, not a senior pastor. This staffing option is important, as revitalization leaders are few and far between.¹¹² As a campus pastor, this person's charge is to lead and manage this church in a supportive, second-seat leadership role. Where a church planter, a replanter, or a revitalization pastor is required to provide point leadership for every aspect of a church, a campus pastor at RCC is given multi-site support for most aspects of church leadership.

With that in mind, a similar option would be for RCC to convert RCC Fairway to a less directly connected local church. This "network church" option would be similar to a campus, in that the church would receive some level of support, but as a network church, RCC Fairway would have more discretion over their ministry implementations. This approach would allow the

¹¹² Tomberline and Bird, Kindle Location 1106.

RCC approach to remain holistically intact, but give the local leadership of RCC Fairway more flexibility in executing ministry in the Fairway community's local context. Rather than RCC Fairway replicating the ministry and service playbook provided by RCC Marysville, RCC Fairway would have space to deviate as they see fit.

With these factors in mind, either of these options is theoretically the most biblical, expedient, and likely pathway to success for TTC's full revitalization.

A Theory Without Guarantees

Even with RCC's first adoptive merger analyzed and better understood compared to RCC Fairway, there is no guarantee that RCC Fairway will move past simple survival.

Several factors linked to RCC Fairway could prove as permanent impediments to success. The distance from this campus to the other RCC locations and community uniqueness could be too great an obstacle to overcome. Even so, it is distinctly possible that the principles that allowed for a successful first adoptive merger could be applied at RCC Fairway, even if the implementation of these principles looks different. If a unique implementation at this fifth campus is required, the multi-site church's economies of scale would still help support this church, allowing for full revitalization in time.

The factors surrounding RCC Fairway could be unique enough to eliminate complete success. While RCC's current hope is to expand its influence and help support the revitalization of the former TTC in Alabama, this approach may not be viable if factors outside their control overwhelm their efforts or if internal needs do not align with what is eventually needed for a complete revitalization of TTC.

The Power of Proximity

As suggested in Chapter One, “strategically opportunistic” best describes RCC’s current expansion strategy. This approach has an implied locational implication, but RCC may not have thoroughly evaluated these implications in accepting TTC’s request to become a campus location.

RCC’s successful adoptive merger to create their third campus, while strategically opportunistic, was initially powered by its proximity to their first two campus locations. Not only did several families create a core team by transitioning from these two campuses to RCC Chesterfield, the third location’s proximity to the other campuses also provided brand recognition in the community.

This is not the case with RCC’s adoptive merger of JBC. Fairway, Alabama, is roughly three hours from the nearest RCC campus location. Creating a core team from an existing campus and establishing brand endearment with RCC was impossible with this distance. This lack of proximity could be an overwhelming factor in the merger.

Specific Community Demographics

Outside of the Alabama community, the demographics of RCC’s campus locations are similar. The first four campus locations are all located in the central panhandle of Florida. These mostly rural communities are similar economically, socially, and racially. The Alabama community is uniquely different from the other RCC communities. Located on a bay of the Gulf of Mexico, this community boasts significantly higher household incomes and is far less rural. While not explicitly designed for a rural community, the RCC approach to preaching and ministry may not translate as easily to this more upscale, Alabama community.

Willingness to Accept RCC Campus Location Requirements

As a campus location of RCC, a church agrees to a relatively centralized approach to multi-site. Specifically, this means a campus receives broadcast messages, content and curriculum, and overall leadership direction from the central location. While local campuses have some opportunity to contextualize, being as most RCC campus locations are in virtually identical communities, contextualization is unnecessary.

That is not the case for the fifth campus location. It could be that the RCC approach, the preaching style, or any number of factors that do not create obstacles for the Florida locations are creating issues for the Alabama location. As the research progresses, this factor could become the primary problem for implementing new solutions.

Theoretical Summary

While much church revitalization research is available, few studies have focused explicitly on multi-site churches adopting dying churches as campus locations. As this research effort will compare a single church's successful adoptive merger of JBC and their subsequent failed adoption of TTC, it is safe to say no academic research or strategic models are available as a theoretical foundation.

However, Dirk Elliot's text *Vital Church, A New Church Start Approach that Joins Church Families Together*, may be the closest to a model of record. Elliot begins this work from the foundation of failed church mergers of the past, writing:

“Many church mergers in the last twenty-five years have not ended up as most churches anticipated or desired. The merged churches expected that joining as one church would make things easier and secured their future. Churches entered into mergers driven by financial pressures – they just couldn't continue on their own. It is difficult for a church

to come to that realization and to be willing to give up its autonomy. So, in order to survive, they merged by default.”¹¹³

Unlike RCC’s vision and merger hope, Elliot focuses on the potential successful merger of two churches to become one, separate, individual church.

Theoretically, with one successful church adoption merger completed, RCC has a repeatable model for other adoptive mergers. However, every opportunity is different, meaning the proximity to other campus locations, community demographics, willingness to accept video teaching, and willingness to embrace the RCC vision contribute to the uniqueness of individual campus success or failure. Without scientifically controlled variables, theoretical conclusions must be drawn and extrapolated to RCC’s re-consideration of their fifth campus and any future campus expansions.

¹¹³ Elliot, Kindle Location 75.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This project addressed River Community Church's (RCC) challenging adoptive merger of The Truth Church (TTC), a struggling church located in a gulf coast community of Alabama, following their previously successful adoptive merger of Journey Baptist Church (JBC). In each merger experience, RCC adopted a struggling church to become a campus location. RCC's first merger (RCC's third campus) was substantially more successful than its second (RCC's fifth campus).

Identifying the strategies and methods utilized in RCC's successful adoptive merger of JBC (now RCC Chesterfield) against the methods found in their less successful adoptive merger of TTC (now RCC Fairway) provided the primary research focus. Insights into the differences between these two adoptive merger experiences, a potential relaunch pathway for RCC Fairway, and a more predictable approach for future adoptive merger endeavors was the desired outcome of this effort.

Additionally, other multi-site churches considering adopting struggling churches through a merger as campus locations may benefit from this study. This version of revitalization provides a viable alternative to other, more typical revitalization methods, including senior pastor replacements, church planting, and survival-based mergers for the dying church.

With two adoptive mergers of varying success, the intent of this research effort was a comparative analysis. Through action research, an investigation into the success at RCC Chesterfield compared to the decline at RCC Fairway was conducted to illuminate similarities and, more importantly, differences in the adoptive mergers. From this comparative analysis, the discovered thematic results highlighted the difference in RCC's executions. This intervention

design should present a pathway for RCC to replicate the successful merger processes found at the third campus location in future efforts.

While specific details remained undiscovered before the action research, the implemented comparative analysis illuminated similarities and differences in how RCC hired, trained, and placed the Lead Pastor for the new campus, how RCC hired, trained, and placed supporting staff, how attendance, generosity, and volunteerism changed in each location through the mergers, how RCC navigated each merger transition, and how other factors influenced the success of the first adoptive merger over the failed attempt of the second. These other factors might include elements noted in Chapter Two, such as proximity to other RCC campus locations, community demographics, willingness to accept video teaching, and willingness to embrace the RCC vision fully. Some of these factors are changeable, while others are stagnant, such as proximity or community demographics.

The quantitative and qualitative research identified some similarities and many distinct differences in RCC's adoptive mergers of JBC and TTC. Chapter Four presents these categorized themes.

Two distinct sections divide Chapter Three. The first section (Intervention Design) highlights how the research study was structured, focusing upon research design, nature and source of data, target populations and sample sizes, and analysis approach. The second section (Implementation of Intervention Design) outlines explicitly how the research was conducted, including data gathering, study participants, the instruments used in the study, and quantitative and qualitative analysis methods.

Note: Pseudonyms represent all church names, campus names, and individual participants throughout this project.

Intervention Design

The intervention design began by identifying the specific questions to be addressed in the research effort.¹¹⁴ As this research effort required a comparative analysis, the following questions required answers:

1. What similarities exist in the adoptive mergers that formed RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway?
2. What differences exist in the adoptive mergers that formed RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway?
3. What research methods best identify, codify, and discover the similarities and, more importantly, differences?

Intended Purpose and Objectives of the Intervention Design

The research design required both a quantitative and qualitative approach. Both are necessary for a comprehensible intervention plan that allows RCC to replicate the success of RCC Chesterfield to RCC Fairway and future adoptive mergers. If the problem is a disappointing adoptive merger as a campus location following a successful merger, the intended intervention plan prescribes to the senior pastor of RCC what is different, missing, and necessary to attempt a second revitalization in the less successful location. The results should also provide RCC a strategic adoptive merger blueprint for future opportunities.

¹¹⁴ Jack Rothman and Edwin Thomas, *Intervention Research: Design and Development for Human Service* (New York, NY: Haworth Press, 2013), 1-10.

Philosophical Position of the Intervention Design

The philosophical approach of the research methodology is significant and was chosen appropriately.¹¹⁵ To this point, a philosophical overview of the selected methodology must be provided. According to Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis, and Adrian Thornhill in *Research Methods for Business Students*, four popular data collection methods exist: Pragmatism, Positivism, Realism, and Interpretivism.¹¹⁶ The philosophical stance determines the necessary method of data collection.

Taken in reverse order, Interpretivism is a qualitative approach focused upon small samples and in-depth, open-ended questions. Realism can be either qualitative or quantitative, depending on the effort and the subject matter in question. Positivism is a highly structured approach, using large samples of primarily quantitative research. Finally, Pragmatism is a philosophical approach of mixed methods.¹¹⁷

For the research problem in question, a Pragmatism approach was most appropriate. The combination of quantitative data analysis for empirical success evidence is needed but alone is not sufficient to understand the adoptive merger differences without a qualitative parallel effort.

Proposed Tasks to be Executed During the Intervention Design

Before beginning this research endeavor, the researcher planned to seek complete IRB approval signed consent forms from the RCC senior pastor. With this preliminary step completed, the project would continue in two phases.

¹¹⁵ Kerry Howell, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Methodology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2013), 59.

¹¹⁶ Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis, and Adrian Thornhill, *Research Methods for Business Students*, 6th ed. (New York, NY: Pearson Education, 2012), 60-66.

¹¹⁷ Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 60-66.

Two primary research elements were needed during the action research and following intervention to fulfill this project's purpose and objective: Quantitative Analysis and Qualitative Analysis. Descriptions of each research element are below.

Quantitative Analysis

A quantitative analysis was necessary to provide empirical evidence of the discrepancy between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway to substantiate the effort. The leadership of RCC claimed the first adoptive merger was more successful than the second. If this is accurate, an empirical data analysis of RCC Chesterfield against RCC Fairway either validates or invalidates this assumption.

To verify the success levels within the quantitative portion of the effort, the researcher planned to request campus location data, metrics, and dashboards from the senior pastor at RCC. This data was to be gathered, tabulated, and compared. This information was necessary to benchmark how each church functioned during the merger transition and 18-months following the merger. As this data was analyzed, unique metric-related differences between the two RCC campus locations were to be noted.

The researcher requested attraction and engagement metrics for this phase of the research. Using the third campus' data as a benchmark, this quantitative approach served as a proxy for success, as RCC desired to more closely mimic the RCC Chesterfield experience by reaching more people in the Fairway community (attraction) and growing disciples within this campus location (engagement).

For this portion of the study, the researcher requested the following metrics:

Attraction and Conversion

- Average weekly attendance of adults, children, and students.
- Average first-time guests per Sunday.
- Average salvations per Sunday.
- Average baptisms per Sunday.

Engagement and Participation

- Average giving per Sunday.
- Average giving per attendee per Sunday.
- The number of adults in long-term community groups.
- The number of individuals serving.

Objective measurement and data comparisons are required to identify similarities and differences.

Qualitative Analysis

As the objective was to understand further and more closely mimic RCC's successful adoptive merger of JBC against their adoptive merger of TTC, the qualitative research portion of the study needed to identify the similarities and differences between the adoptive mergers that created the third and fifth campus locations of RCC for a complete comparative. Comparative data analysis painted a picture, but personal interviews and focus group conversations told the story.

To build an appropriate candidate list, the researcher needed to solicit a list of paid staff and highly involved lay staff from RCC's senior pastor. Each person on this candidate list would ideally have direct experience with either or both adoptive mergers. Ideally, interview candidates

would come from one of three primary sources: Central staff members at RCC, Campus staff members from either RCC Chesterfield or RCC Fairway, or highly involved lay staff from either RCC Chesterfield or RCC Fairway. With the candidate list in hand, the researcher planned to email each potential interviewee a project summary, a recruitment letter, a consent form, and a link to selected a virtual interview time.

The researcher slotted interview options into sixty-minute segments over three weeks to provide adequate time for each conversation. The initial plan was to create twenty such slots to accommodate the interviews. These interview slots were offered on a first-come-first-serve basis to the candidate pool via the researcher's solicitation email. As a candidate selected a time segment, the researcher planned to send additional details, including the interview questions for the interviewee to consider and a Zoom interview link for the virtual meeting. The researcher planned to record each Zoom interview for future transcription and analysis.

The researcher estimated that each interview would last 30 – 45 minutes unless the conversation warranted additional time. If that need arose, the researcher planned to request additional time at the moment or, if the interviewee did not have additional time, the researcher planned to request the interviewee select a future open interview time slot to continue the conversation.

Upon completion of the interview portion of the research, the researcher hoped to engage a smaller group of RCC staff from the interview candidate pool for a focus group conversation. The researcher planned to base the selection of focus group participants upon their overall knowledge of RCC and their adoptive merger experiences. The researcher planned for this to be a more extended conversation of up to 90 minutes.

For all interviews and the single focus group, the researcher would generate questions as

a conversation guide. Knowing each interviewee's adoptive merger experience within RCC would be unique, the open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed the conversation to remain directed, yet fluid.

After the focus group and interviews concluded, the researcher planned to output transcripts for coding and evaluation, looking for themes of differentiation. These themes would form the bulk of Chapter Four (Results).

Implementation of Intervention Design

As the project began, the initial, driving questions expanded to ensure a full and complete research effort was employed:

1. Through quantitative analysis, does there appear to be any empirical substantiation between the success of RCC Chesterfield and the less successful RCC Fairway?
2. Are there any quantitative similarities between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway? Are there noteworthy empirical differences between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway?
3. Where empirical differences demonstrate more success at RCC Chesterfield than RCC Fairway, and what antidotal reasons are uncovered through qualitative research?
4. What key themes prevailed from the focus group and interview analysis?

Due to this research effort's nature, quantitative and qualitative research served as a prerequisite for the intervention implementation. This section outlines how the researcher executed the methodology in light of the original design.

Timeline and Tasks Executed During the Intervention Design

The researcher executed a series of tasks during the action research process leading to the intervention plan.

Initial IRB Approval and Permissions

As the researcher conceived this project, the first step was engaging the leadership of RCC to present the project concept and evaluate their interest. This conversation concluded with a signed permission letter from the senior pastor (see Appendix B). Following permission from the senior pastor, the researcher submitted an IRB application and obtained IRB approval before any research began. (see IRB Approval after Appendices)

Quantitative Data Gathering

The first step in this comparative research analysis required the procurement of metric data for RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway. Upon request, the senior pastor of RCC provided access via Google Sheets for all relevant data. These Google Sheets allowed the researcher full access to all attendance and engagement dashboard data for the campus locations in question. Once available, the research conducted a comparative analysis to quantitatively validate the difference in success at RCC Chesterfield against RCC Fairway. The researcher completed this analysis by exporting the data from Google Sheets into a private Microsoft Excel document only accessible to the researcher, stored on a password-protected laptop.

The RCC Chesterfield data created the benchmark for comparison. With is data, the researcher performed a quantitative analysis comparing attraction metrics and engagement metrics. As suggested in the Intervention Design, RCC provided the following metrics for

evaluation:

Attraction and Conversion metrics:

- Average weekly attendance of adults, children, and students.
- Average first-time guests per Sunday.
- Average salvations per Sunday.
- Average baptisms per Sunday.

Engagement and Participation metrics:

- Average giving per Sunday.
- Average giving per attendee per Sunday.
- The number of adults in long-term community groups.
- The number of individuals serving.

These campus locations opened roughly two years apart (RCC Chesterfield in 2016 and RCC Fairway in 2018). To ensure the analysis was appropriately comparable, the researcher analyzed the data from each adopted church's launch as an RCC campus location through 18 months for trends. Percentage change in each relevant data category was the barometer of choice for this research, as it illuminates both positive and negative trends by comparisons. The results of this quantitative research substantiated the presumed chasm of success between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway. This discovery necessitated the next phase of the research focus upon uncovering any specific themes of differentiation.

Chapter Four presents the completed quantitative results.

Qualitative Interviews and Focus Group

Upon completing the data analysis, interviews and a focus group session were essential to

expand the understanding of the data findings. This process began with RCC's senior pastor providing a list of staff and lay staff for interviews. This list included 18 individuals with direct experience with one or both adoptive mergers, a number within the allowed 20 by IRB.

The provided list of potential interviewees and focus group participants covered both adoptive mergers. The list is as follows:

1. Potential Interviewee 1: Senior pastor
2. Potential Interviewee 2: Executive staff member
3. Potential Interviewee 3: Executive staff member
4. Potential Interviewee 4: RCC Chesterfield staff member
5. Potential Interviewee 5: RCC Chesterfield staff member
6. Potential Interviewee 6: RCC Fairway staff member
7. Potential Interviewee 7: RCC Chesterfield lay staff member
8. Potential Interviewee 8: RCC Chesterfield lay staff member
9. Potential Interviewee 9: RCC Chesterfield lay staff member
10. Potential Interviewee 10: RCC Chesterfield lay staff member
11. Potential Interviewee 11: RCC Chesterfield lay staff member
12. Potential Interviewee 12: RCC Chesterfield lay staff member
13. Potential Interviewee 13: RCC Fairway lay staff member
14. Potential Interviewee 14: RCC Fairway lay staff member
15. Potential Interviewee 15: RCC Fairway lay staff member
16. Potential Interviewee 16: RCC Fairway lay staff member
17. Potential Interviewee 17: RCC Marysville staff member
18. Potential Interviewee 18: RCC Blounts staff member

The lay staff members were indispensable to this research effort. First, only using paid RCC staff would limit the overall list to a potentially insignificant sample size, limiting the information obtained and its usefulness. In tandem, this limitation could significantly alter the researcher's ability to identify the realities of differentiation. Secondly, and of equal importance, many of these lay staff members were a part of a struggling church adopted by RCC, giving them deep insights into the process, conversation, and transition.

After obtaining this candidate list, the researcher sent a Recruitment Letter (see Appendix C) via email to each potential participant along with the IRB approved Consent Form (see Appendix D). This email requested each potential interviewee review the project, sign and return the consent form electronically, and schedule an interview session. Of the 18 individual interview requests, 14 were scheduled with signed and returned consent forms. From the candidate pool, the researcher invited three of the four individuals not participating in personal interviews to join the focus group conversation. Only one individual from the candidate pool was not included in the research study.

The researcher conducted the interviews during the weeks of June 14, 2020 – July 5, 2020. While the researcher originally intended in-person interviews, travel limitations, the interviewees' availability, and the impact of COVID-19 required the researcher to conduct all interviews via Zoom Video Conferencing. This video platform was more than serviceable as a replacement, as it allowed for both video and audio utilization during each interview and a full recording was available to the researcher after each conversation. Utilizing Zoom Video Conferencing as a replacement for in-person interviews did not hamper the conversations or intended purpose of the qualitative research.

Each interview began with a quick project review and a reminder of what was signed in

the Consent Form. The researcher then proceeded to record the interview with permission from the interviewee. First, each interviewee provided a brief history of their time with RCC and their exposure to one of both adoptive mergers. The lay staff's backgrounds were of particular interest due to their experiences with the struggling church prior- and post-merger. This inside perspective proved insightful to the research, as the "being adopted" experience provided a perspective not available by RCC staff.

The proposed time for each interview was 30 – 45 minutes, which proved sufficient in most cases. In three instances, the interview ran long, and the researcher requested an additional 15 minutes, which was granted and added to the initial time.

Upon concluding each interview, the researcher thanked the interviewee for their time and ceased the recording. The researcher saved each recording on a personal, password-protected laptop.

After completing the individual interviews, the researcher selected candidates from the original interview pool and administered a focus group conversation. The process of this interview was identical to each individual interview, using Zoom Video Conferencing to conduct and record the conversation and utilizing the focus group questions as a fluid discussion guide. Unlike the interviews, the focus group conversation lasted just over 90 minutes with permission from the participants. Holding this conversation last was critical to the research effort, as the focus group provided both new insights and clear confirmation of the themes already presented during the individual interviews.

Appendix E shows the baseline questions for the focus group and individual interviews. Each interview began with these questions in mind, but as the individual's experience and answers warranted, the interview conversation followed a fluid path of discovery. This fluid

pathway was especially true of the lay staff interviews, as their experiences with only one RCC campus location negated a portion of the proposed questions.

For accuracy, the focus group and interviews were recorded via Zoom Video Conferencing and transcribed through Happy Scribe (<https://www.happyscribe.com>). The researcher codified all transcripts through NVivo. The NVivo software client coding analysis provided the resulting themes presented in Chapter Four.

The focus group and each individual interview recordings and the ensuing file were stored on a password-protected laptop only accessible by the researcher. The transcriptions conducted in Happy Scribe were done through the researcher's private account and are only accessible by the researcher. The resulting transcriptions were output in Microsoft Word format and stored on a password-protected laptop only accessible to the researcher. The same is true of the NVivo analysis.

Finally, during the process, each interviewee was given a pseudonym to protect their privacy.

Additional Interview and Focus Group Information

While the empirical data analysis proved a success discrepancy between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway, the focus group and individual interviews told the full story behind the quantitative details.

Initially, the interviews contained nearly identical, open-ended questions to extract opinions and information about the similarities and differences between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway. As the interviews began, it became evident that each participant's background with RCC and campus creation experience through adoptive merger would necessitate a paring

down of the questions for more focus. Of the 14 interviewees, only two people had direct exposure to both mergers, leaving twelve interviews focused only on one of the two mergers. These twelve divided as follows: Seven for RCC Chesterfield and Five for RCC Fairway. This shift in approach was beneficial, as the interviewees with only one adoptive merger exposure could expound on their experience with more specific details without the complication of the other merger experience.

The researcher took notes in a personal journal during the focus group and interviews and transferred the entries to Evernote (a note-taking and note storage application) on the researcher's password-protected laptop. These notes were not replacements for the transcript codification but served as prompts and reminders while compiling the results.

The Credibility of the Methodology

The credibility of the research methods relies on the validity of the research design and implementation. Similarly, the methods and instruments applied in the research must measure what they are intended to measure for the effort to be valid.¹¹⁸ In the case of this research endeavor, the pragmatic philosophy of combining quantitative research to empirically prove a gap in success between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway, followed by a qualitative approach of personal interviews and a final focus group sufficiently illuminated not just a different experience, but key themes of differentiation. The clarity of issues and the consistent confirmation of problematic themes grants credibility to the research effort.

A version of data triangulation was also employed to validate the research findings

¹¹⁸ Matthias Baumgarten, *Paradigm Wars - Validity and Reliability in Qualitative Research* (Munich, Germany: GRIN Verlag, 2012).

further. As linking data from different sources provides for data triangulation,¹¹⁹ the quantitative data empirically proved a gap in success, the 14 individual interview conversations allowed gave an individual perspective on the gap in success, and the final focus group served not only to provide additional, qualitative data, but as a validating source for the data analysis and the individual interviews.

The primary goal was to ensure that the research results were credible, reliable, and consistent. The empirical data was consistent and clear. The alignment and consistency in each interview and final focus group, combined with some of the findings presented in the theoretical section specific to church mergers, further validates the research findings.

Potential Limitations of the Chosen Methodology

While the credibility of the methodology and validity of the findings is evident, it is not without demerits. First, by nature, this research study is limited to one church with two juxtaposed adoptive merger experiences. The data comparison proves a gap in success, but the antidotal interview data is only antidotal. The consistency of thematic issues presented in the interviews and focus groups appear to validate the results presented in Chapter Four. However, a sample size of two adoptive mergers is not statistically significant enough to draw full proof conclusions for all future RCC mergers or any other multi-site church endeavors.

Second, most of the findings were generated through the researcher's analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts. As stated previously, the use of NVivo software aided in the codification of the transcripts, allowing for themes to more naturally present, but as is true for

¹¹⁹ Mohammad Karim, *Analyzing the Role of Triangulation in Research* (Munich, Germany: GRIN Verlag, 2013).

all human evaluation, personal bias or presuppositions could taint the findings to some extent. To protect against this internal bias, the researcher kept a Reflective Journal through the interviews.

As part of the process, the researcher compared the final themes discovered through codification to the concepts initially recorded in the journal. The researcher's familiarity with RCC provided some initial and potential points of comparative differentiation, but the final codification of the transcripts accentuated deeper and more insightful themes than initially assumed. The focus group conversation further moved the study past any initial bias or presupposition held by the researcher.

Third, a lack of research on multi-site churches adopting through merger struggling churches does not allow for the findings within this research to be overtly validated by previous research on the topic.

Summary of Methodology

The primary research purpose was to identify the methods utilized in RCC's successful adoptive merger of Journey Baptist Church (now RCC Chesterfield) against the methods found in their less successful adoptive merger of The Truth Church (now RCC Fairway). The intended results of this research were to provide the leadership of RCC a potential relaunch pathway for RCC Fairway and a best practices approach for future adoptive merger endeavors.

While the methodological implementation was adjusted slightly, the research achieved the desired outcome. The quantitative data provided a clear empirical differentiation between the adoptive merger experiences of RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway. The qualitative focus group and individual interviews provided extensive thematic differentiation elements in the approach, transition, and implementation of the new campuses.

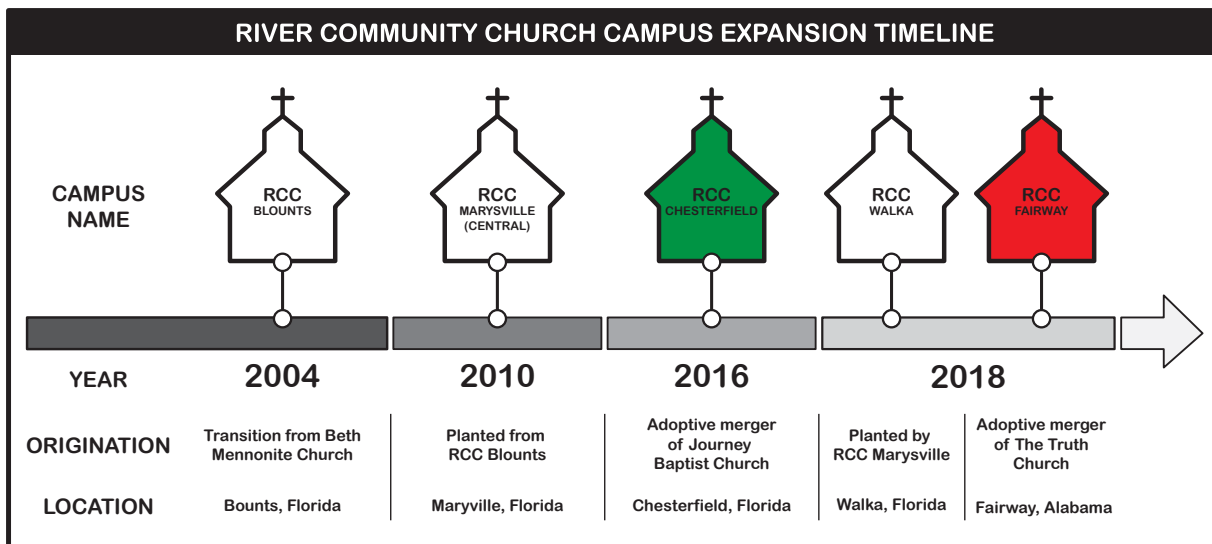
While several key issues were presumed as potential obstacles to the success of RCC Fairway (proximity to other RCC locations, community demographics, willingness to accept video teaching, and willingness to embrace the RCC vision), the focus group and interviews ultimately provided clarity around these theoretical issues by consistently validating and confirming the core issues.

Chapter 4

Results

River Community Church (RCC) is a multi-site church with five campus locations. RCC's third campus originated in 2016 through an adoptive merger of Journey Baptist Church (JBC), a struggling church in Chesterfield, Florida. Analogously, in 2018, RCC adopted through merger another struggling church in Fairway, Alabama, to become their fifth campus location. Unlike RCC's first adoptive merger experience, the adoption of The Truth Church (TTC) has been far more challenging.

Figure 4.1: RCC Campus Expansion Timeline



Uncovering the challenges RCC experienced in adopting TTC as their fifth campus location and providing a more successful pathway for future RCC adoptive mergers is the focus of this research effort. Additionally, these results may prove helpful for other churches in need of revitalization by providing an alternative to other, more typical revitalization methods, including senior pastor replacements, church planting, and survival-based mergers, while directing healthy, multi-site churches to consider adoptive mergers as an expansion strategy.

The quantitative and qualitative research approach accentuated some similarities and

many distinct differences in the two adoptive merger efforts at RCC. Two distinct sections divide this chapter. The first section (Quantitative Results) highlights the empirical differences between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway for the 18 months following each campus opening. While necessary to baseline the success gap, this quantitative section represents actual people and legitimate ministry opportunities. The second section (Qualitative Results) unveils the nature of RCC's second adoptive merger failure by presenting three thematic differences discovered through the focus group and individual interviews.

This research and subsequent results are essential to both churches and people in and beyond RCC. While this chapter summarizes the results, behind the numbers and analysis are real individual lives representing marriages, relationships, children, careers, choices, and, most importantly, a potential relationship with Jesus. The strategic nature of fundamental church revitalization matters because people matter. Declining and dying churches work directly against the corporate, collective, and eternal mission of God's local church. A revitalized church represents a resurrected congregation who can once again reach their community in obedience to the Great Commission.¹²⁰

Quantitative Results

The qualitative results create a thematic story emphasizing the problems experienced in the formation of RCC Fairway. Concurrently, the data, dashboard, and metric analysis comparison of RCC Chesterfield to RCC Fairway defines the empirical gap of success between these adoptive merger experiences. Rather than assuming a disparity of success, this empirical evaluation plays a vital role in substantiating the assumptions. While the analysis is factual, each

¹²⁰ Matthew 28:16-20

declining metric represents a person lost to RCC and possibly to faith. Beyond the comparison, these numbers matter because people matter.

Upon request, the senior pastor of RCC provided access via Google Sheets to all relevant data to evaluate the empirical gaps. These Google Sheets allowed the researcher full access to all attendance and engagement dashboard data for the campus locations in question. Once available, the researcher conducted a comparative analysis to validate the difference in success for RCC Chesterfield against RCC Fairway quantitatively.

Two sections separate the quantitative data: 1. Attraction and Conversion, and 2. Engagement and Participation. The Attraction and Conversion data assess weekly attendance, first-time guests, salvations, and baptisms. Engagement and Participation metrics measure giving, small group participation, and volunteering. Again, decreasing or lagging comparative metrics at RCC Fairway indicates lost opportunities to reach and grow people in the Fairway community.

These campus locations opened roughly two years apart (RCC Chesterfield in 2016 and RCC Fairway in 2018). Data comparing the adopted church's launch as an RCC campus location through 18 months ensured the analysis was appropriately comparable. Percentage change (where appropriate) in each relevant data category is the barometer of choice for this research, as it illuminates both positive and negative trends and comparisons. Where appropriate, the table presents total change. Data for JBC and TTC prior to the adoptive merger and campus launch was not available. Please note: Where people are compared or counted in the analysis, the researcher rounded the data.

Attraction and Conversion Metric Analysis

Weekly attendance and first-time guests are not necessarily a full measure of success, but these metrics do provide insight into a congregation's health and viability. Salvations and baptisms are, however, a measure of Great Commission¹²¹ success, as they represent the presence of unchurched people, Gospel conversions, and public steps of faith. With this in mind, growing attendance and new guests provide more opportunities for gospel-centered life change.

Average Weekly Adult Attendance Comparison:

As is evident in Table 4.1, the growth at RCC Chesterfield in the 18 months following their opening is relatively small (an additional six average weekly adults), but still positive as compared to the significant decline experienced at RCC Fairway in the 18 months post-merger (a reduction of 16 average adults attending per week).

Table 4.1: Average Weekly Adult Attendance Comparison

| Campus Location | Average Weekly Adult Attendance Months 1 - 12 | Average Weekly Adult Attendance Months 13 - 18 | Actual Change | Percent Change |
|------------------------|--|---|----------------------|-----------------------|
| RCC Chesterfield | 147 | 153 | + 6 | + 4.0% |
| RCC Fairway | 94 | 78 | - 16 | - 17.0% |

Source: RCC Metrics and Dashboards

Average Weekly Student (Grades 6 – 12) Attendance Comparison:

At RCC Chesterfield, student ministry launched in its second year, not allowing for a percent change comparison. Nevertheless, even without a first-year comparison, this location's

¹²¹ Matthew 28:16-20

student ministry size is nearly triple that of the fifth campus location. At RCC Fairway, an eight-student decline is significant, especially considering this church was once known for its thriving student ministry.

Table 4.2: Average Weekly Student Attendance Comparison

| Campus Location | Average Weekly Student Attendance Months 1 - 12 | Average Weekly Student Attendance Months 13 - 18 | Actual Change | Percent Change |
|------------------|---|--|---------------|----------------|
| RCC Chesterfield | 0 | 29 | + 29 | N/A |
| RCC Fairway | 19 | 11 | - 8 | - 42.1% |

Source: RCC Metrics and Dashboards

Average Weekly Children (6-Weeks-Old – Grade 5) Attendance Comparison:

As Table 4.3 shows, for the first time, a positive growth trend is visible at RCC Fairway, if only one child. This change is most likely representative of the focus RCC places on children’s ministry. By comparison, RCC Chesterfield grew by 14.8%, or seven children, representing a more successful trend. This result continues to expose the gap in attendance success.

Table 4.3: Average Weekly Children Attendance Comparison

| Campus Location | Average Weekly Children Attendance Months 1 - 12 | Average Weekly Children Attendance Months 13 - 18 | Actual Change | Percent Change |
|------------------|--|---|---------------|----------------|
| RCC Chesterfield | 47 | 54 | + 7 | + 14.8% |
| RCC Fairway | 20 | 21 | + 1 | + 0.5% |

Source: RCC Metrics and Dashboards

Total Yearly Salvations Comparison:

RCC’s vision is to create churches unchurched people love to attend, a vision with

aspirations of inspiring people outside of Christianity to place their faith in Jesus as their Savior. Conversion is a defining metric of success for a reaching-oriented church like RCC. As RCC Chesterfield grew numerically, their Gospel engagement grew even more, as shown in Table 4.4. In RCC Chesterfield’s second year, an additional 12 people placed their faith in Jesus. At RCC Fairway, no known salvations were recorded in the 18 months following the adoptive merger.

Table 4.4: Total Annual Salvations Recorded

| Campus Location | Total Salvations Months 1 - 12 | Total Salvations Months 13 - 18 | Actual Change | Percent Change |
|------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| RCC Chesterfield | 3 | 15 | + 12 | + 400% |
| RCC Fairway | 0 | 0 | 0 | N/A |

Source: RCC Metrics and Dashboards

Total Yearly Baptisms Comparison:

Without conversions by salvation at RCC Fairway, a lack of baptisms is not surprising, as baptism at RCC represents a public step of faith. At RCC Chesterfield, the increased attendance and increasing conversions by faith are leading to public professions of faith through baptism, as is seen in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5: Total Annual Baptisms Recorded

| Campus Location | Total Baptisms Months 1 - 12 | Total Baptisms Months 13 - 18 | Actual Change | Percent Change |
|------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| RCC Chesterfield | 4 | 8 | + 4 | + 200% |
| RCC Fairway | 0 | 0 | 0 | N/A |

Source: RCC Metrics and Dashboards

Attraction and Conversion Metric Summary

As is evident in every comparable metric, RCC Chesterfield numerically outpaces RCC

Fairway. The only increasing category for RCC Fairway is with children, with a one-child average increase over 18 months. As is the case with all other metrics, this increase trails RCC Chesterfield by a wide margin. These findings validate the assumption of greater success at RCC Chesterfield over RCC Fairway in attraction and conversion. More personally, these findings represent a potentially lost church revitalization opportunity in the Fairway, Alabama community.

Engagement and Participation Metric Analysis

Where the attraction and conversion metrics analyze weekly attendance and in-service decisions, the engagement and participation metrics evaluate RCC attendees' involvement. While engagement and participation are not directly equivalent to discipleship, contributing to a local church's mission is fruitful evidence of a disciple. A statistical engagement gap between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway reveals the chasm of success.

Comparison of Generosity:

Unlike the attraction and conversion metrics, positive financial growth is visible at RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway (see Table 4.6, Table 4.7, and Table 4.8). However, as is seen in the other metrics, the gap of success is still broad.

The giving analysis is partially incomplete without a community income assessment, however. According to city-data.com, the median annual household income for the community surrounding RCC Chesterfield is \$29,381.00.¹²² By comparison, the median annual household

¹²² Data available at <http://www.city-data.com/city/Chesterfieldley-Florida.html>

income for the RCC Fairway community is \$69,569.00.¹²³ That difference represents a 136%, or \$40,188.00, gap. When taking the median household income discrepancy into account, the generosity success seen at RCC Chesterfield against RCC Fairway is more pronounced.

The positive generosity growth at RCC Fairway is noteworthy. The hope the congregational remnant has in the future of RCC Fairway is the most likely culprit of this data point.

Table 4.6: Average Annual Giving per Adult Attendee

| Campus Location | Total Giving per Adult Attendee Months 1 - 12 | Total Giving per Adult Attendee Months 13 - 18 | Percent Change |
|------------------|---|--|----------------|
| RCC Chesterfield | \$441.90 | \$1,351.83 | + 206% |
| RCC Fairway | \$1,516.51 | \$3,526.87 | + 132.5% |

Source: RCC Metrics and Dashboards

Table 4.7: Average Weekly Giving per Adult Attendee

| Campus Location | Average Weekly Giving per Adult Attendee Months 1 - 12 | Average Weekly Giving per Adult Attendee Months 13 - 18 | Percent Change |
|------------------|--|---|----------------|
| RCC Chesterfield | \$19.21 | \$26.00 | + 35.3% |
| RCC Fairway | \$56.17 | \$67.82 | + 20.8% |

Source: RCC Metrics and Dashboards

Table 4.8: Total Annual Giving

| Campus Location | Total Annual Giving Months 1 - 12 | Total Annual Giving Months 13 - 18 | Percent Change |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|
| RCC Chesterfield | \$87,501.00 | \$274,604.00 | + 213.8% |
| RCC Fairway | \$172,916.00 | \$342,743.00 | + 98.2% |

Source: RCC Metrics and Dashboards

¹²³ Data available at <https://www.city-data.com/city/Fairhope-Alabama.html>

Comparison of Church Volunteerism:

Similar to the attraction and conversion metrics, volunteerism is growing at RCC Chesterfield and declining at RCC Fairway (see Table 4.9). This is important, as volunteering directly connects to missional engagement and experience creation for guests and attendees alike.

Table 4.9: Average Weekly Volunteer Participation

| Campus Location | Average Weekly Volunteers Months 1 - 12 | Average Weekly Volunteers Months 13 - 18 | Actual Change | Percent Change |
|------------------|---|--|---------------|----------------|
| RCC Chesterfield | 43 | 48 | + 5 | + 11.6% |
| RCC Fairway | 27 | 25 | - 2 | - 10.0% |

Source: RCC Metrics and Dashboards

Comparison of Small Group Involvement:

Per Table 4.10, RCC Chesterfield shows positive growth in group participation. As TTC did not offer small groups before the adoptive merger, and with a limited transition timeline from TTC to RCC Fairway, groups were not launched in the first year of the campus.

The percentage of people participating in small groups as compared to average adult attendance is empirically significant. In year two at RCC Chesterfield, 34% of their weekly adults participated in a small group. At RCC Fairway, that percentage was 61.5%. This larger percentage could indicate more missional engagement, but as the other metrics tend to show (I.E., salvations and baptisms), it is more likely this metric indicates a church struggling to reach the unchurched community. That is important, as RCC's vision is to create churches unchurched people love to attend.

Table 4.10: Average Weekly Small Group Participation

| Campus Location | Average Weekly Group Participation Months 1 - 12 | Average Weekly Group Participation Months 13 - 18 | Actual Change | Percent Change |
|------------------------|---|--|----------------------|-----------------------|
| RCC Chesterfield | 46 | 52 | +6 | + 13.0% |
| RCC Fairway | 0 | 48 | + 48 | N/A |

Source: RCC Metrics and Dashboards

Engagement and Participation Metric Summary

As is true of the attraction and conversion metric analysis, RCC Chesterfield has been more successful in growing overall missional engagement compared to RCC Fairway. The giving at RCC Fairway is trending positively, yet considering the community socioeconomic environment, this trend is still problematic. Equally unsettling is the volunteerism decline at RCC Fairway as compared to RCC Chesterfield. Finally, a year-over-year comparison of small group participation is not available for RCC Fairway, as this location did not offer small groups in the initial year of launch. If this category falls in line with other metrics, however, a decline in groups participation is to be expected without intervention.

Quantitative Results Summary

The purpose of the quantitative analysis was to validate the success gap between RCC’s successful adoptive merger of JBC in 2016 against the less successful adoptive merger of TTC in 2018. In nearly every statistical category, RCC Chesterfield is more successful than RCC Fairway. In the few instances where RCC Fairway has a positive trend, the trend at RCC Chesterfield is even more significant. The overall empirical evidence suggests an apparent success chasm between the two campus locations. The quantitative gap warrants the strategic and

methodical effort to identify any implementation differences for potential improvements at RCC Fairway and future adoptive merger opportunities.

Without intervention, the declining attendance of RCC Fairway, as displayed in Table 4.1, will likely lead to this campus location's death. Empirically, the analysis shows a church in crisis. The qualitative evaluation helps us understand why.

Qualitative Results

With quantitative data representing RCC Fairway's struggle in comparison to RCC's initial adoptive merger, the qualitative research portion of this research effort began in hopes of identifying a detailed account for the gap in success. This process consisted of 14 personal interviews and a final focus group.

Interviewee Profiles

The individuals participating in the interview portion of the research effort represent a diverse cross-section of adoptive merger experiences within RCC. The below profiles are presented by campus affiliation.

Please Note: Pseudonyms represent all church names, campus names, and individual participants throughout this project.

RCC Marysville Central Team Interviewees

Interview 4, Kaden: Outside of Paul Johnson, Kaden has the most time invested at RCC. Kaden has been on staff at RCC for 15 years, but as a child, Kaden attended Beth Mennonite Church, the precursor to RCC. In his 15 years of staff service, Kaden has worked in many roles.

He currently serves on the central campus team as the Associate Pastor over Adult Ministries. As the senior pastor and point decision-maker, Paul provides a depth of insight, but Kaden's extensive involvement with RCC while serving as an advisor to Paul gives him a different perspective and awareness.

Interview 6, Janice: Like Kaden, Janice has a long, rich history with RCC. Her grandfather was a founding member at Beth Mennonite Church. Janice began attending the original RCC campus location in 2008 and transitioned to the RCC staff in 2011 as a systems designer. She currently serves as the campus administrator at RCC's Central Campus. Janice has strong opinions matched with a keen insight on both adoptive mergers.

RCC Chesterfield Interviewees

Interview 1, Luke: Luke, an original member and attendee of JBC, currently serves as a lay staff in guest services, leading a parking team at RCC Chesterfield. Luke's background with JBC, the merger conversation, and his time serving at RCC Chesterfield gives him an in-depth perspective on the transition.

Interview 3, Louis: Louis has served in various staff roles at RCC for over five years. Like many RCC staff members, he serves in more than one role. Currently, Louis works at RCC Chesterfield as the Weekend Experience Director and Student Director while providing central campus support to all RCC locations as the Media Director. Louis' church experience began as an intern at another church, but he had family members serving as musicians at RCC who introduced him to the church and this new ministry model. He was initially skeptical, but quickly saw the fruit of creating churches unchurched people loved to attend. Louis believes in the RCC model and culture as much as anyone interviewed.

Interview 5, Julia: Like Luke, Julia was a founding member of JBC. Julia and her family were able to watch the launch of JBC, the initial success, the senior pastor's decision to leave full-time ministry, and the subsequent decline. As a founding, highly involved member of JBC, Julia and her husband played a strategic role in the merger conversations with RCC. In her interview, she described the merger with RCC as "winning the lottery." Julia is considered lay staff, currently serving at RCC Marysville in student ministry administration.

Interview 7, Sophia: Sophia was a founding member at JBC and watched the initial growth and subsequent decline over five years. She noted that JBC had the same mission and desire to reach the unchurched as RCC, but the lack of infrastructure and resources were eventually more than could be overcome. Sophia currently serves as a lay staff member at RCC Chesterfield in children's ministry. While Sophia has experience with RCC prior- and post-merger with JBC, she has also taken time to visit RCC Fairway on a few occasions. In the interview, Sophia explained the adoptive merger experience at JBC and noted some issues she experienced when visiting RCC Fairway as a guest.

Interview 8, Rose: Like several others, Rose was a long-time member and attendee at JBC before the RCC merger. Her background with RCC is unique, however. Before the merger conversations, her son began dating a young lady who attended RCC's original campus location. Admittedly, Rose was initially skeptical of RCC. In her words, "This was a large church with multiple locations, which in rural areas is not necessarily normal." Her skepticism shifted quickly after attending RCC, positioning her as an early supporter of the potential merger. Rose currently serves at RCC Chesterfield in the production department.

Interview 10, Matthew: Matthew is a businessman in the Marysville, Florida, community. He and his wife, Julia (Interview 5), were founding members of JBC and were heavily involved

in the merger conversations and transition. Matthew's role in the process might be the most significant, as he and Paul met before the merger conversations. This relationship is what prompted the merger conversation and allowed for the organic nature of the discussion. Before introducing the merger idea to the elders of JBC, Matthew and Julia visited RCC per Paul's invitation. Their experience prompted the introduction of this idea to JBC. While JBC did not initially embrace the concept, Matthew's experience with RCC and friendship with Paul provided the necessary traction for the discussion. Currently, Matthew attends RCC Marysville and serves in guest services and as a student ministry small group leader.

Interview 11, Henry: Henry is a lay staff member serving at RCC Chesterfield. While he was not a part of JBC prior to the merger, he did move from RCC Marysville to be part of the core launch team at this new campus at their launch. As the former JBC attendees attended RCC Marysville during the transition, Henry began to invest in them and their core team, deciding to participate in this launch. Henry has remained involved at RCC Chesterfield, serving with guest services and on the offering committee.

RCC Fairway Interviewees

Interview 2, Miles: Prior to his current marketplace career, Miles served in different church and ministry roles for 30 years, most recently as a church planter. Miles and his family attended TTC for three years before the RCC merger. The TTC youth program initially drew Miles and his family to the church, and the hope of merging with RCC to become a regional hub for campus expansion was exciting for Miles. His excitement severely curtailed, as is evident in responses such as this: "Everything seemed to change overnight. Worship changed. Preaching changed. Content changed. We were told that the TTC name would not change and [our

leadership] would remain in place. Then the name was changed and our pastor was removed.”

Currently, Miles serves as lay staff, serving at RCC Fairway in student ministry and guest services. His vast ministry experience gives Miles a unique perspective on this transition. Miles is in his mid-fifties.

Interview 9, Mike: Mike was the first worship leader hired by TTC. Mike’s longevity at TTC allowed him to experience a lead pastor transition and the merger with RCC. Mike heard the conversations as a staff member, but as RCC and the TTC senior pastor made decisions, Mike mostly observed from the side. This position gave Mike an excellent view of the conversations and the process. Mike has remained on staff through the merger and serves at RCC Fairway as the worship leader.

Interview 12, Penny: Penny and her husband David (Interviewee 13) live in the Fairway community of Alabama, but did not attend TTC before the merger announcement. The merger is very personal to them, as Penny is the sister of Paul Johnson, the RCC senior pastor. Hoping to bring an RCC church to the area, they initiated conversations with Paul, prompting Paul and RCC to evaluate the area. This process introduced Paul and RCC to TTC, the future adoptive merger that created RCC Fairway.

Interview 13, David: As Penny’s husband and the brother-in-law to Paul Johnson, David was instrumental in the initial conversations and consideration of adopting TTC to become the fifth campus of RCC. After the decision to merge, David and Penny began attending TTC and are still actively involved at RCC Fairway. David’s experience with RCC is vast, yet his time at TTC was limited, giving him interesting insight into the emotions and resistance to change seen in many TTC attendees.

Interview 14, Ken: Ken was a founding attendee, staff member, and leadership team

participant of TTC. Ken’s extensive experience with TTC and the merger with RCC provided an additional, personal perspective. In his words, the “merger opportunity was a surprise.” While TTC was struggling, the church remained uninformed of the potential for a merger. In hindsight, Ken believes “RCC did their part. TTC failed to do their part.” Currently, Ken serves at RCC Fairway in financial administration.

Additional Focus Group Profiles

In addition to Kaden, who interviewed individually, the following individuals from the interview candidate pool joined the focus group conversation:

Focus Group Participant 1, Paul: Paul Johnson is the senior pastor of RCC. Paul led Beth Mennonite Church through a seismic transition, becoming River Community Church, which has expanded to five campus locations. As senior pastor, Paul serves as the point leader and vision-caster for the organization.

Focus Group Participant 2, Dylan: Dylan joined the RCC staff in July 2012 and has served in many roles. In April 2017, Dylan became the campus pastor for RCC Blounts, where he currently leads a local staff and volunteer team to implement the RCC vision in the original location. As a staff member since 2012, Dylan has indirect experience with both adoptive merger expansions.

Focus Group Participant 3, Phil: Phil is the campus pastor of RCC Chesterfield. Phil joined the RCC staff team in August 2016. He served in multiple roles leading to his current placement in July 2018. Initially, RCC Chesterfield was led by Isaiah, a staff member who was targeted for this position and location while training with Louis at RCC Marysville. After some time in this role, Paul determined that Phil would be a better fit for RCC and the Chesterfield,

Florida, community. As with Dylan, Phil leads a local staff and volunteer team to implement the RCC vision in this third campus location.

Focus Group Participant 4, Bryson: Bryson is the newest addition to the RCC staff, joining the team in July 2019. Bryson has a long history of ministry, including church planting and multi-site church leadership. At RCC, Bryson initially served on the RCC Marysville executive staff, overseeing the campus pastors and campus locations. When Paul Johnson concluded the campus pastor at RCC Fairway (who was the former senior pastor of TTC) was no longer fit for the role, Bryson took over the campus pastor role at RCC Fairway in addition to his multi-site responsibilities. Like the other campus pastors, Bryson leads a local staff and volunteer team to implement the RCC vision at this struggling fifth campus location.

Key Thematic Findings

As is true of any church launch, the laborious and demanding work done before the launch dictates the success of the church post-launch. The three thematic points of success differentiation uncovered during the interviews and focus group conversation are considered pre-campus launch issues. As noted below, in the TTC adoptive merger, RCC disregarded and neglected the required work that proved successful in transitioning JBC to RCC Chesterfield. The lack of preliminary strategy, investigation, and transition management set RCC Fairway up for failure.

The collective conversations provided three clear themes of differentiation between the creation of RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway:

1. Strategic drift
2. Deficient investigation

3. Transitional errors

The following section outlines the findings within each theme.

Strategic Drift

An unintentional departure from RCC's successful campus expansion strategy is the first thematic issue between their thriving third campus as compared to their fifth campus.

Initial RCC Strategy

The mission of RCC is to lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. Growing their influence through campus expansion is strategically missional for RCC. From their humble, conservative beginnings as a Mennonite church, RCC's first location eventually outgrew their facility. This growth was due to direct community engagement and surrounding community attraction, as people were attending RCC from up to an hour away. This regional reach reality forced RCC to consider their first campus expansion into a neighboring community.

RCC desires to create great local churches. As a campus location becomes less localized, RCC considers launching a new location in neighboring communities to provide a more local RCC context. From the beginning, RCC's campus expansion strategy was clear. According to Kaden, the "initial strategy really was to help create a prevailing church in rural communities in north Florida." As RCC evaluates from where people are attending, they strategically consider the feasibility of creating a new campus location in a community where they have existing traction. Paul Johnson, the senior pastor of RCC, calls their strategy the "Dollar General model." By putting "a location back in their neighborhood," Johnson believes they can create great local churches across the Florida panhandle. This strategy opens seats for more local attendees by

cannibalizing attendance through planting new campuses in more distant communities already attending an RCC campus.

This was the exact strategy for the first four campus expansions. Paul Johnson, speaking to these initial campus expansions, stated, “Our strategy on the first four campuses was that we were going to plant prevailing churches, reaching churches, in rural communities where there were none. That was our strategy.” This strategy proved successful in each of their first four campus expansions. For example, RCC Marysville, or Campus Two, was birthed due to a lack of a prevailing church in the Marysville community combined with many families attending RCC Bounts from the Marysville community. Existing traction, paired with an existing community need, created the initial and successful RCC expansion strategy.

The RCC’s Strategy and Campus Three

While the third campus of RCC was their first adoptive merger, the launch of RCC Chesterfield mostly followed the existing, proven strategy. Before being approached by JBC with the merger opportunity, RCC was operating two campus locations, both of which had attendees traveling from the Chesterfield, Florida, community near JBC. Prior to being connected to JBC, RCC evaluated the Chesterfield community for campus expansion, as it fits the strategy: plant a prevailing church campus in a community with existing traction.

Before discovering a potential campus site, JBC approached RCC. JBC was struggling to remain open and believed a merger with RCC was their best option for revitalization. The need for JBC matched RCC’s desire to expand into this community. It was opportunist but equally strategic. Julia, a lay staff member of RCC Marysville and founding member of JBC, likened the merger with RCC to “winning the lottery.” They continued, saying, “We got to be a big church

with resources when we weren't big and didn't have the resources.”

Henry noted the need in the Chesterfield community for RCC before the merger, saying, “There were a lot of people from the Chesterfield area that were traveling to Marysville, similar to the way people from Marysville were traveling to RCC Bounts before they decided to start the Marysville campus.”

The merger with JBC matched RCC's defined, proven campus expansion strategy.

Abandoning the Strategy to Adopt TTC

In the adoptive merger of TTC, RCC's jettisoned the proven strategy utilized in the first four campus expansion. The new strategy, or lack of strategy utilized in the TTC merger, is summed up by Mike, a former TTC staff member currently serving at the fifth campus:

“I guess three years ago now, we went to meet Paul and really were just hoping to glean some advice. And as the day went on – just talking to him – our Pastor and Paul had great chemistry. And as the day went on, it kind of turned into a job interview. And by the end of it, the TTC staff were told that RCC would be as involved as we wanted. They said, ‘we can just resource you guys or you could even come on board fully.’ So we did that.”

At least in this instance, the prevailing church with existing traction strategy gave way to an opportunity outside of the strategy. In Paul Johnson's words, “TTC was an opportunity that we took advantage of.” This “opportunity” was strategically problematic on two fronts. First, RCC adopting TTC did not create a “prevailing” church in the Fairway, Alabama, community. Miles pointed to this reality, stating, there are “lots of good, modern churches in the [Fairway] community. There are at least two similar churches with over 1,000 in weekly attendance.” Louis reiterated this sentiment, suggesting, the “Fairway market is saturated with lots of great, well-known church brands doing great things in the community.”

Secondly, RCC has four campus locations in the rural panhandle of Florida. Providing a more localized RCC campus option to current RCC attendees drove the launch of these first four

campus locations. However, Fairway, Alabama, is nearly three hours away from the nearest RCC location. This distance precluded the RCC brand from being known in this new campus community and precluded any attendees from transitioning to support this new campus launch. Concurrently, there was no existing traction in Fairway for RCC.

From the focus group, an RCC staff member noted, “The strategy for expansion was to launch people into another community, you know, take a team of people, go, and launch the same church, but with people who were already equipped, who knew the mission and knew the strategy.” RCC executed this strategy in their first four expansions, but the distance between RCC’s Florida locations and the Fairway, Alabama, community, made it impossible to replicate.

Summary: Avoiding a Strategic Drift

Whether by planting or through adoptive merger, campus expansion into a new community with existing traction in need of a prevailing church is a successful, proven strategy for RCC. Neglecting this strategy is the first theme of success differentiation between the formation of RCC’s third and fifth campus locations. Strategically, the opportunity to adopt through merger JBC fit the RCC model. JBC was in an adjacent community. This community had people already attending an RCC campus location. Finally, this community did not have a thriving church with an RCC-like approach.

Kaden, a staff member in the focus group conversation, admitted the campus expansion strategy might have shifted, saying, “Our strategy has moved to preparing for what's next without knowing the location, and then being ready to walk through the door when God opens it.” This approach sounds spiritual, but is problematic for RCC, as they unintentionally allowed an exploratory conversation to become an escalation of commitment in creating an RCC campus

in a community clearly outside their strategic pathway.

Deficient Investigation

Taking the necessary time for inspection and conception is the second thematic success differentiation between RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway. Speaking about the investigation into the decision to adopt TTC as their fifth campus, Paul Johnson stated, “There were some truths that came out [after we made the decision and launched the campus]. Had we known the reality, there would probably have been some different decisions.” The initial investigation and merger conversation present significant points of differentiation between these two campus locations. In Paul’s words, uncovering the actual “truths” is critical to any strategic decision and merger conversation.

Investigating the Community

In keeping with RCC’s initial, successful strategy, investigating the community is imperative for long-term success. As stated above, the Chesterfield community needed an RCC model of church, where the Fairway community was not. The Chesterfield community was familiar with the RCC brand and had people from the community already attending another RCC location, where the Fairway community did not. This lack of community investigation contributed to the lack of success at RCC Fairway.

Investigating Ministry and Multi-site Models

When considering RCC’s first adoptive merger, it is clear that both RCC and JBC were open and honest about their reason for existing. Sophia stated, “[JBC] had the same mission and

purpose basically of RCC, but we had ten people trying to do everything.” She continued this summation, saying, “RCC was everything we wanted and what we were dreaming of doing in the community. We just were not able to execute it on our own.” This synchronization of mission, vision, and ministry model is paramount to a successful merger.

In the case of RCC’s second adoptive merger, TTC appeared to have the same ministry mindset, but there were apparent gaps in TTC’s willingness to adopt the RCC mission and model fully. Mike, a long-time staff member at TTC, said it this way: “It was one foot The Truth Church and one foot RCC Fairway.” It is clear post interviews that while TTC’s mission and vision used similar words, their model and desire to adjust to RCC’s model was severely lacking, as was RCC’s willingness to investigate their desire to adjust thoroughly.

As was stated in Chapter One, RCC Marysville serves as the central support hub for all RCC campus locations. As the central campus location, RCC Marysville serves as a broadcast location for sermon delivery to all other campuses. Messages are streamed globally across RCC most weeks, but there are occasions where local campus pastors preach to their local churches.

Programmatically, every RCC service is virtually identical, as RCC is a highly centralized multi-site entity. On Sunday, every campus service performs the same worship set, service hosts in each location communicate similar messages from talking points provided from the central staff, and children and student programming follow suit.

The adoption of TTC to form RCC Fairway drove unwelcomed ministry and model changes at TTC. From Miles, “Everything seemed to change overnight. Worship changed. Preaching changed. Content changed.” This model shift was a distinct point of contention with many at the former TTC. Miles continued, saying, “We were told that the TTC name would not change and [our leadership] would remain in place. Then the name was changed and our pastor

was removed.”

The decision to make the changes at TTC as part of the transition to RCC Fairway was necessary. However, a more thorough investigation into the potential adoption would have most likely illuminated the need for these changes before the merger, allowing TTC to better understand, consider, and prepare for the adoption process. In the case of RCC Chesterfield, the more robust investigation and ongoing conversations negated these issues. This reality was reiterated by Henry, saying, “[The adoptive merger of JBC] was not something that RCC rushed into. I think that Paul took his time. And, you know, I’m sure there were conversations going along in the background. But it felt like we took our time and we let JBC almost come to us versus us going to them.”

Investigating the Importance of Proximity

Long-distance relationships are challenging but possible. Long-distance campus relationships can work; however, the nature and flexibility of the model determine the potential success of a more distant campus. At RCC, all campuses run the same play from the same playbook each Sunday. This approach represents a more centralized model. The distance from one campus to the next does affect the need for centralization, as differing communities existing in differing contexts might require unique service implementations.

On this topic, Bryson, a central staff member at RCC, put it clearly: “I really think if it’s over an hour, it is too far away to be a multi-site campus. I think it could be a network church.”

Investigating Leadership Readiness

According to John Maxwell, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.”¹²⁴ RCC believes this is true at their campuses, too. As RCC’s expansion strategy evolved, some elements remained intact. Leadership readiness and availability being one. From Paul Johnson, “[Our strategy] was where are we going to have a leader, and where do we have a group of people?” Having a leader ready to execute the RCC model is critical to the success of an RCC campus.

In the case of RCC Chesterfield, RCC had three staff members employed at the central location, preparing for campus leadership. Louis, one of these individuals, talked about this in his interview, saying, “[Three of us] worked for several months at RCC Marysville in preparation for the launch of RCC Chesterfield. All three of us trained at that campus prior to launch.” This training time provided a culture infusion to the soon-to-be campus staff while allowing RCC to evaluate their leadership readiness.

TTC had leadership and staff in place, but the lack of investigation led to TTC leader and staff inclusion into the RCC family before being trained and vetted by RCC. In hindsight, Louis mentioned, “The TTC senior pastor wasn’t a leader. He was a communicator only. RCC allowed the senior pastor of the dying church to remain in place as the campus pastor.” Similarly, in hindsight, Penny stated, “It would have been better to take [the TTC senior Pastor] out of that leadership spot initially.”

A more thorough investigation of TTC would have shown that the TTC senior pastor was not ready to lead within the RCC campus model or capable of leading within a complex multicampus configuration.

¹²⁴ John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader: Becoming the Person That People Will Want to Follow* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 267.

Investigating the Financial Stability

A more thorough investigation allows for more truths to be uncovered and discovered. Financial instability is often a driving force for a struggling church to seek a merger opportunity. This was the case with TTC, but a lack of investigation allowed this truth to remain hidden. David spoke to this gap in discovery, saying, “I don't think people understood how financially entrenched the church was. It would have probably been better if the elders had been really upfront with the church.” This “financial entrenchment” was indeed problematic. In another interview with a lay staff directly involved with TTC and now RCC Fairway, it was said, “TTC should have provided more financial transparency. There was only enough funding for about two more months of ministry.” In short, RCC adopted a financial problem without knowing the depth of the issue.

To the contrary, the adoption of JBC as RCC's third campus was not a survival play for JBC, but an opportunity to thrive in their intended, matching mission. At the time JBC approached RCC, they were sitting on roughly \$100,000 in cash reserves. This financial position allowed the merger not to be one of survival.

TTC needed RCC as a bailout. JBC wanted RCC as a partner. This lack of investigation proved problematic.

Investigating the Merger Mindset

Based on RCC's two adoptive merger experiences, the struggling church's mindset behind their desire to seek a merger is essential to the merger's future success. In the case of JBC, the senior pastor was stepping down, allowing the congregation to seek a next step among a

few alternatives. After evaluating the potential of bringing in a new senior pastor, it became clear that a merger with RCC was the best solution to further the JBC mission. Ultimately, this was a mission-driven decision. During the focus group conversation, it was clear that JBC was ready to be a full part of and partner with RCC. Reflecting on this merger process with JBC, several RCC reflected on JBC's attitude, remembering comments like: "Here, we're going to give you everything we have. Take it. You're the stewards of it now." This sentiment was reiterated several times through the research process.

In RCC's second adoptive merger, the mindset of the TTC was distinctly different. From Louis:

"One key difference in my mind was that JBC was ready to give all assets and leadership and authority to RCC. 'We want to be a part of what you're doing,' they would say. 'Your direction, your leadership.' At TTC, there wasn't that level of handoff or handover and leadership. And I think that's where some of the confusion and heartache came through."

Mike, a long-time member of TTC, put it more bluntly, saying it "felt like we were acquired by a company."

That feeling was primarily due to TTC's lack of interest in RCC's leadership and centralized ministry model. TTC wanted a church savior more than a ministry partner. TTC was looking to survive, and RCC provided a mechanism to remain open. As Tomberlin and Bird stated from their merger research, the failure rate for mergers motivated by survival is too high to be seen as a viable revitalization method.¹²⁵ The RCC experiment is validating Tomberlin and Bird's statement.

In each instance, the merger rationale from RCC's side was identical: Create a new campus in a new location via adoptive merger. From the struggling church's side, however, the

¹²⁵ Tomberlin and Bird, Kindle Location 2169.

two approaches were distinctly different. JBC saw the merger as missional, where TTC saw the merger as a survival mechanism. In missional terms, JBC was operating to reach people, where TTC was simply hoping to remain open.

Summary: Avoiding Deficient Investigation

The investigation, or lack thereof, played a vital role in moving forward with each adoptive merger. In TTC's, the lack of detailed investigation into the community, ministry model, significance of proximity, leadership availability, financial stability, and the struggling church's rationale for accepting the adoption created more problems than could be overcome. Additional investigation into these "truths" would have highlighted TTC's pitfalls, most likely causing them to pause the adoption and consider other, supportive opportunities.

Transitional Errors

Change and transition are not the same. Leaders often equate the two, but, as stated by Jeff Iorg,

"Foundational to helping people through major change is this seminal idea: change is different than transition. Change is the new circumstances introduced into organizational life, Transition, on the other hand, is the emotional, psychological, and spiritual adjustments people go through when change is implemented."¹²⁶

Leaders make a fundamental mistake by focusing more on the desired change than the required transition to achieve the change. Rather than announcing a change, wise leaders intentionally guide people through the transition of the change.¹²⁷ This transition requires time:

¹²⁶ Jeff Iorg, *Leading Major Change in Your Ministry* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), Kindle Location 970.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 980.

time for culture adoption, core team development, leadership development, and team deployment. Apparent transitional differences between the adoptive mergers of JBC and TTC became glaring during the interview and focus group research process, leading to the third and final theme of differentiation.

A Timeline Tale of Two Transitions

The emotional, spiritual, and psychological adjustments experienced during transition take time. Transitions are process movements, taken one step at a time. As discovered during this project's qualitative research phase, the timeline of transition for JBC to RCC Chesterfield was distinctly different from that of TTC to RCC Fairway.

Multiple interviewees noted the much longer timeline provided for the JBC to RCC Chesterfield transition.

“It was about eight months. We started conversations October or November. They end up closing their doors around Christmas time. And then we said what we want you to attend our Marysville campus while we remodel the building. And we will relaunch in about six months. It ended up being like eight months. July or August, we relaunched.” – Kaden

Reflecting on this timeline in hindsight, many interviewees noted the length of time as integral to the success of transitioning JBC to RCC Chesterfield, yet many also questioned if the timeline was too long. In the midst of that eight- or nine-month space, it was difficult for the RCC staff and JBC attendees to see the timeline's necessity. Looking back, the importance of this space was evident. From the focus group:

“I believe it felt like a really long time. But looking back now, that time I think was critically essential, because it gave us time for closure and for people to adopt a new identity. We sent teams of people for volunteer work days from RCC Bounts and RCC Marysville to go and work on the JBC building. That helped everyone realize they were part of something bigger and part of something very special.” – Kaden from the Focus Group Conversation

Paul Johnson, reflecting on the time of closure, believed it was intentional and strategic.

In his interview, he mentioned that the Elders unanimously endorsed the closure timeline. From Paul: “Allowing JBC to completely shut down, bring closure to that church, and give space for the transition to becoming an RCC campus, was ‘100% strategic.’”

In the adoption of TTC, RCC did not employ this “space for transition” strategy. Miles, a long-time attendee of TTC, noted the transition speed in the second interview, saying, “It is amazing how fast things changed. From May to July.” He continued, mentioning, “Everything seemed to change overnight. Worship changed. Preaching changed. Content changed.”

This speed of change did not provide proper closure for TTC, nor did it give RCC adequate time and space to launch their new campus with purpose. Additionally, transitioning over the summer months, where attendance is sporadic and communication less efficient, provided even less space for closure. Several TTC individuals mentioned during the interview process that the transition felt rushed. One specifically mentioned coming back from a trip to hear the church name and signage changed without any warning. Miles recalled, “People showed up one week to TTC, and then the next week it was RCC.”

When asked why the strategic closure and reopening of JBC to RCC Chesterfield went unutilized in the transition of TTC, Kaden, a person with direct staff exposure to both mergers, stated, “I think we were too scared of a shutdown [at TTC] like we did with JBC.” The lack of time for strategic closure created a severe obstacle for the ongoing struggle.

Transitioning a Culture

Culture is both caught and taught, making proximity, intentionality, and time a requirement for culture transfer. Existing churches have an existing culture, even when they are struggling and dying. While at times operating with some local, contextual content, campus

locations also need the core culture of the broader, multi-site church. At RCC, all aspects of ministry culture are nearly identical, from paint colors to worship sets to volunteer roles and ministry models. In the case of multi-site churches like RCC, the infusion of culture into a new campus is critical to success.

In the fifth interview, Julia mentioned this missing culture infusion multiple times. From Julia: “Honestly, I think that’s why RCC Chesterfield is successful, because we went to the Marysville campus for seven or eight months before our new campus launched.” Later in the conversation, this person mentioned this time utilization again, “I really feel like it was key that we had those eight months that people could go to an RCC location, learn the model, begin to volunteer, and experience the culture.”

The time allowed the JBC remnant to let go of the former JBC culture and embrace RCC. Upon opening RCC Chesterfield, Louis, a staff member at RCC Chesterfield, noted, “They became part of RCC before they helped launch RCC Chesterfield.” It is impossible to emphasize the importance of this culture transfer. Both church transitions and cultural transfusions take time.

Conversely, with the TTC adoption, the lack of transition time did not provide the necessary space to intentionally close the old TTC culture and launch the new RCC culture. Kaden, speaking specifically to the TTC struggle, mentioned, “We installed the look of culture. With paint colors and signs, we installed the facade of culture. But we did not integrate the reality of culture. And you can’t do that in two or three months.”

The prevailing question of culture transfer was posed by Louis, asking, “How can a staff member grasp the RCC culture if they are not at or near RCC?” This individual understood the tension. In their words, it took nearly two years for them to fully let go of previous church

culture to fully understand and embrace the RCC ministry model while working at a campus location. While two years may be an extreme example, it is clear that three months is not enough time for a new culture to replace old practices.

Without a culture transfusion, RCC Fairway has continued to struggle to embrace and implement the RCC ministry model. Video teaching from Paul Johnson has been a point of contention, the worship style and music choice have been disputed, and the flow of the Sunday morning service has created conflict. As is seen empirically, volunteer engagement and small group adoption have been problematic. All of these issues are cultural. Mike stated this previously, but it bears repeating: “It was one foot The Truth Church and one foot RCC Fairway.”

Transitioning a Core Team

The launch of a new campus is somewhat parallel to the launch of a church plant, in that a core team of givers and reliable volunteers is necessary. The transitional journey of JBC to RCC Chesterfield created space for a core team to develop before launch. The eight-month gap in closing JBC and opening the campus gave RCC time to bring the remaining JBC attendees to RCC Marysville to listen, learn, and become involved. This involvement prepared the core team to be fully RCC by launch day.

During the transition timeline of RCC Chesterfield, each focus group participant noted how the newly transition JBC attendees were encouraged to get involved. Remembered by Paul, “We told the people attending, ‘Listen, if you want to be part of relaunch, you need to get involved by serving on a team so you learn our culture.’” They recalled this time as both exciting and challenging. That is normative for any transition. In this case, the JBC members were

unlearning their version of church to understand and lead within a different model and scale. While it was a challenging season, it was equally a critical season. At the time of RCC Chesterfield's launch, a core team from JBC, RCC Bounts, and RCC Marysville were one in mission and desire for this new campus's success.

By comparison, as was previously stated, the transition timeline for TTC to RCC Fairway was only three months, without any closure and core team creation. TTC went from meeting as a church one week to the next week, being a campus of RCC. The lack of space and closure precluded a successful cultural transition and core team development. The remaining attendees at TTC found themselves more confused than excited. This negative emotion gave way to frustration and anger. As Mike mentioned, "It's hard to get healthy in the middle of the chaos." Equally surmised, it is challenging to build a core team after the transition and opening of a new campus location.

Summary: Avoiding Transition Errors

The distinction between change and transition cannot be overstated or underestimated. The lack of transitional awareness created many obstacles for TTC's adoptive merger transition to become RCC Fairway. The emotions and feelings of a corporate takeover and overnight change represent the lack of time, space, and guidance provided to the struggling church throughout the merger conversation, decision, and implementation.

The complimentary use of transitional time is evident in the strategy utilized in converting JBC to become the third RCC campus location. The eight-month window of time allowed for the complete closure of JBC, a time for culture transfusion, core team development, facility changes, and momentum to be gained. While this timeline felt long to some in the

moment, in hindsight, it was a critical theme in the successful launch and ongoing experience at RCC Chesterfield.

By comparison, the seemingly overnight transition from TTC to RCC Fairway was hazardous to RCC, the TTC attendees, and the campus's launch. Without adequate time, TTC never fully closed the chapter on their church, leaving people stuck between what was previously known and understood and what was currently in place, but not entirely welcomed.

A declining church cannot lead through the transition of adoption. In a struggling church, the ongoing strain of decline takes a toll on the leadership and congregation. The exhaustion and emotions of failure need to be acknowledged, and closure must be provided, especially considering transitions in and of itself are exhausting. This closure of time allows for a church-wide sabbatical of sorts, providing time and space for the emotions of the change to be understood, accepted, and eventually embraced.

The JBC adoption to become RCC Chesterfield allowed adequate time for this transition to occur. When RCC Chesterfield launched as the newest RCC campus location, a ready core team and a transfused culture provided the staff and attendees with great expectations. The complete lack of transition from TTC to RCC Fairway did not give the change a fighting chance.

Qualitative Results Summary

The personal interviews and a final focus group provided more than enough information to surmise the thematic gaps of success between the adoptive mergers and campus creations of RCC Chesterfield and RCC Fairway. The abdication of their proven strategy, lack of detailed investigation, and significantly reduced transition timeline set TTC's journey to becoming RCC Fairway in a perilous position.

Summary of the Project Results

Unfortunately, it is difficult, and at times impossible, to correct pre-launch issues post-launch. With a proven strategy discarded, hidden realities undisclosed, and adequate transition time not taken, a church like RCC Fairway cannot naturally succeed. The work of revitalization through adoptive merger does not begin at the campus launch, but in the days, weeks, months, and in some cases, years prior. Pre-launch work is a determining factor for post-launch success.

A multi-site church reactivating a struggling church through adoptive merger is a viable, potentially preferable, revitalization solution. With thousands of churches closing each year,¹²⁸ creating a proven pathway for thriving, multi-site churches to infuse leadership, funding, strategy, vision, and direction for dying churches is vital to the Kingdom, to communities, and humanity. RCC has proven that this approach can be successful, yet they have equally proven the inherent handicaps and hardships of a poorly executed pre-merger plan. A successful approach can lead to successful outcomes, such as increase conversions to faith, public declarations of faith through baptism, and growing discipleship participation. That is a strategy worth understanding and replicating.

¹²⁸ Croft, Kindle Location, 79.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

A previously proven strategy of creating a prevailing, reaching-centric church in communities with some degree of existing traction positions River Community Church (RCC) to expand into neighboring rural communities in Florida's central panhandle. RCC has repeatedly executed this successful strategy in four of its five expansion opportunities, including an adoptive merger of Journey Baptist Church (JBC) to become RCC Chesterfield. Their one failure materialized in the most recent adoptive merger of The Truth Church (TTC). Three overarching factors contributed to this failure.:

1. RCC's drift from their proven expansion strategy,
2. RCC's lack of investigation and honest evaluation of TTC, and
3. RCC mismanagement during the transition.

This chapter will compare these findings against other literature and research, define the study's success, draw conclusions for RCC, provide guidance for other churches considering similar mergers, and suggest future research recommendations.

Comparing Results with Current Literature and Research

The primary contributors to the growing conversation of church revitalization are pastors with successful revitalization stories and church leaders observing these efforts. As this more traditional church revitalization mechanism proves insufficient to reverse the trend of church death, additional instruments and systems are required.

Thriving multi-site churches creating campus locations by adopting dying churches is a

recent trend gaining traction.¹²⁹ While the sheer volume of churches in decline has created an epidemic of church death, multi-site churches expanding through mergers provide a bright future for the church in America.¹³⁰ This is true in RCC's adoptive merger of JBC, and is still partially true of the subsequent adoptive merger of TTC. In reality, the trends at TTC before the RCC adoption were leading to another church closure. With only two months of funding left, TTC was nearing the end of life, but RCC's infusion of resources has allowed this once dying church to be revitalized, if only partially at this point. With additional measures, RCC Fairway will find a way forward and experience success, providing RCC with two successful adoptive mergers to campus location experiences.

Additionally, it is crucial to note that RCC was actively pursuing a Chesterfield, Florida, campus location before entering into conversations with JBC, but could not identify a substantial temporary or permanent space. Multi-site churches attempting to expand often struggle to secure meeting spaces for new campus locations. However, according to the National Congregation Study, "small churches have most of the church buildings, and big churches have most of the people and the money. Small churches have what many big churches want: property, often on highly valuable land. And big churches have what most small churches want: Money and people."¹³¹ While not every small church is struggling or in need of revitalization, many are at risk of closing their doors.¹³² This reality creates a feasible context for multi-site churches to adopt smaller, struggling churches to create campus locations and revitalize these locations.

The relational introduction between Paul Johnson at RCC and a founding member of JBC

¹²⁹ McIntosh, 169.

¹³⁰ Rogers, 174.

¹³¹ Smietana, 44.

¹³² Croft, Kindle Location 88.

created RCC's pathway to expand into the Chesterfield community. This successful expansion, which may have never happened outside of JBC's need and willingness to engage, was facilitated by the merger.

Theologically, the successful revitalization of JBC and ongoing work at RCC Fairway are creating new lights out of previously dimming churches. The light of local churches matter. This light is evident in the salvations and baptisms in the 18 months following the launch of RCC Chesterfield. According to the RCC dashboard, God facilitated 18 salvations and 12 baptisms through the ministry of RCC Chesterfield. Every step of faith is significant and represents the necessity of church revitalization efforts.

Defining Success of the Study Against the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this thesis was to identify the methods and strategies utilized in RCC's successful adoptive merger of Journey Baptist Church (now RCC Chesterfield) for implementation in a potential relaunch of the less successful adoptive merger of The Truth Church (now RCC Fairway) and other future adoption merger endeavors by RCC. The uncovered deficiencies that allowed RCC Fairway to be less successful than RCC's previous adoptive merger were strategic and directly connected to the inadequate investigation and mismanaged transition.

The clarity and consistency of these findings would suggest a successful research study. While a painless intervention path to correct the RCC Fairway merger experience is doubtful, the project's purpose was to identify thematic differences between RCC's two adoptive mergers implementations and propose a pathway for better future results. From this perspective, the project has been successful.

Conclusions for RCC

For RCC, this research uncovered the thematic differences in implementation success for their two adoptive merger efforts. Their first adoptive merger trajectory is positive, as is seen in the quantitative analysis and qualitative conversations. RCC Chesterfield is a growing congregation through transfer, conversion, and participation. Multiple interviewees suggested the only limiting factor at RCC Chesterfield is their facility, as it is at or near capacity on most Sundays. The strategy employed in creating RCC Chesterfield, the investigation into Journey Baptist Church's merger mindset, and the transition management from JBC to RCC Chesterfield created this positive experience.

The story for RCC Fairway is, in many ways, an inverse experience from RCC Chesterfield. The strategic drift from creating a prevailing church in a community with existing traction to taking advantage of an opportunity proved problematic for RCC. Additionally, RCC's lack of adequate investigation did not uncover TTC's full reality or identify the need for a prevailing church like RCC in the Fairway community. Finally, RCC's mismanagement of the transition did not provide closer for the TTC congregation, space for culture transfusion, time for core team development, and excitement for the pending campus launch. These critical errors all occurred pre-merger and pre-launch, making an intervention post-merger and post-launch difficult. Without redoing the past, RCC has two feasible options to more fully revitalize the church currently known as RCC Fairway.

Option One: Close, Move, and Relaunch the RCC Campus

RCC desires for their Fairway location to thrive, but the pre-merger issues have created a

dire situation. RCC Fairway is a struggling church currently trending in the same direction as the once dying TTC. Without any intervention, the church will most likely cease operations.

RCC has an option to reset RCC Fairway by implementing several of the learnings from RCC Chesterfield. While the lack of proximity is an ongoing limitation, RCC can recreate a transition timeline that provides a reset and relaunch. For this to happen, RCC needs to mimic the complete shutdown executed during the JBC to RCC Chesterfield transition. This closure would give RCC Fairway time to rest, build a stronger core team, work on the culture, and evaluate their location.

The current location is a significant issue for RCC Fairway. As was suggested multiple times during the interviews, the Fairway community is not under-churched or lacking in reaching-centric churches. This community has several large, thriving churches with similar missions and visions to reach the unchurched Fairway community. However, there is a more rural, neighboring community without a prevailing church where some RCC Fairway traction does exist.

In the interview, Miles, a founding member of TTC and current lay staff for RCC Fairway, suggested a change of locations is imperative to their future success, saying,

“We haven't been in our building for three months (due to the global COVID pandemic), and no one in the physical area knows we're even gone. [We should] give a 90-day notice on our lease. Become portable. Go into Danbury High School on the other side of the largest subdivision in Alabama. Maybe even change our name to Bayview Community Church, an RCC affiliate, or whatever.”

Miles is not the only RCC Fairway congregant sharing this opinion. When asked about staying in the current location versus moving to the neighboring community of Diana, Alabama, Mike stated without hesitation, “I would get out of [Fairway] tomorrow.”

The option to shut down the current operation at RCC Fairway to facilitate a move to the Danbury community 15 minutes north of Fairway would allow the remnant of TTC to experience

some much-needed closure, the staff and congregation to regather and build a core team, and for the RCC staff to plan for a proper transition into a new grand opening. While this alternative does not cure the initial strategic drift, it does allow for a more holistic investigation and competent transition.

The option to close, reset, and relaunch in a new community does not provide guaranteed success. However, as the current negative emotions between the TTC remanent congregants and RCC leadership is ever-present, closing to move creates a transition opportunity to create local buy-in through group participation. The current situation is an energy drain for the staff and attendees of RCC Fairway. The potential positive change to a new, better location and community might be enough to galvanize the group with trend-changing energy necessary for a better future.

Relaunching in a new community would also allow RCC Fairway to change the church name to represent their desired local ministry's context more accurately. Because the RCC brand was unknown in the Fairway community before the campus launch, the brand association at RCC Fairway has been mostly unfavorable due to the negative transition experience from TTC to RCC Fairway. Changing locations allows for RCC Fairway to leave the negative brand with the old location's negative experience. A new name allows for establishing a new brand connotation without the negative baggage from the first attempt.

For these reasons, moving RCC Fairway to the Danbury, Alabama, community under a new name allows the church to remain operational as an RCC Campus while providing a fresh restart without the negative baggage acquired during the initial transition.

Option Two: Release RCC Fairway from Their Campus Affiliation

A second option is for RCC to release their Fairway campus location to become an independent, network church. This option would allow RCC Fairway to become independent in leadership and finances, but keep a connection to RCC for some agreed amount of ongoing support. This option would function more like a sizable, well supported, and thoroughly connected church plant.

Compared to other options, the positives within this solution (complete divestiture and closure of the campus or keeping the church directly connected as a campus) are numerous.

First, an independent RCC Fairway would have the flexibility to design its ministry offerings, church model, and services to fit the local community context. Currently, RCC campus locations function in a nearly identical fashion, as RCC is a centralized multi-site operation. A shift to an RCC connected church rather than an RCC campus location would provide local autonomy and contextual flexibility. With the lack of proximity and significant communal dissimilarities to RCC's other, more rural locations, the local RCC Fairway staff and congregants would most likely welcome this autonomy.

Second, attempting to lead a campus location three hours away is challenging for RCC's central team. Similarly, being led by a central team three hours away is frustrating for RCC Fairway staff. The level of challenge and frustration works against the synergy seen among the other RCC campus locations existing in close proximity. Transitioning RCC Fairway to a mostly independent church would provide relief to both involved parties.

Third, while many metrics are trending negatively at RCC Fairway, the church is financially viable and prepared to cover their costs. Fiscal viability was not attainable for the dying TTC, but RCC's investment in this location through adoptive merger has positioned the

church for financial stability. Releasing RCC Fairway would give the local church budgetary autonomy.

Finally, while many revitalization efforts fail due to a lack of revitalization leadership, RCC currently has a leader in place with a proven track record of church planting and multi-site leadership. Bryson is not an RCC clone and did not develop as a pastoral leader at an RCC campus, but he is a capable leader and pastor of a congregation.

For RCC Fairway to exist as a fully functioning campus location of RCC, many additional changes need to be implemented and embraced by the congregation. The less than ideal transition from TTC to RCC Fairway has had a lasting, adverse effect, possibly positioning RCC's central model approach in a no-win situation. This emotion was evident in many interview conversations, such as with Miles:

“Everything changed overnight. Worship changed. We have a great [worship leader], Mike. I mean, he's great. He's really good. But all of a sudden, even Sunday morning seemed programmed. We had three songs and everything felt so corporate. It's like we've been acquired by this company, right? Mike, was laid back, and all of sudden, he looks timid. He looks programmed, I guess like [the people in] Marysville. They sing these songs in Marysville. We don't.”

This level of ongoing pessimism toward RCC created during the mismanaged transition is significant. Keeping RCC Fairway a campus of RCC will not naturally negate this emotion. It is conceivable only releasing the location to become independent will provide the needed space for the church to reset emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

Summary for RCC Conclusions

If left unchanged, the current quantitative and qualitative trend for RCC Fairway points toward a bleak future. Numerically, the campus is financially more stable than in their TTC season, but attendance, salvations, baptisms, volunteerism, and other participation metrics are

trending downward. Maybe more important, the antidotal stories and negative emotions uncovered in the interview process show a frustrated team and church, teetering on emotional apathy and physical absence. Resetting the culture and core team is necessary to correct the course, and therefore a period of closure leading to a relaunch is required. Both Option One and Option Two presented above present a reset to relaunch opportunity.

Recommendations for Other Churches

The specific results presented in Chapter Four are generated from and directly pertinent to RCC. However, the thematic points of conflict between RCC's adoptive mergers give supporting insight to other churches looking to merge, adopt, be adopted, or plant.

Recommendations for Merging Churches

As church mergers are not a new phenomenon, a relatively extensive amount of research and case studies currently exist on the topic. When revitalization becomes a necessity, in desperation, churches often begin looking for a merger partner.¹³³ Merging from a place of desperation is rarely a successful strategy.¹³⁴

The importance of merger mentality is evident in the RCC study. JBC was struggling and leaderless, but financially stable and positioned to continue gathering as a church. With options available, they choose to approach RCC for merger consideration. This conversation was about the continuation of their mission, not to fend off their mortality.

In opposition, TTC in Fairway was hemorrhaging financially. Their lack of point

¹³³ McIntosh, Kindle Location 169.

¹³⁴ Bandy, 18.

leadership, systems, and structure was doomed to fail. They saw RCC as a savior, not a partner. This reality became all too evident after their merger. TTC did not want to be led by RCC, just supported and saved. This behavior shows classic survival-based merger mentality, and the lack of success is in keeping with survival-based merger case studies and research.

With better mindsets, revitalization through merger is feasible and brings a likelihood of success when the greater mission organically drives the conversation. Dying churches often struggle to experience transformation without support. They need help from thriving congregations.¹³⁵ When a merger is grounded in a shared mission to reach and disciple more people in a community, a successful outcome is more likely.

These successful outcomes seem to require a leading church and a following church to adept their position. Pride is the enemy of fighting against this essential merger agreement. Jeff Brumley suggested, “There is a huge win-win if people can put aside their egos and their logos.”¹³⁶ Mergers require open-handed congregations who are less committed to a merger and more committed to a broader, bolder, biblical vision.¹³⁷ This approach summarizes the heart behind JBC’s merger mentality. This attitude was, and is still, missing at RCC Fairway.

Recommendations for Multi-Site Churches Looking to Adopt

Multi-site church expansion strategies are varied. When it comes to expansion, a multi-site church adopting a struggling church poses a viable solution that often brings success under the right circumstances. As seen in RCC’s successful adoptive merger of JBC, the favorable executions of the three discovered themes are the keys to success.

¹³⁵ Hallock, 15.

¹³⁶ Brumley.

¹³⁷ Bandy, 20.

First, a multi-site church considering a church adoption must operate within their proven campus expansion strategy. When RCC drifted from their proven strategy, the result was an opportunity outside of their competency. Leaders often struggle to let go of opportunities, even when the opportunity is not within their proven strategy. Not to suggested an inflexible methodology is the only satisfactory option, but multi-site churches must intentionally deviate, not accidentally drift, from a stated and successful strategy. Thoroughly evaluating an opportunity and calculating the cost of a strategic deviation is necessary.

Second, on either side of a potential merger, a full diagnostic investigation of their mission, vision, theology, financial health, discipleship pathway, openness to change, systems, structure, metrics, and leadership is critical to the decision process. This discovery process is integral to uncover what is not superficially obvious. Paul Johnson admittedly did not thoroughly investigate TTC when considering the adoptive merger. In his words, “There were some truths that came out [later] that had we known, we would probably have made some different decisions.” Multi-site churches must uncover all the hidden “truths” before moving forward with a merger.

Finally, a successful transition that creates a new culture, core team, and campus location takes time. The RCC team collectively believed the transition timeline to create RCC Chesterfield from JBC was too long while in process, but in hindsight, see this time as necessary. For RCC’s first adoptive merger, eight months of closure gave the struggling church time to grieve the loss of their church, time for a culture transfusion, space for core team development, and anticipation of a new campus opening. The inverse experience in creating RCC Fairway is still creating confusion and agitation.

Transitions are often awkward and complicated, therefore competent management is

required for the change to occur successfully. Multi-site churches adopting through merger struggling churches must build in physical closure to effectively transition a tired congregation. This stoppage period allows for a chapter to close in a church's life before turning over a new page to begin a new chapter in the story. Concurrently, the full stoppage of services and ministry offerings provides time for the necessary unlearning and relearning of culture and ministry models.

Recommendations for Struggling Churches Looking for Adoption

Both JBC and TTC needed a revitalization solution. JBC lost their pastor and were contemplating revitalization options. TTC lost their way and was seeking deliverance.

Having financial stability and options, JBC approached RCC organically through an existing friendship. The process's organic nature allowed RCC to strategically validate the opportunity, investigate JBC thoroughly, and take the necessary time to transition the church through eight months of closure.

This more natural and organic pathway presents a critical path for adoptive merger success. The word "surrender" marks this path. A struggling church must surrender to the adopting church's existing strategy, surrender records and dashboards with transparency, and surrender their timeline. Finally, they must surrender their pride. Willing surrender to a greater, Kingdom good actively shows a willingness for adoption.

A merger opportunity with a thriving multi-site church is a proven pathway to renewal as a revitalization strategy. Research by Warren Bird and Jim Tomberlin found that declining churches that became a satellite site of a larger, healthier church often do exceptionally well.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ McIntosh, 169.

When these conversations are organic and within the Holy Spirit's flow, the potential for success increases. When desperation drives the merger conversation, the obstacles only increase.

Recommendations for Church Planters

While church planting is distinctively different from church merging, the findings from RCC's successful and unsuccessful adoptive mergers are applicable. Outside of church planting's distinct nature and unique challenges, each of the three discovered thematic realities for adoptive merger success provides a guiding direction for church planting pastors.

First, church plants can benefit from defining and following a clear expansion strategy, as starting a church is an act of expanding a church. This reality is especially true for the numerous church planting organizations. In creating RCC Chesterfield, existing traction in a community without a prevailing church provided the occasion for success. Church plants can follow suit by first evaluating a community's needs against their ministry model and offerings. Planting churches in communities already oversaturated with like-minded and like-modeled ministries may not prove fruitful.

Second, and to borrow a word from Paul Johnson, the senior pastor at RCC, an appropriate and adequate investigation is required to fully uncover all "truths" before fully committing to plant. A merger investigation is quite different from a planting examination, yet the requirement and necessity are identical.

Lastly, success in any church begins with establishing a core and developing a culture. Creating a core team and installing a defined culture positions a church for foundational success. Taking adequate time to plant a church from concept to creation requires leading through change and managing the many pending transitions. Time is an asset to this process, as is seen in the

RCC Chesterfield process.

Recommendations for Future Research

RCC is not the only multi-site church revitalizing churches and expanding their campus footprint via adoptive mergers. Future research through case studies of both successes and failures from other churches attempt this hard work would provide new insights and validation of RCC results.

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Appendix A
Permission Request

March 30, 2020

Paul Smith
Senior Pastor
Rivertown Community Church
4534 Lafayette Street
Marysville, FL 32446

Dear Paul:

As a graduate student in John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a DMIN degree focused on church revitalization. The title of my research project is Improving Adoptive Mergers at River Community Church and the purpose of my research is to analyze the similarities and differences between the formation of the RCC Chesterfieldley campus and the RCC Fairhope campus to decipher the unique characteristics that allowed the Chesterfieldley adoptive merger to be initially more successful. These findings will be evaluated and compared to create a new intervention plan that could be executed at RCC Fairhope in hopes of increasing the success of this campus location.

I am writing to request your permission to contact members of your staff to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to gadams26@liberty.edu or send permission letter via email to gadams26@liberty.edu. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Gavin Adams
Doctoral Student
Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Appendix B
Permission Letter



MAKING OUR COMMUNITIES MORE LIVABLE AGAIN

Marianna ☎ 850.482.2477

March 30, 2020

Paul Smith
Senior Pastor
Rivertown Community Church
4534 Lafayette Street
Marianna, FL 32446

Dear Gavin,

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Improving Adoptive Mergers at Rivertown Community Church, we have decided to grant you permission to contact our staff and invite them to participate in your study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

The requested data (financials and metrics) WILL NOT BE STRIPPED of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.

I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

Paul Smith
Sr. Pastor
Rivertown Community Church

4534 Lafayette Street | Marianna, Florida 32446 | rivertown.cc

ONE CHURCH | MULTIPLE LOCATIONS: BLOUNTSTOWN | CHIPLEY | FAIRHOPE | MARIANNA | WAKULLA

Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

Dear [Rivertown Community Church Staff Member Name]:

As a doctoral student at the Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, I am conducting research to better understand how multisite churches can expand via adoptive mergers. The focus of my research is to compare and contrast the mergers that created RCC Chipley and RCC Fairhope, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be staff members at Rivertown Community Church with knowledge of one or both of these mergers. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an interview and potentially a subsequent focus group. Interviews should take approximately 45 minutes to complete. Focus groups should take 60 – 90 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate, please sign and return the attached consent document via email and you will be contacted to schedule your interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

Thank you in advance for helping me and Rivertown Community Church,

Gavin Adams
Doctoral Student
Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Appendix D

Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Improving Adoptive Mergers at Rivertown Community Church

Principal Investigator: Gavin Adams, Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be an adult, 18 years of age or older, serving on staff at Rivertown Community Church (RCC) on the central team or at the Chipley or Fairhope campus. As this study is focused on the adoptive mergers that created these two campus locations, knowledge of these campuses and/or mergers is necessary. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to analyze the similarities and differences between the formation of the RCC Chipley campus and the RCC Fairhope campus to decipher the unique characteristics that allowed the Chipley adoptive merger to be initially more successful. These findings will be evaluated and compared to create a new intervention plan that could be executed at RCC Fairhope in hopes of increasing the success of this campus location.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a 45 minute, recorded personal interview to allow a deeper understanding of the mergers and associated strategies.
2. Potentially participate in a 60 – 90 minutes, recorded focus group session with others from the RCC Staff.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the compilation of a strategic blueprint for future adoptive mergers by RCC and potentially other multisite churches looking to expand while revitalizing dying churches.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in

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Approved on 5-14-2020

future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym and all interviews will take place in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Gavin Adams. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at gadams26@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Zabloski at jlzabloski@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

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Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record or video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Liberty University
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Approved on 5-14-2020

Appendix E

Proposed Interview and Focus Group Questions

Title of the Project: Improving Adoptive Mergers at Rivertown Community Church

Principal Investigator: Gavin Adams, Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Purpose of the Interviews

The purpose of the questions to be asked in each interview is to uncover the Rivertown Community Church (RCC) campus expansion strategy and compare the adoptive mergers that successfully launched RCC Chesterfieldley and less successfully launched RCC Fairhope. Each interview will be conducted with RCC staff, some of who were directly involved in each merger, some only involved in one of the mergers, and some more indirectly involved. Each perspective will be synthesized to generate an accurate picture of the differences within the mergers.

Interview Questions

1. What is your name and role at RCC?
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. Have you held any previous roles at RCC?
4. What did you do before joining RCC?
5. Did you attend or volunteer at RCC prior to joining the staff?
6. In your role, how is your time spent working at a campus or across multiple campuses?
7. How many campus expansions at RCC have you experienced on staff? As a volunteer or attendee?
8. What is RCC's mission?
9. As you see it, what is RCC's campus expansion strategy?
10. What similarities have you seen between RCC campuses? What differences have you noticed?
11. Has the RCC campus expansion strategy changed in any way during your tenure on staff?
12. What defines a successful RCC Campus?
13. What precipitated RCC moving into Chesterfieldley, Florida?
14. How was RCC Chesterfieldley initially staffed? How did that change in the first year?
Two years?
15. What precipitated RCC moving into Fairhope, Alabama?
16. How was RCC Fairhope initially staffed? How did that change in the first year?
17. In your opinion, would you say RCC Chesterfieldley was initially successful? Why or why not?
18. In your opinion, would you say RCC Fairhope was initially successful? Why or why not?
19. What are some key differences in the initial adoptive mergers that created RCC Chesterfieldley and RCC Fairhope?
20. In your opinion, what would you do to help improve the success at RCC Fairhope?
21. If you were made senior pastor of RCC tomorrow, what would you do with RCC Fairhope?

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 14, 2020

Gavin Adams
James Zabloski

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY19-20-275 Improving Adoptive Mergers at River Community Church

Dear Gavin Adams, James Zabloski:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office